**Different communicators need not apply:**

**Why the pre-admissions experience matters for non-hearing and non-verbal learners applying to university**

**Discussion paper, September 2021**

Business Disability Forum reviewed the admissions and contact information on the websites of 100 universities which feature in The Guardian’s Best UK Universities 2022 rankings[[1]](#footnote-1) to assess the standard of inclusive communication options universities offer at pre-admission stage. Our findings show that many universities have a ‘telephone only’ approach to admissions processes, which is likely to be a disadvantage to people who do not hear or speak to communicate.

# **Headline findings**

Out of the 100 university websites we reviewed:

**40 per cent** only give a telephone number for prospective students to contact them on.

**Only 48 per cent** give an email address in addition to a phone number for prospective students to contact them on.

Just **2 out of 100** offered a British Sign Language (BSL) video interpreting service on their website.

Out of the 58 clearing sites we reviewed, **76 per cent** offered no other means of getting information other than by telephone.

Other findings included the following:

There was a general **over-reliance on social media and web contact forms as an alternative to using the telephone**. Web contact forms are not the same experience as providing an email address for people to get in touch. Many web contact forms and social media platforms remain inaccessible to a wide range of assistive technology users and disabled people.

**The provision of email addresses was generally imbalanced, even within a single university**. For example, on some university websites, email addresses were offered to contact the accommodation or campus security teams, but not for contacting the admissions team.

**There were a lot of moving images or multiple scroll actions needed to find universities’ contact details**. This meant that, when trying to locate contact details, ‘pop up’ boxes were often prompted. This can be frustrating for people who, for example, do not have steady hand or arm movements or who have difficulties with dexterity. Some people with autism or conditions affecting attention (particularly when using digital platforms) tell us that ‘pop up’ options can be distracting or alarming. On two websites, we could not find the contact details at all.

# The context: The chasm between admissions and outcomes

According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), the number of disabled students entering higher education is increasing. There has been a **47 per cent increase** of students with a known disability since 2014/15 – an increase of 106,000 disabled students in five years. This means, as per 2019/20 statistics, over **17 per cent** of all home students have a known disability.

“Over 17 per cent of home students in higher education have a disability – a 47 per cent increase in the last five years.”

When we look at the reported number of people who may struggle with inaccessible websites and communication methods, the representation of students who are deaf or have a condition affecting their vision has **increased by 12 per cent** since 2014/15. The figures do not capture speech impairments as a ‘standalone’ category, and the activity of this ‘group’ is therefore hard to track.[[2]](#footnote-2)

These are self-reported figures, and Business Disability Forum therefore expects the actual number of students with a disability to be higher. This aside, these figures show that the number of disabled students wanting to get into university are continuing to increase, and universities need to ensure that their admissions processes are not preventing anyone from applying.

We know from anecdotal evidence that some students ask others to make a phone call to the university for them, or they are asking their school careers team to find information for them instead. We also know from many disabled people who struggle with inaccessible websites or who cannot easily make contact with a service or organisation, that they rarely pursue it; they instead give up and go somewhere else. Universities therefore need to consider the following: although numbers of disabled students in university are rising, **how do we know for sure that our website and admissions processes are allowing everyone in and are not turning anyone away?**

“Many disabled people who struggle with inaccessible websites or who cannot easily make contact with a service or organisation rarely pursue it; they instead give up and go somewhere else.”

In addition, figures from the Office for Students show that, although more disabled students are entering university, there is **a notable progression gap** between disabled and non-disabled students. Furthermore, the progression gap is more concerning when we look at the data by type of disability or condition: **students with disabilities that affect how they communicate have much lower outcomes**; only 61.8 per cent of students with a disability that affects their communication progressed into “highly skilled” work or postgraduate study six months after they completed their course, compared to 73.3 per cent of non-disabled students.

“Looking at the gaps by disability type highlights that not all disabled students’ needs are being met at all points of the student lifecycle…. Much remains to be done to ensure that disabled students have the same opportunities and experiences as their non-disabled counterparts.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

# The impact of ‘telephone only’ cultures

We know from our continued research about disability related support in education and access to adjustments in employment that the experience of d/Deaf people and BSL users in these settings is poor, primarily due to an over-reliance on telephone-only communication or people being able to hear to communicate. We know many organisations only provide a telephone number for customers, clients, patients, students, and servicer users to get in touch with them. This is a ‘hearing and speaking first’ approach to communications and service design, which is potentially discriminatory. It, in effect, suggests to non-hearing people and people with speech impairments that they are not ‘designed in’ to that environment and university culture, and that the way they communicate is ‘not the norm’.

People who are d/Deaf, whose first language is BSL, or who have a condition affecting their speech often tell us they experience a “fight” or a “struggle” to get their employer to consider how they communicate in internal and staff communications, in meetings, and in social interactions at work. Many also tell us that their experience of an institutional ‘telephone only’ culture began when they were in mandatory education and continued when they were at university.

In addition, when universities only offer a telephone number for potential students to get in touch with them, it goes beyond preventing people with hearing related conditions, BSL users, and people with conditions affecting their speech from applying to university. We also know people with mental health conditions, autism, and some brain injuries can find using and speaking on the telephone difficult, particularly when ‘on hold’ music or multiple fielding options (for example, “Select 1 for admissions, select 2 for media enquiries…”) are essential to the process of an individual getting in touch with a university. Many people also tell us recorded messages are often difficult to hear when the sound quality or background noise on the message is poor.

# What universities need to do

Ultimately, universities’ communication options must be suited to the diversity of the people it is trying to reach. If a university truly wants to be open to people of all different backgrounds, experiences, bodies, and who demonstrate their abilities in different ways, universities must understand that, as not everyone thinks in the same way, **not everyone communicates in the same way** either.

Guidance released last year by the Disabled Students’ Commission advises disabled staff to do the following:[[4]](#footnote-4)

Contact the university they are thinking of applying to by phone or email to ask how they are able to support them if they were to study there.

Locate the details of the disability and wellbeing support services on the university’s website and ask them what support would be available to them if they were a student at that university.

Contact the admissions team to ask how the course they want to apply for will be able to support them or be delivered in a way that is inclusive to them.

Contact the university they want to apply to request information about the accessibility of the campus.

Disabled students are being advised to do the above. Universities therefore need to ensure the following:

Both phone **and email** (at the very least) contact options are clearly available.

Details of the disability and wellbeing support team and services should be **close to admissions information** on the website, where prospective students can clearly find it.

Information about the **accessibility of the campus** and the **support that is available to adapt course delivery** is readily available (and that this information is available in their preferred format).

**Equip each team** who might receive these requests from prospective students to know (a) how to respond, and (b) how to arrange the information to be provided in a different format if needed.

In addition, the following actions will help universities to identify the barriers that are blocking people from applying to study at their institution:

If web contact forms are used, get them **accessibility tested and user tested**. User testing must include disabled people with a wide range of different types of conditions and impairments. This feedback should inform whether the university continues to use the provider or platform, or source a more accessible option. Pay attention to the useability of CAPTCHA[[5]](#footnote-5) functions, which can prevent people from moving on to submit their contact form.

An institution’s approach to inclusive communications should be **consistent across the whole university**. For example, if one department offers WhatsApp chat and an email address, ensure every department offers the same. A common complaint from disabled people is that organisations offer an inconsistent approach to accessibility and adjustments depending on what area of the organisation they are in contact or working with at the time.

**Develop an inclusive communications sign off ‘checklist’** to equip all staff to embed inclusive communication options and accessibility practices across the whole institution. An inclusive approach to communications that recognises a wide range of communication options will enable a university to reach a wider range of prospective students is not the sole responsibility of accessibility or communications teams. The organisations that get the best feedback on accessibility from disabled people are not leaving their inclusive practices to chance; they are **standardising processes** and putting checklists into the hands of every member of staff to ensure consistent knowledge and practices. A practical ‘one page’ checklist that gives anyone in any department who is responsible for publishing information and content can remind them to check the accessibility of what they are producing and ensure they are offering all the ‘agreed’ communication format options. This will help ensure inclusive options are consistently provided without overloading staff with technical information or requiring them to be experts on accessibility (neither of which are necessary).

For many people who have been Deaf for most or all their life and who use BSL to communicate, it is likely that **BSL is the individual’s first language**. In such situations, written English or email is sometimes not an easy or comfortable alternative to a hearing-based option. Get a video remote BSL video interpretating service for your website so that people can communicate with you in BSL in ‘live time’. This does not have to be expensive (different pricing options are available from most providers).

The best thing universities can do to identify what is not working is to **map the end-to-end ‘journey’ that a prospective student goes through** when applying to university, from the point of visiting a website, all the way through to the day they start their course. When this has been documented, universities who want to provide the best, most welcoming experience for prospective students that makes every applicant feel as though ‘I belong and am valued here’ will ask disabled people – whether that is from among disabled staff at the university or current students – to user test this journey by going through the process themselves as an applicant would and identify any barriers at each stage of the admission-to-induction student journey.

**Disabled people must be involved in reviewing the admissions to induction experience.** It is important that people with a wide range of disabilities, conditions, and ways of communicating (including people who do not use the phone, and people who use assistive technologies) are included in giving this feedback. Some institutions ask first year disabled students who themselves went through the process and their staff disability network to give feedback and to suggest areas for improvement. This process should include user testing digital environments (such as websites, chatbots, and web contact forms), as well and the accessibility of processes that can rely on navigating physical and built environments, such as in-person open days and registration days.

Business Disability Forum’s research and auditing work generally shows that if universities are not providing an inclusive approach to ensure accessible communications and format options for applicants and students, they are typically unlikely to be doing this for staff either. Therefore, the above review should be **replicated from an employee perspective** as well.

Conclusion: Getting serious about widening participation

Our findings show that a ‘telephone first’ culture begins even before people get into university – if they manage to get in at all. Universities that are ranked as being the best in the UK (and whose applicants therefore need to have achieved well in secondary education) are preventing people who cannot use the telephone from entering their institutions. This is despite an increase in disabled students applying to university, and many of these universities making public commitments to increase inclusion or advertising their commitment to increase diversity and advance inclusion in their institution.

Universities must ensure removing barriers and increasing opportunities for disabled students and staff is core to an institutions’ equality and diversity strategy and objectives. This is law, and it is part of the Public Sector Equality Duties which UK universities are covered by – and it also reinforces that everyone is different yet equally valued in any university that proudly advertises its commitment and proactive vision to widen participation.

Although the number of disabled people in higher education is rising, we must not assume that this means their experience of accessing higher education is ‘automatically’ improving. It is often easy to accept that, amid a diversity and inclusion agenda that is based on reporting ‘numbers of people’ in diversity groups, representation is enough. The higher education sector can lead on refusing to accept that representation is the same as inclusion and instead work to ensure every single applicant’s experience makes them feel as though ‘I belong here’, and that an exemplary experience at application and admission continues throughout the lifecycle of their university experience.

**“The higher education sector can lead on refusing to accept that representation is the same as inclusion and instead work to ensure every single applicant’s experience makes them feel as though ‘I belong here’.”**

Contact us

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1. The Guardian University Guide 2022 – the rankings. Accessible at: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/universityguide> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Statistics are from the Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2019/20. Accessible at: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Office for Students, 2019, “Review of support for disabled students in higher education in England”. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Disabled Students’ Commission, 2020, “Consideration for disabled students when applying to university in light of Covid”. Accessed on 15 September 2021 at <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/considerations-disabled-students-when-applying-university-light-covid-19> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Completely Automated Public Turing test to tell Computers and Humans Apart (CAPTCHA). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)