

Disability in Higher Education and Employment – Implications

10,000 Interns Foundation, 24 August 2023

This research paper provides an analysis of disabilities in higher education and employment based on statistical reports published by UK government organisations. The findings of this paper showcase recent developments in employment trends and its recommendations build on the completion of the 2022 pilot cycle of the 10,000 Able Interns Programme.

1. What is a disability?

According to the 2010 Equality Act, a person with a disability has a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on their ability to do normal day-to-day activities.¹

A 'substantial' effect is defined as "more than minor or trivial", such as taking much longer time than it usually would for one to complete a daily task.

A 'long-term' effect refers to an effect that lasts, or is likely to last, 12 months or longer. For example, a chronic breathing condition that develops as a result of a lung infection will have a substantial long-term effect.

Under the Act, it is against the law for employers to discriminate disabled candidates because of their disability. Employers are required to cover areas such as application forms, interviews, assessments, salary, and training opportunities.²

The 10,000 Able Interns (10KAI) programme builds its candidate eligibility criteria on the definition of the Act. The programme defines disabled applicants as students and graduates³ with one or more long-term physical or mental impairment(s) who experience social or physical barriers due to the effects of their impairment(s).

¹ Gov.uk. (2023). Definition of disability under the Equality Act 2010. <https://www.gov.uk/definition-of-disability-under-equality-act-2010>

² Gov.uk. (2023). Disability rights. <https://www.gov.uk/rights-disabled-person/employment>

³ Who is currently enrolled in university, or has completed their university degree since 2020, or has an unconditional offer of study at a university.

The 10,000 Interns Foundation uses the social model of disability, which is widely accepted as the most effective approach in meeting the needs of disabled students and employees.⁴

Following the social model, the Foundation understands that it is not a person's impairment that is the disability, but rather society's lack of accommodating environments and attitudes toward the person's impairment that disables them. The 10KAI programme's eligibility criteria considers the effects of an applicant's impairment(s), rather than the underlying conditions themselves.

Thus applicants to the 10KAI programme are described as 'disabled students' as opposed to 'students with disability', reflecting the Foundation's mission of building inclusive practices into the UK workplace and reducing barriers that disable underrepresented talent from entering the workforce.

2. Disability in Higher Education

Hubble & Bolton's (2021) briefing paper shows that there is a general increase in the number of students in higher education (HE) reporting a disability since 2014. In 2019/20, 332,300 students in UK higher education institutions said they had a disability, representing 17.3% of all home students.⁵

This number is a 47% increase from the 2014/15 academic year that saw 106,000 reports of students with a known disability. The rise of declared disabled students has been attributed to factors such as availability of funding, greater social acceptance, and the 2010 Equality Act.⁶

⁴ Office for Students. (2019, October 18). Beyond the bare minimum: Are universities and colleges doing enough for disabled students?. Insight Brief. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/beyond-the-bare-minimum-are-universities-and-colleges-doing-enough-for-disabled-students/>

⁵ Hubble, S & Bolton, P. (2021). Support for disabled students in higher education in England. BRIEFING PAPER. 8716. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8716/CBP-8716.pdf>

⁶ Office for Students. (2019, October 18). Beyond the bare minimum: Are universities and colleges doing enough for disabled students?. Insight Brief. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/beyond-the-bare-minimum-are-universities-and-colleges-doing-enough-for-disabled-students/>

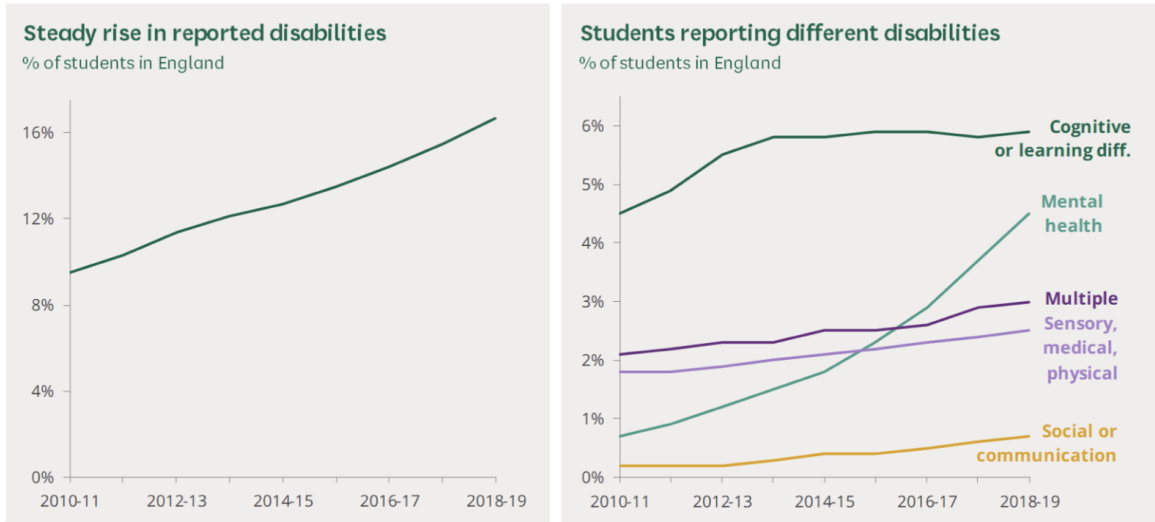


Figure 1: Representation of the rise of reported disabilities between the years 2010-2019.⁷

The majority of the increase comes from students reporting mental health conditions, which increased by more than 180%.⁸ The sharp rise of mental health condition reports may be attributed to greater awareness, less perceived stigma associated with mental illness.

The most common type of reported disability was ‘specific learning disabilities’, which includes conditions such as dyslexia, dyspraxia, and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). The next most common type was mental health conditions.⁹

⁷ Hubble & Bolton. (2021).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

Types of disabilities reported by HE students

All modes and levels of study

	2014/15	2018/19	2019/20	% of all disabilities in 19/20	Increase 14/15 to 19/20
A specific learning difficulty	105,550	110,795	111,820	34%	6%
Mental health condition	33,045	81,960	93,770	28%	184%
Two or more conditions	21,095	34,155	41,210	12%	95%
A long-standing illness or health condition	22,425	28,430	30,110	9%	34%
Another disability, impairment or medical condition	21,580	22,925	23,980	7%	11%
Social communication/Autistic spectrum disorder	6,755	12,815	14,120	4%	109%
A physical impairment or mobility issues	7,480	8,250	8,400	3%	12%
Deaf or a serious hearing impairment	5,065	5,485	5,675	2%	12%
Blind or a serious visual impairment	2,840	3,170	3,190	1%	12%
Any disability	225,835	307,985	332,275	100%	47%

Figure 2: Table of the types of disabilities reported by students in higher education¹⁰

The briefing paper finds that although the number of disabled students in HE is increasing, disabled students remain an underrepresented group with 'expressed concerns about the support provided for these students'.¹¹

Although disabled students can be supported by the Government through the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) scheme, only 40% of prospective students were aware of the scheme before the start of their HE course.¹²

Moreover, disabled students in HE had somewhat worse HE outcomes and worse employment outcomes than nondisabled students. However, those with cognitive or learning disabilities had the same likelihood of being in highly skilled employment or higher level study as non-disabled graduates. These findings were persistent even after intersectional factors such as gender, age, and ethnicity were taken into account.¹³

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

2.1 Mental Health in Higher Education

In Higher Education, mental health 'conditions' refer to mental health conditions that can be clinically diagnosed, such as depression, bipolar disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), and schizophrenia.¹⁴ Mental health issues, poor mental health, or mental distress that is not related to diagnosable mental health conditions are not included in this definition.

The 2010 Equality Act states that mental health conditions can lead to a disability, if the conditions' effects are substantial and long-term (lasts, or is likely to last, 12 months or more).

According to a research briefing (Lewis & Bolton, 2023) on student mental health in England, there were 119,500 students reporting mental health 'conditions' in 2020/21, making up 5.5% of all home students. This number was nearly seven times as high as a decade earlier.¹⁵

There has been a similar rise of reported student mental health 'issues'. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence state that some factors that contribute to the rise of broad mental health issues among students in HE are as follows:¹⁶

- Moving away from home
- Academic and financial pressures
- Absence of familiar social and emotional support networks
- Covid-19 pandemic
- Rising cost of living

The rise can also be related to the changing demographics of university students. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds, international students, and neurodiverse students have been identified as being more likely to experience mental health issues. In the past decade, more students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds have entered university.¹⁷

The most common model for mental health provisions in HE institutions in the UK in response to this rise of broad mental health issues is to provide services in a three-pronged approach:¹⁸

1. Wellbeing services - low-intensity support and signposting to non-medical services;
2. Counselling services - for students with moderate mental distress;

¹⁴ Lewis, J & Bolton, P. (2023). Student mental health in England: Statistics, policy, and guidance. Research Briefing. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8593/CBP-8593.pdf>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

3. Disability services - for students who receive disability students' allowances or experience a mental health condition that meets a clinical threshold for diagnosis.

This model allocates resources and services by differentiating students who have broad mental health 'issues' from students with mental health 'conditions' who have been diagnosed or are eligible for DSA.

This separation allows for disability services to be catered to disabled students, who by definition experience substantial barriers from the effects of chronic or long-term mental health conditions.

Negative effects of mental health issues and conditions for students may range from poor academic performance, dropping out of HE, to self-harm and suicide.¹⁹

Non-continuation rates	
2018-19	
Mental health condition	13.0%
Social or communication impairment	11.3%
Sensory, medical or physical impairments	10.9%
Multiple impairments	10.6%
Cognitive or learning difficulties	8.5%

Figure 3: Table featuring the non-continuation rates of first-year students with known disabilities in 2018/19²⁰

The table above shows that first-year students with a reported mental health condition had the highest rate of non-continuation (13%) out of all reported disability groups in 2018/19. Notably, the percentage of non-continuing students with cognitive or learning difficulties 8.5% was below the percentage of non-disabled students.²¹

According to the data provided by the Office for Students, students with a reported mental health condition were also less likely than average to secure higher level employment or progress to postgraduate study.²²

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Hubble & Bolton. (2021).

²² Lewis & Bolton. (2023).

3. Disability in Employment

Until the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, general trends in disability employment had been steadily improving. Since 2013, the number and rate of disabled people in employment rose, and the disability employment gap narrowed.²³

However, post-pandemic trends between July and September 2022 have shown a decreased disability employment rate and increased non-disabled employment rate. Thus the disability employment gap in 2023 is at its widest point since 2018.²⁴

In the same quarter, the rate of disabled people who self-reported that they are not in or looking for work increased by 1.1%. Compared to the disability economic inactivity rate of 14.8% for non-disabled people, the rate was 43.3% for disabled people.²⁵

These findings also show that:²⁶

- The number of people reporting long-term health conditions or classed as disabled continues to rise.
- The increase in the number of people reporting a disability is largely driven by an increase in reports of mental health conditions (83.7% increase between 2023/24 and 2021/22).
- Nearly one in three people classed as being disabled one year were no longer classed as being disabled in the next.

The disability employment rate is lower for disabled people with a mental health condition or with five or more health conditions than other disability groups. Disabled people with a musculoskeletal condition are more likely than those with a mental health condition to be in employment, people with one health condition are more than twice as likely to be in employment than those with five or more conditions.²⁷

Disabled people were also more likely than non-disabled people to work in Health, Social work, Retail, and Education, and in small employers than large employers.²⁸

²³ GOV.UK. (2023, January 26). Official Statistics: Employment of disabled people 2022. Department for Work & Pensions. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/the-employment-of-disabled-people-2022/employment-of-disabled-people-2022>

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

4. Conclusion

The 10,000 Able Interns Programme is designed to champion underrepresented disabled talent in the UK by offering disabled university students paid internship opportunities across a range of industries.

The findings of this research paper show that despite steady improvements in disability support and awareness, disabled students are still underrepresented in higher education and specific employment sectors.

This paper has also found that there is a recent, considerable growth in the reporting of mental health conditions in both higher education and employment. Disabled students with mental health conditions are most likely to leave their university course, less likely to secure high level employment, and less likely to pursue postgraduate studies. Disabled people with mental health conditions are less likely to be employed and are paid less than disabled people with other health conditions.

Implications - 10,000 Able Interns

After its successful pilot cycle in 2022/23 that created 100 internship opportunities for disabled students and graduates, the 10,000 Able Interns programme now aims to replicate this success and champion students and graduates with long-term mental health conditions.

Drawing on the findings of this paper, the Programme has expanded its eligibility criteria for the 2023/24 cycle to students and graduates with long-term mental health conditions in its applicant pool.

Following best practice by disability services in higher education, the Programme also differentiates mental health 'conditions' from mental health 'issues'. As the 10KAI programme is committed to promoting equity of opportunity and offering access to paid internships for disabled students and graduates facing social/physical barriers, the eligibility criteria only expands to applicants with mental health 'conditions' that can be clinically diagnosed.

Thus to be eligible for the Programme, applicants must be:

- Disabled – experience social/physical barriers to their day to day activities due to the effects of their condition(s)
- Students and graduates – currently enrolled in a UK university, or recently graduated from a UK university (2020 onwards), or over 18 with a confirmed place at a UK university.

The groups of conditions covered by the Programme include:

- Sensory impairments:
 - Deafness or other hearing impairments
 - Blindness or other visual impairments
 - Deafblindness or dual sensory impairment
- Physical impairments
 - Cerebral palsy
 - Multiple sclerosis
 - Epilepsy
 - Amputations
 - Spina bifida and spinal cord injuries
 - Musculoskeletal disabilities
 - Dwarfism
 - Down's Syndrome
 - Other chronic and/or debilitating physical impairments/illnesses
- Neurological Disorders
 - Tourette syndrome
- Mental Health Conditions (long-term, can be clinically diagnosed)
 - Depression
 - Bipolar disorder
 - Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD)
 - Schizophrenia
- Social/Communication Impairments
 - Autism Spectrum Disorders (including High-Functioning Autism, Asperger's Syndrome and social pragmatic communication disorder)

The sub-lists of conditions for each group are non-exhaustive. If an applicant cannot find their condition listed above, the applicant will have space to write in their condition and the social/physical barriers they face in their application form.

For any queries on the research or eligibility criteria for the 10,000 Able Interns programme listed above, please contact general@10000internsfoundation.com.