

Students in Scotland: Neurodiversity, mental health and disability

What We Found

Neurodiversity features prominently among the disabilities self-reported by students in Scottish colleges and universities.

Among college students, 'multiple disabilities' was the most common self-reported disability type (28%), followed by dyslexia (23%) and then mental health conditions (20%). In universities, this was specific learning difficulties (32%), mental health conditions (28%) and multiple disabilities (11%).¹

In universities and in colleges, students identifying as 'other' sex/gender had higher rates of disclosing disabilities than men/males or women/females. In addition, specific disabilities or mental health conditions feature in some genders more than others.²

In both universities and colleges, white students declared disabilities at a higher rate than ethnic minority students. In colleges, this was 18% of white students as against 9% of ethnic minority students. In universities it was 17% of white students and 7% of ethnic minority students.

Learning disabilities, having any disabilities or multiple disabilities, or social and communication impairments, were negatively associated with Scottish Credits and Qualification Framework (SCQF) level. However, this difference decreased as students came from more socio-economically advantaged backgrounds.

Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) had a very low take-up among university students at just 19% of Scottish-domiciled students with disabilities.

What We Suggest

Further research is needed to understand the experience of neurodivergent students, and those with other disabilities.

We recommend further research to identify:

- The percentage of students who do not declare that they have a disability, and the reasons for their non-disclosure.
- The relationship between sex/gender and mental health conditions among students.
- The reason for the gap in disclosure of disabilities between white and ethnic minority students.
- The reason for the low take-up of DSA.
- The role disability plays in course choices.
- How to close the gap in course choices occurring for students most affected by socio-economic disadvantage.

Students in Scotland: Neurodiversity, mental health and disability

What We Did

We analysed Scottish college and university data to understand the prevalence of disability, and neurodiversity.

We recruited a final-year University of Edinburgh quantitative methods student to explore the college and university student data provided by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) for the 2019/2020 academic year.

After a brief literature review, we used descriptive statistics to explore the profile of students with disabilities in Scottish colleges and universities. The disability categories were cross-tabulated with gender, ethnicity, age and socio-economic status.

We used descriptive statistics on the subjects studied by students with disabilities, followed by a linear regression to examine the relationship between disability, socio-demographic factors and the qualification aims of students.

For university students, we also examined the proportion of students receiving Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA).

Why We Did It

Disability among college and university students is under-reported, and this makes it more likely that they do not receive the support they need while studying.

We wanted to follow the pathway of neurodivergent school pupils into further and higher education, but we realised that there is not good statistical data available.

Although we have been able to collate statistics on disability, this is likely to be under-declared: one study found that only 40% of students who had additional support needs (ASN) in secondary school declared a disability to their college or university.³ Therefore, it is likely many students are not receiving the right recognition or support for their needs.

We know that students with, for example, dyslexia often receive a late diagnosis – only once attending at college or university in many cases. We are also aware that many neurodivergent students struggle to manage through their courses unless they have the right support and recognition.

For these reasons we need better identification of, and understanding about, neurodivergent and disabled students, and having some baseline data is an essential starting point.

Thank you

Our thanks to Julia Allard, who conducted the quantitative analysis, and to the Scottish Funding Council.

1. Note that the terminology for different disabilities differs between Scottish colleges and universities. Terms such as 'specific learning difficulties' or 'impairments' are those used by further and higher education providers in Scotland. For our analysis, we adopted the terminology used by these institutions, recognising that, for example, specific learning difficulty (SpLD), is a recognised term.
2. For % figures, see <https://www.mindroom.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Students-in-Scotland-Research.pdf>
3. Coghill, E. et al., (2021). *Disability Support Services*. In Supporting neurodiverse college student success: A guide for librarians, student support services, and academic learning environments. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, pp. 246–266. Available at: <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=vYCEAAAQBAJ&printsec=copyright#v=onepage&q&f=false>. [Accessed 22 June 2021]