Understanding how teaching and learning adjustments are shared at the University of Leeds

LITE fellowship 2023-2024
Project report

Clare Taylor
Disability Services
University of Leeds

c.s.taylor@leeds.ac.uk

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Introduction

More disabled students than ever are studying at the University of Leeds: over 8500 students and PGRs currently access Disability Services. We support students with a wide range of conditions including neurodivergence, dyslexia, ADHD, anxiety and depression.

Disabled students are legally entitled to adjustments to teaching and learning so they can experience the same access to their academic studies as their non-disabled peers. This might include receiving teaching materials in advance, access to lecture capture, adjustments to group work, amongst many others. The Equality Act 2010 places a formal duty Higher Education Providers to provide these adjustments.

Information about these adjustments is shared with colleagues across the University using Support Summary Sheets: password protected Word documents that hold highly sensitive information about each student's disability and, crucially, the adjustments they need. In 2023-24 over 4000 students had a Support Summary Sheet: an increase of 58% since 2018-19.

We often hear from academic and professional services colleagues that sharing and accessing Support Summary Sheets is increasingly cumbersome and time-consuming. We hear from disabled students that they do not consistently receive the adjustments that are listed on their Support Summary Sheet.

In 2023-24, I undertook a Fellowship with the Leeds Institute of Teaching Excellence, to gather data from academic and professional services staff, and disabled students.

The research aims to find out how disability information about students is shared at the University, identify any barriers in current processes, and the impact of this on staff and disabled students.

This report refers to 'disability information' which includes Support Summary Sheets and other methods of sharing teaching and learning adjustments with staff such as Argos reports.

Context

Equality Act 2010

'The duty to make reasonable adjustments is not a minimalist requirement of simply ensuring that some access is available to disabled students; it is, so far as is reasonably practicable, to approximate the access enjoyed by disabled students to that enjoyed by the rest of the student body. The purpose of the duty to make reasonable adjustments is to provide access to an education as close as is reasonably possible to the standard normally offered to students at large.'

Equality Act 2010 technical guidance

Disabled Student Commitment

'The Commitment calls upon HEPs to ensure that over time, students are asked only once to share information about their disability during the course of their study [and] open channels of communication are in place, to help create appropriate and timely information sharing across the provider with relevant individuals and departments'

The Disabled Student Commitment (Disabled Students' Commission)

University of Leeds Strategy

'We will embrace the values of equality, diversity and inclusion in our entire community, welcoming underrepresented groups, enhancing both their sense of belonging and their chances of succeeding'

University of Leeds strategy 2020-2030

Student Education Strategy

'We will create a positive and inclusive culture, helping all students and staff to feel and promote a sense of belonging as valued members of our community'
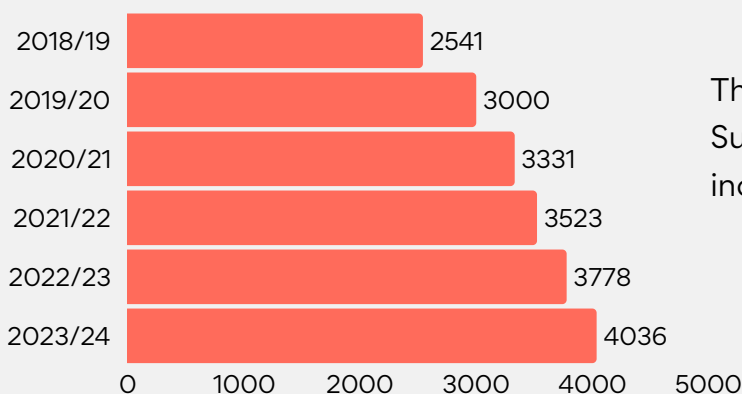
Student Education Strategy 2020-2030

Facts & figures

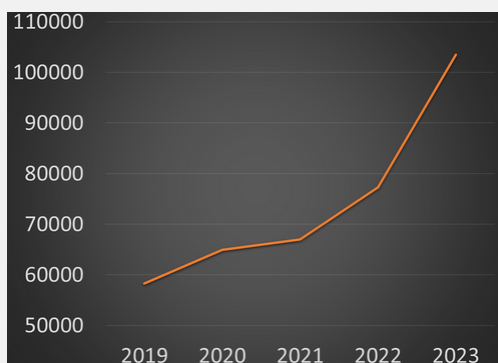## Students who have shared they are disabled with the University of Leeds

8536

December 2024

Students with a Support Summary Sheet

Year	Value
2018/19	2541
2019/20	3000
2020/21	3331
2021/22	3523
2022/23	3778
2023/24	4036

The number of students with a Support Summary Sheet has increased by 58% since 2018/19

UCAS data shows rise across UK

UCAS end of cycle data for 2023

The number of accepted UK applicants sharing a disability increased to 103,000 in 2023.

This is up from 77,000 in 2022 (+33.8%) and from 58,000 in 2019 (+77.5%)

Support Summary Sheets

In 2023/24, over 4000 students at the University of Leeds had a Support Summary Sheet.

- Legally required adjustments to teaching and learning

- Password protected Word document

- Contextual information about disability

Methodology

Online surveys

281 students
109 academic staff
22 disability contacts

Listening Rooms

8 pairs of students

Findings

Timing
Academics often receive information after teaching has started

Accessing information
Difficulties locating password to access Support Summary Sheet

Method of sharing
Difficult to keep track of Support Summary Sheets

Contents of Support Summary Sheet
Adjustment information not always easily identifiable

Putting adjustments in place
Staff and students unsure about how adjustments could be put in place in practice
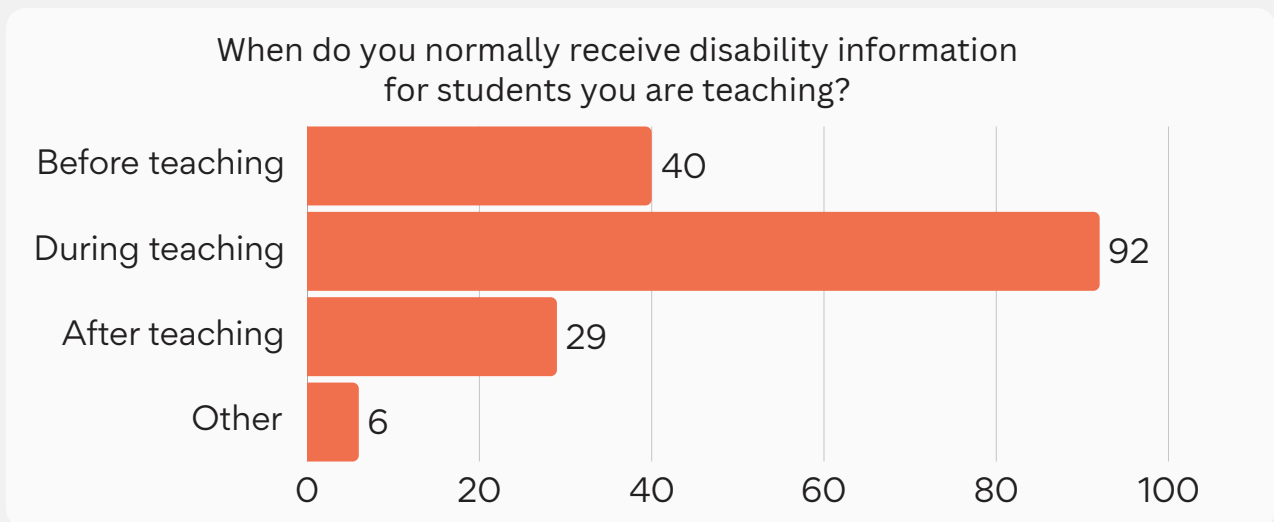
Identifying disabled students
Staff unaware of disabled students. Students not sure if academics know about them.

Timing

Support Summary Sheets are generated when students register with Disability Services, which means they are created throughout the academic year.

Staff report receiving Support Summary Sheets after teaching has started which makes it more difficult to ensure adjustments are implement.

This is likely to be due to when students register with Disability Services, and how Support Summary Sheets are shared within a student's school.

When do you normally receive disability information for students you are teaching?

Category	Value
Before teaching	40
During teaching	92
After teaching	29
Other	6

"It would help to receive the information before teaching starts rather than weeks into term. That way I can plan to include any support seamlessly rather than having to draw attention to it when I find out"

"This information needs to be shared well in advance of teaching starting to have any significant impact on planning and delivery. At the moment, it feels as though we are misleading students who might reasonably assume their needs are known and being taken into account.

In reality, this information might not come to the people leading teaching on their modules until several weeks after the semester has begun. This can cause harm and damage trust."

Accessing information

Student disability information is categorised as 'Classified/highly confidential' according to the University's Information Protection Policy.

The policy specifies that "Highly Confidential data must be encrypted if kept in Office 365 [...] Where Highly Confidential data stored in SharePoint or OneDrive needs to be shared with other individuals the decryption / encryption key (password) needs to be divulged to them verbally or via text message, not via email."

Disability Services encrypts each student's Support Summary Sheet with the student's date of birth. Academic staff can access a student's date of birth via Faculty Services.

Staff report difficulties locating passwords for Support Summary Sheets, which can result in Support Summary Sheets not being accessed.

> "It's a bit of a nightmare having to access their date of birth. When I am presented with 10-20 students with disability sheets for a module of 100, the thought of having to assess each student's information to find their date of birth so I can scan the disability sheet is incredibly daunting. When I'm pushed for time, the result is I don't do it."
>
> "The current password system is labour-intensive and adds a not insignificant level of difficulty to accessing this key information"
>
> "I know that a lot of teaching staff do not check disability summary sheets because it takes so long to get the password for each and go through them."
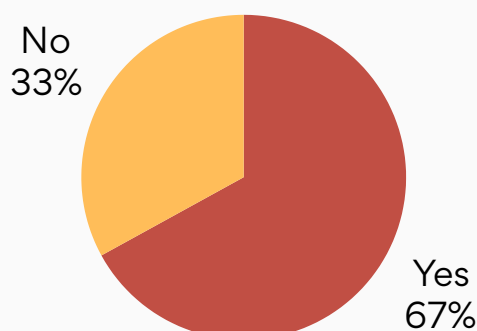>
> "The current password system is labour-intensive and adds a not insignificant level of difficulty to accessing this key information."

Do you experience any difficulties when accessing disability information about students?

No 33%

Yes 67%

Method of sharing

Disability Services emails each completed Support Summary Sheet to the Disability Contact in the student's school. Disability Contacts ensure that Support Summary Sheets are then shared with staff who teach or support the student. This might include module leaders, academic personal tutor etc.

Most Disability Contacts share Support Summary Sheets via email, or a SharePoint site with restricted access.

Academics: how is disability information shared with you?

Email	94
SharePoint site	17
Other	4
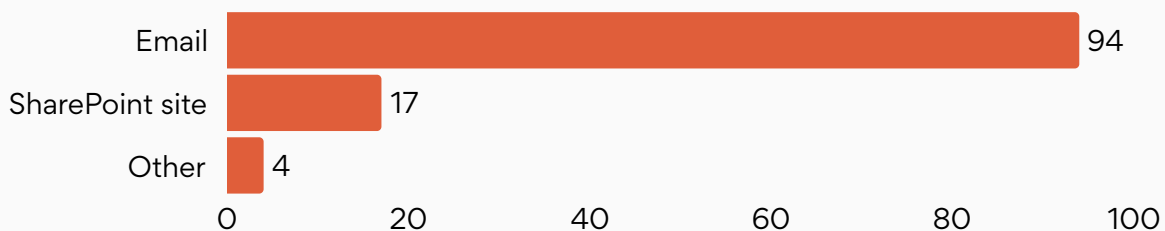
Academic staff report difficulties keeping track of Support Summary Sheets due to the number of them, and current methods in the way they are shared

> "It's very cumbersome having a separate support summary sheet per student, rather than getting a updatable list of students in a specific module, separated into tutorial/practical groups. It makes it hard to keep teaching staff up-to-date."
>
> "It would be nice to get the list of accommodations and students by teaching session/assessment in a single file/spreadsheet/webpage, rather than handle dozens of different support summary sheets."
>
> "We are sent a link to a Sharepoint and it is not always straightforward to find the particular student."
>
> "At times it seems quite "clunky" i.e. Summary Sheets are uploaded to SharePoint, put into relevant folders manually [...] then relevant staff are notified that sheets are available and how to access them. If there was a way to integrate this into other University systems directly e.g. if under Tutee Information in Faculty Services there was a direct link to Summary Sheet and other relevant data."

Contents of Support Summary Sheet

Students and academic staff generally responded positively when asked if they understood the content of a Support Summary Sheet.

Is there anything on a Support Summary Sheet you didn't understand?

Students

| No | Yes | **91%** |

Academic staff

| No | Yes | **73%** |

However, open ended survey responses suggest there some some staff and students find the format and length of the Support Summary Sheet a barrier to understanding the content.

Students:

"I didn't understand the codes fully and had to do extra research to understand what I was entitled to - I worry it might be the same for my lecturers!"

"The support around exam and timed assessments is unclear. I struggle, at times, to process information and may need to re-read something a number of times."

Staff:

"There is so much generic information repeated verbatim on every form that it can be difficult to quickly find the specific adjustments we have been asked to make for each individual. "
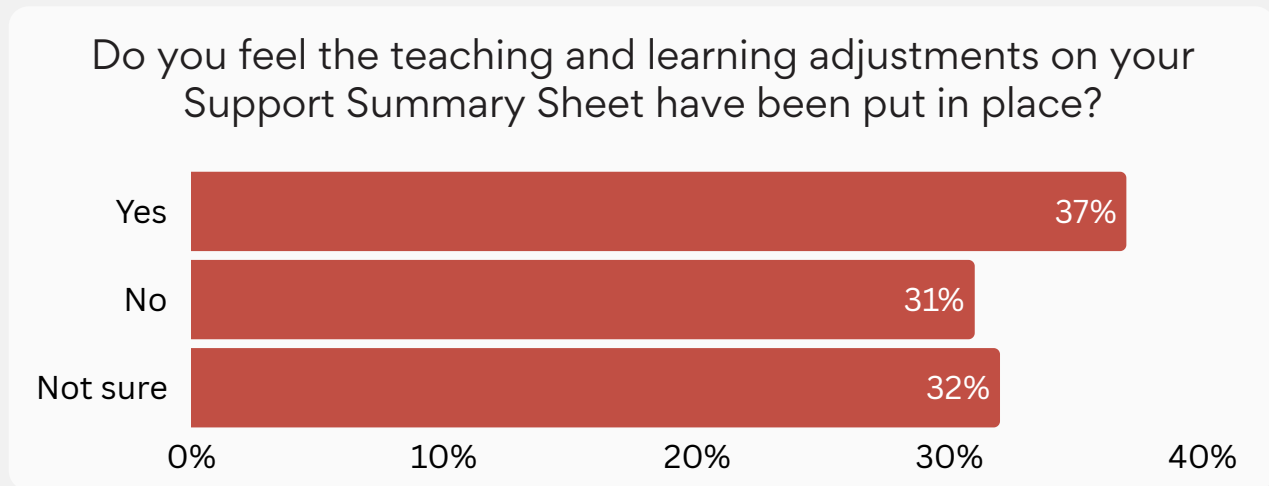
"The standardised format can often make it hard to identify concrete actions other than inclusive practice"

Putting adjustments in place

Students and academic staff were asked several questions around the implementation of teaching and learning adjustments.

Only 37% of student repondents reported that they felt their teaching and learning adjustments had been put in place:

Do you feel the teaching and learning adjustments on your Support Summary Sheet have been put in place?

Response	Percentage
Yes	37%
No	31%
Not sure	32%

"I have just given up trying to get the things on my support summary as it is such a battle and hours of emailing and chasing people to be told that they cant facilitate me."

"I have had to ask in front of the rest of the students in the session to have my adjustments [...] which I find awkward and embarrassing"

Students also reported that adjustments listed on the Support Summary Sheet can appear vague:

"I didn't understand how points made under adjustments to teaching and learning would be actionable."

"It says a lot of thing like 'give consideration to...' and 'may struggle with...' but how does this transfer to real world application?"

"the explanation of the adjustments available to me are very general and vague and often invites more questions rather than giving clarity"

Staff reported that it can be difficult to know how adjustments listed on the Support Summary Sheet could be put in place:

> "the descriptions of the disability and mitigations are vague and difficult to apply"
>
> "the student information feels very vague; often it's just a generic 'students with this condition may need:' and then 5-10 different adjustments, but no indication of what this students actually needs or wants."

There are a number of references to the University's Baseline Standards for Inclusive Learning and Teaching. Some staff feel that including adjustments on the Support Summary Sheet that are covered by the baseline standards is 'unnecessary'.

> "there should be some clarity about whether adjustments are 'standard teaching practice' or more specific."
>
> "[there is] a load of unnecessary information when the instructions can be boiled down to teaching practices that you usually carry out anyway (e.g. not calling on students directly in seminar, being considerate about absences, providing lecture slides in advance...)"

Identifying disabled students

Most academic staff reported being unaware of a student's teaching and learning adjustments. Responses to the survey suggest that may be due to not receiving or accessing the student's Support Summary Sheet, and not being able to identify the student even if they have received their Support Summary Sheet.

Have you ever been unaware of a student's teaching and learning adjustments?

Yes	64%
No	36%

0   10   20   30   40   50   60   70
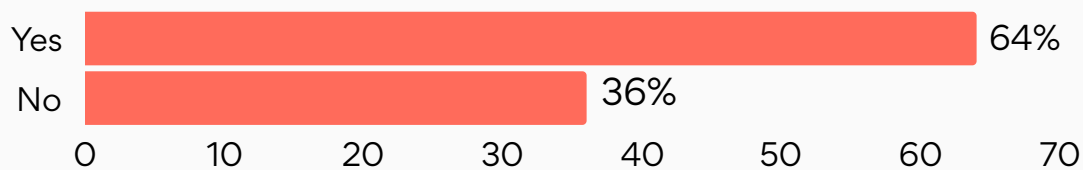
"I am reliant on [students] making themselves known to me (and I remember that they have a disability and what that disability is)."

"[it would] be really useful to have a photo of the student- with cohorts of 250+ I do not know student names and have no way of knowing them."

Students report staff being unaware of their teaching and learning adjustments, and 35% of students report approaching academic staff to discuss their adjustments.

"Many staff members have not even been aware that I am deaf, indicating that many are not reading support summaries before teaching. This means they do not implement adjustments or accommodations and have never asked about what could be done to accommodate me."

"I spoke to one of my lecturers after a lecture about exam arrangements. They were happy to accommodate these but had not been made aware of my summary sheet. I had to send them a copy of it myself."

Recommendations

➤ Schools should embed the University's <u>inclusive baseline standards</u> so that student education is delivered inclusively, which will reduce the need for individual adjustments

➤ Schools should inform students who their Support Summary Sheet has been shared with, and explain how common reasonable adjustments are implemented locally

➤ Schools should check-in regularly with disabled students to identify any issues with their adjustments, and reduce the need for students to approach academic staff and/or identify themselves in front of their peers

➤ Staff should access <u>Working with disabled students</u> guidance on the staff intranet, including the guidance on '<u>Commonly recommended reasonable adjustments</u>'

➤ Long term, the findings indicate that alternative ways of sharing disability information should be explored that:

- eliminates the need for disability information to be shared using a Word document via email or SharePoint

- allows any updates to a student's support to be communicated to relevant staff quickly, and would no longer require a Word document to be updated and reshared which can cause delays

- allows disability information to be shared automatically each year for returning students rather than schools having to manage this at the start of each academic year

- can be accessed using a single log in, rather than staff being required to access each Support Summary Sheet using a unique password

- is linked to student records information in Banner and, therefore, can only be accessed by staff directly involved in teaching or supporting the student. Currently, sharing Support Summary Sheets using email and SharePoint risks data breaches

- allows staff and students to access information about both teaching and learning adjustments and exam adjustments in the same format and location. Currently staff and students are required to look this information up separately: staff using SGADISA and SWAMEDI on Banner and students using their Support Summary Sheet and Faculty Services.

- updates staff when a student changes modules, year of study programme and/or level of study, and automatically informs staff if they are teaching a student who is parented by a different school. Currently schools are required to identify students who are taking modules in different schools and ensure that the relevant staff in that school receive their disability information.

- includes information about students who have an Impact Statement. These are created for students who have been unable to provide supporting information that confirms disability, but may need temporary adjustments, in accordance with the Equality and Human Rights Commission advice note, following the University of Bristol v Abrahart High Court ruling.

- includes module level information so module/programme leaders can access a summary of disabled students for each module

- informs students who their disability information has been shared with, which reduces the need for students to identify themselves to staff, and reduces anxiety that students can experience when they are unaware who has access to their disability information.

- includes student photos so staff can identify disabled students more easily and reduces the need for students to identify themselves to staff

- identifies adjustments that are included in the University's inclusive baseline standards

- links to guidance on how adjustments may be implemented in practice

- complies with GDPR requirements and reduces the risk of a data breach

Next steps

➤ Explore alternative ways of sharing disability information that eliminates the need to generate, share, update and re-share disability information using Word documents

➤ Look at the crossover between inclusive teaching practices and reasonable adjustments, and how this might be better communicated to academics (e.g. guidance, toolkit)

➤ Review the format of the Support Summary sheet templates in light of student and staff feedback

➤ Work with colleagues to generate guidance for students on the Disability Services student-facing webpages, including case studies and examples of how adjustments may be implemented

➤ Gain an insight into how other universities, of a comparable size to Leeds, share disability information

➤ Continue to explore ways to avoid students having to share information about their disability more than once. This aligns with the Disabled Student Commitment that calls upon universities to ensure that:

> *"Over time, students are asked only once to share information about their disability during their course of study. Students may want to update the information shared and should have opportunities to do so during their course, for the purpose of ensuring appropriate reasonable adjustments are in place."*