

# 175 A longitudinal exploration of the impact of COVID-19 on Disabled and Neurodivergent students

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## Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

## Abstract

Teaching practices adopted in Higher Education (HE) during COVID-19 had mixed impacts on equity for the learning of disabled and neurodivergent students (DaNS; Disabled Students' commission, 2021).

This project implemented multi-method real-time longitudinal research to explore the experiences of DaNS during and post-pandemic. This presentation focuses on survey data administered to a sample of DaNS and nondisabled students, across three time points, across differing COVID restrictions.

Multifactor repeated measure ANOVAS found a statistically significant difference in wellbeing, loneliness, institutional support received, feeling forgotten, sense of community and belonging, and self-advocating for needs between the DaNS and comparison group across the three time points, with DaNS consistently scoring worse than their peers on these factors.

This research provides an evidence-based overview of the longitudinal impact of the pandemic on important factors for practice and policy regarding DaNS within HE, and provides recommendations to support learning equity based on this.

## Full paper

The pandemic saw rapid changes to Higher Education (HE) delivery, and a turn to Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) with little time to adapt, and subsequently little understanding of this impact. Empirical reports regarding first-hand experiences of the pandemic for disabled and neurodivergent students studying in HE did not emerge until 17-months after the UK lockdown began (DSC, 2021); despite speculation by Disabled Students UK (2020) of issues/barriers, and knowledge of suspected vulnerability to adverse effects from this situation for these groups, including:

- 1) Disabled people being at a higher risk of mortality due to COVID-19 (Bosworth et al., 2021; Shakespeare, Ndagire & Seketi, 2021).
- 2) The pandemic being accompanied by declining mental health and wellbeing issues, with a heightened impact on wellbeing of disabled people (68% of disabled people concerned for the impact of COVID-19 on their wellbeing compared to 48% of non-disabled people; OfNS, 2022).
- 3) Disabled students required to shield in seclusion more than peers to avoid adverse effects (OfS, 2022).
- 4) Technological accessibility when learning online acting paradoxically for disabled students (Steyaert, 2006), i.e., increasing elements of accessibility generally, whilst producing other barriers for technological accessibility.
- 5) Concerns of relevant theory regarding the academic success of minority group students (Jones & Stewart, 2016); particularly considering speculated issues of technological accessibility during COVID-19 for those with accessibility requirements (Botelho, 2021).

The lack of knowledge or research exploring the experiences of learners in HE was concerning, especially when ERT presented many technology and accessibility related issues (Jili, Ede & Masuku, 2021). These circumstances raised concern about the inclusivity and needs of disabled and neurodivergent students, therefore an exploration using real-time data was necessary.

This paper overviews a project utilising a constructivist grounded theory (CGT) approach and complex multi-method design to explore the impact of COVID-19 on disabled and neurodivergent students' learning and education. Longitudinal analyses of follow-up data explore key factors which emerged regarding factors in practice and policy, and models these findings for a framework of equity.

Initial findings were gathered via 22 in-depth unstructured interviews with disabled and neurodivergent students in April-November in 2021, regarding experiences of learning in HE during the pandemic. Key concepts from interviews included institutional barriers (lack of institutional support, feeling forgotten by the institution, some issues with delivery methods or technological accessibility- leading to student having to be adaptable), psychological distress (loneliness, poor wellbeing), and social elements (reduced sense of community and belonging, self-advocating for needs), in turn, impacting students' academic satisfaction.

Interviews informed longitudinal surveys collecting data from 307 students, including 165 disabled/neurodivergent students, and 145 non-disabled/neurotypical students at three time points; January- February 2022 (during the pandemic), in March- April of 2022 (after restrictions were lifted) and October- November of 2022 (during a new academic year).

Data were analysed using one-way between group ANOVAs, and multifactor repeated measure ANOVAS to observe the differences between groups for relevant measures, and explore how scores may have changed overtime. This project further maps these changes as we emerge into a post-pandemic world, and highlights what we must bring into future practice via an informed model of equitable learning.

The ANOVAS found that there was a statistically significant difference in wellbeing, loneliness, institutional support received, feeling forgotten, sense of community and belonging, and self-advocating for needs between the two groups, across all three time points, with the students in the disabled and neurodivergent group consistently scoring worse than their non-disabled peers on these factors.

Further, Path Analyses was used to test a model of these factors, which confirmed that institutional support, community and belonging, adaptability, and having to self-advocate, all predicted academic satisfaction, both directly and through the mediation of mental health for the disabled/neurodivergent student group.

The current findings show that there were multiple elements of concern for disabled and neurodivergent students' education during the pandemic, and these elements relate to aspects of the removal of formal accommodations/ support, issues with technological accessibility causing adaptability to become important. Students were having to self-advocate for needs, whilst coping with a removal of community, sense of belonging, and other issues around wellbeing, loneliness and mental health, which are modelled to predict disabled and neurodivergent students' academic satisfaction at university. These findings demonstrate that these issues remained almost 1 academic year later, and appear more concerning for disabled and neurodivergent students in comparison to their peers. This research project works to bridge the gap between speculation, knowledge and future action, and does so via modelling and evidence-based recommendations for HE going forward.

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