

## Working with Students – Reflections from our Student Advisory Committee

May 2024

*Dan Thompson*  
*Influencing and Engagement Assistant*

The 2024 cohort of our Student Advisory Committee (SAC) met for the second time this year in April. Like many in the charity sector, Student Minds is keeping a close eye on the upcoming General Election. We have just released our [Student Mental Health Manifesto](#) and are gearing up to support students during this election period. With that in mind, our last meeting was very much focused on policy and influencing for an important year ahead.



The group discussed the experiences of disabled students, the funding of higher education institutions, and advised us on both our influencing and student engagement strategies moving forward. To run you through the meeting, I am joined by SAC member Seira who reflects on their experience volunteering with us.

### Disabled Students in Higher Education

The past decade has seen a sharp rise in the number of students disclosing a disability on their UCAS application forms. This rise can be largely attributed to a substantial increase in [students disclosing a mental health condition](#), including a 125% rise since 2019. Whatever the reasons for this (likely a mixture of the rise in mental health conditions in primary and secondary education, alongside applicants feeling more comfortable to disclose without fear of discrimination), it is clear that universities are being tasked with an increase in the number of disabled students who require additional support and reasonable adjustments.

We know that, generally, [disabled students fare worse in higher education](#) than non-disabled students; they are more likely to have lower attainment, more likely to drop out, and less likely to have 'positive outcomes' when leaving university, such as entering the graduate market or further study. Disabled students are also far less likely to access higher education in the first place. Tailored support must be provided throughout all stages of education, and the sector must do a better job of communicating the support that is available at university.

Our Student Advisers brought a range of lived and observed experiences to the discussion on disabled students. A common theme throughout was the genuine desire to provide appropriate and timely support at institutions, but a lack of resources to effectively do so, and issues of access. There were also considerable differences between higher education providers (HEP) on whether support for disabled students was implemented effectively. We urge all universities to work alongside the Office for Students to produce and carry out Access and Participation Plans to avoid a postcode lottery for disabled students, ensuring all providers offer high standards of support.

A lack of awareness was a common issue cited by SAC in relation to the Disabled Students Allowance (DSA). DSA is further funding provided by the government for students with a mental health condition, long term illness or other type of disability. Due to the allowance being grant-based, rather than a loan, in theory the system is progressive. However, there are multiple issues when it comes to access, including [considerable bureaucratic and financial burdens](#). One SAC member even stated they had not heard of DSA prior to the meeting, despite having studied at university with a mental health condition for six years.

It must also be stressed that the disabled student experience is not homogeneous - there are many intersectional barriers that arise, and stark differences in experience for different types of disability. What is clear, however, is that universities and policymakers need to continue to work towards making the higher education experience accessible and equitable for all.

Student Minds will be producing a briefing on the experiences of disabled students in higher education, with a particular focus on mental health and wellbeing, in the coming month - [sign up to our newsletter](#) to receive it straight into your inbox.

## Funding Higher Education

The financial sustainability of the higher education sector has been an increasing concern over the past few years. Whilst student numbers continue to grow, fees have been capped since 2017 and costs have risen considerably over the past couple of years. As the university sector has shifted to relying heavily on income from student fees, many institutions are now at financial risk.

International student fees, which are of course higher, have provided some financial relief recently but some universities report a [drop in international student deposits](#) due to concerns over recent policy and the future of the graduate visa. [Universities UK report that:](#)

“if the growth rate for international students were to decrease by 20 percentage points relative to university forecasts in 2024–25, 80% of universities could be in deficit in 2025–26”.

The SAC discussed the funding of higher education, alongside the current model of the student loan system. There were particular concerns over [recently announced budget cuts](#) to creative arts courses and widening participation programmes. Members argued that the value of a course should be linked to the experiences of students, not simply graduate outcomes and economic contributions.

The committee also criticised the current repayment system for students, one which saddles graduates with a large debt tied to interest, in what is essentially a graduate tax. In our Manifesto, we urge the next Government to review the repayment model to ensure payments are proportional, fair, and manageable for all graduates. We also ask that the next Government addresses the sustainability of the higher education sector, in a manner that does not produce further financial deficits for our student population.

## Influencing

Having released the [Student Mental Health Manifesto](#) on the 30th of April, Student Minds is now looking forward to the year that lies ahead. We urge all parties to adopt our policy recommendations in their own manifestos, and then look forward to working with whoever forms the next Government to move towards a mentally healthy student population and wider society.

We will, however, not be alone in our efforts. We have seen multiple organisations endorse our Manifesto, [released a blog](#) written through by our sector colleague at Centre for Mental Health, and will be running [a webinar with Student Hubs for students](#) closer to the election. If you are a student, higher education professional, VCSE sector worker, or anyone with a passion for student mental health, please visit our '[get involved](#)' page to support and share our vision for a future where every student can thrive.

## Our Student Engagement

At Student Minds we pride ourselves in genuine and inclusive student engagement. We believe that it is vital for any organisation or individual with a stake in higher education to speak to, and work with, students directly. Without a co-production approach, we lose sight of our mission and cannot truly understand the university experience. Over the years we have co-produced many specific projects with students, including the [Well Lads project](#) and the [Positive Digital Practices Panel](#), alongside our ongoing student roles, such as the SAC and our student Trustees.

We recognise that no student engagement is perfect and requires consistent reflection to grow and develop. We therefore brought our new student engagement strategy to the SAC, along with questions around their experiences with us. I urge any student who is interested

in volunteering or working with Student Minds to [sign up to our newsletter](#)- as Seira outlines below, you won't regret it!

## Reflecting on the SAC Experience

*Seira Imanova*

*SAC member, Host of Behind the Stigma Podcast, MSC in Psychology @ KCL*

If I could describe my two-year volunteer work on the Student Advisory Committee (SAC) in one word, it would be this:  
*hopeful.*

As a member of the SAC, I've gained incredible insights into forthcoming discussions within the higher education sector and mental health charities. Recognizing the significance of these conversations instils a profound sense of hope and potential for the future of student mental health.



This month, our meeting covered various topics from disability and housing to the Student Mental Health Manifesto and beyond. One topic that particularly resonated with me was ensuring inclusivity for disabled students in higher education. I advocated for a concept known as "NeuroUrbanism," which integrates neuroscience with urban planning, to create environments that support the well-being and cognitive health of individuals with disabilities, including those on the autism spectrum, those with learning disabilities, and those with severe mental health conditions.

As one example, universities could adapt their environments by designing quieter public spaces with minimal noise and softer lighting in classrooms. This could potentially help individuals on the autism spectrum reduce sensory overload and enhance their learning environments more effectively. Additionally, implementing clear signage, predictable layouts, and visual cues would assist those with spatial orientation challenges. As someone with misophonia, I value soundproof spaces that facilitate distraction-free studying, and I believe that similar accommodations could significantly improve productivity for students with similar experiences.

The prominence of these discussions within our committee is truly promising. Organisations like Student Minds are pivotal in raising awareness about the diverse needs of all students, and their structured approach aims to make higher education more inclusive and accessible. As SAC members, our ideas and experiences are genuinely listened to and considered. Each member's contributions are respected, valued, and integrated into the discussions. We understand the significance of lived experiences and advocate for their recognition in shaping tangible outcomes.

As I continue my journey with SAC, I am filled with hope and excitement for the future discussions and developments. With upcoming elections and the recent release of the student mental health manifesto, our goal is to ensure safety and support for all. Being a part of SAC for the second year has been a privilege and an eye-opening experience. I look forward to what we can accomplish together in the near future.

**Learn More**

*If you'd like to read more about our SAC, [check out our webpage](#) which introduces our members. You can sign up to our newsletter [here](#).*