

---

# Where is there an underrepresentation of different impairment types among Scottish first-degree entrants in Scottish universities?

---

Leah Dobbs (University of Glasgow)  
in collaboration with Lead Scotland

Lay Report: 2020

---



University of Glasgow | School of Education

## Introduction

This report is outlining research conducted in 2020 as part of a Masters degree in Educational Studies at the University of Glasgow. This research was conducted collaboratively with Lead Scotland, a charity dedicated to breaking down the barriers disabled people and carers face within post-school education and learning across Scotland. Currently, Lead Scotland are focusing on Scottish disabled school leavers and their destinations when finishing their school education, an important part of which for some, is attending university. When applying for university, individuals have the opportunity to provide contextual data, such as their socio-economic background, as it can indicate why an individual may not have achieved the required grades for their university offer. This may allow individuals access to their chosen university with adjusted offers if they do not meet the desired grades. As it currently stands, disability is not a contextual indicator when applying to university, despite the additional barriers disabled pupils may face whilst studying at school. The Public Sector Equality Duty in the UK Equality Act of 2010 (Equality and Human Rights Commission, N.D.) states that universities must be “encouraging people with certain protected characteristics to participate in public life or in other activities where their participation is disproportionately low”. This research has been conducted to understand if or where there may be an underrepresentation of certain impairment types among Scottish entrants with a declared disability into Scottish universities, which aims to aid Lead Scotland in helping young disabled people gain fairer and more equitable access to university in Scotland.

## Methodology

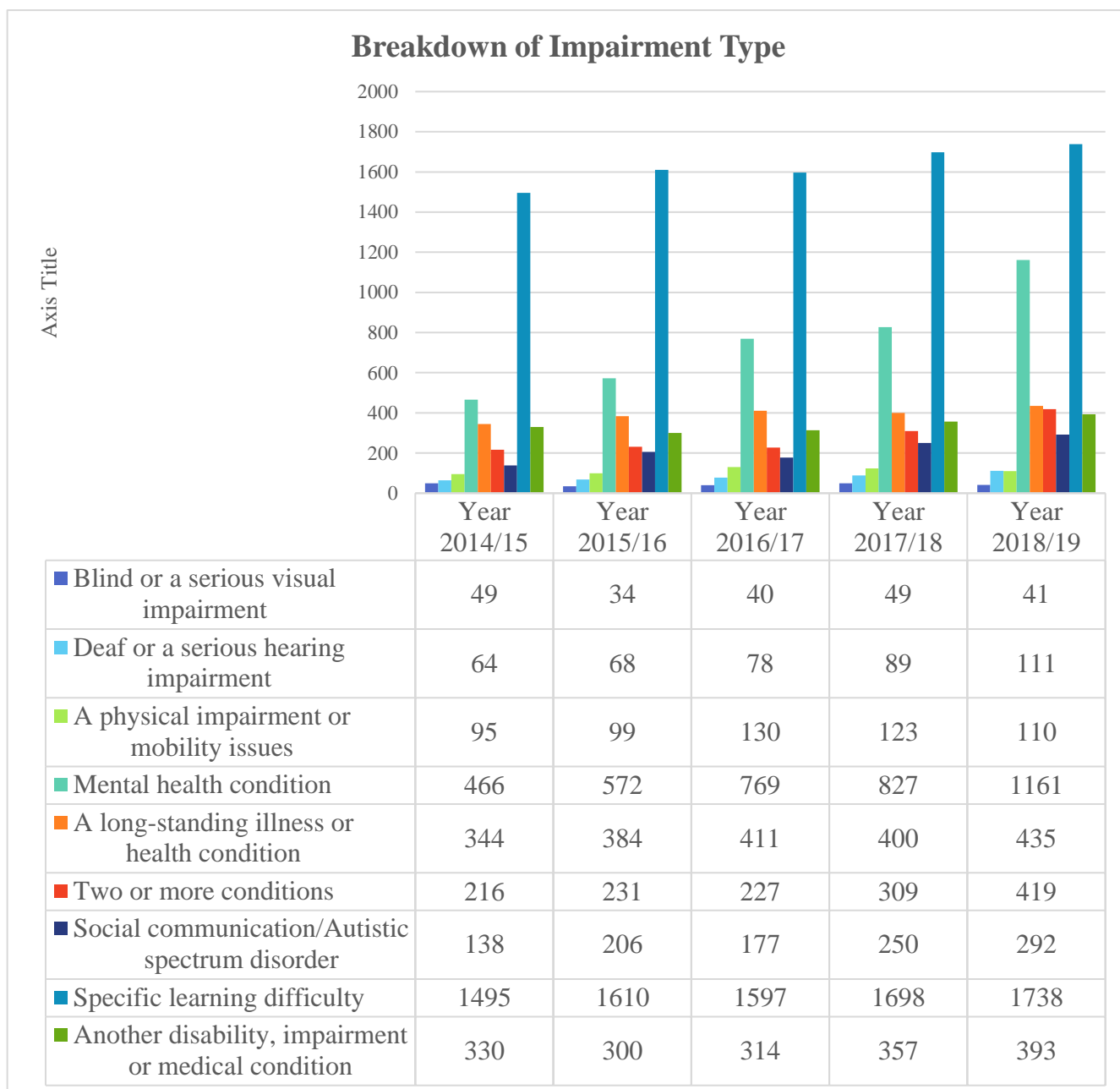
To conduct this research a freedom of information (FOI) request was made to an organisation called Jisc, who obtain data on behalf of the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). This data provided the total number of Scottish domiciled entrants from 2014 to 2018, broken down by the following: the academic year, HE provider, and disability. To conduct the analysis, the data was explored in Excel using tables and graphs for each university, giving a visual representation of the number and proportion of students with each impairment type for each university. Once each university had been analysed individually, the findings were compared with school leavers destinations data from 2017, broken down by pupils with additional needs. The number of students used for this data includes all pupils with each additional need, rather than the percentage entering Scottish university as provided in the data set. For the comparison and overall data, only first-degree entrants were analysed to try and gain an accurate comparison between entrants and school leavers. The data was then compared to understand where there may be an underrepresentation of each impairment type within each university.

## Limitations

- This research has only analysed Scottish universities, rather than other global universities Scottish individuals may have attended. This is due to the ease in access to the data and the Sutton Trust found that Scottish citizens are more likely to attend a Scottish university, rather than going elsewhere.
- When applying for university, students must self-declare their impairment type. This means some students may have chosen not to disclose their impairment and therefore the data used could not give the exact number of disabled students.
- Both the “two or more conditions” and “other” impairment types were not analysed, as the specific impairment type could not be identified.
- When comparing the HESA data with the school leavers data, the two lists of impairment types could not be directly compared as they provided different categories. For this reason, the category “Social, emotional, and behavioural difficulty (SEBD)” from the school leavers data could be applicable to several of the HESA impairment types. Despite this group being one of the largest groups of pupils within the data, it was not used in the comparison as it could not be accurately paired with the HESA impairments.

## Key Findings

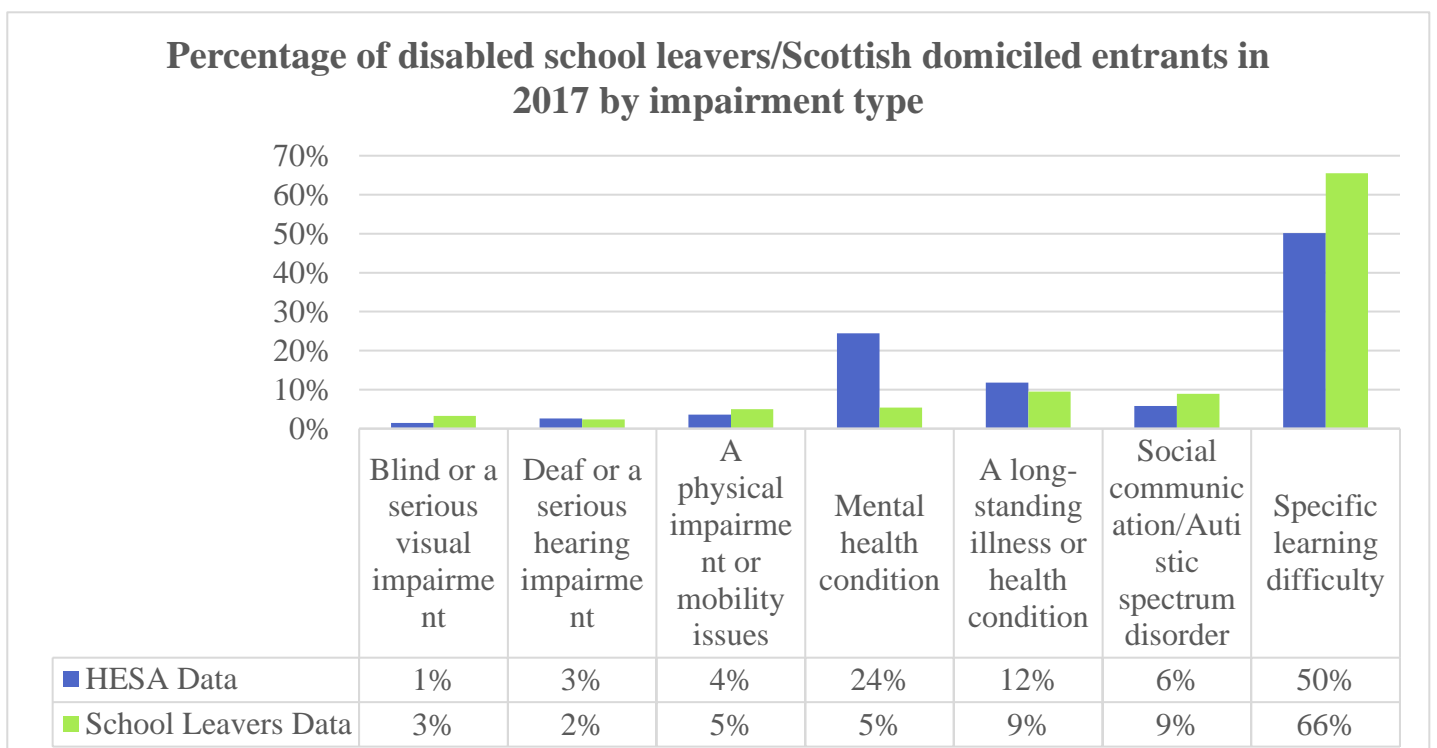
There has been a steady increase in Scottish disabled students attending university over the last five years, with 7764 entrants in 2018, accounting for 13 percent of all Scottish students. The graph below shows the breakdown of different impairment types among disabled Scottish first-degree entrants:



The chart highlights that the most common impairment type among Scottish disabled students over the last five years is a specific learning difficulty, accounting for 37 percent of students with a declared disability in 2018. The second largest proportion of disabled students are those with a mental health condition, who made up a quarter of all Scottish disabled students in 2018. This is followed by those with a long-standing illness or health condition.

The least common impairment type among Scottish students is a visual impairment, who have made up only one percent of all disabled students over the past five years. Those with a physical or serious hearing impairment accounted for two percent in 2018. Students with a social communication disorder accounted for six percent in 2018.

To better understand where there is a possible underrepresentation, the HESA data has been compared with school leavers data of all students with additional needs. The graph below displays the percentage of disabled Scottish students and disabled Scottish school leavers in 2017, broken down by impairment type:



It shows that according to the data collected, there is an underrepresentation of students with a visual impairment, physical impairment, social communication disorder, or a specified learning difficulty within Scottish university. It also suggests that there is an overrepresentation of students with a mental health condition or a long-standing health condition, despite being the two most common impairment types among Scottish disabled students.

As previously mentioned, there were categories that were left out of the data samples as they could not be accurately compared. The ‘social, emotional, and behavioural difficulty (SEBD)’ category from the school leavers data could not be accurately compared with the HESA impairment types. The Scottish Government describe this additional need as: “Pupils with a range of needs, including emotional such as depression and conduct disorders such as oppositional defiance disorder”. This could explain why there was an overrepresentation of students with mental health conditions within the research, as this sample from the school leavers data was not included. The Scottish Government also state the SEBD category could include attention deficit disorder, syndromes such as Tourette’s, or “physical, emotional, social, and communication difficulties”. These conditions all correspond with several of the HESA impairment types and could explain why the findings indicated there was an underrepresentation of social communication disorders and specific learning difficulties (despite being the largest proportion of disabled students).

The limitations to this research indicate that in order to gain an accurate depiction of the underrepresentation of different impairment types among Scottish domiciled first-degree entrants, there needs to be more accessible data that can be accurately compared.

## Policy Recommendations

**Equal Representation:** More needs to be done to ensure equal representation of students with different impairment types. As it stands, students with the following impairment types are underrepresented across all Scottish universities: visual impairments, physical impairments, social communication disorders, and specific learning difficulties.

**Increase Awareness of Different Impairments:** An increase in the awareness and understanding of the impact of different impairments on individuals would benefit the university sector. By increasing staff knowledge and understanding of how best to support disabled people hopefully more would be encouraged to access university, as this can be a large contributing factor in why disabled students do not wish to disclose their disability or attend university.

**Impairment Codes:** As outlined in the limitations, due to the different impairment codes from the school leavers destinations data and HESA data, there is no accurate way of measuring where there is an underrepresentation of students with specific impairment types. There should be one set of codes that is used across all data to help gain an accurate account of where there may be underrepresentation. Once a way has been found to accurately compare the university admissions to the school leavers data, additional research should be conducted.

**Additional Research:** first-hand research should be conducted on reasons why more individuals with certain impairments are not accessing university. Gaining a more in-depth understanding of why there may be an underrepresentation of the different impairment types will help aid making Scottish university a more inclusive environment for disabled individuals.