

Meet Our Disability Champion



Name

Maria Kelly

Institution

The University of Sheffield

Studying

Biomedical Sciences

Route into higher education

GCSEs, followed by A-levels over 3 years to manage my health

Disability

Chronic fatigue syndrome (ME/CFS)

What support did you receive from school/college about going to university?

My school was so supportive when it came to applying for university. The school helped me with extra details that were required on my UCAS application and helped me to understand applying for student finance, DSA and widening participation schemes.

I had regular meetings with my UCAS coordinator and my head of year and the head of the sixth form. Despite the fact that I had chosen to do A-levels over three years as a consequence of my health, they reassured me that this would not impact my chances of going to university.

What support did you receive from your institution prior to going to university?

Before I came to university, the disability team (DDSS) reached out to me and arranged a support meeting. The meeting was an hour long and in that time we discussed a support plan for the whole time I would be at university. This plan could be adjusted every year depending on my needs. They also ensured that my department was aware of my disability and arranged for me to have extra time in exams.

What support do you receive from your institution now?

Aside from extra time in exams, I have regular meetings with my tutor to ensure that things are running smoothly. This year has been particularly challenging because of COVID, and the university have done everything they can to make sure I am comfortable.

I have had flexibility with lab attendance and have been able to attend other sessions if I haven't felt well enough to go. Even in online exams, I have still been able to get my extra time. My learning support plan is also in place, which gives me flexibility when it comes to online classes and means I can recover without worrying too much about falling behind.

What did your parents/carers/supporters need to know when you applied? (or what were their concerns?)

Naturally, my parents were worried about me going to university. They believed I would be better staying at home for uni and wanted me to go somewhere local, but I was really attracted to the course at Sheffield and the city itself. It took quite a bit of reassurance but by communicating with them, they realised that my disability couldn't hold me back. They were so supportive and I am very grateful for that.

When I was applying, they wanted to know more about the DSA application process, my learning support plan and what support I would get, and we needed to ensure that my accommodation and buildings were accessible for me.

Was there support on offer for parents/carers/supporters?

There has been a lot of support available for us as a family. The university has been very understanding when it comes to making decisions around my health, and these decisions are never made without me consulting my parents. I have received counselling whilst at uni and I have been able to bring my parents to the sessions. This has allowed them to access support and figure out the best ways to help me.

My parents found the reassurance from the university to be one of the most helpful things. Once my learning support plan was in place and my DSA funding was approved, they were much more relaxed and felt that I was going to an institution that offered me a lot of support. My counselling has also helped them to understand some of the hurdles I have experienced and this has allowed them to support and encourage me to the best of their abilities.

What advice would you give parents/carers/supporters who are helping their young person consider or apply to higher education?

Always offer support. Having a good support network is vital for any disabled student applying for university. Going through UCAS and sorting out student finance and DSA applications is scary, particularly if you have a disability or illness.

Furthermore, ask questions. Get in touch with the institution your child is interested in and speak to someone who deals with disabilities at the university as this can help to put your mind at rest.

Communication between parents and children is key - it is important that you raise your concerns and worries with your child but keep this constructive. If your child is set on an institution, making sure that they get the right support whilst they are there will be a source of huge appreciation!

Did you have any concerns about applying to higher education? If so, what were they?

The idea of applying for student finance and DSA terrified me. I was particularly worried about applying for DSA because I thought it would be like a PIP application, but I couldn't have been more wrong. The DSA team were amazing and so supportive, and made sure I would get all of the support I could possibly need, including new equipment and software.

Applying for university through UCAS was also scary - in comparison to my peers, I had two less GCSEs and my A-levels had taken me three years instead of two. I thought that universities would see this as an issue, but my school made it clear in my reference that this was purely down to my disability and I still got into my firm choice university.

What would you say to your 18 year old self?

Worry less. The fact that you have a disability will not stop you from attending university and it does not limit your chances of attending higher education. If you have any concerns, raise them and make sure you really understand how the university can support you before you go there in September. Equally, don't let your disability get in the way of enjoying yourself!

Make the most of the opportunities you are given at university - make friends, explore the city, have a night out.

What advice would you give to someone who has a disability about progressing into higher education?

If you want to attend university, don't hesitate. There are thousands of disabled students up and down the country, so don't let it stop you from achieving your dreams! There are opportunities to discuss support with the right people and you will not be disadvantaged.

There are also some really great student support networks at university, for example the disabled students societies. If you are concerned about attending university, make a plan for going and consider how you will overcome possible hurdles and setbacks so they don't feel as daunting.

What is your top tip?

If I could only give one piece of advice to disabled students, it would be to reach out when you need help. Everyone at university wants you to achieve your best, and if your health is getting in the way of this temporarily, there are loads of options you could consider.

At one point, I felt that I wouldn't be able to continue with university, so I spoke to my tutor. He gave me so many options and put me in contact with lots of different people before I made such a huge decision.

By getting this support, I realised that I really didn't want to leave university, but I needed to come up with a plan to manage my condition better. Since doing this, I have thrived at university, and you can too!



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