

Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb i ymgynghoriad y Pwyllgor Cydraddoldeb a Chyfiawnder Cymdeithasol ar Anabledd a Chyflogaeth

This response was submitted to the Equality and Social Justice Committee consultation on Disability and Employment

DE12

**Ymateb gan: Cymdeithas y Gwasanaethau Cyngori ar Yrfaeodd Graddedig |
Response from: Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS)**



Senedd Cymru's Equality and Social Justice Committee inquiry into the disability employment and payment gap

About this response

- [AGCAS](#) is the expert membership organisation for higher education (HE) student career development and graduate employment professionals. Through our members, we represent 165 HE institutions, including all 8 institutions based in Wales and the Open University in Wales, and we support the best possible career outcomes for individuals, institutions, society and the economy.
- This response was prepared by Claire Toogood, Research and Insights Manager at AGCAS, working with Claire Hudson and Jo Jenkins from the Student Futures team at Cardiff University.
 - Claire Toogood is Research and Insights Manager at AGCAS. Claire is the author of the 2024 What Happens Next? report which focused on the outcomes of disabled graduates during 2020 and 2021. Claire was also a co-author on ENGAGE: Enhancing Neurodivergent Graduates' Access to Graduate Employment. Claire's earlier research focused on workplace inclusivity, using qualitative research methodologies to support evidence-informed leadership, management and staff development practices.
 - Claire Hudson is a Careers Adviser at Cardiff University and holds the lead remit for disability.
 - Jo Jenkins is a Business Partner at Cardiff University and holds the lead remit for supporting students underrepresented in HE.
 - The response has been compiled using additional contributions from careers services across Welsh Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).
- University careers services have a vital role in supporting disabled students whilst at university and beyond, embedding employability into curriculum, and delivering information, advice and guidance activities that ensure disabled students and graduates have the tools they need to realise their potential and gain employment in roles that fit with their career plan. AGCAS member services across the UK are recognised in the sector as leaders in this field, offering innovative initiatives and support for disabled students and graduates. AGCAS actively supports sharing of best practice through its [Disability Task Group](#).
- For the past two decades AGCAS has reported on the first destinations of disabled graduates, through the regular [What Happens Next? \(WHN\) report](#), which provides valuable insights into the impact a disability can have on a graduate's prospects in the labour market. WHN is recognised and cited across the HE sector and beyond as the authoritative source on outcomes for disabled graduates. For example, recent WHN reports have been referenced in the [Buckland Review](#), the [Disabled Student Commitment](#), and by the [Office for Students](#). AGCAS have also qualitatively researched the experiences of disabled graduates, most recently in the [Enhancing Neurodivergent Graduates' Access to Graduate Employment \(ENGAGE\)](#) project. This participatory research was funded by Research England and delivered by the University of Southampton, Lancaster University, and AGCAS. Further work, funded by the Royal

Society of Chemistry, is currently underway to explore the career journeys of neurodivergent students in the chemical sciences.

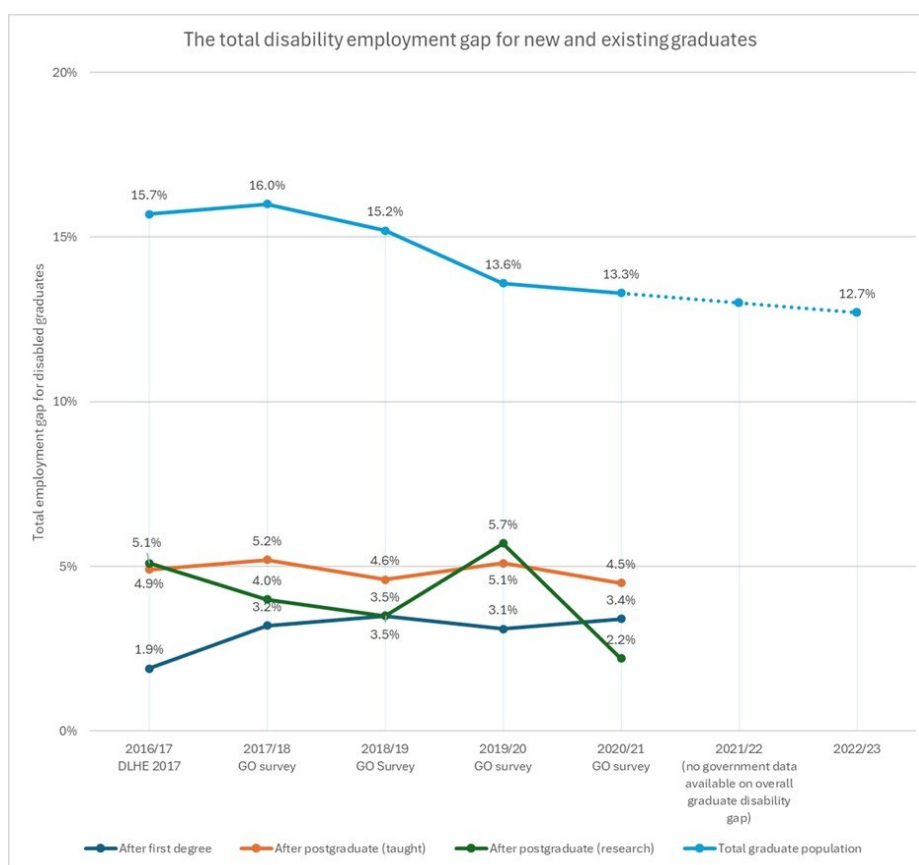
- In this response, the data from these AGCAS reports and projects is combined with practical experiences and examples from Welsh HEIs, to share what we know about the disability employment gap for graduates, what progress has been made, and what more could be done to reduce and remove barriers to employment faced by disabled student and graduates. Due to the nature of our work and membership our response focuses on students and graduates, and work within HE, but these findings are likely to be applicable to other groups and settings. Our response is divided into headed sections for four of the inquiry's terms of reference, where we have valuable data to share.

Executive summary

- HEIs across Wales work collaboratively with employers, government bodies, charities and other stakeholders to deliver the recommendations set out in the 'Locked Out' report and to reduce and remove barriers faced by disabled people. This includes targeted interventions and activities for their own students and graduates, cross-institutional events and resources, and wider civic engagement and support for disabled people.
- The Targeted Employability Support Scheme (TESS) is particularly valuable in supporting institutional and HE sector level work by careers and employability experts. A key consideration raised by these experts is the need for consistency of support for students across Wales alongside flexibility that allows for personal support.
- Wider dissemination of the 'Locked Out' report would also help HE staff to implement the report's recommendations, along with mandated accessible recruitment practices across Wales and increased support and resources for employers.
- AGCAS research shows that the disability employment gap is consistent, with little change in recent years. AGCAS works with its members, the HE sector, charities and government stakeholders, to highlight and research the employment gap and share evidence-informed practice that can help to reduce and remove barriers experienced by disabled students and graduates.
- Further comprehensive research on the career outcomes of disabled students and graduates in Wales is needed to inform future policy decisions. We also call for funding and support for HEIs and employers to explore and develop practical interventions such as more specialist disability careers advisors, a national mentoring programme for disabled students and graduates, and work experience simulations.

What progress has been made to deliver the recommendations set out in the ‘Locked Out’ report and to reduce and remove barriers faced by disabled people who want to access Wales’s labour market. Why progress to reduce the employment and pay disability gap has been so difficult to achieve.

1. Welsh HEIs have noted that insufficient dissemination of key reports like "Locked Out" hinders the effective implementation of recommendations.
2. The Locked Out report noted a recorded employment rate among disabled people in Wales aged 16 to 64 of 48.5%. The equivalent figure for those not disabled was 80.6%. Data from WHN covers the UK and cannot currently be disaggregated by nation. However, this also shows a consistent disability employment gap for UK graduates, illustrated in the graph below:



3. [Data from the Department for Work & Pensions](#) shows that across the whole UK graduate population in 2023, non-disabled graduates are 12.7 percentage points more likely to be in work than disabled graduates. That can be seen in the light blue line at the top of this graph. Positively, this figure has been slowly dropping over recent years, but it is still a significant gap between the disabled and non-disabled graduate population.
4. The three lines at the bottom of the graph show the total disability employment gap for disabled graduates since 2017 by level of qualification. The green line has the most inconsistency, and this represents postgraduate research students, where smaller populations can mean more changeable outcomes. The darker blue line shows disabled graduates after their first degree, and the orange line above that shows outcomes for postgraduate taught degrees. Outcomes for both groups show little change over recent years, and a persistent disability employment gap.

5. We currently do not know why the total employment gap experienced by disabled graduates during their working life is greater than the gap that they initially experience as a new graduate. The data potentially indicates that the obstacles and challenges faced by disabled graduates worsen with time, leading them to leave the workforce. The Locked Out report also noted the multiple factors that affect disabled people accessing work and in work in Wales. Further systematic work to understand the collective impact of these factors will be vital for meaningful action and change.
6. The [open data available from HESA](#)¹ allows preliminary examination of the differences in outcomes for disabled graduates and graduates with no known disability for those originally domiciled in Wales, across all qualification levels in 2021/22. This gives an initial indication of the graduate disability employment gap for Welsh graduates.

Graduate Outcomes	Known disability	No known disability
Employment and further study	13%	11%
Full-time employment	50%	62%
Full-time further study	6%	5%
Other including travel, caring for someone or retired	9%	5%
Part-time employment	14%	11%
Part-time further study	1%	0%
Unemployed	5%	3%
Voluntary or unpaid work	2%	1%

7. The table shows that graduates with a disability are less likely to be in full-time employment, and more likely to be unemployed. AGCAS recognises that full-time employment may not be the goal for all graduates, as the reasons for HE participation are complex and individual. For those who do want to access employment, this gap is concerning, and shows the continuation of barriers for graduates from Wales.
8. The WHN report recommended that we must maintain focus on the total employment gap for disabled graduates, and that HE institutions should review their long-term employability support for recent graduates to help mitigate any additional barriers to successful graduate transition, prioritising support for disabled graduates to prevent the compounding of existing inequalities of outcome. This aligns to the recommendations of the Locked Out report around prioritisation of services for disabled people in Wales. AGCAS strongly support additional action and professional careers staff, resources and interventions to deliver this. We also note the need for data to be disaggregated by nation to support work in this area and will review how we can support this in future activities and publications.

¹ Open data sourced from [Table 5 in “Graduates' activities and characteristics”](#), selecting all graduates with known outcomes at all levels and modes of study for students in any country who were domiciled in Wales, including all “Interim study” statuses. Please note this table has been produced using rounded data and is therefore not directly comparable to the WHN report which is produced from the unrounded dataset. Rounded data may create small inaccuracies and uncertainties, further analysis would be needed for definitive data on the Welsh graduate disability employment gap.

9. HEIs in Wales have been working to deliver the recommendations set out in the 'Locked Out' report and to reduce and remove barriers faced by disabled people. Some of this work is delivered through the Targeted Employability Support Scheme (TESS) which is funded by MEDR, the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research. The aim of the funding is to support the employability of students from groups under-represented in HE (including disabled students) or from lower socio-economic backgrounds who are least likely to have positive employment outcomes when they graduate. TESS aims to help students reach their potential and achieve their goals and aspirations through tailored support. The support may differ across institutions as HEIs have been given the flexibility to design support based on their own students' needs. Support can include:
- Tailored work experience designed for students' specific circumstances and career goals.
 - Personalised career guidance to discuss career options and plan next steps.
 - Financial assistance for training costs and expenses such as travel, subsistence, clothing, and assistive software.
 - Access to mentoring, coaching, peer support and employability events to build students social capital.
10. A careful balance is required between consistency that ensures all students and graduates can access the same level of support across Wales, and flexibility that allows for personal support tailored by institution and individual, particularly when working online to ensure that students have access to suitable technology.
11. HEIs use the expertise and experience of staff within internal departments such as Career Services, Disability Services, Student Unions, and their curriculum employability leads, to offer bespoke support for their disabled students and graduates. They also collaborate externally, offering students networking opportunities with organisations such as Disability Wales, Welsh Government's Disability Champions, DWP, Change 100 and Scope.
12. Welsh HEIs work collaboratively and events are regularly offered to all students across Wales, not limited to students from their own HEI. HEIs in Wales have formed a national TESS group and regional sub-groups with at least one representative from each institution. This allows sharing of information across HEIs and supports collaborative work. The national TESS group worked to develop an online resource, [The Employability e-Hub - Your Career Navigator](#), which encourages students to consider the valuable skills they have because of their life experiences.

How the social model of disability is being used to underpin employment and recruitment practices, and what barriers continue to exist throughout society that impact on access to work (i.e. transport, attitudes).

13. The ENGAGE project found continued barriers for neurodivergent graduates, particularly in relation to how they perceived themselves or how they felt they would be perceived in the workplace. The majority of participants felt they would not be sufficiently accommodated and that employers would not understand their neurodivergence. Consequently, just over half indicated being happy to share information about neurodivergence with employers. In relation to recruitment, just over half of

neurodivergent graduates agreed that they were able to perform well at interview, and only a third felt they would perform well in assessment centres. Therefore, although the social model may underpin employment and recruitment practices, neurodivergent individuals may not feel comfortable to disclose their needs, and subsequently be unable to access reasonable adjustments and support. This may also apply to other disabled individuals. Support to understand and manage conversations around disclosure needs to be addressed in any policy and decision-making. This also aligns to the findings of the WHN report, where AGCAS noted the need for more qualitative data on disability disclosure during and after HE participation.

14. In addition to concern over disclosing needs, Welsh HEIs report that many students are unaware they can ask for adjustments and support in the recruitment process and workplace, and do not know what support would be helpful to them. In response to this, Welsh HEIs have organised events with disabled alumni and disability confident employers so that students can hear directly how graduates have approached discussions around disclosure, their rights under the Equality Act 2010, and the support available from disability confident employers.
15. Some HEIs have specific action groups guiding service delivery, for example, the Open University in Wales has a Mental Health Action Group which includes staff and student representatives. This group informs service delivery, with recent recommendations resulting in enhanced staff training and the development of a “Mental health and your career” webinar incorporating employer insights.
16. HEIs in Wales note the following ongoing barriers:
 - Transport remains a challenge, particularly for students in rural areas. Hybrid or virtual opportunities can be more effective in these cases.
 - Employers may lack the capacity or confidence to support disabled students. Work experience can be a key way for employers to understand the benefits of a diverse workforce, and the valuable skills, experience and capitals of disabled students and graduates.
 - High caseloads for careers advisers in HEIs can hinder the provision of tailored support, negatively affecting disabled students and graduates.

How effective Welsh Government actions (e.g. the network of Disability Employment Champions and apprenticeships) have been in reducing barriers to employment and reducing the employment gap between disabled and non-disabled people, including the extent to which Welsh Government policies complement/ duplicate/ undermine those set by the UK Government.

17. Welsh Government actions, such as TESS and apprenticeships, have made positive steps towards reducing employment barriers. However, progress is mixed. Uncertainty around future funding of initiatives and fixed term contracts for staff delivering support, can limit potential impacts and lead to high staff turnover. The employment gap of disabled students remains significant, highlighting the need for more integrated efforts and long-term financial commitment from Welsh Government.

18. Some HEIs invite Disability Employment Champions and DWP Disability Work Coaches to careers events to raise awareness of the support they provide after graduation to transition to employment. Feedback shows that these organisations welcome the opportunity to engage with disabled students and students themselves value the additional support, although engagement and attendance can be challenging. Inviting wider university staff e.g. disability staff networks and frontline student support staff to these events has also been positive, enhancing overall staff awareness of wider support.
19. In addition to supporting students and graduates, HEIs can provide supported internships. For example, Cardiff University provides supported internships in a range of roles across the university for young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, in partnership with Cardiff and the Vale College and Elite, as part of the [What is Internships Work? project from NDTi](#). This highlights how HEIs work in conjunction with their communities in line with [the Civic Mission of Universities Wales](#), delivering civic engagement and impact and benefitting young disabled people.

What further policy measures are needed to support disabled people, young disabled people and employers to increase participation rates and what can be learned from elsewhere.

20. It is important to highlight that the experiences and outcomes of disabled students vary widely. The [most recent WHN report](#) shows that graduates with specific learning difficulties, which can include dyslexia, dyspraxia and/or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), reported levels of full-time employment that were higher than those of graduates with no known disability. Autistic graduates experienced the lowest levels of full-time employment at all qualification levels. They also frequently experienced higher part-time employment and unemployment, and lower levels of highly skilled work and secure employment contracts.
21. One of the recommendations from the WHN report was the urgent need for collaborative research and data on the experiences and outcomes of autistic graduates, which centres the voices of autistic people. This further demonstrates the vital importance of policy underpinned by the social model of disability, which facilitates consideration of the barriers experienced by an individual or group, and how to recognise and remove those barriers.
22. An example of this focused approach can be seen in the ENGAGE project. Through qualitative work, we found that neurodivergent graduates across the UK experienced employment success through early career exploration and/or work experience during or after their degree programme, which helped them to develop a sense of confidence in the skills that they could bring to the workplace. Identifying the factors like this, that support success, should inform future policy measures. AGCAS therefore recommend evidence-based, focused careers support and resources for disabled people across Wales, delivered by qualified careers professionals, with the impact of this intervention measured and evaluated.

23. In the WHN report, AGCAS also recommended that all bodies collecting quantitative data on graduate outcomes should look to ensure parity of data between disabled graduates and graduates with no known disability, as well as providing a breakdown of data by disability type to highlight variance amongst the outcomes of disabled graduates. We therefore recommend that all policy measures in Wales seek to ensure this parity of data, and breakdown of data, for the disabled population.

24. TESS is working well to support disabled students, it is also enabling employers to see the benefits of employing a disabled student or graduate and the perspective and skills they offer. In addition to expanding TESS, further measures recommended by careers and employability experts in Welsh HEIs include:

- Offer targeted programs incorporating both academic learning and practical skills in schools and vocational settings to prepare young disabled people for the workforce.
- Mandate accessible recruitment practices for all employers, including adaptive technologies, flexible interview formats and offering questions in advance. This would remove the need for early disclosure and specific requests for reasonable adjustments for many individuals.
- Establish national mentorship programs to guide disabled individuals through career paths.
- Develop specific and flexible funding for both individuals and employers, to support internships, and encourage flexible work experience opportunities that do not negatively impact benefit entitlements.
- Use virtual reality to provide experiences that build confidence and simulate workplace scenarios, addressing location and accessibility barriers.
- Increase collaboration among agencies, including the HE sector, to collectively support disabled individuals.
- Establish minimum expectations and standards across Welsh HEIs to ensure consistent support for disabled students.
- Conduct comprehensive research on the career outcomes of disabled students and graduates in Wales to inform future policy decisions.
- All HEIs should become Disability Confident Employers and lead the way for local businesses to follow suit.

[REDACTED]

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