

# Low expectations are stopping young disabled people going to university

June 27 2018, by Stella Chatzitheochari And Lucinda Platt

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Almost half of all young people in England now go on to higher education. This means that teenagers in the UK are [more likely to go to university](#) than ever before.

[Official figures](#) reveal that 49% of students in England are expected to

enter advanced studies by the age of 30. But our new research shows that students with special educational needs and disabilities are far less likely to go to university [than those with no known disabilities](#).

Our [study](#) investigated the different factors influencing disabled young people's attainment. We examined data from a [longitudinal survey](#) of about 16,000 young people in England, linked with administrative data on [school](#) performance. Our analysis covered young people with [special educational needs](#) and those with long-term mental and physical conditions.

We found that only 26% of disabled students achieve five A\* to C grades at GCSE – including English and maths – compared to 67% of their non-disabled peers. Among those disabled students who did achieve five A\* to C GCSEs, 75% chose to continue to A-Levels – compare this with 85% of non-disabled students.

Our findings also reveal that this attainment gap between disabled and non-disabled peers was formed before pupils started at secondary school – and could be seen in test scores at age 11. This was the case even though few of the conditions among the disabled [children](#) we studied implied cognitive impairment.

## **Low expectations**

The reason for this is clearly seen in previous research, which demonstrates how expectations [influence educational trajectories](#), over and above school attainment. Our research supports this, as we found that disabled students are ten percentage points more likely to have low educational expectations compared to non-disabled peers with similar school performance. For disabled students, expectations accounted for more than a quarter of the decision not to continue on to studying A-Levels – despite achieving the required GCSEs.

But our analysis also showed that young people's educational expectations are highly dependent on those of their parents. And we found that generally, disabled young people's parents held lower expectations for their child's future – regardless of their actual performance.

Earlier research suggests that parents of disabled children may become overprotective and anxious about their child's future. Parents' suppressed expectations may well be because of fears surrounding the higher risk of discrimination and stigma at [university](#) and [the workplace](#) for disabled people. Our [earlier research](#) also shows that disabled young people in England are more likely to suffer from [school bullying](#). But in our latest research, it did not seem that bullying was a factor in those pupils deciding not to study for A-levels.

## **Change in attitudes**

Ultimately though, these results highlight the shortcomings of [primary school education](#) to adequately support disabled children's academic progress in England. So given the fact that the majority of disabled children fall behind in primary school and never catch up, it is clear that a rethink of the teaching support provided to disabled children is needed.

Universities could also better promote themselves among highly achieving disabled students – and further support and guidance within school could help. This could help to decrease the numbers of students who succeed but don't proceed.

Our research also shows that positive expectations could make all the difference. In this way then, parents of [disabled children](#) could benefit from more support to help them gain a better understanding of the impact of expectations on [young people's](#) life choices. But of course, expectations are not formed in a vacuum, which is why a major change

in societal attitudes is also crucial to tackling inequality.

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