International students with disabilities (SwD) experiences of UK higher education

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Overview

- This slide deck provides an overview of feedback from British Council international alumni with disabilities concerning their experiences of disability inclusion while studying as students at a UK higher education institution.

- The feedback was generated via a pilot survey developed for the British Council and undertaken between June – August 2024.

International students with disabilities (ISwD)

Disability Inclusion (DI): the extent to which ISwD felt they had equal access to HE and equal opportunities to do well.

Evans & Zhu, 2022, p. 4)

The pilot survey was informed by:

- the Disability Inclusion Institutional Framework (DIIF) 12 core themes

- focused interviews with ISwD on their experiences of UK HE

1	Leadership Capacity	Shared Ownership
2	Evidence-Informed	
3	Embedded Evaluation	
4	Integrated Delivery	
5	Clear Communication	Empowerment
6	Enabling Student/ Staff Voice	
7	Disability Inclusion Training	
8	Enabling Access /Accommodations	
9	Inclusive Learning and Teaching	Independence
10	Assistive Technologies	
11	Transitions Support	
12	Promoting Self-advocacy	

Disability Inclusion Institutional Framework
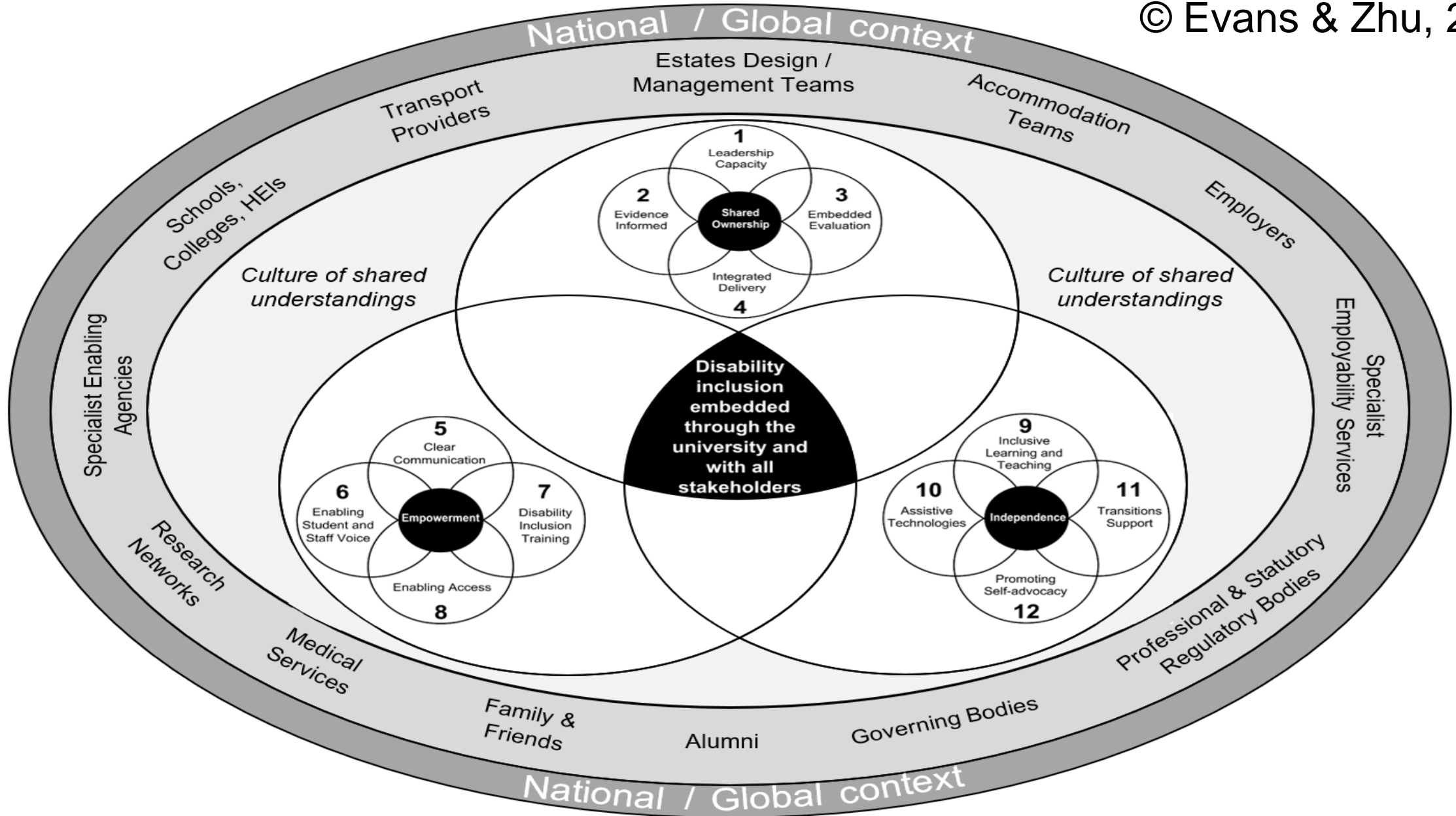
ISwD Characteristics (n=72)

- 27 countries represented with over 46% originating from Nigeria, Pakistan, and India.
  - > 40% from S and E Asia
  - 33% from Middle East and African countries
  - 13% from Europe,
  - 7% from Central and South America,
  - 6% from US and Canada, and < 1.5% from Oceania.

- Mainly working in education, business and health-related occupations

Where and What did ISwD Study

- ISwD studied at 42 universities in the UK, with 39% of these being Russell Group institutions.
  - 31% had studied in the UK on more than one occasion.
- 91% studied at postgraduate level, with 75% of these at masters level.
- 55% studied social sciences, 17% arts and humanities, 14% medicine, 14% STEM subjects.
- 38% had studied at a UK university in the last 5 years.

Reasons for Study Choices

- Disciplinary excellence, academic reputation and research world ranking were the main reasons for choice of HE, followed by recommendations from friends and family.

- 44% had scholarships, 30% were self-funded; 15% had a combination of self-funding and scholarship, and 11% were sponsored (government/employer).

ISwD Individual Characteristics

NATURE OF DISABILITY:
- 23% disclosed physical disabilities; 15% mental health; 13% specific learning difficulties; 11% long-term health conditions; 10% visual impairments; 6% hearing impairments, and 6.5% two or more disabilities.

AGE: Range 21 to > 62 (47% between 21-41; 47% between 42-61).

GENDER: 52% identified as male, 45% as female; 3% non-binary

ISwD Perspectives on Disability

Interactional model: disability as the result of an interaction between a person, their impairment, and environmental and attitudinal barriers (i.e., we are disabled by our bodies and by societal barriers to inclusion).

35% aligned with this view

Social model: Disability is the result of societal barriers rather than a person's impairment or medical diagnosis.

28% aligned with this view

Medical model: Disability as a deficit; it is about proving what we cannot do.

20% aligned with this view

ISwD Identity

Students with disabilities — Favoured by 51%

Disabled students — Favoured by 10%

Do not define themselves in terms of their disability. — Favoured by 33%

ISwD Experiences of UK HE

ISwD mainly very positive in relation to:

- the way disability is viewed in UK HEIs and wider society compared to their home country

- levels of supports available

- the infrastructure to support DI at the HEI and more widely

BUT significant variations across the sector and especially for those with physical disabilities in accessing sites

Emergent Themes

- Disability is multi-layered and personal: 'Barriers are not the same, advocacy is different, and also prejudice is different.'

- Concerns about disclosure especially for those with hidden disabilities (46% of the sample).

- Different ways in which disability is viewed in UK compared to country of origin

- Not knowing how DI worked in the UK

- Barriers to learning

- Self- and shared advocacy required by ISwD and HEIs

Transition into UK HE Challenges

- addressing basic needs (housing, transport, medical access, bank accounts etc.)

- not knowing how DI worked in UK HEIs

- navigating how things worked

- physical access issues to buildings, VLEs, social events

- getting the right supports and at the right time

- course design and assessment concerns

- Confidence and sense of self

Cultural/Personal Adjustment

'The biggest cultural adjustment I had to make was to adjust my mind that in UK I will get support if I need one at the course of my study.'

- 54% ISwD were contacted by their universities to offer DI support

- 46% ISwD initiated contact with their HEI to ask about DI support.

Cultural/Personal Adjustment

- Culture shock in relation to differences in how DI is perceived in the UK compared to country of origin.

- Dual challenge of fitting into a new cultural setting while also navigating identity in a different societal context.

- Lack of awareness of how systems worked in UK and consequences of disclosure.

- Learning how to advocate for needs within a very different system and while managing multiple identities.

- Masking in one country and not in another in navigating systems adeptly

- Knowing when to shift to which persona

Disclosure

< 50% disclosed a disability at point of application

- 'Don't like explaining so have to endure' – constant weighing up of implications but can come at a cost

- 'Working around not disclosing' – effort involved

- 'Balancing the need for support with the desire for privacy and self-reliance would have been a significant factor in my decision '

- 'Need to be less self reliant'

Importance of universities reaching out, explaining process and implications of disclosure

'In a one to one call all hesitation of disclosure was removed'

Having to research what supports were available and how to access them…

'adjustment was not made until I became aware of the supportive services available.' This seemed like common knowledge but not common to non-UK individuals.'

Navigating Support Systems

'While the UK offers robust support for students with disabilities, understanding and accessing these resources initially was overwhelming.'

'Adapting to the structured and institutionalized support systems available… navigating this transition was multifaceted. It involved not only adjusting to a new educational environment but also understanding and leveraging the comprehensive support systems in the UK.'

Navigating Supports

Universities should acknowledge that students may be unaware of the support available or how to arrange these accommodations and recognise the challenges experienced by disabled students when support available at previous institutions is no longer provided…

Brewer et al. (2023, p. 13)

Overload

'**the physical and emotional labour involved in navigating systems** –registration, navigating online platforms and timetabling, resources, submitting assignments; navigating support systems; learning how to use assistive technologies on one's own and the effort involved in integrating supports into daily living.'

- **75% of ISwD noted that at no point in their studies were they asked what could be done to enhance their learning experience** (n = 55).

Barriers to Learning

Sense of being valued/ equality concerns	Perceptions of bias, discrimination, or inequities within the academic community
Lack of empathy	Lack of recognition or support for the unique challenges I faced
Social isolation	Time taken up navigating systems impacts engagement with others
Sense of belonging	Lack of awareness and sensitivity to difference, and lack of empathy within the community
Needs not realised	Lack of support relative to needs Lack of support in accessing and navigating assistive technologies
Locked out and hard labour to get in	Physical access not possible or time consuming – emotionally exhausting

Self-regulating ISwD

76% of sample engaged in advocacy work (n = 55)

- Belief in, and understanding of, self
- Confidence - previous achievements
- Competence- intellectual capacity
- Has perspective - positive attitude – resilient and flexible
- Networked
- Able to identify with others in the space
- Strong communication with disability support services
- Willingness to engage
- Able to fill 'gaps in provision'
- Active advocates for disability inclusion for self and others

Supporting Self-regulation

88% of ISwD did not receive any training on how best to advocate for their disability needs (n = 50).

90% of ISwD would have valued training on self-advocacy (n = 50).

Supportive Organisational Cultures

- **Supporting drive for success of all** - equal opportunities - supporting ISwD rights

- **Acknowledgement of disability** - good communications from disability support - regular consultation

- **Good practical support** – e.g., navigating campus - accessibility of resources/facilities- – advocacy supports

- **Supportive lecturers and peers** - small group teaching - time extensions

Supporting ISwD Networking

- **Being invited** – extra-curricular activities -supportive lecturers

- **Being included** – engagement in unit meetings, conferences etc.

- **Structured social activities** - sensitive to the needs of specific disabilities

- **Access** to internships in UK and overseas - to academic exchange activities - to international alumni network via faculty…..

Transitions into HE Recommendations

- Transitions viewed as an ongoing process and not a point in time.

- Early identified contact point to explain how DI works.

- Better awareness of ISwD context (country of origin and nature of disability).

- Route map to navigate different sources of support.

- Opportunities for ISwD to enrol at earlier date to have time to familiarise themselves with UK context.

Learning in HE Recommendations

- Focus on academic and social supports.

- Course well organised with all resources available and accessible at start of course.

- Specialist and academic support in place at start of course, and aligned to disability needs.

- Training in assistive technologies prior to start of course.

- Reasonable assessment adjustments agreed at start of course/ preferably already inbuilt.

- Access to academic mentoring

- Access to networking opportunities

Challenges with Employment

'don't fit into the system'

Reverse culture shock- familiar but also unfamiliar

Societal attitudinal barriers

Managing discrimination and limited career opportunities

Infrastructure differences

Transitions out of HE Recommendations

- Need for specialist career support

- Workplace learning opportunities

- Access to internships

- Network development

- Advocacy support around navigating the job market

Associated Resources

- Disability in the UK Report

- ISwD survey summary

- Supporting International ISwD UK Higher Education Transitions Checklist

- Appendix A: Making the most of your studies – advice from British Council international alumn with disabilities