

Disability Inclusion in UK Higher Education

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Defining Disability Inclusion

Disability Inclusion (DI): the extent to which students with disabilities (SwD) feel they have equal access to higher education (HE) and equal opportunities to do well.

[Evans & Zhu\(2022,p.4\)](#)

Overview

- Disability Inclusion (DI) context in UK HE
- Leveraging change
- Key considerations in moving practice forward

Our Panel

Dr Hamied Haroon

(University of Manchester, UK)

Maurie van den Heever

(Heriot-Watt University alumnus based in South Africa)

Dr Juuso Nieminen

(Deakin University, Australia)

Professor Anica Zeyen

(Royal Holloway University of London)

While there has been significant progress in disability inclusion in UK Higher Education....

- Disability inclusion remains the poor relation in the inclusion agenda although it is much better for students than staff.
- Students with disabilities (SwD) do not have equal access to HE or employment.
- Access to HE for students is highly variable across the sector.
- Research on DI for students is limited.
- Experiences of disability inclusion are varied across different types of disability, other intersectional characteristics, and across spaces and time.
- Delays in DSA assessment of 5 months+ means many SwD lose access to much of the first year of study.

Staff Experiences of DI

“The university takes responsibility for ensuring an inclusive and accessible working environment reducing the need for staff with disabilities to have to advocate for their needs”.

(NDSS DIIF Survey, Evans 2024-5)

- 8% of staff strongly agreed, 56% strongly disagreed in a national survey of 840 participants.
- 121 out of 127 institutions (95%) were given a rating of 1 or 2 (strongly disagree) by staff.

Not a Level Playing Field for Students

- 47% of SwD come from the most advantaged areas versus 8% from the most disadvantaged (UCAS, 2022).
- Those with physical impairments or challenges with mobility tend to be placed at lower tariff providers closer to home, regardless of their qualifications (UCAS, 2022).
- Many face difficulties attending in-person classes due to inaccessible locations or poor staff attitudes (DSUK, 2024).
- Costs of accessible accommodation are prohibitive (DSUK, 2024).

Outcomes and Experiences

- 25% of UK students with disabilities (aged 21-64) obtained a degree compared to 43% of non-disabled students.
- Attainment data places disabled students 0.5% ahead of non-disabled students, but the reality is very different once disability type(s), pathways, and other intersectional factors are taken into account.
- More attention needs to be placed on continuation, completion and progression.
- The satisfaction gap between disabled and non-disabled students is evident across all NSS survey items, and especially for students with multiple disabilities.
- Students with cognitive or learning difficulties are some of the most least satisfied with course design including assessment.

Access to Supports

- There is no culture of accountability in place to ensure that disabled students receive the support that is necessary to place them on an equal footing for success with their peers (OIA, p.19. 2024 report).
- But students are more knowledgeable about supports available, and the process of accessing supports is becoming less burdensome for some groups (DSUK, 2024).
- However, only approximately 39% disabled students with agreed support, report having all this support implemented (DSUK, 2024).
- 40%+ of complaints to the Office of Independent Adjudicator in 2024 were from disabled students, up from a 1/3 the previous year.

Inclusive Assessment

- The sector is showing resistance to making adjustments to assessment.
- Progress in embedding reasonable adjustments in curriculum design from the outset is slow.
- 48% of disabled students believe that they have received a lower mark within their current course because an assessment was not accessible to them.
- Staff need training in meeting the requirements of the Equality Act.

Rethinking how DI is Viewed & Enacted

Disability Inclusion Institutional Framework highlights 12 interrelated dimensions

Shared Ownership	Empowerment	Independence
1. Effective leadership at all levels	5. Shared culture and language of DI and clear comms on this	9. Being clear about what an inclusive pedagogy is and the research behind this
2. Investment in high quality research	6. Central engagement of disabled students/staff from the outset	10. Training in the use of assistive technologies
3. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation of DI	7. High quality training	11. Maximising the effectiveness of transitions support
4. Integrated approach	8. Access to supports – transparency about the process	12. Supporting self-advocacy skills and a shared advocacy approach

Self- and Shared Advocacy

Supporting **students' self-advocacy development** (knowledge of self, rights, context, how to be heard, and how to be successful in getting the support needed).

- **Having to expose too much of yourself, too soon, to people you do not know, and also with a lack of surety of whether positive outcomes will result from this and at what cost to sense of self, is a big ask.**
- **Not all disabled students arrive at university with the skills to advocate effectively ...Yet, it is precisely at the point of entry that disabled students have to be proactive in seeking out help and accommodations while also trying to make sense of the cultural context. (see Moriña & Biagiotti, 2022).**

Emphasising shared advocacy – the role of the organisation in ensuring an inclusive learning environment that minimises the needs for students to have to advocate for their needs - owned by all in the organisation and fully integrated into all systems and processes.

In Summary, Realising Disability Inclusion Requires:

- **Shared Advocacy:** a shift in focus from the individual to the institution, to support inclusive systems, structures and processes.
- **Ownership:** emphasis on collective responsibility and collaborative effort to drive inclusion.
- **A focus on wider definitions of success:** that go beyond discussion of access and outcomes, to consideration of the **quality of the student experience**.
- **A research-informed rigorous approach to what an inclusive pedagogy is.**
- **Self-regulatory skills development supporting student agency, autonomy and competence.**
- **Awareness:** investment in high quality training and ongoing professional development for staff and students, and **evaluation of the effectiveness of this.**

Panel Discussion

- To enhance inclusion for students with disabilities universities need to address disability inclusion for staff?
- How are universities addressing delays to students getting the support they need?
- How are universities working towards more integrated approaches to DI and addressing key accessibility issues as students transition through HE?
- How can universities pivot to more inclusive approaches to assessment?
- How do we create more disability inclusive research environments?

Relevant Resources

- [Disability in UK Higher Education Report](#)
- [Transitions Checklist for International Students with Disabilities](#)
- [How can UK HE Better Support International Students with Disabilities?](#)
- [International Students with Disabilities Summary Report](#)

Thank you

- You can find the full British Council report here:
- [Disability Inclusion in UK HE](#)

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