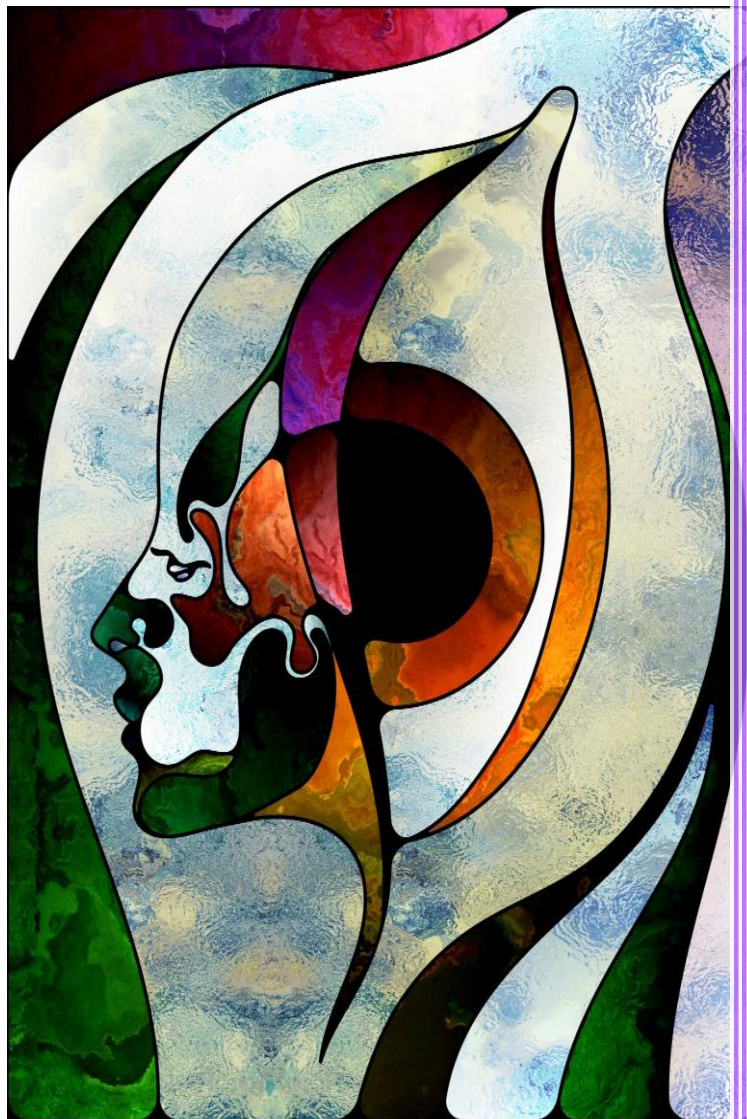




Disability inclusion in UK Higher Education

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Evans, C. (2025). Disability Inclusion in UK Higher Education. Eleanor Glanville Institute, University of Lincoln; Inclusivehe.org. Commissioned by the British Council.

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Executive summary

This report provides an overview of the current state of disability inclusion for students within higher education. It draws on recent UK student survey information supported by pilot research with British Council international alumni with disabilities. Relevant UK and international perspectives from the literature are referenced.

Key areas highlighted in the report include:

- A broader view of inclusion is needed within higher education which requires investment in
 - (i) enhancing awareness and understanding of inclusion through quality training for staff and students underpinned by quality research;
 - (ii) rethinking inclusive pedagogies and the role of assessment in this;
 - (iii) ensuring infrastructure supports an integrated, holistic, and seamless learning experience for all students within higher education.
- The importance of an integrated approach to inclusion that draws on the experiences of those with disabilities as pioneering disruptors in supporting more inclusive learning environments for all students.
- The significant under-representation of staff compared to students that disclose a disability within higher education, and the implications of this on the student experience.
- A need to address equity issues in relation to how students with disabilities experience higher education, and specifically for students with certain types of disability.
- Choice in higher education is more limited for students with disabilities, and especially for those with certain types of disabilities.
- For some students with disabilities the very basics of inclusion are not being attended to, and that this is particularly acute for those with sight and hearing impairments, and wheelchair users in navigating physical access to campus.
- The need to address the enormous challenges facing students with disabilities when transitioning into higher education, and especially for international students where these challenges are magnified.
- Wider societal structural issues face students with disabilities in gaining access to specific services and employment opportunities; universities have a role in promoting more inclusive societies as part of this.

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- The need to consider how disability intersects with other individual variables and course characteristics in impacting how students experience higher education and the outcomes they achieve.
 - The need to consider the quality of students' lived experience of higher education and not just attainment outcomes.
 - Maximising the way data can be used to support understanding of individual differences in learning.
 - The need to address research gaps in the literature in relation to the experiences of postgraduate and international students with disabilities.

1 Introduction

1.1 Overview

This report provides an overview of the current state of disability inclusion for students within higher education providers (HEPs) in the UK. Disability inclusion in this context refers to the extent to which students with disabilities have equal access to, and equal opportunities to do well in higher education compared to their non-disabled peers (Evans & Zhu, 2022, p. 4).

This critique of UK disability inclusion needs to be placed in context in acknowledging that UK higher education is significantly further along the disability inclusion agenda than in many countries around the world. There has been significant progress in supporting disabled student access to university in the UK. However, patterns of access are variable, and it is questionable whether students with disabilities in the UK have the same levels of freedom as their non-disabled counterparts to choose which university they would like to study at given access and cost issues. Support while in university and progression into employment for those with disabilities remain variable across institutions and according to type of disability and other intersectional characteristics.

The relative low levels of disclosure of staff with disabilities in UK higher education compared to students (approximately 6 per cent compared to 16 per cent respectively) is a concern in moving to greater inclusivity and equity at the institutional level. There is, however, significant momentum to progress disability inclusion within the UK and internationally (e.g., FCDO, 2022 strategy), and through research funding mechanisms such as Disability Inclusion Partnerships (e.g., British Council, 2024a, b), and in supporting researchers with disabilities (UKRI, 2024). Equality of opportunity for disabled students is central to the regulation of English higher education providers although there are concerns that other areas of students' disadvantage receive greater attention (Evans & Zhu, 2023b). The recently established [OfS Disability in Higher Education Advisory Panel](#) is a welcome initiative to centre disabled student voice as part of the inclusion agenda (OfS, 2024).

Research on facilitators and barriers impacting disabled students' journeys through higher education is increasing (Collins et al., 2019; Evans & Zhu, 2023a, b; Fernández-Batanero et al., Moriña, 2017). However, translation of this research into practice remains challenging (Amor et al., 2019; Borkin 2023; Evans & Zhu, 2023a, b; Koutsoris et al., 2022; Moriña & Biagiotti, 2022).

Borkin (2023) argues that 'disability is felt not to be a priority in light of competing equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) priorities', highlighting a 'degree of resistance from internal and external stakeholders to progress and embed inclusive practice' (Borkin, 2023, p.

5). Evans and Zhu (2022, 2023a, b) have also described disability inclusion as the poor relation of the inclusion agenda in the UK from their analysis of access and participation priorities of higher education providers in England. They found disability was far less likely to be prioritised compared to other student characteristics associated with disadvantage in English higher education providers. Evans and Zhu (2022, 2023a, b) also found significant gaps in the research literature regarding the experiences of postgraduate and international students with disabilities as they navigate higher education in the UK. In supporting the greater centrality of disability inclusion within higher education equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) research and practice, Bruce and Aylward (2021) argue that 'Universities must attend to disability as a category of diversity worthy of critical exploration and to disabled scholars and students as vastly under-valued contributors to the breadth of knowledge traditions that academia purportedly works to embrace' (p. 23).

1.2 The global context of disability inclusion

The global percentage of disabled persons is estimated to be 16 per cent by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2023). However, accessing information on the numbers of students accessing and completing higher education and the quality of those experiences is complex. Obtaining accurate data on disabled student participation in higher education is difficult given: the limited availability and currency of data on disabilities in some countries, the wide range of definitions of disability, and how access and participation of students with disabilities in higher education is defined.

From the data that is available, we know that the percentage of students with disabilities progressing into higher education across the globe is highly variable (Evans & Zhu, 2023b). For example, undergraduate students with disabilities represent 30 per cent of the university population in the Netherlands (Buscher-Touwen et al. (2018), 19 per cent in the US (Welding, 2023), 10.6 per cent in Australia (ADCET, 2024), 1.5 per cent in Spain (Garcia-Gonzalez et al. 2021), less than 2 per cent in countries such as Botswana (Mosalalage et al., 2021), Russia (Godonikova et al., 2019), Malaysia (Kim & Kim, 2020), and Zambia (Simui et al., 2019), less than 1 per cent of the student population in South Africa (Rhodes University, n.d.), and 0.25 per cent in India (Ashoka, University, 2023). In the UK, the overall access figures for higher education students with disabilities in 2021-22 was 15.9 per cent compared to a figure of 23 per cent for the working age population with disabilities in the UK in 2022-23.

The reality is that access to higher education for many students with disabilities across the world is limited (Mutanga, 2017). According to Thailand's Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation Ministry, (Nattanicha, 2023) only 1.2 per cent of students with disabilities were in higher education in 2021, confounded by the fact that less than 10 per cent

of people with disabilities completed their high school studies. In Indonesia, in 2020 the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) stated that of around 17.8 million people with disabilities of working age, only 2.8 per cent had graduated from college. Of the total of more than 4,500 higher education institutions (HEIs) in Indonesia, approximately 274 HEIs (less than 10 per cent) are able to accept student with disabilities.

At the global level, the United Nations' (UN) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) pledge to leave no one behind and recognise disability as an issue that cuts across all SDGs (WHO, 2019). However, only seven out of 169 targets specifically address disability inclusion, and only 10 of their 231 indicators explicitly require disability data disaggregation according to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The UNDP argue it is time for global and country level policy commitments to engage more actively to advance disability inclusion (Modeer & Viera, UNDP, 2023).

1.3 Scope

This report reviews the current context of disability inclusion for students with disabilities in UK higher education, and explores variations in access to, opportunities within, and beyond higher education for students with disabilities dependent on:

- (i) the nature of disability and intersections of disability with other student characteristics,
- (ii) course elements to include discipline, level of study, mode of study, and
- (iii) institutional factors such as disability inclusion policies and practices (e.g., academic support, training for staff and students, reasonable adjustments).

The report is organised into 4 sections which cover:

- (i) context and methodology;
- (ii) data on access, outcomes, and satisfaction for students with disabilities within UK higher education;
- (iii) consideration of facilitators and barriers to disability inclusion within higher education focusing on two core emergent themes: *access to accommodations*, and *developing inclusive learning environments*;
- (iv) recommendations for advancing research and practice in disability inclusion in higher education.

1.4 Methodology

This report has evolved from the synthesis of a wide range of data sources including primary analysis involving focus and group interviews, and the development and use of pilot survey data. The report also draws on substantive secondary data sources exploring students with disabilities experiences of higher education within the UK. Two core overarching themes emerged through an iterative review of data and cross-referencing with relevant research studies in the UK and internationally. These core themes highlight the dilemma for the higher education sector in both ensuring access for students with disabilities and utilising the abilities of these students to support a reconceptualization of how we deliver inclusive higher education for all students.

The data sources utilised include the following:

a) **Systematic and narrative reviews of articles on disability inclusion** including:

- Desk-top narrative review of data sources from 2022-24 including peer reviewed articles and UK-based DI surveys from 2020-2024 (n = 130).
- Cross-referencing with Evans and Zhu's (2023a, b) systematic review of DI (identifying 149 acceptable quality papers including 22 UK-focused articles that met the quality standards for inclusion from an initial sample of 11,000 articles).

b) **Survey data:**

- *The Snowden Trust* (2021) November 2020 survey with universities, student unions, disabled student services, alumni and disability organisations, targeting undergraduate and postgraduates who had studied or were studying at UK universities after 2015 (n = 236 responses and 8 in-depth case studies);
- *The UCAS (2022) transitions survey*, drawing on responses from 4,905 applicants (representing 6 per cent of all applicants who had applied and shared a disability by the January 2022 deadline);
- *The Student Academic Experience Survey* (Neves & Brown, 2022 for AdvanceHE and Higher Education Policy Institute) (n= 10,142 full-time undergraduate students including disabled and non-disabled students);
- *The DSUK (2023) survey on disability inclusion* (n = 1372 responses);
- *National Association of Disability Practitioners (NADP) survey* by Borkin (2023) on the current landscape of disability support in UK higher education (n= 103 respondents from 67 HEPs equating to 6.5 per cent of NADP membership).

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- c) **A thematic analysis** (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of a pilot survey **of British Council international alumni with disabilities experiences of UK higher education** (Evans, 2024b). The sample size was $n = 72$; representing an approximate 5 per cent sample of those registered as disabled on the British Council's alumni platform. Ethics approval for this research was obtained from the University of Lincoln's ethics committee. The survey design was informed by:
- Three focus group interviews with 16 British Council International Alumni with disabilities between March and April 2024.
 - Feedback from eight alumni to review their personal experiences of transitioning into, through, and beyond UK higher education.
 - An interview with academic and professional services staff with responsibilities for disability inclusion in their institutions including student representation ($n = 11$).

2 Access and outcomes for students with disabilities within UK higher education

2.1 How accessible is higher education for students with disabilities?

There has been significant growth in the number of students in UK higher education declaring disabilities; numbers have grown from 38,680 (5.4 per cent) in 2003-4 to 449,680 (15.9 per cent) in 2021-22. A much greater percentage of students disclose a disability compared to staff, where the comparable figure for staff is 6.8 per cent

Between 2021-22 and 2022-23, the number of students with a known disability increased by 32,675 (HESA, 2023a) with significant increases in the reporting of social, behavioural and communication impairments and mental health conditions, which have increased 249 per cent and 453 per cent respectively since 2012 (UCAS, 2022). 4.5 per cent of full-time students and 5.3 per cent of part-time students reported a mental health condition to their university or college when entering higher education in England in 2021-22 (OfS, 2023b); equivalent to 24,700 full-time students and 4,040 part-time students. The Office for Students (OfS) identify a broad trend of increased reporting of mental health conditions by students entering higher education, but note that they remain a small minority. There is evidence, however, to suggest that universities and colleges have been seeing an increase in the complexity and severity of mental health cases in recent years (DfE, 2023).

There are significant variations in participation for students with disabilities across UK higher education providers (n = 130), varying from 2.3 per cent to 19.1 per cent in 2023. 29 per cent of providers had access rates of 6 per cent or less for students with disabilities, a worsening of access provision compared to the previous year where 24 per cent of providers had access rates of 6 per cent or less for students with disabilities.

There is a striking difference between the percentage of UK and overseas students within UK higher education who declare with disabilities (Table 1).¹ Over 19% of students in UK higher education studying for a degree at undergraduate or postgraduate levels in 2021-2 disclosed a disability compared to 4.2% of international (non-EU students) in 2021-22 (AdvanceHE, 2023a). Overall, international students (EU and non-EU) comprised 25% of the

¹ Table 1 draws on Advance HE 2021-22 data sets illustrating the numbers of students with disabilities in UK higher education to include domestic, EU and rest of the world (non-EU students) which demonstrates the relatively small percentage of international students with disabilities studying within the UK higher education system.

student body in the UK in 2023-4, and 71% of the full-time postgraduate student numbers (HESA, 2025).

Table 1 Percentage of UK and overseas students within UK higher education who declare with disabilities (source; Advance HE 2021/22 data)

	Non-disabled			Disabled			All students	
All Students	N	↓%	→%	N	↓%	→%	N	↓%
UK	1,730,605	73.3	80.9	409,255	92.1	19.1	2,139,855	76.3
EU	106,565	4.5	89.7	12,295	2.8	10.3	118,860	4.2
Non-EU	523,830	22.2	95.8	22,945	5.2	4.2	546,775	19.5
All	2,361,000	100	84.2	444,490	100	15.8	2,805,490	100.0

	Non-disabled			Disabled			All students	
First degree undergraduate students	N	↓%	→%	N	↓%	→%	N	↓%
Students	1,274,735	83.1	80.0	319,500	93.5	20.0	1,594,235	85.0
UK	74,215	4.8	88.7	9,440	2.8	11.3	83,655	4.5
EU	185,860	12.1	93.5	12,920	3.8	6.5	198,780	10.6
All	1,534,810	100	81.8	341,860	100	18.2	1,876,670	100

	Non-disabled			Disabled			All students	
Other undergraduate students	N	↓%	→%	N	↓%	→%	N	↓%
UK	90,965	84.2	86.1	14,715	96.2	13.9	105,675	85.7
EU	1,745	1.6	94.4	105	0.7	5.6	1,845	1.5
Non-EU	15,270	14.1	97.0	475	3.1	3.0	15,745	12.8
All	107,975	100	87.6	15,290	100	12.4	123,265	100.0

	Non-disabled			Disabled			All students	
Research postgraduate students	N	↓%	→%	N	↓%	→%	N	↓%
UK	53,795	55.3	80.5	13,065	82.1	19.5	66,860	59.1
EU	10,060	10.3	92.1	870	5.5	7.9	10,930	9.7
Non-EU	33,390	34.3	94.4	1,975	12.4	5.6	35,365	31.3
All	97,250	100	85.9	15,905	100	14.1	113,155	100

	Non-disabled			Disabled			All students	
Taught postgraduate students	N	↓%	→%	N	↓%	→%	N	↓%
UK	311,110	50.1	83.4	61,980	86.8	16.6	373,090	53.9
EU	20,545	3.3	91.6	1,880	2.6	8.4	22,430	3.2
Non-EU	289,310	46.6	97.4	7,575	10.6	2.6	296,885	42.9
All	620,965	100.0	89.7	71,435	100.0	10.3	692,400	100.0

The total number of students with disabilities registered in UK universities has grown significantly, however the percentage of those taking up support in the form of the Disability Student Allowance (DSA) has declined from 42.5 per cent in 2003-4 to 30 per cent in 2021-22.² DSA take-up varies by subject area, for example, 36 per cent of students with disabilities studying veterinary sciences take up DSA compared to 13.4 per cent in combined and general studies (AdvanceHE 2023a). ([DSA](#) is available from the government for under- and post-graduate students living in the UK with a disability that impacts their study enrolled on higher education courses of at least one year's length).

Students with certain types of disabilities have greater representation within UK higher education (Table 2). There is underrepresentation of students with physical impairments or challenges with mobility (9 per cent of disabled applicants), and an over-representation of mental health conditions (UCAS, 2022). In comparing the numbers of students and staff that disclose a disability within university with the wider UK population profile of disability (for those aged 16-64), it is evident that those with certain types of disability are under-represented in UK higher education, for example those with visual and hearing impairments (see Table 2). Caution is required in interpreting this data as the categories reported in national statistics (DWP, [Family Resources Survey: financial year 2021/22](#); Kirk Wade, 2023) do not map neatly to the HESA data used in the AdvanceHE student and staff data sets (AdvanceHE 2023a, b).

² Changes to DSA funding from 2016-17 have resulted in reduced funding for some activities for students

Table 2 Proportion of students disclosing specific disabilities within UK Higher Education (source; AdvanceHE Equality+ higher education students - statistical report 2023a)

Nature of disclosed disability	% of students with specific types of disability	% of HE staff with specific types of disability	% of impairment types reported by UK population Adults (16-64)
Blind or a serious visual impairment uncorrected by glasses	0.9	1.5	7
Deaf or serious hearing impairment	1.7	4.0	5
A long-standing illness or health condition	8.7	21.2	NA
Mental health condition	29.2	15.4	44
Physical impairment or mobility issues	2.2	6.6	43 Dexterity 23
Social/communication impairment/autistic spectrum disorder	4.4	2.1	10
Specific learning difficulty	31.9	21.0	Memory 13 Learning 13
Two or more impairments	13.4	16.5	NA
Another disability, impairment or medical condition	7.6	10.7	NA
General learning disability		0.9	NA
Other			20

Students with specific learning difficulties and those with mental health conditions comprise over 60 per cent of those who declare a disability, with significant increases in recent years of those reporting mental health concerns, many of which have not received a formal diagnosis at point of entry to university. Mental health conditions are more predominant amongst undergraduate compared to postgraduate student populations (AdvanceHE, 2023a).

There are similarities and differences in the proportions of staff and students with certain types of disabilities within higher education. For staff, a longstanding illness or health condition is the highest represented disability which may reflect the wider age distribution of staff

compared to students (Kirk-Wade, 2023). The dominance of specific learning difficulties is evident in staff and student profiles.

Representation of students with disabilities within UK higher education varies according to a range of interacting individual and contextual factors including, but not limited to, geographical location, socio-economic status, discipline, study pathway. For example:

Individual characteristics

Socio-economic background

- Significantly more students with disabilities are likely to come from the **most socio-economic advantaged backgrounds** in the UK (47 per cent POLAR4 quintile 5) than the most disadvantaged areas (8 per cent quintile 1), and they are nearly three times more likely to come from an independent school.
- Student entrants to full-time courses who were **eligible for free school meals** when at school, were more likely to report a **mental health condition** than their counterparts who were not FSM-eligible: 5.7 per cent and 4.8 per cent respectively for full-time students in 2021-22 (OfS, 2023c).
- **Full-time students from areas with the lowest rate of participation** in higher education in England are most likely to have reported a mental health condition (6.0 per cent in 2021-22). Similarly, **part-time students from quintile 5 areas** were least likely, and those from **quintile 1** the most likely, to report having a mental health condition (OfS, 2023c).
- The difference in reporting a **mental health condition** between entrants from **quintile 1** and **quintile 5** is widening (OfS, 2023c).
- The intersectionality of impairment type and personal circumstance influences where students apply: those with **physical impairments or challenges with mobility** are more likely to be mature and from less advantaged backgrounds; despite having a higher-than-average A level attainment, they tend to be placed at lower tariff providers closer to home (UCAS, 2022).
- **Deaf/hearing impaired students** are no less likely than their hearing counterparts to obtain good grades and pass courses in higher education. Despite this, under half the number of deaf pupils, compared to hearing pupils, go straight from school to university (Hendry et al., 2020).

Age

- **Mature full-time** entrants (>21) are more likely to report a **mental health condition** than their younger counterparts (4.9 per cent compared with 4.3 per cent in 2021-22, OfS, 2023c).

Gender

- **Men are more likely to share an impairment**, although **women** are more likely to **apply** to higher education overall (a 1:1.4 ratio of men: women). The gender gap narrows for disabled applicants overall, and reverses for those with a **social, behavioural or communication** impairment (a 2:1 ratio of men: women), and with **visual impairments** (a 1.1:1 ratio) (UCAS, 2022).
- **Women** are more likely to report having a **mental health condition** compared to males (6.3 per cent of full-time female entrants compared to 2.3 per cent for males) (OfS (2023c).

Ethnicity

- **Asian** students entering university in England in 2021-22 were the least likely to report a **mental health condition** and those of **mixed ethnicity** most likely to (OfS, 2023c).

Course characteristics

Level of study

- Rates of access to higher education are higher for **undergraduate compared to postgraduate students** with disabilities. Disclosure rates for first degree undergraduates are 18.2 per cent compared to 12.4 per cent for other undergraduates, 14.1 per cent of research postgraduates and 10.3 per cent of taught postgraduates (Table 1) (Advance HE, 2023a).

Discipline studied

- Rates of access to higher education for **postgraduate** students vary according to discipline (AdvanceHE, 2023a).
- The proportions of students with disabilities are higher in some subjects compared to others with relatively similar percentages, overall, for non-SET subjects (e.g., Social Sciences, Arts) and SET subjects (Science, Engineering, Technology) (Advance HE, 2023a).
- Overall, at the subject level, the highest proportions of students with disabilities were in **Arts** (25.25) and **Psychology** (24.2 per cent) with the lowest rates being in **Business** (7.4 per cent) and Engineering (10.9 per cent) (Advance HE, 2023a).

Level of study and discipline

- The highest proportion of disabled students at undergraduate level were found in **Geography** (23.7 per cent) and **Psychology** (23.6 per cent); lowest proportions of disabled students were found in Engineering (8.9 per cent) and Languages (10.5 per cent) (Advance HE, 2023a).
- For **postgraduate research** students, the proportion of disabled students were highest in **Psychology** (20.2 per cent), **Arts** (20.9 per cent) and **History** (20.4 per cent). The lowest proportions of disabled postgraduate research students were found in **Business** (7.1 per cent), and **Archaeology** (8.9 per cent).
- Participation for disabled students is lower for **postgraduate taught students** with proportions of disabled taught students being much lower, for example with figures of 4.2 per cent for **Engineering and Business** (Advance HE, 2023a).

Pathway

- **Part-time undergraduate** students are more likely to report a **mental health** condition than full-time students. In 2021-22, 5.3 per cent of part-time entrants reported such a condition, compared with 4.5 per cent of full-time entrants (OfS, 2023c).

In sum, the intersection of individual differences and organisation and societal barriers to disability inclusion has resulted in UCAS identifying that students with disabilities in the UK higher education system, compared to non-disabled students, are more likely to be male, mature (>21), from most advantaged areas (from a socio-economic perspective), white, LGBT+. Those with disabilities are more likely to travel further to university or college, less likely to be placed at a high tariff university, more likely to study alternative qualifications post-16, and less likely to achieve top grades in their A levels (UCAS, 2022). The UCAS study also found that students with disabilities compared to those without, are more likely to defer entry to higher education (23 per cent more likely to defer entry than non-disabled students pre-pandemic, rising to 28 per cent in 2021); this disparity also varies by impairment type.

UCAS (2022) argues that to address socio-economic barriers to inclusion within higher education that there needs to be equity of access for all children, regardless of background, to diagnostic assessment of learning differences and support. Their report argues that more funding is needed in all schools and colleges to allow every student up to the age of 14 to access diagnostic testing for a learning difference if they wish to have one, and the right support if a diagnosis is given (UCAS, 2022).

2.2 How successful are students with disabilities in higher education?

It is not enough to guarantee access, but rather it is necessary to establish policies and plans to ensure that all students, including those with disabilities, remain and succeed in university studies (Fernández-Batanero et al., 2022. p.2).

There have been improvements in higher education outcomes for students with disabilities in recent years, but marked differences remain between the outcomes for disabled students compared with non-disabled students. For example, approximately 25 per cent of UK students with disabilities (aged 21-64) obtained a degree compared to 42.7 per cent of non-disabled students in 2020-21 (ONS, 2022). Differences are most marked in the 21-24 age group where in 2021 approximately 18 per cent of disabled people in this age group obtained a degree, compared to 43 per cent of non-disabled people (ONS, 2021). Kirk-Wade et al. (2024) also noted that 17.8 per cent of disabled people aged 21 to 24 had a degree compared with 42.5 per cent of non-disabled people in 2020-2021.

In 2021-22, disabled students' completion rate in England was 2.1 per cent lower than their non-disabled peers (85.5 per cent compared to 87.6 per cent). The percentage of first or 2:1 degree awards was 0.5 per cent higher for disabled compared to non-disabled students (79.4 per cent compared to 78.9 per cent) (OfS, 2023a). However, aggregated data sets fail to show the reality for many students with disabilities where the effects of type(s) of disability, studying mode (e.g., part-time vs full-time, where part-time disabled students attainment is 4 per cent lower than their non-disabled counterparts). In addition, other intersectional characteristics (e.g., social class; ethnicity, gender) compound access to, and opportunities to realise one's potential within higher education. For example, having a reported mental health condition affects specific student groups differently (OfS, 2023c).

National data sets do not capture hidden inequalities. For example, Hewett et al. (2021) found that whilst national equality data in the UK captured improved access and attainment for students with **visual impairments** in higher education it failed to capture poor lived experiences, and restricted choice.

Similarly, in capturing employment data, those with disabilities are less likely to be in jobs commensurate with their qualifications. For example, Evans (2024) in research on international students with disabilities experiences of UK education found that 24 per cent of them felt they had not secured employment in areas commensurate with their skill sets (n = 54). The Snowden

(2021) report found that 78 per cent of disabled students in the UK felt their higher education had led them closer to their dream aspirations, but many were daunted by post-university life and the potential of discrimination they may encounter. Students expressed concerns that administrative burdens would continue into the workplace.

What can we deduce from the data?

Student continuation rates:

The overall difference in student continuation for disabled versus non-disabled students in England (from year one to two of an undergraduate year) in 2021-22 was relatively small for students in English higher education providers at 88 per cent compared to 90 per cent. However, these figures mask significant differences in continuation rates for certain groups of students.

- Students with **mental health conditions** and **social or communication** disabilities had lower continuation rates of 87 per cent.
- Students' continuation rates across all disability characteristics were significantly lower than their full-time and non-disabled counterparts with the exception of students with **cognitive or learning difficulties** whose continuation rates were 2.2 per cent higher than their non-disabled counterparts.
- Continuation gaps of nearly 10 per cent for **part-time** undergraduate students with **mental health conditions** and 8 per cent for those with **multiple or other impairments** were found.
- For disabled students on particular pathways continuation rates were also much lower, and this was especially the case for students with **social or communication disabilities** on apprenticeships demonstrating continuation gaps of 11.5 per cent (OfS, 2023a).
- For full-time entrants continuation gaps between disabled and non-disabled students with **mental health conditions** was amplified when **gender** was considered (2.5 per cent for female students and 3.7 per cent for male students with mental health conditions, OfS, 2023c).

Completion rates

Completion rates in 2021-22 for disabled students are lower than those of non-disabled students in the English higher education system; 85.5 per cent compared to 87.6 per cent respectively. Completion gaps have slightly increased compared to 2020-21 figures.

- Completion gaps were highest for students with **mental health conditions** (5.35 per cent gap) and **social or communicative disabilities** (4.25 per cent gap).

- Students with **mental health or multiple or other disabilities** studying **part-time** exhibited the biggest attainment gaps standing at 20.9 per cent and 22.1 per cent respectively.
- The completion rate for **black students** entering higher education in 2017-18 was 10.3 percentage points lower if they reported having a **mental health condition** (OfS, 2023c).
- The completion gap for students on **apprenticeships with mental health conditions** was 12.4 per cent.³ (OfS, 2023a).
- **Disabled PhD students** were more likely to drop out than other PhD students (DSUK & Pete Quinn Consulting 2023).

Awarding/attainment rates:

A slightly greater percentage of disabled students in English higher education received a first or 2:1 degree compared to non-disabled students in 2021-22; 79.4 per cent compared to 78.9 per cent respectively, but again there are differences when considering specific disability characteristics.

Degree class awarding varies according to the nature of disability

- **Full-time** students with **mental health conditions** had the highest proportion of first or 2:1s at 81 per cent and those with **social or communicative** disabilities the lowest proportion at 74.5 per cent.
- Those with the lowest percentages of firsts or 2:1s were **part-time** students with **cognitive or learning difficulties** (65.2 per cent) and **part-time students with multiple or other disabilities** (65.3 per cent) (OfS, 2023a).
- 81.3 per cent of those who disclose a **long-standing illness or health condition** and 80.8 per cent of those who disclosed a **mental health condition** received a first/2:1, compared with 76.6 per cent of qualifiers disclosing a **social communication/autism spectrum disorder**.
- **Autistic** students self-reported significant challenges and more **mental health** difficulties than non-autistic students, were more likely to withdraw and had some of the worst employability outcomes of any disabled student group (Gurbuz et al., 2019).

³ UCAS (2022) has highlighted the need for enhanced information and advice about the support disabled students can expect to receive in higher education apprenticeships and training and the need to review the accessibility of learning and assessment in some technical and vocational qualifications to ensure that disabled students are not excluded from progressing to higher level technical qualifications and apprenticeships.

Degree class awarding varies according to subject

- In **SET subjects, except for engineering and technology**, in every subject area, a higher proportion of non-disabled students received a first/2:1 than disabled students.
- In **non-SET subjects** a higher proportion of disabled students achieved a first/2:1 degree than non-disabled students in **business and management** (79.1 per cent compared to 74.0 per cent), **media, journalism and communications** (81.3 per cent compared to 80.9 per cent), **geography, earth and environmental studies** (social sciences) (91.7 per cent compared to 90.2 per cent), and **social sciences** (79.5 per cent compared to 78.3 per cent).
- The proportion of first/2:1 degree awards was exactly the same among non-disabled and disabled students in **education and teaching**.
- In all other subject areas, the proportion of non-disabled students receiving a first/2:1 degree was higher than that of disabled qualifiers.
- The disability degree awarding gap was widest for students in **combined and general studies**, where 74.2 per cent of non-disabled students received a first/2:1 compared to 70.5 per cent of disabled students, a 3.7 percentage point difference.

Progression:

OfS data for students studying in English higher education providers 2021-22 identified a 1.7 per cent progression gap for full-time students (70.9 per cent for students with declared disabilities compared to 72.6 per cent for students with no reported disabilities). Progression is defined by the OfS as the percentage of students who have progressed to professional or managerial employment, further study, or other positive outcomes, 15 months after gaining their qualification (Graduate Outcomes Contact Details record 2021/22, HESA, 2022, 2023; OfS, 2023, p. 29).

Progression also needs to be considered in relation to differing employment rates for disabled and non-disabled people in the workforce. For example, in 2023 there was 13 per cent difference in employment rates for those with a degree or equivalent qualification in the UK (Powell, 2024). The disability pay gap (the gap between median pay for disabled and non-disabled employees in the UK was 13.8 per cent in 2021 (Kirk-Wade et al., 2024).

Variations in progression rates for students with different types of disability

- **Full-time students with cognitive or learning difficulties** had the highest progression rates at 74.4 per cent which was nearly 2 per cent greater than for students without disabilities (72.6 per cent) (OfS 2023a).

- Students with **social or communicative disabilities** had the lowest progression rate of all full-time students with disabilities at 59.8 per cent (OfS 2023a).
- The disparity in progression rates for those with **mental health conditions** compared to those without a **reported health condition** was greater for full-time males (4.2 per cent) compared to full-time female students (3.3 per cent) (OfS, 2023c).
- Progression rates were lower for both **full-time mature and full-time young students** who reported a **mental health condition** (OfS, 2023c).
- **Asian and Black students** who reported having a **mental health condition** (2020-21) had higher progression rates than those who did not (OfS, 2023c).
- The lowest progression rates were found amongst students from the **lowest socio-economic backgrounds** (21 per cent progression gap for quintile 1 students compared to quintile 5). (OfS 2023a). What we do not know from the data is the impact of the combined effect of **socio-economic background and disability** on progression.
- **Part-time disabled students** had higher progression rates compared to full-time disabled students (+8.5 per cent) although generally, **disabled part-time students** did less well than their non-disabled counterparts (OfS 2023a).
- **Part-time students** with **mental health conditions** and those with **social or communicative disabilities** had lower progression rates than for other disability groups with progression gaps of 8.5 per cent and 7.4 per cent respectively, compared to non-disabled part-time students (OfS 2023a) (OfS 2023a).
- For students on **apprenticeship pathways**, progression was highest for students with **sensory, medical or physical impairments** (91.4 per cent), and also higher than for those on apprenticeship pathways with no disabilities (89.5 per cent).
- Students with **multiple or other disabilities** on **apprenticeship pathways** had lower rates of progression (84.9 per cent) compared to other disabled groups (OfS, 2023a).
- Poorer **employment outcomes** for graduates with disabilities, and especially for those with **visual impairments** is noted by Hewett et al. (2021).

Hewett et al. (2021) highlighted that disabled students are less likely to secure permanent or open-ended contracts, noting that a third of those in employment were in roles specifically aimed at people with disabilities, and therefore not necessarily in comparable roles and employment schemes to their peers. They argue the importance of ascertaining whether the jobs disabled graduates are employed in are comparable to those of their non-disabled peers with equivalent qualifications when looking at outcomes data.

2.3 How satisfied with their education are students with disabilities with UK Higher Education?

Students with disabilities studying in UK higher education providers are less satisfied than students who do not identify as disabled across all 26 questions of the UK National Student Survey data in 2023 and 2024, and there is evidence of widening dissatisfaction gaps in key areas (NSS, 2023, 2024). In 2024 satisfaction gaps between those with and without declared disabilities either remained similar or increased in 22 of the 26 survey items.

The Snowden (2021) report (n =236) found that only 10 per cent of students with disabilities said university ‘very much’ met their expectations, with students on average rating their experience at 6.86 out of 10. The UK Student Academic Experience Survey (2022) data suggest disabled students had higher anxiety levels than those of non-disabled students; 56 per cent of disabled participants stated they had high anxiety compared to 34 per cent of non-disabled participants. The 2022 Student Academic Experience Survey also found disabled students had lower perceptions of value and lower likelihood to make the same choice again compared to non-disabled students. They were also more likely to feel that the level of in-person contact hours / teaching is not at the level required.

The Disabled Student Survey (Snowdon Trust/ GDI Hub, 2021) highlighted the stress and anguish reported by disabled students due to the impact of additional administrative burden on their study time and social lives. Stress that for some was exacerbated by changes to the Disabled Students’ Allowance (DSA) where funding no longer covered the difference in accommodation costs they were required to spend to ensure they could reside in accommodation that met their needs (Neves & Brown, 2022). Neves and Brown noted that the application and assessment hurdles students face in securing DSA can be significant.

Brewer et al. (2023) in their review of 91 online forum posts on disabled students’ experiences of higher education argue the need for greater recognition by universities of the limited energy and time available to disabled students. They found that disabled students were aware of the additional challenges they experienced and that they needed to work harder than their non-disabled peers for the same outcome. Brewer et al. (2023) also noted the knock-on effects on disabled students’ finances given that if they were studying for longer, they also had less opportunity to obtain paid employment to cover the many additional costs of disability (e.g., access to assistive technology or accessible accommodation and transport). Brewer et al. concluded that universities need to give greater consideration of the additional financial challenges experienced by disabled students and the extent to which these financial issues may become an additional barrier to engagement or achievement.

Students with disabilities from **non-dominant cultural backgrounds**, identifying as **mature**, and/or from **low socio-economic backgrounds** find transitions through university more challenging (Bruce, & Aylward, 2021).

Evans (2024b) found that international students with disabilities were, on the whole, very positive about their experiences of UK higher education from a survey of 72 British Council international alumni. However, these international students reported that understanding and learning how to access resources was initially overwhelming, which was not helped by a lack of clarity of information, and where orientation programmes had been limited in UK higher education providers. They reported that what seemed like common knowledge to UK students was not common to non-UK individuals. Adjustments were not possible until international students with disabilities became aware of the support services available.

In the UK National Student Survey NSS (2023 and 2024) the areas where the **satisfaction gap** between disabled and non-disabled students' responses were the greatest related to course organisation and management, student voice, learning resources, assessment and feedback, and learning opportunities as shown in Table 3.

It is noticeable that between 2023 and 2024 the overall satisfaction gap between disabled and non-disabled students has got larger, although there are variations across different disability groups. In 2023, students with **mental health conditions** comprised the most dissatisfied group of disabled students overall. In 2024, students with mental health conditions registered some of the lowest satisfaction scores on 38% of the 26 items.

In 2023, students with **multiple or other impairments** expressed the greatest dissatisfaction in areas relating to having chances to explore ideas and concepts in depth, access to library and subject specific resources when needed, right opportunities to give feedback on their courses. In 2024 it is notable that this group of students registered some of the lowest scores on 65% of the NSS items. These scores may reflect wider structural issues with systems and processes (e.g., accessing medical support and medication; ability to cope with changes to their teaching schedules, and lack of flexibility of university learning and assessment arrangements to respond to these students' needs).

Table 3 highlights areas where the largest gaps in satisfaction have been identified between disabled and non-disabled students, and also across disability types. The overall satisfaction gap between disabled and non-disabled students has increased in seven of the areas highlighted in Table 3. Course organisation, communication of changes, and transparency about how feedback from students has been acted upon are key concerns.

- Disabled students are less satisfied with assessment guidance and this is especially the case for students with **cognitive or learning difficulties** and for students with **multiple or other impairments**.

- Students with **cognitive or learning difficulties** expressed lower levels of satisfaction in areas relating to course organisation, and access to resources. Addressing access issues for students with disabilities can benefit all students.
- Students with **mental health conditions** were least satisfied with the way the university communicated with them in many areas (e.g., how the university had acted on student feedback; how well the students' union represented their interests; how well the university had communicated with students about mental wellbeing support).

Table 3 The DI satisfaction gap; largest gaps in levels of satisfaction between students with and without disabilities in relation to aspects of course provision ([accessed from OfS NSS website](#))⁴

Q.	NSS 2023 / 2024 Selected questions	Satisfaction gap disabled vs non-disabled students Satisfaction level %	Mental health condition Satisfaction level %	Sensory, medical, or physical impairment Satisfaction level %	Social or communication impairment Satisfaction level %	Cognitive or learning difficulties Satisfaction level %	Multiple or other impairments Satisfaction level %
Q18 (2023)	How well were any changes to teaching on your course communicated?	-6.5	68.2	71.5	72.1	68.7	69.6
Q18 (2024)		- 7.1	69.9	74.3	72.9	71.2	68.8
Q24 (2023)	How clear is it that students' feedback on the course is acted upon?	-6.3	52.3	58.1	60.2	57.8	54.7
Q24 (2024)		- 7.2	55.4	60.0	60.7	59.5	55.4
Q17 (2023)	How well organised is your course?	-5.9	66.5	70.2	71.2	66.6	69.3
Q17 (2024)		- 6.9	68.3	72.2	71.1	68.2	67.3
Q25 (2023)	How well do the students' union represent students' academic interests?	-5.0	67.2	69.5	68.3	67.2	68.2
Q25 (2024)		-5.5	68.7	71.8	68.2	67.7	67.6

⁴ Note: NSS data for 2024 are shown in bold on Table 3

Q.	NSS 2023 / 2024 Selected questions	Satisfaction gap disabled vs non- disabled students Satisfaction level %	Mental health condition Satisfaction level %	Sensory, medical, or physical impairment Satisfaction level %	Social or communication impairment Satisfaction level %	Cognitive or learning difficulties Satisfaction level %	Multiple or other impairments Satisfaction level %
Q26 (2023)	How well communicated was information about your university's mental wellbeing support services?	-4.5	71	74.4	73.4	71.2	71.8
Q26 (2024)		-4.4	74.2	77.6	76.3	75.1	74.5
Q21 (2023)	How easy is it to access subject specific resources?	-4.5	82	83.3	83.5	81.5	81
Q21 (2024)		-4.3	83.4	84.7	85.1	82.8	81.1
Q19 (2023)	How well have the IT resources and facilities supported your learning?	-4.1	80.8	82.8	81.4	79.3	81.5
Q19 (2024)		-4.2	82	84	81.4	80.5	80.9
Q8 (2023)	To what extent does your course have the right balance of directed and independent study?	-4.1	70.3	75.3	76.3	73.5	73.3
Q8 (2024)		-3.5	82.4	85	86.4	82.8	81.7
Q10 (2023)	How clear were the marking criteria used to assess your work?	-4.1	71.7	74.8	74.2	71.3	73.2
Q10 (2024)		-4.7	72.2	75.1	73.5	71.7	70.9
Q23 (2023)	To what extent are students' opinions about the course valued by staff?	-3.7	70.2	72.8	76.5	71.7	70.9
Q23 (2024)		-4.3	71.8	75.3	76.4	73.9	71.4

3 Facilitators and barriers to disability inclusion within UK Higher Education

There are many facilitators and barriers to the inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education, the effects of which are the ‘result of the convergence between collective actions, individual actions, and social conditions’ which are manifested in students’ academic and social experiences of higher education (Fernandez-Batanero et al., 2022, p. 2).

3.1 Supporting changes in how disability inclusion is viewed and enacted

Mobilising disability inclusion requires awareness of evidence-based approaches and the theoretical underpinnings of them, the knowledge of how to implement inclusive practice, and the resources to do this. Resource includes the structures, systems and processes that support and sustain inclusive practice. Wider societal and cultural attitudes towards disability inclusion highlight the important role of higher education in promoting disability inclusion, and the significant challenges posed by wider structural inequalities in society (Koutsouris et al., 2022).

Evans and Zhu (2022, 2023b) identified 12 key areas of practice that higher education institutions need to address to support disability inclusion from their systematic analysis of international research and review of practice across the sector. They argue the importance of an integrated approach to disability inclusion that takes account of these 12 themes in exploring the lived experience of staff and students with disabilities within higher education. These themes, which are elaborated in detail in the [Disability Inclusion Institutional Framework](#), include the importance of:

- Effective leadership of disability inclusion.
- Investment in high quality research on disability inclusion.
- Effective monitoring and evaluation of disability inclusion.
- An integrated approach to disability inclusion (e.g., across admin and academic and professional service areas, and in relation to the holistic experience (e.g., academic, social, housing, transport, medical etc.).
- A shared culture and language of disability inclusion.

- The importance of the central engagement of disabled students and staff in framing disability inclusion approaches.
- High quality training in disability inclusion for staff and students.
- Ensuring access to accommodations/supports.
- Making the core features of inclusive curricula accessible and explicit.
- Training staff and students in the judicious use of assistive technologies.
- Maximising the effectiveness of transitions support.
- Supporting the development of student self-advocacy skills and the organisational role in minimising the need for disabled students to have to advocate for their needs and sharing the heavy lifting where this is required.

Evans (2024a) highlights the importance of self-advocacy and autonomy, and related self-determination constructs (e.g., relatedness; self-efficacy; self-awareness; agentic engagement; metacognitive, cognitive and affective regulation) in impacting the participation, academic success and engagement of students with disabilities in higher education (Kutscher & Tuckwiller, 2019). Self-advocacy referring to the: ‘the ability to assertively state wants, needs and rights, determine and pursue needed supports and to obtain and evaluate the needed support with the ultimate goal of conducting affairs independently’ (Pfeifer et al., 2021, p.20). To realise disability inclusion institution commitment to supporting ‘shared advocacy’ is needed. This is where an organisation and individual collaborate to facilitate access and equal opportunities to do well for all those with disabilities (staff and students) (Kim & Kuschter, 2020); described by Hewett et al. (2021) as achieving mutual accommodations.

Such mutual accommodations require a disability inclusive environment where the need for adjustments is minimised through a rethinking of what inclusion means in every aspect of practice to minimise the need for students to have to advocate for their disability needs as they should largely be addressed through anticipatory design of curriculum, and in supporting all students to develop the self-regulation skills they need to be successful (Evans & Waring, 2024).

While self-advocacy is a good thing our expert interview panel felt it ‘only works when you’ve got someone who not only can listen but can respond’ highlighting the role of organisations in supporting student self-advocacy to ensure that the ‘tall poppies do not get their heads cut-off’. The expert panel raised concerns that staff and students who self-advocate a lot are often seen as troublemakers or as not fitting into an organisation.

Academics and practitioners identify concerns about the way in which self-advocacy is sometimes framed as part of disability inclusion. While being able to self-advocate is an

essential skill, and especially in knowing one's rights, being able to pursue and realise them, placing responsibility for disability inclusion on the disabled person to sort for themselves is not an acceptable solution to addressing disability inclusion within higher education (Bruce & Aylward, 2021; Goodley, 2024).

Bruce and Aylward (2021) identify that many disabled students arrive at university without the levels of self-knowledge and awareness of accommodations that might best support their learning, and that 'university processes expect a level of self-knowledge that experienced faculty may not even have achieved [which] exposes the impractical nature of institutional expectations' (p. 21). A key argument is that defining self-advocacy as an individualised skills set where emphasis is insidiously placed on the individual to advocate for their disability needs as a solution to disability inclusion is ableist (Shaw, 2023) and can serve to negate the responsibility of higher education and wider society in promoting disability inclusion. Ableism involves 'othering' and stigmatising disabled students compared to the 'ideal' or 'normal' student. Placing the responsibility of disability with the individual, Goodley (2024, p. 6) argues that 'disability tends to be understood as a technical problem within a person that requires a solution.... [where] each disabled member of staff or student is expected to manage their impairment, problem and pathology in the university.'

An alternative self-advocacy perspective is one framed around shared advocacy and mutual accommodations where disability is considered as a societal construct, requiring higher education providers and wider society to 'rethink how we might all exist in the world in more equitable ways' (Goodley, 2024, p. 6). A context where diversity is valued (Bruce, & Aylward, 2021), where disability is not seen as problem to be solved, and the responsibility of a specific population (i.e., disabled student/staff, professional service colleague). Goodley (2024) argues the need for a cultural shift in how disability is viewed within higher education from being seen as a problem to be solved to being seen as an opportunity for higher education to rethink and reset how it designs curricula, placing disabled persons in the driving seat in leading much needed change. The positive disruption advocated requires a significant shift in thinking for staff and students in higher education and investment in infrastructure and resource to achieve this (Evans & Zhu, 2022, 2023a, b).

Bruce, & Aylward (2021, p.22-23) agree on the possibility of a different self-advocacy reality: 'one that can be created by the important connections that students are able to establish with professors who understand disability as valued diversity in educational settings. The activist potential of a reconceived and reclaimed self-advocacy in higher education needs attention, and disabled researchers have much to offer to these vital activist analyses.'

3.2 Priorities in supporting disability inclusion

Evans and Zhu's (2023b) report on 'what works for disability inclusion for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes (TASO) identified the importance of an integrated approach to disability inclusion, that can support an overarching [inclusive education model](#) for staff and students (Evans, 2023, 2024a). In their work for TASO, Evans and Zhu highlighted that some of the most impactful activities supporting disability inclusion within higher education included transitions approaches that supported students with disabilities entry into higher education, and into employment, and approaches supporting students' development of self-advocacy skills. Providing timely accommodations and assistive technologies were also identified as essential.

Evidence on the impact of training for staff and students on disability inclusion and inclusive learning and teaching incorporating universal design for learning approaches was inconclusive due to the lack of robust studies investigating these areas. Variations in the quality of studies and inconsistent intervention types and various outcome measurements, make results only partially comparable across studies (Römhild & Holleder, 2024). Furthermore, findings are tied to very specific contexts highlighting the interactional nature of disability, which makes generalisability of findings limited.

This desktop review of the experiences of students with disabilities in higher education identified two core themes which were substantiated in discussions with an expert panel of disability practitioners in higher education and through the pilot survey of international students with disabilities. These themes focus on:

- (i) Students' navigation of access to disability support (accommodations), their awareness of systems and processes to support their learning and wider needs, and the role of individual and institutional factors impacting their access and use of them.
- (ii) Development of inclusive learning environments.

In exploring these themes, it is evident how they intersect with the 12 areas of practice previously prioritised for action in developing more inclusive higher education by Evans and Zhu (2022, 2023a, b) that would also need consideration in addressing the issues raised.

3.3 Students' navigation of access to disability support

Provision of Accommodations

Successful interventions identify the need for early identification, risk assessment, and appropriate support provision for students with disabilities (Crouch, 2019), and that such support should be 'anticipatory, progressive and mutual' (Hewett et al., 2017). Student self-

awareness of what support they need, how to navigate the supports available and advocate for their needs is dependent on the quality of support available in relation to their needs.

Accommodations within the university context such as academic (e.g., extended assessment time, study skills, specialist equipment), wider holistic supports (e.g., counselling support) and national schemes (i.e., Disabled Students Allowance for students entering higher education and Access to Work support for those in employment in the UK) make a difference to student success and progression (Brewer et al., 2023; Newman et al. 2021). However, the evidence base to support this is variable given the wide range of factors involved and quality of research studies (Evans & Zhu, 2023a, b; Madaus et al., 2018; Römhild & Holleder, 2024).

Brewer et al. (2023) found that accommodations were limited in impacts as they did not fully address the challenges experienced by students with disabilities noting the need for resources to ensure disability services staff are empowered to provide students with the required support. It is also important that students with disabilities are fully engaged in decisions around their accommodations and have the self-regulation skills to make best use of resource.

Differential levels of support for disabled students studying at UK higher education providers are found related to the interaction of personal and study characteristics:

- **Social class:** 36 per cent of disabled students who have had any support approved by their university in the UK had all that support put in place, but this was the case for only 29 per cent for students from **low socio-economic backgrounds** (DSUK, 2023).
- **International students:** 45 per cent of students who declared a disability reported that their university approved all the adjustments they could to make their experience as equal as possible to the experience of a non-disabled student, compared to a figure of 34 per cent for **non-EU international students** (DSUK, 2023).
- 75 per cent of **international students with disabilities** noted that at no point in their studies were they asked what could be done to enhance their learning experience (n = 55). (Evans, 2024b).
- **Postgraduate students:** DSUK & Pete Quinn Consulting's 2023 study of 192 STEM students found that only 33 per cent of participants felt they had received the support they needed to be on an equal footing with their non-disabled peers. Less than half of disabled PhD students felt it was clear where they should get their disability support from.
- **The nature of disability:** Those with **hidden disabilities** may experience more difficulties in accessing support (UCAS, 2022). Studies suggest such students face more disadvantages due to a lack of understanding and commitment to accommodate them (McEwan & Downie, 2019).
- **International students with disabilities** (ISwD) and the nature of disability (Evans, 2024b).

- ISwD with **physical impairments** found accessing centrally provided study skills, and accommodation needs more straightforward than other ISwD groups.
- ISwD with **hidden disabilities** found it more difficult than other ISwD groups to access supports from academics than those with visible disabilities, and those with both visible and hidden disabilities.
- ISwD with a **declared mental health** condition found it more difficult than other ISwD groups to access academic support and to address their accommodation needs.
- ISwD with **visual and hearing impairments** expressed greater difficulties in accessing social networks than other ISwD groups.

The positive impacts of social interventions and student organisations and mentoring programmes on the engagement of students with disabilities in higher education is well reported (Ashbaugh et al., 2017; Bialka et al., 2017; Hillier et al. 2019). Römheld and Holleder (2024) in their review of 46 studies found health promotion, and social and academic integration impacted student outcomes. Emphasis on social skills development was found to be especially pertinent to the needs of neurodiverse students (Fabri et al., 2020; Gurbuz et al., 2019). Evans (2024b) found international students with disabilities were very positive about wider university supports but found it difficult to access these; this was especially the case for students with mental health conditions, and those with learning difficulties and social communication conditions. International students with visual and hearing impairments also found it more difficult to access social supports such as disability networks and peer support groups.

Wavehill (2022) reporting on the relative success of a three million investment by OfS in 18 mental health projects in universities and colleges in England found that these projects had reached high numbers of students from groups who were typically underrepresented in the use of support services or faced barriers in accessing support at university or college. The report concluded that involvement in the co-creation of mental health initiatives was beneficial for students and staff. It improved students' mental health awareness, their confidence about accessing support, and promoted a sense of belonging. The co-creation work also helped improve staff knowledge of the barriers to accessing support (Wavehill, 2022).

Awareness of 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., p. 13)

Students with disabilities need to know what support is available and how to access it to successfully manage their transitions through university (DSUK, 2023). UCAS (2022) found a

disparity between the number of students sharing an impairment in the application and at the point of enrolment, indicative of the fact that a proportion start their course within the UK without discussing support with their university or college which may reflect a lack of awareness of how this information is used, worries about disclosing, and lack of awareness of their own disability.

DSUK (2023) argued that for students to have all the reasonable adjustments they require, they need to have sufficient information to ask for the right adjustments, have the adjustments they ask for agreed, and have the agreed adjustments implemented. The DSUK survey found that only 16 per cent of student with disabilities studying in the UK stated that all three of these things happened, with implementation of support being especially difficult. In addition, 36 per cent of students with disabilities found that most of the adjustments that had been provided were ineffective.

Evans (2024b) found that a lack of awareness of what support was available, the complexity and range of supports available, and for some students, a lack of self-awareness of what support was needed made it difficult for international students with disabilities to access support when they first arrived in the UK.

The expert panel highlighted the need for clearer and more accessible information about what support was available to students with disabilities in making transitions into higher education; a need identified by both UCAS (2022), and DSUK (2023). The expert panel felt that students' lack of awareness of disability support when entering higher education led them to not getting the support they needed early enough and/or could result in unrealistic expectations about what support could be provided. The expert panel argued that lack of knowledge about disability inclusion provision in universities for students with disabilities by those supporting them (e.g., by teachers in schools, parents, carers, careers guidance in schools) acted as a discriminatory barrier. 41 per cent of higher education applicants to UK higher education providers reported they needed additional support to navigate the funding application process, with 43 per cent of disabled students reporting that they had spent more time on administrative tasks than they had expected (n= 236) Snowden Report (2021).

In transitioning from school or college into university in the UK, UCAS (2022) identified that applicants:

- with **physical and/or visible impairments** were more likely to feel supported than those with **'hidden' disabilities**.
- with **hidden disabilities** were more likely to feel uncomfortable sharing an impairment, and less likely to have high expectations for higher education (UCAS, 2022).
- who felt least supported by their school or college included those with **two or more impairments** and those with **social, behavioural or communication impairments** (UCAS, 2022).

UCAS (2022) highlights the differential access to supports for students with **learning differences** and from the **least advantaged backgrounds**, recommending that there should be funding in all schools and colleges so that every student up to the age of 14 can access diagnostic testing for a learning difference if they wish to have one, and get the right support if a diagnosis is given as noted on page 10 of this report.

Shaw (2021) found that disabled students were 23 per cent more likely to defer entry to higher education due to delays with support (Shaw, 2021). DSUK (2023) found that 45 per cent of declared disabled students and only 37 per cent of **second generation British students** (students whose parents migrated to the UK) said they had been given enough relevant information about different possible adjustments that could help them.

Evans (2024b) found from a pilot survey of **international students with disabilities** (ISwD), that ISwD who had been contacted by their universities prior to starting were more positive about their experiences of support (54 per cent of ISwD were contacted by their university to discuss support; 46 per cent reporting that they had to initiate contacts). Those who had to initiate contact to ask about support were less positive about the support they received.

DSUK (2023) found that the biggest predictors of students feeling that they had enough information about adjustments was their disability advisor. Students who felt their disability advisor was helpful and knowledgeable were 4.6 times more likely to have been sufficiently informed. However, resourcing of disability services was also important. Students who felt that disability staff had enough resources to do their job were 2.4 times more likely to be sufficiently informed. However, Borkin (2023) highlights the increasing pressure on disability support teams within universities in the UK. From a review of 103 staff working in disability services in the UK within 67 higher education providers, she found that, on average one disability adviser is now supporting up to 583 disabled students, and that nearly a quarter of all respondents (22 per cent) stated that one disability adviser supports over 750 disabled students. These figures are considerably in excess of the recommended guidance on base-level provision for disabled students in higher education of a ratio of one disability adviser to 200 disabled students suggested in 1999 by the Higher Education Funding Councils for England and Wales (HEFCE).

Evans (2024b) pilot survey of **international students with disabilities** (ISwD) found significant relationships between the extent to which a student felt valued by their academic community and had a strong sense of belonging to a university with their reported relative ease in accessing supports and assessment of the relative value of them. Evans suggests these variables can be mutually reinforcing in that receiving good support from a university would most likely increase one's sense of belonging and of feeling valued which in turn could impact student satisfaction with supports (n = 50).

Success in accessing support

Success in achieving adjustments is dependent on several variables. The DSUK (2023) survey found that one of the main reasons cited by 51 per cent of students who did not disclose their disability to UK higher education providers (n = 75) was the burdensome administrative process. 70 per cent stated that they went without adjustments because it took too much time and energy to ensure they were put in place. The DSUK (2023) survey also found that 45 per cent of students held back from raising the key access issues they encountered citing that it would take them too long to advocate for themselves. This is unsurprising given that 47 per cent of students in the same survey who have raised access issues stated that they had never been resolved (DSUK, 2023).

Osuna-Juárez, & González-Castellano (2023) point to barriers caused by the bureaucracy of university systems which can make it difficult for students to get the support they need and when they need it. They argue it is important for higher education providers to consider the extent to which administrative processes, and teaching and learning methodologies create barriers for students with disabilities, and can play a significant part in excluding them from university.

A recent study by Rowan (2024) suggested that the support **international students with disabilities** (ISwD) receive beyond reasonable adjustments is limited in comparison to domestic students from her study of 20 ISwD experiences of UK higher education. Rowan (2024) found that while some higher education institutions had developed approaches to ensure ISwD received adequate levels of support, this was not the case in most providers. While she identified that 'reasonable levels of disability support' were provided for all students, differences emerged between domestic and international students for support that went beyond the 'reasonable' requirement.

ISwD do not have access to the same funding sources as domestic students, the Disability Support Allowance (DSA) is not available to international students. Higher education institutions are under no legal obligation to provide ISwD with additional funding for disability support including disability needs assessment. ISwD are therefore at a significant disadvantage in accessing the support they need compared to domestic students, and at the same time, having to pay much higher costs for their higher education degree.

Rowan identified 5 key concerns facing ISwD: (i) the relatively poorer experiences of disability needs assessment for ISwD at the postgraduate level; (ii) discrepancies in requirements on acceptable evidential proof of disability and delays in receiving support across UK higher education institutions (HEIs); (iii) ineffective information sharing between disability services and academic departments; (iv) funding challenges; (iv) lack of staff knowledge and familiarity in supporting ISwD.

A significant challenge for students with disabilities is around disclosure. Meeting expectations around the sharing of disability information is problematic for some students. 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.

UCAS (2022) found that university applicants to UK higher education are generally comfortable sharing a disability, noting that two thirds (65 per cent) of applicants reported feeling comfortable with this. 10 per cent of students with disabilities were uncomfortable; this is a particular issue for those with **hidden disabilities**, and also for **international students**. Evans (2024b) found from a pilot study of **international students** with disabilities (ISwD) that 48 per cent disclosed to their university at point of application, and a further 25 per cent disclosed during their course of study (n = 61). The core reasons cited for not disclosing included not knowing what the consequences of disclosure meant, and concerns about bias, misconceptions, and being treated differently.

The dilemma students face about balancing the risks of exposure (stigmatisation; personal identity issues) with the need to receive accommodations is considerable, and a constant noise/distraction for some students, and especially for **international students with disabilities** and those with **hidden disabilities** as noted previously. Bruce and Aylward (2021) argue that multiple personal exchanges with faculty and disability services staff can have significant impacts on disabled students' sense of themselves, and their sense of fit with an organisation, which can in turn have impact on student engagement and success (Evans, 2024a, b; Evans & Zhu, 2023). Clouder et al. (2020) argue that this dilemma is especially acute for **neurodiverse** students (dyspraxia, dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, dyscalculia, autistic spectrum and Tourette syndrome), as fear of stigmatization and labelling worsens the divide between what is needed and what is available to ensure neurodiverse students' success in higher education.

Additional support is often contingent on disclosing a disability and the cost of success for some disabled students may be too high as outlined by Macleod et al. (2018) in their study of **autistic** students. Bruce and Aylward highlight how some students struggle with the obligation to connect with a disability identity, that is often required in the sharing of disability-related information: 'They understood the necessity for officially sanctioned labelling in order to be granted accommodations, but grappled with the marginalizing implications of doing so publicly' (Bruce, & Aylward, 2021, p.21). The disclosure of disability especially for students with **hidden disabilities** can be complex and painful, meaning that some students forgo the accommodations they are entitled to (Moriña & Martins, 2024). For **international students with disabilities** it meant a constant weighing up of implications and the cost of these (i.e., balancing the need for support with the desire for privacy and self-reliance (Evans, 2024b).

The physical and emotional load on students with disabilities in navigating access to support is evident in student survey responses (DSUK, 2023; Snowden, 2021), and reflected widely in the literature. In Evans (2024b) review of **international students with disabilities** (ISwD) experiences of UK higher education, ISwD commented on the amount of effort they needed to put into their studies, and into navigating supports compared to their non-disabled peers. For example, the process of registering with disability services, understanding the accommodations available, and integrating assistive technologies into their daily routine required significant time and effort. Managing academic and personal needs, and integration with others, while also managing accommodation and transport considerations ISwD found challenging.

Brewer et al. (2023, p. 13) describe students negotiating with disability or support services as ‘battling the system where difficulties may be exacerbated where accommodations (or the process of requesting them) are not consistent with prior experience at school.’ The energy and time taken to advocate may have knock on effects on study, and disabled students’ perceptions of self as valued or marginalised members of their community (Bruce & Aylward, 2021). The DSUK 2023 survey found that only 42 per cent of disabled students felt part of a community at their institution. A relationship between feeling valued and feeling part of a community was related to how **international students with disabilities** perceived ease of access to, and quality of supports (Evans, 2024b).

Success in accessing supports is dependent on students’ self-advocacy skills (i.e., their knowledge of self, rights, context, how to be heard, and how to be successful in getting the support needed which includes good negotiating skills and high-level emotional regulation capacity). Not all disabled students arrive at university with the skills to advocate effectively and grapple with changed roles from being in a system at school to being part of a system in university (O’Byrne et al., 2019). Yet, it is precisely at the point of entry that disabled students have to be proactive in seeking out help and accommodations from specialist disability offices and teaching staff. Moriña & Biagiotti (2022) argue that this rarely happens because of the reasons cited previously to include but not limited to students’ lack of awareness of procedures and what help is available, perceptions that they do not need help, the need to avoid disclosure and the potential for labelling, stigma and differential treatment students with disabilities are concerned might happen.

The expectations of disabled students being able to navigate the complex world of accommodations within higher education is high. Hewitt et al. (2017) in exploring the experiences of **visually impaired** students’ navigation of higher education highlighted that these students had to be able to explain their required adjustments and have well-developed independent study skills. Bruce and Aylward (2021, p. 17) argue that it is difficult for disabled students to discuss their disabilities and assert their learning-specific needs with multiple

audiences (academic, administration and professional services staff and specialist support advisors) 'alongside the power imbalances that shape experiences of students as they work to understand and comply with the procedural elements of [unrealistic system requirements]'.

Evans (2024b) found that while **international students with disabilities** rated themselves as having relatively well developed self-advocacy skills they also were aware that the utility of these skills in cultural contexts very different to ones they were used to was more limited requiring them to quickly learn new approaches.

The attitudes of academics and professional services staff have considerable impact on the ability of students with disabilities to advocate for their needs and have them realised (Brewer et al., 2023; Clouder et al., 2020). Borkin (2023) highlights that the increasingly specialised expertise of staff based within disability services has contributed to the UK higher education sector's overall ability to support growing numbers of disabled students, but she also acknowledges the pressure the system is under with an average of one adviser supporting 583 disabled students from survey responses from 67 UK higher education providers.

65 per cent of students in the DSUK (2023) survey reported that a staff member had stated or implied that it was okay to need support. However 26 per cent of students reported having been made to feel unwelcome by staff at the university due to their disability; comparable to the 23 per cent of international students with disabilities that felt unsupported by academic staff in Evans (2024b) pilot study.

Brewer et al. (2023) found in 91 online forum posts that students with disabilities had reported that some academics refused to provide accommodations and in other cases, disability services denied accommodations on the basis that academics could not, or would not, support the adjustments.

3.4 Developing Inclusive Learning Environments

Findings from recent student surveys in the UK highlight that students with disabilities face significant barriers in relation to the basics of access to learning, and to inclusive curricula including assessment. Evans's (204b) research with **international students with disabilities** (ISwD) studying in the UK found that while 54 per cent of ISwD said they were contacted by their university to ask about any supports they required prior to starting their courses, 75 per cent of ISwD noted that at no point in their studies were they asked about what could be done to enhance their learning experience (n = 55). This study also revealed that where universities had initiated contact with ISwD to discuss their needs, these students were more positive about the accessibility and quality of supports received.

Expert panel and international research identify that within both new and old universities disabled students' access to accessible bathrooms in the 21st century remains challenging (Osuna-Juárez, & González-Castellano, 2023). Access issues are particularly prevalent for **wheelchair users**, and students with **visual and hearing impairments**. Some of the findings highlighted below make for very difficult reading and confirm the significant differential access to learning experienced by many students with disabilities within UK higher education.

Access

- 35 per cent of students with disabilities had been unable to attend in-person teaching due to **physical/sensory** inaccessibility (DSUK, 2023).
- Access to interpreters for **hearing impaired** students is problematic (Hendry et al., 2020).
- 50 per cent of **STEM PhD students** (n = 192) found the physical/sensory environment on campus inaccessible (DSUK & Pete Quinn Consulting 2023).
- 24 per cent could not name an accessible workplace for them on campus (DSUK, 2023).
- 30 per cent of disabled students wanted to join a group but felt they were not accessible (Snowden, 2021)
- 40 per cent of students with **mobility difficulties** found their campus inaccessible (DSUK, 2023).
- **PhD** students with **mobility difficulties** were the least likely to have a sense of belonging at their institution (DSUK & Pete Quinn Consulting 2023).
- Students with **multiple disabilities or other impairments** were least satisfied with their access to subject specific resources compared to non-disabled students and other disabled groups (OfS, NSS, 2024).
- Students with cognitive or learning difficulties and also those with **multiple disabilities or other impairments** were least satisfied compared to non-disabled students and other disabled groups (OfS, NSS, 2024).

Curriculum

- Only 16 per cent of disabled students felt that their modules, as a whole, had been designed with accessibility in mind (DSUK, 2023).
- 37 per cent of students state that the vast majority of their recordings had useful captions (DSUK, 2023).
- Access to course materials remains difficult for **visual** (Hewitt et al., 2017) and **hearing impaired** students (Hendry et al., 2020).

- 54 per cent felt their digital teaching experience to be a negative one (Snowden, 2021).
- Students with **multiple disabilities or other impairments** were least satisfied with course organisation compared to non-disabled students and other disabled groups (OfS, NSS, 2024).

Assessment

- 50 per cent of disabled students believed that they had received a lower mark due to inaccessible assessments (DSUK, 2023).
- Disability inclusion in assessment is mostly understood as a matter of adequate individual adjustments rather than any questioning of the quality of assessments themselves (Nieminen, 2023).
- Students with **multiple disabilities or other impairments** were least satisfied with the clarity of marking criteria used to assess work compared to non-disabled students and other disabled groups (OfS, NSS, 2024).

Different perceptions and understandings of what inclusive practice is, and more specifically, what disability inclusion is, who is responsible for it, and how this translates into pedagogy pervade higher education (Amor et al., 2019; Borkin, 2023; Evans & Zhu, 2023; Moriña & Biagiotti, 2022). Koutsouris et al. (2022) in their analysis of 24 Russell group university documents on inclusive practice found what constitutes 'genuine' inclusion was not defined or discussed, and that there were no discussions on the complexities of translating inclusion into pedagogic principles or applications.

In looking at effective transitions initiatives to support students, **international students with disabilities** commented on the need for universities to have positive organisational cultures around the value of diversity and that this needed to translate to policy and practice (Evans, 2024b). Scott et al. (2014, p. 27) argue that the focus should be on how to change institutional structures, cultures and practices that reproduce deeply embedded inequalities within higher education rather than focusing on the role of the individual student in managing change (Scott et al., 2014, p 27). Evans and Zhu (2023b) found a disconnect between research on effective transitions for students with disabilities, and what happened in practice, in an analysis of English higher education access and participation plans. Kutscher and Tuckwiller (2020) identified the effectiveness of transitions programmes focused on supporting students' self-determination and self-advocacy skills, but there is a need for more research on practice in this area.

In addressing system related issues to student transitions, a number of recommendations for the higher education sector have been made, mindful that transitions are not a point in time but a continuous process. These recommendations include:

- **Early investment:** there needs to be greater integration across all stages of education to support students in having ownership of their transitions, and knowledge and skills to navigate this well.
- **Awareness of the student context:** higher education providers need to have better understanding of the specific contexts of students with disabilities and the potential challenges they face.
- **Supporting entry into higher education:** The importance of supporting students in their first weeks at university to focus on the key knowledge and skills required at specific points in their learning journey (Moriña & Martins, 2024); providing sufficient time for orientation, cultural adjustment and networking.
- **Clarity on institutional messaging surrounding disability:** to attract disabled students to disclose and feel confident in sharing their conditions (UCAS, 2022).
- **Detailed and transparent information about the support available** for students with disabilities, (e.g., accommodation process, self-advocating, and the types of accommodations available) to enable students with disabilities to make informed decisions (Evans, 2024b, c; UCAS, 2022).
- **The importance of consistency regarding supports and resources** from secondary school into higher education and into employment and across universities and employers to support seamless transfers (Brewer et al., 2023).
- **The need for enhanced collaboration within and across sectors to best support students** with disabilities and to make best use of resource (e.g., (i) school to university shared responsibility in supporting transitions; (ii) engagement between professional, statutory, and regulatory bodies, academic staff and staff working in disability services, and wider services; (iii) ensuring streamlined systems and improved communications between students, university departments and funding streams (DSUK, 2022).
- **Ensuring joined up academic and social support** and implementation of reasonable adjustments in an inclusive way, thereby avoid stigmatising the student (Fabri et al., 2020).
- **Ensuring early opportunities for internships, work-based learning, academic mentoring, and research engagement** (Evans & Zhu, 2023b).

There are also significant opportunities to rethink how inclusion is delivered within universities using disability inclusion as the disruptor to enhance inclusion for all students and staff and using assessment as a driver of such change (Evans & Waring, 2024).

The predominant emphasis in higher education is on individual academic adjustments, access and support services for students with disabilities rather than a questioning of the very

nature of assessment itself (Marquez & Aguila, 2022; Tai et al., 2021). Despite calls for a move away from individual adjustments toward a fully inclusive design for learning, the practice of applying institutional reasonable adjustments for students with disabilities persists in UK higher education (Beck, 2022). Nieminen (2023) highlights the disruptive possibilities of assessment in enabling a reset of how disability inclusion is framed in higher education, citing recent research on how to achieve more inclusive assessment for all students in a way that reduces the need for individual adjustments (Nieminen, 2022; Tai et al., 2021). Moves in this direction include the mainstreaming of the most common adjustments', alongside 'personal assessments' wherein students can self-select their own reasonable adjustments from a pre-populated list towards a more inclusive model (Borkin, 2023).

Realising inclusive design

Koutsouris et al. (2022) highlight the challenges inherent in defining what inclusive practice is in higher education, mirroring Evans and Zhu's (2023a, b) findings regarding the quality of discussion about what inclusion includes, what theoretical frameworks have informed approaches, or how to do this effectively within higher education. Marquez and Aguila (2022) argue the need for a broader view of inclusion that goes beyond inclusive action on a specific group of students and refers to the participation and success of everyone. This broader perspective on inclusion is pertinent given that 'disability is intersectional in that it is but one factor impacting an individual that works in combination with other individual factors and situational contexts' (Evans, 2024a).

Enabling a significant paradigm shift in how disability inclusion is framed within higher education requires transparent discussion around the theoretical framing and associated principles underpinning inclusion approaches. Evans and Zhu (2022) in developing the [Disability Inclusion Institutional Framework](#) and its underpinning [principles](#) highlight the need for institutions to attend to 12 areas of practice in an integrated way to ensure inclusion for students and staff, to include consideration of the fundamental purposes of higher education in supporting more inclusive societies. Open discussion around what constitutes 'genuine' inclusion needs to address the: who, what, and how of disability inclusion, as part of a comprehensive inclusive approach. Such an approach requires:

- A shift in focus from the individual to the institution, to support inclusive systems, structures and processes, that reflect community values and are thus bottom-up, negotiated and context dependent (Evans & Zhu, 2022; Koutsouris et al., 2022).
- A focus on wider definitions of success that go beyond discussion of access and outcomes, to consideration of the quality of the student experience at university encompassing engagement and sense of belonging through opportunities to participate in academic, social, and wider activities (Moriña & Biagiotti, 2022).

- Balancing differential student learning needs and requirements and enhancing community belonging (Koutsoris et al., 2022).
- Emphasis on collective responsibility and collaborative effort to drive inclusion that does not see disability inclusion as the sole responsibility of disability services to deliver (Baltaru, 2020; Beck, 2022; Koutsouris et al., 2022).
- Explicit discussion about what an inclusive pedagogy is, and based on what theoretical underpinnings and evidence in practice, and the provision of the tools, and wider resource to enable this. Such a pedagogy needs to:
 - reframe diversity as something to be valued rather than mitigated (Nieminen, 2023, p. 47);
 - recognise that students have multiple intersecting identities that are shaped by wider environmental and personal influences, including disabilities (Rowan, 2022, p. 15);
 - be anticipatory in building inclusion into design from the 'get go' to reduce the need for reactive and individual responses to inclusion for students (Evans, 2022);
 - recognise transitions as a process and not as a point in time, and explore with those with disabilities potential rate-limiting steps at each stage in the learning process (Evans & Waring, 2024: Waring & Evans, 2015);
 - focus on achieving more inclusive assessment for *all* students in a way that reduces the need for individual adjustments (Nieminen, 2023, p. 47);
 - ensure transparency in enabling access and engagement Evans, 2022);
 - be holistic in addressing academic and social participation (Moriña & Biagiotti, 2022; Nieminen, 2023);
 - emphasize shared advocacy – in maximising what an institution can do to ensure equal access and opportunities for all to do well, while also attending to the self-regulatory skills development of students and staff which includes essential self-advocacy skills that support agency and autonomy (Morina & Martins, 2024; O'Byrne et al., 2019);
- Invest in high quality training and ongoing professional development for staff and students (Moriña & Carnerero, 2022; Tăbăcaru et al., 2022) underpinned by an inclusive research culture that invests in supporting the development of high quality interventions and rigorous analyses of these (Evans & Zhu, 2023a, b). Such training to include:
 - opportunities for staff and students to explore their perceptions of disability inclusion and to develop shared understandings (Marquez & Aguila, 2022; Shaw, 2023);

- working with those with disabilities to support embedding of anticipatory design in all courses;
- investment in developing ‘effective brokers’ (Kozhevnikov et al., 2014) that can support the translation of theory into practice nuanced to specific contexts (Borkin, 2023; Fernández-Batanero et al., 2022);
- development of robust tools and frameworks to support implementation and evaluation of practice (Evans & Waring, 2024; Osuna-Juárez, & González-Castellano, 2023; Smith, K., & Smith, D., 2021);
- access to a strong resource base developed with students and staff as part of building an inclusive community of practice;
- engagement with professional, regulatory, and statutory bodies (PRSBs), and employers to support inclusive curricula and working environments.

Advancing understanding of inclusive pedagogies is key. An informed understanding of the relevance of self-determination theoretical perspectives to support inclusive practice is important. This includes understanding of wider self-regulatory approaches that promote learners’ metacognitive, cognitive and affective skills development, and how to apply this knowledge within disciplinary contexts (Evans & Waring, 2024).

Self-determination theory highlights the interaction between perceptions of autonomy and control, goal orientation/motivations, affect, locus of control (whether an individual feels outcomes are within one’s control or not), and expectancy of success; relatedness (referring to the need to have meaningful relationships with others) is also implicated (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Self-advocacy is related to self-determination in that it comprises knowledge of self, and in relation to the context, confidence in one’s abilities, including one’s ability to take control of events to successfully achieve goals (Moriña & Biagiotti, 2021). Self-advocacy skills have relevance to all students, but especially for those with disabilities where acquisition of such skills significantly impacts participation and success in higher education (Kutscher & Tuckwiller, 2019).

Pedagogical initiatives underpinned by an understanding of self-determination constructs reduce the need for students with disabilities to have to advocate for their needs, enabling such students to focus on the business of learning. This approach can also be used holistically as in university transition programmes that aim to develop self-determination, academic skills, interpersonal relations, academic and professional expectations (Moriña & Biagiotti, 2022).

Reducing the need for students to have to advocate for their needs supports a move to a shared advocacy approach whereby ‘mutual accommodations undertaken by an individual and an organisation support independence and agency, and minimise the need for further

adjustments through integrated, inclusive, and anticipatory design' (Evans, 2024 a, b). A shared advocacy approach encapsulates organisational awareness of statutory responsibilities towards all members of the community (*knowledge of rights*), organisational commitment to inclusion and valuing of diversity (*beliefs*), and organisational *behaviours* in supporting individual autonomy and agency. Sensitivity to the cultural context of disability inclusion and emphasis on translation of ideas into practice is centred in the British Council's (E(DI)) theory of change model in their HE and Science programmes by focusing on four areas: enhancing awareness, ensuring access, embedding inclusive design, and with emphasis on ongoing monitoring and evaluation (Evans, 2024a).

Promising inclusion initiatives within higher education include Moriña & Martins' (2024) focus on supporting students' development of essential skills (problem-solving skills, learning about oneself, goal setting, self-management, self-advocacy), and attributes (autonomy, resilience, and empowerment). Moriña & Martins found from an analysis of 16 qualitative studies, involving 303 participants, that being self-determined at university contributed to academic success. It allowed students to advocate for their rights and find the support they needed, establish relationships with disability offices, faculty, peers, and gain self-awareness and self-knowledge. Many studies agree in identifying both personal factors (e.g., self-determination or self-discipline) and contextual factors (e.g., family, friends, support services, faculty, or peers) that influence successful trajectories in university).

In supporting an inclusive approach to assessment, and moving the dial away from a focus on individualised supports, Evans (2013, 2022) argues the importance of designing assessment that supports student agency and autonomy and the associated skills they need to be successful. Evans' (2022) [Equity, Agency, and Transparency \(EAT\)](#) framework promotes student and staff self-regulatory skills development, and their agentic engagement in learning, mindful of individual differences and contextual affordances and limitations (Evans & Waring, 2024). Evans' (2016, 2022) asks all practitioners to examine the extent to which their design and delivery of assessment impacts students' differential outcomes. Integral to this work is discussion around the fitness for purpose of assessment. The relevance and integrity of assessment are central conversations that universities should be having about what we should be measuring and how (Rienties et al., 2024). To facilitate this, Evans addresses the theory-practice impasse, by creating effective blueprints of how to explore assessment design in practice with staff and students calling for an emphasis on the high regulatory skills needed in specific disciplines and contexts. Evans and Waring (2024) highlight the importance of high quality sustained professional development to support students and staff in accessing concepts, implementing approaches attuned to their own needs, and in monitoring and evaluating the impacts of their efforts. (The self-regulatory assessment and feedback (SRAF) approach is outlined in Evans & Waring, 2024; Evans et al., 2024).

The reasons why initiatives such as those outlined above are successful is that they promote the development of skill sets and attributes known to impact learner success, and do so by promoting the autonomy and agency of learners (staff and students). For example, self-determination theory (SDT) highlights the interaction between an individual's perceptions of autonomy and control, their goal orientation/motivations, affect, locus of control (whether an individual feels outcomes are within one's control or not), and expectancy of success (Deci & Ryan, 1995).

Challenges to inclusive practice

Shared understandings of inclusive practice

Marquez and Aguila (2022) argue that greater investment is needed in staff development in order to cultivate a broader view of inclusive education (Osuna-Juárez, & González-Castellano, 2023). A view where inclusion goes beyond focusing actions on a specific group of students to considering the participation and success of everyone. They argue that this kind of paradigm shift needs to be cultivated deliberately, to enable open debate about the meaning and implications of inclusion.

The need for sustained professional development of staff to support more inclusive education approaches within higher education is well supported within the literature where training in inclusivity and disabilities has been identified as a weakness in the university system (Moriña & Carnerero 2022; Omissi, 2020). For example, Tăbăcaru et al. (2022) found that only 30 per cent of professors surveyed had received prior training on inclusive education from a study of 158 teachers from universities in United Kingdom, Romania, Finland, Belgium, and Greece; highlighting a significant gap in the preparedness of faculty members to create inclusive settings for students. Training is also needed to support robust assessment design (Brown, 2024). Nieminen (2023) notes much effort is expended around agreeing and justifying amendments to assessments for those with disabilities without seriously questioning the fundamental quality and validity of assessments themselves (Brown, 2024).

Shaw (2023) supports investment in enhancing staff awareness of disability inclusion given that a lack of confidence and adequate training of lecturers results in teaching and learning not being as inclusive as it could be, leading to the continuing need for application of individual reasonable adjustments (Beck, 2022). Baltaru (2020) questions how reasonable adjustments are applied within current models of inclusivity in higher education, where emphasis is often on disability support services as providers of inclusion without further questioning the real inclusion levels of students; this is seen as limiting.

Significant questions have been raised about the varied levels of understanding and expertise by academics and administrative teams in decision-making around reasonable adjustments. Lack of awareness and understanding of competency standards in the areas of

teaching, learning and assessment can lead lecturers to feeling students have an unfair advantage, which can lead to resistance in adapting assessments (Borkin, 2023; Fernández-Batanero et al., 2022; Osuna-Juárez, & González-Castellano (2023).

Cameron et al. (2019) argue that universities run a risk of being non-compliant with national legislation (e.g., the 2010 Equality Act in England and Wales) if they are unable to be transparent about decisions made for each student with disabilities on reasonable adjustments. For example, how the decisions are made, and if so, whether what is requested to be adjusted is actually a competence standard, and if not, what adjustments would have the effect of reducing or removing the disadvantage, and finally what is reasonable in the specific circumstances.

Such concerns about the application of reasonable adjustments has led Beck (2022, p. 415) to suggest that reliance on individual reasonable adjustments as a way of supporting students with disabilities should only be considered as an interim measure while developments in inclusive practices, including inclusive curriculum design are ongoing.

A holistic view of inclusion

Metrics on the comparative performance of students with disabilities compared to their non-disabled counterparts are used as strong indicators of inclusive practice but the quality of the lived experience of those with disabilities regardless of outcomes needs more attention. Moriña and Martins (2024, p. 2) argue the importance of students' sense of belonging as a key component of self-determination which is implicated in student retention and success. They emphasize that studying at university 'is not only about achieving academic objectives to obtain a qualification and finding a job; it can also be an opportunity to reinvent an identity that has deteriorated in previous stages ... and to live an experience of participation and social inclusion with other peers inside and outside the university classroom'.

Manifestations of narrow conceptions of inclusion are identified in the lack of emphasis placed on the social dimension of students' learning in higher education (Nieminen, 2023). Moriña and Martins (2024) found in 16 studies they reviewed, that the emphasis of self-determination approaches to support students with disabilities was placed on academic opportunities. And that in not one of the studies they looked at was there discussion about social opportunities for learning and participating at university for students with disabilities.

The need for high quality translational research

In supporting inclusive pedagogies, the relative lack of high quality research on disability inclusion, and of work demonstrating translation of theory into practice create significant challenges in moving to a broader model of inclusion. Evans & Zhu (2023a, b) found in their systematic review of disability inclusion in higher education that only 12 per cent of articles were of the highest reliability and validity quality. They also noted that much of this work was

developed in the US and questioned the extent to which it would have relevance to the UK and other countries given the specific cultural and social contexts in which disability is rooted. Amor et al. (2019) found that most of the articles they looked at in their review of inclusive education were theoretical and/or descriptive in nature, and that there was little high quality work demonstrating application of inclusive approaches in practice.

The difficulties inherent in knowing how to apply ideas to practice can be illustrated through the example of universal design for learning (UDL). There is no clear consensus on what it constitutes (Sewell et al., 2022). The (UDL) concept (CAST, 2024 and previous iterations (2011, 2018); Meyer et al., 2014)) has strong face validity, but understanding of how to use it effectively within higher education is an issue (Sewell et al., 2022; Shaw, 2021). The evidence base to support its use is patchy because of the many different ways it may be interpreted and utilised, and because the quality of studies investigating impacts are highly variable (Martin, 2019; Evans & Zhu 2023a).

The aim of UDL is to devise learning environments to enable all learners to be able to access them albeit in different ways building on the universal design movement in architecture. Key principles underpinning UDL in education focus attention on three core areas:

- (i) how information is presented (*representation*) (i.e., different formats and organising structures to permit access to a wide range of learners);
- (ii) enabling learners to demonstrate their knowledge in different ways (*action and expression*), and
- (iii) enhancing motivation through engaging students in meaningful activities (*engagement*) (Evans & Zhu, 2023).

Recent additions in the latest guidelines acknowledge learners' multiple and intersecting identities, and individual, institutional, and systemic biases as barriers to learning.

The concepts underpinning UDL cut across many different theories of learning involving multiple constructs and the interactions between them, necessitating high quality sustained professional development to enable UDL to be used in a meaningful way (Sewell et al., 2022). In implementing and evaluating UDL, the underpinning theoretical concepts being privileged need to be transparent, and how to implement them effectively and measure the effectiveness of what has been done also need to be clear. Applying UDL without fully understanding the rationale underpinning a specific approach means that certain types of learner may be disadvantaged. For example, choice is a key element of UDL but choice is problematic for students who regulate poorly and make poor choices for themselves. Assessment choices are not always equivalent in enabling students to equally demonstrate how they have met learning outcomes; this is also a consequence of poor assessment design. Not having a good understanding of the theoretical principles underpinning UDL (Borkin, 2023), the

interrelationships between different constructs, and how to apply this work effectively to practice can lead to significant misinterpretations of what constitutes good practice and for whom.

Pedagogical frameworks that are focused on specific skill development related to self-determination constructs and wider self-regulation ones related to the high level skills students need to master within their courses (which are also highlighted in UDL) are capable of delivering better results in the drive towards more inclusive practice (Evans & Waring, 2024; Morina and Martins, 2024).

4 Recommendations

This report highlights the need for a broader view of inclusion within higher education, and one that recognises that inclusion is central to the very purposes of higher education (Koutsoris et al., 2022). By acknowledging and addressing the needs of those with disabilities, universities can move toward a model of inclusivity for all that is integral to all structures, systems and processes, centred within pedagogy (Evans & Zhu, 2022), and in relationships with all stakeholders. Shifting to a new inclusion reality requires investment in the following three areas as part of an integrated approach to inclusion (Evans & Zhu, 2022).

- **Investment in coherent and sustained programmes of staff and student professional development** to promote the development of shared understandings of inclusive practice; and valuing of diversity. To support this work investment is needed in research and innovation projects about inclusion to include understanding of individual differences (Marquez & Aguila, 2022). Effective monitoring and evaluation processes to ensure informed collection and use of data to inform student, staff and organisational learning are required (Borkin, 2023; Brewer et al., 2023).
- **Investment in infrastructure to support an integrated and holistic approach to inclusion.** Such an approach maximises the potential of technologies including AI to support learning but also ensures baselines of provision are met so that no one is excluded from a learning context. For example: (i) ensuring physical access to social, and employment opportunities (Evans, 2024b); (ii) ensuring the availability and quality of assistive technologies (Evans & Zhu 2023a, b); (iii) promoting shared responsibility and co-ordination across academic, professional services and student societies to enable joined up academic and social supports (Fabri et al., 2020); (iv) ensuring joined up academic and social supports (Fabri et al., 2020); (vi) engaging those with disabilities in designing and contributing to anticipatory curriculum design, and wider infrastructure supports.
- **Investment in comprehensive transitions support.** Attention should be focused on how best to change institutional structures, cultures and practices to reduce inequalities (Scott et al., 2014). The experiences of students' transitions into universities is hugely significant for their academic careers, and is additionally complex for those with disabilities. International students, with disabilities have additional challenges in trying to fit into a new cultural setting while also navigating their identity (ies) in a different societal context (Evans, 2024b). However, transitions needs to be understood as a collaborative and continuous process, in working with students, over time. Higher education needs to ensure effective transitions support at all stages of the student learning journey, working closely with students with disabilities, schools, colleges, professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, and employers (Evans, 2024c; Gurbuz et al., 2019; UCAS, 2022).

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- **Investment in evidence-informed inclusive pedagogies** that support and cultivate learner autonomy and agency through high level skills development. Brokers are needed who can take the very best of research and translate this into accessible blueprints for change sensitive to individual and situational requirements. A key aspect of this work is achieving inclusive assessment for *all* students in a way that reduces the need for individual adjustments (Nieminen, 2023). As an absolute bare minimum, students need clear guidance from the outset about support available, including the extent of any reasonable adjustments to assessment so that they can make informed decisions about what, where, and how they study (UCAS, 2022). In moving to a more inclusive model of assessment a thorough rethinking of the very nature of assessment with students and staff is needed; about what we value and how best to measure it. A key question course assessment teams should be thinking about is whether assessment design narrows or widens attainment gaps and why. As part of this, universities should consider the extent to which assessment design enables and empowers learners to take control of their own learning, and the extent to which resources to support student learning enable this.

Acknowledgements

A massive thank you to all colleagues who contributed to this research including, in no specific order, colleagues at the Eleanor Glanville Institute, University of Lincoln, British Council alumni with disabilities, and higher education disability expert practitioners in the UK.

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