

Not hearing, not engaging, not happening: Elusive Inclusive HE, it is time to reconsider sector practices in partnership with disabled student expertise.

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Abstract

This paper focuses on inclusive higher education in the United Kingdom. It details international literature, research studies and national reports, including findings from the authors' study, 'Working with disabled students to address unequal outcomes in UK HE during the pandemic' where we critically explored inclusive practice in Higher Education (HE) and disabled students' learning experiences. Our national study was carried out as a collaboration between the University of Plymouth, University of Wolverhampton, and Disabled Students UK (DSUK). Data collection took place in 2021 with an extensive literature-based investigation alongside the dissemination of a questionnaire to DSUK members resulting in 14 responses from across a variety of UG and PG programmes. This research took place whilst DSUK were completing a complementary national study asking disabled students about their experiences of Higher Education during lockdown periods, they received more than 300 responses. Alongside these studies, the Disabled Students' Commission (2021/2022) were compiling their annual report. Findings from all three investigations, contribute to evidence that disabled students across undergraduate and postgraduate courses continue to experience discriminatory and exclusionary practices (DSUK, 2020; NADP, 2020; NMHP, 2020). The work suggests too many disabled students studying in HE today, experience integration, which results in frustration, course transfers and failure, as opposed to the progressive and transformational learning that is associated with successful inclusion. The paper concludes by proposing HE policy makers and practitioners 'partner-up' with disabled students to reconsider what is understood, envisaged, implemented, experienced and evaluated as inclusive HE. Furthermore, that this collaboration and partnership is led by disabled students and takes place at both macro (Government, OfS DSC, and HEA??) and micro levels (lecture theatre).

Key words: disabled students, inclusion, higher education, collaboration, partnership, widening participation

Introduction

In the UK, widening participation, inclusive policy plus practice have been a focus and ideological driver in Higher Education (HE) for many years. This has led to increased efforts in supporting disabled students to access HE, to develop a sense of belonging whilst attending HE, experience inclusive practice, achieve in their studies, to progress and be fulfilled in life (Gibson, *et al.*, 2016; Koutsouris, Mountford-Zimdars and Dingwall, 2021). The Covid-19

pandemic led to unprecedented changes in practice and pedagogy that included moving teaching and assessment online. These changes were welcomed and led to questions as to why, although having been requested for many years by disabled students, they had not been possible before the pandemic (Borkin, 2022). This paper critically considers widening participation and inclusive practice in HE. It evidences difficulties disabled students experienced before the pandemic, and how the pandemic exacerbated disparities between disabled and non-disabled students (Disabled Students UK, 2020). The work refers to disabled students, rather than students with disabilities to visually represent and emphasise how society and institutions like the university, lead to experiences of disablement for these students (Gibson, 2020). The findings contribute to evidence that disabled students continue to experience discrimination and exclusionary practices, resulting in their not being fully represented at HE nor achieving on a par with other students (DSUK, 2020; NADP, 2020; NMHP, 2020; Peruzzo, Rapper and Westander, 2023). This has a knock-on impact upon wider society and arguably the economy in terms of graduate numbers and disabled student future recruitment. The paper highlights the need to rethink and revise inclusive policy, practice and its evaluation in partnership with disabled students. We conclude the leading roles in this work needs to be with our disabled student body.

Widening participation and Inclusion

Widening participation has been a dominant discourse in education policy for over twenty-five years (Gibson, *et al.*, 2016) intrinsically linked in UK policy since New Labour introduced it in the party's manifesto (1997). This has led to increased efforts to engage and include disabled students amongst others prior to and during their HE experiences. The key aims of effective Inclusion and WP being that students develop a sense of belonging, experience inclusive practice, and achieve in their studies (Koutsouris, Mountford-Zimdars and Dingwall, 2021). Internationally, the term refers to policy and practice applied to 'non-traditional' or minority student groups, including disabled people (ARC, 2013). Its original and continued core aim has been to provide more equitable access to Higher Education (HE) and improve retention (Gibson, 2016; Lewis and Johnston, 2002). ARC (2013, p.ii) defined 'under-represented groups as ...*not a homogenous group. They may have a range of identities, diverse social characteristics and come from a variety of backgrounds* [...]. These groups include people from lower socio-economic locations, Global Majority groups, disabled people, first in the family to attend HE, mature students, and care leavers. Conceptualisation of these groupings are termed 'intersections', i.e. they represent intersections of our world, groups in society who have experienced various forms of exclusion and oppression. It is debated within and between

these intersections whether all should be linked to inclusion (Liasidou, 2014). However, commonality across all is the experience and impact of injustice and the continued need for systemic alongside cultural change to achieve equality for every person (Gibson, 2016).

Widening participation practices are commonly positioned as social justice responses to ingrained cultures and perspectives, which have prevented under-represented groups from their human right to an equal education (Gibson, 2020; Madriaga et al 2011). For instance, *The Future of Higher Education* (2003) White paper states, “Education must be a force for opportunity and social justice, not for the entrenchment of privilege” (Jary and Jones, 2004, p.1). Actions have included national directives, statutory policy, the introduction of government bodies and funding mechanisms to support access to HE, including- the Equality Act (2010), the Disabled Student Allowance (1993), the introduction of the Social Mobility and Child Poverty commission (2010), the Higher Funding Council for England (1992-2018) and the Aim Higher programme (2004-2011).

Widening participation is currently delivered through activities and strategies organised and applied within individual HEIs, work and policy development undertaken by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) and Office for Students (OfS), which also approve and monitor access agreements and disseminate best practice. OfS (2020a) have recently pushed HEIs to show more explicitly where they are working with and responding to student voice in revising their provision and practices. Furthermore, the work of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), provide activity funds and administer the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (Hubble and Bolton, 2021)- both contributing to WP across the sector. Widening participation’s impact includes the growth of further education or equivalent colleges (FHEs), increased registration numbers of under-represented groups in HE, including disabled people and an increase in colleges gaining university status (Moore, Sanders, and Higham 2013).

Whilst the number of students with a declared disability in HE has increased significantly, by 46% since 2018, (HESA, 2022a; HESA, 2022b) and now make up almost 20% of home students (DSUK, 2020, 2022; HESA, 2022b), it is also evidenced there continues to be silencing, misrepresentation, and failures in supporting them (Gibson and Kendall, 2010; Gibson, 2015; Gibson and Cook-Sather, 2020). Recent 2019/2020 statistics also show a significant growth in numbers of students reporting mental health conditions since 2014/15 (Bolton and Hubble, 2021). This has been positioned as a significant positive development, as referred to in the *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice* White paper (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2016, p.7): *We have gone from a higher education system that serves only a narrow band of people, to a*

broader, more diverse and more open system that is closer than ever before to fulfilling Lord Robbins' guiding principle that higher education 'should be available to all who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue it

On that basis, it could be argued widening participation is working, however the reality of students' experiences and progression is more complex and nuanced than the simple fact of an increase in numbers. For example, the statistics may not mean an increase of disabled students entering HE but indicate more disabled students deciding to declare their disability. Importantly, even with this increase of declaration, disabled students remain underrepresented in HE (Bolton and Hubble, 2021; OfS, 2020a, 2020b). Furthermore, Hamilton (2019) stated that whilst anti-discrimination legislation, including the SENDA act (2001) and Equality Act (2010) promoted a progressive shift from a deficit model of understanding disability to a social justice and rights-based perspective, 'misguided assumptions of ability and disability' have led to the shallow and tokenistic use of the term 'inclusion'. Gibson (2020, 2022) amongst others (Shaw 2021) has sourced a key failing of WP and meaningful inclusive practice being the lack of participation and contribution of disabled people- i.e. they are a key and core group who should be central and devising and leading the necessary change. Hamilton (2019) stated there are two contrasting agendas surrounding widening participation. One a social justice agenda, which aims for inclusion and the other, more prominent, an 'ableist capitalist agenda' which focuses on providing an educated workforce to meet the needs of the economy. In addition, Shaw (2021) highlighted tensions between the Government's accountability agenda in HE and its 'inclusive practice ideals'.

Evidence of continued discriminatory and exclusionary practice

It is well documented that disabled people face inequalities in many aspects of life, including education (DSC, 2021; ONS 2020) and employment (Policy Connect, 2020). Research has found that regardless of widening participation, disabled students continue to experience ineffective forms of provision, under-representation, and marginalisation. As noted, due partly to ineffective forms of consultation and engagement caused by factors such as hegemony, traditional ideology, unconscious bias and stigma (Beauchamp-Pryor, 2012; Gibson, 2012; Gibson, 2015; Madriaga, 2007; Vickerman and Blundell, 2010). Disabled students continue to be among those most at risk of withdrawing from HE studies and have lower degree outcomes than their peers (OfS, 2020b, Shaw, 2021). The Office for Students (OfS) stated in June 2020 (Office for Students, 2020b, p.2) *Before the pandemic, there were already clear attainment and outcome gaps between disabled and non-disabled students; students*

reporting a disability have lower degree results overall and lower rates of employment after graduation than non-disabled students. In December 2018, the OfS had set five targets to achieve equality of opportunity in higher education. One of these targets to eliminate the degree outcomes gap between disabled and non-disabled students by 2024/2025. The gap in 2020 was 2.8% (Policy Connect, 2020).

The pandemic has intensified existing inequalities including life expectancy, income, employment, relationships, education, and progression (DSUK 2020; Meleo-Erwin et al. 2021; Runswick-Cole 2021; Pring 2021). Disabled people have been harder hit by the effects of the pandemic (Disabled Students UK, 2020). Including, being more likely to experience financial hardship, less likely to access a computer and reliable internet, needing to shield, restrictions in health and social care, being unable to access regular medication or receive hospital care, experiencing food insecurity and requiring additional mental health support (Disabled Students UK, 2020). Several reports have highlighted disabled students' negative experiences, including the Disabled Students Commission (2021) who surveyed 473 disabled students studying undergraduate and postgraduate courses. In total, 80% of respondents reported the pandemic had a negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing. Almost half felt that universities had been 'ineffective' in considering disabled students' needs. It is imperative that examples of discrimination and exclusionary practice are evidenced and critically reviewed if successful inclusion policy, practice and outcomes are to evolve. This paper now moves on to evidencing examples of exclusion from a study carried out by the authors during the Covid-19 pandemic and in summarising its findings we overlap with other studies to consider the need for the HE sector to rethink, rebuild and reposition its work on inclusive provision with disabled students being partners and leaders in those processes.

Methodology

Our study: 'Working with disabled students to address unequal outcomes in UK HE during the pandemic', was a collaboration between - the University of Plymouth, University of Wolverhampton, and Disabled Students UK. It began in 2020, the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic seeking to investigate students' perspectives and experiences of Higher Education during lockdown periods. We aimed for a sample of disabled students through disseminating a questionnaire via DSUK's networks and applied an interpretivist approach when analysing the data. We aimed for an in-depth understanding of each participant's position (Basit, 2010). Data collection started early in 2021 and whilst we had a small response rate, a total of 14 disabled students completed the survey, the range of degrees and detailed responses provided much rich material to work with. We found that participants held commonalities of

perspective even when studying differing courses and/or having different Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). We concluded our findings needed to be published to complement the other national work taking place, providing further evidence of disabled students experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic. Demographic information for participants can be found in the below tables. This information includes responses from the participants. The table shows the range of disabled students SEND, undergraduate and postgraduate courses studied, ethnicity and gender.

[insert table one]

By applying an interpretivist approach, the work focused on each participant's position, acknowledging that their perspective and actions alter over time and are dependent on their situational circumstances (Cohen *et al.*, 2011). The questionnaire included open and closed questions and emphasis was placed on detailing qualitative responses to evidence differing perspectives and experiences. Questionnaires typically require participants to respond to categories decided by the researcher. This questionnaire included open ended questions to ensure that participants were able to tell us their perspectives, experiences and focus on what mattered to them. In doing so, the findings evidence experiences that the participants chose to focus on in their responses to the questionnaire. Open question responses were analysed using thematic analysis and closed question responses were calculated as percentages. It was not the case that all participants completed every question in the questionnaire. Percentages were worked out based on how many students stated they agreed with the closed question out of the sample size of participants. In considering validity of the research, participants were all disabled students studying in HE, they were from a range of universities and courses with a range of SEND and the study's analysis was peer-reviewed.

In qualitative research, the relationship between researchers and participants is key. *...ethical practice implies that the relationship we establish with participants should respect human dignity and integrity, and should be one in which people feel safe, comfortable and among friends* (Simon, 2009, in, Moraña, 2021, p.1560). It was important in the planning of the questionnaire that this data collection was inclusive for all participants. We went through several iterations as we discussed differing structures, formats and the way questions were worded to ensure the content was accessible. We also detailed ways participants could gain additional support to complete the questionnaire, including contact details for members of the project team. It was also important that participants felt free to express their perspectives and experiences without concern of their identities being revealed in dissemination of the research. Questions were asked about the participants course, SEND, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality.

All other forms of identification were omitted from the questionnaire. For instance, participants were not asked to name their setting. This means that the study is unable to state how many universities students attended, but it provided participants with the reassurance that the team did not know where they studied. As detailed by Moriña (2021, p.1560) research needs to *respect a basic set of ethical principles* as well as ensure high quality and rigour. The front page of the questionnaire detailed information about the study, including its aims and objectives. Details on the study and information on confidentiality, anonymity of participants, right to withdraw and voluntary completion were provided online before participants completed the questionnaire. Participants were asked to proceed to data collection if they consented to taking part.

Findings

Our findings explore the responses provided, building a picture of participants' commonalities of perspective and experiences on the inclusivity of their particular HE experiences and practice, presenting examples of the struggles many faced during the pandemic. They have been collated into three main themes as follows:

- Failures in inclusive practice that lead to a reduced sense of belonging
- Examples of discrimination
- Accessibility difficulties

Failures in inclusive practice that lead to a reduced sense of belonging

Fewer than 21% of the disabled students in this study felt that they were accepted and/or belonged to their university. Statements from the questionnaire are evidenced in the below table:

Statement	Number of participants who agreed with this statement
I've felt a sense of belonging on my course	14%
This university welcomes disabled students	21%
People have been accepting of my disability/disabilities	21%

Eight students provided additional qualitative comments on how they believe universities treat disabled students. Four students commented on their universities lack of understanding disabled people:

“I feel that there is a distinct lack of understanding and easements in place at my university for disabled students which would be considered unlawful within the workplace” (studying BA Hons Fashion and Costume).

“useless bunch...lack of understanding” (studying Law, participant 5).

“There has always been discrimination towards disabled people in society. Although Covid has impacted upon many, you would think and hope it would bring more understanding and aid in disseminating discrimination. It has not. People haven’t changed. The same unpleasant views and actions remain” (studying Law, participant 14).

Just seems to be lack of awareness about disabled students, and the difficulties that they go through” (studying English).

Four students focused on failures in supporting disabled students:

“The disability service has been very inaccessible. I have not heard any more since I had my appointment with them” and “We don’t have the option for synchronous learning. This would benefit me a lot but the university doesn’t care for the disabled students” (studying a Doctorate in Clinical Psychology).

“The university effectively abandoned PhD students during the pandemic. They made no effort to get back to numerous emails about my worries about travel restrictions and have been silent on disability related issues” (studying PhD Health Security).

“Support was appalling pre pandemic, it’s only been exacerbated” (studying Counselling).

“They’re very medical model. I have a formal diagnosis and have disclosed disabilities, but I only get support if I formally request it” (studying Doctorate in Education).

Whilst this is a small sample of participants, our findings correlate with DSUK’s larger National report of that same year (2021) and feed into recommendations for better inclusive HE practice, as cited by Disabled Student’s commission report (2022). For instance, Disabled Students UK’s recent national report entitled ‘Going back is not a choice’ surveyed 326 respondents from 69 HE providers across the UK (DSUK, 2020). They found that 23.1% of disabled students received the support they needed over the pandemic, with many saying

they felt 'left behind', 'alienated', and 'forgotten'. Individual accounts include the work of Nolan (2021) who describes being 'silent and unseen' as a disabled person of colour. In sum the work further evidences disabled students experiencing non-inclusive education at university.

Inclusive education is ...*a transformatory process for all participants. [Where] social justice, acceptance and promotion of diversity inform its practices* (Gibson, 2015, p,2). However, the pandemic has drawn further attention to underlying systemic barriers, which continue to constrain inclusive practice, with several reports evidencing disabled students being overlooked during this time (Zhang *et al.*, 2020; NADP, 2020; Snowdon Trust, 2021, NMHP, 2020). Additionally, some of the changes that were made because of the pandemic, were changes that have been requested by disabled students for many years. These included moving teaching and assessment online, lecturers being recorded and captioned, easement in administration required for extensions and submission evidence. These changes happened quickly in response to the pandemic but led to questions as to why they were not possible before the pandemic for disabled students (Borkin, 2022). Disabled Students UK (2020) stated:

The fact that disabled students were long denied these same accommodations when they needed them, highlights the stark difference in the sacrifices we are willing to make for disabled and non-disabled students (especially as universities continue to deny disabled students accommodations during the pandemic).

It is clear from these findings that meaningful and effective inclusion is not a priority in universities, too many disabled students are still experiencing discrimination and exclusion in their learning and University experience.

Examples of discrimination

Many disabled students identified experiences of discrimination in HE that have led to exclusionary practice. Statements from the questionnaire are evidenced below:

Statement	Number of students who agreed with the statement
I've experienced discrimination or negative bias	43%
I've experienced ableism	57%
My tutors/lecturers have employed inclusive practices	14%

My tutors/lecturers/support staff have enabled me to learn in a way that works for me	14%
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Eight disabled students provided examples of discrimination they have faced studying in HE during the pandemic. Three students focused on the lack of support offered to them by their universities:

“I am pre-diagnosis for all of my conditions. My university’s policy does not allow me to receive any significant support from the disability support team without a diagnosis (I’ve been waiting for ADHD diagnosis for well over a year). The university takes a very reactive and individualised approach to disability, seeing it as individuals with challenges or deficits they need to be helped with, rather than systems or structures that should be made accommodating” (studying Computer Science/Robotics PhD).

“Hopeless. I have a variety of needs that the university has not attended to and for which I have been consulting a lawyer about” (studying Law, participant 5).

“I have been treated like my heightened risk is my problem to sort out” (studying Counselling).

Five students focused on lack of adjustment offered by their universities to support their SEND:

“My university are refusing to allow blended learning because “they don’t have to”. The university as a whole is telling everyone they will have to attend in person teaching from 2nd semester. The university is elitist and ableist .. they don’t put recording online either” (studying a Doctorate in Clinical Psychology).

“I tried to access subtitles for lectures, which involved me emailing multiple lecturers myself. Some started using subtitles, other said they were unable to and one professor suggested that subtitles didn’t promote ‘active learning’ and suggested I watch the lecturers with a course mate...Before remembering we were in the midst of a pandemic and I couldn’t” (studying Human and Social Sciences).

“Initially SFE refused to let me have a reassessment despite the fact I had changed courses and universities. This meant I was entitled to one (change of circumstances-p.6 of the DSA2 form refers). It wasn’t until a raised an official complaint with SFE that they permitted me a reassessment. I have ordered my equipment but do not know if it will arrive in time” (studying law, participant 14).

“Because I took a medical leave of absence due to my disability in early 2020 I’m not eligible for the fee free extension all PhDs are supposed to receive. In essence I’m being punished for being disabled” (studying PhD Health Security).

“...Uni disability centre refused to gain us access to captioning software, directing us to DSA- but DSA won’t fund things it expects universities to cover under their duty to provide reasonable adjustments. Equality reps, SU Liberation Officer etc were all involved but no one took real action to resolve it until May 2021. The move to online learning and socialising could’ve revolutionised my ability to partake in uni life, but everyone kept using the inaccessible platform- this was true academically as well as for the social events, they all used platforms with no subtitles!” (studying BSc Chemistry). ...”.

The Equality Act (2010) states reasonable adjustments should be made anticipatorily. However, it is clear from these findings that students were not provided such anticipatory necessary reasonable adjustments. This is comparable with findings from the Disabled Students Commission (2020) who found that reasonable adjustments that were put in place were not always adjusted to accommodate the pandemic. The Snowdon Trust (2021), along with evidence from findings of this study show that this has led to students’ chasing universities to implement reasonable adjustments. The Office for Students (OfS) in its Coronavirus Briefing Note (2020b) placed emphasis on students being responsible to chase necessary accommodations. However, Disabled Students UK (2020) stated that the OfS should be enforcing the law and in not doing this they are failing disabled students.

These findings show that complexity in needs is not being taken account by these universities to ensure adjustments are suitable for each disabled student. Hughes and colleagues (2016, p.488) stated *while universities are bound by institutional requirements for ‘reasonable accommodations’ emanating from the Disability Discrimination Act, support levels-and quality-vary between institutions greatly, as well as across different physical, psychological and emotional illnesses or conditions.* Gorard and colleagues (2019) emphasised the need to see the complexity in disability in terms of contextualised admissions and support. Students with differing disabilities have differing experiences and require tailored support. It can be purported that inclusion is still integration, which is really focused on placement of disabled students into HE and not equally focused on ensuring disabled students are included whilst studying in HE. This is exemplified by the below examples of accessibility difficulties.

Accessibility difficulties

Only 14% of disabled students felt requests for reasonable adjustments had been dealt with effectively and none agreed that staff had prioritised their access arrangements. Half of the students (50%) had been able to apply for a coursework extension without evidence. Many

students emphasised that adjustments put in place because of the pandemic were not accessible for all students. Most of the accessibility statements had around half the students agreeing on its effectiveness. Examples are provided in the below table:

Statements	Number of students who agreed with this statement
I have had the necessary accessibility equipment to study from home	43%
Asynchronous/recorded online sessions work well for me	43%
Learning materials were provided in a format that's accessible to me	14%

Four students commented on their overall accessibility difficulties:

“Poor and almost non-existent throughout” (studying BA Hons Fashion and Costume)

“Absolutely no accessibility whatsoever. My health has been put at risk because of the university and the course” (studying a Doctorate in Clinical Psychology).

“Hopeless. No inclusiveness at all” (studying Law). Still bad as the university is not making adjustments (studying Law, participant 5).

“Support has been poor in the past. The ongoing pandemic has exacerbated it. Access to remote learning has been removed too”...“Virtual learning environments are not accessible to screen reader users. Can't get any answers to how in person support is supposed to work” (studying Counselling).

Whereas three students focused on accessibility difficulties in moving back to face-to-face from online learning:

“Massive change from online learning to in person. I struggle with change, so it's been difficult” (studying English).

“Moving from online to face to face was done too quickly for comfort, it would have been better to continue making courses available online” (studying PhD)

“There is now a massive “get back to normal” attitude which doesn't account for shielding students. Whenever an event is online everyone apologises and says ‘of course we wish we

could all be face to face', which I find exclusive because face to face was never accessible for me anyway" (studying BSc Chemistry).

These findings evidence the frustration students have experienced whilst trying to access reasonable adjustments during the pandemic. This is comparable with HEPI's report (2020) based on two roundtable evidence sessions and over 500 responses to their survey. HEPI found that disabled students have experienced inconsistency and frustration with 25% of their respondents rating the accessibility of their course as 1/5 or 2/5. There have been significant and varied difficulties experienced by disabled students in moving learning from face-to-face to online and from online to face-to-face learning. Evidence has been published on the difficulties some disabled students faced in accessing specialist equipment, such as adapted furniture when learning went online (DSUK, 2020; OfS, 2020a, 2020b) and access to specific technology required for this learning (DSC, 2021; NADP, 2020). Individual accounts of difficulty are evidenced in a variety of publications that show the difficulty students with specific SEND had with moving learning online. For instance, students with sensory impairments (NADP, 2020; NMHP, 2020; Snowdon Trust, 2020), autism (NMHP, 2020; Snowdon Trust, 2021), specific learning differences (NMHP, 2020, Snowdon Trust, 2020), and students who experience mental ill-health (NMHP, 2020).

There were significant changes made because of the pandemic to provide learning for all learners (DSUK, 2020). Some of these changes had been called for by disabled students for many years. Yet, these findings contribute towards evidence provided in the above reports that one approach does not work for all disabled students. These findings show that some disabled students struggled with the move to online learning, and others struggled with the move back to face-to-face learning; some wanted to see the continuation of online learning, where others wanted to return to campus. It is therefore essential that universities provide learning support that is accessible to all learners in a variety of ways, using a hybrid approach so that disabled student's individual reasonable adjustments can be enacted.

The strength of these findings is compounded by the commonality of the DSUK (2019-2021) national research study, Policy Connect and the Higher Education Commission's report, Arriving at Thriving (2020) and the Disabled Students commission report (2022). With reference to DSUK (2022, p.4) six key lessons for the sector emerged including:

- *Universal measures such as online delivery can have a disproportionate positive effect on disabled students- One size does not fit all - access must be individualised*
- *Staff must be resourced and hold inclusive education knowledge*

- *Flexibility and compassion are valid approaches to education provision*
- *The administrative burden effectively blocks access for disabled students*
- *The sector must take responsibility through effective forms of leadership*
- *Listen to disabled students*

With similar results, Policy Connect with Higher Education Commission concluded (2020, p6-8); *Many disabled students are not fully able to access teaching and learning [...] Disabled students face heavy bureaucratic and financial burdens [...] Awareness and accessibility are needed to facilitate better social inclusion [...] Information and advice are key to successful transitions [...] training for staff is needed and reviews of inclusive provision need to be carried out with disabled students.* DSC's research further reinforced certain points including that (2022, p21) *Frustrations centre in several key areas, including: + administrative burden + online learning + inclusive and accessible design* and presented four key themes for the sector to pick up in their future considerations and planning for inclusive design (DSC, 2022, p.27): *Communication: consult and communicate with disabled students as often and inclusively as possible. Consistency: a consistent approach across departments and between HEPs is required. Choice: anticipatory reasonable adjustments and a more flexible approach to teaching, learning and assessment. Certainty: during a period of rapid change and uncertainty, disabled students need to feel confident that support will be in place at the commencement of their studies.*

The similarities with our study are striking. We argue what sits at the core in all of these national reports, studies and user focused plus designed investigations is:

- the drive and need to prioritise 'knowing' our students,
- 'understanding' and valuing their individual and collective positions,
- knowing their story and positioning that knowledge as powerful, ie they are the expert
- moving institutional culture, practices and professional knowledge beyond a pejorative/ableist position on 'disability' and
- engaging meaningfully with our disabled students

What our study adds to the wider field of work is the position that disabled students need to be seen and engaged with as leaders at the table of policy development, inclusive pedagogy development, application and evaluation.

Conclusion

As shown findings from our study, correlate to the more expansive DSUK research (2021) and the DSC report (2021). The study provides examples of disabled students not being considered by their universities, having inappropriate reasonable adjustments, struggling to get universities to agree to appropriate provision, and/or being told that the university cannot put in place reasonable adjustments. These actions are evidence of unlawful practice, where statutory provision has been broken and equal rights not valued or upheld. Research has shown that inclusive practice for disabled students was not fit for purpose before the Covid-19 pandemic and, whilst changes have occurred in both policy and practice terms, they have not resulted in successful transformative inclusive education for disabled students.

It is clear from our findings and those of others (NADP, 2020; NMHP, 2020, DSC 2022) that disabled students' needs differ and therefore so too will requirements for reasonable adjustments. Borkin (2022) highlights that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach is not suitable between disabled and non-disabled students and/or in relation to disabled students differing needs. Borkin (2022, p.1) stated "...we know that disabled students are not a homogenous group and so approaches must be tailored as far as possible by impairment type and applied with an intersectional lens". Disabled students who have been diagnosed with the same SEND for instance Specific Learning Difficulties, Autistic Spectrum Conditions and mental health conditions are likely to have variation in 'degree and type'. Cameron and colleagues (2019, p.214) state that *in practice, this means that two individuals who have been given the same broad diagnosis may experience very different educational challenges which differ in type, degree of difficulty, and which may depend upon the environmental barriers present in a particular context*. Regarding reasonable adjustments, Cameron and colleagues (2019, p.214) go on to say that *...what may be 'reasonable' for one student given a particular diagnosis may not be so for another given the same diagnosis*. Nolan (2022, p.151) emphasises the importance of considering intersectionality and how it can create 'a compounded burden'. As a disabled student of colour Nolan reflects on disparity in disabled student's experiences:

We must understand that the individual-level barriers of a white male will be different than those of a Black woman, even if they have similar disabilities or chronic illnesses. The process of self-acceptance is a critical consideration, as is awareness of identity-specific barriers that may lead to difficulty accepting help or accessing services.

There also appears from our findings to be challenges across the sector in its definition and application of term 'reasonable adjustments'. This is echoed in research that has found a lack of understanding in Equality Act entitlements (Cameron *et al.*, 2019) and a lack of *knowledge*,

training and awareness of disability (Banbury, 2020, p,966). Universities have been subject to disability discrimination legislation since 2001 (SENDA) with the Equality Act (2010) imposing further obligations on HE regarding discrimination against disabled students, i.e.: *...universities must take reasonable steps to avoid any substantial disadvantage which would otherwise be faced by disabled students as a result of a provision, criterion or practice or physical feature....*(Roberts and Hou, 2016, p.149). Discriminatory and exclusionary examples evidenced in our findings and other larger-scale reports, show that students' negative experiences are not because they have asked for unreasonable adjustments. In fact, all the requests detailed in these findings, including blended learning and use of captioning, can be considered as reasonable adjustments, adjustments that universities could and should provide.

An evident issue is that these universities do not engage with their students' lived knowledge and expertise, which if utilised effectively, could change policy, procedures, training and/or reasonable adjustments/resources, as obligated by the Equality Act (2010). Inclusive practice has been aimed for in HE for many years, efforts now need to focus on listening to our disabled students, learning from their knowledgeable voices, taking their lead to ensure an end to the elusive practice of inclusive education in today's HE. As evidenced in our findings this means ensuring policy, procedures, training, and reasonable adjustments are effectively put in place to meet disabled students differing needs, furthermore, ensuring that it is disabled students who evaluate the effectiveness of provision. We argue, this change needs to happen at both macro (Government, OfS DSC, and HEA??) and micro levels (lecture theatre) and be conducted in partnership with and leadership of disabled students.

The pandemic exacerbated existing disparities between disabled and non-disabled students and showed that significant pedagogic and systemic change can happen, when suddenly prioritised as essential. Findings suggest we rethink inclusive practice by listening to and engaging with our disabled students, to ensure that disabled students studying today experience HE where they fully participate, feel they belong, are always included and progress successfully. One way in which this can be done is through meaningful collaboration with organisations like DSUK who (DSUK 2022a) *embody a radically different model of disabled students as experts and creators of change rather than recipients of charity*. A new model for inclusive provision in HE, emerged from this organisation after the publication and dissemination of their report No Going Back (DSUK 2022b). The model is entitled- [Access Insights](#) and entails DSUK experts working with HEIs to develop systemic reviews of their practices, and provide consultation for inclusive student services and for senior leaders with input to annual reports such as the Access Participation and Plan.

It is clear from our research that user informed positions, practices and leadership need to be prioritised in all HEIs and across all courses, otherwise what continues is the re-production of integration, labelled as ‘inclusion’, resulting in frustration, struggle and failure for many. This has a knock-on effect in terms of our wider society wellbeing and our economic sustainability, i.e. we all miss out. The authors of this paper align themselves with the position as poignantly taken by DSUK (2020, p.20) and argued from a position of power, *The pandemic can be used as an excuse to deny disabled students their rights, or it can be used as a springboard for creating more humane and inclusive universities*. We recommend readers take lessons from this work, pushing forward in partnership for change and equality in our HE spaces with disabled students leading the way. We recommend readers take lessons from this work, pushing forward in partnership for change and equality in our HE spaces with disabled students leading the way.

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Table one: demographic information of participants

Participant number	Course studied	SEND	Ethnicity	Gender
1	BA(Hons) Fashion and Culture	C-PTSD and limited upper-body mobility	White British	Female
2	Computer Science and Robotics PhD	ADHD Likely Ehlers-Danlos Likely POTS Potential Autism Phantosmia Delayed Sleep Phase Disorder All undiagnosed	White	Male, but possibly on the agender or demigender spectrum
3	Human and Social Sciences	Moderate ADHD (combined), dyspraxia and anxiety	Caucasian	Nonbinary/transmasc
4	Doctorate in Clinical Psychology	Rare autoimmune disease. Leaving me extremely 'clinically vulnerable' and impacts on my mobility	White Welsh	Female
5	Law	Irlen Syndrome, Dyspraxia, Chronic back pain due to a variety of back problems, asthma. So a hodge podge of	White British	Male

		problems with no easy answers.		
6	Ancient History and archaeology	Mental Health	White/Asian	Female
7	PhD Health Security	Longstanding illness and mobility impairment	White	Female
8	Counselling	Covering multiple domains	British	Male
9	Doctorate in Education	Mental Health Condition (Bipolar) and long term health condition	White	Female
10	BSc Psychology	Mental and physical disabilities that limit quality of life	White	Female
11	English	Issues with coordination and writing	South Asian	Male
12	PhD	Limb difference	Indian	Agender
13	BSc Chemistry	Severe chronic pain Sensory disabilities Auditory processing disorder Neurodivergent (autism) Mental health conditions	White European	Nonbinary/gender fluid
14	Law	Epilepsy and severe migraines	White	Female

