

Outcomes: Inclusive Practice in Higher Education

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Overview

“Without inclusion there is no way to effectively remove all the barriers” – Alice Speller, Goldsmiths University

The aim of inclusive practice in HE is to remove barriers for disabled students through reforms that improve teaching and learning for all. On the 1st of April 2019, the APPG for Assistive Technology held a roundtable with parliamentarians and representatives from universities, HE sector organisations, technology developers, and the Office for Students (OfS) to explore the particular and vital role of technology in implementing inclusive practice (see Appendix for a full list of participants). These outcomes have been presented to researchers from the OfS to help inform their new study on disabled students’ experiences and outcomes, and Policy Connect will continue to use these findings to impact future policy.

Key findings

Assistive Software

“The driving factors for using technology are [its] perceived benefits and ease of use.” –Abi James

2017 Report for HEFCE¹

- “In the vast majority of institutions (94%) specialist software is part of their mainstream IT provision to students”.
- “It would be useful to explore further the way students are making use of this software and the extent to which institutions are providing training to enable them to use it effectively”.

¹ Williams, M., *et al* (2017) ‘Models of support for students with disabilities: report to HEFCE’.

2019 APPG Roundtable:

For the students who do access AT, it revolutionised how they work. The problem is not the software but how people are accessing it (Piers Wilkinson, NUS).

- HEPs have taken a step forward by providing software but it is not always widely used by students:
 - In some cases, the AT is only available on a small number of computers so, while it's technically available to all students, it's unlikely to be widely used.
 - The computers that do have AT on them are also sometimes not accessible to wheelchair users and/or don't have course related software that is present on other lab computers
 - Site licenses allow all students to access AT but this availability does not ensure that the technology is used, and individual downloads of site licenses are reportedly quite low.
- HEPs need to raise awareness about their AT provision, showing students that it can help them and is easy to use.
 - Study skills training/resources for students should, but typically don't, include information on assistive technologies and accessibility features of mainstream technology.
 - AT should be taught to students as part of teaching academic strategies for students with disabilities.
 - Disability officers need to be able to explain the value of AT, and even teach how it is used.²

Assessment

"One course at Goldsmith's offers alternative assessments and it has had a massive impact on the mental health of students on that course." – Alice Speller, Goldsmiths

2017 Report to HEFCE:

- "Generally alternatives [e.g. presentation-by-video] are not offered as standard, or available for all students, rather they are considered on a case by case basis".
- "There is a limited move towards more widespread inclusive assessment practice. Where this exists it often sits with an enthusiast or at departmental level".

² Cf. Holtam, G and McLaren, R (2017), '[Perspectives, challenges and opportunities: the role of assistive technology specialists within universities in England](#)'.

2019 APPG Roundtable:

- Students should be able to decide their assessment method when choosing their module.
- Alternative assessments should be available as long as they meet the core competencies of the course..

Data and technology-enhanced support

“One area that’s developing is using technology to deliver forms of support in tandem with human support.” - Robert McLaren, Policy Connect

2017 Report to HEFCE:

- “At just over a quarter of 76 providers (27%) their system flagged low attendance to student services automatically”.

2019 APPG Roundtable:

- There is now a developing discussion of how learning analytics can be a tool for inclusion (or hindrance, if not properly used).³
 - Predictive learning analytics and responsive technology platforms can be used to understand student needs, and prompt outreach by staff, and avert non-continuation and other negative outcomes. In addition, diagnostic learning analytics can be used to identify learning barriers and disparities of outcomes and so inform the development of inclusive practice.
 - In addition to learning analytics, technology can be used for disclosure and signposting, as well teaching of AT skills with academic skills through e-learning.
 - These tools allow students to access support without declaring a disability. They help identify barriers, enable flexible access to resources, and support learning by allowing students to re-watch/repeat lessons.

Accessible Resources

“Students are choosing courses and modules based on what’s accessible over what’s good for them.” – Piers Wilkinson, NUS

2017 Report to HEFCE

- “it is important to note that putting materials onto online platforms such as VLEs does not mean that the materials themselves are accessible”.

³ For discussion see e.g. Jisc (2018) [‘Learning analytics: help or hindrance in the quest for better student mental wellbeing?’](#) and Jisc (2016) [‘Accessibility considerations for learning analytics’](#).

- “Half of institutions provided their staff with guidance, support, and training and/or undertook reviews to help staff to develop learning resources that are inclusive”.
- “Software and technology measures were used to ensure that learning resources are inclusive in just over one third (36%) of providers, and e-versions of books, font and braille are used in this way at a quarter of institutions (26%”.
- “Some case study institutions also reported that an inclusive approach and a focus on accessibility need to be built into design and procurement”.

2018 *Accessible VLEs* Report⁴

- In September 2018, the government introduced regulations to promote digital accessibility in the public sector.⁵ The regulations cover including higher education and require HEPs to:
 - Ensure learning materials are accessible, where they are published to Virtual Learning Environments.
 - Publish a digital accessibility statement, outlining any non-accessible parts of their websites.
 - Create a mechanism by which students can request accessible learning resources when those on the VLEs are not accessible for them.
- The OfS is not responsible for the monitoring and enforcement of these regulations – the relevant bodies here are the Government Digital Service (GDS) and the EHRC – but the OfS can play an important role in promoting the new requirements as part its commitment to the inclusive practice agenda.
- Following the *Accessible VLEs* report, a number of HEPs formed the FE/HE Digital Accessibility Working Group.⁶ GDS is working with that group to help the HE sector to implement the regulations, e.g. the University of Kent and GDS are developing a model digital accessibility statement for the HE context (to be published in the next couple of months).

2019 APPG Roundtable:

- Digital accessibility is part of an inclusive approach:
 - Converting individual documents for some students is reactive rather than anticipatory: HEPs should provide accessible resources from the start.

⁴ Policy Connect (2018), '[Accessible virtual learning environments - making the most of the new regulations](#)', from an inquiry of the APPG for Assistive Technology, co-chaired by Seema Malhotra MP and Lord Holmes of Richmond MBE. For a short summary see McLaren, R (2018) '[New regulations for online learning accessibility](#)', Wonky

⁵ GDS (2018), '[Guidance: Make your public sector website or app accessible](#)'. For the most-up-date HE-specific information on the regulations visit www.jisc.ac.uk/accessibility

⁶ For details see www.jisc.ac.uk/accessibility

- Accessible resources are good for everyone, not just those students who have declared a disability: “95% of students using the alternative formats automatically generated by Blackboard are not listed as having a disability” (Nicolaas Matthijs, Blackboard).
- When students struggle with inaccessible content they need a clear method for requesting that an alternative be provided: presently, students don’t know who to report issues to.
- To ensure resources are accessible, HEPs should adopt a strategic level approach that engages with:
 - Content creators (lecturers, staff)
 - e-learning department
 - procurement of 3rd party resources (journals, e-books)
 - HEP’s leadership
 - Students

Inclusive Teaching

“Not every student is sitting in a lecture. We teach in seminars, we teach in labs, and if we’re looking at areas where there is really low participation of disabled students, we need to consider all these different learning environments. It’s very tempting for us to think lecture capture will solve everything but that’s only for chalk and talk teaching.” -Abi James

2017 Report to HEFCE:

- “78% of HEPs use lecture capture..., but of these only 20% recorded more than half of all lectures”. Smaller institutions are less likely to use Lecture capture.
- “(88%) produced lecture notes in advance. Although ... only 45% of these did this for all students”.

2018 Accessible VLEs Report:

- New regulations (see above) require online video content to be accessible (e.g. with captions).⁷ A range of technologies can be used to achieve this, from AI-power auto captioning to re-speaking, to hydride approaches.⁸
- In addition, the FE/HE Digital Accessibility Working Group have stressed the importance of a proportional and common sense response to this requirement: even were HEPs are unable to caption all content, they should still embrace lecture capture as this makes teaching more inclusive for many students (the regulations contain exemptions relating to 'discorporate burden').

2019 Roundtable:

- Qualifications to teach in HE settings should include training on inclusive teaching practice.
- HEPs should ensure power sockets are available in learning spaces for students to use their personal AT.
- Not all lectures are 'chalk and talk.' HEIs should consider how AT works in other settings such as seminars and labs.

Funding

2017 Report to HEFCE

- "the 2016 HEFCE grant letter prioritised funding towards development of inclusive teaching approaches to support disabled students, and to this end HEFCE doubled the funding for disabled students to £40m in 2016/17 (and this is anticipated to remain at the same level during 2017/18) in order to support HEPs to move towards a more inclusive social model of support"
- This funding level continues in 18/19

2019 Roundtable

- We need to ensure the OfS funding for support for disabled students leads to additional investment from HEIs in inclusive practice – this could be supported by greater awareness of the funding among disability support professionals or even ring-fencing of funds.

⁷ This requirement only applies to videos published after September 2020.

⁸ See Ai-Media '[What is Respeaking? The Conclusive Guide](#)' and Microsoft '[Generate automatic captions for your videos](#)'.

- The OfS is placing greater emphasis HEIs demonstrating effectiveness and impact from investment in disability support and inclusive practice.
- Inclusive practice is particularly beneficial for those students with SpLDs who do not identify as disabled nor access DSA funding

Appendix: roundtable participants

Amy Norton

Equality and Diversity Manager, Office for Students.

Lord Addington

Liberal Democrat Peer

Lord Low of Dalston CBE

Crossbench Peer

Alistair McNaught

Accessibility and Inclusion Specialist for Jisc

Nicolaas Matthijs

Product Director, Blackboard Ally

Abi James

Chair of the New Technologies Committee of the British Dyslexia Association

Rick Bell

Vice-Chair of the British Assistive Technology Association.

Head of Education, Texthelp

Noel Duffy

CEO, Dolphin Computer Access

Jeremy Brassington

CEO, Notetalker

Gemma Holtam [statement read out]

Specialist Tutor, De Montfort University

Chair of the Assistive Technology Network

Adam Tweed

Service Development Manager, AbilityNet

Phil Ambler

Director of Evidence and Policy, Thomas Pocklington Trust

Piers Wilkinson

Disabled Students' Campaign National Executive Committee Member, National Union of Students

Alice Speller

Head of Student Support, Goldsmiths, University of London

Nicola James

CEO, Lexxic Ltd

James Ward

Vice President for Europe, the Middle East and Africa, Ai-Media

Robert McLaren

Head of Industry, Technology and Innovation, Policy Connect

Geena Vabulas

Policy Manager for Assistive Technology, Policy Connect

Richard Orme

CEO, DAISY Consortium