Improving Outcomes for Disabled Students – literature review

By Rebecca Scarlett, August 2019

Contents

Aim

Research and explore the full range of current practice and initiatives taking place across the Scottish college and university sector on student disability support approaches and measures, with the aim of identifying initiatives with some evidence of impact (qualitative or quantitative).

As part of research a literature review was undertaken, with consideration and exploration of existing related evidence or research for the Scottish sector.

Summary

There appears to be a lack of research specifically related to initiatives that have some evidence of impact in the area of student disability support, both in the Scottish sector, and in the rest of the UK. In addition, there is a lack of recent research related more generally to disabled students' support and outcomes in the Scottish sector. It was therefore necessary to expand the parameters of the desk-based review to examine evidence related to the experiences, key issues and challenges emerging for disabled students throughout the UK, although research was predominantly connected to English higher education providers. Research around

equality and diversity more generally also gave some useful insights into practices related to support for disabled students in Scotland. It was also possible to examine guidance, tools, resources and case studies with some anecdotal or small-scale qualitative evidence of impact. There was limited research related to supporting disabled students in further education colleges.

What is striking about the evidence examined, is the parity between the experiences and challenges emerging 10 to 15 years ago, in comparison to issues persisting in more recent research. These include:

➢ Tension and confusion between maintaining competence standards and providing reasonable adjustments
➢ Academics' competence and capacity to support disabled students
➢ Lack of specific or valuable CPD, especially for academic staff
➢ Issues with disability disclosure, language and identity
➢ Higher withdrawal rates for students with unseen impairments
➢ The differences in disabled students' experiences
➢ Attitudinal and cultural barriers
➢ Lack of student engagement and voice
➢ Predominantly formulaic reasonable adjustments being common
➢ The disconnect between how data is collected, who it's shared with and how it's used to improve outcomes and experiences for disabled students
➢ Limited or varied progress in embedding inclusive practice
➢ Limited or varied use of robust evaluation methods to measure impact of support
➢ Issues around transitions, especially related to career advice and support for disabled students

There were also similarities between recommendations that were being made in both the earlier and more recent studies, suggesting progress has been slower in some areas. Key recommendations emerging from the literature reviewed include:

➢ The need for institutions to develop and deliver more specific training related to disability equality, awareness and inclusive practice
➢ The need to mandate all staff, especially academics, to undertake relevant training
➢ Undertaking full scale reviews of teaching and learning programmes to assess accessibility and embed inclusion
➢ Develop a wider range of alternative assessment methods
➢ Senior level leadership in the area of disability equality and inclusion to drive forward change
➢ The need to develop robust evaluation methods
➢ The need to develop an external award or recognition programme to audit and measure progress with developing inclusive practice, especially in teaching and learning

Significant changes to the funding landscape in England as a result of the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) reforms in 2016, along with additional external drivers such as the rising prevalence in the number of students disclosing a mental health issue, have resulted in increased scrutiny and regulation related to support and

outcomes for disabled students within English higher education providers. The Office for Students (OfS) also gained new regulatory powers in 2018 as a result of the Higher Education Research Act 2017. OfS commissioned a baseline study of support for disabled students in 2017 after the DSA reforms, with a follow up study in 2019, analysing progress and practices across the sector.

With their new regulatory powers and this increased scrutiny, OfS have identified key gaps in disabled students' outcomes around retention, degree outcomes and graduate employment, and have set specific targets for the sector related to disabled students as part of the Access & Participation Plan requirements. They are also asking providers to disaggregate their data related to disabled students by impairment type, to develop a more granular picture of where gaps in access, success and progression lie. Closing the degree outcome gap between disabled and non-disabled students has been set as one of four key national priorities. In addition, campaigning by NUS and disabled students in England led to the UK Government announcing the establishment of a new Disabled Students' Commission in 2019. It will be chaired by OfS and aims to be an independent strategic and advisory group that will influence and inform higher education providers in England, to improve disabled student support.

Amy Low, the Service Delivery Director of Ability Net wrote a recent blog for the Higher Education Policy Institute, entitled, "Is this a 'moment' for addressing the challenges faced by disabled students?", where she reflects on whether this increased scrutiny and the current conditions will bring about meaningful change for disabled students. Whether real change will come about and how quickly remains to be seen, but these developments and the extra scrutiny is sending a clear message about the importance the UK Government and OfS are placing on improving support and outcomes for disabled students in England.

The lack of recent research specifically related to the Scottish sector suggests there could be a gap in knowledge about current practices related to disabled student support, especially in relation to where there is evidence of what is working well to improve outcomes. While DSA was not reformed in Scotland, the Scottish Government have recently asked SAAS to review the current system of support for disabled students in both further and higher education as an add on to the wider review of student financial support in 2017[1]. A set of surveys for students, graduates, parents and staff has recently been disseminated, with a report due to the Minister in Summer 2020. While the review's remit is to focus predominantly on financial support, the questionnaires have been designed to capture the wider disabled student experience. The results and recommendations from this review may also highlight the need to gain a better understanding of current practice.

For example, Scotland consistently has the lowest take up rate of DSA each year in comparison to the other UK nations – including in England where DSA has been reformed and less disabled students are eligible for it. Advance HE's latest statistical report[2] shows that 22.5% of Scottish domiciled students declaring a disability

[1] https://www.gov.scot/publications/independent-review-student-financial-support-scotland/
[2] Equality in Higher Education, Student Statistical Report, 2019, Advance HE

claimed DSA, compared to 36.1% in England, 38.3% in Northern Ireland and 38.2% in Wales. The reason behind this lower take up rate could be because Scottish providers are better at mainstreaming and embedding support across their institutions, thus reducing the need for individual adjustments. However, Advance HE's report suggests students in receipt of DSA are marginally but consistently more likely to achieve a good degree outcome (first or upper second class) in comparison to disabled students not in receipt of DSA. In 2017/18, 75.5% of UK domiciled disabled students in receipt of DSA achieved a 1st/2:1, in comparison to 74% of disabled students who were not in receipt of DSA. Further, Scotland has a 4% attainment gap between disabled students achieving a 1st/2:1 compared to non-disabled students. This compares to a 5.5% gap in Northern Ireland, 1.6% in England and 0.6% in Wales. The Welsh Government use DSA take up rates as a performance indicator and measure of success related to disabled students and this is also common practice amongst English providers. It could therefore be useful to further explore the relationship between DSA take up and degree outcomes for Scottish domiciled disabled students, as well as to measure how much progress has been made around developing inclusive practices across Scottish providers, if that is being cited as the reason for the low DSA take up rates.

Recommendations

Reflecting on the body of research reviewed in conjunction with current practices in England, and current outcomes for disabled students in Scotland, the recommendations emerging for the Scottish sector are:

- ➤ Commission a full-scale review to understand current practice related to support for disabled students to include:
  - The range, use, take up and impact of relevant training for all staff
  - Approaches to supporting retention and practice related to disabled students on interrupted study leave
  - Measures, activities and progress related to embedding inclusive practice including the use and impact of technology
  - Approaches to support transitions and tailored career advice and graduate support for disabled students
- ➤ Set more ambitious targets related to intake, completions, retention, degree outcomes and destination for disabled students in outcome agreements
- ➤ Disaggregate data related to impairment type when measuring access, retention, success and progression and set national priorities where there is evidence of persistent inequality for students with specific impairments
- ➤ Develop an online, well managed resource bank for the sector related to support for disabled students and inclusive practice
- ➤ Better alignment between the Fairer Scotland for Disabled People: employment action plan and outcome agreement guidance

Methodology

The following sources were accessed to carry out the desk-based literature review:

- ➤ The Higher Education Academy online resources

- ➢ Advance HE online resources/ECU archives
- ➢ Google Scholar
- ➢ Centre for Research in Education Inclusion and Diversity, University of Edinburgh
- ➢ Department for Education, UK Government, online publications
- ➢ Office for Students online publications
- ➢ Colleges Scotland online publications
- ➢ College Development Network publications
- ➢ The Office for the Independent Adjudicator in Higher Education online publications
- ➢ SFC Outcome agreement guidance and Access & Inclusion plan guidance

The research and literature reviewed dates from 2005 to 2019. This was a key period for disabled students' rights as legislation was strengthened with amendments to the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) in 2005 followed by the introduction of the Equality Act in 2010. The DDA already aimed to protect disabled students from being discriminated against within education, but the 2005 amendments required public bodies to not only prevent discrimination, but to also promote equality for disabled people. The proportion of students declaring as disabled also grew considerably in this time, increasing from 5.4% in 2003/04 to 12.9% in 2017/18[3] across the UK. This was therefore a historically significant period for disabled students with a number of external drivers for change.

Experiences, perceptions and challenges for disabled students

Difference in experience

Disabled students are often considered a homogenous group within the Scottish further and higher education sector, especially when measuring intake and outcomes. The exception to this is in relation to students with mental health difficulties, which has become a key priority for the sector over the last five years. Campaigning by NUS Scotland and steep rises in the number of students presenting with mental health difficulties have led to a number of recent policy initiatives. This includes a commitment of an additional £20 million from the Scottish Government to fund student counsellors and a requirement for colleges and universities to develop mental health agreements and strategies as part of their outcome agreement commitments.

However, with the exception of extra commitments related to approaches in supporting students with mental health difficulties, universities in Scotland are only asked to report on the proportion of first-degree undergraduate entrants declaring as disabled, as well as the proportion returning for the second year. Colleges are asked to report on the proportion of credits being delivered to students with a protected

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[3] Equality in Higher Education, Student Statistical Report, 2019, Advance HE, p72

characteristic, and they must also produce an Access and Inclusion Strategy. The previous 2017-20 Access and Inclusion Strategy guidance asks colleges to outline successful completions and destinations by disability type where possible. In the new 2020-23 guidance, the wording is slightly different in that it states colleges are expected to undertake a detailed assessment of outcomes, broken down by disability type. It was not possible to analyse all of the Access and Inclusion Strategies due to time constraints, however looking at a sample, there appears to be a lack of this disaggregated data, with high level data related to disabled students in general being more common. A number of the college strategies sampled made reference to the need for improved data collection and analysis of this more granular detail and had set actions to address this. Beyond reporting on performance indicators, the strategy guidance also asks colleges to describe how they are supporting priority students, investing in staff development and resources and ensuring they are developing inclusive practices.

While the number of students declaring as disabled has steadily increased in Scotland over the last 15 years, caution should be taken when making assumptions about how well disabled students are represented at colleges and universities. Weedon et al (2008) noted there had been a steady rise in the number of students with dyslexia, increasing from around 15% in 1994/95 to 50% in 2004/05 of the UK disabled student population. Students with a specific learning difficulty remain the largest represented group amongst disabled students in Scotland, accounting for 41% of disabled undergraduate entrants at university and 31% of disabled students at college[4].

The SFC Triennial Review on Widening Access reports every three years on progress made related to priority groups. The report produces a more granular analysis of the proportion of disabled students by impairment type, which is then compared to estimates in the population, adjusted for age, using the 2011 census data. The 2017 triennial review suggested disabled students were well represented in colleges and universities overall, but there may be some underrepresentation for disabled adult returners and those with specific impairment types, including physical impairments, blindness or sight lost and deafness or partial hearing loss. However, it concludes that the census data does not breakdown prevalence of impairment type by age and that as we can assume these impairments are more likely to occur in older populations, the degree of underrepresentation is unclear.

Completion rates at college and retention rates and graduate destination data is also analysed in the review. Disabled students were found to have similar completion rates at FE as non-disabled students, but lower completion rates in HE. They also had lower retention rates and lower graduate employment rates after university. While analysis of success was not broken down by impairment, the review noted that that students with mental health conditions had the lowest retention rates while students with physical impairments and specific learning difficulties were found to have higher retention rates than non-disabled students. There are no specific recommendations made in the report related to these gaps for disabled students,

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[4] Triennial Review on Widening Access, SCF, 2017

however more general recommendations are made around improving understanding of withdrawal rates by protected characteristics and their interconnections. A detailed analysis of successful completion rates was also recommended. The next triennial review into widening access will be published later in 2020.

In the discussion paper, Disabled Students at University[5], produced by the Commissioner for Fair Access in 2019, there is a suggestion that disabled students *are* likely to be underrepresented at university. The report also uses the 2011 census, but it uses a different analysis of the data to estimate the proportion of disabled people, adjusted for age, in the population. Data from more recent Annual Population Labour Force surveys was also inspected to show there has been a general upward trend in the proportion of disabled people in Scotland,

> "This suggests that the increase in disabled entrants since 2011 does not necessarily denote a substantial increase in representation. Moreover, for 16-24 year olds, the proportion of full-time first degree disabled entrants is still markedly lower than the population proportion was in Census 2011."

The discussion paper also concludes that students with mental health difficulties, autism and those with multiple impairments were more likely to withdraw, and that overall, disabled students had slightly lower degree outcomes in comparison to non-disabled students.

It stands to reason that as disabled people have a broad spectrum of impairments, and varying degrees of impact by their impairment, the barriers they face will also vary widely, not just by impairment type, but also by the individual. The type of institution attended, subject studied, and socioeconomic background can also be an influencing factor. These themes have been explored in previous research on disabled students' experiences and outcomes. For example, Weedon et al (2008), found that students with dyslexia were more likely to be satisfied with the adjustments available to them due to the range of support offered and easier access to DSA, while students with mental health difficulties were least likely to be satisfied. The authors also concluded that despite satisfaction levels, barriers persisted for students with dyslexia, with access to lecture notes in advance being commonly cited.

A 2009 report funded by Higher Education Funding Council England and the Higher Education Funding Council Wales[6] also found that students with mental health difficulties, mobility issues and hearing impairments were least likely to have their needs properly met. Weedon et al (2008) suggested that while there may be marginal gaps between outcomes for disabled and non-disabled students, a more granular approach could be helpful,

> "However, there is an indication that students with other, unseen impairments do not do as well as non-disabled students. More detailed analysis of completion rates and outcomes by impairment at institutional level may allow

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[5] Disabled Students at university, Scottish Government, 2019
[6] Evaluation of Provision and Support for Disabled Students in Higher Education, Centre for Disability Studies, 2009

for more targeted support of students with other, unseen impairments who may be more reluctant to contact the disability services."

There is evidence that students with hidden impairments sometimes struggle to get the right support at college as well. In the 2015 Lead Scotland study, *'Supporting disabled learners to realise their potential'*[7], learners and parents reported that there could either be reluctance to disclose an unseen impairment, or an assumption by college staff that support wasn't needed. Others talked about difficulties with getting a diagnosis, or where a lack of understanding around unseen impairments like mental health difficulties or a social/communication impairment could lead to insufficient or ineffective support. The research also found that learners with a social/communication impairment were the least likely to progress to the next SCQF level. Feedback from the head teacher of a special school in the study highlighted concerns that incorrect assumptions could often be made by college staff about the level of support students with sensory impairments required,

> "If the young person is deaf and able to lipread a little, the college often decides that a communication support worker is not necessary even if the young person is a sign language user. If the young person is registered blind and has a little useful sight, the college may decide they don't require everything in enlarged print"

Respondents reported that getting impairment specific support would have the most impact with achieving progression to the next learning level. In the survey, respondents were asked about why they had withdrawn from college early, and the majority reported this was due to not getting the right impairment specific support. Again, learners with a social/communication impairment felt there was a lack of understanding, with disciplinary action being commonly cited as a result of behaviours linked to their impairment.

Fuller et al (2005) also evidenced the varying degree of negative impact disabled students experience generally, with many reporting no or limited barriers in their learning, while some reported a severe negative impact,

> "These findings suggest that using a catch-all category 'disabled students' is problematic and that devising generic policies to support their teaching, learning and assessment may not always meet the specific needs of individuals." (Fuller, 2005)

A recent OfS briefing on disabled students[8] reports that although the continuation, attainment and employment gaps are less pronounced between disabled and non-disabled students in England in comparison to between black and white students and students from the least and most deprived neighbourhoods, breaking the data down by impairment type shows more significant gaps. In particular, statistics show that those with a mental health condition and a social or communication impairment experienced wider gaps in their outcomes in comparison to non-disabled students. As a result, OfS have made closing the gap in degree outcomes between disabled

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[7] Supporting disabled learners to realise their potential, Lead Scotland and Equality Challenge Unit, 2015
[8] Beyond the Bare Minimum, Office for Students, 2019

and non-disabled students one of four national key performance indicators for the sector, along with indicators related to deprivation and ethnicity. This is significant, as the degree outcome gap between disabled and non-disabled students is wider for Scottish domiciled students at 4%, than it is for English domiciled students, currently at 1.4%,

> "The national KPMs have been set to address some of the most challenging gaps in access and participation that affect large numbers of students. Therefore, if consideration of these KPMs is not included in a plan, providers will be expected to explain why they are not relevant."[9]

OfS Access & Participation Plan guidance also asks institutions to disaggregate data related to disabled students, by mental ill health, physical impairments and specific learning difficulties as a minimum, to ensure they have a good understanding of disabled student groups at their institutions. The Scottish and English sectors are not directly comparable as there are much smaller numbers in Scotland, different funding arrangements and different provider characteristics. However, disabled people account for around 30,000 students in Scottish universities and almost 40,000 students in Scottish colleges, so they make a significant contribution to the diverse makeup of the further and higher education sector in Scotland.

While recent SFC outcome agreement guidance has streamlined reporting requirements related to most priority groups, there is a danger that measures are not specific or ambitious enough to address some of the more entrenched issues disabled people with specific impairments face in tertiary education, especially in relation to graduate employment rates. The Scottish Government have prioritised closing the disability employment gap in Scotland and have implemented a strategy to address this with their [Fairer Scotland for Disabled People: employment action plan.](#) However, commitments in relation to improving outcomes for disabled students in FE and HE are limited in the plan and could be better aligned with national measures in outcome agreement guidance.

Transitions and employment support

Issues related to transitions for disabled people have been well documented in the Scottish sector, and the literature reviewed confirms this continues to be a pertinent concern. The SFC ELS Review reported this was a particularly challenging area for colleges and that issues were compounded by difficulties in data sharing from schools as well as resourcing and capacity to attend school transition meetings. College staff also reported they were often not invited to attend transition meetings while some stakeholders said college staff were invited but could not always attend,

> "Stakeholders also felt that colleges could do more to support transitional arrangements. Colleges also reported challenges with transitions and that transition arrangements varied from school to school and depended on personal relationships rather than a formalised process. All colleges reported that transitional arrangements could be improved." (ELS Review, P21-22)

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[9] [Access and Participation Plan Guidance](#), P19-20, Office for Students, 2019

Colleges are asked to detail how they support transitions in their Access and Inclusion Strategies and SFC have funded pilot training to colleges and some universities to improve knowledge and capacity around transitions. ARC Scotland are taking forward a number of national actions and working closely with the Scottish Government to continue to improve transitions for young disabled across Scotland. The issues related to progression for disabled learners at college were also explored in the Lead Scotland (2015) report, which concluded more impairment specific support was required to aid moving up SCQF levels.

Transitions into university also pose challenges for some disabled people, especially for autistic students due to the nature of their impairment and how they can be affected by change. There is anecdotal evidence that a number of Scottish universities deliver specific transitional programmes to support autistic students prepare for and adjust to university life, however it would be useful to understand this approach better, including where there is evidence of this making a difference.

Understanding how to select a university that best meets specific students' needs also poses challenges for some disabled students. Some campuses, approaches to support, halls of residences and even geographical locations will be better suited to some disabled students in comparison to others, so it is important there is clear information on websites to help disabled students make decisions about the most suitable options for them. A student led investigative report by the Muscular Dystrophy Trailblazers campaigners found that 60% of students surveyed could not get enough information for disabled students from university websites,

> "It would be good to have a cross university standardised checklist of different services available to disabled students and what is and isn't accessible on campus and nearby so that prospective students can quickly and easily check that the university will meet their needs, and compare different universities."

There is definitely a need for something similar in the Scottish sector as although Disabled Go is in use across a number of campuses, more work could be done to improve the accuracy of the information available. There is also a need to involve disabled students and disabled people's organisations more in this work, and this is something that could be developed with organisations like Euan's Guide, the Glasgow Centre for Inclusive Living and local Access Panels.

The transition into employment for graduates is just as much of a priority as evidence shows disabled students have lower employment rates after completing college or university in comparison to non-disabled students, with gaps widening when broken down by impairment type. Students with autism were found to have the lowest employment rates (add source). In the Muscular Dystrophy Trailblazer's report, 80% of students surveyed said their university careers service did not offer support specifically for disabled students. Disabled people face a particular set of challenges when trying to negotiate areas like disability disclosure, reasonable adjustments and employment rights, so it's vital that colleges and universities contribute to preparing them for the world of work. Tailored career coaching, workshops, partnership projects with employment support organisations and well supported work placements could all make a difference. Advance HE have produced a number of resources and

guides to support education providers with making their careers services more inclusive and accessible for disabled people.

Teaching and learning and inclusive practice

Developing inclusive curricula, practice and pedagogies has been the subject of much research in the UK further and higher education sector in recent years. Progress with promoting disability equality and eliminating discrimination is considered to have gone through three stages[10]:

• Stage 1: improving access and reducing barriers in response to physical impairments

• Stage 2: improving support systems, needs' appraisal and teaching, assessment and staff training in response to less visible impairments of many kinds

• Stage 3: embedding disability issues more firmly across the core activities and central management processes in response to the Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)

Anecdotally, individual students still report experiencing issues related to stages 1 and 2, but progress with embedding disability equality and diversity across institutions does seem to have been slower, especially in relation to teaching and learning. A 2009 Quality Assurance Agency review[11] of English institutional audit reports produced between 2003 and 2006 revealed there was no doubt providers were responding to the needs of disabled students, but very little reference was made in relation to good practice in the area of teaching and learning.

 There is continued tension around where responsibility lies in relation to supporting disabled students, often still considered a role for disability services rather than academic staff. A 2015 HEA analysis[12] of equality and diversity in learning and teaching in the Scottish sector notes that disability services have been influential in embedding accessible design around physical access on campuses, and there are many examples of good practice, but progress with teaching and learning remains a challenge,

> "Of more relevance to this report is that disability services have not yet seen a radical change in how learning, teaching and assessment is being addressed as a coherent space of disabled student experience. The call within disabilities work for engagement with universal design processes is not new (Weedon et al. 2008)."

The argument for embedding inclusive practice is evident from the body of research reviewed. In Fuller et al (2005), the responses of a survey which used identical questions for both disabled and non-disabled students at the same institution was analysed. The results showed that the issues disabled students can experience within learning are not necessarily unique to them, with non-disabled students citing

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[10] Disability Equality in Higher Education: A Synthesis of research, HEA, 2010
[11] Outcomes from Institutional audit Institutions' support for students with disabilities, QAA, 2009
[12] Equality & Diversity in learning and teaching in Scottish universities: trends, perspectives and opportunities, HEA Academy, 2015

areas where they also had difficulties, including taking notes, the amount of time taken to read materials and participating in group work. The review concludes that making learning and teaching more inclusive will invariably benefit non-disabled students as much, if not more so, than disabled students,

> "Arguably, in the long run, the main beneficiaries of disability legislation and the need to make suitable adjustments in advance are the *non-disabled* students, because many of the adjustments, such as well-prepared handouts, instructions given in writing as well as verbally, notes put on-line, and variety and flexibility in forms of assessment, are simply good teaching and learning practices which benefit all students."

This is an important observation as it also supports the notion that not all disabled students identify or disclose as disabled, or indeed realise they are disabled in their learning settings, a common theme emerging in the research, so inclusive practices stand to benefit a potentially much wider group of disabled students.

The Fuller et al (2005) study also analysed the responses from three additional different surveys solely exploring disabled students' experiences. The analysis confirmed the areas where most students did report difficulties related to lectures and assessments. Almost 50% of students surveyed reported issues with lectures, referencing concentration, note taking, attendance and length of time to complete tasks amongst other reasons as giving rise to barriers. Course work and assessments were also found to be problematic for students, especially in relation to written examinations. Again, the reasons for these difficulties varied but included poor concentration, memory issues, difficulties with writing, fatigue and the length of time of the exam.

The authors in Weedon el (2008) also found the majority of the reasonable adjustments made for disabled students were generally quite formulaic, with support such as providing a laptop, or getting extra time in exams being common. There seemed to be a lack of a more individualised approach to understanding the specific difficulties students faced and how their impairment affected them. This echoes previous findings, where assumptions were made about the type of support certain disabled students were presumed to require.

Another common theme emerging from Weedon et al (2008) related to the difference in experience students had when trying to 'negotiate' reasonable adjustments with lecturers, with some having to make multiple attempts to ensure adjustments were understood and put in place. Even within the same subjects there was a variation in lecturers' approach to inclusion and understanding their obligations under the legislation. Concerns about fairness and compromising academic standards were common among lecturers,

> "Most lecturers were supportive of disabled students and the broad principle of making adjustments to the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. However, there was uncertainty about what counted as a 'reasonable adjustment', and the extent to which allowances should be made in marking

assignments, for example, whether students with a diagnosis of dyslexia should be penalised for errors in spelling, grammar and structure."

Weedon et al (2008) concluded that approaches to inclusive practice, pedagogy and alternative assessments to meet a wide range of needs were still very much in the embryonic stages.

The 2015 HEA analysis reported that issues around reasonable adjustments were persistent in the Scottish sector, with evidence to suggest they remained formulaic in nature. The authors also noted it was unclear as to whether the reasonable adjustments being provided were as a result of a universal design process or due to the amount of negotiation disabled students still had to engage in with lecturers, as observed previously by Weedon et al (2008). The analysis also observes that while making reasonable adjustments should be anticipatory as per the Equality Act, it is unclear whether academic staff are considering this duty when developing teaching and learning programmes, or if staff are being sufficiently encouraged and supported to develop their capacity to do this with CPD,

> "The proactive nature of adjustments as outlined in the public sector Equality Duty requires a degree of speculative pragmatism on the part of academics designing learning and teaching situations. It is not clear to what extent this predictive capacity is being incorporated into curriculum design and review or postgraduate certificates in higher education learning and teaching (and their equivalents)."

The SFC ELS Review also provides evidence of students having to negotiate reasonable adjustments in the college sector. The review held some student focus groups and some of the feedback alluded to similar difficulties,

> "When the students were asked what could be improved, they spoke about improved communication, delays, and scheduling conflicts. "Communication between lecturers and support staff could be better." Students spoke about lecturers forgetting about certain accommodations such as printing the lecture on a different coloured paper or emailing the lecture materials to the student ahead of time." (SFC, 2016, P24)

The authors of the 2015 HEA report make a number of recommendations to help progress embedding inclusive practice across Scottish institutions, including broadening recognition awards related to equality and diversity to encompass teaching and learning, updating and encouraging wider use of teaching and learning toolkits as part of whole programme reviews and asking institutions to report on what impact they think various initiatives have had in relation to equality and diversity in monitoring processes.

The authors of the HEA report acknowledge their analysis has limitations, as it reviews key grey literature related to equality contexts, rather than the specific activities happening across the sector. It did however make reference to a number of specific examples in the Scottish sector where institutions are working to embed equality and diversity into at least one level of the curriculum, including:

- Glasgow Caledonian University's use of the HEA self-evaluation toolkit in the creation of their FAIR (Flexible, Accessible, Inclusive and Real) curriculum, which supports staff in developing pedagogical approaches that anticipate and take into account students' educational, cultural and social backgrounds;

- University of St Andrews has its own inclusive curriculum toolkit used by directors of teaching;

- University of the West of Scotland also developed an inclusive curriculum toolkit, which is used in all programming activities;

- Many of the colleges within the University of the Highlands and Islands (e.g. Moray and Lews Castle) explicitly note how they monitor curriculum materials for bias and unacceptable stereotyping via an adapted version of the Quality and Equality in Learning and Teaching Materials (QELTM) curriculum audit tool produced by the SFC funded QELTM project in 2006;

- Within their curriculum reform process, which was introduced after a period of four years of strategic development, the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland took an innovative approach and, as part of whole curriculum renewal, intentionally designed a credit-bearing human rights module, which all first year students undertake through collaborative activity.

The authors observed that while there is clearly evidence of excellent practice, it was rarer for them to find examples where equality and diversity were embedded at every level of the curriculum.

There does not appear to be any recent research exploring how well Scottish providers have progressed with embedding inclusive practice since the 2015 report, however a 2017 Department for Education study[13] (which included representation from Scottish providers as well as one of the authors of the HEA report), concluded that evidence suggested not many institutions had managed to fully embed inclusive practice across their degree programmes, beyond a few examples of good practice. The DfE report acknowledges how difficult and complicated it can be to bring about change related to inclusive teaching, but observes there are some very simple and

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[13] Inclusive Teaching and Learning in Higher Education as a route to excellence, DfE, 2017

basic changes all institutions could make to vastly improve disabled students' experiences, including:

• Housing all teaching materials on the virtual learning environment in such a way that students can access them when they are needed, before or after formal teaching.

• Improve the accessibility of all materials provided (even if just with the right sub-headings or an appropriate use of font).

• Ensure reading lists are focussed and up to date

• Allow or facilitate the recording of teaching

• The use of plain English and clear presentation in lectures

• The pre-selection of diverse learning groups

• Diversify the range of learning opportunities, approaches and assessment

  methods

• Regarding students as learning partners

• The embedding of inclusive practice in recruitment, promotion, performance

development review and other staff focussed processes

A lot of these suggestions will already be happening to a greater or lesser degree in most colleges and universities in Scotland. However, there is undoubtedly still resistance in some areas to following these principles on a whole institution basis. The recording of all lectures as standard is a particularly contentious subject and there are variety of approaches and policies in place related to this. Many institutions do have the ability to record and capture lectures as standard for everyone, but due to concerns from teaching staff around confidentiality and copyright, it is unclear how often this is happening in practice. Anecdotally, students report difficulties with accessing recordings and advise it is common to be given an individual audio recording device to make recordings instead. This can be an inferior option as it requires students to remember to bring the device in and ensure it is charged, which can be particularly challenging for students who have memory difficulties. Students also report the quality can be far inferior and that having audio recordings only rather than audio and visual, with no easy way to access or organise relevant sections, can deem them not fit for purpose.

The Office for Students commissioned a large-scale baseline study of support for disabled students in 2017 following reforms to Disabled Students Allowance in England. Another large-scale follow up study was then undertaken in 2019 to measure how much progress had been made. The studies are extensive, and although they do not provide a completely exhaustive account of practices happening across England related to disabled student support, a total of 67 higher education providers and further education colleges responded to the surveys, which represents approximately 42% of the sector. Questions in the survey covered a broad range of areas including around inclusive practice and approaches to using

technology, CPD, monitoring and evaluation and student engagement. A number of case studies and good practice examples are also included, along with anonymised key informant interview responses. Analysis suggests excellent progress has been made in some areas, while still patchy in others, especially around a whole institution approach to inclusion. Similar research in the Scottish sector could provide a much needed baseline understanding of support for disabled students and progress with inclusive practice to help identify barriers to change and key priorities for funding and development. Colleges are asked to provide information about how they are embedding inclusive practice and mainstreaming support within their Access and Inclusion Strategies as part of the outcome agreement process, so a similar approach could also be considered for universities.

CPD

The need for increased training around supporting disabled students, developing inclusive practice and progressing disability equality, especially for teaching staff, was evident throughout the literature reviewed. There is dispute around who has responsibility for ensuring an institution is fully compliant in their equality obligations. Tension can exist around motivation, capacity and commitment to professional development in this area for academic staff, especially when there are competing priorities with teaching and research.

In Weedon et al (2008), interviews took place with staff from four higher education providers, including two pre-92 institutions (one of which was an ancient Scottish university) and two post-92 institutions. The authors observed that lecturers in the pre-92 universities were much more likely to have research commitments and therefore may have less time for student support. They also found the Scottish ancient university placed the least value on CPD related to developing inclusive practice as they did not consider it a priority for their institution.

The 2015 Lead Scotland report suggested there could be a lack of understanding from some college staff around how to support people with specific impairments,

> "There is a lack of specialist training and understanding amongst college staff as to how best to support many of the students in their care, thus leading to a skewed version of individuals' needs". (add page number and who quote is from)

Stakeholders interviewed for the SFC ELS Review also called for improved training for college staff,

> "In addition to improved training in the effective use of technology, stakeholders would like to see colleges invest in training for staff to create more inclusive environments. This includes providing staff with a better understanding about how to deliver more dyslexic or autistic friendly approaches. Stakeholders also stressed that the staff in a position to identify a need must be appropriately trained, qualified, and paid."

The Scottish Parliament's Equality and Human Rights Committee took evidence from disabled students, sector staff and key stakeholders in their 2017 *Disabilities and*

Universities[14] enquiry to gain a better understanding of the current climate for disabled students in Scotland. The evidence provided reaffirmed the tension that exists around whose responsibility it is to provide support,

> "From the evidence we have taken it is clear that social attitudes are changing. Nevertheless, there is still strong tendencies and attitudes by some in the academic world who view the need to make necessary changes or adjustments for disabled people or BSL users, or to be aware of the need to understand the challenges they face, as primarily the job of 'specialist' university staff, such as disability support officers, admissions officers, student associations etc."

Staff equality and diversity training is already commonplace in most colleges and universities in Scotland, however it is unclear how valuable the training is in challenging attitudes or in changing practice. Anecdotally, there is also a suggestion that the majority of training offered is generic and may not address specific disability equality issues. There have been multiple recommendations for specific mandatory equality training for all staff, including from the HEA 2015 report and in Advance HE's response to the report,

> "We have found that equality capacity building of academic teaching staff is taking place, both as embedded and discrete equality and diversity development provision; however, it is not always compulsory or of consistently high quality. We would therefore support the recommendation for mandatory equality training for learning and teaching staff. In addition, we would advocate a whole-system approach to supporting equality and diversity expertise of all staff, including professional and support staff, and of students, which our research indicates is the most effective strategy (ECU 2015a). With regard to content, in our experience, general as well as specific training and development is required." (ECU/Advance HE, 2015)

The 2017 Equality and Human Rights Committee report also called on the Scottish Government and universities to move away from a voluntary approach and towards more mandatory rights-based equality training for academic staff.

Anecdotally, there is debate as to whether mandatory equality training will have the desired effect of improving outcomes for disabled students and developing and embedding inclusive practice across teaching and learning. Training would need to be regularly updated and evaluated to understand what is working. Staff also need to have a clear steer from senior management to ensure they understand the full benefits of developing their practice. Consideration would also need to be given to ensure academic staff engaging in CPD have the right commitment and motivation levels. Training that is developed to address particular priority areas for an institution and encompasses a disciplinary approach could have more success than general disability awareness courses. It is also vital that disabled students and disabled

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[14] Disabilities and Universities, 1st Report, Scottish Parliament, 2017

people's organisations be at the forefront of developing and delivering relevant training.

Colleges have to report on how they are investing in staff development in their Access and Inclusion Strategies, however the information provided tends to make reference to an approach or a statement about CPD, rather than specific activities or how it has made a difference. It is therefore unclear what practices are happening across both the college and university sector in Scotland related to CPD in disability equality and inclusion, so gaining a better understanding of this, especially where there is evidence of positive engagement and impact, is vital.

Monitoring and Evaluation

It was evident from the research reviewed that there is an inconsistent picture of how well practices and initiatives to improve experiences and outcomes for disabled students are being monitored in Scotland. Earlier research indicates this was also the case in England in Wales,

> "A lack of strong data and robust evaluation is referenced. Lack of evidence indicating good practice around transitions, both into post graduate study and into employment." (HEFCE and HEFCW, 2009)

Colleges and universities are not currently asked to describe what impact their activities have had on disabled or other groups of priority students in monitoring agreements. The 2015 HEA report suggested a question should be included in outcome agreement guidance asking institutions to show what effect their initiatives have had. In the recent 2019 OfS study, the majority of providers reported they did monitor and evaluate support for disabled students, however it was less clear whether particular initiatives were being evaluated, or if more aggregated quantitative data and general student feedback were being used to monitor progress. Anecdotally in the Scottish sector, it is clear disability services are engaging with students accessing their services to get feedback and suggestions for improvement. There is less evidence however, of progress with measuring the mainstreaming of disability support or embedding inclusion into programmes. There is also a lack of data that evaluates what impact equality and diversity training has had on teaching and learning, or of how particular practices and initiatives have worked.

> "Arguably, the more we engage with the equality and diversity agenda, the less we have adequate research to inform the most effective methods, processes, and reporting of change. This is particularly the case in two areas: research on diversity and student learning both in general higher education and specific to the disciplines; research on campus climate within the Scottish sector." (HEA, 2015)

The HEA report refers to some examples of good practice but notes that generally the lack of Scottish specific research is concerning. Again, the limited key metrics colleges and universities are asked to report on in reference to disabled students in Scotland makes it difficult to get a good understanding of how well data is analysed and used to focus attention and develop practice, especially in reference to students with specific impairments. Analysis of college Access and Inclusion Strategies would

suggest this is an underdeveloped area but also an emerging priority for the sector. College staff interviewed for the SFC ELS Review reported it was actually very challenging to quantify the impact of extended learning support (now Access and Inclusion) funding on student outcomes and experiences. There was an agreement however that if ELS funding was withdrawn, the impact on students would be obvious, but it was difficult to directly corelate this with quantitative data. Staff felt the impact of ELS funding would be more prominent through student case studies and focus groups.

Robust evaluation methods are needed to support the sector with knowing where to concentrate their efforts and deepen their understanding of what works, so it can be replicated and scaled up if appropriate, as recommended by the HEA,

> "design robust impact assessment methods for initiatives, including professional development activities as well as equality and diversity focused learning and teaching projects; support student involvement in equality impact assessments of all learning and teaching practices and regimes." (HEA, 2015)

In the OfS 2019 report, some disability support staff said they felt there may be better buy in from academic staff to deliver and support specific initiatives if there is sound evidence and research underpinning the benefits of doing so.

Some of the examples the 2015 HEA Academy report gives around evaluation includes reference to GCU

Student Involvement

Involving and engaging with disabled students to influence and make changes to policies, services and practices, is not only vital to ensure they meet a variety of people's needs, it's also a legal obligation under the Equality Act. There is anecdotal evidence suggesting engagement happens most often at a project specific level rather than as an embedded whole institution approach. Colleges and universities are assessed on the results of the annual National Student Survey in outcome agreements, but the published results of the NSS do not disaggregate disabled students' responses. The Office for Students 2019 study noted that individual institutions can and do analyse specific groups' responses to understand trends and identify areas for change, and anecdotally this also happens in Scotland, however it is not clear how consistent this practice is or how it is making a difference for disabled students. A recent set of experimental data[15] has been published by the Office for Students, analysing results from students with specific characteristics from the 2018 and 2019 surveys. The analysis shows disabled students were less likely to be satisfied with every aspect of their learning experience, but the most significant gaps were related to their satisfaction levels around the organisation and management of their course. The NSS does not currently ask questions related to disability support. This is obviously an increasing priority area for the Scottish

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[15] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/national-student-survey-nss/sector-analysis/

Government with the latest SFC outcome agreement guidance asking colleges and universities to better capture the student voice,

> "Institutions are asked to enhance engagement of students' association representatives in the development of OAs to ensure the lived experience of students informs, and is embedded in, OAs and their monitoring."[16]

A lot of research has been carried out investigating disabled students' experiences in the past, especially when those experiences have been negative, but what is missing from the evidence are examples of disabled students being partners rather than participants in research, and exploring practices that *are* working to improve their outcomes and experiences. There is therefore an opportunity within this current research project to consider how to include disabled students with exploring initiatives that have some evidence of success.

Conclusion and key recommendations

It is clear significant progress in supporting disabled students at colleges and universities across the UK has been made in the last 15 years. Steep rises in the number and proportion of people declaring an impairment within FE and HE settings shows disabled people are more confident and comfortable to disclose personal information they may have otherwise hidden in the past, for fear of discrimination. Society in general has more awareness and understanding of impairments like mental health conditions and autism and how they impact people, which has likely contributed to people feeling safer to disclose. However, while overall representation of disabled people at Scottish colleges and universities is good, it is important not to lose sight of the persistent barriers some individual disabled people will face in trying to access tertiary education, especially people with physical or sensory impairments, who may still be underrepresented. Continued monitoring of disaggregated data compared with the upcoming 2021 census data will help to provide a better understanding of where these entrenched gaps in access lie.

The picture around retention, success, degree outcomes and employment is less clear for disabled students. There are gaps at all levels, but as they are marginal when compared to non-disabled students, they are less closely monitored and not currently considered a priority. It is vital disaggregated data is collected and analysed and targets or specific initiatives implemented to help close these gaps. From reviewing the literature available, students with mental health issues and those with autism or a social/communication disorder appear to have some of the most persistent issues around support. While the work to improve support for students with mental health issues is still ongoing, there has been a strong and coordinated response from the Scottish Government, SFC, colleges and universities to address this need. Further research is therefore required to explore what is working well to support students with autism or a social/communication disorder so this can be capitalised on.

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[16] http://www.sfc.ac.uk/funding/outcome-agreements/outcome-agreements-guidance/outcome-agreements-guidance.aspx

There is obviously a rich tapestry of approaches, initiatives and support happening at colleges and universities across Scotland to support disabled students and embed inclusion, but there is less evidence of practices that are proving to have an impact on improving their outcomes and experiences. More tailored training for academic staff, a whole institution approach to embed inclusion, student involvement and improved career services are some of the key priorities emerging from this research.