

Improving outcomes for disabled students

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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).

Context Setting

This report has been authored and published by Lead Scotland and grew out of a research project that was originally developed with Advance HE.

Lead Scotland deliver the country’s only national disabled students’ helpline and information service and have a unique perspective of disabled student support across the further and higher education sector. We receive calls from prospective and current disabled students as well as their parents and carers in both college and university settings. We gather evidence of emerging themes and trends and use this to inform our influencing and policy work affecting disabled students. We have therefore used evidence from the helpline to contextualise and analyse the initiatives explored in this research.

Background

The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) previously co-hosted the ‘Improving outcomes for disabled students’ advisory group with Lead Scotland, which brought students, parents and sector professionals together to identify key issues and discuss solutions. SFC asked Advance HE to deliver a project that would attempt to address some of the key issues emerging from the group and for the sector to improve outcomes and experiences for disabled students.

Advance HE consulted with the disabled student advisory group, the Scottish Heads of Disability Services and College Development Network’s Access and Inclusion Group to develop an understanding of what would make a difference to disabled students’ outcomes and experiences. Lead Scotland also consulted with disability advisors from across Scottish universities at their 2018 summer conference, to gain an understanding of where they felt the current gaps were. The practitioners we engaged with expressed the need for improved networking and sharing of best practice related to supporting disabled students and progressing inclusive approaches, particularly for academic staff.

Another common response emerging in the consultation stage was that despite many initiatives and pilots being delivered in the past, progress had been slow to address continuing professional development for academic staff.

Taking all of this into account, we decided the best approach would be to develop an understanding of the range of practices and initiatives currently happening across Scotland's colleges and universities. We agreed the key to understanding this range of practice would be to identify initiatives that had some evidence of impact as it was clear from the literature review this is an underdeveloped area. The aim of building this picture of practice is to share evidence of what is working between colleges and universities, so we felt it was vital to ensure the practices we were examining had been evaluated or had some evidence of creating positive change.

The project took place in four stages:

- Literature review (August 2019)
- Online survey (October-December 2019)
- In-depth interviews with institutions and student focus groups (January-February 2021)
- Final report (June 2021)

Methodology

Literature review summary

An extensive literature review was undertaken initially, to try and explore current and recent research related to improving outcomes and experiences for disabled students in Scotland. The parameters were expanded to cover work from the rest of the UK over the last 15 years due to the lack of recent Scottish specific research.

What was striking about the evidence examined, was the parity between the experiences and challenges emerging 10 to 15 years ago, to issues 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 CPD, especially for academic staff.
- Issues with disability disclosure, language and identity.
- Higher withdrawal rates for students with hidden impairments.
- The differences in disabled students' experiences.
- Attitudinal and cultural barriers.
- Lack of student engagement and voice.
- Prevalence of assumptive, formulaic reasonable adjustments.
- The disconnect between how data is collected, who it is 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 in the recommendations in both the earlier and more recent studies, suggesting slow progress 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 recognition programme to measure progress with developing inclusive practice, especially in teaching and learning.

Key recommendations that emerged for the Scottish sector include:

- Set more ambitious targets related to intake, completions, retention, degree outcomes and destinations for disabled students in outcome agreements to close the gaps.
- 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, including impairment specific information, evaluation methods, evidence of successful initiatives and opportunities to network and share best practice.
- Better alignment between the Fairer Scotland for Disabled People: employment action plan and outcome agreement guidance.

Online survey

An information sheet and questionnaire (see Appendix B) was developed to capture evidence of unpublished work and to encourage self-reporting (including on key learning and 'what doesn't work'). A list of indicators showing positive impact was also developed to support respondents to think about what positive changes they were able to observe and measure, as a result of an initiative or practice. We wanted this list to be broad enough to capture progression with softer skills, as this can sometimes be overlooked in an attainment driven policy landscape.

We were looking for initiatives that had *some* evidence of impact, even if evaluations were ongoing or there were early indications of success with more recent projects.

Respondents were asked to comment on what the rationale was for developing the practice (what need or issue it would be addressing), what staffing and resources were required to deliver the project, key reflections, whether they thought it would be scalable, what methods they used for evaluation, and what indicators of positive impact they observed (if any). We also asked respondents to reflect on what they thought had been integral to the success of the project. We asked respondents to categorise the practice in terms of whether it related to access, participation or progress as well as whether it related to students with a specific impairment or to disabled students more generally.

We discussed the importance of ensuring disabled students had a voice and shared their lived experience in this project, so we asked a supplementary question to identify whether respondents would be happy to share a second survey with students involved in the initiatives to gather their feedback.

All the information and a full list of questions were also hosted on the [Lead Scotland website here](#), along with a link to the survey. We disseminated information about our research and put out the call for evidence to Advance HE and Lead Scotland's networks, including key partners in the further and higher education sector and across all social media platforms.

Individuals we had a professional relationship or institutions where we had heard about a specific initiative, were also personally contacted. We impressed the importance of sharing the call for evidence with colleagues beyond the remit of student support roles, with a specific ask to share it with academic teams.

One month after the survey opening, we had only received three responses (all from the same university), so we decided to use more direct targeting to try and increase the response rate. We sent a personal email to the heads of Student Support or Disability Service at every college and university in Scotland, informing them about the research project and asking them to disseminate the information with their colleagues, again putting particular emphasis on sharing it with academic teams. Recipients were invited to get in touch if they had any questions or wanted to discuss it further. As we approached the deadline, we made the decision to extend it by another month as there had still been a low response rate (a total of six at this point). The survey was therefore extended and was open for three months in total.

Summary of Results

We received a total of 13 complete responses and one partially complete response, spread across six universities, one HEI and two colleges. There was also one response from sparqs, which relates to the college sector. As this was such a small sample size we could not make any generalisations or draw conclusions from the results, but have shared the data for information below.

The initiatives shared were aimed at providing support to students with a range of impairments including:

- Disabled students in general: 7
- An autistic spectrum disorder: 4
- Mental health issues: 4

- Learning disabilities: 2
- Specific learning difficulties: 2
- Long term health conditions: 1

Some of the initiatives provided support for people with multiple impairments.

The initiatives related to the following areas of student support:

- Access: 5
- Participation and the student experience: 9
- Progression onto an advanced course: 3
- Progression into employment: 4

Some initiatives addressed multiple areas.

Seven respondents said they consulted with disabled students before delivering the initiative and seven did not.

Three of the initiatives had been evaluated, eight had evaluations planned but were still ongoing and three had not been evaluated.

Four respondents reported using quantitative or monitoring data as one method of evaluating their initiatives, and a total of eight respondents used qualitative data in their evaluations. Some respondents used a mixture of both. Feedback forms or surveys were the most popular type of evaluation used, with eight respondents using them, including five respondents that solely used feedback forms to evaluate their projects. One respondent also said they used a combination of case studies, focus groups and questionnaires to evaluate their project. The quantitative methods used were:

- Number of appointments attended and number of students seen: 1
- App usage data: 1
- Usage of online toolkits and usage of sections of toolkit: 1
- Monitoring and evaluating usage of the online Personal Learning Support Plan process: 1
- Job outcomes and job sustainability (this was recorded by an employment partner rather than the college): 1
- Confidence scales: 1
- Likert scales: 1
- Retention and progression data: 1

Nine respondents reported they observed indicators of positive impact as a result of their initiative or practice, however one respondent said they could not directly relate it to the practice. The indicators of positive impact reported were:

- Improved confidence in student soft skills: 4
- Improved student confidence in disclosing an impairment: 4
- Improved student knowledge in their rights under the Equality Act as a disabled student or employee: 2
- Improved student confidence in discussing support needs: 3

- Improved representation/proportion of disabled students: 2
- Improved retention: 2
- Increased successful completions: 1
- Improved attainment: 2
- Improved health and wellbeing: 4
- More successful progressions into a job: 1
- Reduced waiting times to access DSA, disability services or disability related support: 1
- Improved staff confidence in competency to support disabled students: 1
- Other – ‘Increased confidence by employers when working with autistic individuals’: 1

Not all of the respondents who reported improvements in key performance indicators such as attainment, progression, retention and completion used quantitative evaluation methods for their project or practice, so it is difficult to determine causation, which was noted as a concern by one university.

Conclusions from the survey

It is not possible to draw conclusions about the full range of practice related to disabled student support that has evidence of positive impact happening across Scotland’s university and college sector, due to the low response rate. Upon reflection, some of the practices shared were one off initiatives, and evaluations beyond feedback forms were limited. Some respondents commented that more in depth evaluations were not appropriate for their initiatives, as they were “small scale targeted interventions” or “light touch”.

This supports the findings in the desk-based review, which showed evaluating and measuring impact of equality and diversity related practice was an underdeveloped area. Institutions may have been discouraged from responding if they thought it would be difficult to prove causation between their work and changes in performance indicators.

As recommended in the desk-based review, a more thorough and exhaustive piece of research into the full range of practice related to disabled student support would be helpful in understanding what is working, where there are gaps and what lessons can be learned and shared. As discussed in the review, the Office for Students (OfS) commissioned two extensive research projects to understand the range of practice related to supporting disabled students in England, and their approach to engagement is something we could emulate for the Scottish sector to improve response rates.

In-depth interviews

Methodology

While the responses did not generate enough data to progress with having the evidence further evaluated, there were interesting and innovative initiatives reported throughout the online surveys that warranted further investigation. We therefore developed a plan to undertake further research with colleges and universities across

Scotland by carrying out face to face semi-structured interviews with staff. We wanted to explore some of the initiatives from the survey in further detail as well as identify additional initiatives that were addressing some of the themes and recommendations emerging from the literature review.

We felt using a semi-structured interview format would elicit a better return of data and would support us to develop more in-depth case studies. For consistency we kept to the same line of questioning used in the online questionnaire, however to encourage participation, we simplified this into broad themes when engaging with prospective interviewees. We used a targeted approach rather than contacting every student support service in Scotland, in the hope of getting a higher response rate. Using our own networks and membership on various sector-based groups we directly approached specific staff members to explore the work they were currently doing and its potential for being part of this research. The College Development Network also took a lead role in identifying key members leading the way in inclusive practice and who they felt were more likely to respond. We also undertook research of initiatives we had identified that were related to inclusion, disability or mental health that had won awards, and reached out directly to these colleges and universities.

Interviewees were all sent an information and data consent sheet (see Appendix C) in advance and were supported to prepare for the interview by being provided with an overview of the broad themes we would be asking about. We also created interview guides for consistency and to help facilitate the discussions (see Appendix D). The interviews varied in length from 45 to 90 minutes and from one staff member being present to up to four. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for reporting purposes.

After each interview we asked participants if they would be willing to share an email invitation with the disabled students who had taken part in their initiative or alternatively with disabled students at their institution to talk about the support they receive in general, to be part of a focus group with Lead Scotland so that we could capture their lived experience.

Results

In total we interviewed seven institutions exploring eight different initiatives that aimed to improve outcomes and experiences for disabled students. The initiatives included:

1. Edinburgh Napier University's 'I'm In': a whole institution approach to mainstreaming inclusion.
2. Edinburgh College's Autism Strategy and Transition Sessions: creating an autism friendly campus and reducing the cycle of withdrawal and repeat.
3. Perth College's in-house assessments for Specific Learning Difficulties: reducing student waiting times to access Disabled Student Allowance funded support.
4. The University of Dundee's 'Stay on Course' programme: supporting retention.

5. Glasgow Kelvin College's Digital Inclusion Strategy and use of Recite me: a whole college approach to digital inclusion and accessible applications.
6. Glasgow Clyde College Students' Association's use of sparqs' adapted class rep training for students in supported education: empowering students often left behind to affect change.
7. Glasgow Caledonian University's 'Dyslexic and Confident' workshops: mainstreaming support and reducing waiting times at the start of term.
8. Glasgow Caledonian University's Mental Health Matters: pre-entry transition sessions.

Case Studies

We will examine the data, approaches and evidence for each initiative separately as part of the case studies.

1. [Edinburgh Napier University: I'm In: the inclusive practice programme](#)

I'm In is Edinburgh Napier University's whole institution approach to driving forward inclusion by design across all departments of the university. The project is in year two of three and their aim is to take a universal design for learning (UDL) approach, mainstream reasonable adjustments and bring about a cultural and attitudinal shift to support for disabled students.

Part of the rationale for instigating the project was a growing awareness of the trend towards UDL happening both at neighbouring universities as well as in North America and Ireland. Inclusion is also an important strategic aim for the university and I'm In was considered to have the potential to effectively meet this objective. The project is led by the Head of Inclusion and the Inclusion Services Manager at Edinburgh Napier but is a collaborative cross departmental initiative along with school disability leads and teaching and learning directors. I'm In aims to address multiple areas of inclusion including:

- Improving access to physical spaces
- Creating disabled student ambassadors to influence change and shape services and support.
- Mainstreaming adjustments, e.g., recording all lectures as standard, extra time in exams for all students, providing all materials in advance, meeting legal web accessibility requirements, and ensuring digital formats are accessible.
- Offering alternative assessments to exams
- Improving transitions
- Supporting staff CPD
- Designing inclusive and accessible curricula including exploring disability issues.

Colleagues from estates, student support, teaching and learning and ICT, are all involved and responsible for driving the project forward.

One of the gaps the inclusion team identified was the lack of peer-to-peer engagement between disabled students and the absence of their lived experience in

shaping support services. Instead, the team found their interaction with disabled students was exclusively transactional. Involving disabled students was therefore a key element in shaping this work, so the creation of a new full-time post of Disabled Student Engagement Worker to complement the project was considered vital to capturing the student voice. Their remit is to engage with disabled students and graduates about their experiences with Edinburgh Napier, from initially choosing the university right through to their transition into employment.

The university has now also established a Disability Inclusion Student Ambassador programme, where disabled students are recruited to represent different aspects of inclusion and work together to influence change. The students are provided with induction training on working together as a team and then they are set tasks to explore different issues affecting disabled students to help bring about change where needed and to write blogs exploring some of these issues.

The main resources and costs involved in the project were the salary of the Disabled Student Engagement Worker and the capacity of the inclusion team to lead on the work. As it supported such a core strategic aim, there was already significant support from senior staff to help coordinate the work across departments. However, Edinburgh Napier recommended funding a full-time post to lead on the work to dedicate the time required to manage the project. The project team felt it would be beneficial for the project manager to have both an academic and student support background to help bridge the gap between teaching and learning and support services.

While there was initial resistance from some lecturers who did not feel it was their role to implement changes or did not feel comfortable recording their lectures, the rapid change to remote learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic helped to support with the transition,

“...because we've built inclusion into this support for the move online over the past year, there's more and more help readily available. More and more examples for people to follow, so some of this is a bit of gentle handholding and encouragement. And actually, it stops being a scary thing. It becomes easily a doable thing, and they shift. So, it's about trying to kind of make it more accessible for people and trying to remove some of the fears that people might have. Part of the sales pitch, so to speak, at the moment is a lot of this stuff you've been doing for a year? Let's keep that. So, trying to emphasise continuity. Part of the story is some of these things can make your life easier too. So, trying to play up the benefits for the teaching staff as well as to the future.”

As the project is still in its early stages and is about a whole culture change, the university are measuring output and activity as indicators of positive change. For example, there are currently a group of ten lecturers going through an online course in universal design for learning, who will then apply the principles to a pilot module so that it is inclusive by design. The expectation is that over the next few years increasing numbers of lecturers will undertake the UDL course as part of a core programme of CPD. Further down the line other indicators of success the university hope to see include fewer requests for individual reasonable adjustments, fewer

student support plans and fewer individual learning profiles as support becomes more mainstreamed and teaching and learning more inclusive. Ultimately though, becoming an inclusive university is about changing attitudes, so the inclusion team don't expect to see a lot of hard data as a measure of success. Instead, they hope to see softer outcomes, like a shift in thinking, accessibility and inclusion being considered with any new proposals from the outset, and consultation happening with disabled students as standard.

Analysis

In the SFC/Lead Scotland Improving Outcomes for Disabled Students' Group, one of the top three priorities identified through a series of workshops, was the need to mainstream support and progress inclusion. The group had also identified the importance of focussing on a culture shift rather than simply training staff, with members stating,

“Focus on adaptive change, shifting values, behaviours and cultures, rather than increasing knowledge. Greater engagement with disabled people to give them support and a platform to share their experiences and views of being a disabled student.” (SFC/Lead Scotland Advisory Group member)

This initiative therefore stood out due to its ambitious aim of changing a culture and shifting attitudes, taking a whole institution approach to inclusion and placing disabled students' experiences at the centre. It was also of significance as the literature review suggested that progress towards embedding inclusion in teaching and learning has been slow, with a 2017 report from the Department for Education showing there were pockets of good practice, but less evidence of institution wide success.

While part of Edinburgh Napier's rationale for implementing the project was to ensure they kept up with their neighbouring universities and follow wider trends, evidence from the Lead Scotland helpline suggests inclusive practice at institutions across Scotland may be inconsistent. For example, students report to us difficulties with obtaining permission to record their lectures, not being provided with learning materials in accessible formats and being refused requests to have alternative assessments to exams. These issues are reported at institutions that have statements and policies in place committing to inclusive practice. The project team's reflections on lecturers being resistant to the changes initially also concurs with both evidence from our helpline and from the literature review, with frequent reports of academic staff acting as gatekeepers of certain adjustments.

Edinburgh Napier reflected on the difficulties in evaluating an initiative like I'm In in the short term, due to the lack of hard data it would produce. The team made reference to a visit carried out to University College Dublin as a leading example of an inclusive university and were advised it took them seven years to bring about the kind of change they were hoping to see. It is harder to measure a change in culture and attitude, but the creation of a Disabled Student Engagement Worker post and the development of the Disability Inclusion Student Ambassador programme at the centre of this project should give the university the best chance of ensuring they are held to account by the students they are seeking to serve in this work.

2. Edinburgh College: Autism Strategy and Transitions Workshops

Edinburgh College is currently in the early stages of devising an Autism Strategy to improve student retention and experience. The strategy will involve creating an 'autism friendly' campus, a wider roll out of transition programmes they have been piloting and building up their autism champion initiative.

The rationale for developing the strategy emerged as a result of observations being made by a Learning Support Advisor who has a particular interest and professional background in supporting autistic individuals. She was aware of a repeated cycle of autistic students withdrawing from their course early, returning, dropping out again and this cycle repeating before students were perhaps finally completing on their fourth attempt. She felt their expectations were not being met and they were not being adequately prepared for the transition into college. Another driving force behind the strategy was the increasing number of students declaring an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) across all subject areas and the need to support academic staff who did not have previous experience of working with autistic students.

The Learning Support Adviser was also becoming aware of how certain aspects of the campus environment were not always the most inclusive for autistic students, especially those experiencing sensory difficulties. For example, weekly Friday morning fire alarm tests were causing huge amounts of distress for some students,

"It's so detrimental to any students with sensory impairments but particularly autistic students. I mean, this is ruining anybody who's learning on a Friday that's sitting at 10:00 AM. That's a whole day gone, the whole day ruined. And it was such an easy thing that could have been such an easy win. I have quite a strong feeling that you should be able to walk into a campus and know immediately it's autism friendly. And there's so many small things that you can do to make that the case."

Prior to working at Edinburgh College, she worked for an autism specific charity where she helped to set up a transition programme for Heriot Watt University. Having seen the success of the programme there and feeling increasingly like they were not meeting the needs of their autistic students at Edinburgh College, she presented the idea to her team, and they piloted some transition sessions.

The Edinburgh College transition programme covered everything from orientation, survival guides, funding sessions, talks from the wellbeing and learning support teams, advice about where to go to get some quiet space and hearing from previous autistic students, to how much a bag of chips cost. They also included lunch from Dominoes and a Therapets session to encourage attendance.

The sessions were evaluated, looking at students' confidence ratings, qualitative feedback and engagement; and on the back of that, the Learning Support Advisor secured two funded hours per week to work solely on developing the Autism Strategy and transitions programme. She sought help from the college's Equalities Officer to start looking at data more closely to understand how many autistic people are applying to the college, how many turn up on day one, and how many are

returning for semester two, so they can use this granular level of detail to better evaluate the initiative and what impact the strategy has made on early withdrawal rates of autistic students. Another indicator they will be looking at to understand the impact of the strategy is the experience of autistic students, with plans to have two post transition meetings with participants, with one planned for October and one in January, to gather qualitative feedback.

Another key element of the strategy will be the autism champion programme. Part of the rationale of developing the initiative was the increasing number of students disclosing an ASD. Academic departments that were not traditionally selected by autistic students were starting to see an increase of this cohort, and in some cases, tutors were getting 'flustered' and struggling to understand why certain adjustments had to be made.

The Learning Support Advisor raised the point that training has the potential to feel quite punitive for some tutors if they are being told the approaches they've been using (or refusing to use) have actually been causing an individual distress and anxiety. The College therefore feel a much more effective approach is to create autism champions in each academic department to allow for informal discussions and 'training' over staff room chats and cups of coffee. A pilot is currently being developed for this, where academics in the IT department (where there are currently a high proportion of autistic students) who have a special interest in autism and have the expertise, knowledge and training in supporting autistic students will then share that best practice with colleagues in a more informal and less threatening setting.

While it feels it still has some distance to travel, Edinburgh College wants to become known as the 'autism college' where they are selected specifically for their reputation in supporting autistic students.

Analysis

Edinburgh College's Autism Strategy was of particular interest for this research as the literature review suggested students with an ASD experience some of the most persistent issues around retention and success in tertiary education. This evidence is echoed in the Lead Scotland helpline statistics with year on year increases in the proportion of calls related to students with an ASD, with an average of 30% of enquiries coming from autistic individuals or their families.

The background, expertise and passion of the Learning Support Advisor managing this initiative is of particular relevance in this case study as without her drive, dedication and wealth of experience from the third sector, it is difficult to know whether the strategy would have progressed. She talked about being met with initial resistance when planning the transition sessions.

While transition sessions are certainly not a new concept, it is unclear how widespread they are across Scotland, especially in the college sector, despite the clear benefits of having adequate time and information to help prepare autistic students make the move to college. When interviewing Glasgow Caledonian University, they made reference to their summer autism transition programme that was recognised by SFC as a model of good practice in 2010, for which they received grant funding to disseminate the model, through a series of regional workshops.

While we are aware of some similar transition sessions happening across the university sector, again it is unclear how widespread this practice is.

The reference to tutors sometimes getting 'flustered' and not understanding why adjustments were required, echoes the evidence we have seen in the literature review and the difficulties that can arise for disabled students negotiating their support plans with academics. In 2019/20, 31% of calls to Lead Scotland's disabled students' helpline related to students seeking advice in relation to their institutions failing to make reasonable adjustments for them.

There are divided opinions in the sector over the effectiveness of mandating academic staff to undertake training, though it was a recommendation of the literature review to make training mandatory. During discussions in the SFC/Lead Scotland advisory group, colleagues raised concerns around how it would be funded, evaluated and sustained over time. The concept of embedding autism (or other specialism) champions right across an institution to informally support their colleagues is certainly a more inclusive approach and could perhaps form a suite of support tools for academic teams that transcends the standard offering of a training session.

3. Perth College: In-house Specific Learning Difficulty Diagnostic Assessments

Perth College UHI took the decision to invest in training its Additional Support for Learning Team Leader to carry out specific learning difficulty (SpLD) diagnostic assessments for students in-house, to allow them to access the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) fund earlier.

Currently, students must have diagnostic evidence of a SpLD to claim DSA, however the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS) will accept evidence from a wide range of professionals holding suitable qualifications. To access DSA for a SpLD, a student needs to have a diagnostic assessment if they do not already have one and they then need to wait for a needs assessment from a Scottish Government validated assessment centre as part of the application process, which can be time-consuming. All of this usually does not happen until at least September when a student starts their course, and the process can often run on for weeks, if not months, to complete.

Perth College saw an opportunity to try and reduce some of the waiting times and support students to access the appropriate support at an earlier stage to give them a better chance of succeeding on their course. While reduced waiting times and an improved experience was the main rationale for taking the initiative, there were also clear cost benefits to taking this approach as well. The cost for a SpLD diagnosis can cost anywhere between £500-800 when carried out by an educational psychologist, and although Perth College was receiving excellent market rates from a certified Assessor at a cost of £275 per assessment, the costs were becoming increasingly unpalatable, as the funds are currently diverted from budgets for further education students and for assistive technology.

The course cost £4000 to complete and following qualification, Perth College was able to see 50% of all student referrals requiring a SpLD diagnosis, which equated to 27 students in the first academic year. If these assessments had been charged at the normal rate of £275 then the college calculated they had already saved almost

£7500. There are ongoing CPD costs involved as assessors need to keep their Assessors Practicing Certificate updated, and there also are timing and capacity issues to consider.

On top of the cost savings, the college now has increased capacity to take student referrals for SpLD diagnostic assessments as they are split between the ASL Team Leader and the Assessor they were already using. One of the key positive indicators of the initiative is that the ASL Team Leader can now see students earlier than September, which has resulted in reduced waiting times for access to a needs assessment (and therefore DSA), which means students can start their course with the appropriate support in place. An additional measure of success of the initiative is how much more intuitive the assessments can be when carried out by a member of college staff rather than someone external,

“It brings the students closer to the process and that is done by a person who works in the department, who understands their cognitive profile significantly more than you ever would otherwise, and therefore able to make more appropriate, accurate, reasonable adjustments in order to support that student. And they're much more likely to be successful as a result of that. The cost benefit, well that is there for all to see as well.”

Analysis

This initiative was of particular interest for this research due to the volume of calls Lead Scotland receives on the helpline related to the delays students experience in accessing DSA and getting the correct support put in place early enough. This is also evidenced in the recent [Policy Connect report, Arriving at Thriving on Page 35](#),

“The most common complaints from students were around the length and complexity of the application process, which is still paper-based; the length of time it takes for applications to be processed; and the length of time it takes for support and equipment to be put in place.”

While the Policy Connect report predominantly refers to the English based Disabled Students' Allowance, there are parallels with the system in Scotland. Lead Scotland are on the steering group of the Scottish Government's review of Disability Related Student Support which is due to be published in late summer/early autumn, and the findings there concur that delays in being awarded the funding and getting the support put in place in time can be common.

Despite the wide range of professionals SAAS will accept evidence of an SpLD from, anecdotal feedback from colleagues and students suggests universities most commonly use Educational Psychologists to carry out the diagnostic assessments. This can be costly and can cause additional delays for students as there are often waiting lists to access these professionals. Further, assessors with specific qualifications in diagnosing an SpLD are specialists in the field, whereas educational psychologists may be more generalists. Considering the cost savings, reduced waiting times for DSA, the opportunity for staff CPD and the improved student experience, it could be prudent for institutions to consider training their staff to carry out the diagnostic assessments in-house.

The impact on retention and successful completions as a result of the initiative are unknown, as Perth College felt the combination of the relatively small numbers and the difficulty in proving causation would make it difficult to drill down into the data to show a direct link. This has been a common observation in the research interviews however, with staff looking to softer outcomes like improved student experiences for students and more efficient working practices.

4. University of Dundee: Stay on Course

The University of Dundee's Stay on Course initiative aims to reduce early withdrawal rates for students not engaging with their studies. While this initiative is not solely aimed at disabled students, the service, which was developed by the student support team, receives a significant proportion of referrals from students experiencing mental health difficulties, with the most common issues relating to low mood, motivation, depression, stress and anxiety.

Students can either self-refer onto the programme by filling in an online form or are referred by their academic school following a period of non-engagement. These students are 'flagged' as being at risk of early withdrawal and requiring 'follow' up support. The Stay On Course team will then offer a holistic and tailored coaching style approach to the student to suit their needs, working with them to identify barriers, set goals, provide information, make them aware of their options and refer them on into relevant internal and external services, ranging from counselling and wellbeing services to academic support. Students are encouraged to engage with their academic tutors to make a plan to get back on track and the team can provide time and stress management resources to help support with this.

An important element of the service is the follow up emails and appointments that take place, as these act as a check-in for the students and can be motivating to making progress with their studies,

"You know, sometimes I've had emails back from students saying something along the lines of, "this is just what I needed to motivate me to change what I'm doing". It's just the fact that somebody went, hang on a minute, what's going on with you? What do you need?"

Part of the rationale for developing the initiative was a growing awareness of the increasing number of students not engaging with student support services who were withdrawing from their course early. The student support team wanted to reach these students as an early intervention to help them explore the options available, like temporary breaks and the mitigating circumstances scheme, as an alternative to full withdrawal. The university also wanted to proactively offer the service to students returning to their studies to repeat a year or after taking a break, to support with the transition back onto their course.

The student support team initially developed a pilot with the school of social sciences, creating a referral system where tutors would alert them if students were not attending classes, responding to emails, or submitting work. These students were then contacted and offered the Stay On Course service. The team evaluated the project after the first year and found there had been a small increase in the number of students who had retained their place as a direct result of the intervention.

This successful pilot was necessary to gain the support of other academic schools and over the next few years the referrals started to increase. Stay On Course has been running for seven years now and went from approximately 200 referrals in the first year to over 1200 in the most recent year.

There were no overheads involved, the only resource required was the staff time to develop the project. The team also created online toolkits called LIVE Smart and LEARN Smart which are vetted links for support services and academic resources for both staff and students to complement the service.

In order to measure the impact of the project the University looks at various different indicators, such as the number of appointments attended and the retention rates of students who accessed the Stay On Course programme. One report showed 62% of students had retained their place following engagement with the initiative. Qualitative feedback has given the team confidence that the initiative is working,

“But all I can say is the feedback we're getting back from the schools is that yes, they are seeing students. This is working. And certainly you know, anecdotally, they're saying that students are reporting to them that this is working for them, so that to my mind it's like, yes, we're actually doing, you know, useful things.”

Analysis

The literature review showed retention rates can vary greatly for disabled students, but there is evidence of more persistent inequality around retention and success for students with mental health issues. The SFC/Lead Scotland advisory group also identified the need to explore the approaches and processes institutions make available to disabled students at risk of withdrawal as a key priority, so the Stay On Course initiative was an important inclusion in this research.

What is particularly striking about this initiative is the apparent simplicity of the model in supporting students to re-engage with their studies. Essentially students have a proactive coaching service, motivating them and informing them of their options, letting them know about the different services the university has to offer, checking in with them, goal setting and holding them to account. Students contacting the Lead Scotland helpline often comment that they would benefit from a more proactive and engaged student support service, but a more common experience reported involves minimal contact unless the students themselves instigate it. This is not unusual or unexpected given institutions simply would not have the capacity or budget to provide a coaching type proactive support service to every disabled student registered with them. However, considering the higher rates of early withdrawal for particularly at-risk groups, developing an early warning and intervention system like this could be instrumental in supporting these students to sustain their place.

While there were clear indicators of success in delivering Stay On Course, the team talked about issues with accurately gathering the data they needed,

“I mean, from the student support point of view, we were aware that there were students who were falling through the cracks. We are aware that data was being gathered by the academic schools about students, although to be

honest, sometimes it's a bit patchy because of the systems we have in the University about when people are engaging and not engaging, so it's a bit outdated always and it's getting a little bit better and we're looking at some sort of electronic way of gathering that data, you know we were waiting for registers coming from lectures and then that gets put on the system and that takes a certain amount of time."

Having a database that could properly interrogate the data, pull up reports and link in with other departments across the university was cited as a challenge in general for the team. [A recent review of provision for students with disabilities at the University of Glasgow \(Page 6\)](#) recommended a move to an electronic case management system was required to improve tracking and monitoring student information, so it raises the question as to how many other disability services might be facing similar IT related challenges. The Stay On Course team also spoke about the challenges of balancing their front-line work with evaluating the project,

Lead: "were you able compare the retention stats to before using Stay On Course?"

Dundee: "I don't think we've ever got round to actually doing that completely, because we'd have to then know what the stats were then and the stats now. And to be honest, that's a resource issue, because we're so busy taking the actual appointments that were not actually spending so much time looking at things."

The issues around accessing and analysing data were a recurring theme throughout the interviews and concur with the literature review finding that there can often be a disconnect between how data is collected, who it's shared with and how it's used to improve outcomes and experiences for disabled students.

During the interview Dundee also touched on a new related pilot they are launching this summer that will replace the mitigating circumstances scheme for certain students facing what they refer to as 'enduring and recurring circumstances'. Normally when an unforeseen event happens that significantly impacts on a student's ability to sit an exam or complete an assessment, there are certain circumstances that allow them to submit a mitigating circumstances form. However, this can be a very challenging process for disabled students as university policies often state they cannot be used for a 'declared' disability if reasonable adjustments have already been anticipated and put in place. Policies like this are potentially problematic for students with chronic and fluctuating conditions that can suddenly and aggressively flare up, and no amount of anticipatory adjustments can adequately support them to successfully sit an exam or complete an assessment in these circumstances. Lead Scotland receive regular calls about this issue on their helpline and the process of having to continually submit mitigating circumstances forms can be extremely distressing. Dundee's pilot will remove the need to repeatedly go through this process, and again while it is not solely aimed at disabled students (there was reference to student carers or those with ongoing court cases) there had been specific consideration of making provisions for those with worsening or fluctuating conditions.

5. Glasgow Clyde College Students' Association and sparqs: Class rep training for students on supported courses

In 2012, sparqs (Students Partnerships in Quality Scotland), a publicly-funded agency supporting student engagement, adapted their class representative training to better meet the needs of students on supported learning courses. The initiative was developed amid concerns being raised by trainers, who did not feel equipped to train learners in supported education, as well as doubts that these students were fully benefiting from the standard training on offer. The training was considered vital for this cohort of students, as being a class rep is all about empowering students to speak up, and people with learning disabilities are often considered to be some of the most marginalised and voiceless in society.

sparqs worked with a focus group of students in supported education to explore what they thought the training should include. They also sought input from People First, a national disabled people's organisation of adults with learning disabilities, to bring a user led perspective. sparqs developed the training with staff and students in a supported education department before piloting the training with two colleges. The training has a high staff to student ratio (around 1 to 5) and is designed to be adaptable to different learning styles.

sparqs can provide Associate Trainers to deliver the training directly to students in supported education, or an alternative option is the 'train the trainer' model, where either a member of staff in a students' association would undertake the training or a student at the college can do it. Associate Trainers delivering the class rep training for learners within supported education often have a special interest or background in working with this specific group.

Four years ago, Glasgow Clyde College Students' Association (GCCSA) saw there was a gap in the provision of class rep training for learners on supported education programmes. They felt there was room for improvements with the processes that were in place for the training in general, but especially for students with additional support needs. They observed class rep training sessions where supported education students and ESOL students had been put together, where class sizes were too big and reasonable adjustments for disabled learners had not been considered. They reviewed the processes and researched the support sparqs could offer, and agreed bringing in Associate Trainers on a regular basis to deliver the adapted training would be the best approach to ensure the trainer had the right knowledge and skillset to appropriately facilitate supported education students.

Key to ensuring the programme is a success at Glasgow Clyde College is the students' association's relationship with the supported learning department, as they rely on the tutors there more so than in mainstream courses to make the students aware of the class rep training and programme,

“So it has been a bit of a process, but I would say that from quite an early stage, the head of curriculum for that area linked in with us pretty quickly and was one of the heads who engaged straight away, so that helped us start to do stuff with the department which then really helps you when it comes to class reps and the other things that you're trying to kind of push further. So I

would say the head of the curriculum and the relationship with them makes a big difference. Our relationship with them allows the student officers to connect with the students more and that's probably one of the key things. But then also the teaching staff within that department actually engaging with the head of curriculum to allow us to have class reps to get the students along to meetings.” (Glasgow Clyde College Students’ Association)

Class reps for mainstream courses are recruited through a variety of channels including via email and social media, however not all students on supported learning courses use digital technology in the same way. Staff members from the students’ association try to give presentations about the class rep process, but due to their capacity they can’t get round all the classes, so they rely on the tutors to engage the students about the importance of the opportunity. This could potentially be a hard sell if tutors have a negative perception of the class rep system and its potential to be critical of their teaching style, however the supported education department at Glasgow Clyde are committed to ensuring their students are empowered to have a voice and influence changes that affect them.

The students’ association use several different indicators to measure the success of the training, including engagement at class rep meetings and development of student led campaigns. Previously the number of people doing the training and turning up to class rep meetings were counted as positive indicators, however GCCSA realised this wasn’t the best measure of success,

“...now I think we're a lot more focused on the feedback that actually comes out of these meetings, the engagement that we're actually getting from students, and we would much rather have 10 students on a call that would all engage with us than 20 that just turned up and didn't know what was going on. So, it's more about focusing on the actual impact of what we do rather than, oh great, 40 students turn up to something that makes no difference.”

Other indicators of positive impact are the campaigns that are developed as a result of class reps, using the skills they have learned in the training to speak up and bring about change. For example, there have been ongoing issues with using the lifts and accessible toilets at Glasgow Clyde College. Supported education class reps approached the students’ association about the problem and together they developed and launched the ‘Stop, Think, Consider’ campaign. Following the launch of the campaign GCCSA observed a reduction in the number of disabled students coming in to complain about the issues with both the lifts and the toilets. Supported education class reps have also been instrumental in implementing new accessible social activities and fitness classes that better meet their needs and interests.

Analysis

Meaningful involvement of disabled students to influence change was another underdeveloped area emerging from the literature review. The research suggested there is a lack of evidence showing how well institutions are engaging with disabled students as participatory partners rather than research participants, with the majority of studies focussing on exploring negative experiences rather than positive change. The review also revealed that enhanced engagement between institutions and their

students' associations to ensure lived experience 'informs and is embedded in outcome agreements' was a key priority for SFC. GCCSA were emphatic about how their relationship with the supported learning department was key to the success of this initiative and along with the class reps being at the centre of the process, it shows a strong example of partnership working.

People with learning disabilities are often left behind and not empowered to shape the services and facilities that they use. The adapted training that sparqs have created is such a valuable resource for colleges, however it is unclear how often it is used or what wider impact it is having.

sparqs evaluate the training and try to implement any feedback they get. In 2016/17, they delivered training to 157 supported learners across 17 sessions. sparqs emphasised there was no specialist funding to do this work so like everyone, they face resourcing and capacity issues.

What is also less clear is the potential to which the adapted training is being used to support learners to influence changes on their course. An Associate Trainer reflected on the impact of the training, and while they felt using the class rep system to tackle issues related to the wider student experience (like accessible toilets and lifts) was vital, they also thought it had further potential to make changes to the actual teaching and learning,

“Because the wider student experience for them is not comparable to somebody else, that's something that's getting in the way. And I would probably like to see more of that type of campaigning voice being involved and the training still having an opportunity to focus more on the learning experience, which is also a part of that class rep system. And I'm not taking anything away from those issues because they are really, really important and we do need to see change, but I feel like there's a part where it's falling down that we miss, taking that great campaigning and thought process and putting it in the learning experience. Like having great conversations with students around the learning experience that you spoke about, like work placement modules that they've done. Or enterprise modules that they've done. You know where they've got the experience, something that relates specifically to their learning.” (Associate Trainer, sparqs)

The Students' Association staff agreed the fact students could ask for changes to the structure and assessments on their modules could be a really difficult concept to get across, including for those on mainstream courses. However, they have seen some success with moving this conversation forward for students on mainstream courses recently but feel there is a role for both them and sparqs to do more work in this area for students on supported learning courses.

6. [Glasgow Kelvin College: Digital Inclusion Strategy and Recite Me tool](#)

Glasgow Kelvin College wants to be the most digitally inclusive forward-thinking college in Scotland. While they admit they are not there yet, the college think it is an appropriately ambitious target to have. Working towards this aim, the college have implemented a digital strategy that prioritises access and inclusion, began reviewing the accessibility of all their digital platforms and set a baseline of knowledge related

to assistive technology they will support all staff to achieve. The college have also recently invested in a tool called Recite Me, which is cloud-based accessibility software, across multiple platforms, to support students and staff to access information in ways that best meet their needs.

In 2015 when SFC carried out a [review of Extended Learner Support](#), the funding system in place to help colleges meet the needs of learners requiring additional support, Glasgow Kelvin College's Learning Support team saw a real opportunity for change. With the introduction of the Access and Inclusion Strategy and Fund, the team felt funding and support could be de-centralised from solely within their department, and finally become a whole college responsibility.

When the opportunity arose, one of the learning support team agreed to chair the college's access and inclusion sub-committee on digital inclusion and assistive technology. This role was a gateway into pushing forward with reviewing the accessibility of college wide systems, and part of the committee process was feeding into a new digital strategy. One of the college's key aims stated students should have an 'enriched learning experience delivering services throughout technology, which allows users to interact with information in ways that best suit their needs'.

One of the first tasks the team carried out was to ask Jisc to do an accessibility snapshot of their digital platforms. Jisc are the UK higher, further education and skills sector not-for-profit organisation for digital services and solutions. Jisc suggested making improvements to the free plug-in accessibility tool the college were using for their virtual learning environment (VLE). The free plug-in was part of a tool called Recite Me, but it had been added onto the VLE at the end, resulting in a poor user experience. In contrast, the college was already using a paid version of Recite Me on their website, which had been built with an inclusive by design approach, with the tool embedded in it. The learning support team realised it didn't make sense to introduce prospective students to a fully accessible website, where they could easily use a screen reader or change the font, style, colour or language to suit their needs, only to progress into the college and be faced with different platforms that were less accessible. It also went beyond the VLE, there was the funding platform, the application platform, the student portal, the online individual learning plan and then there were all the internal platforms the staff used as well. Overall, the college have over 20 different digital platforms, the majority of which had accessibility tools 'tagged on' at the end (or none at all), rather than built in at the design stage.

The team started to look at the user stats for Recite Me on their website so they could understand how often students were accessing it. They found that in an eight-month period, Recite Me had been launched 27,000 times. They were shocked by this figure, as it showed 27,000 times someone had struggled to access digital information in a format that suited them. Having this data was the ammunition they needed to make a case for redesigning all of their platforms and building in a paid version of the Recite Me tool right across the college. Part of the rationale for wanting to take this approach referred back to the access and inclusion strategy and its intention to provide equal access to all learning and teaching provision for all students; the learning support team felt their digital platforms did not currently meet this requirement.

The Recite Me site license costs £12,000 for three years to run across all their platforms – this cost was negotiated down from £14,000. Previously they were paying £2,000 to run it across two platforms. As it was such a big outlay, the team decided to approach the marketing department and the ICT department to see if they could pool their budgets in order to cover the costs, as again, going back to the access and inclusion strategy, this was a whole college responsibility. This approach proved successful, combined with the fact there were some key senior staff making budgetary decisions who had a background or special interest in digital inclusion, including the vice principal who was chairing their access and inclusion committee and had previously been the learning support manager.

Alongside Recite Me, the learning support team also wanted to create a baseline of knowledge related to digital inclusion and assistive technology for academic staff. They would see scenarios where a student might struggle to read something in class due to a visual impairment, and a tutor was unsure of how to support them, so would refer them to the learning support team. This whole process could take a few weeks from start to finish, but in some cases the solution might just be something simple like using a magnifier. The team therefore designed a toolkit covering key areas related to digital accessibility and assistive technology that all staff should know as a baseline. This included website accessibility, creating accessible Power Point slides, PDF's and Word documents and using built in tools on Windows like narrator and the magnifier. They also developed a Moodle course to complement the toolkit, which although was not compulsory, had a high take up, with over 100 staff completing it. Ongoing CPD related to this area also takes place at staff conferences throughout the year as there is such a strong appetite for it. The benefits of developing staff confidence in this area has been obvious,

“So going back to that kind of referral process, it's a lot easier for a tutor to be sitting in a class and someone sticks their hand up and says, “I can't read that” and then they can go, there's a solution for that, and it's a lot faster than them getting referred to us, us giving them a needs assessment, then having to send out a memo with all these support strategies, than them having to think to themselves, how do I do that? And so the approach that we made which we tried to make as attractive as we could, was to say, look, this doesn't need to be additional work for you, this is gonna make everybody's life much simpler.” (Glasgow Kelvin College)

The college is looking at a number of indicators to measure the success and impact of introducing Recite Me across their platforms and implementing the digital strategy. They are continuing to track the Recite Me user stats and are getting feedback from staff about the impact it is having on their students. They are getting less calls now from students who are struggling to access information that is accessible. They are also seeing positive feedback from staff and students in relation to the use of other built in accessibility tools like the immersive reader on Microsoft Word. Prior to the pandemic the team were seeing less referrals from tutors for less complex needs where their baseline knowledge was being put to use,

“And like I said before, it might have been the case that a tutor who was maybe a bit less confident with stuff might have put in a referral to us, but now

I think that they've got more awareness and feel more confident about providing that actual support in the class and maybe only sending somebody to us for more specialist support. I think there's less likely to be referrals made to us for these small adjustments."

When Covid-19 hit and there was a rush to move all learning online, the learning support team saw an increase rather than decrease in referrals. However, what they have observed is reduced waiting times for some students to get support who no longer need to access DSA if they can provide an effective solution for them in-house.

The learning support team at Glasgow Kelvin College also meet with all students who have declared a disability three times a year as a minimum, to check in with them and discuss the support strategies that have been put in place to find out if they've been working. This is an opportunity for the student to feedback about any assistive technology or tools they are using and what impact they might be having on their learning.

Analysis

Like Edinburgh Napier's 'I'm In' initiative, Glasgow Kelvin College's strategy is an approach focussed on embedding inclusion at functions, services and departments rights across the institution. Evidence from the literature review indicated there remains tension between academic departments and student support teams in terms of where the responsibility lies to not only support disabled students, but also around embedding inclusion into teaching and learning. It is therefore interesting to hear how influential the transition from Extended Learner Support, to Access and Inclusion funding was, in emboldening the Learning Support team to look beyond their own department to mainstream digital inclusion. That change seemed like the catalyst they needed to shift the conversation and sole responsibility away from their department and onto the wider college environment.

There are also interesting parallels between the University of Dundee's Stay on Course approach of proactively checking in with students and Glasgow Kelvin College's Learning Support department's policy of setting minimum meeting points with students throughout the year. Again, capacity issues will impact how proactive teams can be at times and there is also rightly a culture of fostering independence and self-advocacy in tertiary education, however this can leave more vulnerable students at risk of early withdrawal if they are not getting the right support but don't know how to address the issue. Evidence from the Lead Scotland helpline shows this can be a particular issue for disabled students in further education. Glasgow Kelvin's approach of three formal meetings a year as standard could be key points at which to pick up on issues before a student withdraws from their course early if they feel unable to cope.

The college's mixed method approach to CPD and training appears to be having a positive impact, with staff having access to toolkits, online modules and in person training. While the CPD is not mandatory, the interviewee felt it should be as part of the college's responsibility to uphold its duties under the Equality Act. In the literature review and previous case studies we have seen there are a diverse range of views

on mandating staff to training, however ensuring academic staff have a baseline of knowledge around assistive technology and digital accessibility could be one direction institutions take in addressing the gap, or it could form part of a suite of CPD support as mentioned previously.

7. Glasgow Caledonian University: 'Dyslexic and Confident' Workshops

Glasgow Caledonian University has developed a number of initiatives to drive forward inclusion across the university. The Disability Service are particularly passionate about their approach of mainstreaming support to reduce reliance on the Disabled Students' Allowance wherever possible. One such initiative is their 'Dyslexic and Confident' workshops, which give new students an opportunity to gain an introduction to assistive technology and learn about strategies and university services that will support their learning at an early stage.

One of the main reasons the sessions were introduced, was to tackle the bottleneck of students waiting for DSA needs assessments and one-to-one assistive technology training the university was experiencing at the start of every academic year. The aim of the workshops is to familiarise students with the range of assistive technology tools and academic services already available at the university, to ensure they have access to the right support from the beginning of their course,

“In a broader sense it's making sure that you highlight how they get support with little things that they may ask you about in those sessions, and just make sure that they know IT services help you with your print credit, and the learning and development centre does a great session on note taking, the library does a great session on reworks and reference. And so just make sure that you're name dropping all those different departments as well, so that they know that there's broad support, not just you, and it's a good chance to let them know. People finish their courses without knowing that the learning development centres exist if they're not careful.” (Glasgow Caledonian University)

The workshops consist of three two-hour sessions and are delivered by both a disability advisor as well as the assistive technology specialist and they look at strategies, applications and tools to aid with academic reading, writing and note taking. Students also have an opportunity to try out different software and hardware to help familiarise themselves with equipment like Livescribe pens and Dictaphones.

There was minimal resource involved in delivering these workshops other than the staff time to develop and facilitate them. The Disability Service believe implementing the sessions has resulted in a cost saving, as seeing students in groups at the start of term has had a significant impact on their capacity to then meet students one-to-one. This is because as a result of delivering the sessions, they found that some of the students did not then need to go on to have a full needs assessment and specialist one to one assistive technology training, as their needs had been met through the provision of the workshops and provision of in-house technology already available. This then had a knock-on effect for other disabled students who had more complex needs and did require full assessments and more support, as their waiting times were reduced, and they had more quality interactions with the team.

8. Glasgow Caledonian University: Mental Health Matters

The Mental Health Matters workshops are a new initiative and delivered as pre-entry sessions for first year students before the term starts, to help make the transition into university more manageable. The initiative is all about trying to reduce students' fears about such a big life change and make meeting new people a bit easier to cope with. The Disability Service saw a need for transition support with the rising number of students declaring a mental health condition, but they also saw a gap in provision for students who did not necessarily have a diagnosed mental health condition but were experiencing general anxiety about coming to university. They were also getting feedback from students who said they would have benefitted from knowing what mental health support and services were available at an earlier stage, before they reached crisis point. The team agreed a more proactive approach may prevent some students from becoming too overwhelmed to cope.

The team decided an adapted version of their established summer autism transitions programme could prevent some students from reaching a crisis point further into the academic year. The sessions were developed by three staff members from across the disability, wellbeing and mental health services and consist of two half days on campus (though it was adapted the second year it ran for online delivery as a result of the pandemic). In the first year, students were given an opportunity to tour the facilities, talk to some members of staff, find out about support and wellbeing services, learn about coping strategies, and experience mindfulness and stress management techniques. Students were also introduced to online mind maps and other digital technology that could aid their learning.

One of the main objectives of the initiative was to bring people together who might have similar fears about starting university or who may have similar lived experience of dealing with mental health issues. The team wanted participants to feel comfortable to make connections and safe to share their experiences if appropriate, so they kept the groups to a maximum of 20. Facilitators observed friendships forming and felt the sense of shared experience was an important factor in this. The online sessions were delivered to larger groups, but sessions were reduced to two or three hours at a time in recognition of the potential for screen fatigue.

Both the Dyslexic and Mental Health initiatives are evaluated using student confidence rating scales and feedback forms, and when the sessions are delivered in person these are done both before and after delivery to measure distance travelled, so as to give a more tangible outcome. Evaluations have shown consistent increases in student confidence across multiple areas including knowing where to get academic and mental health support, how to read more effectively and knowing which tools to use to support with reading.

The reduction in student waiting times for needs assessments and one to one technology training has been a significant positive outcome from the dyslexia workshops, however as the mental health transition sessions have only run once in person and once online it was difficult for the team to comment on longer term impacts.

Analysis

Both these initiatives from GCU are another example of a university acting proactively rather than reactively to increasing demands and growing caseloads. The start of a new academic year is an exceptionally busy time for all disability services and the issue is often compounded by students not applying for DSA until they start their course, so any initiatives aimed at reducing waiting times and providing support to students earlier are welcomed. Despite the wealth of services and information available to students, it is not uncommon for Lead Scotland helpline callers to report never having heard of or accessing them. This is often because of information overload and knowing where to go to find the right information at the right time, so a guided tour of academic and wellbeing support services for new disabled students is an innovative way to tackle this.

When asked about whether there had been wider impacts on disabled student retention, completion, and success as a result of this work, GCU did not feel it was possible to prove this level of causation, which was a recurring theme throughout the research. They went on to say that there can sometimes be too much focus, especially in the English system, on the impact of DSA in relation to student outcomes, whereas they feel it is not necessarily the DSA, but the interaction with disability services and student support teams that makes the difference. When asked whether they gather data about this to show the impact of their service on student outcomes, they said this was not something they did, but would like to do,

“I mean we ask for this data and we would like this data to be gathered and reported. In particular, the other week the University had shared data about improved outcomes at GCU compared to the sector for mature students. So I immediately went to our policy planning and said that was really interesting to read. Do we have some differential data for disabled and non-disabled students? No, we don't. That's not being gathered, it was just a focus on mature students. And, you know, that would be really helpful to see.”

The issues around relevant teams collecting, analysing and sharing data were documented in the literature review but have also been raised as an issue by other student support services taking part in this research.

GCU also commented on some recent external data that had been published relating to employment outcomes for autistic graduates and how this had not shifted in the last ten years, and that despite these ‘bleak’ outcomes, it was really important universities are aware of these statistics,

“...it's that kind of stuff that we really need to highlight. So yeah, I mean it would be useful for us in terms of over time measuring the impact of what we do, but I think also just to focus minds that these are really disadvantaged groups. And then we do something about it.”

This draws upon the evidence examined in the literature review and the more nuanced granular level of detail the Office for Students are now requesting of universities in England. If there is clear external evidence of persistent inequalities for students with specific impairments, then disability services and the wider

university community needs to be aware of this to help steer more targeted interventions.

One of the areas we also touched on in the interview was around CPD, networking and the sharing of best practice with colleagues from universities across Scotland. The team felt there was currently very limited opportunity to do this. They said assistive technology conferences have become more like showcase events for suppliers, and it is very difficult to actually network with other colleagues as instead they were being constantly engaged in demonstrations. While there is an annual conference for disability advisors to come together in Scotland, the team felt doing something more regularly could be beneficial. There was reference to national mailing lists, but these are often not relevant or specific to the Scottish sector and their usefulness can be very dependent on who is a member at any one particular time.

Prior to Covid, GCU had been having discussions about creating a regional networking model with Glasgow, Strathclyde and the University of the West of Scotland, with more regular meetings to bring people together. GCU suggested for any professional network to be consistent in the future, it had to be properly funded rather than relying on advisors volunteering to oversee it.

Student Focus Groups

As part of the research, we held two online focus groups to explore disabled students' experiences of accessing support to learn. All participants were studying at undergraduate level and based at the same university. Students were provided with a data consent and information sheet (see Appendix E) and an overview of the themes we would be exploring in advance. A focus group question sheet was developed to ensure consistency and to help facilitate discussions (see Appendix F).

In general students were overwhelmingly positive about the level of support they received from their disability service with some commenting advisors were more understanding and empathetic than their own GP's. Notably, students with dyslexia were more positive about the equipment and adjustments they had been provided in comparison to students with more complex physical or mental health needs. Students with more complex needs referred to blanket approaches to adjustments being applied that didn't take their specific requirements into consideration, or not being able to access sufficient mental health support. This feedback mirrors evidence examined in the literature review where one study found students with dyslexia were the most likely to be satisfied while students with mental health issues were the least likely to be satisfied. It also corresponds with the finding that adjustments can often be formulaic and not necessarily person centred.

While students were positive about their disability service, they were less enthusiastic about their interactions with lecturing staff. The most common complaint was related to staff not being aware of their individual learning profiles and therefore students were not always given the provisions that had been agreed. Students also spoke about having to repeatedly disclose as being disabled to different lecturers to ensure they could get pre-agreed adjustments like rest breaks, or allowances to

avoid being penalised for their sentence structuring or permission to record lectures, which some found humiliating,

“I have a similar issue because I've got a pain disorder and I've got the right for breaks, but some of the lecturers are quite abrupt, so if you stand up and interrupt the whole class, they're going to point you out. They're gonna say, what do you think you're doing, you know? Because they don't know your learning profile. It's embarrassing to say in front of the whole class, well actually I've got the right to small breaks 'cause I've got a disability, although it shouldn't be embarrassing, but it is, having to explain yourself every time. I don't wanna have a tag around my neck.” (Student, focus group)

Students spoke about the need to 'sell' their disability to their lecturers and constantly advocate for themselves, but they recognised not all disabled students would have the confidence to do this. Some students felt they had to fight to get the right support and be very proactive in presenting themselves to their disability service if things weren't going well. Other common issues raised were around not getting access to handouts and learning materials in advance or not being able to access them on the Virtual Learning Environment after the lecture. This again echoes the evidence examined in the literature review that found despite students with dyslexia reporting high levels of satisfaction with the equipment and support provided, barriers persisted for them in other areas like accessing lecture notes in advance.

One student reflected that only one learning style was currently being catered for at their university, with learners expected to retain huge volumes of information in very short time frames with little support to then process that information.

Students were generally positive about the move to online learning as a result of the pandemic and those with physical health conditions particularly welcomed the change. Prior to the first lockdown there were times when some of the students were in too much pain to physically attend lectures, but it was not an option to attend remotely, so there were hopes the changes will be made permanent to support students with more complex and fluctuating conditions in the future.

Participants did not feel they had enough or any opportunity to influence changes that affected disabled students at their university but were all keen to get involved in this type of activity. They also suggested there would be huge benefit in a disabled students' network or group, so they could share lived experience and get advice and tips from their peers. The students also felt education was needed for non-disabled students, as there was still so much stigma surrounding disability and people's perceptions of it, especially in relation to what they described as 'hidden disabilities'.

When it came to making a choice about which university they would attend, the focus group participants all said the disability support and facilities available did not contribute to their decision-making process. One participant said physical access and availability of lifts was necessary, but students said factors like staying local, or the fact there were limited options available to them were more important. Some commented that they did not ever believe university would be achievable for them, so didn't have the luxury of being able to choose which would have the best disability

support. Other students commented that they didn't get an official diagnosis until they reached university, so the disability support was not something they considered in advance.

When asked what suggestions they had for changes and improvements, the main comments related to lecturing staff and the need to improve communications to avoid students having to repeatedly request individual adjustments, especially in relation to being given permission to record lectures. In the recent Scottish Government/SAAS Disability Related Student Support Review, 40% of survey respondents said their lecturers had not followed their agreed learning support plans, which included but was not limited to recording lectures.

While the two focus groups contained a small sample size of students, the experiences they reported were strikingly similar to those examined in the literature review, reminding us that despite progression and advances in learning technology, practice and attitudes are still preventing a level playing field for disabled students.

Conclusions and recommendations

While we were unable to achieve our original aim of exploring the full range of practice related to disability support at colleges and universities across Scotland, we have uncovered multiple examples showing innovative ways of working to improve outcomes and experiences for disabled students.

What is abundantly clear is that disability services and learning support teams are often working to capacity as they face increasing caseloads with rising numbers of students declaring as disabled each year. The start of a new academic year was a particularly challenging time for several of the research participants, with many of the initiatives developed in part to reduce the waiting times students face to access support. With frontline staff balancing their time with delivering services while trying to develop initiatives and find improved ways of working, designing and undertaking robust evaluations seemed to be a challenge. This issue was exacerbated by the fact some staff seemed to have limited access to the appropriate data and potentially inefficient databases to properly analyse, interrogate and report on that data. Institutions use multiple different platforms and databases which do not necessarily work in harmony together. Only one participant was working in partnership with an equalities officer and none of the initiatives seemed to involve input from policy and data analysis colleagues.

Staff seemed to be opportunistic about developing initiatives, if they saw change was needed then they would push to try and get something in place, but having senior staff championing inclusion across all departments appeared to be absolutely key to getting approval in many cases. Success was often measured by observations, word of mouth, speaking to staff and students, and a feeling of 'doing something good', rather than being intentionally measured. When asked about measuring outcomes, research participants frequently referred to outputs instead, often counting referrals, appointments booked, attendance or usage data as measures of success. Commissioning support for CPD in evaluation could therefore help teams to develop confidence and knowledge around developing more robust evaluation methods, as we also saw this was an underdeveloped area in the literature review.

As evidenced in the research we examined from 10 to 15 years ago, as well as more recent research, both the case studies and the student focus groups showed there continues to be resistance from academic staff on following support plans, making reasonable adjustments and allowing students to record lectures, with the upcoming Scottish Government review adding significant weight to this evidence. The move to remote learning online has undoubtedly helped to address some of these challenges, however it is vital this practice is not lost when institutions return to a fully in-person model of delivery. Additionally, we have received anecdotal evidence on the helpline that issues remain, or new issues have emerged, related to the accessibility of online learning for some disabled students. Many of the initiatives explored however did aim to address some of these challenges by driving forward inclusive practice, mainstreaming support, embedding accessibility across the whole institution and developing academic staff competence and capacity to support disabled students. Much of this work is still at an early stage, and as one research participant pointed out, seismic cultural and attitudinal change like this will take time. The lived experiences of disabled students themselves must be the ultimate indicator of how successful these initiatives are however, so further consideration should be given to ensure meaningful engagement. Students are more likely to provide honest feedback if they can do so anonymously with their peers or with an organisation independent to their institution, as fear of negative repercussion is a common concern raised on the helpline.

While the literature review and the research did not indicate a consensus around whether staff training should be mandatory, what is clear is the need to improve confidence and adopt a culture of inclusiveness, as disabled students are being prevented from fair and equal access to learning far too frequently, despite the dedicated efforts of student support teams and disability services. There are obviously many different approaches to consider in supporting academics to feel more confident and capable, and informal training may work better than formal training in some circumstances. Embedding champions into each department and developing a baseline of knowledge in certain areas as standard could also be helpful. Focussing on supporting academics and providing ongoing CPD opportunities and accessible resources and toolkits is key. Regular regional networks to share best practice could work better than one national annual conference for practitioners, but networks need to be properly funded and resourced.

A number of initiatives and support services we explored used a proactive approach to engaging disabled students to support retention and help prevent early withdrawal. While resourcing and capacity may prevent services from offering this level of intervention to all disabled students registered with them, the approaches of offering a minimum number of appointments throughout the year or just targeting students at risk of withdrawal could lead to an improvement in disabled students' experiences and outcomes. This could be particularly beneficial for students with unseen impairments such as sensory impairments, mental health difficulties and autism spectrum disorders, as both the literature review and case studies showed they were at higher risk of not asking for support, not having their needs met and early withdrawal.

As explored in the literature review and case studies, staff would benefit from having access to disaggregated data to see where the persistent inequalities are, so they know where to focus their attention, set programmes of work and key performance indicators, but also to understand when their work is making a difference.