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Higher education and ableism: Experiences of disabled students in England during the Covid-19 pandemic – stepping into inclusion

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Abstract

This paper details the persistent and continuous struggles disabled students experience studying in HE, and how these were exaggerated during the Covid-19 pandemic (DSUK, 2020). We critically consider progress made by Widening Participation and related equality policy, determining that higher education (HE) continues to be an ableist system and space because inclusion is not understood, nor prioritised, at either strategic or practitioner levels. Furthermore, orthodox pathological positions on disability continue and are re-created via hegemony, ignorance, and fear (Madriaga, 2007; Gibson, 2020). Attempts at practices for the inclusion and equality of disabled students take place within the constraints of other policy objectives such as recruitment, standards, internationalisation, graduate outcomes and financial capacities (Gibson *et al.*, 2016; Williams-Brown *et al.*, 2022). The paper details key findings from a study by the authors, comparing them with national studies to consider consistent themes and implications for the future of an inclusive HE sector. The work determines what actions need to be taken in order to move forward effectively and inclusively for the progression and success of all students (DSC, 2020; DSUK, 2020; HEPI, 2020). We evidence that disabled students continue to have negative experiences of accessing, learning and progressing at university, which has longer term implications in terms of graduate outcomes. The paper concludes with recommendations including moving inclusion policy objectives on from their traditional ideological framing to focus on user-informed, user-led tried, tested and experienced

inclusive education. It is argued that this move is taken in collaboration with senior leaders. We advocate for the position and expert knowledge of disability, as understood by disabled students to lead and evaluate change for inclusion, to inform what and how the HE sector evolves. Universities must be accountable for promoting inclusive changes in practice, geography and culture.

Key words

Disabled students, inclusion, inclusive education, higher education, pandemic, reasonable adjustments

Link to article

Introduction

This paper details the persistent and continuous struggles disabled students face in attempts to be included in Higher Education (HE). Sector practices for widening participation and inclusion are critiqued as not concentrating on disabled students' lived experiences, including their experiences of belonging, nor their expert knowledge of disability and access, in particular what needs to occur to enable their full participation as equal students in HE. The paper considers the practical implementation of inclusion alongside conflicting HE objectives, including neo-liberalism, the massification of HE, and the standards and performativity discourse. The paper situates inclusion within the context of these objectives, evidencing that ineffective forms of inclusion are implemented and student access and equality are not prioritised as a core objective in HE's policy folder. This paper adopts the ONS (2021) definition when referring to Disability: we define it as someone who has a '...longstanding illness, condition or impairment, which causes difficulties with day-to-day activities' (ONS, 2021:1). This paper refers to disabled students, instead of students with disabilities, to visually represent that society and its institutions disable these students. The authors take a social model position as to the causation and location of disability, as opposed to a traditional medical model view, which we perceive as limiting, stigma laden and regressive in terms of social justice and equality. We acknowledge the merits of critical disability theory with regards to challenging both

assumed and established positions on 'disability' in relation to both identity and experience.

"It goes on and on and on":disabled students' continued struggles to be included

The Office for Students (OfS) (OfS, 2020: 2) in June 2020 stated:

Before the pandemic, there were already clear attainment and outcome gaps between disabled and non-disabled students; students reporting a disability have lower degree results overall and lower rates of employment after graduation than non-disabled students.

Research (Gibson, 2020; Beauchamp-Pryor, 2012; Madriaga, 2007) highlights that regardless of statutory policy and the growth of a widening participation and inclusion agenda and industry, disabled students continue to experience ineffective forms of provision, and are under-represented and marginalised without effective forms of consultation due to dominant discourses, hegemony, and stigma (Gibson *et al.*, 2016; Beauchamp-Pryor, 2012; Madriaga, 2007). It is well documented that disabled people face inequalities in many aspects of life, and these include education, qualification attainment (DSC, 2021; ONS 2020) and employment (Policy Connect, 2020). Moreover, disabled students continue to be among those most at risk of withdrawing from their HE studies and having lower degree outcomes than their abled peers (OfS, 2021, in, Shaw, 2021). In December 2018 the OfS set five targets 'to achieve equality of opportunity in higher education'. One of these targets was to eliminate the degree outcomes gap between disabled and non-disabled students by 2024/2025. The gap in 2020 was 2.8 per cent per cent, it has been argued recently that eliminating this became more difficult due to the 2019 Covid pandemic (Policy Connect, 2020). However, evidence shows that entrenched difficulties and significant gaps continue (Raaper, Peruzzo, and Westander 2022).

The pandemic enforced unprecedented change in HE practices that included rapid change to online learning, a form of inclusive pedagogy that had been requested by disabled students for many years (DSUK, 2020). Changes included online teaching

and assessment, recorded and captioned lectures and ease of administration, and evidence required for assignment extensions. Whilst these changes were welcomed, it led to questions such as why, in the name of equality, it had not been possible to change practices in this way before (Borkin, 2022). Changes were implemented with both positive and negative effects as detailed in the report by the Disabled Student's Commission (2020: 3) entitled *Three months to make a difference*.

...While initiatives introduced in response to the pandemic have benefitted many disabled students, they have proved a significant barrier to others. The shift to online learning and assessment coupled with the uncertainty created by the pandemic presents barriers for disabled students.

The pandemic has intensified existing inequalities for disabled people, including life expectancy, income, employment, relationships, education, and progression (DSUK 2020; Meleo-Erwin *et al.*, 2021). This included being more likely to experience financial hardship, being less likely to access a computer and reliable internet, some students needing to shield, restrictions in health and social care due to risk of infection, some being unable to access regular medication or receive hospital care, some students experiencing food insecurity, for instance people with visual impairments who may have relied on online food shopping before the pandemic, and some students needing additional mental health support (Disabled Students UK, 2020).

There is also evidence of regression in terms of disabled students' positive education experience and academic achievement (Hunnam-Swain and Bailey, 2021; Meleo-Erwin, 2021; Zhang *et al.*, 2021). Several reports have been published detailing disabled students' negative experiences. For example, the Disabled Students Commission (2021) surveyed 473 disabled students studying undergraduate and postgraduate courses. In total, 80 per cent per cent of all respondents reported that the pandemic had a negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing. Almost half of the respondents felt that universities had been 'ineffective' in considering disabled students' needs. The Association of Non-Medical Help Providers (2020) surveyed 3,614 disabled students and found that 81.3 per cent per cent had their studies negatively impacted by the pandemic. Accessibility was highlighted as a difficulty for many, including 57.6 per cent per cent who said not having access to teaching

impacted on their studies. These findings evidence the detrimental impact of the pandemic on disabled students in HE.

Best-laid intentions: Policy to promote inclusion in higher education

Widening participation has internationally dominated educational discourse for over 20 years (Gibson, *et al.*, 2016). Its practices are commonly positioned as social justice responses to ingrained cultures and perspectives which have prevented under-represented groups from their human right to an equal education (Gibson, 2020). Its original and continued core aim has been to provide more equitable access to HE and improve retention of under-represented student groups (Gibson, 2016; Lewis and Johnston, 2002). Its impact includes the international growth of further education or equivalent colleges (FHEs), increased numbers of under-represented groups attending HE, and an increase in colleges gaining university status (Moore, Sanders, and Higham 2013). Commonality across all is the history, experience and impact of injustice and the continued need for systemic alongside cultural change to achieve equality (Gibson, 2016).

The number of students with a declared disability has increased significantly, by 46 per cent per cent since 2018 (HESA, 2022a; HESA, 2022b), including almost 20 per cent of home students (DSUK, 2020, 2022; HESA, 2022b). It could be argued on this basis that widening participation for disabled students has been effective; however, the reality of students' experiences and progression once recruited is more complex and nuanced than a story of recruitment statistics. For instance, the statistics may not mean an increase of disabled students entering HE but indicate more students deciding to declare their disability once registered. Importantly, even with this increase disabled students remain underrepresented in HE (Bolton and Hubble, 2021; OfS, 2020a, 2020b). Widening Participation has been viewed as successful due to an increase of underrepresented groups in HE, which has produced a "...diversity of demographic student profiles". At the same time, without necessarily making a direct link between Widening Participation and student support demands, there has been an increase of students seeking support to cope with their studies and an increase in students reporting mental health issues (Barkas *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, while there are more declared disabled students attending, HE, there continues to be silencing, misrepresentation, and failures in supporting them (Gibson and Kendall, 2010; Gibson,

2015; Gibson and Cook-Sather, 2020). This leads to forms of practice which concentrate on integration and the placement of disabled students into HE rather than on providing an inclusive and transformational education experience resulting in their success and continued progression (Koutsouris, Mountford-Zimdars and Dingwall, 2021).

Inclusion has been promoted globally in education since the late 1990's and plagued with difficulties in its implementation. One of the fundamental difficulties proffered with inclusion is its lacking a unified definition across and within education (Hodkinson and Williams-Brown, 2022). It is regularly positioned as an ideological concept, which focuses on a developmental process towards eventual equality– something that is considered as happening sometime in the future, but not now in this present moment (Gibson, *et al.*, 2016, Gibson et al, 2022). This allows for education institutions to take a laissez faire attitude to the changes needed, applying flexible objectives that do not result in significant changes happening presently (Williams-Brown, Hodkinson and Jopling, 2023). For instance, HE providers decide on the provision and support they offer for disabled students. Hubble and Bolton (2021) state that most, but not all, HE providers have disability policies that describes their support for disabled students. Baltaru (2019) states that universities' approaches in terms of human resources to equality schemes, including supporting disabled students "...are expected to vary depending on the needs of individual institutions". Support usually offered by HE institutions include disability services teams and disability advisors as well as support that commonly includes specialist support workers, signers, support for assessments, lecture notes in alternative formats and use of assisted software (Hubble and Bolton, 2021).

Hamilton (2019) stated that whilst anti-discrimination legislation, including the SENDA act (2001) and Equality Act (2010) promoted a progressive shift from a deficit model of disability to a social justice and rights-based perspective, 'Misguided assumptions of ability and disability' led to a shallow use of the widening participation term, a tokenistic consideration of inclusion and the lack of participation and contribution of disabled people in considering the changes that needed to happen for their equality to be realised presently. Gibson (2020, 2022) has sourced a key failing of Widening Participation and meaningful inclusive practice on the lack of participation, contribution

and leadership of disabled people. We argue disabled students are a key and core group with essential knowledge, thus power, who should be central when devising and leading necessary changes to policy, practice, and culture in HE.

The Equality Act (2010) requires education institutions to make 'reasonable adjustments' to ensure that disabled students are not 'substantially disadvantaged'. This is an anticipatory duty that entails changing practice, adapting the built environment, and providing auxiliary aids and services to enable and facilitate disabled students in their studies (Hubble and Bolton, 2021). However, Bunbury (2018) stated some university staff struggle to accommodate disabled students because of lack of knowledge, training, and disability awareness. Agreed and funded reasonable adjustments can be left to university staff to determine, meaning the outcome of some adjustments in the eyes and lived experience of the disabled students, are not in fact reasonable at all (Bunbury, 2020). The Department for Education guidance (2017: 25) '*Inclusive teaching and learning in higher education as a route to excellence*' adopts a strategic approach to reasonable adjustments. The guidance acknowledged that some reasonable adjustment may not be granted because of perceived disadvantage to other students and requests for reasonable adjustments are turned down because of perceived movement beyond embedded policies and practices. Risks highlighted included "lack of anticipatory action in the design and delivery of courses" which make individual adjustments more 'onerous' and can be incorrectly interpreted as an adjustment which is not 'reasonable'. The responsibility placed on university staff was also highlighted (DfE, 2017:25):

There is insufficient institutional oversight of the approach to reasonable adjustments. Decisions which are made could therefore be unduly influenced by what individual member of staff perceives as 'reasonable' without proper understanding of what the EA (Equality Act) requires or with inappropriate emphasis being placed on irrelevant considerations. This would leave individual staff members and the HE provider vulnerable to claims of discrimination.

Conflicting objectives: neoliberalism, massification and standards

Inclusive practice cannot be considered in silo from other changes in HE and competing sector objectives. Massification of HE has led to diversification of the student population. Whilst this has made universities more inclusive and diverse in terms of demographic student profiles, HE is still not diverse or inclusive in terms of practice, culture and as noted above student outcome (Gallagher, 2018). The mass higher education model has enabled wider opportunities to participate in HE, but this is within the constraints of an existing ableist HE system which 'others' disabled students as "...the ones who are inside but recognised to be different" (Dolmage, 2017, in, Nieminen, 2023: 63).

Hamilton (2019) stated that there are two contrasting agendas surrounding widening participation. One is a social justice agenda, which aims for inclusion and the other, more prominent, is the 'ableist and capitalist agenda', which focuses on providing an educated workforce to meet the needs of the economy. Olsen and colleagues (2020: 265) detailed the impact neoliberalism has had on HE. It is "...rooted in the belief that financial markets should organize and regulate the provision of goods and services to grow the economy". In the last decade HE has been transformed from being a 'fully funded system' to a privately funded 'market-driven' system fuelled by competition amongst universities to appeal to students and support economic success (Raaper, Peruzzo and Westander, 2022; Shaw, 2021). Raaper and colleagues (2022: 1) stated that this form of competition is "...often at the cost of equity and universalism", enforcing an ableist culture and marginalising disabled students. Fundamentally, this neoliberal reframing of 'inclusion' via Widening Participation policy resulted in embedded and complex histories of exclusion, inequality, and misrecognition not being considered or understood, lessons of history are yet again ignored (Gibson, 2016).

Consequently, Shaw (2021) highlighted that there are tensions between the Government's accountability agenda in HE and its 'inclusive practice ideals'. HE practices are dominated by market-driven purposes that prioritise 'certification, quick graduation and competition' (Nieminen and Pesonen, 2022). Across education sectors inclusion is implemented within the constraints of existing standards objectives (Williams-Brown and Hodkinson, 2020), whilst 'performativity culture' (Ball 2015 and Tomlinson, 2018, in, Stentiford and Koutsouris, 2021: 246) has become embedded in many countries HE practices, where:

...university leaders are now under increased pressure to improve the quality of educational provision so that student 'consumers' might feel that they have received 'value for money' in an increasingly competitive HE marketplace

However, this is not the case for disabled students as detailed by Olsen and colleagues (2020: 265) when they are considered as 'costers' in this neoliberal system, requiring investment to remove barriers to practically implement inclusion. This includes reasonable adjustments and policy changes where, it has been evidenced, they have been blocked due to a 'neoliberal belief' that disability is detrimental to HE (Raaper, Peruzzo and Westander, 2022). Constraints within university policy and procedures that have not been created with inclusion in mind, place pressure on staff to choose between standards and performance criteria which, they will be measured by or implementing inclusion objectives. For instance, Pearson and colleagues (2019) identified that, in some disciplines, university staff feel that reasonable adjustments are prevented by the requirements of degree accrediting bodies. Goodley and Lawthom (2019: 247) expressed concern that "disabled people risk becoming the collateral damage of neoliberal-ableism: justifiably excluded because they simply cannot survive the demands of everyday living".

It is imperative that disabled students' perspectives and experiences in HE are heard and acted on. Current examples of discrimination and exclusionary practice need to be evidenced and considered to make proactive change that ensures disabled students are no longer disadvantaged by a disabling system, culture, space. This paper moves on to evidence examples from a study carried out by the authors during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Methodology

The study was entitled 'Building back better: working with disabled students to address unequal representation and outcomes in UK Higher Education during the pandemic' and was a collaboration between the University of Plymouth, University of Wolverhampton, and [Disabled Students UK](#). It began in 2020, in the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic and sought to investigate disabled students' perspectives and experiences of HE at that time.

A questionnaire was used to reach out nationally to disabled students from different universities and regions in the UK and from a range of courses. Our partners in this project, Disabled Students UK, sent an information update to members about this project including a secure link to the questionnaire. Data collection started early in 2021, and whilst initially disappointed to receive 14 responses, the detail of qualitative evidence returned was significant. We surmised that there were likely a few reasons why we'd had a low response rate, including disabled students experiencing unprecedented difficulties at that time. Whilst the sample is small, it includes detailed student's perspectives and experiences from 13 different courses in the UK and our data correlates with other larger national studies (DSUK 2021; DSC 2021). Demographic information for participants can be found in Table 1 below. This information includes responses from the participants. The table shows the range of disabled students recruited, undergraduate and postgraduate courses studied, ethnicity and gender.

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

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

Table 1: Demographic information of participants

This study was qualitative in nature and wanted to explore disabled students' individual perspectives and experiences. Open questions and closed questions were used, leading to participants providing detailed qualitative evidence. The findings evidence

the experiences participants chose to focus on in their responses to the questionnaire. Closed question data are evidenced as percentages and open questions were analysed using thematic analysis, represented as detailed direct quotes from the participants. In considering validity the research participants were all disabled students studying in HE, from a range of universities and courses and the study's analysis was peer-reviewed by the research team including our partners, the community research organisation DSUK.

It was important to us that participants felt free to express their perspectives and experiences without concern their identities were revealed in dissemination of the research. Questions were asked for participant specific demographic information. Other forms of identification were omitted from the questionnaire, including the name of their university. As detailed by Moraña (2021) research needs to respect 'a basic set of ethical principles' as well as ensure high quality and rigour. The front page of the questionnaire detailed information about the study, including its aims and objectives. Details on the study and information on confidentiality, anonymity of participants, right to withdraw and voluntary completion were provided online before participants completed the questionnaire. Participants were asked to proceed to data collection if they consented to take part in the study.

Findings:

Discriminatory experiences and adverse learning experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic

Many of the disabled students in this study provided qualitative comments on perceived experiences of discrimination in HE that have led to exclusionary practice. In total, 86 per cent per cent of the students agreed that they had to raise an issue, concern or complaint and 50 per cent of these students did not feel they were taken seriously. In the closed question responses, 43 per cent of disabled students agreed that they had experienced discrimination or negative bias. Similarly, low numbers of disabled students agreed that they had experienced inclusive practice. This included statements on not feeling accepted at university for instance:

* Only 21 per cent of students agreed that people had been accepting of their disability/disabilities.

* Only one student agreed that people seemed genuinely interested in their experiences.

* 43 per cent of students agreed that people had expressed empathy about what it is like to feel isolated.

* Only two students agreed that people had expressed empathy for people who had long-term health conditions.

* 36 per cent of students agreed that staff had been understanding with regard to the time they had to do additional admin during the pandemic.

Low numbers of disabled students in this study felt that learning adjustments whilst studying online during the pandemic had been effective. In total, 21 per cent of students agreed that they had been given ample warning about any changes to teaching and learning, for instance face-to-face to online learning. Comparatively, 21 per cent of students also agreed that all lectures had been delivered with good quality audio, and the same percentage agreed that they had been encouraged to choose whether to have their camera on or off. Only two students agreed that they always knew what to expect when they joined a taught session and only 29 per cent of the students agreed that they knew how they could make contributions to the session and/or to group work. None of the students agreed that lectures or presentations had been supplied with good quality captioning.

Three students qualitatively commented on struggles they faced during distance learning:

“So much extra stress, trying to write my thesis while home schooling, while locked down, trying to run research at a distance...” (studying Doctorate in Education).

“Almost impossible to work from home whilst completing a creative degree. No access to many resources that were intrinsic to my skills and education” (studying BA Hons Fashion and Costume).

“It’s been okay, but when the constant staying in has made my social anxiety worse and makes it difficult to go to face to face lectures” (studying Ancient History and Archaeology).

The Equality Act (2010) clearly stated that reasonable adjustments should be made anticipatorily. However, it is clear from these findings that many of these students were not provided with necessary reasonable adjustments by their universities during the pandemic. This is comparable with findings from the Disabled Students Commission (2020) who found that reasonable adjustments that were put in place were not always adjusted to accommodate the pandemic. Moreover, changes were made quickly during the pandemic that disabled students had campaigned for years to have changed (Disabled Students UK, 2020). It is clear from these findings that all reasonable adjustments, such as the use of captioning, were not carried out by all universities in all courses and, for some students, progressive changes implemented in the pandemic were being removed as teaching returned to face-to-face learning. These findings show that indirect changes made by universities without considering individual need significantly impacted on these students' HE experiences. It also shows that 'reasonable adjustments' provide a flexibility in response from universities to say no. This is particularly if the university staff do not believe they can make these adjustments regardless of whether it is necessary for the student.

The pandemic itself may not have been avoidable, but there is evidence in these findings that disabled students suffered further hardship because learning adjustments were not effectively put in place. Most notably for these students was the effect of online support from the lack of reasonable adjustments to ensure online learning was inclusive. These findings compare with national studies that show individualised education support during the pandemic was ineffective (DSC, 2020; Disabled Students UK, 2020).

Examples of university staff being inclusive and overcoming the system

Most of the disabled students' comments on university practice were negative; however, the main commonality in perspective was the benefit of positive relationships when a key individual understood disabled students' needs, were supportive and/or aimed to accommodate their needs and were able to overcome system and/or university processes.

In total, 36 per cent of the students felt supported by a connection at the university, for instance a personal tutor, staff member or disability services. Much lower numbers of

students felt that staff members more generally were supportive. Only 21 per cent of the participants felt that their tutors/lecturers cared about their education and well-being, and only one participant felt listened to and their comments taken on board. Six of the 14 students detailed positive relationships they encountered with one or more members of staff at their university. Three focused on specific relationships that supported their studies:

“My study skills tutor is incredible and I wouldn’t have made it through first year without her. She is neurodivergent, as well, and I’m starting to consider her my friend. I barely know my academic tutor...” (studying Human and Social Sciences).

“I’ve had an interim mentor recently as my mentor is on holiday. This interim mentor was by far better than my mentor and better than all staff at my uni, she was passionate and had actual concerns for me, my wellbeing and my learning” (studying BSc Psychology).

“...very variable – depends who you’re talking to. My tutor and supervisor were brilliant, but the head of school and central uni management have been very obstructive” (studying BSc Chemistry).

The other three students focused on more than one staff member:

“Many many individual staff members are excellent and understanding, just hamstrung by the systems and procedures they are bound to” (studying Computer Science/Robotics PhD).

“Communication from the university has been good throughout the pandemic” and “My tutors/lecturers have employed inclusive practices (studying Doctorate in Education).

“My supervisors and tutors have been incredibly supportive, but getting relevant permissions always involved bureaucratic hassles that were sometimes exhausting” (studying PhD).

Recent national studies have recommended that universities improve communication with disabled students and increase inclusion training for staff members (DSC, 2020, 2021; Policy Connect, 2020). Findings from this study show that many students did

not encounter inclusive practice, but those that did mostly had a supportive relationship or relationships with lecturers and support staff. Maric's (2022: 31) recent study, which related findings from a small sample of lecturers to Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, found that lecturers have an important role in creating a 'transformative momentum' for inclusive change. The study found that a positive 'shift' can occur when a rights-based approach is used '...within a pro-inclusion model of inclusive education consisting of a nested system of intersecting relationships'. Positive direct influences were clearly significant for disabled students in this study, and those who experienced these relationships benefited from it and had some positive reflections on their HE learning and university. However, these findings also evidenced that some of the students had to navigate through various barriers and layered processes presented by the university system to support their learning.

Conclusion

This paper has detailed the persistent and continuous struggles disabled students experience in HE, as reflected in our research findings and correlated to other larger similar national studies (DSUK, 2021; DSC, 2021). Our sample included detailed students' perspectives and experiences from 13 different courses in the UK. As argued, the ideological concept and general understanding of inclusion promotes a focus to the future, i.e. inclusion is positioned as something that will happen, the sector is working towards it but it is problematic and considered expensive. This is a significant flaw in the positioning and /or understanding of inclusion that impacts on all education sectors (Williams-Brown *et al.*, 2022). It results in students and practitioners feeling they are metaphorically pushing against a cliff face, a stream of energy going in the wrong direction, a dominant or ingrained hegemonic position that refutes the present realisation of inclusion (Ahmed, 2012; Gibson, 2020). As detailed in the *Inclusive Teaching and Learning in HE* (2017: 21) guidance '...approaches need to go beyond making reactive changes when individuals encounter barriers'. For instance, a fully inclusive curriculum would include course content, teaching and assessment being established and inclusive of all HE learners in advance of their registration, ie applying a Universal Design for Learning model. Furthermore, Croucher and Romer (2007: 3) define an education space designed inclusively as one that:

... does not place groups in opposition to each other. It respects diversity but does not imply a lack of commonality it supports the concept of widening participation, but does not imply an externally imposed value judgment; it values equality of opportunity, but encourages all to feel that this relates to them, and that the issues are not just projected as being relevant to groups more commonly defined as disenfranchised, and translated into universities' targets for equality.

The first set of bullet points provides a summary of evidenced barriers, tangible and intangible, as found in our and other national research studies, that continue to exist highlighting the ableist context, culture and system of HE:

'Continued ableism in HE'

- Perceptions of disability need to change from othering disabled people and seeing disability as a challenge in HE, to 'something that enriches it' (Nieminen and Pesonen, 2022; UPIAS, 1976, in Gibson, 2016).
- Universities are not ensuring that all disabled students experience reasonable adjustments that are based on their individual needs. Universities have been subject to disability discrimination legislation since 2005 and the Equality Act (2010) imposed obligations on HE to not discriminate against disabled students (Roberts and Hou, 2016). However, there are examples evident in this study and national studies that disabled students are still experiencing discrimination in HE (DSUK, 2020; NADP, 2020).
- Disabled students experienced inclusive practice from key HE professionals. However, over half of the participants in this study commented on experiencing positive relationships. As noted by Banbury (2020: 964) some HE staff members struggle to accommodate disabled students and this may be 'due to a lack of knowledge, training, and awareness of disability'.

This second set of bullet points provide a series of measures and targets for the sector to consider in becoming present and 'now' with inclusion and realising equality for all.

'Presently stepping into Inclusion'

- Findings from this study and national studies (DSC, 2020; DSUK, 2020) have evidenced that disabled students' exclusion in HEIs have been exaggerated by the

Covid-19 pandemic. This needs to be recognised in universities and effective individualised support put in place to ensure that all students are supported to achieve in the aftermath of the pandemic.

- Inclusion policy needs to focus more on today's practice. Inclusion objectives aim to move more towards inclusive practice overtime, but professionals in education are left to decide how much inclusion can be implemented (Williams-Brown and Hodkinson, 2020). Findings from this study evidence that universities are not doing all that is possible to ensure disabled students experience inclusive practice.
- Evidence concluded that disabled students need to actively participant, to offer collective insight into their lived and observed experiences with inequality and to be part of the decision making for appropriate changes to occur (DSC, 2020; DSUK, 2020; HEPI, 2020).
- Universities need to be accountable for promoting positive change, eradicating discriminatory practice and ensuring that policy objectives are met, and that reasonable adjustments are tailored to meet individual need. This can be done by supporting staff with regular training to ensure their practice is inclusive and they hold a critical and informed knowledge of disability.
- Senior leadership roles prioritising inclusion in collaboration with disabled students is key to presently establishing sustained change for inclusion and building a process of 'transformative momentum' for equality, (Maric, 2022; Williams-Brown and Hodkinson, 2020; Gibson, 2020; Gibson and Peruzzo, 2023).
- The Office for Students (OfS) in its *Coronavirus Briefing Note* (2020) placed emphasis on students being responsible for chasing necessary accommodations. However, Disabled Students UK (2020) stated that the OfS and university leaders should be enforcing the law and not leaving it as the responsibility of disabled students, which only adds additional administrative burden to their load.
 - Good practice as experienced and understood by disabled students must be disseminated widely.

In HE, WP has led to a focus on participation and the integration of disabled students with flexible objectives, leaving universities and their staff to determine how much actual inclusion is possible (Williams-Brown *et al.*, 2022). Research, including national studies carried out by disabled student organisations, has highlighted the struggles and barriers to inclusion faced by disabled students (DSC, 2020; DSUK, 2020; HEPI,

2020). Evidence from this study and others, shows that direct positive influences by senior leaders in HE has had a significant and positive impact on disabled students' HE experiences, as reflected by lockdown experiences shared by students. This paper has argued it is important to firstly acknowledge and then understand the disabling system and environment that currently exists, reflect on lessons learnt from changes made during the pandemic and consider that the present time is a key point for a critical departure into inclusion, shifting away from the established view that inclusion is an ideological future state. That critical departure must be informed, led and evaluated by disabled students in collaboration with sector leaders.

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