

# Inclusive Teaching and Learning: What's Next?

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# Inclusive Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: What's Next?

## Executive Summary

This paper reflects the 'Inclusive Teaching and Learning in Higher Education as a route to Excellence' published by the Disabled Students Sector Leadership Group's (DSSLG) in January 2017 and highlights actions that may be required to attain the goals set out in the report. Here we link Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles with the Social Model of Disability and highlight how successful inclusive teaching and learning practice supports all students. The main findings that will require further consideration are:

- **Successful inclusive teaching and learning practices involve planning, design, delivery and evaluation of curricula outcomes** as part of a UDL agenda.
- It is essential to **have sector wide agreement about the minimum expectations for inclusive teaching and learning practices** that adhere to the Equality Act 2010.
- Strategic leadership is recognised as essential, but without **collaboration with students including those with disabilities**, results may not represent the needs of all stakeholders.
- **Outcomes must be open to public inspection** in particular those that involve maintenance and measurement of quality over time.
- **Training and support to embed inclusion is vital** to assist faculty, researchers, teaching support staff and other service providers.
- **Being flexible, equitable and proactive in the provision of multiple means of curricula presentation and assessment modes.** This includes making 'reasonable adjustments' and allowing for personalisation to support a diverse student population.
- **Effective implementation and training in use of technologies is required to enhance productivity and enable inclusion.** This includes tools for planning and organisation, note taking, reading and writing support.
- The need for **clear pathways for student communication with named personnel** to ensure the success of anticipatory actions and the requirements for reasonable adjustments.
- **The sharing of expertise to support research into evidence of good practice.**

# Inclusive Teaching and Learning: What Next?

## Introduction

In January 2017, the Disabled Students Sector Leadership Group published a report entitled 'Inclusive Teaching and Learning in Higher Education as a route to Excellence' (Disabled Students Sector Leadership Group (DSSLG), 2017), hereafter referred to as the DSSLG (2017) report. This paper examines the risks, recommendations and evidence base presented in the report in more detail and further explores the requirements for a successful implementation of the principles of inclusive teaching and learning.

The principles of inclusive teaching and learning have been variously described, but perhaps best summed up in a Teaching Essentials Toolkit from Sheffield Hallam University (Sheffield Hallam University, 2016) as:

- "Being Flexible – open to change and versatile
- Being Equitable – ensuring consistency and accessibility for all
- Working Collaboratively – involving students and stakeholders
- Supporting Personalisation – recognising that successful learning and teaching is governed by personal difference
- Embracing Diversity – creating opportunities to develop awareness of diversity and global issues"

Developing inclusive and accessible learning practices can only be successfully embedded if seen as an evolving journey at a national, organisational and professional level. This has been highlighted by the continuing publication of evidence and guidelines in other jurisdictions, since the release of the DSSLG (2017) report.

Although clearly driven by the government changes to the Disabled Students Allowances (DSA) (Hansard Commons, 2014) the report bases many of its recommendations on the Equality Act 2010 (HM Government, 2010) and the concept of 'reasonable adjustments' for disabled students and the anticipatory nature of these duties. The report introduces the use of the Social Model of Disability in order to achieve inclusive practices across Higher Education Providers (HEPs). These concepts encourage providers to pursue a proactive approach to removing barriers and to mitigate the possibility of disadvantaging disabled students in their wish to study to degree level and beyond.

The DSSLG (2017) report notes that in the literature and research different terms for 'inclusive teaching and learning practices' are used in different regions and disciplines. This report quotes the Higher Education Academy saying "Inclusive learning and teaching

recognises students' entitlement to a learning and experience that respects diversity, enables participation, removes barriers and anticipates and considers a variety of learning needs and preferences without directly or indirectly excluding anyone". In addition, the report indicates that the terms "inclusive approaches", "universal design for learning" and "inclusive teaching and learning" may be interchangeable. While there are pitfalls to defining inclusive teaching and learning (in particular a risk of reducing aspirational planning and out-of-the-box thinking), the broad concepts covered by such terms as "inclusive approaches" can be understood to encompass a wide range of equality, diversity and widening participation priorities. The Equality Act 2010 (HM Government, 2010) requirement for HEPs to anticipate the needs of prospective and current disabled students, through inclusive teaching and learning practices, is only applicable to individuals with disabilities, not those with other protected characteristics (EHRC, 2016).

If the sector is to leverage evidence based-practice in order to implement inclusive teaching and learning practices, as well as put in place systems to monitor, measure and evaluate the effectiveness of their actions, there needs to be an accepted model of what inclusive teaching and learning practices comprise for disabled students.

The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework provides a proven model for inclusive practices. It is defined by the US Federal Government as "a scientifically valid framework for guiding educational practice that provides flexibility in the ways information is presented, in the ways students respond or demonstrate knowledge and skills, and in the ways students are engaged. UDL reduces barriers in instruction, provides appropriate accommodations, supports and challenges, and maintains high achievement expectations for all students including students with disabilities" (US Congress, 2008).

Some may feel that being mindful of 'reasonable adjustments' and 'anticipatory duties' are additional requirements, but using a UDL framework offers a positive approach to inclusion, from the planning, design, delivery and evaluation of curricula (goals, assessments, methods, and materials) (National Center On Universal Design For Learning, 2011). UDL also aligns with the 'UK Professional Standards Framework for teaching and supporting learning in higher education' (HE Academy, 2011) by sustaining a vision that involves the student voice in diverse learning communities.

The advantage of applying a UDL ethos to underpin inclusive practices not only extends beyond disabled students to the wider student body, but also allows for different teaching and learning situations. These may include accessible elearning or distance and blended learning using multiple formats for curricula resources and the use of accessible digital technologies. If the UK HEP sector considers the UDL framework in the context of inclusive teaching and learning practice, it will be possible to build on and access a growing

international evidence base.

## **Planning**

Evidence has shown that if the goal to embed successful inclusive practices is to be achieved then careful planning is required. Successful planning for change only happens if there is an understanding regarding the disconnect between the 'diverse populations' within HEPs and acceptance of behavioural change with both 'top down' and 'bottom up' pressures, attention to departmental contexts, and a strong evidence base (Lawie, et al., 2017). Whilst DSSLG (2017) recognises the role for strategic leadership and the value of external scrutiny, it offers little evidence of the importance of student involvement in this aspect of strategic or curricula planning, which has been acknowledged by others.

Planning for inclusive curricula is part of the anticipatory duty of the Equality Act 2010 (HM Government, 2010) and includes all 'qualifying institutions' and all students whether international, part-time, distance learners or those who do not qualify for DSA. This not only requires the simple actions to effect change as mentioned in the report, but also an underlying belief that inclusive teaching and learning adds value for all learners.

The report recognises that there is a need for culture change as well as support to engage staff with sector wide initiatives. This has been recognised as critical to the success of inclusive teaching and learning practices internationally (Mitchell, 2014) and nationally. The concept of sector wide frameworks for inclusive teaching practices is already embedded within school teaching standards and the OFSTED framework for England (NASEN, 2015) and the Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years (Dept. for Education, 2015), where 'Quality First Teaching' and a 'Graduated Approach' to support ensure that the needs of learners are considered within day to day teacher planning.

A recent European initiative has provided frameworks to guide HEPs through the process, including the use of UDL principles, to achieve inclusive teaching and learning. The AHEAD 'Licence to Learn' Guidelines suggest the need to 'create a sustainable and coherent policy through clear visions and strategies' (UDLL Partnership, 2017). The report provides ideas for creating the vision and offers the roles that should be involved when thinking about questions such as:

- Do you have an over-arching institutional policy for inclusive teaching and learning?
- Are you using the expert knowledge of the diverse learner?
- Is a clear and challenging vision for UDL understood by all?
- Have sustainable strategies at all levels been implemented?

- Have you developed action plans for implementation coherent with budgets and other important plans?
- Have you used/developed a system for evaluation and quality assurance?
- Can your policies, procedures and systems for evaluation with outcomes be internally and externally scrutinised?

In order to be successful, planning for inclusion must involve all stakeholders with a consistency of approach across HEPs. This means that those in leadership positions, departments, faculties and services not only collaborate to deliver policies and procedures, but also listen to the student voice (all student cohorts including disabled undergraduate, graduate and research students). In addition, both internal and external scrutiny is necessary in order to achieve measurable outcomes and progress. This process would also allow for comparisons to be made across the sector in order to raise standards.

Where inclusive learning, teaching and assessment frameworks are developed and implemented, the outcomes should be open to public scrutiny so that they are available for prospective students as well as for Quality Assurance.

## **Design and Delivery**

There is nothing new about the design and delivery of curricula and the concepts of the UK Professional Standards Framework can easily be adapted to suit the principles of Inclusive teaching and learning. Based on these ideas there are several Inclusive learning, teaching and assessment frameworks that have been developed by universities such as York St John University Inclusive learning, teaching and assessment framework (York St John University, 2016) and Anglia Ruskin University's Inclusive Teaching Checklist (Anglia Ruskin University, 2017) to indicate good practice.

It may seem self-evident that academic staff could complete these checklists and there would be an audit trail to ensure that the outcomes are reviewed over time. However, as these initiatives are relatively new there is little public guidance as how to begin this process of designing and delivering inclusive teaching and learning or how to check for compliance. The UDLL Partnership UDL guidelines (2017) suggest that it helps to "Build on strong networks and value all partnerships" in order to progress the process. They ask:

- "What kind of networks could exist for collaboration to create change and address UDL as a best practice solution?"
- What structures are there in your institution, and if you were to invite a group of colleagues to discuss diversity and UDL, where would you start?
- Who are your key colleagues for developing and implementing universal design

(UD) and UDL thinking where you are?

- In what way and on what level can students be involved?
- What does it take for you or someone in the right position to be the UD and UDL coordinator at your institution?"

Clearly, the Quality Assurance process must be transparent to enable the management of expectations, encourage engagement of diverse learners and balance the degree to which reasonable adjustments have been achieved.

The practical elements required to ensure delivery of teaching and learning considers inclusion with access for all students and has been documented in the report with examples from such universities as De Montfort who offer lecture capture, advanced notes and other good practices. Further examples can also be found on the AHEAD web pages on inclusive teaching (AHEAD, 2015) and a recent project by the Institute of Physics (2017) examined the state of inclusive teaching and learning within physics departments. It found that while individual reasonable adjustments were embedded, there was little evidence that academics were familiar with inclusive practices beyond those who had a personal interest in the area. It will be necessary to provide ongoing support to faculty, researchers, teaching support staff and other service providers to enable them to develop the necessary skills and ensure evidence-based practice is the norm. A recent Massive Open Online Courses on Digital Accessibility and Inclusive Teaching and Learning Environments have had over 7,000 enrolments with comments that have highlighted issues related to appropriate training across the sector (Draffan, et al., 2017). These courses have also resulted in the sharing of expertise demonstrating best practice.

The question remains as to how one judges a baseline for provision for diverse learners when technologies, curriculum design, delivery and assessment are changing. Nevertheless, multiple means of presentation, action and representation as well as engagement are considered essential for successful inclusive teaching and learning practices.

## **Evaluation**

The UK Quality Code for Higher Education Part B (2013) suggests that "Those involved in enabling student development and achievement are routinely represented in internal decision-making processes to enable realistic goal-setting and monitoring of progress" and that "where possible equity of access is achieved through inclusive design, but in some circumstances, arrangements are made to enable access for individuals. Higher education providers work in partnership with students to understand the implications of their specific needs. It appears at no point are clear indications offered as to who should be involved in these tasks and how the process will be routinely undertaken in the light of the DSA

changes.

If those with expertise in disability matters are suggesting ways in which inclusive learning and teaching practices can be implemented with examples of good practice, it would seem that questions need to be asked once again, as to how these ideas will be monitored and progress judged across the sector. The implementation of aspects of The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) could possibly fill the gap (Department for Education, 2017). Although the TEF does not specifically mention disabled students under widening participation or “the desired outcomes of the work described in the Access and Participation Statement”, it does aim to provide all students “with high quality experiences and outcomes” (Higher Education Funding Council, 2016). However, there is no specific mention of inclusive practices or UDL within the TEF, so some joined up thinking will be necessary in order to make use of it in this regard. Assessors will need to depend on criteria that show “evidence of how far a provider demonstrates teaching and learning excellence across its entire provision”. There is mention of student involvement in the TEF guidance and, in order for the TEF to help this agenda move forward, disabled students should be included in discussions.

The DSSLG report notes the role that professional bodies can play in evaluating academic programs and the importance of identifying competence standards. It is also noted that reasonable adjustments should be provided in order to enable disabled students to demonstrate required competence skills. Indeed some professional bodies have collaborated to produce and disseminate information on reasonable adjustments within their professional networks (ECU, 2015). However, lessons learnt from these activities are often retained within the specific academic fields, while they could be included in institutional planning across a range of disciplines, as well as strategic planning. Therefore, in order for inclusive practices to be embedded within courses, internal and external evaluation of required competency skills should be commonplace.

Embedding inclusive teaching and learning practices form part of HEP’s anticipatory equality duty and it is important that any resulting actions are regularly reviewed to evaluate how effective and appropriate they are in the light of changing circumstances as outlined in 7.26 and 7.727 of the Equality Act 2010 Technical Guidance on Further and Higher Education (EHRC, 2014). The Public Sector Equality Duty (EHRC, 2014) also requires HEPs to regularly publish equality information and objectives in an accessible format while Section 149 of the Equality Act (2010) (HM Government, 2010) requires that these equality objectives “must be specific and measurable”. Therefore, it is important that HEPs consider how to monitor, measure and evaluate inclusive teaching and learning practices in order to meet their Equality Act responsibilities and to comply with the legal obligation this information is published “in a way that is easily understood by the public”.



**Having comparable information on approaches to inclusive teaching and learning as well as reasonable adjustments would be of particular interest to prospective students** when assessing the suitability of a course and HEPs to match skills and needs. This is already provided to learners at earlier stages of their educational journey as local authorities, schools and colleges are required through the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice (Dept. for Education, 2015) to publish annually a SEND information report detailing the provision and resources available, as well as an evaluation regarding the effectiveness of these activities.

HEPs can only meet Equality Act responsibilities and anticipatory duties if there is a sector wide agreement regarding the principles, requirements and evidence of inclusive teaching and learning practices and how they are measured.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has identified, outlined and started to unpack issues the authors have recognised as key in the document under discussion and proposed ideas for practical implementation, assessment of progress and ongoing sector wide monitoring of developments towards inclusive practice in the HE sector.

Senior leadership buy-in is clearly key. Effective action planning, review and monitoring of progress appears to require the identification of a solid baseline from which to move forward. Staff development is an essential component of effective change management working towards a strategy for inclusion which is underpinned by principles of UDL and informed by an ethos influenced by The Social Model of Disability, but applicable to all students who may experience barriers to learning. Embedded UDL comes with long-term cost benefits and quality enhancers, which reduce the requirement for bespoke individual adjustments and make the benefits of accessibility available to all. While the report focusses on sector responsibilities towards students, including the requirements of the TEF, the whole university community could benefit from UDL.

A sector wide analysis of progress in this arena would clearly be easier to implement if a common framework document could be developed for evaluation purposes in order to facilitate comparisons effectively for research purposes. The benefits of taking a strategic evidence based approach are that progress towards the goal of improvement in inclusive practice can be made tangible. Underpinned by UDL, further gains can be made in the enhancement of all aspects of all students' experiences with the potential to improve quality across departments, the institution and the sector. The benefits to staff as well as learners are obvious. There is a need to facilitate comparable minimum expectations for inclusive teaching and learning practices. This could be built on the TEF requirements as

suggested in the DSSLG report along with more rigorous guidance and monitoring of the action plans required by the Equality Act (2010) where lessons can be learnt from the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 2005 (HM Government, 1995) and the Children's and Families Act 2014 (HM Government, 2014).

As part of the process, the authors have identified the need to capture current information on how HEPs are adapting to the changing environment, in particular regarding the mitigation of the risks mentioned in the DSSLG (2017). A survey could also include questions about plans to embed inclusive practices and knowledge of the personnel involved, as well as the type of technologies being used to support UDL.

However, there remains a need to develop a long term plan to support the sector in developing the necessary tools and skills to embed these inclusive practices within the academic and teaching staff communities. There also needs to be a way of establishing a means of evaluating the effectiveness of this approach to ensure the goal of reducing barriers for disabled and disadvantaged students is achieved.

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