Strategic approaches to
disabled student engagement

Case studies
About these case studies

These case studies are drawn from responses from the seven higher education institutions (HEIs) that participated in the joint Higher Education Academy and Equality Challenge Unit project:

= Brunel University
= De Montfort University
= University of Derby
= University of Staffordshire
= University of Sunderland
= Swansea University
= University of the West of England

They are supplementary to the project guidance, Strategic approaches to disabled student engagement, providing details of the participating institutions’ experiences of identifying and implementing effective mechanisms to further the involvement of disabled students across a range of institutional departments and services as well as offering practical ideas and information for other institutions wishing to advance their work in this area.

The case studies show that successful disabled student engagement depends less on the particular method chosen and more on the provision of a range of methods, with consideration given to the context and implementation of these methods. Consequently it is necessary to use a variety of methods and consider a number of contextual factors, such as accessibility, location and timing, to maximise student participation. The case studies highlight that what may be effective in one department, service or HEI may not be in another.

Through the experiences of the participating institutions, the programme found that HEIs need to consider the cultural, strategic and individual dimensions of their approach to enable the successful engagement of disabled students. A strategic approach embeds the agenda and engages staff to develop inclusive and reflective practices to ensure student engagement becomes a joint responsibility and a key driver for cultural change.

The case studies are testament to the hard work and commitment of the teams from the participating institutions. We are grateful that they shared their learning experience.
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Brunel University

HEI context

Geographical location
Uxbridge

Student numbers
- 15,799 students at Brunel
- 1110 disclosed a disability

Relevant aspects of mission/corporate strategy or plan
- Continual enhancement and improvement of services for disabled people is a priority and work on equality and inclusivity is a primary focus
- Encouragement, support and empowerment for individuals and groups to achieve collective goals
- Valuing external partnerships and collaborations that enrich the university and the wider community

Associated strategies
The disability and dyslexia service and assessment centre’s five-year plans complement the strategic plan and widening participation strategy.

Student involvement in development or implementation of equality schemes
The disability equality scheme and action plan have always been developed with the involvement of disabled students, who have attended focus groups and responded to questionnaires and other publicity.

HEI progress in meeting equality issues
- Entitlements of disabled students a high priority in the design of new build and the refurbishment of existing facilities
- Involved disabled students in the production of the disability equality scheme
- Disability and dyslexia service produced publicity and information and ran staff development sessions
- Equality group has been re-established
Rationale for participation
To enable disabled students to engage with the policies and practice of the university, recognising both the legal imperative and the moral case for doing this.

Institutional goal, aim or vision for this project
- Improve the quality and depth of disabled students’ engagement in policy and planning activity
- Ensure that disabled students are actively involved in university activities and developments over the years ahead

Interventions
- Established a group of five disabled student representatives to represent their peers and hold meetings of the focus group which receives training and support from the students’ union, the disability and dyslexia service and others
- Reported on findings from meetings about access requirements with students with impaired mobility
- Met with the estates department to agree priorities for action based on disabled student involvement, resulting in the construction of, and plans for, ongoing access improvements
- Re-established an equality and diversity working group, chaired by the new equality champion for the university
- Publicised findings from the 333 responses from international students for a survey about attitudes, awareness and the experiences of disabled international students to the sector and produced a resource pack, including a booklet and research report
- Involved disabled students in the one world week activities
- Arranged high profile events to raise awareness and promote positive images of disabled people, one of which included the Great British wheelchair basketball team
- Disabled students worked on the information stall and assisted with the international disabled students’ survey

Implementation process
- Using existing contacts and networks at the university
= Approaching the students’ union, widening participation officers, disabled student ambassadors, and colleagues in estates and other departments
= Reminding colleagues of the business, moral and legal cases for continuing to make improvements in services and facilities for disabled people and by encouraging students to become involved

**Institutional functions**

**Institutional functions targeted to further the involvement of disabled students**

= Governance and management
= Students’ union and widening participation office
= Estates
= Induction and other publicity events

**Reason for choosing these areas**

These were chosen to involve a wide range of staff, disabled students and service areas across the institution, incorporating both practical service areas and research activity.

**Governance and management**

= Report on actions required following consultation with students and staff

**Students’ union and widening participation office**

= Train and support a new group of disabled students’ representatives to fulfil their role in increasing the involvement of their peers

**Estates**

= Work with the results of students’ feedback to plan improvements to buildings and facilities

**Induction and other publicity events**

= Give presentation opportunities to existing disabled student ambassadors about their experiences which help to raise awareness of the services available
= Elicit the views of students, analyse feedback and publicise the findings of the disabled international students project for the benefit of the university and the sector overall
How the approach was tailored to the needs of these particular areas
Our approach was tailored by making use of personal contacts and networks to plan meetings and create project plans.

Methods used to engage staff across functional areas
- Ran a programme of staff development events throughout the year
- Publicised the work being undertaken and the successes achieved through videos, booklets and a range of online resources
- Used networks and individual contacts with staff at all levels of the university to encourage their engagement in taking positive action

Main challenges
Time available and commitment from some to see the disability agenda as being one for which all have a responsibility.

Overcoming challenges
Senior managers have helped to get this message across and the new equality group, with the university senior manager champion, should help embed this.

Methods used to engage disabled students across functional areas
- Used existing contacts with disabled students, ambassadors, the students’ union and widening participation networks
- Invited students to participate in project groups
- Undertook surveys
- Advertised for new disabled student representatives and provided training and support for them
- Paid students to be involved in awareness-raising events
- Involved students in filming publicity about services

Main challenges
Gaining disabled students’ interest and commitment to time needed.

Overcoming challenges
- Paying the student ambassadors
- Highlighting the benefits of involvement for the curriculum vitae
- Employing some inspirational students to influence others
- Offering training

**Key achievements**
- Recruiting disabled students representatives
- Finalising a number of new build and refurbishment access improvements
- Re-establishing the equality group
- Completing the international disabled students project and publicising the findings
- Organising a number of successful events, including those for one world week, with the major involvement of disabled students

**Evidence that interventions have been successful**
- The ongoing process of raised awareness can be witnessed around the university
- The student representatives group now has many contacts across the university, as well as a Facebook page
- Ongoing improvement in services has been recognised by external organisations and peers in other institutions

**Next steps**

**How the institution plans to continue this work and ensure the sustainability of the interventions/developments implemented**
- Raise awareness and promote positive attitudes through the disability and dyslexia service
- Continue with service improvements across the university
- Train and support disabled student representatives
- Replace student representatives as they move on to ensure continuity of representation
- Continue existing mechanisms for obtaining student feedback and views
- Complete specific projects and then replace them with others in which students will continue to be involved
Events will continue to benefit from the involvement of disabled students

**Key learning points**

- Work to ensure that colleagues at the university see that any work in relation to disability is a shared responsibility, not one solely for the disability service team
- Engage with as many networks and positive individuals as possible, particularly senior manager champions, to gain support for positive action
- Employ a project management approach to initiatives so that objectives are agreed and outcomes monitored
- Be prepared to work extra hours to bring about change, recognising that there is no quick fix and often many years of work will be needed to bring about significant improvements
- Use the moral, legal and business case with colleagues to press home the case for doing what is ‘the right thing’
- Engage with the students’ union, student ambassadors and widening participation colleagues to harness the students’ energy to be involved year after year

**Lessons for other institutions**

Persevere and form alliances with staff at all levels, particularly senior staff, and always attempt to harness the students’ voice.
De Montfort University

HEI context

Geographical location
East Midlands

Student numbers
= 17,150 full-time undergraduate students (approximately)
= 15 per cent disabled (approximately)

Relevant aspects of mission/corporate strategy or plan
The university is a community, drawn together by intellectual curiosity and a drive to explore and maximise potential. We work together to provide a welcoming, friendly and diverse university, characterised by the open and respectful exchange of ideas. Our students and staff understand that they too are members of other communities: the local community in the city of Leicester, regional community in the East Midlands, universities across the UK and local and the regional business communities.

Associated strategies
Our involvement and engagement strategy is being developed by the equality and diversity committee.

Student involvement in development or implementation of equality schemes
= A small group of disabled students was involved in the development of the first disability equality scheme in 2006
= Focus groups for disabled students, specifically those with visual impairments and those within the autistic spectrum, were held during 2008/09
= The student services directorate launched a diversity survey in October 2009 for the 2009/10 academic year
= The disabled student group, student voice, was asked to contribute to the development of the diversity survey
= An involvement and engagement strategy is being considered by the equality and diversity committee
HEI progress in meeting equality issues

- Equality schemes and action plans for race, gender and disability
- Disabled staff group set up
- University-wide project to develop the equality impact assessment process and relevant training
- Athena SWAN award

Rationale for participation

- Develop a strategic approach to involving and engaging disabled students
- Share our learning, reflection and experiences with others
- Consider the best practice in developing a dialogue with disabled students

Institutional goal, aim or vision for this project

- Identify and initiate a disabled student involvement strategy and approach developed by disabled students themselves
- Involve disabled students in the preparation of the university’s next disability equality scheme
- Involve disabled students in an equality impact assessment of the recruitment and enrolment process

Interventions

- Established a steering group to ensure that there is support behind the disabled student group
- Organised and supported disabled student involvement groups
- Facilitated the invitation of key staff to the disabled student meetings
- Worked with the students’ union to raise awareness of the volunteering award scheme
- Identified regular disabled student group and steering group meetings for the academic year 2009/10
- Reported current progress of the disabled student group at the equality and diversity committee
- Invited a nominated representative from the disabled student group to be a member of the equality and diversity committee
Strategic approaches to disabled student engagement: case studies

- Involved the group in the development of the university’s equality survey
- Created a dedicated student voice webpage
- Linked feedback from the webpage to the student voice focus groups and invited representatives from across the university to participate

**Implementation process**

- Creating a steering group to ensure that there is support behind disabled students
- Inviting students to a series of exploratory meetings to identify whether there was an appetite for regular meetings via all-user emails, targeted invitations from faculty disability coordinators, posters and flyers in the faculties and student services support areas
- Booking accessible rooms and providing good quality buffet food for meetings
- Staff from the relevant functional areas were invited to have a dialogue with the students that took account of both the issues raised and shared new information where appropriate
- Operating the reward scheme for participating in volunteering through the students’ union
- Issuing disabled students with log sheets to record time spent on the group and associated activities
- Identifying meeting dates for the academic year
- Receiving reports of progress on the involving disabled students project as a standing item in both the work plan and agenda of the equality and diversity committee
- Reconstituting the equality and diversity committee to ensure that representatives from staff and student groups have a membership place
- Inviting disabled students who had expressed an interest in the disabled student group to contribute to the development of the equality survey
- Seeking advice from the steering group and the student voice group as to what information they wanted to see on a dedicated student voice webpage
Institutional functions

Institutional functions targeted to further the involvement of disabled students

- Library services
- Estates
- Teaching and learning

Reason for choosing these areas

Disabled students identified the themes that they particularly wanted to discuss with the university.

Library services

- Provide increased printing allowances and computers with extra accessibility options
- Provide training for staff to raise awareness of unseen disabilities

Estates

- Resolve security issues and physical accessibility

Teaching and learning

- Ensure provision of accessible teaching and learning approaches

How the approach was tailored to the needs of these particular areas

Senior staff were contacted and invited to have a two-way dialogue with students, sharing information and discussing issues.

Methods used to engage staff across functional areas

- Included these departments at the outset so they were aware of the aims and objectives of the project
- Stressed the importance of dialogue and that the meeting is a two-way exchange of ideas and experiences

Main challenges

There have not been any main challenges in taking this approach. Staff have been pleased to engage in this process.
Overcoming challenges
Staff have been very keen to engage in the process of dialogue with students to gain a better understanding of the students' issues.

Methods used to engage disabled students across functional areas
- Sent invitations through all-user emails, targeted invitations from faculty disability coordinators, posters and flyers in the faculties and student services support areas
- Informed disabled students who had applied to the university of the student voice group and following enrolment will be invited to join

Main challenges
Keeping up the momentum of attendance at meetings.

Overcoming challenges
- Faculty disability coordinators made personal invitations to students to attend meetings
- Meetings are set around times identified by students
- Buffet food provided

Key achievements
- Undertaking a review of access to computers and additional resources in the university’s student services centre
- Achieving greater understanding in terms of problems faced in accessing the disabled student allowance
- Establishing a support fund to provide upfront funding whilst a student is waiting for their disabled student allowance to come through
- Allowing a separate application to be made by the faculty to access additional funds to support the student if they exceed their disabled student allowance threshold
- Reviewing current training availability
- Running sessions each term to increase staff awareness of supporting students with mental health issues
Creating a dedicated webpage to provide information to students and an opportunity to comment/make suggestions for areas of improvement

Evidence that interventions have been successful
- Information and frequently asked questions are uploaded on to the website following meetings
- Tangible changes have been made to provision
- Fewer new issues are being raised by disabled students

Next steps

How the institution plans to continue this work and ensure the sustainability of the interventions/developments implemented
- Continue to support the disabled students’ meetings and help them access key personnel
- Invite new students to a separate introductory meeting early in the new term
- Continue to encourage disabled student representation on the equality and diversity committee
- Continue to follow up issues addressed by disabled students with staff across the university in order to implement positive changes
- Develop and conduct a university-wide student diversity questionnaire
- Ensure that the issues raised by the disabled students are embedded into the new disability equality scheme
- Ensure the dedicated website is updated with details of meetings to ensure the sustainability of focus groups and to engage with students who may wish to become involved
- Post achievements on to the website

Key learning points
- Make sure that the issues students raise are responded to, and that the students are informed about progress made
- Encourage dialogue – a two-way process between students and institution
- Recognise that student engagement in such projects can be challenging and at times limited
Lessons for other institutions

= Be realistic in the promises that are made and provide full justification as to why some requests are not possible

= Offer incentives such as good food, opportunities to gain volunteering credits or free accredited courses
University of Derby

HEI context

Geographical location
East Midlands

Student numbers
= 12,000 full-time undergraduate students (approximately)
= 8.1 per cent disabled

Relevant aspects of mission/corporate strategy or plan
University: ‘To be the learner’s first choice university for quality and opportunity’.
Students’ union: ‘To defend and extend the rights of our students by proactively
creating and maximising opportunities’.

Associated strategies
Core strategies include the student experience strategy and learning, teaching and
assessment strategy, with equality embedded within. The equality and diversity
strategy is in draft form.

Student involvement in development or implementation of equality schemes
= The university has subgroups for each strand of equality and diversity, with
student representation on each which feed into a central equality and diversity
committee, chaired by the pro vice-chancellor and with students’ union
representation
= Consultation forums have been regularly held as part of this structure, with
varying levels of engagement
= The job description for student representation at programme level is being
examined to make it more robust, with a focus on equality and diversity issues

HEI progress in meeting equality issues
= Dedicated equality and diversity team
= Equality and diversity champions in every faculty and department as well as
disability coordinators
Equality in teaching and learning coordinator to provide academic staff development, training and support

Achieved Stonewall and Two Ticks (disability) and working towards Investors in Diversity accreditation

Rationale for participation

Reflect critically on what has currently been achieved and what opportunities are available to improve current practice

Develop a proactive approach to engaging with disabled students, enabling the university to offer an improved student experience

Institutional goal, aim or vision for this project

Take a holistic approach to embed attitudes and behaviours that ensure the ongoing engagement of disabled students in change processes.

Interventions

Established a cross-departmental working group to shape and deliver project, supported by both the students’ union and the university

Encouraged integral involvement of disabled students in the project at every level

Facilitated two-way communication through a jointly facilitated feedback forum for disabled students at which the project team shared its objectives

Created a springboard to more active participation by disabled students in institutional development

Organised departmental information events to raise awareness of the support and advisory service

Created forums to improve communication between disability services, academics, the students’ union and central departments

Set up an equipment loan scheme for students not entitled to the disabled student allowance or awaiting equipment funded through this allowance

Streamlined provision of support workers to disabled students

Held workshops at our pre-entry event for disabled students

Undertook an analysis of demographics of disabled student population
= Gathered the representation of disabled students from a number of current feedback mechanisms
= Determined the means of capturing the disabled student voice and preferred methods of communication
= Made key recommendations for internal changes
= Organised a separate clubs and society fair for disabled students during their early enrolment to increase membership
= Established a disabled student society
= Arranged a disabled student-led campaign, sport development, looking at how disabled students can be best engaged through sports clubs and societies
= Produced a workflow to give guidance to internal clients working with estates on projects
= Held appropriate consultation with disabled students throughout all stages of estates projects

**Implementation process**

= Ensuring a holistic approach through cross-departmental representation in the group, which met on a monthly basis between December 2008 and August 2009 to identify key actions, assess progress and review deliverables
= Assigning both a university and disabled student lead to each objective to ensure that any outcomes would go beyond traditional consultation processes and that staff would take responsibility for pushing their key actions forward within the context of their own department, and reporting back to the group on progress and challenges

**Institutional functions**

**Institutional functions targeted to further the involvement of disabled students**

= Support and advisory service
= Statistics team and student experience strategy
= Students’ union
= Estates department
Reason for choosing these areas

Support and advisory service
- Find out the attitudes of academic staff toward disabled students
- Consider new ways to foster partnership working
- Review the effectiveness of disabled student support plans which are relied on by students who may not take other action to alert academics of personal needs, but currently require evidence of disability, which can cause delays, and may not be relevant for certain settings

Statistics team and student experience strategy
- Improve the statistical analysis of data held internally on disabled students, including results from internal and external surveys and demographic information, with the aim of better understanding the disabled student body and the issues they face
- Investigate the best methods of communication with disabled students by interrogating existing data and student feedback methodology
- Increase disabled students’ understanding of the methods used by the university to gather feedback
- Avoid disengagement caused by over-surveying students
- Evaluate the ‘you said it, we did it’ promotional campaign

Students’ union
- Encourage wider participation of disabled students
- Gain knowledge of the current extent of disabled students’ involvement in sports and societies
- Test the effectiveness of the marketing and communication of clubs and societies for disabled students
- Align the current joining process methods with the needs of disabled students

Estates department
- Improve engagement and consultation within estates project planning and decision-making processes that impact on the disabled student with implementation of the student charter
- Show appreciation for the value of engaging disabled students in estates matters
- Identify avenues for consultation and engagement
University of Derby

How the approach was tailored to the needs of these particular areas
We set up a working group to represent all areas of the university, including the democracy and activities manager from the students’ union and the disabled students’ officer (who is also a student) on the group.

Methods used to engage staff across functional areas
- Provided a brief outline to be included in the vice-chancellor’s monthly report to all staff to raise awareness of the project
- Set up a working group of staff
- Reported on the events of the forum in the staff magazine, Connected
- Focused on the positive outcomes for students
- Encouraged a collective responsibility to address current problems and seek solutions
- Communicated through members of the university disability coordinators group who disseminated information across the faculties and departments
- Organised a dissemination event at the end of the project with representation from the university executive, senior managers from the university and students’ union and the Academy/ECU

Main challenges
- Setting up a working group to represent key areas across the university
- Time and resources were limited as work carried out was supplementary to normal day jobs

Overcoming challenges
- Support from highest level in the university encouraged staff to join the group
- Early successes led to expansion of the group
- Derby’s can-do attitude meant that we achieved results with few resources

Methods used to engage disabled students across functional areas
- Worked with the students’ union’s elected disabled student officer (himself a disabled student) as a key member of the project team
Ensured that there were student leads on each objective, finding students who had a personal interest for the functional areas being looked at

Established a disabled student feedback forum, a one-day event jointly led by students’ union and university

Main challenges
We were unsure of how best to communicate with students to encourage them to engage with project.

Overcoming challenges
- Targeted marketing to all students who had declared a disability by all-user email and text message
- Incentives for engagement such as payment for travel, shopping vouchers and free hot buffet lunch
- Hot topics identified to promote debate and engagement from disabled students
- Promoted the notion that engagement could be used to enhance the curriculum vitae and hence students’ employability

Key achievements
- Establishing a cross-departmental approach, leading to a continued working relationship between departments
- Setting up a successful and well-attended disabled forum
- Arranging a follow-up event with the long-term goal of organising an annual event
- Embedding mechanisms to go beyond consultation into our long-term strategy via the university’s disability equality scheme
- Presenting a final report to the executive and senior management by the project team for feedback and further debate

Evidence that interventions have been successful
- Feedback from students after the event was very positive and many students returned to our follow-up event
Our model for engaging students is being introduced in other equality and diversity strands.

Students’ feedback (via internal campaigns, complaints procedure and the national student survey) is to be analysed to see if impact has been made.

Next steps

How the institution plans to continue this work and ensure the sustainability of the interventions/developments implemented

- Continue to function as a working group and lead on change culture
- Put key learning outcomes into a long-term strategy
- Invite other key functional areas that did not contribute to the current project to join the working group (e.g., library and computing)
- Use the project as a template and mirror successes in other equality and diversity areas (e.g., the race equality group)
- Run a follow-up event to feedback the outcome of the project to disabled students
- Embed participation and look at long-term objectives
- Run workshops to consult on other key areas of concern not addressed by the initial project
- Explore mechanisms for the dissemination of project outcomes across the sector
- Set up a website to further disseminate information to students and staff

Key learning points

- Success comes from a close working relationship between university staff and the students’ union
- Cross-departmental representation in the project group enabled key areas of concern to be addressed
- Outcomes are most effective when working in partnership to embed responsibility for disability issues across the institution
- The ideal communication strategy to engage disabled students would include targeted marketing methods such as email, text and telephone
= Commitment from the university executive is crucial to ensure staff buy-in in order to effect change culture

= It is important to maintain a consistent approach in considerations towards disabled students and staff

= Empower disabled students to be co-producers in their own student experience

**Lessons for other institutions**

= Do not just rely on dedicated disability departments and staff with disability as part of their remit

= Believe what you hear and be prepared to act on it – we considered this to be fundamental in capturing and responding to the disabled student voice

= Key objectives and learning outcomes from the project need to be incorporated into high level institutional strategies

= Get support for your goals from the highest level, both in the university and students’ union

= Do not rely on just one form of communication to engage disabled students, use all available tools (social networking, text, email, personal contact, etc)

= Be realistic in your goals
University of Staffordshire

HEI context

Geographical location
Midlands

Student numbers
= 17,800 students
= 1215 (7 per cent) disclosed that they were disabled

Relevant aspects of mission/corporate strategy or plan
Widening participation institution, which is clearly reflected in our university plan.

Associated strategies
A disability equality scheme developed at university, faculty and service levels.

Student involvement in development or implementation of equality schemes
= Staff-student initiatives at faculty/school level
= Direct email contact with all disabled students from the careers centre
= Initiatives set up by disabled student centres show that individual students wish to discuss more general issues

HEI progress in meeting equality issues
Development of a single equality scheme with a subscheme for disability equality, again at local faculty/service level.

Rationale for participation
To address the issue of our stated commitment to engage with disabled students in all university business and our failure to achieve that commitment.

Institutional goal, aim or vision for this project
Empower disabled students to engage with the university in a way that ensures the disabled student voice is influential in the development of the university’s future.
Interventions

= Mapped current opportunities for the involvement of disabled students across both the university and students’ union
= Found that levels of involvement were actually higher than we had anticipated but noted the clear gaps in the opportunities
= Ran a marketing campaign to encourage further engagement through a direct approach to disabled students
= Undertook a training needs analysis

Implementation process

= Encouraging disabled student centres, faculty and school disability coordinators and the students’ union to undertake the mapping exercise
= Holding preliminary meetings between disabled students and the head of disabled student centres

Institutional functions

Institutional functions targeted to further the involvement of disabled students
= Estates
= Other areas to target will be discussed during the training period identified in our action plan

Reason for choosing these areas
= Stoke-on-Trent campus is about to undergo redevelopment
= Ensure that disabled students are happy with both the area of engagement and the time commitment required for effective engagement

How the approach was tailored to the needs of these particular areas
= We had a formal arrangement between estates, project managers, disabled student centres and disabled students
= Training was organised and delivered for December 2009
Methods used to engage staff across functional areas

- Used the university's disability forum which is attended by representatives from all faculties, schools and services and responsible for monitoring the progress of the disability equality scheme
- Utilised the disability subgroup of the learning and teaching enhancement committee which is responsible for advising the main committee on requirements for the creation of inclusive learning and teaching environments
- Reminded managers of both their legal and institutional responsibilities towards disabled students

Main challenges
Resistance from some disabled staff who do not see the relevance of disclosure or have fears around disclosure.

Overcoming challenges
Legal and institutional responsibilities give the project leads significant leverage in taking forward our action plans, which was particularly evident in gaining the commitment of estates to engage formally with disabled students in an organised and functional way.

Methods used to engage disabled students across functional areas

- Included members drawn from both the university (academic and service staff) and the students’ union (the president) on the project team
- Encouraged joint commitment to take this agenda forward

Main challenges
- Some disabled students reported that they felt that they were being asked to engage at a tokenistic level
- There is a large number of local students who do not engage generally with university life
- General communication difficulties with all students
- Students not perceiving themselves as disabled
- Common ground issues (eg dyslexia v physical impairment)
No disabled student representation through students’ union societies

Overcoming challenges
We have sufficient ambassadors in the disabled student body to ensure that we gain the involvement of more disabled students than before.

Key achievements
- Recognising that we needed a systematic approach to improving the engagement of disabled students in university functions
- Recognising the extent of engagement already achieved through the mapping exercise and the opportunities to build on that base

Evidence that interventions have been successful
- Establishment and maintenance of the disabled students engagement group
- Maintenance of communication between group and facilitator

Next steps
How the institution plans to continue this work and ensure the sustainability of the interventions/developments implemented
- Continue with the identified actions and see the action plan through to its conclusion
- Use what has been gained this year to maintain the enthusiasm and momentum into the next year
- Employ the disabled students we are working with this year as the mentors for disabled students in the future
- Plan a marketing event for October and have high hopes that this will be a success

Key learning points
- Be prepared to change your initial plan where needed
- Make no assumptions about the level of engagement disabled students are likely to offer
- Prepare a persuasive argument that will show disabled students they can make a difference and be agents for change
Lessons for other institutions

= Prepare the ground for engagement through your disability equality scheme action plan – this should make staff engagement more straightforward
= Check your current levels of involvement through a mapping exercise
University of Sunderland

HEI context

Geographical location
North-east England

Student numbers
= 14,000 students (approximately)
= 6 per cent are disabled

Relevant aspects of mission/corporate strategy or plan
= Our academic strategy, enhancing the student experience, reaffirmed our commitment to listen to the student voice and provide our students with the best possible experience
= We have a strong widening participation mission
= We work closely with partners throughout our city and region

Student involvement in development or implementation of equality schemes
= We work closely with our students in everything we do
= We recently restructured academic committees to ensure consistent and meaningful engagement with the student voice

HEI progress in meeting equality issues
= Opportunity Now (gold award holder)
= Athena SWAN (bronze award holder)
= Stonewall (diversity champion)
= Universities that Count
= Disability Tick employer

Rationale for participation
To embed consultation with, and involvement of, disabled students from the strategic to the operational level.
Institutional goal, aim or vision for this project
Explore ways of hearing the disabled student voice.

Interventions
- Involved disabled students in shaping the future of their university
- Built a positive and supportive culture that is student and diversity centred
- Translated university functions, initiatives and themes into student-centred projects
- Encouraged students to get involved in the projects and engage with the identified themes
- Provided an opportunity for students to identify additional areas or issues that motivated their interest
- Promoted disability equality in university-wide communication and marketing
- Involved disabled students in shaping the postgraduate research student experience for the future
- Increased student participation in the disability equality duty working group
- Stimulated a desire for long-term student engagement through encouraging participation
- Established student working groups to address each of our project themes

Implementation process
- Assigning the student team member as coordinator, who would be the initial point of contact for disabled students
- Providing an opportunity to gauge progress along the way through project team meetings

Institutional functions
Institutional functions targeted to further the involvement of disabled students
- Marketing and communications
- Graduate research support
- Academic experience committee
= Diversity
= Students’ union

**Reason for choosing these areas**

Functions to be targeted were identified from the university’s disability action plan, feedback from some disabled students and student-centred developments.

**Marketing and communications**

= Ensure accessibility of university communication
= Include positive images of disability in marketing materials

**Graduate research support**

= Engage disabled research students in a discussion about issues faced and how the university could improve the postgraduate research student experience

**Academic experience committee**

= Incorporate disabled students’ views and needs into the production of the student promise document, working together

**Diversity**

= Increase student membership and input into the disability equality duty group’s work including the production of the disability action plan and disability equality scheme

**Students’ union**

= Ensure disabled students are well represented within the students’ union

**Graduate research support**

= Find out why disabled postgraduate research students are less satisfied with some aspects of their experience than the postgraduate research student body as a whole

**Methods used to engage staff across functional areas**

= Used the academic experience committee to appeal to senior staff
= Gave a presentation at the annual collaborative conference (delegates drawn from across the university and partner colleges) of our project and findings
= Arranged one-to-one meetings with relevant senior staff
Main challenges
Suggestion from both staff and students that students were suffering from engagement fatigue.

Methods used to engage disabled students across functional areas
- Sent an invitation from the student member of the project team to every disabled student of the university to attend an open discussion about the project and its themes
- Established individual working groups, each covering one of the key project objectives and each with its own action plan and methodology
- Set up a Facebook site to engage with students

Main challenges
- Sustaining student involvement
- The number of students in each of the working groups who consistently worked with us was relatively small (three to four students in each group)

Overcoming challenges
The Facebook site, which was set up to encourage further student engagement, has had some initial success in doing so.

Key achievements
- Increasing the number of students who regularly attend the disability equality duty working group
- Raising a number of issues for discussion

Marketing and communications
- Including more images of disabled students in university publicity materials
- Facilitating direct communication between the students and the head of marketing due to a review of marketing and communication methodologies and materials

Graduate research support
- Including information on disability services in induction for research staff and welcome packs for research students
Academic experience committee

= Identifying issues with the student promise document, working together, which were fed into the final version

Students’ union

= Proposing to set up a disabled students society

Evidence that interventions have been successful

Diversity

= Redraft of our disability equality scheme

Students’ union

= Disabled students identifying issues that the university should address as part of the equality and diversity agenda

Next steps

How the institution plans to continue this work and ensure the sustainability of the interventions/developments implemented

= Continue to work with disabled students through the disability equality duty working group, in particular on the revised disability equality scheme

= Support students in setting up a disabled students society and to use this society as a focal point for activities and for engaging with the disabled student voice

= Continue to experiment with Facebook and social networking as a medium for engaging with disabled students

= Promote the lessons learned and disseminate the experiences we have had within our university and nationally

Key learning points

= Initial interest is strong but it takes work and effort to sustain this

= Many of the issues that disabled students raise are similar to those raised by students in general

= Everything takes longer than you think it will

= It is important to empower disabled students so that they feel confident and able to take forward issues themselves
It is important to train students so that they are able to represent the disabled student body in a fair and meaningful way.
Swansea University

HEI context

Geographical location
Wales

Student numbers
- 14,000 students
- 1100 (approximately 8 per cent) disclosed a disability

Relevant aspects of mission/corporate strategy or plan
Aims to provide a working and learning environment free from unfair discrimination, which will enable staff and students to fulfil their full potential.

Student involvement in development or implementation of equality schemes
- Disability and equality working group to gather student comments and feedback on draft policy and procedures before the processes are confirmed
- Ability for students to give formal feedback directly to the disability office

Rationale for participation
To understand and relieve the difficulty experienced in engaging students at an appropriate level to ensure engagement with these issues.

Institutional goal, aim or vision for this project
Develop an inclusive curriculum.

Interventions
- Developed inclusive curriculum by:
  - developing support, training and policy
  - considering appropriate alternative assessment methods
  - anticipating possible student needs to reduce the requirement to make specific provision for individual students
  - consulting with students
Swansea University

- considering the appropriateness and effectiveness of guidance and support for staff
- reviewing the effectiveness of reasonable adjustments in relation to assessment and examinations

= Established a working group to look at the quality, availability and appropriateness of the documentation and support provided to staff and students
= Established a student working group to enable consultation and debate to feed into the project
= Developed a social networking site for students to engage in active discussion and involvement with the project

Implementation process

= Reviewing how support and training was advertised and what support/guidance was offered to staff
= Developing a guide for staff – supporting students with disabilities guide
= Feeding back to students in plain English through the students’ union representative

Institutional functions

Institutional functions targeted to further the involvement of disabled students

= Staff development
= Student voice
= Students’ union

Reason for choosing these areas

Staff development

= Implement more appropriate and effective support to nurture relationships between staff and students with specific needs so that students do not need to rely entirely on their support plans

Student voice

= Hear student opinion and experiences
Provide useful insights into the practicalities of a number of proposals, which had previously been overlooked at an institutional level

**Students’ union**

- Increase discussion between the students’ union and the forum for disabled students
- Ensure disabled students feel included within the activities of the students’ union

**How the approach was tailored to the needs of these particular areas**

The student voice project was led by a university representative and a students’ union representative.

**Methods used to engage staff across functional areas**

- Ensured that staff understood that this was a project the university intended to take seriously and encouraged participation
- Used a joint approach between university staff and the students’ union
- Provided timely and effective feedback following each session to retain focus and keep individuals engaged
- Gave real life examples and experiences which helped all involved to understand why specific approaches are required

**Main challenges**

Finding appropriate time slots to meet with all of the staff involved and ensure that sufficient time was allotted to complete our deliberations.

**Overcoming challenges**

Flexibility was essential and small group meetings were often called for to talk about very specific areas.

**Methods used to engage disabled students across functional areas**

- Invited the students’ union sabbatical officer as the student voice at all meetings
- Held open forum sessions led by students to ensure that students felt comfortable enough to share their experiences and thoughts
Swansea University

= Created a social networking site where students could drop in and out when it suited them
= Followed up a questionnaire asking students about their experiences with an email from their disability coordinator to encourage involvement and offer support and advice
= Enabled students to anonymously email, telephone or send in any issues that they felt should be raised

Main challenges
Take up for the student forum was initially slow.

Overcoming challenges
Engagement increased by making a conscious effort to discuss issues with students using student-friendly terminology.

Key achievements
= Setting up the student forum and social networking area
= Placing discussions with disabled students about their needs as a regular agenda item for university meetings
= Agreeing the development of the supporting students with disabilities guide and associated training programme
= Agreeing to set up an enhancement review to consider the appropriateness of current reasonable adjustments in relation to learning, assessments and examinations

Evidence that interventions have been successful
Engagement with the student forum increased and students utilised the social networking area to discuss their needs in more detail.

Next steps
How the institution plans to continue this work and ensure the sustainability of the interventions/developments implemented
= Continue student forum meetings both in a physical capacity and online to retain student involvement
Continue development of the supporting students with disabilities guide and associated training programme

Students might develop training sessions for staff themselves

Complete the enhancement review considering the appropriateness of current reasonable adjustments in relation to learning, assessments and examinations

Key learning points

Ensure that the senior management team, schools, support staff and students’ union are all committed to the project from the outset

Utilise students’ union links when developing publicity material and documentation aimed at the student body

Flexibility is essential – think about whether the project needs the student to be physically in attendance or whether a more virtual approach is appropriate

Feedback is key – students will disengage very quickly if they are not regularly updated with progress

Lessons for other institutions

It is essential that we remember just how much of our committee level language and terminology means nothing to the outside world

Our students preferred to be advised that there were issues we could not solve rather than feeling that their issues were falling on deaf ears

Your initial project plan will be too ambitious – evaluate the most urgent issues and then park some for a future academic session
University of the West of England

HEI context

Geographical location
Bristol

Student numbers
= 31,000 students (approximately), more than 21,000 are full-time
= 8.2 per cent of students in 2008/09 declared a disability

Relevant aspects of mission/corporate strategy or plan
To create a teaching and learning environment where every person can thrive and where the institutional ethos is that the university, in all its many facets, should include everyone, including disabled people.

Student involvement in development or implementation of equality schemes
= Meaningful student involvement in the development of equality schemes had been ad hoc rather than integrated into the institutional culture
= Involvement of disabled students has inevitably been tokenistic, typically with one particular student being invited on to a committee without being empowered to represent the wider constituency of disabled students
= More opportunities for students in general to make their voices heard, but the feelings and experiences of disabled students have been in danger of being submerged within this wider group

HEI progress in meeting equality issues
= The appointment of an equality and diversity manager (December 2007) and two additional staff (2008)
= Conducting a review of the support offered to disabled students (2007)
= Establishing a disability working group

Rationale for participation
To review mechanisms for involving disabled students in the development of a more inclusive institution following a period of institutional change, reorganisation
of faculties and the appointment of a new vice-chancellor and to ensure that the involvement of disabled students did not lose its place on the agenda in the move towards a single equalities policy.

**Institutional goal, aim or vision for this project**
Embed inclusive practices and create a change in attitude so that the involvement of disabled students was mainstreamed and seen as an institutional strength.

**Interventions**
- Ensured the involvement of disabled students in the disability working group
- Increased involvement of disabled students in the development of the new roles of administrative and academic faculty disability contacts
- Involved disabled students in the design of new buildings and spaces
- Ensured the involvement of dyslexic students in service improvement
- Developed the disabled students group so that it became a self-sustaining, independent group led by disabled students for disabled students

**Implementation process**
- Inviting members of the disabled students group to the disability working group
- Discussing how to make the meetings more accessible to students with the chair
- Developing a new induction and training package for faculty disability contacts in partnership with disabled students
- Creating an award to value publicly work in faculties that actively involved disabled students
- Lobbying for meaningful consultation with disabled students from the start of the design process for all building projects, particularly for the new master plan for the extended campus
- Piloting focus groups as a mechanism for obtaining feedback from dyslexic students, with particular reference to developing student-led solutions to recognised problems
- Creating a part-time disabled student’s officer post to raise the profile of the group
Institutional functions

Institutional functions targeted to further the involvement of disabled students

- Teaching and learning
- Faculty administration
- Estates
- Student services
- Students’ union

Reason for choosing these areas

Teaching and learning
- Ensure equality of access to the curriculum

Faculty administration
- Ensure consistency of service delivery

Estates
- Have responsibility for new developments and campus master plan

Student services
- Maintain the project operationally

Students’ union
- Develop opportunities for students to make their voices heard

How the approach was tailored to the needs of these particular areas

Teaching and learning and student services
- Used existing committee structure

Faculty administration
- Utilised existing development work

Estates and students’ union
- Personal contact

Student services
- Capitalised on existing enthusiasm of staff
Methods used to engage staff across functional areas

- Personally approached the chair of the disability working group and associated task group chairs to discuss the changes in working practices that had been advised by the chair of the disabled students group
- Devised an approach towards the involvement of disabled students in staff training
- Secured funding to create an award celebrating inclusive practices within faculties
- Held consultation events on the proposed plan for the new campus extension
- Adjusted the arrangements that had been agreed for a new building to provide a more equitable solution to the design problem regarding the arrangements for disabled access to the building
- Met with staff representing faculties and services to discuss how support for dyslexic students could be improved to which student representatives were invited
- Referred enquiries from functional departments to the disabled students group

Main challenges

- Implementation of the adjustment of working practices coincided with the examination period and a consequent lack of representation of disabled students
- Lack of funding has prevented further progress for involving disabled students in staff development training
- No specific session had considered aspects of the master plan that might have an impact on disabled students
- Persuading staff that the consultation must be meaningful and that simply speaking to the convener of the group does not constitute a sufficient level of involvement

Overcoming challenges

- Work into adjustment of working practices is ongoing
- Disability working group is considering training for faculty disability contacts for which disabled students are involved in the planning and delivery
- Additional event organised
Methods used to engage disabled students across functional areas

- Held discussions between project team and chair of the disabled students group
- Sent an open invitation to all students to encourage participation in a consultative event
- Invited all students who had indicated on their UCAS form that they have a specific learning difference to a meeting including faculty disability contacts and tutors to discuss how support for them could be improved
- Encouraged the disabled students group in its activities and holding regular meetings with the chair of the group

Main challenges

- Open invitation clearly a flawed method as it will not facilitate the involvement of disabled students who are reluctant to disclose as disabled in a public forum
- The disabled students group currently does not have the capacity to respond to all queries and requests
- Ideas for involvement came to fruition during periods of high pressure for students and reduced the scope for student involvement as the students naturally gave priority to examinations or coursework submission deadlines
- Finding ways of contacting disabled students particularly in relation to students with mental health issues
- Unavoidable changes in personnel in the disabled students group caused by the normal departure of students on completion of their studies means that some initiatives for involvement have had to start again with new people
- Convincing the wider community of the university that student involvement is a crucial part of activity is not always straightforward
- Convincing staff of the importance of involvement

Overcoming challenges

- Embedding the disabled students group into the students’ union framework has helped to overcome the problem of having to restart initiatives for involvement each year
- Persistence in persuading people helps to convince the wider university community that involvement is crucial
= Continued activity of the disabled students group will provide us with some concrete examples of where partnership working leads to genuine achievements

**Key achievements**

= Agreeing the principle of ensuring more accessible and student-friendly committee meetings

= Agreeing funding for an annual award for staff working to support disabled students or make substantial improvements to the experience of disabled students

= Organising a specific event to involve disabled students in the master planning exercise

= Holding a focus group of students with specific learning differences

= Continuing the disabled students group

**Evidence that interventions have been successful**

Profile of disabled students has been raised within the students’ union (eg disability sport has been established).

**Next steps**

**How the institution plans to continue this work and ensure the sustainability of the interventions/developments implemented**

= Continue to discuss with the chair of the disabled students group how future meetings can involve disabled students at a more meaningful level

= Approach the staff development unit for funding for an induction and training programme for faculty disability contacts with a contribution from disabled students

= Ensure that full participation of disabled students in the master planning exercise continues and becomes part of every change to the campus and its buildings

= Work closely with estates to help to embed the importance of closer working with disabled students in the achievement of the aims of the inclusive university

= Consider closer association with dyslexic students
Explore idea of a dyslexia café as an opportunity for dyslexic students to exchange views and provide mutual support

Hold a consultation with disabled students to provide the first-ever opportunity for disabled students at the university to discuss issues affecting them and to express views on current practice and policy development

Key learning points

- Personal contacts and face-to-face discussions tend to be the most useful way of convincing staff of the importance of student involvement
- Working with disabled students to encourage individuals to participate can be rewarding as it is possible to see individuals grow into the role of representing others (e.g. as chair of a group or representative at a meeting)
- A side-effect of increased involvement is increased confidence in the individuals who become involved
- It is difficult to get beyond the initial group of enthusiasts to recruit others to undertake this work
- Academic staff superiors are likely to view this type of work as a ‘hobby’ rather than a constituent part of the role of an academic
- Funding for initiatives to encourage the involvement of disabled students is difficult to secure
- Listening to disabled students and encouraging them to become involved can produce creative solutions to existing problems and lead to genuine improvements in the way that a service is organised

Lessons for other institutions

Reflect on the key learning points.
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