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What can we learn from the systems in place in the higher education sector to support international students with a disability?

University of Kent



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What can we learn from the systems in place in the higher education sector to support international students with a disability?

Dr Andres Velarde, Philippa Moreton and Graham Gorvett, University of Kent.

Executive summary

This paper reports on the findings of the AMOSSHE-funded research project conducted between December 2013 and May 2014 by the University of Kent on Disability Support Services that have been developed in the UK higher education (HE) sector for international and European Union disabled students. The evaluations and reflections of participating universities are also presented.

The different operational structures for the advisory and assessment of needs have been established; the extent of the provisions of auxiliary aids and services as well as their budget mechanisms have been identified; and the constraints and difficulties of the workings of university Disability Services have been ascertained.

The results of the research are, in many cases, unexpected and striking. Some universities show that they have developed advanced systems that enable them to anticipate students' needs and provide comprehensive support provisions. These systems are incipient in a minority of institutions, but are consistent with a model of support that ensures international competitiveness. The majority of universities' financial systems, however, show weaknesses that are compensated for by the commitment and creativity of members of staff.

This paper identifies good practices that universities may wish to take into consideration when designing their policies, and reflects on the implications of the findings in terms of their long-term impact on institutions' internationalisation strategies.

About the research

The aim of the research project is to increase awareness of the varied and existing systems of support across the sector for international and European Union disabled students (referred to henceforth as 'international disabled students' in this report), their advantages and the areas for possible improvement. It is hoped the research will provide Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) with a greater understanding of how to improve services, and to enable good practice to be shared.

This project also seeks to identify institutional challenges and highlight the views of disability specialists who are responsible for organising support to help students successfully complete their academic studies, in accordance with the requirements of the Equality Act 2010.

Upon a request from AMOSSHE, the research includes a strand of investigation into the type of systems developed in the sector to finance the support of international disabled students, and identifies the possibilities and limitations of the different systems used.

The research aims to provide a greater understanding of the model(s) of disability support developed by universities that are embracing and dealing with the challenges of globalisation.

The objectives

Three main objectives were identified in terms of achieving the main aims of this project:

1. To ascertain the level of services for these students provided by the posts that deal with disability support in seven areas:
 - Administration and monitoring
 - Assessment of needs
 - Financial resources
 - Care and medical needs
 - Auxiliary aids, for example equipment, hardware/software
 - Auxiliary services, for example non-medical helpers, accommodation and transport
 - Reasonable adjustments to teaching and learning
2. To identify the challenges that institutions face.
3. To evaluate institutions' experiences and identify areas for improvement.

The context and background of the research

Over the last 30 years, HE in the UK has become increasingly international with a high global demand for study at British universities. According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), 299,555 students in the UK (12.8%) came from outside the European Union (EU) and 126,375 (5.4%) were from countries within the EU in 2012-13. International students, therefore, constituted approximately a fifth (425,930 or 18.2%) of the UK HE student population¹.

In terms of their region of derivation, undergraduate international students come from Asia (35.1%), Europe (35.1%), Africa (6.3%), Middle East (5.5%) and North America (5.2%)².

¹ HESA's statistics for the year 2012-2013 show a total number of 2,340,275 enrolled students. Kelly, U., McLellan, D., and McNicoll, (2013, p.16). "The impact of universities on the UK economy. Universities UK, <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/news/newsarchive/2013/news81928.html> <Last visited on 06.05.2014>

² Ibidem.

It is estimated that international students contribute approximately £2.3 billion per year to the UK economy⁴.

In terms of disability access, the HE sector has also developed a very international outlook. Available data shows increasing numbers of international disabled students accessing UK Higher Education. In 2010-2011 there were 10,305 international disabled students, representing 5.4% or 199,925 of the total number of disabled students. From 2009/2010 to 2010/2011 numbers increased from 9,395 to 10,305 – an increase of 9.7%, with an accumulative growth of 54.2% between 2005-2006 and 2010-2011.

The figures cited above indicate that HEIs are operating in an increasingly specialised international market for disabled-accessible higher education.

This research considers that there is a need to broaden the evidence-based data regarding the support provided to international disabled students in the HE sector, and inform policy developments within the sector.

The complexity of this task is considerable. These students have different funding arrangements to support the extra costs associated with their disabilities whilst studying in the UK. International disabled students are not entitled to funding support such as the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA). Students are also not eligible for secondary health services such as therapists, treatments and equipment via the National Health Service (NHS). Often, their assessment of needs requires the consideration of different funding arrangements, the organisation of private care services, the harmonisation of diverse cultural understandings and (occasionally opposed) medical models. In summary, HEIs operate various models of disability support. This project seeks to investigate how these institutions manage those differences.

Although there exists a current trend of research on disability issues in HE institutions (Adams and Brown 2000; Riddell, Tinklin and Wilson 2005; Adams and Holland 2006), the effects of globalisation from a disability perspective have received less attention. The works of Patricia McLean (2003), in Australia, on the challenges to HEIs, and Armineh Soorenia (2011, 2013), in the UK, showing the international disabled students' perspectives on their pursuit of support in HE, invite a serious scrutiny of the state of provision from an institutional viewpoint.

Disability legislation in the UK is clear with regards to the equitable treatment of international students. HEIs have a duty to make equal anticipatory arrangements, reasonable adjustments, provisions of auxiliary aids and services, etc. It does not lessen the level of provision with regards to the domicile of students or their (in)eligibility for government funding such as the DSA³. The legislation, on the

³ The Disability Student Allowance (DSA) is a government-funded scheme for each eligible student to compensate for the extra cost they would incur in HE because of their disability. The DSA would pay for auxiliary aids (e.g. enabling equipment) and services (e.g. note-taking, sign language interpreting, dyslexia tuition, etc.) and it is generally administered by HEIs on behalf of students. For an overview, go to: <https://www.gov.uk/disabled-students-allowances-dsas/overview>

contrary, appears to increase the level of expected organisational intervention when students do not have access to funding and at the same time pay high fees⁴.

The above invites an enquiry into the type of provision that is available for international students in the HE sector.

Supporting international students is an area of specialisation due to the complexities involved. Educational literature shows that international disabled students are potentially exposed to added difficulties in their host institutions: misconceptions regarding their learning (Kimeber, 2009); different academic needs based on their complex identities (Gasman and Vultaggio, 2009); and added vulnerabilities during their cultural transition, which might include issues around identity, perceptions of power relationships, gender roles, achievement and expectations, perceptions of discrimination and modification of social networks (Bhugra, 2004; 2012).

Anecdotal evidence would suggest that HEIs are providing comparable support for these students. However, and more importantly, there is no information on how this support takes into account any specific complexities and how these might be funded. Many international students come from very contrasting backgrounds, but there is no information as to how disability services are dealing with these differences.

There is a need to evaluate the provision of support to international students for institutional reasons. Since the introduction of tuition fees to the HE sector, HEIs are, in effect, competing on a global stage, and international disabled students are therefore, intentionally or not, part of their marketing strategy. Recruitment of disabled international students has increased since the introduction of tuition fees (Currie and Vidovich, 2009). This appears to be an unintended development that requires further investigation.

Over the last ten years the internationalisation strategies of HEIs have coincided with the application of disability equality legislation, and have given the HE sector in the UK an initial competitive advantage in the global market of disabled accessible higher education.

This, combined with the slow pace of development of disability provision in the European Union and elitist education systems in emerging economies (e.g. India, Brazil, China) (Ka Ho Mok, 2009), has facilitated the efforts of these HEIs to embrace their disability equality obligations. This has enabled the sector to position itself very effectively in the market for disabled-accessible higher education. The initial advantageous position for UK HE institutions, however, is not stable, as internationalisation is also making HEIs in the UK vulnerable to fluctuations in the global student market: the average proportion of international students in the UK is 15 to 25% (Currie and Vidovich, 2009)

<https://owa.connect.kent.ac.uk/OWA/?ae=Item&t=IPM.Note&id=RgAAAADuAr%2fE>

⁴ The Equality Act 2010 establishes a series of factors to be taken into account when considering what adjustment is reasonable. Amongst them are the size and resources of the institution and the availability of grants and other assistance to disabled students for the purpose of enabling to receive student service. Equality challenge Unit (2013: Point 2.3.2), and SKILL (2010).

[TuO%2bTL1rTiTQGyEiBwC7L5uPzH0oTqrjoblWOB0AAAAMEAeAAC7L5uPzH0oTqrjoblWOB0AACbERnHAAAJ - x ftn5](#). As the UK has an approximate 12% share of the international student market in recruitment terms (Currie and Vidovich, 2009), and is competing with countries with established disability support systems such as Australia, the USA and Canada, HEIs are required to monitor developments in different student support areas, the provision for international disabled students being one of them⁵.

The internationalisation of HE is also bringing about robust pressures for the globalisation of standards in their disability services. This research aims to provide the institutional perspective regarding the state of provision to international disabled students in the UK HE sector.

The research strategy, methodology and methods of data collection

The research strategy for this project was to secure the institutional engagement through the participation of specialists who provide advice and support to international disabled students. A particular approach was used to highlight the transactional elements between the actors involved, which characterise a business model of disabilities (Albrecht, 1992). This administrative business model was chosen to facilitate the transmission of new understandings within institutions, and change (Velarde, 2012) by eliciting consistency on the operation of institutional services.

The research was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, all 145 HEIs with AMOSSHE membership were contacted by an introductory letter and asked if they would be willing to participate in the research via their Disability Services. Alternative means of communication was offered to disabled members of staff in partner institutions.

Fifty institutions offered to participate and designated a named member of staff as the point of contact for the project.

In the second stage, the named contact was invited to complete a survey on behalf of their institution to establish basic statistics in relation to disabled international students, key elements of their support provisions, provide self-evaluation of the administrative challenge and volunteer feedback on the perceived areas for improvement. In total, 37 institutions participated in the survey.

Participating institutions comprised a cross section of geographical locations, classifications, including the Russell Group, Million+ and 1994 Group.

⁵ According to HESA, the influx of international students to the HE sector was affected by the financial crisis of 2008, although not in the same way as domestic students. From 2012-2013, the recruitment of UK undergraduate students decreased by 7.4% and postgraduate students decreased by 5.9%. In contrast, international students experienced a different trend. Non-EU undergraduate students increased by 3.2% in the same period (a lower rate than in previous years) while other EU students decreased at a lower extent (4.4%). HESA: http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_search <last seen 16.05.2014>

The methodology used is a version of Action Research (Bryman 1989, Elliott 1991, Mills 2000).

The research allowed flexibility so the information requested could be expanded and redirected by the disability specialists involved. Individuals were encouraged to use their day to day work for their case studies, with their findings informing possible future actions. Following Cohen and Manion, 1994 (in Carr Kemmis, 1986), the researcher's role was to encourage the participants to monitor their own practices, enhance their practical judgements and self-reflect on the reasons for their own actions concerning support for international and EU disabled students.

The study included three methods of data collection:

- survey
- different forms of semi-standardised interviewing
- analysis of documentation and data.

Particular care was given to the handling of disability-related data, to comply with the requirements of the Data Protection Act 1998.

The preferred validation method of the observed data was the use of 'abduction inference', or the best explanations in the process of reasoning (Evers 2007, pg. 200).

Timeline

In January 2014, the University of Kent put forward to AMOSSHE its proposal for a research project to find out: "What can we learn from the systems in place in the HE sector to support international students with a disability?"

The aim of the research is to increase awareness of the varied and existing systems of support across the sector for international disabled students, their advantages and the areas for possible improvement. It is hoped the research will provide HEIs with a greater understanding of how to improve services, and to enable good practice to be shared.

Following approval of the project proposal the Head of Student Support and Wellbeing Graham Gorvett, International and EU Adviser and project leader Dr Andres Velarde, and project assistant Philippa Moreton met to discuss how to proceed with the project, and to agree the methodology to be used.

An introductory letter was sent out to all AMOSSHE members in January 2014, inviting them to participate in the research project. Over 50 institutions responded, indicating their willingness to take part in the survey.

Beatrice Addo, AMOSSHE's Policy and Research Officer, visited the University of Kent in February 2014 to assess the team's progress with the project, and monitored progress regularly by phone.

In early March 2014, a survey was sent out by email to the HEIs who had replied positively to the introductory letter and, in that first week, 15 institutions responded. A further 18 institutions responded by the end of March 2014 and, following a reminder email, another four completed the survey in April 2014. By the

end of April 2014, 37 institutions had taken part in the survey, with 33 of those completing it fully.

The survey itself required a certain amount of detail and took at least 10 minutes to complete. The team were extremely grateful to those institutions that took the time to complete the survey in full. Many of the responses were very thorough and informative, and provided a real insight into the issues and problems surrounding international disabled students.

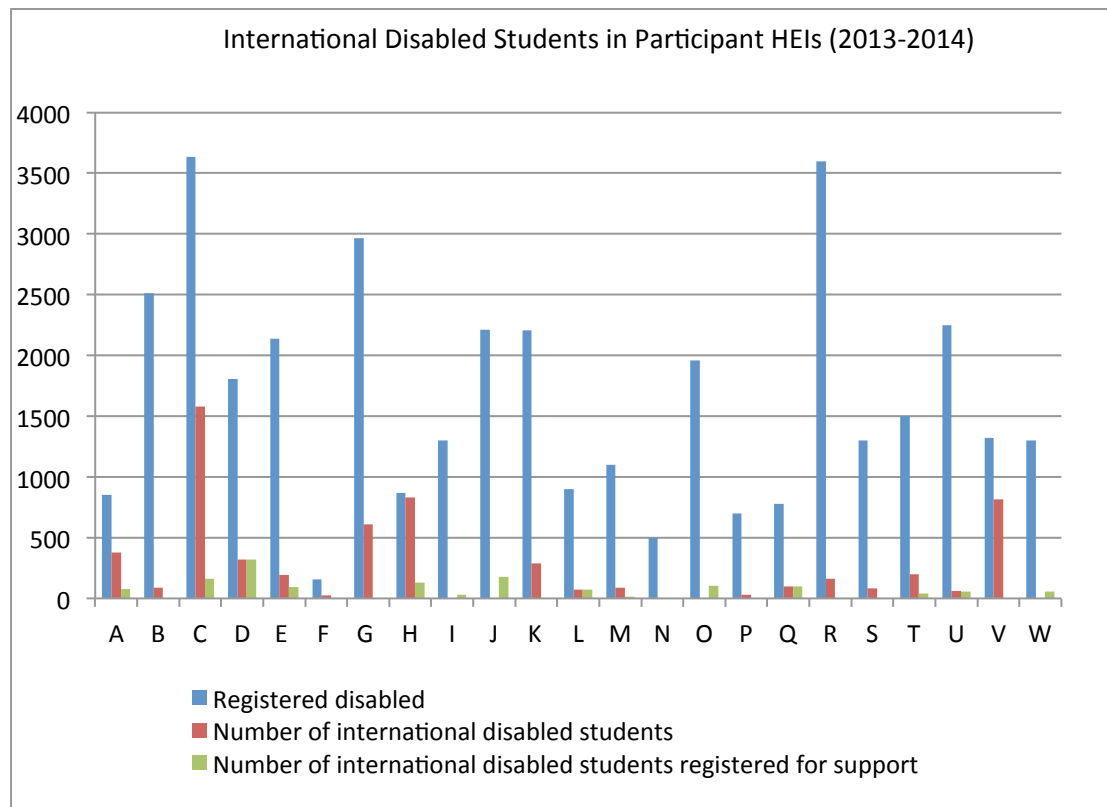
While most institutions were able to provide figures for the total number of students, total number of disabled students and total number of international students, few were able to say how many international disabled students they had, as this number was seldom registered separately from UK disabled students.

The findings

International disabled students in HE

The research shows that HEIs are currently receiving an influx of international disabled students. Although a minority in the participating institutions, they represent a substantial subgroup. This is shown in institutions C, G, H and V (see Diagram 1).

Diagram 1:



In institutions C and V, international disabled students constitute approximately half of the disabled students' numbers, and in institution H, their numbers are slightly below the numbers of UK disabled students.

Diagram 1 provides an indication that the influx of international students is in proportion to the rate at which institutions are developing internationalisation strategies. These strategies include overseas recruitment and entail the expansion of their operations. This, in effect, means the export of their educational services to other countries outside the UK, including distant learning programmes, joint programmes with foreign universities, satellite campuses, etc., all of which increase the numbers of international students effectively enrolling in UK universities.

The research shows that although the majority of HEIs are aware of the increasing number of international disabled students in their institutions, some do not systematically collect statistical information in the same way that they do for UK disabled students. In some cases, institutions do not seek to establish whether international disabled students are actually registered for support or not. Although this lack of information cannot be equated as an indication of a lack of awareness or duty of care, it may hint at an indication that institutions are unintentionally prioritising other disabled students. A possible explanation for this may lay in the fact that the collection of statistical data with regards to disability issues concerns capturing and reporting on the use of government funding (DSA funding; premium funding⁶) by UK universities. The lack of systematic collection of data for international disabled students may also be indicative of a predominant reactive rather than anticipatory approach to disability support, at least towards this subgroup of students. All in all, institutions that do have statistical systems in place are better prepared to create strategies and inform policy to address the impact of the internationalisation on the services they provide to disabled international students.

International disabled students as a subgroup

The research sought to establish the significance of disabled international students for participating institutions. The aim was to identify them as a proportion of the disabled student population to highlight their standing as a subgroup in their institution. The finding was that in general they represent a significant proportion of the registered disabled for support in their institutions - see Diagram 2 below. Diagram 2 shows the percentage of disabled students in their institutions (in blue) and the percentage of disabled international students within the group of disabled students (in red). In a few cases they have a similar proportion (see proportions in institutions G, J, N). In other cases they have a wider proportion (for example institutions E, H, K, P).

Three institutions reported that international disabled students represent between 10 and 15% of the disabled student numbers. They represented more than 5% of the

⁶ Premium funding is a government transfer to HEIs to make anticipatory arrangements and ensure continuity of service for disabled students. It is set with a formula that considers eligible students. For more information <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/wp/currentworktowidenparticipation/howwefundwideningparticipation/>

disabled students in three institutions and 5% or less in 13 institutions. Nineteen institutions revealed that they did not collect statistical records of international disabled students.

Diagram 2:

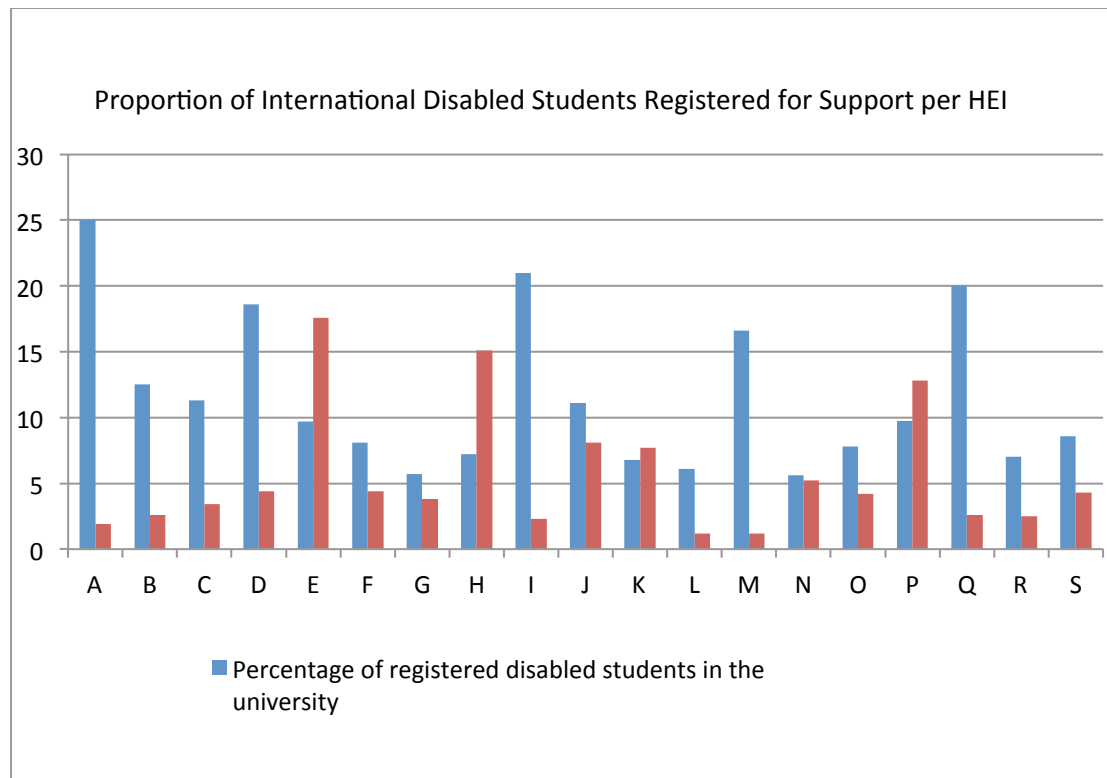


Diagram 2 demonstrates that international disabled students represent a significant subgroup within the disabled student population in universities. In some cases, their proportion is greater than the proportion between the non-disabled/disabled student ratio. This indicates that they may be demanding significant attention from their disability services. This characteristic can be indicative of the possibility and, perhaps, convenient to address their needs as a special sub-category.

This introduces the subject of how institutions, in effect, support international students.

How have international disabled students been supported?

The survey requested information on the current support provisions in three ways. Firstly, disability specialists were asked to inform us if they have a specialist officer to coordinate their support and who carried out the assessment of their needs. Secondly, they were asked if the students were required to contribute to the cost of support services via a list, or if they were covered by the institution (partially or totally), and to provide information on how their institution budgeted for the cost of their support. Thirdly, they were asked to provide feedback on the level of difficulty they experience on a list of common issues arising from supporting international students. What follows are the findings in these three areas.

Coordination and assessment of needs

The research shows that the majority of the universities (92%) coordinate the support services to international students through the same structure of disability specialists as are used for UK students. These structures are typically organised by disability specialisation (such as sensory and mobility; special learning difference⁷; mental health, etc.). International students are not a subgroup in themselves.

However, 8% of universities have created specialised services for international students, considering them as a subgroup within the service, because of the complexities that surround their impairments. The research shows that traditional services encounter greater difficulties than specialist ones in supporting international students in nearly all areas of support.

The specialised services are typically coordinated by a full-time International Disability Adviser who has expertise in the field, and is able to integrate international and cultural issues into disability practices. The post coordinates on four levels: within the disability service for the provision of auxiliary aids and services and additional expertise; within the institution across Schools and Departments; externally, with private providers of services not provided by the University such as care or secondary health services; and abroad with foreign institutions, international specialists and funding authorities as well as other third parties (British Council, for example).

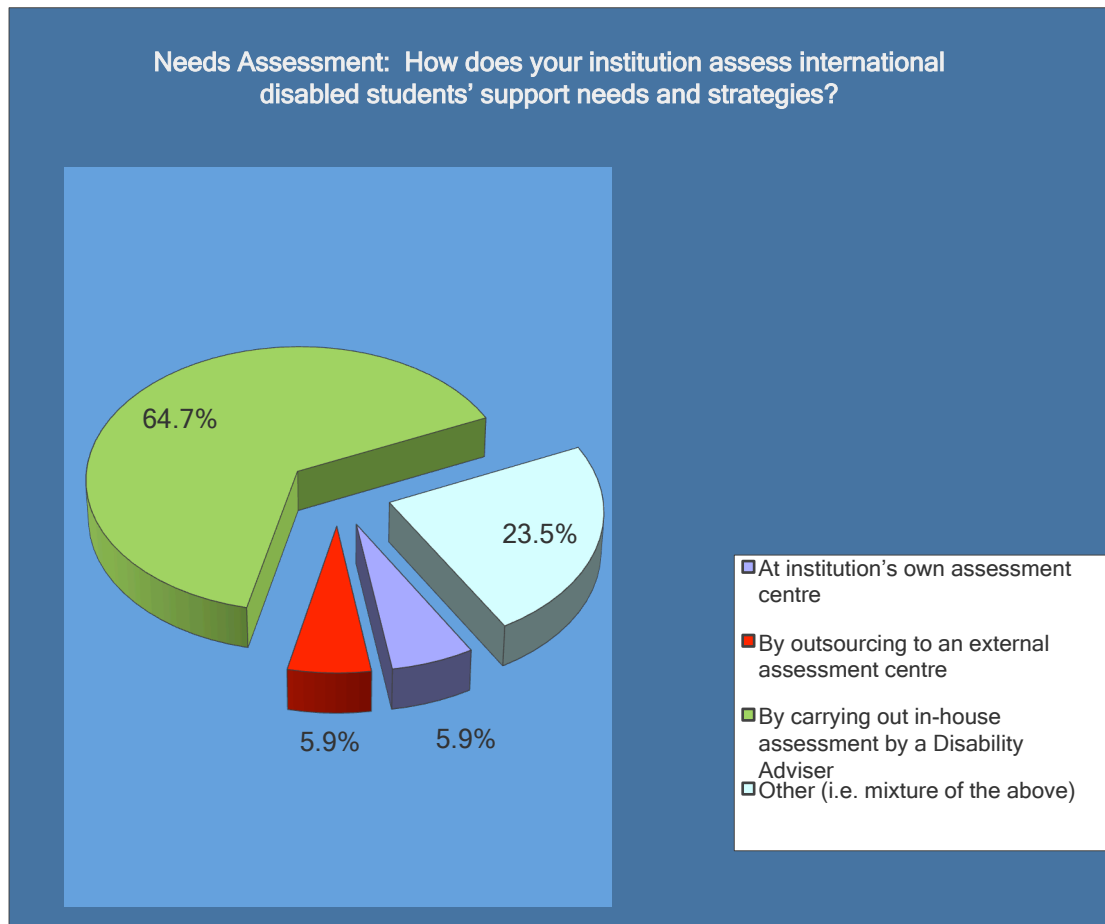
This person specialises in balancing different disability models, anticipatory strategies, support for transition, in-house assessment of needs, and monitoring and liaison with third parties.

The assessment of needs

This area of disability support is a special feature of support for international students. As a general rule, all local disabled students are assessed in independent assessment centres, external or internal to the institution, not by Disability Services. The results of the survey suggest that, in contrast, international students are, in the majority of cases, assessed in-house by their university's Disability Services (64.7%). Approximately 12% of institutions use assessment centres (external or internal) and 23.5% have a mixture of systems; only specific complex cases are commissioned to assessment centres (see Diagram 3 below).

⁷ The term used in this paper (Specific Learning Differences-SpLD) replaces the more usual Specific Learning Difficulties.

Diagram 3:



Provisions

Participating institutions reported that they aimed to provide the same services to international students as local students to meet their obligations under equality regulation. The majority stressed that they provide a series of auxiliary services and aids such as exam arrangements/concessions, library services, loan equipment, non-medical help, dyslexia diagnosis, one to one support (such as note-taking, mentors, library support and study skills tuition) and other student services.

They also implied that parity of provision may not always be achieved because of cost implications. When asked which services are covered by the university's internal resources, the responses showed that provision in the majority of cases is limited. This does not only apply to what the majority would consider to be a reasonable limited provision of enabling equipment, such as hardware and software, dictaphones, etc., which are instead available on loan. Equally, this does not apply to provisions when there is no access to alternative transport and ancillary equipment, such as photocopies, cartridges, etc., which appear to have an equivalent to a subsidy. Universities appear to be rationing personal support. Some universities, for example, mentioned that support via non-medical helpers is not provided to the same extent as through the DSA. One Disability Adviser, when asked

which services are covered by the university, stated: “(We cover) all services, but at a reduced level.”

The pressures of the cost implication of support provisions have enticed some universities to request that students contribute to cover some of the costs involved, but this practice is not widespread. The survey shows, however, that universities are budgeting and discussing these issues internally. Another Disability Adviser stated: “Sometimes we have to be a little creative to ensure our disabled international student budget is fairly distributed, but a student never goes without.”

Such an accommodating approach reflects in many ways a welcoming and positive attitude in the sector. It also reveals that universities may be exposed to unexpected turns of events. One Disability Adviser commented: “The difficulty is when we have a high cost international student. Disability support only has a small budget and funding needs to be found elsewhere in this case.”

What follows is an overview of the budget arrangements in place in HEIs.

Financial issues

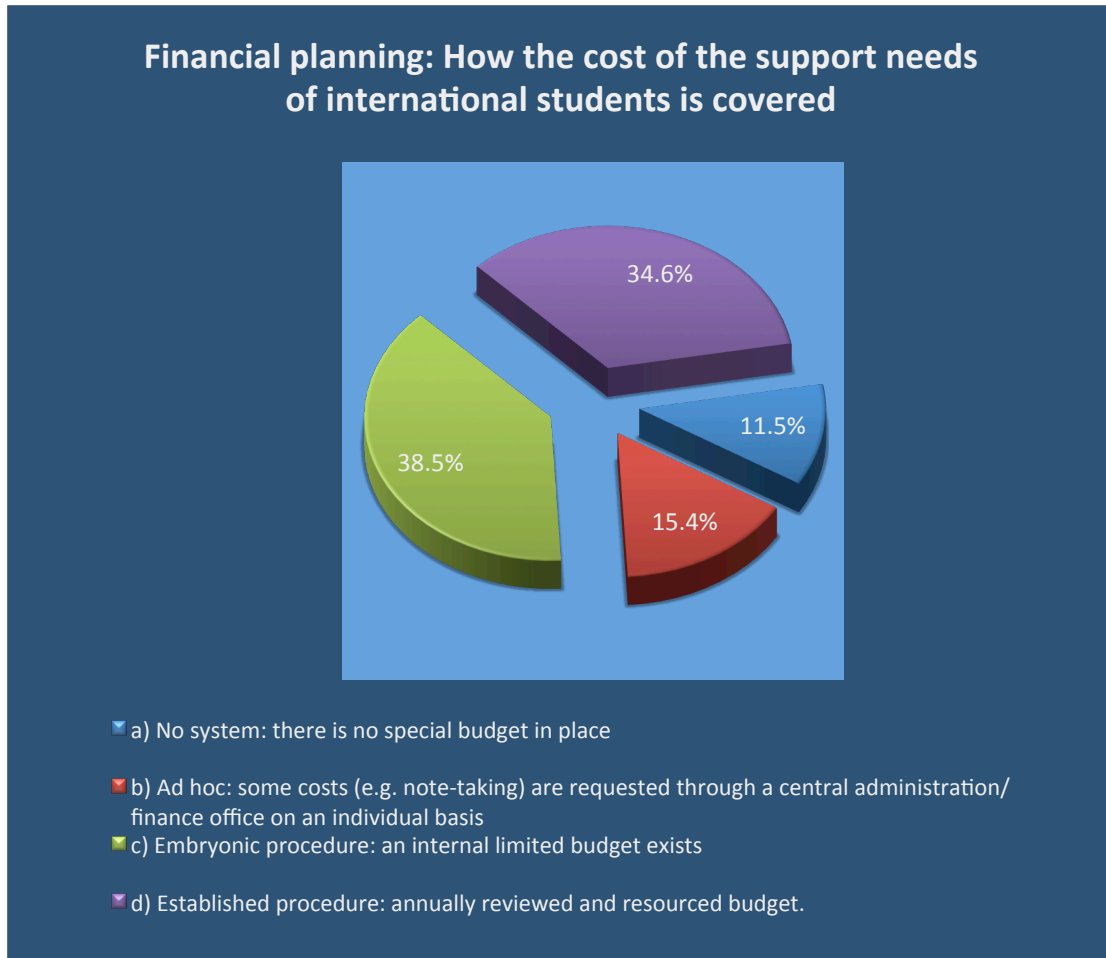
The survey indicated that the majority of institutions have not yet introduced financial planning to anticipate and cover the cost of support provisions. Just over a third of respondents (34.5%) have financial planning in place. This is a well-resourced budget which is reviewed annually. Annual budgets take into consideration historical statistical information for predicting possible costs. Some universities have established procedures in place for international students that mirror the support provided by DSA funding to local students.

However, 38.5% are starting to develop a procedure, albeit one which is at an embryonic stage, characterised by having a limited budget and a series of procedures for complex individual cases with ‘unexpected costs’. In general, Disability Offices make a case to request additional funds from a central office or a panel of senior officials who allocate extra resources. Most universities are reviewing their procedures, as the numbers of ‘complex cases’ are increasing.

A minority maintain an ‘ad hoc’ system (15.4%). This is a system in which they request extra monies to support international disabled students on a case-by-case basis.

The survey also showed that some universities do not have a system in place (11.5%). This appears to imply they only provide advice and information to students, but do not provide for auxiliary aids or services. Further research is required to establish their operations (see Diagram 4 below).

Diagram 4:



How the universities see their system of support

Self-evaluation

Participating institutions were asked to reflect and share their views on how challenging they found dealing with specific issues of support for international students. In general, the following main areas were of significant or moderate difficulty: making documents compatible; supporting students during transition; funding substitutions for care; charging for services; accommodation and transport; arranging diagnostic assessment in the UK, and dealing with third parties (funding authorities, family, etc. – see Diagram 5 below).

Diagram 5:

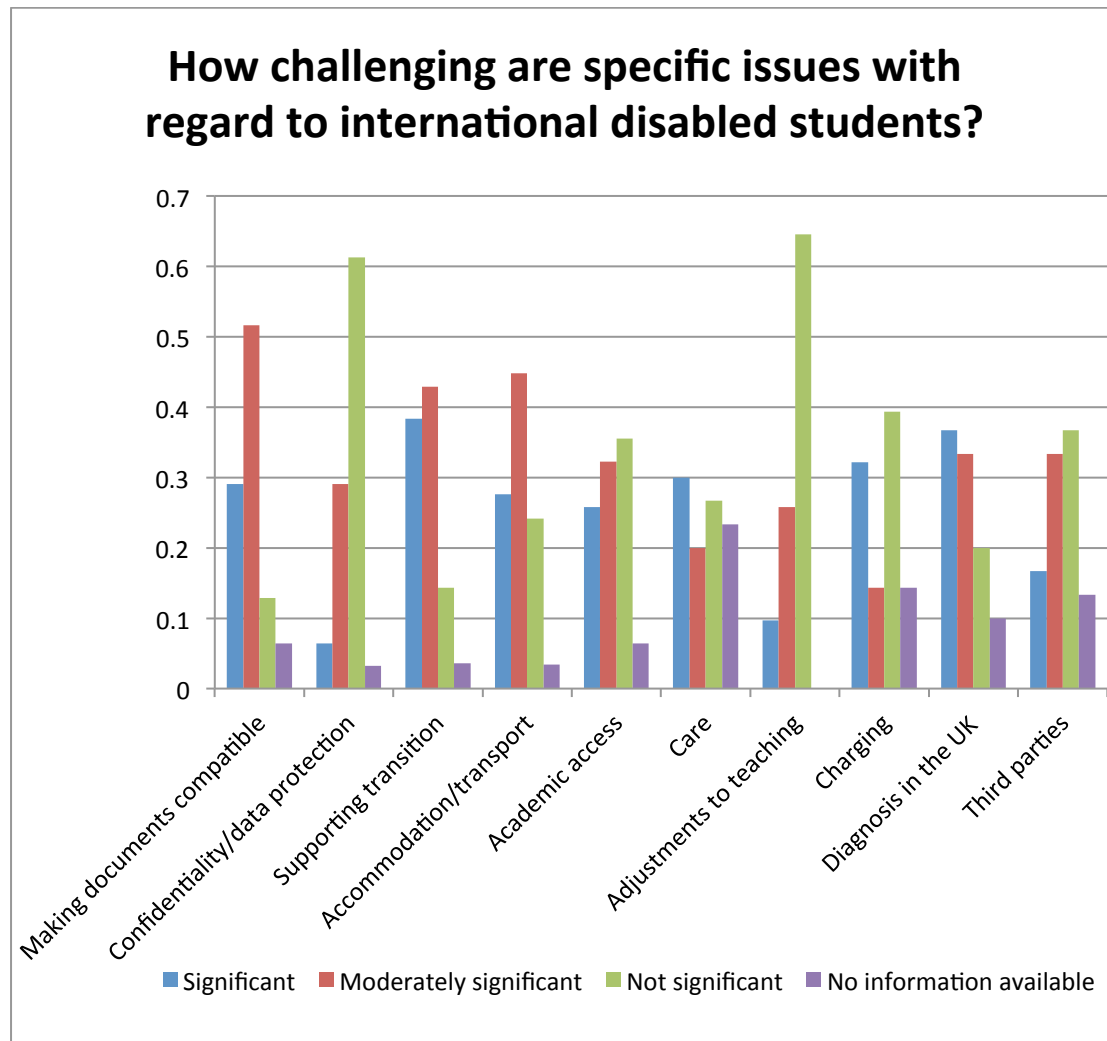


Diagram 5 demonstrates the level of difficulty in the sector with respect to addressing specific aspects of support to international disabled students.

A revealing common element of responses is that information is not available in institutions that do not have specialist services, or where they do not have established budget arrangements. Conversely, information is provided when their support is better equipped.

Similarly, the appreciation of difficulties in key areas of support for international disabled students appears to be underestimated when institutions do not have special arrangements. Diagrams 6 and 7 below show the level of responses in the categories where institutions have been most challenged. The high level of non-response and appreciation of non-difficulty (Option 1, Non-Significant in the diagrams below) coincide with institutions with weak support systems.

Diagram 6:

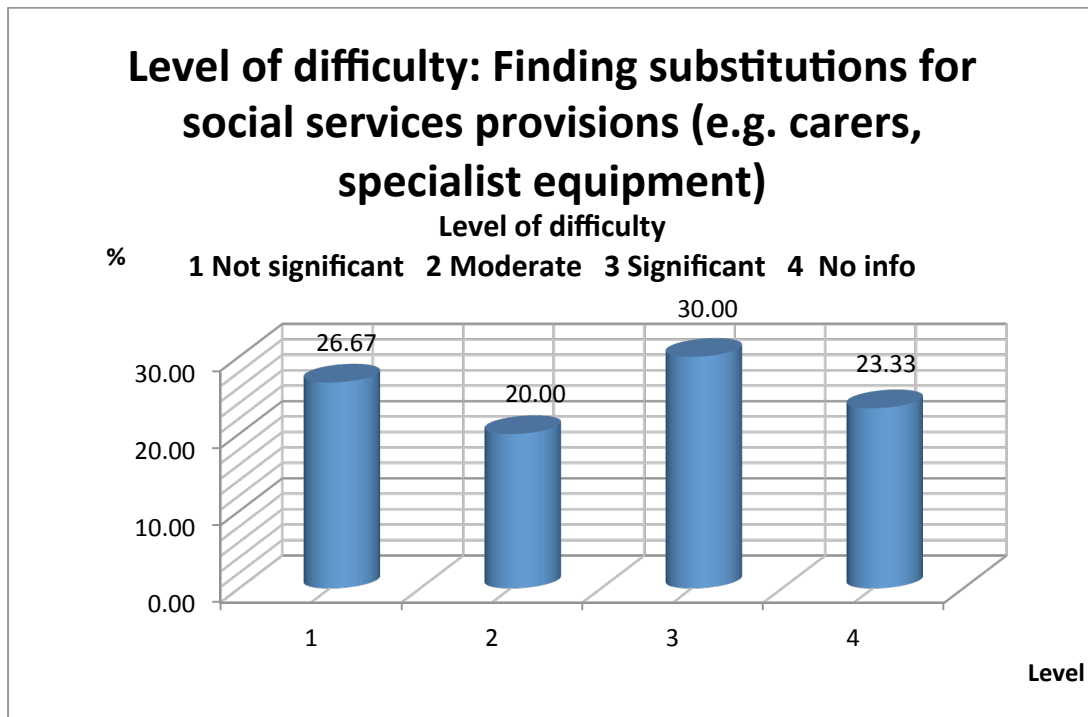
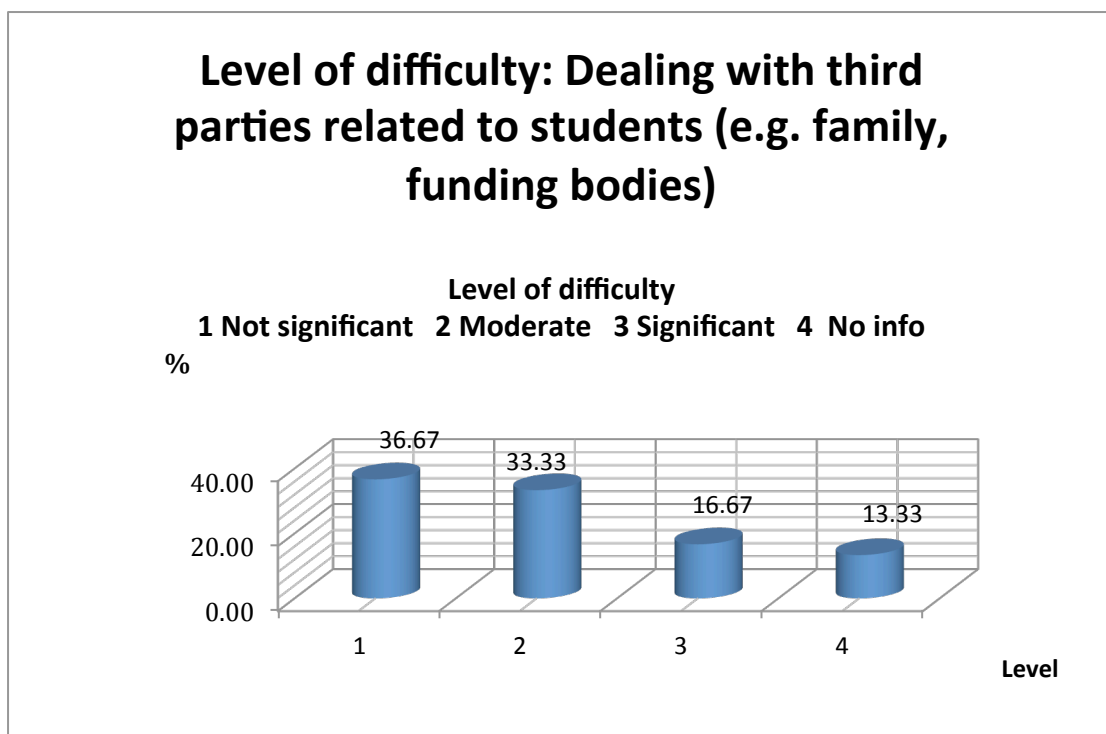


Diagram 7:



The survey shows a connection between administration systems and levels of response. Generic disability services (e.g. services that do not have an international disability section) encounter greater difficulties than specialist ones. The former score more often than option 3 (Significant) and the latter score option 2 (Moderate) in nearly all areas of support for international students:

- Making foreign documents about impairments compatible
- Explaining confidentiality, data sharing and protection
- Enabling academic access
- Supporting students during transition
- Dealing with third parties (family, funding bodies)
- Funding substitutions for social service provisions
- Accommodation and transport

The difficulty that generic services may have could be explained by their requirement to be consistent with the UK medical model of disabilities (i.e. an approach that centres on impairments as described by medical practices in the UK). They are likely to apply one single approach to all cases, which may be prone to disregard key differences. For example, if a student has an impairment that is not exactly evidenced as in the UK (for example autism, mental health, SpLDs), their support needs would be delayed until diagnosis is established by medical practitioners or similar in the UK. This approach may create inflexibilities and possible lack of provision, particularly when an exact similar diagnosis may take the students a long time (sometimes years) to obtain. Rigidity is less likely to occur with a service that is entrusted to operate their expertise with a high degree of professional discretion and reasonableness.

Areas for improvement

Participating universities were invited to reflect and volunteer information regarding the areas they considered could improve in their institutions. There were three common themes:

1. Improvement to budgeting systems to enhance the level of prediction with regard to the support needs of international disabled students and to cover the additional cost of support;
2. To raise awareness across their institutions on the different and specific issues that international disabled students bring to their institutions.
3. To work towards the specialisation of staff to deal with international issues and disability matters.

Financial support

On ways of improving their finances, two ways were identified: some universities suggested supporting their budgets with a percentage of the extra revenues international students bring to their institutions. As one disability specialist put it: “A top-slicing of fees system to finance support (would be) preferable.” Another group of universities reported that the allocation of funding could be based on student numbers.

Raising awareness

Universities considered that work could be done on two fronts to improve awareness: within their institutions and, also, on the information available to international students. The following measures were proposed:

1. Improving links with the International Office, recruitment officers and agents
2. Providing staff awareness training;
3. Improving declaration levels, by working on ways to ameliorate stigma and 'normalise' students' perceptions of disability, and encouraging early declaration
4. Encouraging applicants to check funding arrangements
5. Improving information on their websites by including charges for Non-Medical Helpers, as one adviser said, "...so they are aware of the realities of the cost of personal support"
6. Improving university policies and clarifying their university's standard of support, in order that students know "...what universities can and cannot do"
7. Finding creative ways to show disabled international students the institution's environmental barriers, as most of international students could not attend open days.

Specialisation of staff

On improving the specialisation of members of staff, participants cited the following issues:

1. Needing more resources in their Disability Office
2. Allocation of time for training current disability specialists on international issues
3. Encouraging disability specialists to participate in international recruitment issues and activities.

Due to the time constraints of this project, it was not possible to request further information on the above recommendations, but universities as a whole considered these three themes critical to the improvement of their support systems for international disabled students.

Other observations

Additionally there were other suggestions from participant institutions in four areas: the assessment of needs, information systems, auxiliary support and curricula, and these are briefly listed below:

1. On the assessment of needs:
 - To work towards formalising a system of assessment of needs for international students, whether in-house, external or a mixture of approaches.
 - To develop templates for assessment of needs.
2. On information systems:
 - To create a network of advisers on specific issues for international disabled students, to share advice and disseminate good practice within the HE sector.
 - To create a bank of useful information on international issues relevant to institutions, for example, with regards to disability issues in different countries.

- To create national guidance to provide base-level support for international students in HE.
3. On auxiliary support. Some universities considered improving the following areas for international students:
 - Mental health support
 - Bank of equipment
 - Use of lecture capture software to lower the costs of note taking
 - Creating a bank of in-house medical helpers
 - Introduction of dyslexia assessment for non-English speakers
 - Contacting students in advance of arrival and working on transition issues, which might include gathering documentation, liaising with different specialists and ensuring medications are compatible, establishing the predominant approach to their disabilities in their own country, preparing them for cultural differences and cultural shock, establishing and securing sources of funding (where possible), securing providers for secondary health services and clarifying their service agreements, establishing protocols on handling emergencies, etc.
 - Creating buddying systems with current students to help them adapt to a different academic culture
 4. On the curricula: Some universities suggested that programmes of study could be more international and flexible to allow adaptation to students' needs.

Conclusions: achievements and challenges

The main focus of the research has concerned the institutional perspective of disability provision to international disabled students in UK HE. Principles of an administrative-business model of disabilities were utilised to adjust with the institutional context. The aim was to open an area of examination and initiate a process of dialogue within HE. Action research methodology was chosen to facilitate self-reflection of working practices, evaluation and opportunity to volunteer areas of improvement.

This section presents conclusions drawn from the findings, and considers the administrative-business model used in the research. They are organised into five key themes with discussion and insights for policy development. Finally, issues for future research will be considered.

Summary

1. The research confirms that 14 years after the introduction of anti-discriminatory disability legislation in higher education, universities are receiving an increasing number of international disabled students. Statistical information from participating institutions shows international disabled students to be an important subgroup. In some cases they constitute over 10% of the disabled students in an institution. In the current context, this means that the UK HE sector has had a head start in Europe and has

positioned itself globally in the niche market of disabled-accessible higher education. The UK has a share of the global market, and is, in effect, competing with established institutions in the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

2. The majority of HE institutions are supporting international students, utilising existing support structures for domestic students. These are typically organised by impairments (physical, sensorial, learning differences and mental health conditions), and operate to capture and use government funding for the provision of auxiliary aids and services.
A small number of institutions have adopted a different approach with specialised offices that combine expertise on a plurality of impairments and issues of international education. These specialised offices liaise with institutions and expertise globally as well as internally. They assess the needs, establish learning support strategies, coordinate arrangements and adjustments, and maintain tight financial controls in support of these students.
3. A small number of institutions have adopted additional measures that give them greater flexibility and capability in the provision of support. These include: the systematic collection of statistical data about international disabled students; an anticipatory outlook; special budgets that are annually reviewed and resourced; referral to independent assessment centres to establish fair levels of support; auxiliary aids and services that mirror the DSA funded allocations to domestic students.
4. A significant number of institutions indicate that they are working with reactive methodologies, showing an absence of expertise on international issues, and have inexistent or ad hoc budget systems. They also lack financial planning, and ration scarce resources. These deficits are compensated by disability specialists being welcoming, committed and creative. Many specialists are, however, concerned that they are unequipped to respond to sudden fluctuations in the complexities that international disabled students bring to their institutions and the influx of students requesting costly support arrangements.
5. Institutions' self-evaluations and recommendations reveal that the majority of disability specialists are aware of the complexities surrounding the support of international disabled students and the different support applicable to them. The majority of disability specialists consider that their services require improvement in the following areas: information and policies; financial planning and budgets; specialisation and training; levels of provision of aids and services; and flexibility in the curricula.
A minority of institutions are unaware of the specific issues and complexities of supporting international disabled students, or misjudge their levels of difficulty. This is often the case with services that lack adequate budgetary systems and/or special support structures.

Insights

The research identified a series of factors (enumerated in point 3 above) that can help institutions to be better prepared to anticipate and respond to the demand of their services from international disabled students, and to deal with the sudden changes in composition and complexity associated with it. These elements could also help institutions to maintain or develop competitive advantage in the international market for disability-accessible higher education. Institutions may want to consider that a concerted effort for constant improvement of their support systems would enable them not only to protect themselves from market fluctuations but also attract recruitment.

Marketing specialists advise that the international market for education relies heavily on the personal experience of alumni and the dissemination of their extended social network in their home countries, for example through word of mouth (ECU 2012). The success of HEIs in maintaining or increasing their market share in this niche market will depend on the professionalization of their disability services, and their ability to operate under international standards of disability support. Institutions therefore may want to look further than complying with disability legislation by investigating the support systems of more experienced international competitors as a method of seeking ideas for improving standards.

The improvements to support provision for international disabled students will present a significant challenge to HEIs in the UK, and each institution's organisational complexity will need to be taken into consideration. Rather than listing recommendations that may not be applicable in particular institutions, this paper has identified a series of good practice measures that are recognisable as affecting the institutions' capabilities to support international disabled students, and improve internationalisation and market share in this area. Institutions may also wish to use the list of critical factors below as an aide-memoire of the possible dangers when considering developing their services. These factors include:

- Lack of awareness of the positive contribution international disabled students bring to their institutions and regions in which they live, through an exclusive emphasis on the additional cost of their support needs;
- Internal institutional structures organised exclusively to capture and use government funding (such as the DSA and Premium funding), and reporting mechanisms on the state of disability provision based exclusively on this arrangement.
- Assessment of needs and advisory services operating under a single model of disability support and its application to international disabled students whose impairments may have different meanings, support systems and contexts;
- Support services operating under exclusive cycles of domestic demand; and lack of awareness of the added vulnerabilities of international disabled students in international education;
- Incomplete statistical data and information regarding international disabled students;

- A reactive approach of disability support needs, absence of financial planning and inadequate operations under inexistent or ad-hoc budget systems;
- Operation of diminished services and lack of awareness of their long-term impact on international recruitment.

Final reflections and areas to consider for future research

This research project provided an opportunity to air the difficult issues regarding the challenges that follow increased globalisation. The future is one in which HEIs will need to look at these challenges as opportunities to support the next generation of international disabled students and secure our share of an increasingly competitive global market.

This research project provided a possibility to touch on financial planning. It was not possible, due to the scope of the research, to investigate this area in more detail. Future research could look at the specific types of budget arrangements and accounting techniques that can be used to support the anticipatory approach. A much more detailed account of the experience of universities that play a leading role in this area would be a sensible starting point, and comparative research with institutions in other jurisdictions may be another.

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