



“What can be learnt from the use of Inclusive Learning Plans to help improve academic support for disabled students within the higher education sector?”

Dr Andy Velarde, Graham Gorvett, Philippa Moreton, University of Kent



University of
Kent



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Executive summary

1. This research seeks to improve our understanding of the ways in which higher education (HE) organisations communicate internally in the coordination of academic support for disabled students. The 'lessons learned' from the evaluation and reflection of those participating in the study are also presented.
2. The different ways in which internal communication is used by staff in various institutions across the UK is considered, along with how that communication is used and its influence across the institution. The strengths and weaknesses of different 'systems' of communication are evaluated and suggestions for improving communication are made.
3. The study identified that institutions tended to operate one of three different 'systems' of internal communication:
 - paper-based systems
 - a hybrid-system, which blends a paper-based system with the use of email and some database sharing
 - intranet-based systems, using a centralised database accessed across the organisation.
4. Over the years, these systems have evolved to deliver excellence in the support provided to an increasing number of disabled students, currently accounting for over eight per cent of the HE population¹.
5. Key drivers for improving the quality of disabled students' experience of HE have included the increase in demand for the provision of auxiliary aids and services in the form of personal assistance (e.g. note taking), specialist tuition (e.g. dyslexia support) and mentoring services; an increased demand for adaptations in the mode of delivery of study programmes (e.g. hand outs in advance, group/individual presentations, etc.); as well as increasing requirements for adaptation of assessment methods (e.g. extra time in exams, modification of the written format), and other forms of curriculum adaptation.
6. The results of the research are striking. They show that, following disability equality legislation, organisations have developed practical tools of internal communication to coordinate support provisions to disabled students across administrative and academic departments. Progressively, these mechanisms, practical in nature, have evolved organically to reach a point where they unite across the organisation and appear to possess their own procedures and internal logic.
7. This development appears to have been mainly through informal procedures, which are constantly undergoing revision in terms of improvements to mechanisms that can ensure a wider engagement and agreement amongst all parties, mechanisms that can ensure consistency as well as personalisation, mechanisms that can enable staff to monitor implementation, and mechanisms that can ensure on-going revision.
8. Inclusive Learning Plans are key tools within this development, and they are enabling organisations to disseminate good practice on disability equality. They are also mechanisms that deliver specific advice to members of staff who are delivering reasonable adjustments for disabled students. Such capacity to reach key organisational actors with specific knowledge makes them unique mechanisms of internal communication. They are, in effect, mechanisms of transmission of new understandings that enable organisational change (Velarde 2012). The current research shows that members of staff in HE organisations understand the usefulness, possibilities and constructive limitations of Inclusive Learning Plans and are seeking to find ways of improving them in their own practise.

1. <http://www.hesa.ac.uk/content/view/1897/239/>

1. About the research

The research focussed on the main communication systems used by Student Services in higher education institutions (HEIs) to coordinate disability support, encourage dissemination of good practice and provide expert advice on disability across the organisations.

The research considers the advantages and disadvantages of the different methods of communication used, from the point of view of the members of staff who use Inclusive Learning Plans. It also provides suggestions for improvement. It aims to provide greater understanding of the logic, limitations and possibilities of these different types of communication, and can be used as an aid to organisations' decision-making on improvements to their services.

1.1. The objectives

Three main objectives were identified in terms of achieving the overall aims of this project within the time-scale:

1. To survey the different mechanisms used for dissemination of good practice and for reaching agreement on the support needs of disabled students, namely :
 - a paper-based system.
 - a hybrid system using a paper-based system, with use of email and some database sharing.
 - an intranet system, using a centralised database and accessed across the organisation.
2. To evaluate institutions' experiences regarding their chosen internal communication system.
3. To establish strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats of each system.

1.2. Background and context of the research

The Inclusive Learning Plan (ILP) is the name chosen to describe the different mechanisms of communication used by disability offices in HEIs to coordinate disability support across their organisations. They are also known as Learning Agreements or Disability Support Plans.

These mechanisms were progressively implemented in response to the coming into force of disability legislation (i.e. SENDA 2001²) and the complementary mechanisms created by government to support disability equality in the sector.

SENDA introduced protection for disabled people in pre- and post- age 16 education by becoming Part IV of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 on 1 September 2002. SENDA changed the legal regime by requiring universities to take a proactive approach to take steps to:

- not unjustifiably treat disabled people less favourably; and
- make reasonable adjustments so that disabled people would not be substantially disadvantaged (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Act 2001: Chap. 2, 2OR).

SENDA 2001 also established universities' obligations to disabled students, in the form of reasonable adjustments and auxiliary aids and services. Such obligations were incorporated into existing Student Services structures due to two separate government initiatives. These were the HEFCE's funding programme called 'Base Level Provision' in 1999³ and the former Department for Education and Skills (DfES)'s direct financial mechanisms of support to disabled students, called the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA), currently under the Department of Education⁴.

The HEFCE's 1999 initiative created a model of support based on the creation of special units (Disability Offices) and roles (Disability Advisers) that encouraged the establishment of central and coordinating services for disabled people. This has been highly successful across HEIs (Adams, M. and Brown 2000).

The creation of the DSA allocated funding to each entitled 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). This initiative encouraged the growth of expertise in Disability Units and, hence,

2. Since SENDA, further legislation has been introduced, amongst the most important the DDA 2005 (that introduced the Disability Equality Duty) and the Equality Act 2010 (that streamlined and strengthened anti-discrimination legislation)

3. <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/11521/>

4. <https://www.gov.uk/disabled-students-allowances-dsas/overview>

in Student Services structures. The services increasingly relied on these units as they generally took over the administration of the DSA on behalf of students, in order to facilitate delivery and effectiveness due to economies of scale. The operation of these additional services has, in many instances, become part of Student Services in HE organisations.

In this context, the Inclusive Learning Plans became the natural mechanisms by which Disability Units informed academic and administrative departments of the disabled students' needs, the type of auxiliary services students were receiving, as well as the type of adaptations they required to have access in parity of opportunity on a par with non-disabled students.

The Inclusive Learning Plans played a key role in the dissemination of disability advice and best practice in teaching and learning in the sector. However, the growth of disability support in HE took place with some difficulties in this area. Key actors, such as teaching practitioners, became uninvolved, a phenomenon that is known by disability scholars as disengagement, and which has been considered to have weakened the efforts for equality in the sector (Parker 2002, Riddell, Tinklin and Wilson 2005). To overcome such a problem, HEIs sought to attain mainstreaming (Adams, M and Holland 2006) and the Inclusive Learning Plans became a tool for such an aim. Their capacity to reach individual members of staff in academic departments made it the most important mechanism of institutional transmission of disability knowledge to achieve organisational change (Velarde 2012). In this context, government and universities have consistently deployed resources (estimated at 6-13 million pounds per year⁵) and efforts to institutionalise disability equality since 2001, and Inclusive Learning Plans have, in practice, developed as the mechanisms by which such efforts have generally been expressed.

As of today, the mechanisms named Inclusive Learning Plans have been operating in HEIs for approximately 13 years. They have evolved rapidly from being a practical tool of sharing information about the needs of a particular group of students to something more complex and sophisticated. The mechanisms have acquired particular formats, procedures and have their own logic. This project

aims to increase our understanding of these systems and broaden the evidence base as to Student Service efforts to use them to achieve disability equality in HE.

1.3. The research strategy

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. In the letter, alternative means of communication were offered to disabled members of staff of the participating organisations.

Members were initially questioned as to their method(s) of internal communication to support disabled students, and were asked to name a responsible and knowledgeable person to provide further detail of the system of internal communication that was used. This step yielded participation from 50 HEIs.

In the second stage, the named person was directly contacted to survey the operation of their systems of internal communication and to request self-evaluation of the process. In total, 35 organisations participated at this stage, by providing more details of their system's operation, their procedures and the self-evaluation.

The participating organisations provide a good cross section of:

- geographical locations
- classifications (Russell group, Million +, 1994 Group, University Alliance, etc)
- type of academic focus
- size of student/disabled student population
- structure and size of disability support services.

Full details of the process and the time-scales are given in Annex 1.

1.4. The methodology, methods of data collection and validation methods

The research used an Action Research methodology (Bryman 1989, Elliott 1991, Mills 2000). Although a concrete research focus (the system of communication used in HE to coordinate disability equality) had been

5. <https://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2009/200949/>

established, there was also some flexibility so that the information collected could be shared and discussed, with the aim that this would become the basis of a review process.

In this methodology, individuals' participation and self-reflection are part and parcel of the research objective, such that: "...participants monitor their own practices with the immediate aim of developing their practical judgement as individuals. Thus the facilitator's role is Socratic to provide a sounding-board against which practitioners may try out ideas and learn more about the reasons for their own action, as well as learning more about the process of self-reflection." (Carr and Kemmis 1986, in Cohen and Manion, 1994).

In this present research, individuals were encouraged to use their day-to-day work as their case studies and their findings to inform strategy.

The study uses three methods of data collection: online survey by questionnaire, different forms of semi-standardised phone interviewing and limited statistical data analysis. On the basis of the information gathered, the participant organisations were placed in one of three groups (A, B and C) determined by the type of internal communication system used. These are:

- Group A - institutions that use a paper-based system of communication
- Group B - institutions that use a hybrid system, which blends a paper-based system with the use of email and some database sharing
- Group C - institutions that use intranet-based systems, using a centralised database accessed across the organisation.

'Abductive inference' (that is an inference of the best explanation in a process of reasoning - (Evers 2007: pg 200) is used, when appropriate, as a validation method of the observed data.

1.4.1 Confidentiality and anonymity

The research followed strict rules of confidentiality and anonymity, and only non-personal data was to be disclosed by the participants. All university names were coded in the graphs of the final report so that they could not be identified.

2. The findings

2.1. The operational and procedural aspects of the Inclusive Learning Plans

The research shows that although organisations use combined mechanisms of communication with academic departments, it is possible to group them by the predominant means in which they communicate: a paper-based, a hybrid and an intranet-based system.

Institutions would typically use a paper-based system if it predominately used a hard copy of a form that included students' contact details and essential information regarding their support needs and advice. This form is then circulated amongst departments for consultations/opinion and/or approval/acknowledgement.

Similarly, an intranet system is used by organisations that use one or more of their institution's centralised databases. Typically these databases provide essential information about the students, such as their contact details, module information, attendance, marks and other information about their programme of studies. Disability Units use them by adding essential information about the students' disability support needs and specific advice to academic departments. This information is introduced for sharing amongst the persons involved in supporting students.

In this classification, institutions are said to use a hybrid system when they use different or combined methods, and a dominant system is not identified. All methods could be equally important or are used in different circumstances or for different purposes. A hybrid system could be one whereby a Disability Unit sends out an electronic copy via email which has been devised as a hard copy. The email may contain the document as an attachment or be a summary of the support needs/advice provided.

2.2. Common elements

All systems have in common that they are managed by a Disability Unit and Disability Advisers (or, as they are also known, Disability Coordinators). The systems are mostly initiated by Disability Advisers in response to disabled students' requests for support. Academic

departments are seldom involved in their elaboration, even when they may first identify their difference needs or when their support provision may require modification of the curricula. They seem to comply by referring disabled students to Disability Units. Therefore, the responsibility of assessing the students' support needs and identifying areas for reasonable adjustments lies entirely with Disability Units in general, and Disability Advisers in particular. There is, however, a common understanding that the identifications of reasonable adaptations of the curricula should be a joint effort between Disability Advisers and teaching practitioners.

2.2.1. Identified gaps

Although the Inclusive Learning Plans have now been consolidated as standardised best practice in

the sector, an overall picture of the systems shows that not all disabled students have access to them. Although registration with Disability Units, and taking up provision, is not compulsory in the UK and it is, therefore, a choice for disabled students to make, the research suggests that there exist two gaps in the support provision for disabled people. The first gap is between the number of disabled students at an institution and those 'registering' their disability with a Disability Unit in their institution. There are fewer disabled students registered for support than the number of disabled students known by that organisation. The second gap is between those students who are registered with a Disability Unit and those actually provided with an Inclusive Learning Plan. These two gaps are illustrated below in Chart 1.

Chart 1. Accessibility to provision gaps 2013

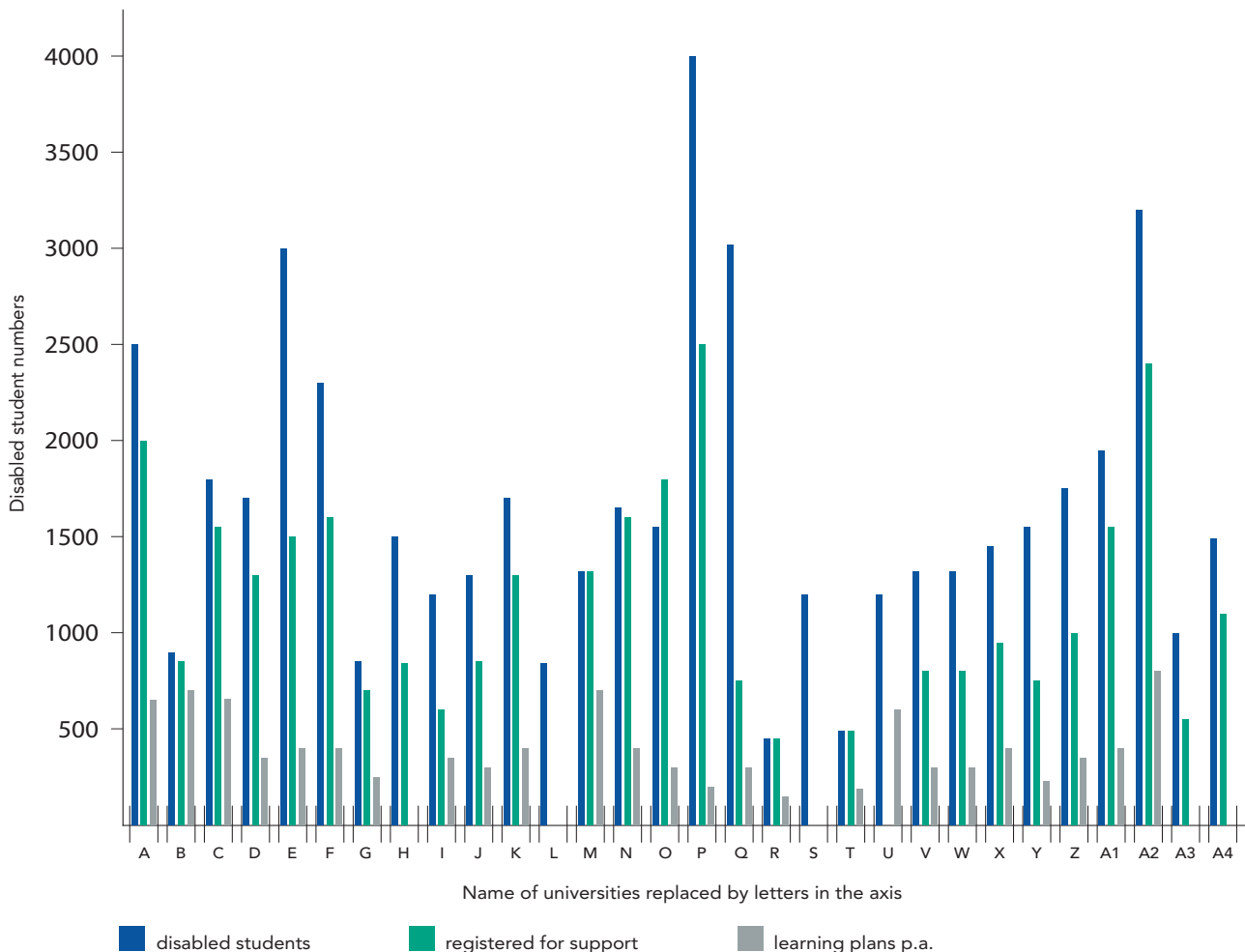


Chart 1 shows students having Inclusive Learning Plans in grey colour, students who are registered for support in green colour and the numbers of disabled students known to the organisation (represented in blue colour). The chart shows the two gaps in the system.

A possible explanation for these two gaps can be found in that organisations may not be aiming to reach all disabled students due to resource limitations. They are rather prioritising their support provisions to those who registered with their Disability Unit, and those within that group that are considered to be more complex cases. In this line of argument, the Inclusive Learning Plans are mechanisms in individual cases that require more complex support provision. Although it is plausible that the gaps may be due to the limited resources available, it may also be an indication that the Inclusive Learning Plans are not used to their full potential. Chart 1 shows the proportion of students without Inclusive Learning Plans who could benefit from this approach to informing academic departments of their support requirements.

A common procedure is followed by Disability Units, whereby the Disability Adviser establishes the support needs of the student with the student, and in consultation with other professionals - for example, medical practitioners, mental health advisers, dyslexia experts. All procedures use medical or expert evidence to establish a basic categorisation of the student prior to the creation of the Inclusive Learning Plan. The Study Aids and Study Strategies Assessment (Assessment of Needs) is also used for such purposes.

The information conveyed in internal communications generally tends to be for two separate purposes. Firstly there is information to advise on reasonable adjustments and, therefore, mainly comprises recommendations. The term 'recommendations' is more often used when referring to the modification of some aspects of pedagogy or curriculum adaptation – for example, modification of deadlines, change of forms of assessments such as oral presentations.

Secondly, there is information which is closer to 'requirements' and directives – for example, in the

case of agreed adjusted assessment and examination arrangements, or modified classroom settings.

Another common characteristic of the various systems in use is that they do not tend to have an established formal procedure in case of lack of implementation. If recommendations and/or requirements are not put in place, students themselves often initiate a variety of actions to inform members of staff of their needs and bringing to their attention their Inclusive Learning Plans. Disability Advisers often become advocates and/or mediators, to different degrees, with Academic Departments. These actions and roles tend to be informal in nature.

In a similar manner, complaints procedures, as applied to concerns over reasonable adjustment for disabled students, do not appear to have evolved as specific procedures, but rather as part of the organisation's general students' complaints procedures. As such, specific disability complaints are often dealt with informally.

Furthermore, the research findings suggest that universities do not have explicit and formal monitoring mechanisms in place with respect to reasonable adjustments. Disability practitioners have expressed a view that, although this is a quality assurance activity and part of the Disability Equality Duty of HE organisations⁶, Disability Units do not have the necessary resources to expressly monitor this activity. As a result, monitoring (as an activity to ensure the achievement of minimum standards) seldom occurs, and is usually only sparked by students' feedback in response to a difficulty experienced within their programme of study and/or by Academic Departments raising issues directly with the Disability Adviser.

The modification of examinations at the end of the academic year is, however, considered as an opportunity for students to raise any concern they may have as to the implementations of their plans. Some disability practitioners consider that any 'remedial support' at this time of the year may well be too late to adequately support many disabled students and,

6. Precept 4 of the Quality Assurance Code of Practice for Disability Students (2010). <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/Section3Disabilities2010.pdf>

consequently, may not be as effective and efficient as on-going support and reasonable adjustment provided throughout the year. As such Disability Advisers often feel that effective on-going monitoring could be part of the communications system between the parties involved; thus resolving this particular issue.

Similarly, there do not generally appear to be systems in place to monitor equal standards of disability support across the organisations' Academic Departments. Although the use of Inclusive Learning Plans are intended to address this, it appears that they are not often fully used as a mechanism that can inform the Disability Units of their equal impact on all students across all departments. Disability Advisers have raised views that there is a need to ensure consistency of treatment of disabled students, and that Inclusive Learning Plans could also be used for this purpose.

2.3. Different uses of the Inclusive Learning Plan systems

The research shows that the use of the different systems of internal communication appears to be linked to the size of the institutions and the numbers of disabled students they have registered. Paper-based Inclusive Learning Plans appear to be used predominately by institutions with fewer than 2,000 disabled students. However this is not always the case, and some larger organisations still used a paper-based system, as shown in Chart 2.

Chart 2 shows that the majority of the participating organisations that use the paper-based system are middle size institutions in terms of their relative disabled student population (represented in Chart 2 in blue). They have fewer than 2,000 disabled students in their organisation. However, the chart also shows two relatively large institutions that have more than 2,000 disabled students also using a paper-based system. In these institutions, however, the provision gaps described in the previous section above appear to be wider. These gaps are represented in Chart 2 by the different columns of students having Inclusive Learning Plans (in grey), and students who are registered for support (in green) and the numbers of disabled students known to the organisation (in blue).

Intranet-based systems, however, appear to be predominantly adopted by organisations with over 1,000 disabled students. A comparison between the organisations with paper-based systems and those with intranet-based systems shows that those who adopted the latter appear to have a higher proportion of students registered for support than do the former. Chart 3 shows a smaller gap between the numbers of disabled student on roll and the numbers of disabled students registered for support.

Chart 2. Organisations that used paper-based Inclusive Learning Plans in 2013

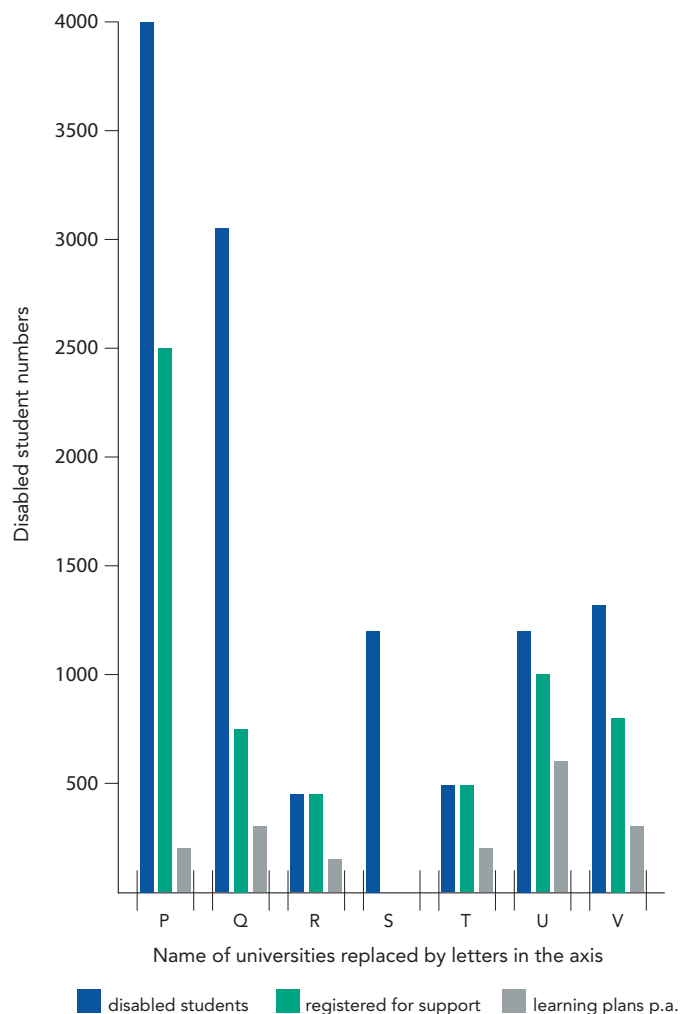


Chart 3.
Organisations that used intranet-based
Inclusive Learning Plans in 2013

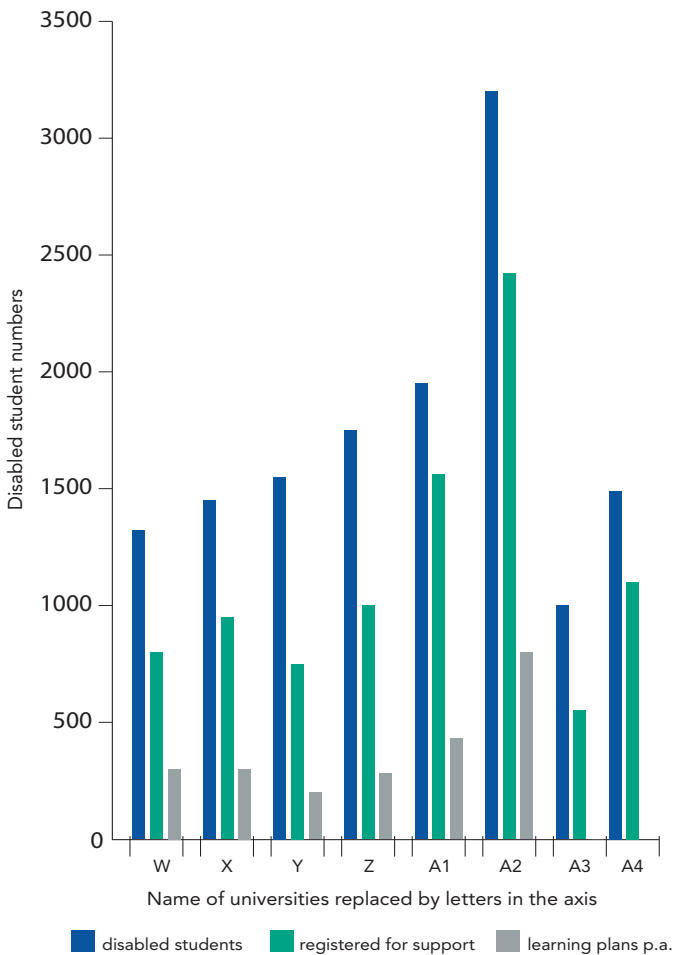


Chart 3 shows that the majority of universities that use the intranet-based system have a relatively greater proportion of students having Inclusive Learning Plans (in grey) compared with the ones using a paper-based system.

In addition to the above, the research findings show that organisations that used a hybrid-based system appear to have also a narrower gap between the number of disabled students on roll and the numbers actually registered for support. This suggests that the hybrid-based and the intranet-based systems are more effective in reaching disabled students for support than the paper-based system. This can be seen in Chart 4.

Chart 4. Organisations using hybrid Inclusive Learning Plans in 2013

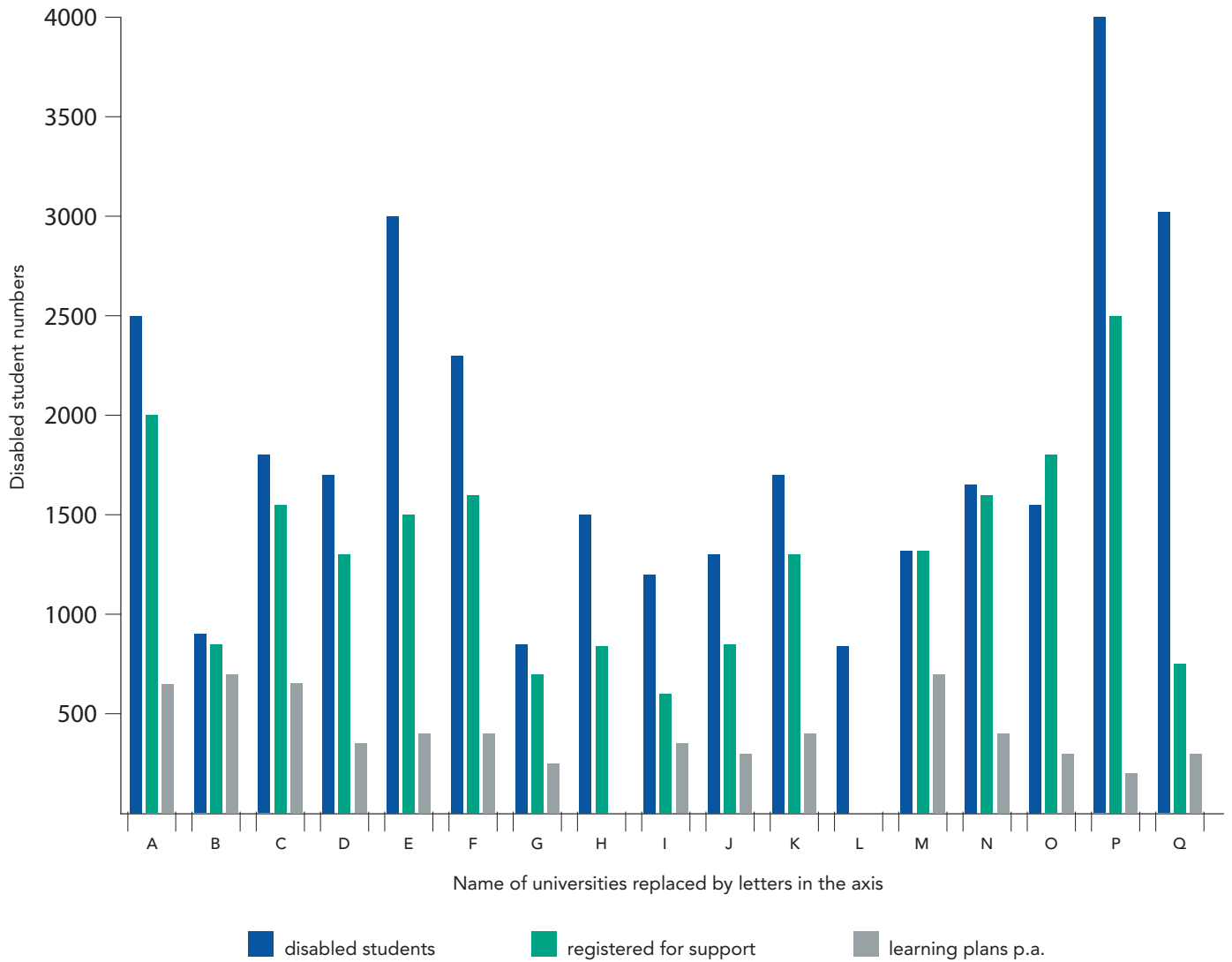


Chart 4 shows universities that use the hybrid system and have a relatively greater proportion of students having Inclusive Learning Plans (in grey) compared with the ones using a paper-based system.

3. Self-evaluations

3.1. The perceived strengths and weaknesses of the different systems

The institutions which participated in the research were asked to evaluate their systems of internal communication by providing feedback on what they felt were their relative strengths and weaknesses. From their responses it is possible to establish three main areas of comment: personalisation, dissemination and consistency.

The paper-based systems were the ones that participants reported as providing the most personalised communication. They were said to provide a face-to-face, one-to-one platform which made the Inclusive Learning Plan more student-centred and individualised. In addition, the Inclusive Learning Plans established by this system appear to be more the outcome of an agreement between the parties, including the academic departments. The main advantage of the paper-based system appears to be that the format provides Disability Advisers more control over the plan and allows it to show the Disability Advisers' detailed knowledge of the individual student's support needs and be clear regarding the requirements for reasonable adjustment that need to be met by the programme of study.

A major weakness of this system, however, seems to be a lack of control over the distribution of the Inclusive Learning Plan. Once the paper form is delivered to the academic departments, their circulation beyond this is relatively unknown. This provides uncertainty of the Inclusive Learning Plans' impact across the organisation, as well as raising concerns regarding data protection and confidentiality issues. In addition, it is time-consuming for Advisers to set up meetings for all those involved to ensure implementation of the Inclusive Learning Plan in a consistent way across the organisation – a necessity if uneven implementation is to be avoided.

By contrast, the intranet-based system's main strength appears to be its capability for instant dissemination to selected parties across the organisation. Because of

this, it is regarded as highly effective when urgent alerts are needed, for example. The system is seen as helping to achieve standardisation of information per disability group (i.e. for students with a type of mobility difficulty, specific learning difference or type of medical condition) which can be then applied to individual cases, reducing the time and institutional cost of the individualisation of support needs. As such, students may only require one Inclusive Learning Plan during their student career. This system is also regarded as being very consistent.

However, its gains appear to be at the cost of clarity and personalisation of support provision. The economy of scale achieved by an intranet-based system may affect the content and relevance to the individual case at hand. Advisers dealing with increasing numbers of individual cases may not have the necessary time to acquaint themselves with each of the requirements of the student's programme of studies and, therefore, establish precise requirements for reasonable adjustments, and this could be problematic. Another weakness appears to be the lack of use by all intended recipients, not least part-time, new or sessional teaching practitioners.

The hybrid system, by comparison, appears to benefit from the strengths of the previous systems but also has adopted their main weakness. The hybrid systems are reported as being clear, concise and easy to disseminate, as well as providing good mechanisms by which to achieve consistency in communication and in student support. However, their dissemination is again often uncertain, as they mainly rely on third parties (e.g. departmental administrators) for that purpose. Again, the increasing numbers of students per Adviser force the content of the system to use brief summaries which are not always understood in academic departments, and the time constraint imposed by using combined methods of communication undermines Advisers' efforts, as they have less time to research into the content of each programme of studies. As a result, the Inclusive Learning Plans become general and unspecific, therefore lacking the necessary personalised approach for them to be fully effective.

For a summary of institutional responses please refer to Annex 2.

3.2. The perceived areas for improvement to the use of Inclusive Learning Plans

Participating institutions were asked to reflect and share their views on what could be improved in their systems of internal communication. There was an initial concern by the research team that, in doing this, participants may replicate their answers to previous questions. However, that wasn't the case, and the majority of responses in participants' reflections centred on three main areas: consistency/standardisation; improving personalisation/clarity; and ensuring accountability. Some participants also provided examples on how to improve these areas.

The institutions that used paper-based systems were more concerned about ensuring that greater numbers of Inclusive Learning Plans were created, and at a faster speed. They were also willing to increase standardisation of the provision in their organisations. They consider that to increase output, more human resources in the form of Disability Advisers were needed. Advisory capacity was considered essential to allow higher outputs without compromising standards in their personalised approach.

The institutions that used the intranet-based systems generally considered it essential to improve their personalisation. It was suggested that this can be achieved by increasing the number of Advisers in elaborating Inclusive Learning Plans, and also by further engaging with teaching practitioners with the aim to make them active participants in the system, rather than passive receivers of the plan.

Disability practitioners also considered that the Inclusive Learning Plans could be improved by building up their dissemination capability. This was considered to be possible by adjusting, adding or improving the software used to link with the intranet system within their organisations. The following were suggested as possible improvements:

1. the creation of an automatic delivery function, so that once the Inclusive Learning Plan is completed it is saved and shared immediately via the email system to specific staff identified within the organisation;

2. the creation of a tracking tool to ensure that readership is recorded;
3. the inclusion of electronic signatures for teaching practitioners and students to improve accountability and ownership; and
4. the inclusion of a software package that could extract centrally-managed information from the programme of study, and individual courses, and deliver it to their database to give Advisers a tool to achieve greater personalisation.

The hybrid system is seen to be open to improvement by the creation of a central database with the capacity to extract information centrally collected (i.e. student details, programme of study, etc.). The organisations that use a hybrid system appear to suggest that their system would be improved if they moved towards a more automated system. The respondents consider that the paper-based components are likely to be eliminated from their system in the future and they are likely to use a similar system to the intranet-based system. They considered that there could be some similar improvements to the ones considered for both the paper-based system and the intranet-based system, above. One such improvement would be the use of electronic signatures to ensure ownership and accountability. An essential aspect of the suggested improvements is the enhancement of Inclusive Learning Plan clarity.

For a summary of institutional responses please refer to Annex 3.

4. Conclusions: common achievements and challenges

The means by which Inclusive Learning Plans were implemented were grouped into three systems in the present research. These systems have evolved in different ways according to the requirements and practicalities of the different institutions in which they are used. Although their internal logic is similar, in as much as they are all systems of communication and transmission, each organisation's systems reflects their unique internal realities and their recognised efforts for excellence in higher education.

The Inclusive Learning Plans are, therefore, the expressions of the development of the institutions' student services' expertise and capability to provide individualised support to a disadvantaged sector of the student population. They are the systems by which equality of opportunity is delivered in the context of current sector developments.

Inclusive Learning Plans are structured and managed by Disability Advisers who have become highly specialised members of staff with a wide and in-depth knowledge in disability matters. This expertise is currently recognised and valued in the sector. To a degree, the Inclusive Learning Plans have followed their professionalisation. The Inclusive Learning Plan is their valuable achievement.

The improvement of the Inclusive Learning Plans convey a significant challenge to HE institutions. Disability practitioners have expressed that their Inclusive Learning Plans require a planned development to be effective. They need to improve their consistency, clarity and their dissemination; and being able to increase the responsibility and accountability of all the parties involved in the support of disabled students' learning, including students'.

It is hoped the research's findings have contributed towards the identification of the potential of the different systems of communication and areas for improvement.

4.1. A final note: the way forward

The research shows a snap shot of the Inclusive Learning Plan in a particular historical context. It is nonetheless hoped that such research will positively inform and influence disability policy and procedure within organisations in the future. However, such research is itself an organic process that changes as time passes. For the future, the current methodology of action research could be used inform future actions which, in turn, become the elements of self-reflection and further research. This is particularly important as the current historical context is changing rapidly. The Inclusive Learning Plan faces some immediate challenges related to the changes in the UK HE system: not least the increase in students numbers, changes in the amount of government resources available to HE in proportion to the UK's economic output, increases in student diversity and the changes in course structures towards a modular system which may be implemented by some institutions (Ashwin 2006). The Inclusive Learning Plan also faces challenges brought about by changes to the HE system as a whole identified by the National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education in 1997 (also known as the Dearing report)⁷. In addition, the demands of the 'learning society' in a global economy, could bring about new expectations and challenges to this specific mechanism of communication about disability.

To a degree, these changes are already impacting on Student Services. The Inclusive Learning Plan was designed to address some of the demands made by changes to equalities legislation. It is possible that the Inclusive Learning Plan will continue playing a similar role to address some of the challenges of the immediate future. It is hoped that the current research will contribute to a process of self-reflection in respect of their use, and help Student Services to better prepare for further changes in the near future.

7. <https://bei.leeds.ac.uk/Partners/NCIHE/>

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Annex 1: A brief journal of the research process

The following is a brief account of the steps taken to conduct the research.

In March 2013, the University of Kent launched a research project into the use of Inclusive Learning Plans among students with disabilities at Higher Education Institutions. A first letter was drafted for AMOSSHE members, with an initial short questionnaire requesting information on the type of documentation they used and also for the contact details of a representative to whom a more detailed survey could be sent.

On March 12th the letter was emailed to AMOSSHE members and this, after two reminders, generated a total of over 50 responses received over the next few weeks.

Using the information from the responses, a detailed spreadsheet was collated which formed a basis for the second part of the research.

A more detailed questionnaire was then set up using SurveyMonkey software. A test questionnaire was sent out on 26th March to members of the Kent DDSS team, who offered useful feedback and this process also provided a better understanding of the survey software.

Satisfied with the results from the practice run, the official SurveyMonkey questionnaire was sent out to our contacts on April 4th asking for responses by 16th April.

By Friday 12th April, 12 responses to the survey had been received. A reminder was sent out on Monday 15th April, extending the deadline until Friday 26th April.

A further six surveys had been completed by Friday 19th April, and by Friday 26th April there were 22 completed surveys in total.

Clearly this was not enough to form a basis for the research, so individuals were contacted directly by email and by phone requesting their support for our project, and by Tuesday 30th April, 28 surveys had been completed.



What can be learnt from the use of Inclusive Learning Plans

A final reminder was emailed out to AMOSSHE members on 30th April, and between then and June 6th a further seven people responded to the survey, bringing the final total up to 35.

There were a few challenges in the process.

The timing of the project coincided with many people going away for Easter breaks, and there were also three bank holidays - Easter Monday on April 1st, Mayday on May 6th and the Spring Bank Holiday on May 27th. Different HEIs had different dates for their Easter recess, and it was also half term for schools from May 27th-31st, with many people taking that week off work. The period for this project also coincided with the start of end of year exams in a number of institutions (including Kent) with student support departments becoming very busy with a last minute rush of students seeking concessions or suffering stress and anxiety as a result of exams or final coursework.

It was quite hard to get hold of people, with contacts often very busy with students for the above reasons. Many people admitted to being very tired and stressed as they approached the end of the academic year, and overworked due to understaffing in their departments. Despite this, everybody who completed the survey was extremely helpful and generous with their time, and their responses provided a solid foundation for the research.

One drawback was that having not used SurveyMonkey before, in setting up the survey it was somehow not possible to see the author of each response unless they had specifically provided their contact details in the questionnaire. Although for the purpose of the report all information gained would be anonymous, it was useful to see who had responded to get an idea of the types of institutions being included in our report and ensure a diverse geographical range. It also helped in linking this survey to our original short questionnaire by mapping the types of learning plan used to the more detailed responses. An improvement to the survey would be to have repeated the question from the earlier questionnaire on the type of learning plan used, which would have avoided this subsequent problem.

The IT helpdesk was not able to help resolve this problem through tracking the IP addresses. However,

after a lot of phone calls and checking the websites of the institutions of the original 50 responses, it was possible to ascertain who the anonymous ones were and to map them accordingly. This helped to create the charts which illustrate the numbers according to types of learning plan from each institution.

Annex 2: Summary of common issues

Group A: institutions that use a paper-based system of communication

Group B: institutions that use a hybrid system of communication

Group C: institutions that use an intranet-based system of communication

Procedures	Group A	Group B	Group C
Responsibility to initiate	Disability adviser		
Requirements	Essential: evidential documentation, meeting with student for consultations/ consent. Not essential: assessment of needs Ideal information: previous support at school, programme/course information.		
Parties involved	Mostly: disability advisers, students, school administrators/disability contact. Occasional: learning support tutors, care workers. Teaching practitioners (academics). Less frequent: only students.	Mostly: disability advisers, students, school administrators/disability contact. Occasional: learning support tutors, care workers. Less frequent: teaching practitioners (academics) Remark: 'none signs up'	Mostly: disability advisers, students, school administrators/disability contact. Occasional: learning support tutors, care workers. Less frequent: teaching practitioners (academics). Less frequent: only students.
Requirements or Recommendations	Both: requirements and recommendations		
Who deals with, if action not implemented	Most often: students, disability advisers, school administrators. Teaching practitioners. Less often: students on their own.	Students, disability advisers, school administrators. Teaching practitioners.	Students, disability advisers, school administrators. Teaching practitioners.
Route if problems arise	Mostly: not a formal procedure. An informal way for which a student raises issues to Disability Adviser. The Disability Adviser would then raise them with relevant staff in schools (administrator, teaching practitioners, etc.) to try to reach a workable outcome. This is a first instance. Less frequent: special formal procedure. Disability manager raises issues to Head of School. It seems to be in place after informal ways have not worked out.		
Time needed to figure out	1-4 weeks for most cases	1-4 weeks for most cases	1-4 weeks for most cases. Less frequent: 4-8/ 8-12 due to large volumes.
Review process	On student request, every 6 months, frequently.	As it is required by circumstances, individual requests, never.	Not possible due to resources, annually, never.

Annex 3: Summary of self evaluations and reflexions

Self-evaluation	Group A	Group B	Group C
Strengths	Robust, individualisation, student-centred approach, can be reviewed, clear directions, one document, help set parties' expectations.	Clarity, consistency, speed, easy dissemination, easy to implement, set responsibilities back to schools.	Consistent, relevant, to the point, one for the duration of the course, all parties involved, good means for alerts.
Weaknesses	Dissemination uncertainties, different papers around (list, etc.). Limited success in creating a shared understanding.	Require capacity to manage numbers. Dissemination uncertainty as it relies on third party in the school. Teaching practitioners do not understand summaries. Disability advisers lack knowledge of programme/course contents/students. Not common procedure across departments/schools. Standardisation of needs/lack personalised approach.	There are examples of limited use in some universities. New members do not have access. Lack control of the review process (review when student raise issues)
Improvements	Establish follow ups. Continue standardisation. Resources to deal with greater numbers. Improve clarity and brevity.	Centralisation of the database. Make notifications from database. Work on improving clarity. Get rid of unnecessary paper. Create electronic signature.	Teaching practitioners to engage and contribute. More personalisation /individualisation/ include contextual information. Create an automatic delivery. Link to information about programme/courses.