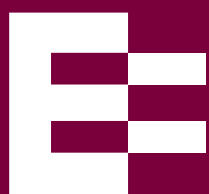


Strategic approaches to disabled student engagement



Equality Challenge Unit



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Strategic approaches to
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Foreword

Universities and colleges are increasingly recognising the importance of student engagement across a range of issues. Whilst students now have an expectation that their voice will be listened to in relation to the quality of their higher education, many institutions are embracing the opportunities of engaging students as partners in their higher education. This type of engagement, going beyond legal obligations to involve students, brings benefits to student learning and harnesses the contribution of students to maintaining and enhancing the quality of higher education. It is a most welcome development.

Engaging with disabled students is of particular importance to institutions in shaping their facilities, services, and curriculum and assessment design, not only in meeting the entitlements of disabled students, but those of all students. Through meaningful and sustainable involvement, HEIs can achieve a truly inclusive learning environment to the benefit of all students and the institution itself.

Disabled student involvement is not always a straightforward exercise and therefore this guidance is welcomed. It is based on the successes achieved and lessons learned by a range of different HEIs in England and Wales. It is clear from the experiences of the institutions involved in this project that engagement is most effective where it is in partnership with students, where the students appreciate that their contributions are valued and acted upon. The guidance reminds us that any approach to furthering disabled student involvement needs to be strategic, including all the functions of an institution. Finally, it reminds us that the effective implementation of disability equality hinges on the actions and understanding of individual staff and students throughout the institution.

We anticipate that this guidance will assist institutions in the development of their policies and practices to further the involvement of disabled students, if not all students throughout the institution. Achieving effective disabled student involvement, with genuine engagement at its heart, is a joint responsibility in which all staff and students have a role to play.

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1 Introduction

This guidance is a joint publication from the Higher Education Academy (the Academy) and Equality Challenge Unit (ECU). It has been written to support higher education institutions (HEIs) to strategically develop more effective mechanisms to further the involvement of disabled students, not only in the development of disability equality schemes (DES), as required by the disability equality duty (DED), but also in the implementation of those schemes and in the wider development of an ongoing institutional culture towards disability equality. This practical guidance draws on the strategies and experiences of seven HEIs from England and Wales to further the involvement of disabled students across a range of institutional functions. It provides some guiding principles for other institutions wishing to advance their work in this area and a series of reflective questions for the sector that can be found in the appendix.

1.1 Background

There was growing concern that institutions required assistance to effectively involve disabled students in policy and practice development. Although such involvement has been a legal requirement of the DED – explicitly within the specific duties relating to the development of a DES and implicitly in the general duties including those relating to the promotion of equality of opportunity for disabled people – other evidence pointed to difficulties in complying with this agenda. In 2007, the Disability Rights Commission (DRC) conducted a review of 21 HEI's DES and found that a common weakness or reason for non-compliance with the DED was 'a failure to clearly illustrate the priorities raised by disabled people during involvement, and how these influenced decisions and actions within the scheme'.

More recently, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales reviewed DES at 11 HEIs in Wales (HEFCW, 2009). This found that whilst most complied with the requirement to involve disabled people in the development of a scheme, few HEIs ensured that the involvement of disabled people was a central part of a scheme's development. The report encouraged HEIs to adopt a more proactive approach to involving disabled people, as required to meet compliance with the DED. ECU hopes to follow up with an equivalent evaluation of DES in England later in 2010.

It is also worth noting the broader context of student engagement within which disabled student involvement sits. The report by the Centre for Higher Education

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Research and Information, to the Higher Education Funding Council for England on student engagement (CHERI, 2009) explores current models of formal and informal student engagement including barriers to effectiveness. The focus on engagement in higher education can be usefully extended to look at how inclusive current engagement practice is.

The recent *Pathways report* (OIA, 2010) found that students bringing complaints are much more likely to describe themselves as having a disability (23 per cent compared with six per cent nationally). The report makes a range of recommendations to improve the Office of the Independent Adjudicator's (OIA) service and HEIs may want to be aware that recommendation 25 proposes that the OIA, in line with general regulatory good practice, should publish:

'summaries of formal decisions made by the OIA, naming the relevant university but retaining anonymity for university staff and individual complainants. The publication annually of summary data for each member of the scheme, including the number and outcome of complaints dealt with by the OIA, the number of completion of procedures letters published each year, and the total number of complaints and appeals received and heard by the university.'

The OIA's recommendation may further increase the impetus for HEIs to ensure that disabled students are actively engaged in the development of institutional policies and practice to prevent damaging complaints.

The Quality Assurance Agency's decision to recruit student auditors with effect from January 2010 adds to the visibility of the student engagement agenda (www.qaa.ac.uk/students/studentEngagement/default.asp). Through encouraging disabled students to apply to become auditors, HEIs can demonstrate their ability to keep the equality agenda as a key component of the institutional audit process. In addition, the project that the National Union of Students and the Academy started in November 2009 aims to develop materials and resources for students' unions and institutions, supporting them to improve how they engage students in shaping their learning experience and evaluate how they currently engage students (www.officeronline.co.uk/education/articles/276691.aspx).

This guidance hopes to achieve a practical focus on potential strategies and approaches that can be adopted by HEIs. It offers a range of examples of effective practice that have been successfully implemented in the sector. Additionally, the

appendix provides questions designed to support HEIs in reflecting on their current practice with a key focus on strategic advances to cultural change.

1.2 Project methodology

In 2008, ECU and the Academy advertised an opportunity for HEIs in England and Wales to participate in a longitudinal programme to further the involvement of disabled students. They were required to submit expressions of interest, including details on:

- = their current approach to involving disabled students
- = a rationale for getting involved in the project
- = who would be involved in their project team, ensuring involvement from those in a disability role as well as individuals drawn from a range of functional areas such as estates, teaching and learning, student services and the students' union

The expression of interest also had to include the endorsement of a member of the senior management team.

Of the 15 applications received from across England and Wales, seven institutions were selected and invited to participate. A list of the participating institutions and a report on their achievements can be found on the ECU website in the form of case studies (www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/disabled-student-engagement).

Each institution identified a project team of four or five members of staff and students to represent a range of institutional departments. Two team members were nominated to attend three project meetings with ECU, the Academy and the other selected institutions. A key element of the project rationale sought to facilitate collaborative work between institutions by sharing their learning experiences. Across the programme timeframe (September 2008 to September 2009), the project teams developed action plans, identified barriers and enablers to involvement, and implemented a range of strategies to engage disabled students more effectively. There are variations in the development of involvement strategies between institutions, dependent on the institutional context, the priorities identified by the working group and how closely involved disabled students were in the development of the engagement strategies.

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1.3 Legal context

The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 2005 amended the 1995 Act of the same name. It introduced a new duty – the DED – requiring public bodies to take a strategic approach to the promotion of disability equality, and to adapt policies and services to ensure that they take full account of disabled people. The DED comprises general and specific duties, both of which have relevance to the higher education sector.

The specific duties of the DED require HEIs to produce a DES which sets out their commitment to achieving greater equality over the next three years and an action plan detailing the intended implementation of the scheme. HEIs are required to provide a statement outlining the ways in which disabled people have been actively engaged in the creation of the scheme. This requirement reflects that it is impossible to identify and prioritise disability equality initiatives without the input and guidance of disabled people. Detailed information about the DED as it applies to HEIs can be found at www.ecu.ac.uk/law/disability-legislation-disability-equality-duty.

The DES, related action plan and annual reporting mechanisms all provide an important framework to assist institutions in planning, delivering and evaluating their approach to disability equality. The emphasis on involvement in the DED requires institutions to actively engage disabled people and develop proactive strategies, which go far beyond simple consultation methods. Involving disabled people will also ensure that an HEI develops policies and practices that comply with the DED general duties to:

- = promote equality of opportunity for disabled people
- = eliminate unlawful discrimination of disabled people
- = eliminate disability-related harassment
- = promote positive attitudes towards disabled people
- = encourage participation by disabled people in public life
- = take steps to meet disabled people's needs, even if this requires more favourable treatment

As the Equality Act 2010 is brought into force, it will replace the DDA with a new public sector equality duty which replicates the general duties of the DED.

However, new specific duties are likely to change the way HEIs are required to report on actions to move towards disability equality. The current proposed timetable is for the new general duty to be introduced from April 2011. Until such time as the new general duty is introduced, institutions are required to comply with the DED.

1.4 Making the case for furthering student involvement

It should be acknowledged that the strategic and practical approaches for furthering disabled student involvement can be applied to all students across the institution.

The legal framework is an important driver for institutions to engage disabled students in the development of institutional policies and strategies; however there are several core benefits that HEIs may find useful to consider within the context of developing an effective student engagement strategy.

- = **Value position:** an opportunity to demonstrate that core institutional values are inclusive. Actively involving disabled students will indicate that the HEI is ethical, open, respectful and responsive.
- = **Business case:** an opportunity to increase (and maintain) student numbers by building and marketing a good reputation as an institution that listens and responds. Students may also be more employable if they are actively engaged in their institution.
- = **Shared ownership and partnership building:** an opportunity to extend ownership and understanding of the student experience with all students, as well as an opportunity to build effective and long-term relationships.
- = **Quality enhancement:** involving disabled students in enhancing the quality of their experience proactively reduces the burden of having to retrofit or make reactive adjustments to practices for particular individuals.
- = **Student satisfaction surveys** (eg, the national student satisfaction survey, the postgraduate research experience survey and the international student barometer): results of national surveys are increasingly important to institutions, particularly given the growing reliance on them by prospective students.

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Engaging with disabled students provides an important opportunity to improve students' sense of satisfaction with their experience.

- = **Student retention and success:** developing a greater understanding of student issues and responding to them may enhance achievement, progression and retention.

1.5 Benefits and risks of involving disabled students

A survey by the Office for Public Management (OPM, 2007) found that through the involvement of disabled people in the development and implementation of the DED, organisations were able to:

- = improve their performance
- = design and deliver better public services
- = change organisational culture to promote disability equality
- = become better employers
- = strengthen the involvement processes and outcomes

Participating HEIs considered the benefits and risks of actively engaging disabled students with institutional policy and practice, highlighting the following issues.

Risks of not engaging disabled students:

- = non-compliance with the legislation leading to legal action
- = institutional reputation, ie negative publicity for not fulfilling legal duty
- = poor institutional performance or under-performance amongst particular students, coupled with the associated costs of re-sitting
- = litigation prompted by not listening to what students are saying
- = a potential increase in the number of student complaints (leading to time and cost implications or intervention from the OIA)
- = risk to student retention
- = an institution not learning and developing will be left behind others in the sector
- = lack of staff development, leading to a lack of understanding about student entitlements

Risks of engaging disabled students:

- = students feel 'consultation fatigue'
- = raising expectations that can't or won't be met
- = over- or under-representation of particular views and experiences
- = weight given to the students who do respond
- = resentment by non-disabled students
- = potential resentment by disabled staff if disabled staff feel disengaged
- = driving disability agenda at the expense of other (ie to potential detriment of others), not proportionate
- = resentment amongst academic and other staff (who may be required to do more preparation as a result of comments by disabled students)

1.6 A note on terminology

In this project, the focus has been on encouraging institutions to design more active and meaningful opportunities for disabled students to be involved in the development of policy and practice across all functions and services. Several terms are currently used by the sector to describe students taking a more active role in their education or in educational processes, including involvement, participation, consultation, partnership and engagement. These terms are often used interchangeably yet have different meanings and implications.

Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation model can be usefully applied in the context of furthering disabled student involvement as a tool for institutions to reflect on and develop opportunities for engagement. It encourages institutions to go beyond simply seeking to 'inform' or 'consult with' disabled students, towards the development of more democratic and active approaches. The model shows the differentiation of the common terms listed previously (involvement, participation, consultation, partnership and engagement) on the grounds of the levels of student engagement and of democratic control (May, 2002). The terms can be defined as follows.

- = **Engagement:** different levels of participation on behalf of an individual (ie a student or staff member), dependent upon both the opportunity available, and their choice as an individual.

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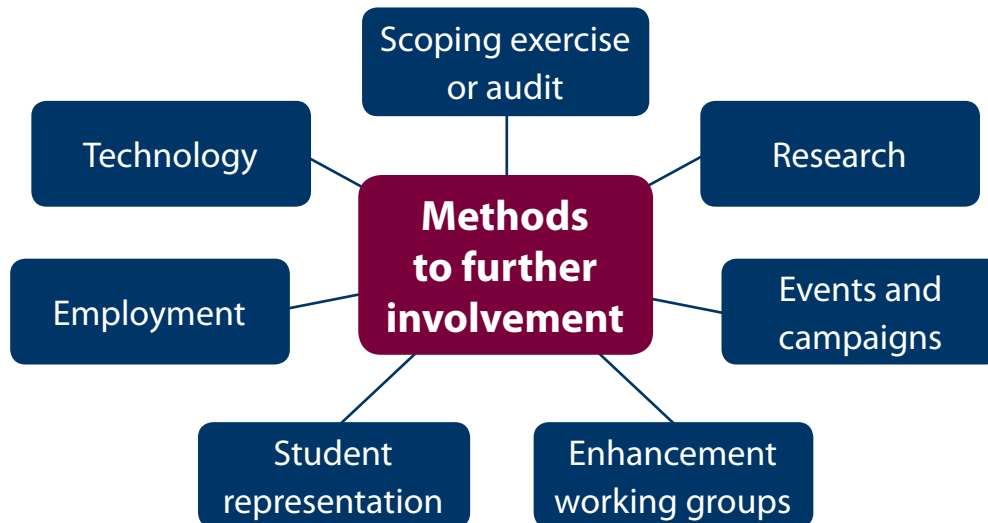
- = **Consultation:** an opportunity to express individual opinions, perspectives, experiences, ideas and concerns. The provider of the opportunity has ultimate control over the process and outcome.
- = **Involvement:** an opportunity, in which individuals are invited to take a more active role. The provider of the opportunity has control over the process and the stage in the process at which the involvement of others is sought.
- = **Participation:** a decision taken by an individual to take part or take a more active role. The opportunity or stage may be predetermined by others, leading to an individual having a lack of control over the decision.
- = **Partnership:** a collaboration (eg between a student and an institution), involving joint ownership and decision-making over the process and outcome.

Throughout this guidance involvement is used to denote an active process on behalf of the student. Whilst it is acknowledged that most HEIs involve disabled students in some processes, the guidance hopes to encourage involvement across the entire institution.

2 Engaging disabled students

Many of the following methods were used by participating institutions during the project (for further detail see the case studies from the project, available from www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/disabled-student-engagement). The methods have been grouped into categories, as outlined in figure 1 below.

Figure 1 Strategies used to engage disabled students in higher education



All seven participating institutions used several methods, recognising that no single method would be sufficient to achieve their overarching goal. The teams selected methods on the basis of ‘fitness to context’, choosing methods or implementing them in such a way as to ensure they were appropriate to the student body in general, and disabled students in particular.

2.1 Scoping exercise or audit

An audit of current practice, collecting information about the nature and level of activity across the institution, can be used to inform an institution’s approach to furthering the involvement of disabled students. It will help to ensure that any future planned strategies can build on existing practice and plug any potential gaps in provision, helping to highlight priority areas to target.

2 Engaging disabled students

Some institutions (Derby, Staffordshire and Swansea) undertook an audit to form a baseline picture of the involvement of disabled students which was used to inform the teams' approach and make the case to others that further work was required.

The University of Staffordshire undertook an initial mapping exercise, identifying existing opportunities for student involvement provided by the university and students' union. It was found that levels of student involvement were higher than anticipated, yet highlighted the lack of engagement experienced by disabled students in the production of the university's DES. This exercise formed a significant aspect of the team's work during the project and informed a more detailed plan of future activity.

2.2 Research

Institutions can involve disabled students and generate a better understanding of them through research.

All project teams employed research methods involving disabled students, including interviews, focus groups, surveys, action research and appreciative inquiry. The use of different research strategies offers students the opportunity to choose a method to suit their availability and accessibility requirements. Some methods were instigated or led by students rather than the institution.

A group of students at the University of Sunderland managed and led a student focus group to inform the development of a university student promise document, which was endorsed by the university's academic experience committee.

Institutions routinely collect an array of data about their disabled student population as part of funding requirements and equality reporting. Such data can help HEIs to better understand their disabled students and gain an insight into students' progression, attainment, retention and satisfaction with their experience.

Project teams utilised a range of national and institutional data sources, including the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) statistics, the national student survey, student complaints and feedback to ascertain potential areas of focus.

The University of Derby conducted a statistical review of disability data involving an analysis of the demographics of the disabled student body and the results of internal and external satisfaction/feedback surveys. The review led to a better understanding of the profile and views of disabled students at Derby, and identified preferred communication methods. The analysis culminated in a report with key recommendations for institutional change.

The information collected about or by disabled students provides a valuable resource to:

- = identify functional areas within the institution to prioritise or target
- = raise awareness amongst staff and non-disabled students about the barriers faced by disabled students
- = highlight key or positive messages about disabled students

Student experiences can be a powerful and compelling way of demonstrating the case for change (May and Bridger, 2010). The data can help to rectify common misassumptions about the definitions and categorisation of disability such as the particular barriers faced by disabled students, the varied experiences of individuals with particular impairments and preferences about disability labelling (Fuller et al., 2009; Jacklin et al., 2007).

2.3 Events and campaigns

Institutions can involve disabled students through events or campaigns that are led by students or focus on issues relating to disability. Events provide the opportunity to bring students together, sometimes with staff, to identify, discuss and debate issues of common interest. Campaigns based on an identified need that change the institution's functioning in some way can engage disabled students and raise awareness of the issues they face.

2 Engaging disabled students

A number of project teams (Derby, Brunel, De Montfort and West of England) instigated events or campaigns, including the provision of:

- = workshops
- = meetings
- = student forums
- = new societies
- = a clubs and societies fair
- = information events
- = a marketing campaign
- = a diversity week

There was a notable distinction between those initiated or led by the staff and those initiated or led by the disabled students themselves. There was a further distinction between those being run as a one-off activity or as an ongoing series.

The University of Derby ran a series of events and campaigns through the course of the project. The students' union ran a clubs and societies fair for disabled students during induction to increase membership. It also set up a new disabled student society and instigated a student-led campaign focusing on sport development seeking to engage disabled students through clubs and societies, as well as accessibility and hidden disability campaigns. In addition, the university ran a conference on the engagement of disabled students.

Brunel University involved disabled students in planning a 'one world week' in which a number of high-profile events took place, including a basketball match with the Great Britain wheelchair team, to raise awareness and promote positive images of disabled people. Disabled students worked on the information stall at the event.

The University of the West of England held an event entitled 'student voices' about the campus master plan for new buildings and spaces. Students, raised a number of significant issues about how to design an inclusive campus. To avoid consultation fatigue, ensure continuity and develop the capacity of the students to participate more effectively as the plan emerges, the student group is being supported by independent local disability groups.

2.4 Student representation

Institutions can enable disabled students' representation on formal committees and decision-making forums at central, faculty or departmental level to include the authentic voice of disabled students.

Disabled students can represent their institution in other ways such as by acting as ambassadors or role models, reaching out into the institution or community to raise aspirations, promote action and community cohesion and bring about knowledge exchange. Institutions can look to provide specific roles for disabled students, such as through the students' union or student services, to advise, lobby and raise awareness of disability equality.

Access to such opportunities should not be limited to a nominated student representative from the students' union, but should look to involve current, prospective and former disabled students where possible. Student representatives may need support (eg physical resources, time, funding) to prepare for their role, attend meetings, and consult with a wider body of students as a representative of others.

Attention may need to be given to the coordination of representatives across the institution to identify cross-institutional issues, provide support for individual representatives and ensure the continuity of representatives from one year to the next.

Many of the participating institutions had representative structures in place prior to commencing the project. For some, the involvement of disabled students as representatives was formalised as part of the work of the project.

Staffordshire University identified a number of disabled student ambassadors in order to involve other disabled students.

At Brunel University, a group of five disabled student representatives was established. The group received training and support from the students' union and disability service to assist them in representing their peers. They will hold focus groups and have undertaken other activities including assisting at events, running stalls, setting up a representatives webpage and Facebook contacts to promote themselves and to communicate with the student body.

2 Engaging disabled students

The University of Derby has subgroups for each recognised area of equality and diversity, including a student representative for each. These feed into the central equality and diversity committee, chaired by the pro vice-chancellor and with students' union representation. Student representation at programme level has been reviewed to make it more robust, with a focus on equality and diversity issues, as part of a long-term representation strategy.

2.5 Enhancement working groups

Bringing together individuals interested or responsible for nominated tasks in a working group is another key strategy that institutions may use to involve disabled students. To bring about change, the group needs to be willing to commit time and effort, gain the support of senior management and access the necessary resources to both raise the status of the work and ensure effective management and coordination of the activity.

All project teams operated as small working groups to bring about change within their institutions. Several teams (Brunel, Sunderland, De Montfort and Derby) set up further working groups involving disabled students working alongside staff. In some cases, students were encouraged to form their own working groups, to lead change within their institution.

A small group of disabled students was involved in the development of De Montfort University's original DES in 2006. Since then, focus groups have been held with disabled students, further enhanced during the project through the creation of a disabled student involvement group. Four meetings were held over the project period in which the students identified themes for exploration.

A student member of the project team at the University of Sunderland issued an invitation to students to become involved in a series of student-managed and -led working groups. Student members of the working groups coordinated the work and held team meetings to keep track of progress. Using a project management framework, each working group covered one of the key project objectives.

A new group, led by disabled students, was established at the University of the West of England. The group has fielded enquiries from sections of the university, and members of the group have served as representatives on institutional task and working groups.

At Brunel University, an equality and diversity working group was re-established from a group that had met previously. The group involved staff and student representatives from all departments to focus on disability.

2.6 Technology

Technology can facilitate dialogue and communication between an institution and its students, as well as amongst students, which in turn may help to further disabled students' involvement. Through technology, information can be easily tailored to particular groups or individuals, ensuring cost-effective, up-to-date and sustained contact.

The project teams used a range of technological tools to further the engagement of disabled students, including email, text, telephone, social networking sites, voting systems, discussion boards and instant messaging. In some cases, these were arranged by the institution whilst in others they were instigated by students.

At De Montfort University, a dedicated webpage was set up for students to comment or make suggestions on the university's operation. The webpage now contains information for students about how issues they have raised have been addressed.

www.dmu.ac.uk/study/student_services/_service/studentvoice/index.jsp

The University of Swansea set up a social networking area to enable disabled students to discuss their needs in more detail and have active discussion and involvement with the project.

Students involved in the working groups at the University of Sunderland set up a Facebook site to engage with their peers. This initiative worked alongside the disabled student working groups to encourage further student engagement.

2 Engaging disabled students

2.7 Employment

Some institutions and students' unions pay student representatives to fulfil a particular role, recognising that whilst some students would like to become representatives, without pay they will have to forego the experience in favour of supplementing their income with other part-time work. Others offer students work experience for time-limited periods, sometimes as part of their course. It may be an incentive to students to know that their involvement has contributed to institutional decisions and may be recognised by future employers.

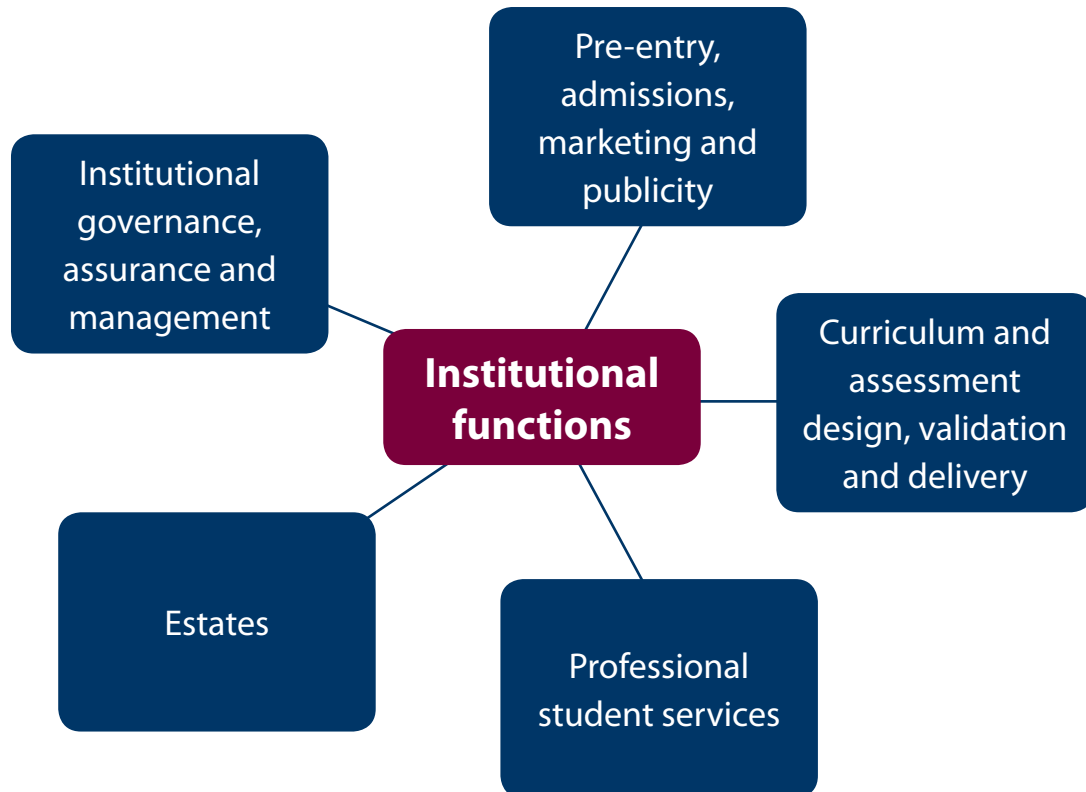
De Montfort University linked into the volunteering award scheme run by their students' union, so that disabled students working on activities associated with the project could log their time spent and potentially gain recognition for time volunteered.

Brunel University paid students to be involved in their awareness-raising events, thereby recognising their time commitment to the project.

3 Engaging a range of institutional functions

Institutions may wish to consider the ways in which they approach their different institutional functions to encourage the further involvement of disabled students. For ease of reference, institutional functions have been grouped together in figure 2 below.

Figure 2 Engaging a range of institutional functions



3.1 Pre-entry, admissions, marketing and publicity

There is a clear moral and business case for furthering the involvement of disabled students in the pre-entry and admission stages in decisions that will impact upon their learning experience in higher education. Through such involvement:

- = students can have a smoother transition to higher education, subsequently influencing their retention and progression
- = students can be better prepared to study in higher education and can take ownership of their own learning

3 Engaging a range of institutional functions

- = there is less likely to be a mismatch of expectations between a student and the institution
- = individual entitlements can be identified promptly so that appropriate support can be in place on or before a student's arrival

HEIs have a responsibility under the DDA (2005) to consider their pre-entry provision (such as open days) and admissions process to eliminate discrimination proactively for prospective, as well as current, students.

Marketing material, including images and text, should look to attract a diverse range of students. It should be available in different formats, encourage the disclosure of disability and provide the right level of information for students to make decisions and choices, including those based on the level of support they can expect to receive and their ability to access, for example, the disabled student allowance (DSA). Disabled students could play a valuable role for future students in identifying and eliminating the barriers encountered either pre-entry, in the admissions process or during induction.

A small number of participating institutions targeted the pre-entry, admissions and marketing functions. The methods they used to engage these functions included:

- = provision of meeting or web space to prompt a two-way exchange of ideas and experiences
- = provision of pre-entry workshops for disabled students
- = a review of how disability is portrayed within the institution's marketing material

The University of Sunderland asked students to give feedback on the accessibility of university communication. Positive images of disabled people were included in marketing material. The project instigated direct communication between students and the head of marketing.

The University of Derby holds a pre-induction programme called 'get ahead', specifically for disabled students to ease the transition into university life. It includes workshops such as an early introduction into the enrolment process and is supported by the students' union.

3.2 Curriculum and assessment design, validation and delivery

The dominant learning paradigm recognises students as active participants in the learning process and consequently encourages students to be autonomous and take responsibility for their own learning in higher education. This shift in thinking has led to significant changes over the last five years in the design and delivery of curricula, moving away from solely using didactic teaching methods (such as lectures), towards more interactive and participatory methods (such as group work, problem enquiry or experience-based learning). HEIs are under pressure from a number of competing agendas to:

- = improve student satisfaction with their learning processes
- = enhance student retention
- = engage employers
- = respond proactively to equality legislation and widening participation performance indicators (May and Bridger, 2010)

Now, more than ever, students are perceived as central to the learning process and should be encouraged to play a greater role in shaping the design, delivery and content of the curriculum as well as in the decision-making processes and quality enhancement related to their learning experience.

Within this context, a number of participating HEIs targeted curriculum design and delivery functions, methods included:

- = a scoping exercise or audit
- = student voice meetings between staff and students
- = specific meetings with senior management
- = continuing professional development
- = alterations to the institution's learning and teaching policy

Disabled students at the University of Staffordshire identified inclusive practice as a priority area. Students felt aggrieved that they were required to negotiate adjustments to which they felt they were entitled. As a result the university is looking to revise its policy.

3 Engaging a range of institutional functions

The University of Swansea targeted staff development as a means of exploring staff attitudes and understanding to improve practice. Following an identification that staff required guidance on how best to support disabled students, the student forum was used to call upon students to discuss and outline their support requirements. This information is now being used to develop staff guidance. The forum will be used to nurture open relationships between staff and students and promote full and frank discussions about support requirements.

3.3 Professional student services

Centrally provided services are an essential part of the support on offer to students during their time in higher education. These include the students' union, disability service, student services, pastoral and counselling services, library services and career services. The disability service in particular plays a key role for disabled students by facilitating their assessment of DSA and other entitlements, as well as helping to negotiate and provide individual adjustments. Other centrally coordinated and managed services, such as the equality and diversity and widening participation functions, support students both directly and indirectly.

A small number of participating institutions targeted professional student services to facilitate collaborative working between the various services and disabled students. These HEIs engaged professional student services through:

- = facilitating a meeting between service personnel and students
- = running a steering group involving a range of service personnel and students
- = setting up a formal arrangement between services
- = creating a cross-departmental working group

De Montfort University set up an internal steering group including representatives from the transitions, disability support, counselling, estates and academic quality departments, as well as a disabled student representative and the students' union. The group met regularly to inform the work of the project.

3.4 Estates

Access to buildings and accommodation remains a barrier to disabled students, despite the progress that has been made to improve accessibility, particularly since the DDA (1995). Institutions face high costs in retrofitting existing buildings and often have to prioritise or make decisions on the basis of demand. There are revised building regulations to help ensure that basic accessibility requirements are met in new constructions. Institutions have a duty to anticipate the additional adjustments they will need to make in order to support prospective disabled students. The involvement of disabled people therefore is crucial, as they can help identify potential areas where adjustments would need to be made, aid prioritisation of any required adjustments and help HEIs to better understand the barriers faced. By involving disabled people in the initial design phase, HEIs may be able to avoid the high costs of retrofitting later on. This may involve disabled students conducting an audit on behalf of the institution to identify the areas they need to target.

A number of the participating institutions (Staffordshire, Derby, Brunel and De Montfort) targeted estates as part of their work associated with this project, often in response to students raising access issues as a priority focus. To engage with the estates department, these HEIs:

- = set up a formal arrangement or charter
- = held student-run meetings with the head of estates service
- = encouraged meetings between staff and students
- = created action plans

Students involved in the disability group at De Montfort University identified issues related to estates (including accessibility, security and car parking) as one of the priority areas they wished to target. The students invited key personnel to 'student voice' meetings to exchange ideas and experiences in order to overcome key issues.

The estates service at the University of Staffordshire has now committed to engaging with disabled students in an organised and functional way to inform the redevelopment of their Stoke-on-Trent campus. A formal arrangement has been agreed between estates, project managers, the disabled student centre and disabled students.

3 Engaging a range of institutional functions

At the University of Derby, a client brief has been drawn up to ensure that appropriate consultation with disabled students will take place throughout future estates projects. Furthermore, a student charter was produced to secure disabled student involvement in future design briefs.

Brunel University held group meetings with students who have impaired mobility to discuss access requirements. Further meetings have taken place with estates to agree priorities for action.

3.5 Institutional governance, assurance and management

Disabled students can play a key role in institutional management, assurance and coordination through contributions to the formation of policy, systems and procedures, ultimately to enhance the student experience. Senior managers need to ensure that disabled students are provided with meaningful opportunities to engage in decision-making processes and that the institution proactively eliminates discriminatory practices and behaviours. In this project, institutions were encouraged to involve senior managers, as a team member where possible.

The team at the University of Swansea sought the support and involvement of the pro vice-chancellor for the student experience. This has ensured that any issues requiring action or endorsement by university-level committees have been possible, which in turn has helped to retain buy-in from staff and students.

At the University of Derby, a working group was established to shape and deliver the project, facilitated by a senior member of staff with responsibility for the student experience, reporting to an existing committee, chaired by the pro vice-chancellor with responsibility for equality and diversity. The working group had representation from key departments around the university, the students' union as well as a student member.

The project team at Brunel University enlisted the support of the vice-chancellor and pro vice-chancellors with responsibility for equality and the student experience to further the involvement of disabled students. Their involvement helped engage staff across the university by spreading a message that all staff have a responsibility for disability, and acting as a champion for the agenda.

4 Developing effective approaches

It is useful to consider a number of different factors when designing effective methods to further the involvement of disabled students. Work with the participating institutions has shown that furthering disabled student engagement depends less on the particular method chosen and more on the provision of a range of methods, the context and the implementation.

4.1 Pay attention to the context

The effectiveness and ultimate success of methods used to further students' involvement depends on the context in which they are applied (May, 2008). Participating institutions found it necessary to consider a number of contextual factors, such as accessibility, location and timing, to maximise student participation. Methods that are effective in one institution may not be in another, in part due to differences in the context in which they are applied.

4.2 Consider the stage at which students are involved

Figure 3 Involvement cycle



4 Developing effective approaches

Figure 3 illustrates the various stages involved in a typical planning or action cycle process. Methods used to involve students may be more meaningful to students when they are involved at an earlier stage or through more stages of the process. Students may be more likely to participate (and engage others) if they are involved from the outset: in defining the purpose, the questions that get asked, or indeed the topic under investigation. This may also help students to see the relevance of the strategy, which could help improve the response rate or the quality and validity of the findings.

De Montfort University asked participating disabled students to identify the priorities and themes that should be discussed at the disabled student group meetings. Whilst the university project team provided the rooms, catering and secretarial support to the group, the agenda itself was set by the participating students and this engendered real buy-in from students.

4.3 Opportunities to lead

The opportunity to lead, own or take responsibility for particular activities can be an empowering experience for students. Through leading, students get a chance to negotiate, influence, take decisions, make choices and adapt; thereby developing graduate skills. It may be that in taking the lead, students choose an approach to take a decision that differs from the one the institution may have taken, which can result in new insights and understandings. Furthermore, a student may feel more comfortable or willing to discuss their experiences with their peers or when they are able to set the agenda themselves.

At the University of the West of England and the University of Sunderland, disabled students were provided with an opportunity to lead their own working group. These groups were independent and self-sustaining and provided a reference group for the institution.

4.4 Promote collaboration

Participating institutional teams benefited from working in collaboration with students and the students' union as well as staff from a range of institutional functions (estates, widening participation, admissions, teaching and learning).

Some participating institutions made use of existing contacts and networks to take aspects of their project forward. The students' union may play a vital role in encouraging student participation in opportunities provided by the institution, in running opportunities on behalf of the institution and in raising the profile of the student voice.

4.5 Provide incentives

The provision of incentives for students goes some way towards recognising, valuing and rewarding students for their input and time. It can help to provide a range of different incentives as what may persuade one student to participate may not work for another. Incentives can include:

- = leisure vouchers or prizes
- = the opportunity to meet new people
- = food
- = payment of time
- = accreditation towards their programme of study
- = the opportunity to gain skills or experience to improve their employment prospects

It should be recognised that some opportunities will require students to pay out money to attend, so reimbursing travel and other expenses may help encourage participation. Articulating the potential benefits of involvement may also improve students' willingness to take part.

De Montfort University worked with the students' union to advertise the benefits of taking part in the disabled student group. Participating disabled students can log and record time spent in disabled student group meetings and associated activities towards a volunteering award scheme administered by the students' union. Such awards are seen by students as valuable assets to list on future employment applications. The university ensured that an accessible room and food was available for students participating in the activities.

Brunel University asked students to become involved in filming publicity about the disability service. They engaged students by making it fun and relevant, and paid students to be involved in awareness-raising events.

4 Developing effective approaches

4.6 Consider the timing

The time of day, time of year or stage in the semester or term can all have an impact upon students' willingness to participate, particularly if activities are unrelated to their programme of study. It is necessary to consider additional pressures that may influence a student's decision to participate. HEIs need to plan ahead and allow flexibility for the timing of opportunities to enable students to participate at a time of day that suits them.

At De Montfort University, students were asked what time of day would best suit them to attend exploratory meetings to identify the themes they would like the university to prioritise. Evenings were recognised to be the most popular time to meet and twilight sessions were held.

4.7 Provide feedback and take action

Feedback can be crucial to the success and significance of a strategy. Institutions should consider the dissemination of feedback as part of the process and the actions they will take as a result of students' involvement. Knowledge of the outcome of previous involvement may influence a student's decision to take part in future activities, as students benefit from knowing that their contributions are being listened to and that what they say will make a difference (May, 2008).

The University of Derby ensures that feedback is provided to participating students through the use of 'you said it, we did it' publicity. The working group also agreed to 'believe what you hear and be prepared to act on it' in their response to ideas, concerns or priorities raised by disabled students.

4.8 Provide training

Students may need training and support to understand and implement their role and responsibilities. Such training can equip students with the tools, skills and knowledge to be effective in their role. Training should include guidance on their roles and responsibilities as well as on the management of confidential information, conducting research, speaking on behalf of others and strategies for reaching the voice of others. Such training could be incorporated into the curriculum or provided by the students' union at an institutional or regional level.

Brunel University's disabled student group received training and support from the students' union and disability service to enable its role of representing its peers, and in holding focus group meetings and other activities.

4.9 Enable informed choice

Students need to be provided with a range of information covering the implications of taking part, what is expected of them, and what will happen to the information they impart, so that they can make an informed decision as to whether to engage.

The NUS provides a range of information to support students' unions to develop course representation systems, much of which is transferable to disabled student involvement exercises. www.officeronline.co.uk/uniondevelopment/resources/representation/275571.aspx

In collaboration with the Association for Managers in Students' Unions, the NUS launched a benchmarking tool in 2009 to enable students' unions to measure the effectiveness of their course representative system and identify ways in which they could improve it.

www.officeronline.co.uk/education/articles/276955.aspx

4.10 Promote a shared responsibility

Responsibility for the promotion of equality, positive attitudes towards disability and the participation of disabled people in public life should be shared amongst all members of staff and students at an institution. Staff in particular should be made aware of their responsibilities and wherever possible, promote good relations between students.

Disabled students at the University of the West of England worked in partnership with the institution to develop a new induction and training package for those working as disability contacts within the faculties. The project team further proposed the creation of an award to value those faculties that actively involve disabled students publicly. These are now being considered for implementation by the university.

4 Developing effective approaches

De Montfort University's disabled student group identified that the university needs to provide disability equality training to staff with particular emphasis on the effects of unseen impairments.

4.11 Tailor opportunities and information

Information provided and methods chosen should be tailored to the context of the institution or department, the student body in general and disabled students in particular to ensure they are relevant and meaningful. Individuals or groups have different preferences, so participating HEIs tried a range of communication approaches.

4.12 Maintain ongoing and regular dialogue with students

Students can benefit from regular and sustained opportunities for communication between staff and their peers on issues that affect them. Participating institutions used a range of technological tools to promote dialogue and communication, including email, text, telephone, social networking sites, voting systems and discussion boards.

4.13 Commit resources

Institutions must be willing to commit resources, whether time or funding, to achieve greater involvement of disabled students. The success and achievements of the HEIs' project teams have come about through an investment of their time, drive and commitment in order to plan, coordinate, report and evaluate activity. Resource outlay can be kept to a minimum by linking to or adapting existing opportunities to engage students, such as collaborating with the students' union, or by embedding a requirement to engage disabled students into routine functioning of the institution.

5 Challenges to furthering the involvement of disabled students

The seven participating HEIs identified a number of challenges to successful involvement.

- = **Student participation:** encouraging students to take up the opportunities provided for them and fully engage when they do so.
- = **Student representation:** ensuring representative roles are meaningfully applied.
- = **Whole staff engagement:** embedding equality as part of the professional practice across a variety of institutional functions.
- = **Sustainability:** maintaining student and staff engagement over time.
- = **Evaluation:** ensuring effective strategies are in place to monitor progress and measure the success of the work undertaken.

5.1 Student participation

Encouraging students to engage in the opportunities provided by the institution can be a significant challenge. Institutions noticed an apparent student apathy and reluctance to engage, whilst students themselves may report consultation fatigue, perhaps due to frustration at not seeing any tangible changes resulting from previous involvement. Demanding academic timetables and responsibilities outside university life (paid work, volunteering, caring responsibilities) will also impact on students' ability to take up opportunities provided.

Student participation may be facilitated through the following solutions, some of which have been covered in more detail in previous sections of this guidance.

- = **Provide a range of methods:** what motivates or encourages the participation of one student may not be the same for another, thus engagement levels may be enhanced by simultaneously implementing a range of methods so that students can choose the one that feels most comfortable to them.
- = **Provide incentives:** incentives can help to demonstrate an institution's recognition of the value of students' input. See section 4.5 for examples.

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- = **Engage students from the outset:** students are more likely to engage with opportunities to participate and take ownership and responsibility for these opportunities if they are involved from the start of their contact with the institution. For further details on the full involvement cycle, see section 4.2.
- = **Embed opportunities within the curriculum:** student uptake of opportunities to participate may be increased where they are provided as part of the curriculum, rather than as an additional task. It may motivate students to participate by aligning participation activities with their study programme or by accrediting their participation.
- = **Consider accessibility:** consideration should be given to the accessibility of opportunities provided. Both individual and anticipatory adjustments should be made to the venue and any information provided wherever possible to minimise the need for students to request individual adjustments. It is preferable for information in various formats to be made available in advance to allow time for adjustments to be made and for students to prepare for the opportunities provided.
- = **Consider the frequency and timing of requests:** HEIs should take student timetables into consideration when planning opportunities, allowing time for students to schedule their workload accordingly.
- = **Build relationships with students:** establishing effective working relationships between staff and students may help students to feel more comfortable about their participation and to know that reciprocal exchange of information is regularly and routinely sought.
- = **Provide feedback:** students benefit from knowing how their contributions have been incorporated into decision-making. See section 4.7.
- = **Make participation fun and interesting:** students may be more inclined to participate when the opportunities are fun, or in some way relevant to students' current work or future plans.
- = **Provide student-led opportunities:** students may be more likely to participate when they have ownership over the activities. See section 4.3.

5 Challenges to furthering the involvement of disabled students

- = **Promote collaboration:** effective collaboration across the institution can promote student confidence and increase efficiency in the system and encourage student participation.
- = **Provide role models:** success stories from other disabled students can be inspirational and empowering and can encourage students to work through any challenges they may encounter. Other roles models may include, for example, disabled celebrities. It can also help students to see positive role models amongst the staff, including senior managers.
- = **Use new forms of technology:** there are many new forms of technology that can be used to further disabled student engagement, such as social networking and freeware communication sites. For examples of how these have been used, see section 2.6. Importantly, online technology can be accessed by students at a time that suits their personal preferences and availability.

5.2 Student representation

Not all opportunities, such as sitting on a committee or taking a staff-student liaison role, will be open to all disabled students within the institution. The higher the level of participation called for, in terms of increasing responsibility and a role on behalf of the student, the smaller the proportion of students who can potentially engage. Seeking to further the involvement of disabled students and provide more meaningful opportunities for students to engage limits the potential numbers involved, and increases the requirement for certain students to speak on behalf of others as a representative of their social or peer group.

The concept of representation is best illustrated as a pyramid of involvement, see figure 4. The tiers signify different levels of engagement, with less involved individuals at the lower levels, and those more centrally engaged at the higher levels. It is useful in identifying the fact that not everyone in any given population can be involved to the same extent.

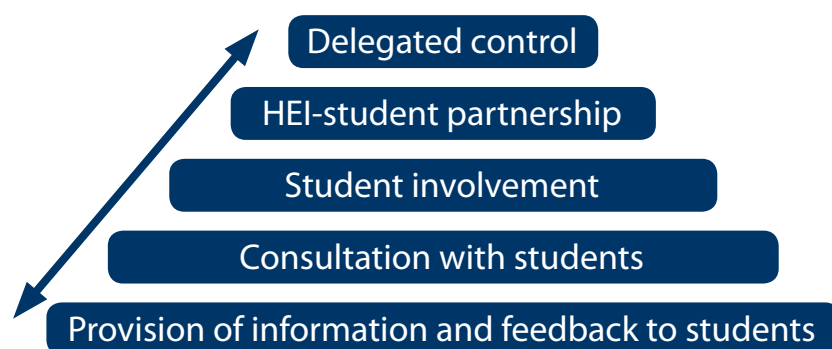
When applied in the higher education context, the pyramid can be used to demonstrate student representation in decision-making or enhancement processes. The whole student population may be offered information or may be consulted with as part of the process, whereas only a small representative sample of students may work in partnership with institutions to make decisions or be

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given delegated control over decisions. Those students engaged at the highest levels are required to represent other students, which in turn, places a higher demand on them in terms of time investment required and responsibilities taken. Representatives have a duty to inform, consult with and involve the student body that they represent.

The involvement pyramid is a reciprocal two-way process; the provision of information or consultation at the lower levels underpins processes further up the pyramid, and information filters down. Information and consultation may be requested more than once as part of the decision-making or enhancement process.

Figure 4 Pyramid of involvement, adapted from The Forestry Commission (2008)



Institutions report challenges to ensuring that those who take on the role are fairly 'representative' of others. This can be particularly problematic amongst disabled student representatives, given the diversity within, as well as across, particular impairment categories, as well as differences in age, gender, race, religion or belief and sexual orientation. This can be further complicated by the fact that not all disabled students want to be labelled as disabled, or be set apart from their peers as such. However, this does not mean that they cannot represent others by taking on the responsibilities of the role. For institutions, it can be a challenge to ensure that the voice of particular individuals does not dominate, relative to their peer group, and that individuals do not use representative roles as an opportunity to address their personal barriers and agenda.

Institutions are also challenged by maintaining the continuity of student representatives, due to course length, paid work and study priorities. It can be

5 Challenges to furthering the involvement of disabled students

time consuming to ensure that they represent the voice and opinions of a range of others. Addressing such concerns may have resource implications for an institution.

The issues around student representation may be overcome by consideration of several of the following solutions.

- = **Provide a range of opportunities:** student representatives can benefit from having access to a range of methods to engage in decision-making or enhancement processes. Individuals can therefore choose the kind of opportunity that suits the type of contribution that they wish to or can make.
- = **Enable informed choice:** the institution has a duty to provide potential student representatives with information about the purpose of their involvement, an outline of their role and responsibilities, and the time and resource commitment required, so that individuals can make an informed decision about whether or not to take up the role. Students should be given opportunities to ask questions and raise concerns, preferably with both staff and previous representatives. See section 4.9 for further information.
- = **Provide training:** student representatives should be given training, preferably in advance, and as part of an ongoing process. Students should be informed about ethical considerations they will need to make including confidentiality and access. For examples of relevant training see section 4.8.
- = **Provide mentors:** peer or staff mentors can help to address any particular concerns a student representative may have.
- = **Provide networks for representatives:** a forum of student representatives from a range of institutional functions or departments enables representatives to share and discuss their experiences and helps the institution to identify common themes and barriers. It also provides the vehicle to relay consistent messages, queries or decisions back to the communities that the students represent.
- = **Provide feedback:** student representatives can benefit from individual feedback knowing that their personal contribution has been valued and listened to, especially initially. Feedback is crucial to ensuring the successful implementation of strategies for wider involvement. See section 4.7.
- = **Use a range of communication mechanisms:** student representatives can benefit from accessing a range of communication mechanisms to engage with

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the community of students that they represent. Online social networking and freeware communication sites are increasingly popular means of facilitating interactions. Representatives may require support from the institution to set up new communication mechanisms.

- = **Allow time:** student representatives need to be given sufficient time to prepare for meetings or to consult with the community they represent, which can be a time consuming process.
- = **Provide incentives:** the incentives provided by an institution for representative roles should reflect the higher levels of participation and responsibility on individuals. This is a particular issue where students are working alongside members of staff who are paid employees of the institution. If students are to be treated as equal partners in the process, they should receive payment for their time, as well as any role-related expenses, as would happen with any non-staff contract worker. See section 4.5 for various types of other incentives.
- = **Plan ahead:** planning ahead can help existing student representatives to be efficient in their role in organising and scheduling their time, as well as helping the institution to address issues of continuity of representatives. Students should be made aware of the demands of the role from the beginning.
- = **Invest resources:** an institution may need to invest resources in order for student representation to run efficiently. This may include staff coordination time in the recruitment, training and networking of representatives to maximise the benefit of the role, as well as resources to meet the associated costs of undertaking such a role, such as payment of time, expenses, equipment and support. See section 4.13.

5.3 Engaging staff and institutional functions

One of the challenges that institutions face in meeting the requirements of the DDA is that of engaging all staff and functions in meeting its associated duties. All staff (and students) have a role to play in (and thus associated responsibilities for) bringing about disability equality and ensuring the institution meets its general and specific duties, in promoting the active participation of disabled people in public life, promoting positive attitudes about disability and engaging disabled students in drawing up an equality scheme.

5 Challenges to furthering the involvement of disabled students

It can help if all staff understand the implications of the DDA for their role and take action to address equality as part of their everyday practice. The recently revised QAA code of practice (2010) on disabled students provides advice on how to embed disability equality in the different functions of an institution. In the revised edition, emphasis is given to the dual responsibility on staff – to proactively seek advice and information – and on institutions – to ensure staff are provided with help whether internally or externally.

It is a challenge to ensure that disability equality is not seen as the sole responsibility of those with disability or equality in their remit, nor that it is seen as yet another additional consideration to add to the increasing responsibilities of higher education staff. Furthermore, it is not an agenda that can be addressed, ticked and moved on from. Disability equality is an ongoing consideration that should be embedded into policies and processes, so that it is part of routine professional practice wherever possible.

Staff and institutional functions may be encouraged to engage in furthering the involvement of disabled students through the following solutions.

- = **Engage senior management:** senior managers play a vital role in fostering the institutional commitment and sense of responsibility for disability equality amongst all staff and functions of the institution. They can act as role models or champions of this agenda to ensure that such duties are embedded within institutional policies and processes. They can also promote staff engagement through rewarding and recognising staff commitment to this agenda, approving resource investment, and devolving additional responsibilities to line managers.
- = **Continuing professional development (CPD):** CPD can play an important role in addressing specific issues associated with the legislation, such as furthering the involvement of disabled students across the institution. It can help staff identify their roles and responsibilities in promoting equality. It is important that staff are given the opportunity to learn about or share strategies for engaging disabled students, as well as considering methods to ensure their effectiveness or to overcome the challenges encountered in doing so. Students can potentially play a valuable role in designing and running CPD for staff.
- = **Make the case:** staff have several considerations to make in planning and delivering their work and may benefit from a clear business case to encourage

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them to engage in this agenda. Such a case could usefully define the background and rationale for equality, make links with other areas or aspects of their role and pinpoint any resultant changes or considerations that are required. It could also draw out any relevant and available evidence, and offer clarity as to what is expected to be relevant to their role and function. See section 1.4.

- = **Draw on the student voice:** the student voice can be persuasive in engaging staff. Disabled student experiences and perspectives can provide a unique insight into the delivery of services and offer compelling evidence to convince staff of the requirement to bring about change. The issues raised can help prioritise the areas to target for development. When encouraging the widespread use of effective practice, it can help to draw out the practices that students appreciate or value, rather than focus on the barriers and concerns that students experience or raise.
- = **Provide feedback:** staff have a clear role to play in not just collecting information from students, but in using the information provided by students to enhance practice and responding back to students about what has happened as a result of their engagement. It can be helpful to have a variety of feedback mechanisms in place, and should be fostered as part of the process.
- = **Performance management:** rewarding and recognising staff commitment to the promotion of equality can be supported by an institution's performance management processes. If line managers were required to ask individual members of staff to reflect on their practice and progress in engaging disabled students as part of probation, appraisal or promotion schemes, staff may be more willing to engage in this agenda and continually seek to enhance practice.
- = **Centralise coordination:** whilst all staff have a responsibility for promoting equality and can arguably play a role in furthering the involvement of disabled students, these requirements call for centralised coordination and management to become a reality. Central coordination can enable practices to become embedded by encouraging staff to take action, monitoring the range and level of opportunities available to students and evaluating the effects to maximise impact.

5.4 Maintaining or sustaining student engagement

Whilst there can be a clear commitment and enthusiasm from students initially, institutions may have difficulties maintaining and sustaining student engagement and interest over time. This applies equally to staff, who may endeavour to further disabled student engagement at the outset, but lose enthusiasm over time, especially if students choose not to engage in the opportunities they have provided.

It can also be a challenge to maintain the momentum of the enhancement of disabled student engagement alongside a variety of other agendas. In an environment where there are a number of competing demands, it may fall on committed individuals to maintain momentum. Therefore, one of the challenges is to ensure that there is not an over-reliance on particular students to take the lead or engage in opportunities, nor on particular staff to provide opportunities for students and monitor progress. Furthering the involvement of disabled students has to be seen as a collective, rather than an individual, undertaking.

The issues around maintaining and sustaining student-staff engagement in the agenda may be overcome by consideration of several of the following solutions.

- = **Undertake benchmarking:** undertaking a benchmarking or audit exercise, whether formally or informally, can help to raise awareness and interest amongst staff and students, identify areas of existing practice and highlight gaps. The information collected can be used as evidence to prioritise areas for development and help persuade people of the need for change. It can also be used as a point of reference from which to measure and demonstrate progress and develop innovative practice.
- = **Monitor and report on progress:** where it can be shown that real progress has been made or that benefits have been derived from an endeavour, staff and students may be more likely to continue to buy in. Tangible benefits such as a reduction in the number of student complaints or increase in student satisfaction, retention or success, can help convince staff to maintain the effort they are investing. Students may also be more likely to maintain their engagement if they can see that things they have done or said have made a real difference and changes have been made as a result. Involvement may be sustained if achievements and progress are acknowledged, disseminated and even celebrated.

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- = **Provide positive role models:** role models can be an effective way of addressing students concerns as they arise, so as to avoid withdrawal from participation. Students may also be more likely to continue their engagement if they know that their experiences or concerns are not unique.
- = **Maintain regular reciprocal dialogue:** the provision of reciprocal and ongoing dialogue amongst students or between students and staff involving active listening and the exchange of ideas can help to maintain and sustain student engagement. Effective dialogue amongst a diverse group can promote creativity and may ultimately yield improved results. The provision of opportunities for ongoing or regular dialogue sends a clear message about the longevity of the agenda and can provide the means by which to develop practice and monitor progress.
- = **Maintain an evidence base:** collecting and using evidence is an ongoing process. It may help to sustain staff and student involvement where their attitudes, perspectives and experiences are being monitored over time.
- = **Link to other initiatives and developments:** it may further the cause where the link between the equality and student engagement agendas, or student engagement and employability, is made explicit. Additionally, it may be more effective and sustainable to 'jump on the bandwagon' of other initiatives within the institution, rather than add to the list of new developments or considerations.
- = **Provide external recognition:** some staff members and students may be motivated by opportunities for an individual or the institution to seek national (eg, kitemarks) or internal recognition for their ongoing involvement. To achieve recognition, it is necessary to collate evidence aligned to predefined criteria, thus providing something for which to aim.
- = **Devolve ownership and responsibility:** passing on ownership and responsibility for the development of disabled student engagement to staff and students may improve sustainability through individual investment.
- = **Take an embedded approach:** a sustainable, long-term approach can be reached by embedding the requirement to further the engagement of disabled students into all student-related policies and processes.

5.5 Evaluation of success

One of the key challenges faced by institutions is to ensure that the aim of promoting the involvement of disabled people is embedded into the institution's action plan within the DES, so that it is addressed as a long-term issue.

Furthermore, evaluation will help institutions with possible new duties around equality object setting covered by the Equality Act 2010. This is likely to be brought into force in April 2011. Another related challenge is to ensure that the outcomes of the work are clearly articulated so that success can be measured more distinctly. Effective mechanisms need to be in place to ensure that progress is measured.

Issues around evaluation may be overcome by consideration of several of the following solutions.

- = **Clearly define objectives:** there need to be clearly defined objectives aligned to the aim of furthering the involvement of disabled students within the institution, which should be articulated in the DES and preferably other institutional policies and strategies. Where possible, these should be specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time-bound (SMART), and should be developed in conjunction with, and shared amongst, staff and students. Investing time up front in setting such objectives will enable institutions to evidence impact and effectiveness more clearly later.
- = **Create an action plan:** the goal of furthering the involvement of disabled students requires a long-term approach, with short-, medium- and long-term plans in place. These actions should be articulated within the DES and preferably aligned with other institutional planning documents and processes.
- = **Articulate outcomes:** by articulating what it is the institution aims to achieve through furthering the involvement of disabled students, in terms of outcomes (ie benefits or levels of performance) rather than outputs (ie deliverables), performance can be more accurately measured. It can be helpful to review which of the institution's processes and policies affect the achievement of each outcome, which in turn can help scope out what needs to be addressed.
- = **Embed evaluation approaches:** evaluation should be an essential part of current work so that it is not seen as an additional extra. Institutions routinely collect a lot of data from students and staff (such as student satisfaction, demographics, equality and diversity) for a range of external and internal

5 Challenges to furthering the involvement of disabled students

purposes using pre-existing mechanisms to do so. Both the data and existing mechanisms can be drawn upon and used for the purpose of evidencing progress, thereby limiting the need for additional methods.

6 Conclusion

This guidance seeks to support HEIs to develop more meaningful methods to engage and involve disabled students within decision-making and enhancement processes. It has drawn on the experience of seven institutions who were involved in a year-long programme to further the involvement of disabled students across a range of institutional functions.

This project found that the successful involvement of disabled students requires institutions to consider the cultural, strategic and individual dimensions of their approach. These three dimensions represent guiding principles for institutional change. Cultural change is an overarching aspiration, promoted through both the institution's strategy and individual practices. When considering these dimensions, it is important to note that disability legislation (DDA, 2005) is unique, in relation to the other equality areas, in specifically requiring disabled people, including students, to be involved in generating an institutional DES and making it lawful to allow more favourable treatment of disabled people.

6.1 Towards cultural change

The disability legislation places an onus on institutions to proactively make adjustments to practices, policies or the physical environment, irrespective of the current student profile. Institutions must also react to the needs of their disabled students, ensuring that barriers experienced by individuals are removed where it is reasonable to do so. The coverage and scope of the DDA legislation is such that it calls for a shift in institutional culture, in the values and traditions that characterise how an institution, its constituent parts and individuals operate.

An institution's culture is reflected in the values it seeks to uphold, which may be evident in its mission statement, corporate objectives and discourse, as well as in the behaviours it seeks to foster in its staff and student body. In order to further disabled student involvement, institutions should pay attention to the value of the student voice, ensuring that it is respected, encouraged and recognised. By listening to disabled people, institutions can benefit from a unique insight into how institutional processes and practices are experienced, which will help them to eliminate discrimination and enhance the quality of the student experience. Furthering student involvement likewise calls for collaboration to be valued,

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recognising the benefit of working with disabled students in terms of the quality and quantity of what can be achieved.

An institution's culture is also evident in its policies and practices. A desire to further disabled student involvement requires a long-term strategic approach that seeks to go beyond mere consultation with students towards fostering partnerships between staff and students and delegating control to students. This requires a strategic commitment from all staff to actively further the involvement of disabled students and provide meaningful opportunities to do so. It is the responsibility of staff across the entire HEI to ensure that disability equality is embedded in the design of all policies and practices and as such requires effective leadership from senior management. These types of cultural practices also extend to the conduct and behaviour of students, who all have a role in promoting positive messages and ensuring that they do not discriminate against disabled people. The institution plays a role in promoting students' understanding of the equality legislation and the associated responsibilities. In this regard, aspects of the law, such as the more favourable treatment of disabled people or positive attitudes, should be explained to avoid misunderstandings amongst non-disabled students and staff.

Whilst disability legislation is unique, the duties are broadly applicable to other equality strands, such as race and gender. The core messages provided within this guidance are not limited to disability or indeed to students. They can equally be applied in the context of promoting other equality strands and to promoting equality for staff. There are also transferable lessons to the wider agenda of student engagement, whereby students are increasingly acknowledged as active participants in the learning process, and the student voice is given greater significance in decision-making processes.

6.2 A strategic approach

Institutions should take a strategic approach to furthering the involvement of disabled students. The strategic approach should cover policies and practice across all institutional functions and be sustainable by having long-term methods in place. It requires commitment and leadership from senior management, as well as those taking operational responsibility for the enhancement and embedding of equality. Leadership may be required to assign resources, approve changes, provide clarity of responsibility and ensure equality is treated as an ongoing process. Staff should

be supported to understand the implications of the DDA for their particular role, and an understanding of equality should be promoted amongst the student body whenever possible.

A strategic approach should begin by identifying and building on existing effective practice, which involves a systematic review of the nature and extent of disabled student involvement across all institutional functions. It should be underpinned by an analysis of disabled student data (both qualitative and quantitative) to gain a better understanding of the student body. Internal and external research evidence should be consulted to ensure methods are fit for purpose and address both student and institutional priorities.

An action plan should address how the institution intends to move beyond the predominant use of consultation methods with disabled students towards an increased range of methods that allow for more meaningful implementation. This should include an evaluation process to identify effective practice and measure the impact of the methods employed. It should also address issues of sustainability so that short-, medium- and long-term plans are in place to ensure that opportunities are not dependent on time-limited resources.

Given that all staff and students within the institution have a role to play in promoting disability equality, a strategic approach should promote a shared responsibility for furthering the involvement of disabled students. Effective practice requires the systematic provision of a range of opportunities across the institution, because what works for one student may not for another. The institution should consider these in the context of different levels of participation, to ensure the provision of more meaningful participation opportunities for disabled students. There should be recognition that not all opportunities will be open to all disabled students, so there should be fair, open and transparent mechanisms in place to select students for particular representative roles. Where possible, these opportunities should be provided as part of other plans to engage students in decision-making and enhancement activity, to avoid singling out disabled students from their peers. Feedback should be factored in to all methods so that students can understand the difference they have made and how or why decisions have been taken. It should be made evident how information and experiences shared by individual students or representatives are used by the institution.

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6.3 Encourage and develop individual practice

The effective implementation of disability equality hinges on individuals. The practices and behaviours of staff and students as individuals significantly influence what can be achieved collectively by the institution. The legislation calls for anticipatory adjustments, with the onus on institutions to adapt the system rather than depend on students to adjust to the system. Achieving disability equality is a joint responsibility, for which all staff and students have a role to play.

Individuals will each interpret the legislation into practice in different ways, dependent upon their own frame of reference and understanding. This can lead to inconsistencies in practice across the institution, even amongst staff who are aware of the legislative requirements and their individual responsibilities. Institutions should therefore take steps to encourage and develop consistent and effective practice. This could be achieved by providing appropriate tailored CPD programmes, embedding equality considerations within curriculum validation procedures or performance and management processes. Making adjustments to practice can be more effective if developed in partnership with disabled students, and where students are encouraged to take joint ownership and responsibility for their implementation. This avoids misassumptions about disability and impairments, and can gather useful insight into how educational practices are being received, thus raising an awareness of disability equality.

The success of the involvement methods has been found to be less about the particular method used to engage with disabled students and more about the way in which the methods are implemented, and the social and educational context in which they are applied. Individuals should reflect on their own practice and on what they can do to optimise the effectiveness and impact of the methods used for successful student engagement.

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Appendix: reflective questions

These reflective questions are designed to support institutions in furthering the involvement of disabled students across all aspects of their work.

Towards cultural change

- a. Which elements of your institution's mission and values reflect a commitment towards equality and can be used to make the case to further the involvement of disabled students across the institution?
- b. Do you have a long-term strategic approach and commitment to further the involvement of disabled students? To what extent does this work link to what the institution is currently doing to promote disability equality or student engagement in your institution?
- c. How does the governance structure and senior management team of the institution actively lead or demonstrate a commitment to furthering the involvement of disabled students?
 - = Are members of senior management actively engaged in taking forward the disability equality agenda?
 - = In what ways does senior management promote a joint responsibility for disability equality amongst all staff (and students)?
- d. Are members of staff across your institution supported in furthering the involvement of disabled students?
 - = Are appropriate mechanisms in place to assess, recognise (and reward) staff for their achievements, effectiveness and impact in promoting disability equality or in furthering the involvement of disabled students?
 - = Is an appropriate level of resource allocated to enable staff to further the involvement of disabled students?
- e. What disability equality development training is provided by your institution to students and staff?

Appendix: reflective questions

- = Does this training promote an understanding of the social model of disability and why it is sometimes necessary to treat disabled people more favourably than non-disabled people?
 - = Does the training encourage staff and students not to make assumptions about disabled people?
 - = Does this training include developing effective and meaningful methods to engage disabled students?
- f. In what ways, does your institution promote positive attitudes towards disabled people?
- = How does your institution celebrate diversity and recognise staff and student multiple identities?
- g. What mechanisms or systems do you have in place to monitor how the (disability) equality legislation is being interpreted in practice by staff across the institution?

Taking a strategic approach

- a. Does your institution have a strategy for furthering the involvement of disabled students? To what extent is this strategy embedded in, or associated with, other institutional policies (eg corporate plan, teaching and learning, admissions, student experience)?
- = To what extent is the involvement of disabled students coordinated across the institution?
 - = What links or learning can be made strategic approaches between departments or functional areas to avoid duplication?
- b. How does the governance structure and senior management team of the institution actively lead or demonstrate a commitment to furthering the involvement of disabled students?
- = To what extent do current committee or governance structures involve disabled students?
 - = Which committee or governance structures could be restructured to include setting objectives for, and monitoring the outcomes of disabled student involvement in their terms of reference?

- = What resources are assigned to coordinate and develop the involvement of disabled students across all institutional functions?
- c. Have you established a baseline that identifies the nature and extent of disabled student involvement and what is known about disabled students at your institution? Are there any gaps in practice and what is known about disabled students? How do you propose filling these gaps?
 - = To what extent, do you analyse and use the range of available data (both qualitative and quantitative) about disabled students (eg HESA returns, student feedback, student complaints broken down by department or service, equality impact assessments)?
- d. What methods are established or in development to further the involvement of disabled students, both centrally and at department level?
 - = Who determines the agenda that gets addressed? Is it student or staff led or a combination of both?
 - = Do you have champions to promote the agenda who can act as agents for change and maintain the momentum?
 - = To what extent are students engaged at all stages of the process to maximise the effectiveness of methods used?
- e. How will your institution ensure that the requirement to involve disabled people becomes part of everyday practice and procedure?
- f. To what extent is your approach to further the involvement of disabled students SMART and outcome focused?
 - = What mechanisms do you have in place to ensure the involvement of disabled students is sustainable?
- g. In what ways do you ensure an ongoing and reflective evaluation of the methods used to further the involvement of disabled students?
 - = Does the strategy have an action plan that requires reporting progress and achievements to key university committees?
 - = How will successes be reported and failures learned to ensure there is a process of learning and development built into the institutional approach to further the involvement of disabled students?

Appendix: reflective questions

Developing individual practice

- a. In what ways, do you proactively reflect upon and make ongoing adjustments to your practice to further the involvement of disabled students or in response to the disability equality legislation?
 - = What support or encouragement do you receive from your institution to do so?
 - = Have you engaged in the opportunities provided by your institution to act on your responsibilities in this area?

- b. In what ways do you involve disabled students in the design and delivery of activities within your area of responsibility?
 - = Do you routinely consider the involvement of disabled students, and from the outset, at the design stage?
 - = Do you consider disabled students as part of current student engagement activity?
 - = To what extent do you provide opportunities for disabled students to lead the development of areas under your responsibility?

- c. In what ways do you promote an understanding and awareness of disability and foster inclusive values (eg respect) amongst all students?

- d. To what extent do you provide feedback to disabled students?
 - = Do disabled students know what has happened as a result of the concerns they have raised?
 - = Do disabled students understand what or why decisions have been taken?

Equality Challenge Unit supports the higher education sector to realise the potential of all staff and students whatever their race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, religion and belief, or age, to the benefit of those individuals, higher education institutions and society.

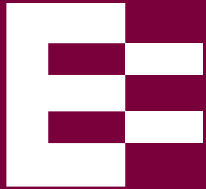
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