Inclusion by Design: Establishing Equitable Participation for Disabled Students in Swiss Higher Education

Compensation for disadvantages (Nachteilsausgleich) at Swiss universities

Professor Suanne Gibson

University of Plymouth

Keynote- 23/10/2026

University of Basel



Talk structure

History of provision –disability inclusion in HE- where are we today?

Recurring most widely documented challenges

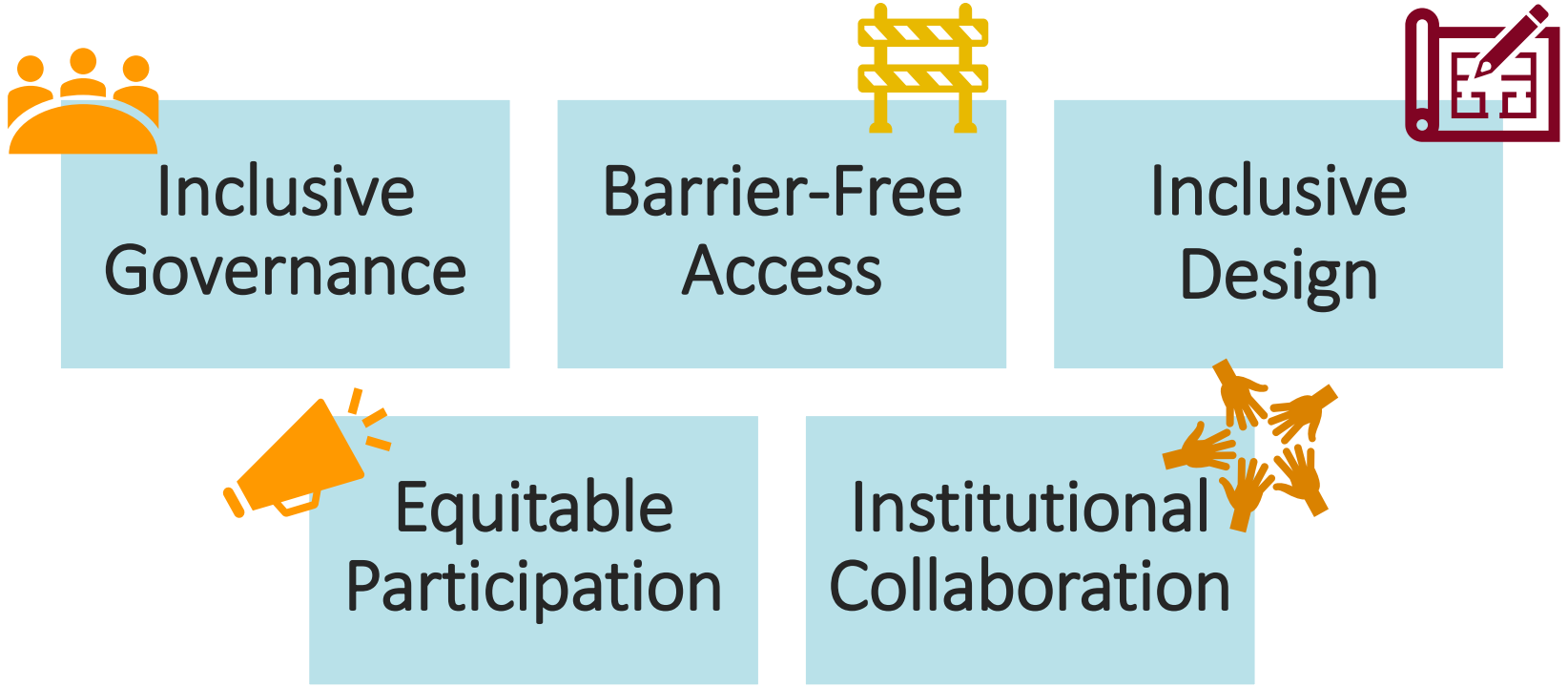
Overview of my current OfS project and international contemporary priorities

A User- informed, User-led, User-evaluated methodology (Gibson 2022)

Disabled students as leaders

Toward institutional, systemic and cultural reform in Switzerland

Five Dimensions of Inclusive Higher Education for Switzerland



Core principle: *User-informed, User-led, User-evaluated* (Gibson, 2022)

An epistemic challenge and question

Four key points:

1

Policy and Practice – The Context

What has evolved in the name of 'Inclusion and equality' for disabled students in Higher Education?

An Overview of Key Research to date

What has been the impact of 'inclusive' change for our disabled students internationally

2

3

Moving Forward… - Policy and Practice

How the sector can move forward successfully in partnership:

User informed, User-led, User-evaluated (Gibson, 2023)

- *Next steps and your contribution*

4

International and UK Context: Widening participation and Inclusion

Widening participation and inclusive policy / practice is a significant international focus, as tied to UNESCO Sustainable Development Goals and the UNCRPD (UNESCO 2006, 2008, 2015).

In UK Higher Education (HE), this can be logged from the SEND Act in 2001 (DfE, 2001), the Equality Act (2006,2010), and UK ratification of the UNCRPD IN 2009.

Increased priority and changes to policy and practice, toward **equitable access, inclusive HE experiences, sense of belonging, achievement and progression** (Gibson, *et al.,* 2016; Koutsouris, Mountford-Zimdars and Dingwall, 2021;).

In the UK, progress has been made, but **still a long way to go.**

19% of HE enrolments in 2024-25 had a declared disability, up from **15% in 2020-21**.

Over 25% of home students

(HESA, 2026)

Evidence of continued silencing, misrepresentation, and failures in provision / experience

(Gibson and Kendall, 2010; Gibson, 2015; Gibson and Cook-Sather, 2020)

The Swiss Context:

- Required by the **UN CRPD** (adopted 2014) to ensure education is available to all: with specific reference to accessibility (art. 9) and reasonable accommodations (art. 2).
- Inclusion of students with disabilities is mandated in **Federal and Cantonal legislation**:

- A gradual transition **from a pejorative medical model lens to a social model lens**
- Moving away **from Nachteilsausgleich (Disadvantage Compensation)** to **Universal Design.**

- Despite considerable progress, a 2022 report by Inclusion Handicap (Hess-Klein & Scheibler, 2022) found that implementation is currently still insufficient overall:



Low disabled student enrolment numbers continue

Insufficient pedagogical adjustments / accommodations

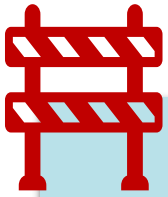
Limited broader systems change or felt improvement in academic life



Lacking Universal Design across the sector

The Swiss Context – progress being made

- Institutions have made considerable efforts to become more inclusive in recent years, but felt impact for our disabled students is often superficial or situational – there is still lots to be done.
- Köferli *et al (2024)* interviewed disabled students across Swiss universities, documenting what is working well and areas for improvement:



Inaccessible architecture
Rigid teaching / learning practices
Digital platform / IT issues
Lack of staff or peer awareness
Bureaucratic exam procedures



Course recordings/streaming
Early access to learning materials
Proactive staff
Support from peers
Flexible exam accommodations
Considerate infrastructure

(Köferli *et al*, 2024)

Too often, inclusive practices rely on **disabled students' self-advocacy** and/or on **individual proactive staff**, rather than embedded system-wide inclusion.

Ongoing Challenges and Ableism in HE Internationally

Regardless of widening participation policy and law, disabled students continue to experience **ineffective provision, under-representation, and marginalisation,** impacted by:

- **Hegemony**
- **Unconscious bias & Stigma**
- **A pathological lens, viewing disability as pejorative and limiting**

(Beauchamp-Pryor, 2012; Gibson, 2012; 2015; Gibson et al 2024; Madriaga, 2007; Vickerman and Blundell, 2010).

According to the UK's OfS, students who report a disability…

- Are among those **most at risk of withdrawing from HE studies**
- Achieve **lower degree results overall** compared to peers
- Experience **lower rates of employment after graduation**

(OfS, 2020, Shaw, 2021); DSC, 2021; Policy Connect 2021.

Disparity in attainment levels continue and, in many cases, is growing:

Example:

In 2021/22 - the UoP attainment gap was **-1.9**

In 2024/25 (latest) this had widened to **-3.2**

What's working well in the UK?

The OfS 'Equality of Opportunity Risk Register'

Lists **12 risks throughout the HE journey**, cross referenced against the stages of course progression, indicators of risk, and student characteristics most at risk- eg. Low incomes, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, mature students, care experienced, etc...

Office for Students



Insufficient personal support	Mental health	Ongoing impacts of coronavirus	Cost pressures
Capacity issues	Progression from higher education	Knowledge and skills	Information and guidance
Perception of higher education	Application success rates	Limited choice of course type / delivery mode	Insufficient academic support

The 'Disabled Students Commitment'

An optional, non-regulatory scheme launched by the Disabled Students Commission in 2023.

The Disabled Student Commitment

Disabled Students' Commission

OfS 'Statement of Expectations'

The OfS are currently writing a 'Statement of Expectations', advising HEIs on what is expected to ensure that disabled students can access, participate in, and achieve in Higher Education.

Office for Students



Moving Forward…

DSUK (2022) shared 6 post-pandemic Lessons in 'Going Back is Not a Choice':

- Take an anticipatory approach
- Resource staff to provide accessibility
- Reduce admin burden
- Improve effective leadership
- Listen to students
- Build enabling attitudes

Inclusive practice **cannot be considered in silo** from other competing HE objectives.

Shaw (2021) – there are **tensions between 'inclusive practice ideals' and accountability and neo-liberalism in HE…**

Gibson et al (2017) - recent mass expansion in HE is linked to a dominant neoliberal logic as opposed to social justice, thus **widening access for equality becomes an imaginary, sweet coating for the pill of profit and product expansion**.

DSUK "Going back is not a choice" (2022); NADP/BERA decks.



The OfS Project

UNIVERSITY OF PLYMOUTH

UNIVERSITY OF WOLVERHAMPTON
KNOWLEDGE • INNOVATION • ENTERPRISE

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

DISABLED STUDENTS UK

Disability Rights UK

The Project

Core research team in three HE providers:
Plymouth, Birmingham, Wolverhampton

Partners:
DSUK; DRUK; Advisory panel as critical friend

More info on our Webpage







Project Aims

Enhance inclusive academic support by creating CPD resources that embed students' lived experiences

Improve **inclusive Student Services support** by developing CPD grounded in disabled students' experiences

Generate and disseminate **replicable, sector-wide guidelines** to address on-course equity.

Promote **sustained impact** and **longevity** through OfS-hosted outputs and open dissemination (CPD, guidelines, and evaluation tools).

An Overview:



Survey (2025):

235 students, 37 academic staff, 19 support staff



3x Workshops (2026):

Focused on Stage 1 findings, feedback, + new CPD activities



CPD Trial (2026):

with 30 staff members



Findings (2027):

Digital platform for dissemination of tools

User-informed, User-led, User-evaluated

Policy Expertise

Lived Expertise and Co-creation

Inclusive Research Design

Methodology:
User-informed, user-led, user-evaluated

Disabled students as co-researchers and co-authors





Co-produced CPD & Guidelines created from *lived expertise*

Gibson (2022); Wonkhe 2025 article.

Inclusive Research Materials

Inclusive Co-Researcher Recruitment



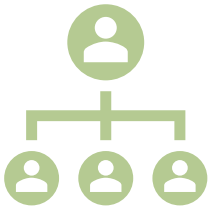
Accessible Questionnaires and Consent

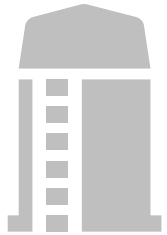


Why a joined-up & co-created approach?

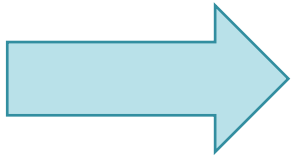
Barriers are cumulative and systemic; goodwill alone is insufficient

Responsibilities are split (departments, services, estates, IT, placements)





Data silos and blurred accountability undermine consistency





Solution:

co-diagnose, co-design, and co-evaluate with disabled leadership

Read our WONKHE article: https://wonkhe.com/blogs/disability-equality-in-higher-education-requires-a-joined-up-and-co-created-approach/

Wonkhe blog: Disability equality requires a joined-up and co-created approach (Gibson, Peruzzo, Williams-Brown, 2025).



Findings so far...

Stage 1 Findings

A Unique Survey

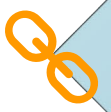
Responses from 3 key stake-holders:

- Disabled students,
- Academic staff,
- Student services staff

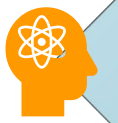
6 Key Findings



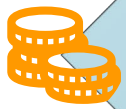
Critical process delays and implementation gaps



Systemic communication failures



Inconsistent staff knowledge and training needs



Critical staffing and resource constraints



Universal Design implementation failures



Disproportionate burden on students to self-advocate

Existing Good Practice

Academic staff demonstrate strong confidence in **providing emotional support** across all scenarios

84-89% say they are quite/extremely confident

Support staff show **exceptional signposting knowledge**

89% quite/extremely confident in knowing where to refer students

When support systems function effectively, **students report very positive experiences**, particularly in health-related programs

Specialist disability teams possess strong expertise, though this knowledge is not consistently distributed

86% of students believe **increased public discussion** about disability would yield improvements

55% expecting noticeable to significant positive impact



Headline Findings
across all three institutions:

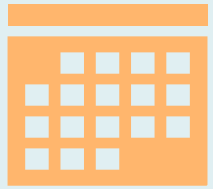
RAP delays

>27% waited more than two months



Passive approach

54% were not proactively contacted about their RAP



70% had their **RAP reviewed** once or not at all in the past year



Basic UDL elements (captions, mics, lecture capture) **inconsistent**

OfS survey analysis (Students).

Student Views on **Overall Experience**

It is required that I have a GP letter that costs £40 — money I do not have.

Communicating through your tutor is like playing a professional game of Chinese whispers.



Lecturers do not always wear microphones; captions are almost never put on.

The university takes a reactive approach rather than addressing systemic barriers.



Left behind, alienated, forgotten...

OfS survey analysis (Qualitative quotes, Plymouth).

Student views on Staff **Attitudes, Knowledge & Training**

I feel that many university staff are afraid to speak to me about my disability, even when I first approach them.

Knowledge is a huge problem. People THINK they understand various disabilities, but they really, really don't, especially if yours is less commonly spoken about or appears superficially similar to something more "relatable'…

I have asked several times for my accommodations of lecturers wearing microphones and captions on videos to be implemented. I received apologies but no action has been taken…

OfS survey analysis (Qualitative quotes, Plymouth).

Academic Staff Voices…

While there is much support for students, it isn't immediately obvious how to find this support and there isn't joined up thinking between these services…

It can be exhausting to try and do it all, especially when staffing numbers are reduced, but student intake numbers increase.



What I think is missing, is CPD which is more practical… where we can look at our own materials and discuss changes with an expert…..or better still, students…



As the RAPs are so generic, it is often difficult to say how it translates to the classroom.

Inclusion cannot be a bolt on exercise and time to think through the best ways of supporting all students… is not being made available

OfS survey analysis (Qualitative quotes, Plymouth).

Support Staff Voices…



Staff are vastly experienced and knowledgeable, there just aren't enough of us. 4 FTE for an institution this size, with the numbers of disabled students we have is an unsustainable workload

We aren't equipped to advise in such a nuanced way. We can advise on a general level, we don't have the experience or training

The Compassion fatigue is accumulative and builds between one point of leave to another. I believe colleagues should have Supervision

Understanding of lecture capture across the university is varied and we are aware that some programmes still refuse to record their content



Inclusive practice needs to be more embedded and less optional

OfS survey analysis (Qualitative quotes, Plymouth).

Our findings map directly onto OfS Risk 6 and 7:

6 Insufficient Academic Support

- **Delays** in implementing adjustments,
- Lecturers lacking **RAP access**,
- Fragmented departmental **communication** reducing access to academic guidance, and
- Inconsistent **staff knowledge** undermining effective support

7 Insufficient Personal Support

- **Overwhelming communication processes** increasing stress,
- **Dismissive attitudes** making students feel misunderstood,
- Burden of navigating **complex systems** without guidance, and
- **Failure to implement adjustments**, signalling needs are not valued

OfS survey analysis (Risks 6 & 7 mapping).

See the OfS Equality of Opportunity Risk Register

Actions – some early Outputs

Immediate Actions



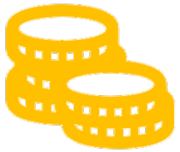
Publish a single visible **pathway for each student** RAP
(roles, timeframes, escalation)



Mandate baseline UDL:
lecture recording + captions + mic policy



Mandate **accessibility reviews** on online learning content and delivery



Fund disability services to sustainable caseloads; remove medical letter costs and **expectation for medical diagnosis**

Systemic Shifts



Move repeated adjustments into **course/assessment design**



Build **proactive RAP reviews** into academic cycles and workload models



Embed **student-led forums** and publish **improvement actions and evidence**



Readily available, innovative and engaging staff CPD tools

OfS survey analysis; Wonkhe 2025 recommendations.

What's Next for our Study…?

Workshops completed…

Drafting the the **CPD programme then a pilot**

In partnership with DSUK and DRUK

Evaluation and **Data Analysis**

Sharing Findings:

Guidelines



"A user-led, user-informed and user-evaluated future"

X From Aspirations to Reality

Equality by design, not by exception

Co-leadership with disabled students at every step

Evaluation loops owned with students:

Did the adjustment work in context?

Joined-up practice across systems, not heroic workarounds



From practical actions to systemic shifts and **sustained cultural change**

Wonkhe 2025; DSUK 2022; OfS survey analysis.

What next for Inclusive HE in Switzerland?

Inclusive Governance

- Co-leadership, with disabled students at every step
- Evaluation loops owned by disabled students
- Nothing about us without us

Barrier-Free Access

- From Nachteilsausgleich (Disadvantage Compensation) to Universal Design

Inclusive Design

- Equality by design, not by exception
- Universal Design in architecture and systems as standard

Equitable Participation

- Flexibility built into our pedagogy at every stage from enrolment to graduation – in communication, teaching, and exams
- UDL – provide choice – multiple options available throughout

Institutional Collaboration

- Joined up practice across systems, not heroic workarounds by proactive staff
- Our collaboration and creativity creates customization and choice for students

Always user informed, user led, user evaluated.

Discussion

and

Questions…





Evaluation, Planning, and Feedback

Possible Follow Up Content:

WONKHE Article:

Disability equality in higher education requires a joined-up co-created approach

(Gibson, S., Peruzzo, F., & Williams-Brown, Z., 2025)

https://wonkhe.com/blogs/disability-equality-in-higher-education-requires-a-joined-up-and-co-created-approach

Addressing Disparity in Support:

Interim Project Report

(Gibson, S., Peruzzo, F., & Williams-Brown, Z, 2026)

https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/rails/active_storage/blobs/proxy/BAh7BkkiC19yYWlscwY6BkVUewdJIglkYXRhBjsAVGkEemALAUkiCHB1cgY7AFRJIgxibG9iX2lkBjsARg==--4181ae7fd4b14fd391a0d0c4f0ed7a40134ee592/Addressing_disparity_of_support_interim_report.pdf

OfS Webinar:

Shaping our statement of expectations on disability

Office for Students

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yb0pBjptpzk

Our project's website:



https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/study/outreach/access-and-widening-participation/addressing-disparity-of-support

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