

The inclusion of disabled students in higher education in Europe: Progress and challenges

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Abstract

Across Europe, there has been a marked expansion in higher education participation, with a growing emphasis on the inclusion of previously under-represented groups including disabled students and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The expansion is supported by the EU and national governments and is driven by both social justice and economic concerns. Policy documents, for example, the European Education Strategy 2020 (European Commission, 2013), subscribe to the view that the majority of newly created jobs in Europe will require high skill levels and failure to build a knowledge economy will result in declining standards of living, particularly in the light of growing competition from emerging economies. In order to achieve this expansion, it is necessary to increase participation by people who, at an earlier point in time, would not have had the opportunity to gain a higher level qualification, since there is little room for growth in participation by those from middle class backgrounds (Weedon and Riddell, 2012). The active engagement of disabled people in higher education is also supported by the European Disability Strategy 2010-2020 (European Commission, 2010) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006).

The paper is divided into the following sections:

- (i) Overview of European policy on widening access to higher education for under-represented groups including disabled students.
- (ii) Discussion of the construction of disability and evidence on disabled students' participation rates in different countries, drawing on the Eurostudent survey.
- (iii) Analysis of UK and Swedish policy and practice in relation to the inclusion of disabled students in higher education.
- (iv) Review of Scottish data on the social characteristics of disabled students, including some intersectional analysis.
- (v) Presentation of short case studies to illustrate the experiences and outcomes of deaf students from different social class backgrounds in Scottish universities.
- (vi) Summary and discussion of key points.

Introduction

Across Europe, there has been a marked expansion in higher education participation, with a growing emphasis on the inclusion of previously under-represented groups including disabled students and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The expansion is supported by the EU and national governments and is driven by both social justice and economic concerns. Policy documents, for example, the European Education Strategy 2020 (European Commission, 2013), subscribe to the view that the majority of newly created jobs in Europe will require high skill levels and failure to build a knowledge economy will result in declining standards of living, particularly in the light of growing competition from emerging economies. In order to achieve this expansion, it is necessary to increase participation by people who, at an earlier point in time, would not have had the opportunity to gain a higher level qualification, since there is little room for growth in participation by those from middle class backgrounds (Weedon and Riddell, 2012). The active engagement of disabled people in higher education is also supported by the European Disability Strategy 2010-2020 (European Commission, 2010) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006).

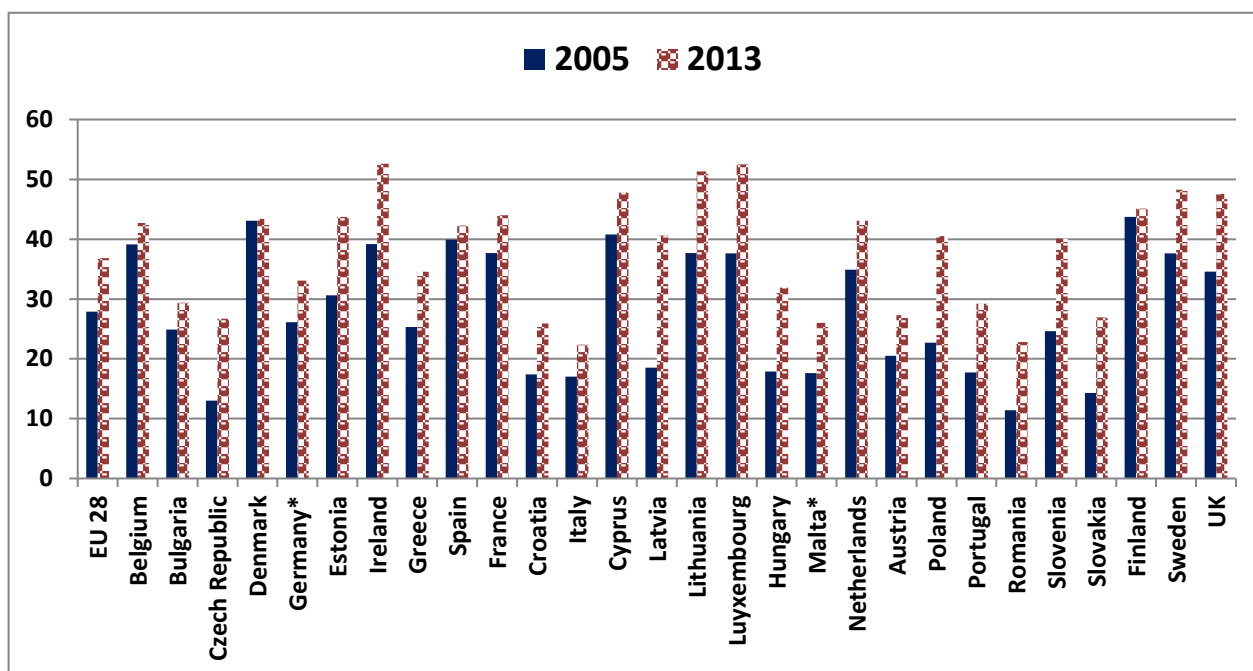
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European policy on widening access to higher education for under-represented groups

Equality of access to education formed part of the post-Second World War welfare settlement across Europe, but participation in higher education did not increase markedly until the late 1990s. During the 1960s across most of Europe, less than 10% of the population attended university. At the present time, as shown in figure 1, in many European countries about 40% of adults under 35 have tertiary level qualifications (although not necessarily a university degree). The EU 2020 Education and Training Strategy states that by 2020, 40% of 30-34 year olds should have completed third level education (<http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/targets/eu-targets/>).

Figure 1: Changes in the proportion of 30-34 year olds with tertiary education in EU28 countries between 2005 and 2013.



Source: Eurostat,

http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=t2020_41&plu gin=1

* break in data series in 2005

The Bologna Process is one of the main mechanisms for promoting participation in higher education by people from under-represented groups, including disabled people. As discussed further below, while this policy has achieved some success, rates of progress have diverged markedly in different countries. There are also issues in making cross-country comparisons due to differences in terminology. Participation in ‘tertiary education’ is generally used as the key indicator in European and OECD data, and is regarded as synonymous with higher education. However, work on lifelong learning across Europe conducted as part of an EU Sixth Framework Project demonstrated that there is considerable variation in different countries with regard to courses classified as at ISCED Level 4 and ISCED level 5 (Riddell, Markowitsch and Weedon, 2012).

The social dimension of the Bologna Process emerged in 2001 but was initially rather ill-defined. By 2007, greater clarity had emerged, reflected in the commitment to achieving equality in participation rates by students from different social backgrounds. Official policy stated that ‘*the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations*’ (EACEA, 2012). A report prepared for the European University Association in 2010 noted that whilst overall graduation rates have increased from 18% in 1995 to 36% in 2007 (Sursock and Smidt, 2010, p. 69), this has not necessarily increased the diversity of the student population. The report noted that highly selective compulsory education systems impact negatively on access for non-traditional groups, including disabled students, limiting access to relevant qualifications. In addition, centralised university admissions systems focusing on examination grades or tests provide institutions with little opportunity to promote access for non-traditional students.

A more recent report published by Eurydice on access, retention and employability (Eurydice, 2014) also questioned the extent of progress on widening access across Europe. It noted that in

most European countries there are few or no targets and limited data gathering in relation to student social characteristics. Some jurisdictions gather data in relation to:

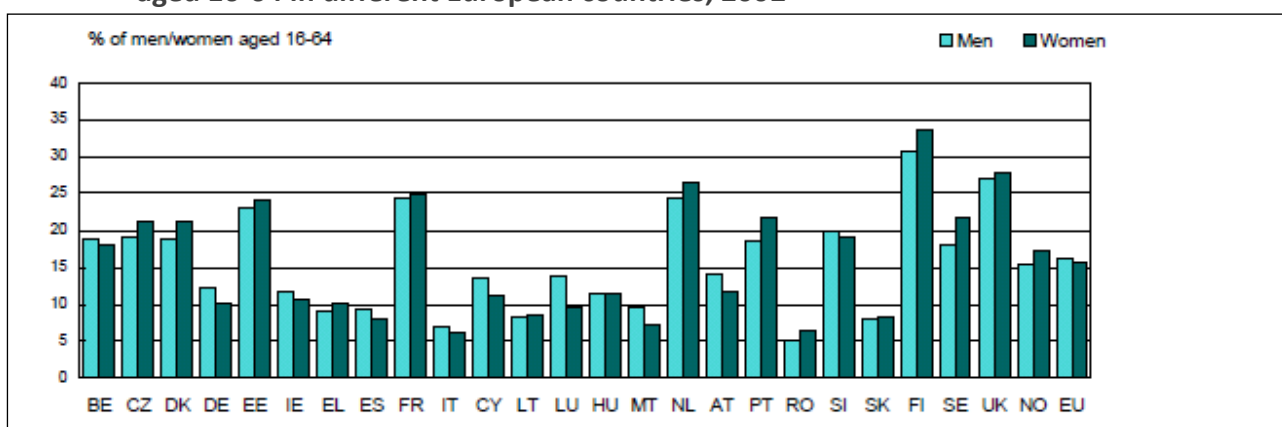
- Qualification prior to entry (27 jurisdictions)
- Socioeconomic status (19 jurisdictions)
- Disability (17 jurisdictions)
- Labour market status prior to entry (13 jurisdictions)
- Labour market status during studies (12 jurisdictions)
- Ethnic/cultural/linguistic minority status (8 jurisdictions)
- Migrant status (13 jurisdictions)

The Eurydice report suggested that information collected on student social characteristics was rarely used to inform policy. Only a minority of national policy makers believed that the student body had become more diverse over the past 10 years, often suggesting that they did not have access to relevant information to chart progress over time. Ireland reported the greatest change, pointing to an increase in disabled and mature students, whilst Swedish policy makers noted an increase in students of foreign origin. Scottish policy makers referred to an increase in students from deprived backgrounds.

Conceptualising and measuring disability and higher education participation across Europe

As noted above, efforts to compare widening access strategies across Europe are limited by the lack of common terminology. This is a particularly acute problem with regard to disability, where cultural understandings and benefits system entitlements play a major role in shaping people’s understanding of impairment and disability, particularly in relation to non-normative conditions. Figure 2 shows the proportion of adults reporting a long standing health problem or disability (LSHPD) in different European countries. People living in more affluent countries with relatively generous welfare systems, such as Finland, France, the Netherlands and the UK, are more likely to report having a long standing health problem or disability than those living in poorer countries with less generous welfare systems, such as Romania. It is evident that cross-country comparisons of this sort are important, but should be treated with a considerable degree of caution.

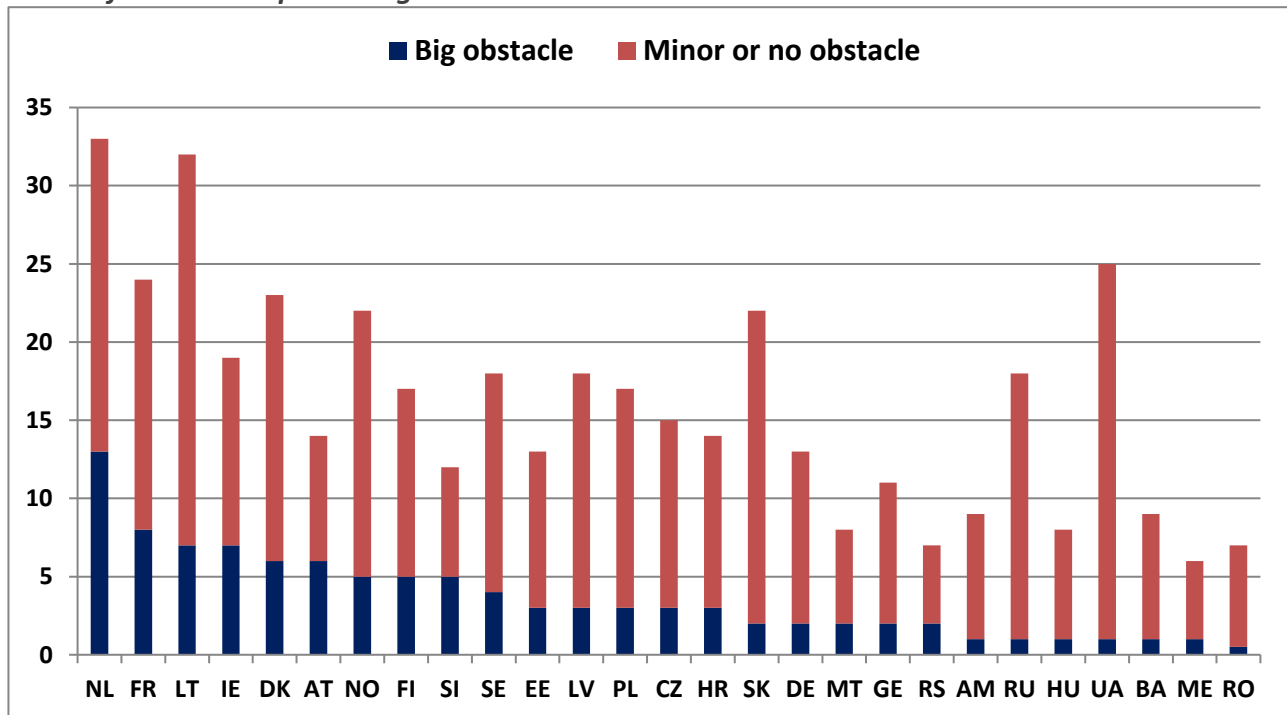
Figure 2: Incidence of long standing health problem or disability (LSHPD) reported by people aged 16-64 in different European countries, 2002



Source: Applica & Cesep & Alphametrics, 2007, drawing on Labour Force Survey data, 2002

Similar difficulties in cross country comparisons emerge when attempting to compare rates of participation in higher education by disabled people in different European countries. The Eurostudent survey (Orr et al, 2008) examines social and economic conditions of student life in Europe, with a view to developing a set of social inclusion indicators, including participation rates of disabled students (DZHW, 2015). However, the original survey was informed by a rather narrow understanding of disability, requesting students to report on any physical disability or chronic disease which had an impact on their studies. The question did not encourage students to focus on mental health problems and general learning difficulties such as dyslexia, which are commonly identified in the student population.

Figure 3: Students with impairments by self-assessed severity of impairments
Share of students in percentages



Source: DZHW 2015 EUROSTUDENT V A.10, A.13

No data: CH, IT

Questions:

5.7 Please indicate if you have a disability, long-standing health problems or functional limitations.

5.8 Overall, to what extent are your impairments an obstacle to your studies?

A later iteration of the survey (DZHW, 2015) requested students to indicate the existence of a disability, long-standing health problems or functional limitations and the extent to which these impairments represented an obstacle to their studies. Figure 3 shows very wide variation across countries in relation to students reporting the existence of an impairment and in their assessment of its implications for their studies. Russia, Malta, Montenegro, Romania and Bulgaria appear to have a relatively low proportion of disabled students (7% or less), whereas the Netherlands has a relatively high proportion (about 30%). As noted above, these variations may reflect material differences in the inclusion of disabled students, or may simply reflect the fact that some countries have more expansive understandings of what constitutes an impairment. In the light of these puzzles, it is suggested that there is a need for more research on the experiences and outcomes of disabled students in different European countries (DZHW, 2015; Fuller et al., 2009).

National policy in relation to the inclusion of disabled students in the UK and Sweden

In this section, we explore similarities and differences in the inclusion policies of the UK and Sweden, both of which have relatively well-developed widening access traditions. Until the early 1990s in the UK, inclusion of disabled students in higher education was somewhat ad hoc, often depending on the goodwill of other students and lecturers to provide support and assistance on a voluntary basis (Riddell et al, 2005). In 1993, a national Disabled Students' Allowance. In 2015, the maximum amount awarded to a full-time undergraduate in relation to each component was as follows:

- equipment allowance (£5,161 over the course)
- non-medical helpers' allowance (£20,520 per annum)
- general allowance (£1,724 per annum).

The Disabled Students' Allowance was not means-tested and students were obliged to provide medical or psychological evidence in order to establish eligibility for particular components. A survey by Hall and Tinklin (1998) indicated that, by the end of the 1990s, considerable progress had been made in developing institutional support for disabled students. At this point in time:

- All institutions had a Disability Statement
- Arrangements were largely in place for addressing disabled students' needs in examinations;
- The majority of institutions had applications and admissions procedures relating to the needs of disabled students;
- Ninety five per cent of institutions in England and Wales and all institutions in Scotland had a disability officer. This was a new post in many institutions;
- The extent and quality of provision for disabled students varied across and within institutions.

The Disability Discrimination Act was extended to education in 2001, and was later incorporated into the Equalities Act of 2010. This provided a strong legislative framework to outlaw institutional discrimination, defined as the provision of less favourable treatment to disabled students and failure to make reasonable adjustments. Students who believed that they were the victims of discriminatory practice were able to seek legal redress, although very few cases were taken to court (Riddell et al, 2005). In 2002, when a further survey of institutional support was conducted, the impact of the legislation was already discernible (Riddell et al, 2005). All institutions had a disability office and dedicated staff, policies and practices were more consistent, efforts were being made to improve the accessibility of estates and buildings and all institutions published annual action reports.

Institutions were further encouraged to become more inclusive by the UK Government's decision to gather data in relation to the proportion of students claiming the Disabled Students' Allowance in each institution. These data were published annually, with each institution's performance benchmarked against that of similar institutions. Whilst there were no penalties for under-performance, the public availability of the data was intended to act as a spur to improvement. Since 2007, the Office for Fair Access in England has required universities to submit annual access plans. There is a requirement to demonstrate increased participation by students from low-participation neighbourhoods and universities may also focus on raising participation of other

under-represented groups, for example, disabled students and those leaving local authority care. Institutions which fail to meet their targets may be refused permission to charge the full student fee, thus potentially incurring a significant financial penalty. Similar regulatory arrangements have been put in place in the devolved nations (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). Again, these appear to be 'soft', rather than 'hard' measures, since financial penalties have never been used, but nonetheless the regulatory framework appears to have been highly effective in concentrating the minds of university managers on the problem of unequal access. There are ongoing debates about the priority accorded to social class as opposed to other indicators of under-representation, and Weedon (2015) has argued for a greater focus on intersectional analysis, so that the interaction of social class with other 'protected characteristics' including disability may be examined.

The UK has clearly made significant efforts to include disabled students in higher education, however qualitative studies have highlighted the difficulties which disabled students continue to experience, particularly those with mental health difficulties and those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (Riddell et al, 2005; Fuller et al., 2009; Fordyce et al., 2014).

In Sweden, there is also a focus on creating a more inclusive higher education system, but a different approach has been adopted. Since 1993, Stockholm University has acted as a hub, administering an extra grant to higher education institutions to cover the pedagogical support needs of disabled students and collating statistics on participation rates in different universities. According to the Stockholm University website, around 17% of Swedish University students have an impairment and 11% consider this a potential barrier to their studies. Under Swedish equalities legislation passed in 2009, students have a right to 'pedagogical support' and each university has a disability officer charged with co-ordinating support arrangements. Sixty four percent of Swedish disabled student who responded to the Eurostudent survey stated they had not contacted the coordinator and 16% stated that they did not know about the coordinator. Disabled and non-disabled students were equally likely to use distance learning and similar proportions studied abroad.

Overall, both the UK and Sweden have made considerable efforts to increase the disabled students' participation in higher education, but have done this in different ways. The UK has targeted financial support at individual students, giving them considerable freedom and resources to organise their own support. Legislation and regulation has also been used to ensure that reasonable adjustments at institutional level take place. Whilst institutions appear to regard adaptations to policies and estates as relatively unproblematic, research suggests that changes to teaching and assessment practices have occurred at a much slower pace, with some lecturers fearing that meeting the needs of students with impairments such as dyslexia might involve discrimination against non-disabled students (Weedon and Riddell, 2014). In Sweden, financial support is targeted at institutions rather than individual students. The equalities legislative framework is very similar to that of the UK, but the Swedish Government has been less pro-active than its UK counterpart in regulating access and publishing institutional performance data. Since both the UK and Sweden have relatively well developed, but contrasting, systems, they provide interesting exemplars for countries which are beginning to tackle the problems of disability discrimination in higher education.

In the following section, we explore the social characteristics of disabled students in UK and Scottish universities, illustrating some of the types of analyses which can be conducted when data are centralised.

The social profile and outcomes of disabled students in the UK

Information on disabled students in UK higher education institutions is based on self-report data recorded by the Universities and Colleges Application Service (UCAS). All applicants applying through this centralised system are invited to indicate whether they have a disability and are provided with a list of categories (as shown in figure 4). The proportion of disabled students in UK universities has increased very markedly since the inception of national data gathering in 1994/95, when disabled students represented 3.6% of the total student population. By 2004-05, the proportion had increased to 7.1% and by 2013-14, disabled students accounted for 11.3% of all full-time undergraduates. There has also been a marked change in the representation of students with different types of impairment. In 1994/95, students with a diagnosis of dyslexia made up only 16.2% of the total disabled student population, but by 2013/14 they made up over a half of this population. There was a marked decrease over the same period of students categorised as having an 'unseen disability', suggesting that there might simply have been a change in terminology, driven by the growing social acceptability of acknowledging the existence of a specific learning difficulty (Riddell et al., 2005). Over the same period, there has also been an increase in the proportion of students disclosing a mental health difficulty. Students with visual and hearing impairments appear to make up a smaller proportion of the overall disabled student population, although their absolute numbers have remained fairly constant.

Figure 4: Disabled students in UK universities, broken down by category of impairment and as a proportion of the total student population (Full time undergraduate) UK, Higher Education Statistics Agency

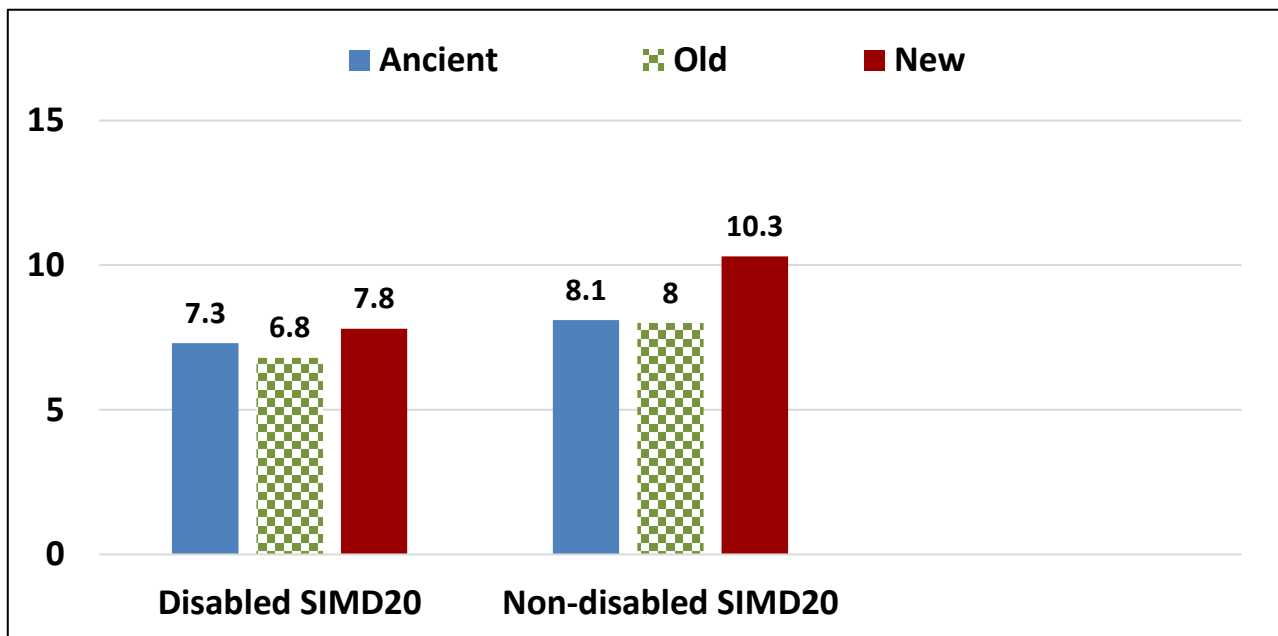
Type of impairment	1994-95	2004-05	2013-14
Unseen disability	57.5	17.1	-
Dyslexia (<i>Specific learning difficulty</i>)	16.2	54.2	53.3
Other disability (<i>or medical condition</i>)	8.9	10.2	8.8
Deaf/hard of hearing	5.9	3.7	2.1
Wheelchair/mobility difficulties (<i>A physical impairment or mobility issues</i>)	2.9	2.6	3
Blind/partially sighted	3.9	2.4	0.2
Multiple disabilities (<i>Two or more conditions</i>)	3.3	4.8	5.3
Mental health difficulties	1.2	4.0	12.5
Personal care support	0.2	0.1	-
(<i>Social communication and</i>) Autistic spectrum disorder	-	0.9	4
Proportion of all full time first degree students	3.6	7.1	11.3

Whilst there has been a marked improvement in participation by disabled students, those from poorer backgrounds are much less likely to be included in all types of institution, particularly the most selective ancient universities (see figure 5). If students from the 20% most deprived neighbourhoods in Scotland were fairly represented, we would expect them to make up 20% of the overall population in each type of university. However, only 7.3% of the disabled student population in ancient (the most selective) universities are from the most deprived Scottish neighbourhoods, and their representation in new (least selective) universities is only slightly better

(7.8%). The pattern for the non-disabled population is broadly similar - students from the poorest backgrounds account for only 8.1% of the total non-disabled student population in ancient universities, with slightly better representation in the new university sector, where they make up 10.3% of the total non-disabled student population. This demonstrates that the social exclusion of the people from the poorest neighbourhoods in Scotland is a problem affecting both the disabled and non-disabled populations, pointing to the need for inter-sectional analysis and action to remedy this injustice.

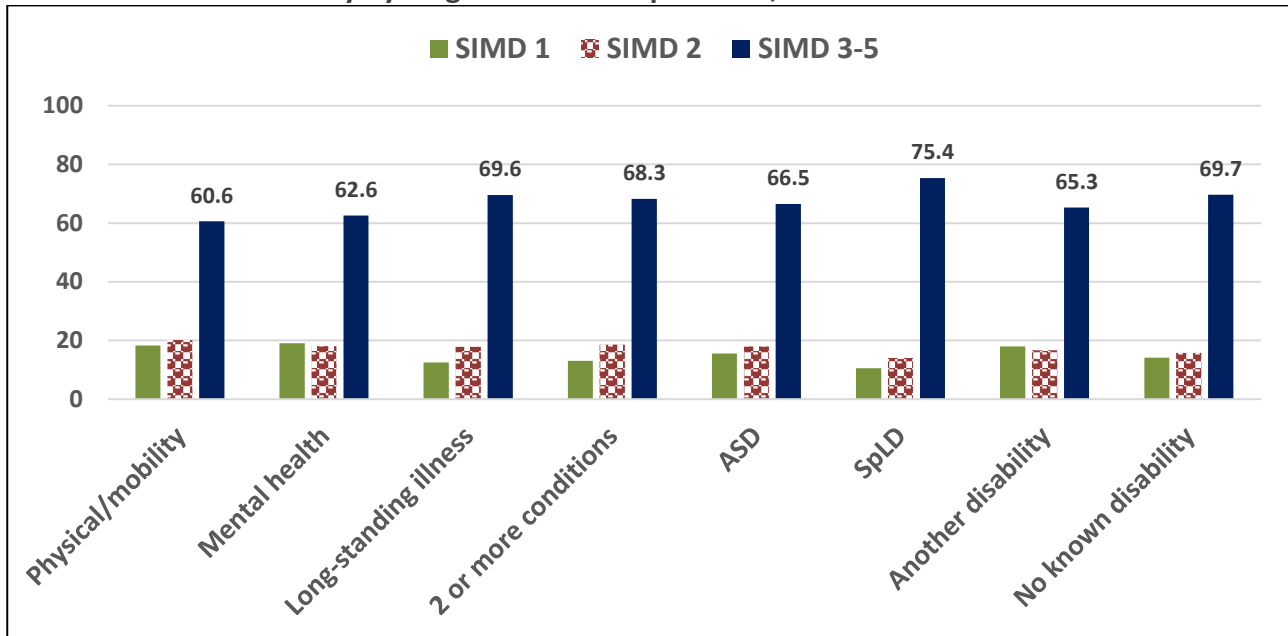
Figures 6 and 7 show significant types of differences in relation to disability and social class. Like other students, disabled students tend to live in more socially advantaged areas. However, this pattern is particularly marked in the case of students with specific learning difficulties (dyslexia). Three quarters of this group live in more socially advantaged parts of Scotland, compared with 69.7% of non-disabled students. Students with a diagnosis of dyslexia are much more likely to attend an ancient (highly selective) institution, suggesting that the advantages conferred by social class outweigh any negative effects associated with dyslexia.

Figure 5: Disabled and non-disabled students from the 20% most deprived neighbourhoods in different types of Scottish university as a percentage of all students in (a) the disabled student population and (b) the non-disabled student population in that type of institution



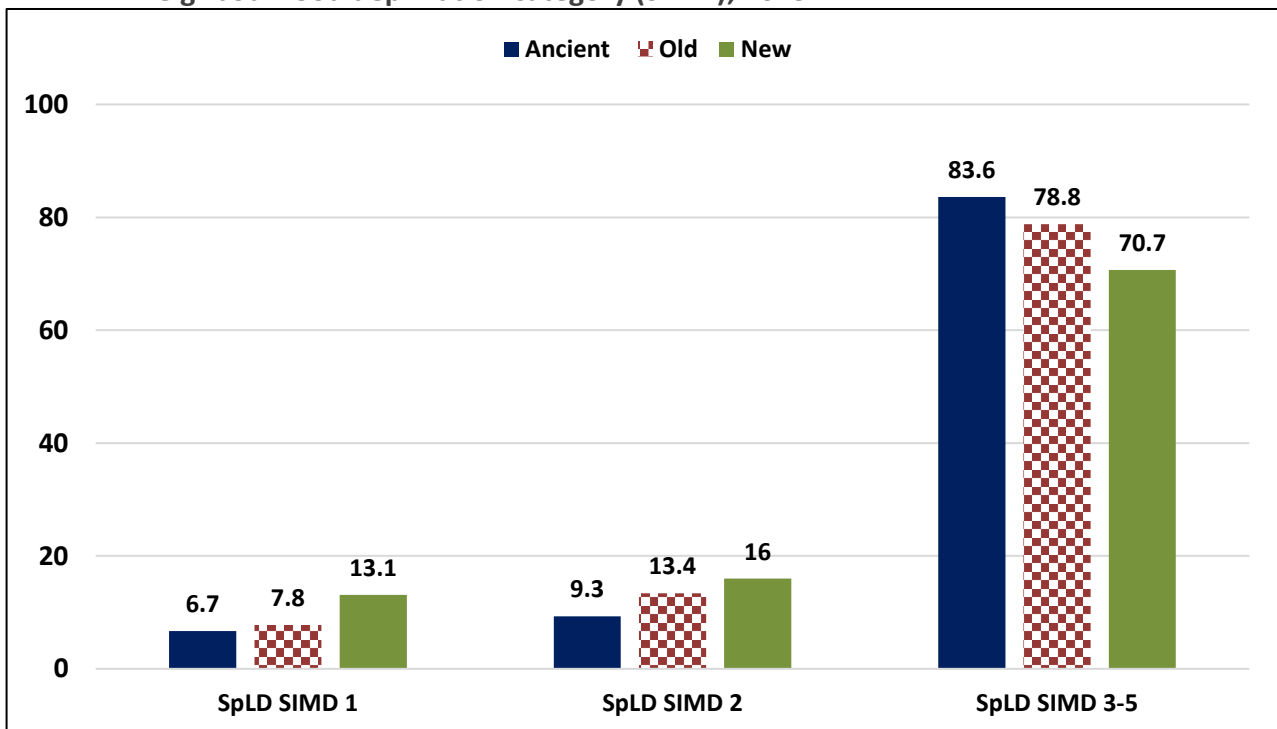
Source: Weedon, 2015

Figure 6: Social background of students with different types of impairments and those with no known disability by neighbourhood deprivation, 2013-14



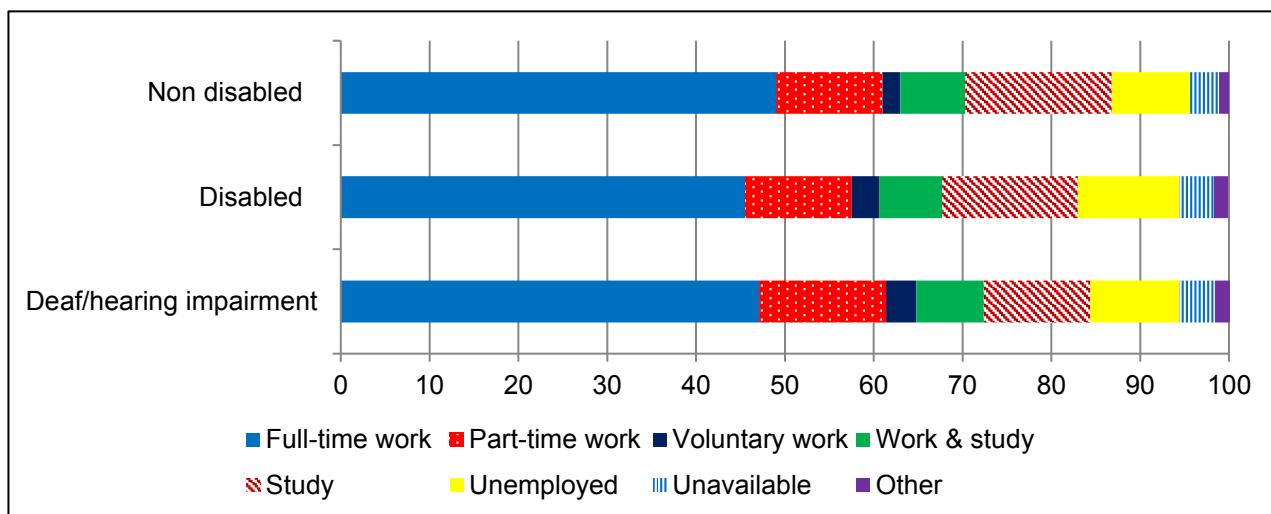
Source: HESA Student Record 2013/14. Higher Education Statistics Agency Limited 2015
 Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) 1 = 20% most deprived neighbourhoods in Scotland
 Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) 5 = 20% least deprived neighbourhoods in Scotland

Figure 7: Students with specific learning difficulties (dyslexia) by type of institution and neighbourhood deprivation category (SIMD), 2013-14



Source: HESA Student Record 2013/14. Higher Education Statistics Agency Limited 2015
 Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) 1 = 20% most deprived neighbourhoods in Scotland
 Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) 5 = 20% least deprived neighbourhoods in Scotland
 SpLD = specific learning difficulties/dyslexia

Figure 8: Destinations of disabled, deaf and non-disabled graduates, as percentage of all graduates in each group, 2009/10



Source: What Happens Next? Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) Task Group (2012)

Disabled students who gain a university place appear to be almost as successful in the labour market as the rest of the graduate population. According to the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS), the employment outcomes of disabled graduates, including those who are deaf and hard of hearing, are generally positive. Overall, those with university level qualifications are much more likely to be employed than those with lower level qualifications (Hills et al., 2010) and this relative advantage also applies to disabled graduates. By way of contrast, disabled people who lack higher level qualifications have much worse labour market outcomes than their non-disabled peers with few or no qualifications. In 2012, disabled graduates were only slightly less likely to have a job than the non-disabled graduate population (see figure 8), and were equally likely to be in professional and managerial occupations (Fordyce et al., 2014). This success is likely to be attributable both to their high skill levels but also to their relatively high socio-economic status, which provides access to social networks, facilitating entry to the professions via internment positions and work experience. In the following section, we present case studies of deaf students from different social class backgrounds to illustrate the way in which social class position intersects with disability within the education system and the labour market.

Brief case studies of deaf students from different social class backgrounds

In this section of the paper, we draw on the findings of a research project entitled *Post-school Transitions of Young People who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing*, which combined an analysis of administrative and survey data relating to school and post-school outcomes, as well as policy analysis and case studies with thirty young people who are DHH. The statistical analysis drew on a range of sources including the Scottish Qualifications Agency (SQA), Skills Development Scotland (SDS), the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS). One of the objectives of the paper is to assess the adequacy of available data, and we therefore provide a critical commentary on data quality and accessibility.

The case studies used semi-structured interviews, conducted orally or using British Sign Language, and e-mail correspondence with thirty young people who volunteered to participate in the study. The interviews focused on the young people's school experiences and experiences of post-16

education, training and employment. The young people, aged between 18 and 24 at the time of the research, were contacted via databases held by the National Deaf Children's Society or by the Achievement of Deaf Pupils in Scotland project, a research and development initiative based at Moray House School of Education. Full details of research methods are available in Fordyce et al, 2013.

Case Study 1: Sophie

Sophie was born with severe sensorineural hearing loss. She uses hearing aids and oral communication. At the time of the interview, she was living with her middle class family in a relatively affluent rural area (Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) 4th quintile) and was in close contact with members of her extended family living nearby. Sophie attended the local mainstream school, where a teacher of the deaf visited her once a week. She was also involved in a weekly session with a deaf peer group organised by the teachers of the deaf in her local authority. In her fourth year of secondary school, Sophie decided she would like to be a PE teacher and to help her achieve this goal, the school organised a work placement with a deaf PE teacher from a neighbouring school.

Sophie received generic transition support from school, but the deaf PE teacher, as well as the teachers at her deaf peer group, advised her to get in touch with the Disability Office at university as soon as possible. Her parents and extended family were very involved with her transition planning:

I have to say, my parents probably helped more than the school did. [...] They were always quite heavily involved in my education in terms of making sure that support was there. And it wasn't just my parents. Like my whole family and wider family, they were always involved.

Her parents investigated the support available at different institutions and advised on her choice of university. Sophie also actively sought information from various acquaintances:

One of the people that I knew. He was actually my brother's friend. His older sister, she had went to [name of university]. She ...texted like 'join as many sport societies that you can cause it gets you like knowing people really quickly. Just take part as much as you can'.

Sophie benefited from family support after she entered university, for example, her aunt proofread her essays and one of her brother's friends recommended that she apply for a work placement at the international company where he worked. At the time of the interview, Sophie had graduated from university and was working full-time for the same company.

Case Study 2: Isla

Isla was diagnosed with profound hearing loss when she was two years old. At the time of the research, she was living in a relatively disadvantaged area (SIMD 3rd quintile) with her hearing family. Isla communicates orally and attended a mainstream school. She left school with Highers (Scottish qualifications taken at the end of upper secondary stage equivalent to ISCED Level 3) and went on to study at a post '92 university. She was well-informed about support options and her support worker gave her a list of questions to ask on Open Days about support at university. She contacted the Students Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS) in her sixth year and completed her Disabled Students Award (DSA) application form.

In summer, as soon as she was accepted, she had a meeting with a disability advisor and was assured that the paperwork was being processed. Despite all of these preparations, when she arrived at university Isla discovered that no communication support had been arranged. Tutors were repeatedly asked to wear the loop system microphone, but microphones rarely worked and tutors often forgot to use them. In a laboratory session, Isla asked to be allowed to sit at the front so she could lip read, but the tutor was not supportive:

She said to me, 'Well you just have to sit through it for this tutorial, this lab, but for the next time I'll have you down the front'. Next time I went in, still hadn't changed it. I was raging. I was like really angry.

As time went by, Isla realised that she was missing most of the content of her course, but unlike more assertive students in our case studies, she did not go back to the Disability Office to ask for help. She dropped out at Christmas, just before she was due to hand in her first assignments.

We had a couple of big papers coming up. I had started them. I had no idea where I was going with it. I emailed my tutor and said, 'look I'm not coming back. I can't, I can't hear anybody so I can't. He said, 'I'm sorry to hear that'. That was it! I think I cried for days.

After she left university, her father wrote a letter to the Disability Office listing their complaints. The Disability Office responded in writing:

We got two letters back. One telling my dad that they need written consent for him to contact the University on behalf of me, although I had signed the bottom of the letter along with my dad! I think that constitutes written consent. The other one I got back was an eight page letter simplifying all the points that I had pointed out to them as to what they had done wrong, accusing me of being a liar! Saying that I had never been up to speak to them.

There was no further contact between Isla or her parents and the university. Isla registered with the Job Centre and looked for work for nine months. At the time of the interview she held a full-time, permanent position as a purchasing assistant with a construction company, and she had started a part-time university degree.

Overall, the first case study illustrates the way in which students from socially advantaged backgrounds are able to mobilise particular forms of economic, social and cultural capital to facilitate their progression through higher education and into the graduate labour market. By way of contrast, the different types of capital available to students from poorer backgrounds do not confer such advantages. Whereas Sophie was assisted throughout her university career by her family's ability to intervene to assist their daughter at key points, Isla's family were much less aware of the written and unwritten rules of the game. Despite this, there was some degree of hope at the end of the research that because of the flexibility built into the UK university system, she would still be able to obtain a higher level qualification.

Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, we have provided an overview of European policy in widening access to higher education, which is seen as a key component of active citizenship. Whilst the rhetoric of inclusion at European and national levels is strong, many countries fail to collate data of the participation of disabled students, or other non-traditional groups, making it impossible to compare progress in different countries over time. The Eurostudent Survey, administered to students across the European Higher Education Area, has attempted comparative analyses, but it is evident that different cultural understandings of disability mean that caution is needed in interpreting the data and drawing conclusions. Despite these caveats, the survey reveals significant differences in the proportion of disabled students within the wider university population. Countries with stronger welfare regimes and less selective education systems appear to be more successful in including disabled students in higher education. Sweden and the UK are used as examples of countries which have made significant progress in encouraging higher education institutions to be more inclusive, although they have taken somewhat different approaches. The British system appears to be more managerialist and directive than its Scandinavian counterpart. The UK has also given disabled students direct control over funds to purchase additional aids and services, whereas in Sweden state support is targeted at the institution. The advantages of nation-wide data gathering processes are illustrated by the British system. Whilst the data are not perfect, it is nonetheless possible to conduct inter-sectional analysis over time so that the impact of particular policy interventions may be identified. This type of analysis reveals, for example, that British disabled students are as socially advantaged as the wider university population, and those with specific learning difficulties (dyslexia) are a particularly privileged group. The case studies of deaf students reveal the way in which, for students with particular types of impairment, the advantages conferred by social class may outweigh the disadvantages associated with disability.

Looking to the future, it is salutary to recognise the progress which has been made, but also to recognise the threats to further inclusion of disabled students which may arise during times of austerity. Sweden appears to have scaled back its efforts to promote alternative routes into higher education (Weedon and Riddell, 2015) and the UK is reducing the scale and reach of the Disabled Students' Allowance. Given that many countries are in the early stages of creating more inclusive systems, there are clearly dangers that the pace of progress may falter. In order to ensure that this does not happen, it is vital that the EU and national governments continue to gather and publish data, establish benchmarks and ensure that the regulatory frameworks around equalities are strengthened rather than diminished. The evidence suggests that, where they have been seriously applied, such measures have been highly effective in promoting change within university systems which may be somewhat conservative.

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