Views of inclusion across time and space: five years of perspectives from university tutors on accessibility and inclusion

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Abstract

It is commonly accepted that in order to ensure students with disabilities have equitable chances of study success, educational institutions need to adopt inclusive approaches to teaching, ensure digital accessibility of content, and have robust mechanisms for student support. There is a rich body of literature on how these practices can be effectively adopted in education. However, many of these studies focus on one particular dimension of inclusive practice, such as technical accessibility, student support, or inclusive curriculum or pedagogy. This can lead to a siloed approach, overdependence on a single aspect of inclusivity, or dysfunction in inclusive practice.

Inclusive practices do not exist in isolation. An institutional approach to accessibility, inclusive teaching, and student support relies not only on the knowledge, skills and attitudes of individual staff, but is also dependent on wider institutional factors, such as leadership, resource, systems, and culture. The voices and views of Associate Lecturers (tutors) as front-line educators within a distance learning context are crucial to understanding how accessibility and inclusion are enacted in practice.

In this paper, we analyse 632 closed-question responses and 207 open comments from three biennial staff surveys, conducted in 2017, 2019 and 2021 with Associate Lecturers at the Open University, UK. These surveys capture views on accessibility and inclusion from tutors across different faculties, both before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. Comparative analysis of these survey responses and thematic analysis of the open comments reveals crucial insights into the challenges for inclusive practice across a large and complex institution, as well as Associate Lecturer's perspectives on institutional culture, leadership, expertise and resource, and the fitness for purpose of the systems and structures in place. In this paper, we highlight the themes that remain constant despite time, space and global circumstances, and explore how these themes can help a complex institution move towards a more accessible and inclusive approach to teaching and learning.

Keywords: Inclusion, disability, students, tutors, accessibility

1   INTRODUCTION

Research and practice have shown that in order to ensure students with disabilities have equitable chances of study success, educational institutions need to adopt inclusive approaches to teaching, ensure digital accessibility of content, and have robust mechanisms for student support [1]–[4]. Literature explores the different practices involved in ensuring inclusivity, such as inclusive pedagogies [5], [6], accessible curricula [7], [8], digital accessibility [9], [10], inclusive approaches to language [11]–[13] and administrative support processes (such as disability disclosure) [14]–[16], reducing barriers to inclusion [17]–[21], and working in partnership with disabled students [22], [23]. However, while all these areas are crucial, it is important that institutions do not become overly focused on one single dimension of inclusive practice, as this can lead to a siloed approach or dysfunction in inclusive practice [24], [25].

Inclusive practices, incorporating accessibility, inclusive teaching, and student support, rely not only on the knowledge, skills and attitudes of individual staff, but also on wider institutional factors, such as leadership, resource, systems, and culture [24], [25]. For this reason, when evaluating inclusion in higher education, particularly during times of challenge or stress, it is important that a range of stakeholder voices are sought [26], [27].

This study took place in the UK Open University (OU), a large distance learning institution with over 150,000 students studying part time and at a distance. OU courses are delivered fully or partly online and may be accompanied by printed materials and diverse online educational resources either as a reasonable adjustment or as a core part of the course content. Students access curriculum content through a Moodle-based virtual learning environment (VLE) and are supported by tutors (also called Associate Lecturers, or ALs) within a tutor group. Tutors run tutorials for their groups, provide academic support to students, and mark and provide feedback on assessment. At the time of writing, over 33,000 students (21.9% of the total cohort) had disclosed disabilities to the OU and are supported by ALs.

The voices and views of ALs as front-line educators within this context are crucial to understanding how accessibility and inclusion are enacted in practice. In this paper, we analyse results from ALs from three biennial staff surveys, conducted in 2017, 2019 and 2021 [24], [25]. These surveys capture views on accessibility and inclusion from tutors across different faculties, both before and during the Covid-19 pandemic and throughout other institutional change and upheaval [25]. The results reveal insights into the challenges for inclusive practice across a large and complex institution, as well as AL's perspectives on institutional leadership, knowledge and resource, and the fitness for purpose of the systems and structures in place. In this paper, we highlight the themes that remain constant despite time, space and global circumstances, and explore how these themes can help a complex institution move towards a more accessible and inclusive approach to teaching and learning.

2 METHODOLOGY

In 2017, 2019 and 2021, a survey was sent to OU staff . The survey aimed to explore staff knowledge, skills, attitudes and support context in relation to accessibility and inclusive practice in their roles, and provides an indication of how these changed over time. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the OU's Human Research and Ethics Committee, and the method and survey instrument were reviewed in detail and approved by the OU's Staff Survey Project Panel. The approval process involved an initial pilot with a sample of 42 staff, and a robust check on the approach, methodology, survey instrument, language, and sample.

In 2017, the survey was advertised on the university intranet and ALs were invited to respond, while in 2019 and 2021 an email invitation was sent to a sample of staff. Table 1 shows the sample sizes, response numbers and rates, and numbers of open comments received for each iteration of the survey.

Table 1. Response rates by year

	2017	2019	2021
Sample size	(Open invitation)	900	800
Responses	66	292	274
Response rate	(NA)	32%	34%
Open comments	17	94	96

The quantitative results of these surveys are discussed and contrasted with different staff group responses in [24], [25]. In this paper, we explore the responses from the ALs as frontline teachers. We focus in particular on the general open comments received, in recognition of the nuance and value these comments can provide [28]. The general open comment field took the form of a question at the end of the survey 'If you have any other comments about accessibility, inclusion and your role that you would like to share, please note them here.' This resulted in 207 open comments from ALs that, when presented alongside their closed question responses, provide important insight into the knowledge and commitment to accessibility of this essential staff group, along with their critiques of systems and structures that can impede inclusive practice, and their recommendations for change.

Open comments were coded by a team of four academics using a reflexive thematic analysis approach [29]. All comments were coded by at least two coders, and all coding was checked with the entire group once complete (and adjusted as appropriate), to ensure reliability.

Closed questions were analysed in SPSS using inferential statistics to test independence of responses between groups. Pearson's chi-squared was used to determine statistical significance, with an alpha

level of 0.05 for all statistical tests. Responses of 'not applicable' were considered a non-response and were discarded.

3   RESULTS

The 207 open comments consisted of 257 coded references, coded to 20 themes, using a reflexive thematic analysis approach [29]. These themes were aligned to three overall categories:

- Knowledge and attitudes (N = 58)
- Critique of systems and structures (N = 145)
- Recommendations for change (N = 54)

These categories align to the multiple-choice responses in the surveys in relation to knowledge, attitudes and support contexts. The following sections explore the open comment responses in each of the three categories, juxtaposing them against relevant multiple-choice responses.

3.1   Knowledge and attitudes

The open comments in the 'knowledge and attitudes' category consisted of six themes:

- Insufficient knowledge (20 comments, 7.8% of total), e.g. '*Generally, I think everyone is trying to do the right thing but a lot of us have superficial or insufficient knowledge to be able to address the issues appropriately. For example, I would not know how best to teach a blind student.*'
- Positive attitudes (17 comments, 6.6% of total), e.g. '*The OU is genuinely open to all and highly supportive in general.*'
- Negative attitudes (11 comments, 4.3% of total), e.g. '*Often, students are lazy and want a qualification, rather than an education. They often think they know more about the subject than I do! It is wearing and so, so demoralising.*'
- Sources of knowledge (6 comments, 2.3% of total), e.g. '*I would always discuss any issues I have with supporting student with disabilities, with [my line manager]. Otherwise, it would take me time to search for guidance etc. on any website.*'
- Not feeling their knowledge is valued (2 comments, 0.8% of total), e.g. '*I have 20 years' experience in inclusive education and I don't feel my expertise has been used sufficiently*'
- Prior knowledge (2 comments, 0.8% of total) e.g. '*I used to work as a DSA assessor, so am familiar with the effects on disabilities.*'

The number of comments where practitioners fear that their knowledge of accessibility and inclusivity is insufficient did not decrease over time, with 1 comment (1.5% of total responses) in 2017, 9 comments (3.9%) in 2019 and 10 comments (3.6%) in 2021. This presents an interesting contrast to the quantitative survey results, where staff perceptions of their knowledge were either consistently high or increased over time (see Table 2), and provides important insight into accessibility expertise within the university.

Table 2. Perceptions of knowledge. Multiple choice survey responses, % agree or strongly agree.

	2017	2019	2021
Q4. I am aware of the types of conditions the OU classifies as disabilities.	90.90%	90.40%	89.80%
Q5. I am aware of the type of accessibility issues disabled students can face.	92.40%	94.20%	91.60%
Q8. I feel confident supporting disabled students, as far as my role requires me to.	69.70%	77.40%	77.70%
Q9. I am confident I could signpost students with disabilities to relevant sources of support, if necessary.	72.70%	71.90%	75.20%
Q12. I am confident that I can recognise potential accessibility issues in the context of my role.	68.20%	74.00%	70.40%

More comments were coded as sharing a positive attitude than a negative attitude, but when compared to the extraordinarily high numbers of positive attitudes in the multiple-choice questions (see Table 3), the number of negative comments is notable. It is interesting that *all* the respondents expressing a negative attitude in the comments expressed positive attitudes in the closed questions. This may suggest that their comment adds nuance to an otherwise positive attitude, but may also imply that negative outlooks can lurk below seemingly positive appearances; it is important for institutions to be aware of this when using surveys to evaluate staff attitudes and institutional culture.

Table 3. Attitudes towards inclusion. Multiple choice survey responses, % agree or strongly agree.

	2017	2019	2021
Q7. I feel committed to accessibility (in my role).	89.40%	96.90%	97.10%
Q14. All staff should have a responsibility to support students with disabilities.	83.30%	94.20%	94.20%
Q18. All teaching and learning activities should be made inclusive and accessible to all students.	77.30%	92.50%	90.90%

3.2 Critique of systems and structures

The category with the largest number of coded comments was named 'critique of systems and structures'; these comments were coded to nine themes.

- Barriers (internal within institution) (31 comments, 12.1% of total), e.g. *'ALs do not have the support of a learning technician to prepare for tutorials and this is a major barrier to inclusiveness'*
- Inadequate student support structures (26 comments, 10.1% of total), e.g. '*The Student Support system as it currently operates can result in students' specific needs being missed.'*
- University policy and leadership (22 comments, 8.6% of total), e.g. *'Introduction of group tuition policy has resulted in less contact with students, which impacts negatively on less confident students / those with disabilities'*
- Issues with initial identification of needs (22 comments, 8.6% of total), e.g. *'I don't think the OU puts enough into working with disabled students at the beginning to identify their problems and the best ways to tackle them.'*
- Student records (16 comments, 6.2% of total), e.g. '*Disability reports and advice on student records vary in quality and helpfulness. Sometimes records are out of date, advice on support is often very generalised'*
- Student disability declaration (9 comments, 3.5% of total), e.g. '*Many students appear to have undisclosed disabilities around anxiety/mental health'*
- Barriers (external to institution) (8 comments, 3.1% of total), e.g. '*Some disabled students attending face to face tutorials experience problems outside the OU's control (e.g. parking problems and costs).'*
- Student choice (6 comments, 2.3% of total), e.g. '*I do feel that some students make it very difficult for themselves by selecting modules that by definition will be challenging to them then essentially expect the whole content to be rewritten for them.'*
- Information, advice and guidance (5 comments, 1.9% of total), e.g. *'Sometimes, the onus is on the individual student to get help when I think more help and guidance is necessary.'*

The high number of comments on inadequate student support structures is consistent with the multiple-choice survey results. As shown in Table 4, ALs consistently showed they did not believe the existing support structures were fit for purpose (Q20). However, despite the high number of critical comments on OU policy and leadership, the majority stated in the closed questions that they believe the OU is committed to supporting disabled students (Q21) and that it actively works to encourage them to succeed (Q22). Responses to these three closed questions became significantly more positive over time (X^2 (4, $N = 632$) = 14.348, $p = 0.006$), but although the number of critical comments in these two areas decreased in 2019, they rose again in 2021 (6 comments (9.1%) in 2017, 18 comments (6.2%) in

2019 and 25 comments (9.1%) in 2021. This implies that while ALs may be critical of leadership, systems and support structures, they are supportive of the institution in general.

Table 4. Perceptions of barriers, systems and institutional commitment. Multiple choice survey responses, % agree or strongly agree.

	2017	2019	2021
Q20. The existing support structures within the OU for students with disabilities are fit for purpose.	43.90%	39.00%	49.60%
Q21. The OU is committed to supporting disabled students.	78.80%	89.00%	89.40%
Q22. The OU actively works to encourage disabled students to succeed.	71.20%	81.20%	82.10%
Q23. Barriers to accessibility for students in my subject/specialist area are externally driven (e.g., accrediting bodies, technical constraints, etc.)	24.20%	26.00%	28.10%
Q24. There are internal barriers to accessibility in the OU (i.e., driven by OU practices, not external ones.)	22.70%	37.30%	29.60%

As shown in Table 4, the number of respondents identifying internal barriers to accessibility (Q24) was generally low but increased significantly in 2019 (X^2 (4, N = 632) = 10.456, p = 0.03). The open comments add valuable detail to this, identifying sub-themes in local practices ('*some modules are inevitably very difficult for visually impaired students*'), workload allocations ('*no extra time is built into an AL's work time for specialised knowledge gathering*'), tutorial venues ('*Issues do crop up with venues and accessibility for individuals with physical disabilities*'), digital practices ('*Online tutorials and modules delivered completely online pose problems for students with some disabilities*') and university processes ('*Currently there is no way [exam boards] can take disability into account unless the student has submitted a Special Circumstances form.*') This presents an interesting contrast to Q23, perceptions of external barriers, which received similar numbers of 'agree' responses, but much fewer open comments. This suggests that ALs may be more likely to critique the systems with which they have greater familiarity, or that they may be less likely to critique areas where they do not feel they can influence change.

Another area of interest were the themes relating to what ALs know about students' disabilities; namely 'Initial identification of needs' (22 comments), 'Student records' (16 comments) and 'Student disability declaration' (9 comments). There were no multiple-choice questions in the survey that corresponded to these themes, yet this seems to be an ongoing issue for ALs, with comments increasing each year (3 comments (4.5%) in 2017, 21 comments (7.2%) in 2019 and 24 comments (8.8%) in 2021). The comments reveal that ALs consistently feel that records can be unreliable ('*"D" info is often out of date or not accurate enough, it creates difficulties*'), that advice about student needs is too generic ('*Advice for each student is too generic; more personalised attention and direction for ALs needed*'), that students' needs are not being correctly identified ('*The Student Support system as it currently operates can result in students specific needs being missed*'), that not all students feel comfortable disclosing or discussing their disabilities ('*Big issue is students who don't want to talk to the OU re the issue*') and that the burden of identifying suitable support while navigating these challenges is placed on the AL ('*too often the OU basically passes on all responsibility to the AL to sort out what is needed*'). This can be time consuming ('*I often spend quite a bit of time in contact with students who have a D marker, first of all finding out how the disability affects them, and then how I can best support the student*') and can be a cause of worry to the AL ('*some students are easier to help than others and I worry about those who struggle more quietly*').

3.3 Recommendations for change

The ALs made a number of constructive recommendations for change, which were categorised into five themes:

- Changes to processes or resource levels (19 comments, 7.4% of total), e.g. '*I would like there to be a nominated contact per module who you can talk to about specific students*'
- Training for ALs (18 comments, 7.0% of total), e.g. '*I would appreciate training on supporting students with specific disabilities such as hearing and visual impairment.*'
- Guidance for ALs (7 comments, 2.7% of total), e.g. '*Perhaps a little more information on "whom to contact" for advice would be good.*'
- Support for disabled ALs (5 comments, 1.9% of total), e.g. '*I would like to see better support for disabled tutors*'
- Resources to support students (5 comments, 1.9% of total), e.g. '*Students with the disabilities listed above need more tutorial time and frequent contact.*'

The comments identified the need for additional expert resource '*I think we should have specialists who work with each faculty/school to provide specialist help and support*', additional out-of-hours resource ('*some of the challenging situations I face can often occur out of normal working times for central OU staff*') or changes to processes in order to better support ALs *('I would like more detailed information on each student'*).

Many other comments called for additional training or guidance. Table 5 shows that AL perceptions of the training (Q13) and guidance (Q15) available to them were generally mediocre, although positivity around training did show a non-significant increase over time (X^2 (4, N = 632) = 8.715, p = 0.069). It is clear that more work is needed here.

Table 5. Perceptions of training and guidance available. Multiple choice survey responses, % agree or strongly agree.

	2017	2019	2021
Q13. The training available to me on accessibility is appropriate for my role.	43.90%	44.20%	55.10%
Q15. The documentation and guidance provided by the OU in relation to accessibility is adequate for my purposes.	53.00%	56.50%	59.50%

It was poignant that five comments called for better support to be available to disabled tutors, with statements such as:

'*There is considerable strong support for students but it's not the same for ALs - as an AL with a disability I have experience of this on several different occasions and for different reasons when I needed some physical support and made me think - the OU doesn't understand my disability and doesn't really care. (That's not everyone of course)*'

It is important to remember that this survey focused on inclusion for students, and that these responses should not necessarily be taken as statements of fact. Nevertheless, the perception that the institution needs to do more work to support disabled tutors is an important insight; it is clear that if an institution truly values student inclusion, it is vital that it also values and supports inclusion for staff.

4   DISCUSSION

General open comments in surveys can be an excellent tool for researchers and policy makers, and can provide a fascinating insight to accompany closed, multiple-choice questions [28]. In this study, as well as giving opportunities for clarification of, or expansion on, other answers, open comments have allowed participants to express 'more socially undesirable answers' [30], and to voice concerns or opinions about policy-level issues or leadership [31]. This has provided insights into challenges for inclusive practice from ALs' perspectives, as well as their views on university policy and leadership, the distribution of knowledge, expertise and resource, and the fitness for purpose of the systems and structures in place.

Despite the turmoil ALs experienced between 2017 and 2021, including a global pandemic and the institutional change described in [25], many of the themes highlighted in the open comments remained consistent over time. These themes can help the OU, and other complex institutions, move towards a more accessible and inclusive approach to teaching and learning.

One key implication of this survey is the need for the OU, and any other similar institution, to conduct an overhaul of the internal barriers to inclusivity that are represented by systems, practices and 'the way we do things around here' [32]. Unthinking practices in modules, assessment norms or digital expectations, and unchallenged systems such as inadequate workload allocation, unreliable student records, inflexible disability disclosure systems or problematic venue allocation systems clearly cause barriers to disabled students and challenge an institution's level of inclusivity. Models like the social model of disability [33] and Universal Design for Learning [34] clearly highlight that trying to retrofit accessibility onto inaccessible systems is inherently flawed; there is a need for institutions to identify and address barriers to accessibility at the root source.

Another theme that remained constant was a desire for additional training, guidance and access to sources of expertise. Training around inclusivity has clearly been shown in the literature to be of value [27], [35], although it is essential it is accompanied by other sources of guidance and expert support [1], [4], [36]. When running this survey with other staff groups, the results showed that 'sustained, ongoing maintenance work, in terms of training, guidance and human support, 'is needed to ensure staff confidence levels can be maintained in relation to inclusive practice' [25].

A final implication of this survey is around culture, attitudes and values. While most attitudes were positive, the open comments allowed ALs the chance to express feelings that they may have felt to be less socially desirable [30]. These emerged as comments expressing attitudes that our research team coded as negative. But the relationship between negative attitudes and stress or burnout is well documented [37], and research suggests that creating spaces within the workplace to discuss attitudes and develop emotional intelligence can be an effective method for both supporting staff and diffusing negative attitudes [38]. This links to other survey comments, which clearly ask the institution to value the staff, their needs and their disabilities, and to act as inclusively towards them as it does to its students. This is not an uncommon sentiment in higher education [39], [40], an industry known for cultivating competition, toxic cultures and stress [41]–[46]. The final implication for the sector, therefore, is to value its staff, their diversity and experiences, and support them so that so that they can support and value their students in turn.

5   CONCLUSIONS

This paper has analysed survey responses from three biennial staff surveys conducted in 2017, 2019 and 2021 with Associate Lecturers at the Open University, UK. These surveys captured views on accessibility and inclusion from frontline teaching staff, and despite limitations in terms of response bias, differences in response numbers, and being conducted in one single institution, they revealed crucial insights into the challenges for inclusive practice. The key implications of these for institutions are:

- University systems, practices, policies and ways of doing things can often present systemic barriers to inclusion and accessibility, and need to be addressed
- Teaching staff may harbour concerns that their knowledge of accessibility and inclusion is not sufficient
- Negative attitudes, possibly caused or exacerbated by stress, may be hidden behind seemingly positive facades
- Teaching staff need accurate, up-to-date knowledge about students' needs and disabilities in order to effectively support them; student records and disclosure processes are crucial to this
- Teaching staff need up-to-date training, guidance and expert support in order to effectively support students and embed inclusivity in practice
- Teaching staff need to be valued and supported; universities need to be as considerate and inclusive towards their staff as they are to their students.

These implications for practice can help institutions move towards a more accessible and inclusive approach to teaching and learning.

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