

# Summary of the Arriving at Thriving Impact Event, held 22nd March 2023

## Speakers

Name	Organisation
The Lord Norton of Louth (CHAIR)	House of Lords
Rt. Hon. the Lord Blunkett	House of Lords
Professor Kathryn Mitchell CBE DL	Vice-Chancellor, University of Derby
Megan Hector	Arriving at Thriving Report Author
Kellie Mote	Subject Specialist, Jisc
Professor Neil Fowler	University of Derby, Associate Provost Learning and Teaching
Professor Deborah Robinson	University of Derby, Professor of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

## Attendees

Name	Organisation
Alex Molasiotis	University of Derby
Alexis Brown	British Council
Alice Speller	NADP
Alyson Hwang	Policy Connect
Ann Kristin Glenster	University of Cambridge
Cindy McAlister	EmployAbility
Claire Gardener	Anthology
Claudia Jaksch	Policy Connect
Craig Kennady	Westminster Commission on Autism and Achievability
David Melville	Policy Connect
Dawn Green	Karten Network
Elly Sample	University of Derby
Emily Darwen	Office for Students
Frankie Walker	Jisc
Gillian Fielding	Anthology
Hannah Hallam	University of Derby
Iliyan Stefanov	London South Bank University
Isabel Appio	Millennium Community Solutions
Janine King	iDiversity Consulting Ltd
Jasmin Adebisi	Policy Connect

Jenna Townend	University of Derby
Jennifer Harley	The University of Law
Jon Wakeford	UPP Group Holdings Limited
Jonathan Shaw	Kent Further Education
Keith McLay	University of Derby
Krupali Parshotam	Pocklington Trust
Larissa Allwork	University of Derby
Leley Morrice	National Network of Assessment Centres
Lisa Brodie	University of the West of England
Mariella Bassano	EmployAbility
Natasha Hardiman	eQuality Solutions
Nick Awde	Bennett and Bloom
Piers Wilkinson	Diversity and Ability
Pilar Cloud	ActionCP
Pravat Bhattacharyya	Pocklington Trust
Rick Bell	British Assistive Technology Association
Robert McLaren	Policy Connect
Rohan Slaughter	University of Dundee / Karten Network
Sandra Booth	CHEAD Council for Higher Education in Art and Design
Sarah Charles	University of Derby
Sarah Richardson	University of Derby
Smita Jamdar	Shakespeare Martineau LLP
Tabassum Ahmad	EmployAbility
Victoria Zeybrandt	Policy Connect
Wykeham Bosworth-Nightingale	University of Derby

## Progress from Arriving at Thriving

1. Panellists and participants discussed the recommendations in the 2020 *Arriving at Thriving* report on improving support for disabled students.
2. The University of Derby shared how they have responded to the reports' recommendations for education providers. Derby reviewed disabled students' access to teaching, learning and assessment. This included the introduction of a curriculum design framework and teaching, learning and assessment framework, which was created in partnership with the University's Union of Students.<sup>i</sup>
3. Vice-Chancellor Professor Kathryn Mitchell emphasised the importance of ensuring that inclusive design and practice are embedded in the curricula. To address the inaccessibility of digital resources, the University offered an online course on the creation of accessible content for users with specific impairments or requirements to over 1,200 staff members.<sup>ii</sup> She also spoke on

implementing change from the top levels of management, with opportunities for leadership and accountability at all levels. This sentiment was echoed amongst speakers and attendees.

4. Professor Deborah Robinson, Professor of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities at the University of Derby, made further recommendations that would aid HE providers with making decisions, such as creating a centralised data dashboard that draws on qualitative data of students' experiences. She stressed the importance of providing a comprehensive, rights-based charter for disabled students that also considers the embeddedness of access and participation plans (which Higher Education providers are required to produce).

Professor Robinson had shared the *Arriving at Thriving* report with her connections to networks of disabled people and activists. She reported their agreement with the changes needed and the fit of the report recommendations. Providing a list of practical actions, she emphasised accountability (e.g., the involvement of the Office for Students in the development of inclusion data dashboards where each HEP would report on its effectiveness at including disabled students drawing on quantitative and qualitative data), and the importance of work placements. She recommended a research and development project focussed on supported internships as integrated elements in postgraduate and undergraduate curricula.

5. Associate Provost Dr. Neil Fowler spoke on the effectiveness of certain initiatives that have taken place at the University of Derby, such as the introduction of an accessibility and digital learning series for students across all programs. These initiatives were further supported by structured staff training, systematic deployment of tools (e.g., Blackboard Ally), and a more accessible suite of library search tools. He stated that these changes have contributed to the elimination of outcome gaps between disabled students and their non-disabled peers, with the cohort of disabled students out-performing non-disabled students by 2 percentage points. Additionally, the University of Derby's score in the AbilityNet Digital Accessibility Maturity Model improved from bronze to gold.

## **Disabled Students and the Cost of Living**

1. The author of the report, Megan Hector, spoke on how the rising cost of living crisis disproportionately affects disabled students. According to a survey of 8,800 students by the Russell Group Student Unions Collective, 33% of the disabled student population have considered leaving university due to costs, in comparison to 18% of students overall.<sup>iii</sup> In addition, 82% of disabled students experienced negative impacts to their mental health because of the cost-of-living crisis. More broadly, the charity Scope has found that disabled people often face higher costs than other groups, which compounds the general increase in the cost-of-living.<sup>iv</sup>

2. The maximum individual Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) has increased by 2.8% to £26,291 in 2023/24. However, this represents a fall in the maximum allowance due to recent high inflation.<sup>v</sup> Similarly, student loans have not kept pace with inflation and The Department for Education (DfE) has recognised that this will impact students from groups “who share protected characteristics and from disadvantaged groups.”<sup>vi</sup>
3. The government has provided additional funding to universities to top up their hardship funds.<sup>vii</sup> However, there does not appear to be data on how universities are using this funding scheme to support disabled students.

## Disabled Students Allowance (DSA)

1. Speakers pointed to the DSA's reliance on a medical model that requires students to provide evidence of disability; they argued that this excludes some disabled students from accessing the Allowance. There was also discussion of the continued administrative barriers to accessing the DSA - something that had been a theme for the *Arriving at Thriving* report, and subsequent reports.<sup>viii</sup>
2. It was reported that many assessment centres – which identify students' support needs – have recently closed or are likely to close shortly. It was argued that this is a consequence of reforms to the way some DSA services are procured by the Student Loans Company.<sup>ix</sup> The loss of assessment centres may cause further difficulties for students wishing to access the DSA. Additionally, the DSA scheme requires highly skilled practitioners to join the sector, and some participants reported that recruitment has been a challenge.

## Accessibility and Inclusion

1. Public sector bodies' accessibility regulations have had a significant impact across higher education, even where a HE provider is not technically a public sector body. This has led to a growing awareness that providing inclusive and accessible digital content is a key component of digital transformation and a high-quality education experience for all students.
2. Kellie Mote, subject specialist at Jisc, noted that digital accessibility awareness has grown at a scale previously not experienced. This is especially pertinent to the rise in blended/remote learning during the pandemic – the heightened risks of being inaccessible has garnered the attention of many university leaders.
3. Furthermore, Jisc reports that there has been good uptake of their professional development offer in the accessibility area. Jisc works with

universities to develop cross-organization strategic approaches to embedding accessibility within the institutional structure. Kellie further reports that Jisc has had increased interest in training that looks at making decisions about assistive technology implementation.

4. Nearly a third of all HE students report actively using captions or transcripts of recordings, and around 22% use features that support spelling or writing.
5. The growing awareness of assistive and accessible technology in higher education can be seen as part of a wider trend in education, that includes, for example, the DfE's pilot of Assistive Technology Training Programme for up to 100 schools, focused on upskilling school staff in "identifying and implementing appropriate assistive technology for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in mainstream schools."<sup>x</sup>

## Access to Work Adjustments Passport

1. In 2021, the Department for Work and Pensions announced a pilot of a 'passport' scheme for disabled university students to ease the transition to employment by reducing the need for repeated health assessments when starting work. The Access to Work scheme gives eligible applicants grants up to £62,900 to cover the cost of specialist equipment needed for their job.<sup>xi</sup>
2. However, speakers suggested that a more holistic approach is needed to support disabled students from school through to university. Although employment is increasing for disabled people across a range of measures, only 52.6 percent of disabled people are in employment, which is 29.9 percentage points lower than non-disabled people.<sup>xii</sup>

## Cross-cutting Themes

1. There should be a mechanism in place to support international students who are not eligible for the DSA. This is especially in consideration of the funding structure of Higher Education and growing awareness of disability on a global scale. There is a significant crossover between accessibility tools and language accessibility, which presents an opportunity to make education resources more accessible to a wider population.
2. As the structure of disability services are often fragmented and decentralised, many disabled students struggle with the administrative barriers when asking for help. Bodies and institutions geared towards disability advocacy should collaborate and reduce the labour of requesting support for the students.
3. Policies aimed at targeting support for disabled students should ensure that adjustments and transitions into work-based learning are available at all points during the journey. The government needs to collaborate with employer partners, so students feel confident enough to engage in opportunities.

4. Multiple speakers noted the importance of a whole-systems approach with senior leadership taking the initiative to embed accessibility into higher education provision. The sector requires more collaborations between organisations such as the National Association of Disability Practitioners (NADP) and the Office for Students (OfS).

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<sup>i</sup> [“Accessibility for disabled students should be embedded across the whole university”](#), *Wonkhe*, April 24, 2023.

<sup>ii</sup> [Ibid.](#)

<sup>iii</sup> [“Cost of Living Report”](#), Russell Group Students’ Union, accessed April 25, 2023.

<sup>iv</sup> “Cost of Living: Impact of Disabled People,” Scope, accessed April 25, 2023.

<sup>v</sup> [“Rising cost of living”](#), House of Commons Library, March 27, 2023.

<sup>vi</sup> [“Higher education student finance for the 2023 to 2024 academic year: Equality Impact Assessment”](#), Department for Education, February 2023.

<sup>vii</sup> [“Press Release: Cost of living boost for students”](#), Department for Education, January 11, 2023.

<sup>viii</sup> Holmes, C., [“Report into Disabled Students’ Allowance \(DSA\)”](#), March 10, 2022.

<sup>ix</sup> [“Procurement reforms launched to improve service for DSA customers”](#), Student Loans Company, 10 March, 2022; Dickinson, J., [“What is going on with procurement reforms for disabled students?”](#), *Wonkhe*, 30 March, 2023.

<sup>x</sup> [“Assistive technology training pilot evaluation”](#), Department for Education, June 30, 2022.

<sup>xi</sup> [“Press release: New government ‘passport’ to help disabled graduates get in to employment”](#), Department of Work and Pensions, 3 December, 2021.

<sup>xii</sup> [“Official Statistics: Employment of disabled people 2022”](#), Department for Work and Pensions, January 26, 2023.