



Transforming Access  
and Student Outcomes  
in Higher Education



**Project report**

# Supporting disabled students:

## Mapping reasonable adjustments and transition support

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# 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Disabled students represent a significant proportion of the higher education (HE) population. In 2023 the number of accepted UK applicants who had disclosed a disability increased by approximately 34% compared to 2022.<sup>1</sup> Disaggregated by level of study, approximately 14% of research postgraduates and 10% of taught postgraduate UK students disclosed a disability (Advance HE, 2023). Effective support to enable disability inclusion is therefore more vital than ever.

The report [What works to reduce equality gaps for disabled students](#) published by the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) in 2023 summarises the evidence on the effectiveness of interventions to address inequalities in HE experienced by disabled students in the UK. The report found that, despite the legal requirements and funding, there is little research on what support is effective and no clear overview of what reasonable adjustments are currently in place.

To address this gap TASO commissioned Advance HE to map the kinds of support available in two key areas: transition support and reasonable adjustments.

The research adopted a multi-pronged mixed-methods approach, including:

- A desk-based review of English higher education providers' (HEPs) current provision, as communicated publicly on their websites.
- A survey open to all HEP staff with a responsibility for designing and implementing transition support and/or reasonable adjustments.
- Focus groups with disabled students across different levels of study, to investigate their perceptions and experiences of transition support and reasonable adjustments.
- A combination of focus groups and interviews with HEP staff identified from the survey, exploring any novel or interesting approaches to transition support and reasonable adjustments.

The findings build on TASO's previous report by examining the experiences of a broad range of disabled students and HEP staff to identify successes and challenges in the implementation of transition support and reasonable adjustments. In particular, the research highlights the frequency with which current approaches are applied, including the evaluation methods most commonly used to monitor their effectiveness.

## Transition support: key themes

- **Only 12% of disabled students currently registered with disability services have attended transition support programmes at their HEP:** This relatively low reach could be associated with various factors, namely, lack of early engagement with prospective disabled students, a lack of robust evaluation and monitoring data that would paint a more accurate picture of attendance, as well as limited resources to deliver widespread programmes.
- **Transition support by type of disability:** Targeted transition support for autistic students was one of the most prevalent approaches offered by HEPs. Open days, campus visits, early induction online information and advice sessions were other frequent approaches available to all disabled students.
- **Early familiarisation with higher education is a key objective of transition support:** Transition support programmes that take place in spring/summer are beneficial to prospective disabled students as they enable students to familiarise themselves with the campus and receive one-to-one support at a quieter time, without being surrounded by the entire student body.
- **The importance of early engagement with disabled students:** Transition support programmes, particularly those that take place over the spring/summer ahead of the academic term, rely on early engagement with prospective disabled students to ensure they can attend. Encouraging the early disclosure of disabilities is crucial, especially among students from under-represented backgrounds or at differing levels of study. External initiatives can play a role here, such as greater collaboration with schools, parents and supporters, as well as the provision of clear and accessible information on HEP webpages.

1 See: [UCAS Undergraduate end of cycle data resources 2023 | Undergraduate | UCAS](#)

- **Timing of transition support during induction week:** Disabled students shared the difficulties they encountered in engaging in transition support programmes during all-student induction weeks, due to the volume of activities they were required to attend. This experience can be overwhelming when they first arrive at university and the timing of these programmes should, therefore, be carefully considered.
- **The provision of information, advice and guidance as a key component of transition support:** Disabled students entering higher education, whether at an undergraduate or postgraduate level, are often unaware of the support available to them or how to access it. The provision of information, advice and guidance signposting appropriate support should be considered a vital component of transition support.
- **Implementation of transition support can be resource-intensive:** Transition support for disabled students requires collaboration across the provider, including the Students' Union and widening participation team if it is to deliver effective and well-resourced approaches. Increased collaboration with schools, parents and supporters would also help to bridge the gap between school and higher education, highlighting the differences in terminology and sources of available funding. There is evidence to suggest that small and/or specialist providers, that is, providers with fewer than 10,000 students, may be better equipped to provide resource-intensive transition support approaches, such as campus buddy schemes.
- **Transition support as a meaningful, longer-term approach to supporting disabled students throughout higher education:** Transition support is often delivered as a standalone one-off programme or event, despite disabled students' requests for support to continue into the academic year. Where the sector can navigate and overcome resourcing issues, transition support that extends into the academic year and is relevant to other parts of the student journey will help to build a sense of community.
- **Evidence of the effectiveness of transition support is slowly emerging, but evaluation approaches are in their infancy:** While the TASO 'What works' report (TASO, 2023) highlights a need for more – and more robust – evaluation of interventions to address inequalities facing disabled students in higher education (HE), the evaluation of transition support is currently not widespread. Initial reports from individual HEPs suggest that transition

support has contributed to an increase in disabled students seeking formal support and remaining on their courses, but this needs further and more rigorous evaluation, including exploring outcomes for individual groups and formally identifying causal impact.

## Reasonable adjustments: key themes

- **An average of 81% of students currently registered with disability services receive reasonable adjustments:** A wide range of reasonable adjustments is available to disabled students, as advertised on HEP webpages. These generally fall into the categories of teaching and learning, assessment and physical access, as well as specialised or more complex adjustments which are likely to be agreed on an individual basis depending on the student's requirements.
- **While HEPs are meeting their legal responsibility to provide reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act 2010, profound challenges remain in accessing these:** While reasonable adjustments provided as standard are often quicker to implement, disabled students report significant challenges related to receiving timely reasonable adjustments. Sometimes, reasonable adjustments are not implemented for up to a year after a student commences their studies. This can be due to a fragmented approach across the provider, as well as outdated information-sharing systems, requiring disabled students to repeatedly share their information.
- **The role of individual members of staff as a single point of contact was cited by disabled students as progressing their support:** Disabled students commend the proactive part played by individual HEP staff members, including disability services staff and academics, in ensuring that reasonable adjustments are in place. However, this is not consistent across the provider.
- **Inclusive practice is the eventual aim of most HEPs, ensuring that resources in disability services are mostly protected for the implementation of specialist or more complex reasonable adjustments at an individual level:** Interest in embedding Universal Design for Learning is increasing but uptake is slow overall. Many HEP staff believe that a more joined-up approach across the provider, and a roll-out of training, would accelerate this process. Inclusive learning practices would also help progress HEPs' anticipatory duty, enabling disabled students (including those without a diagnosis or waiting for

an assessment) to participate fully in their course of study without facing barriers. This approach needs thorough evaluation as part of any roll-out.

- **There are gaps in support, both funded and provided as standard, for individual groups of disabled students, such as international students or students with unseen disabilities:** Disabled students are required to navigate a variety of funding streams to access reasonable adjustments and often face shortfalls. While some HEPs have devised ways to bring funding in-house, they are the minority.

- **Similar to the evaluation of transition support, approaches to the evaluation of reasonable adjustments are often ad-hoc or informal:** Few HEPs disaggregate monitoring data on reasonable adjustments; thus, there is overall little understanding of their impact on inclusion for individual groups. HEP staff also find it difficult to isolate the impact of reasonable adjustments on student outcomes. Support via evaluation frameworks and Theories of Change would, therefore, be beneficial.



## 2. INTRODUCTION

TASO commissioned Advance HE to map the kinds of transition support and reasonable adjustments used in the HE sector for disabled students and to develop an understanding of the existing evidence that HEPs hold on the effectiveness of this support. This work builds on previous research, *What works to reduce equality gaps for disabled students* (TASO, 2023), which summarises the evidence on the effectiveness of a range of interventions to address inequalities in HE for disabled students in the UK.

Part of the report focussed on transition support and reasonable adjustments. Despite the legal responsibilities imposed by the Equality Act 2010 and the funding available from, for example, the Disabled Student Premium, the findings showed little evidence on which forms of transition support and reasonable adjustments are commonly used in English HEPs and whether they have the intended impact on disabled students' outcomes and experiences.

The purpose of this research was, therefore, to undertake a sector engagement exercise to investigate how widely and effectively transition support and reasonable adjustments are currently used for disabled students in English HE, enabling us to better understand:

- How and at what stage in the student journey transition support is provided?
- Which reasonable adjustments are most common?
- How many students benefit from transition support and reasonable adjustments?
- How this support is most effectively delivered, including the successes and challenges in different contexts.
- How far disabled students feel that this support enables their equal participation and inclusion in HE?

The findings are intended to inform TASO's future work, including the development of a blueprint for a model of evidence-based transition support offering scalability and adaptability across the HE sector, to provide more consistent support for disabled students.

Crucially, this research engaged both HEP staff and disabled students in multiple ways to gain insight into their perceptions of designing, delivering and benefiting from transition support and reasonable adjustments.

2 See: <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/latest/insights-and-analysis/higher-education-numbers>

3 See: <https://www.ucas.com/explore/search/providers?query=>

4 See: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/support/providers/provider-affiliations>

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### Overview

The research adopted a multi-method approach to map the kinds of transition support and reasonable adjustments used across the HE sector in England. This included:

- A desk-based review of English HEPs' current provision, as communicated publicly on their websites.
- A survey of HEP staff who have responsibility for designing and implementing transition support and/or reasonable adjustments.
- Focus groups with disabled students, investigating their perceptions and experiences of transition support and reasonable adjustments.
- A combination of focus groups and interviews with staff identified from the survey, exploring novel or interesting approaches to transition support and reasonable adjustments.

Ethical approval for this methodology, as well as the processes and procedures in place to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the data collected, was obtained from Advance HE's internal ethics review committee prior to the research commencing.

### Desk-based review of current provision

The desk-based review involved a search of the current provision offered by 88 English HEPs. While the review could not be exhaustive (Universities UK states that 285 UK HEPs returned data to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) in 2021–22),<sup>2</sup> we aimed to include HEPs across a spread of English geographical regions. We then used UCAS's<sup>3</sup> universities and colleges search and metadata from HESA (including provider affiliations)<sup>4</sup> to target a randomised mix of the following groups:

- Russell Group universities
- Post-1992 universities
- Small and specialist providers
- Further education (FE) providers.

The review looked specifically at disability services webpages, as well as any publicly available policies relating to transition support or reasonable adjustments. A summary of the disability support identified was then transcribed into an Excel document designed to detect emerging themes, and used to inform the content of the staff survey. A more detailed description of the desk-based review sample is included in Appendix A.

## Survey of HEP staff

The survey was designed to capture responses from HEP staff who have a responsibility for designing and implementing transition support and reasonable adjustments for disabled students. Most questions were derived from the desk-based review and intended to capture a more accurate picture of the frequency of the identified approaches across a range of providers. The survey took approximately 15–20 minutes to complete and included questions on the following topics:

- Common approaches to transition support and their uptake
- Common approaches to reasonable adjustments and their uptake
- Evidence for the effectiveness of transition support and reasonable adjustments.

Respondents were initially recruited via disability services' email addresses found in the desk-based review, with the intention of adopting a snowball sampling strategy in which disability services staff would be asked to identify an appropriate member of staff to complete the survey.

Social media was used to further communicate and promote the survey, and Advance HE approached its existing networks and individual contacts to boost responses. Therefore, the survey ultimately drew on a convenience sample, based on the HEPs which had the capacity to respond; in many cases, staff within an HEP worked together to submit a combined response. The proportion of HEPs that responded across different affiliations and mission groups reflected the spread in the desk-based review.

The survey was live for 25 days and yielded a final sample of 37 responses representing 32 unique HEPs. A detailed description of the sample is presented in Appendix A.

## Focus groups with disabled students

While we expected the survey results to be enlightening concerning the frequency of transition support and reasonable adjustments, we also conducted a series of semi-structured focus groups with disabled students to shed light on their lived experiences and perceptions of receiving such support. Specifically, the focus groups explored:

- The transition support and reasonable adjustments used by disabled students and at what point in their HE journey these had been offered.
- Perceptions and experiences of receiving transition support or reasonable adjustments and their effectiveness.
- Which transition support and reasonable adjustments are seen to be working well, what short- or longer-term impact they are having and where there is room for improvement.

Focus group participants were recruited via the disabled student panels supplied by Savanta.<sup>5</sup> The use of a panel ensured that participants were already briefed on the possibility of participating in research. To ensure diversity within the groups, participants were asked to complete a short eligibility survey to enable us to bring together a representative sample according to the following criteria:

- Whether students shared their disability pre-entry or became aware of it post-entry
- Level of study
- Impairment type
- Ethnicity
- Gender

A total of 26 students were recruited to take part in three focus groups which were 45–60 minutes long and recorded on Microsoft Teams for accuracy. Each session began with a briefing on the research and a reminder of our data protection and storage policies and participants' right to withdraw. The participants were compensated with a £40 voucher for their time. A detailed description of the sample is presented in Appendix A.

<sup>5</sup> Savanta is a data, market research and advisory company. The YouthSight panel, now part of Savanta, is a panel of 150,000 13–30 year olds.

## Interviews and focus groups with HEP staff

The final phase of the research used a purposive sampling strategy to follow up with any HEP providers who had detailed a novel approach to either transition support or reasonable adjustments in the desk-based review or the HEP staff survey. Specifically, the focus group format was used to bring together a range of HEPs who were designing and implementing transition support and/or reasonable adjustments in a similar way. This included:

- One focus group on novel transition support approaches, focussing on successes, challenges and evaluation approaches.
- One focus group on novel support approaches in small and/or specialist HEPs focussing on successes, challenges and evaluation approaches.

In addition to the focus groups, six in-depth interviews were conducted with HEP staff members. Both interviews and focus groups were 45–60 minutes in length and recorded on Microsoft Teams for accuracy of transcription. Each session began with a briefing on the research and a reminder of our data protection and storage policies and the participants' right to withdraw. In total, 16 participants took part in this phase of the research, representing 11 unique HEPs. There was a slightly higher proportion of small and/or specialist HEPs in this phase, due to the inclusion of a focus group focussed on their experiences of delivering support. A detailed description of the sample is presented in Appendix A.





## Limitations

The practice of research related to protected characteristics such as disability is not always value-neutral and, as with other organisations, Advance HE's work in this area will invite a degree of subjectivity and bias. Advance HE encourages its researchers to reflect on the potential biases they may bring to projects and to put measures in place, for example, a standardised discussion guide, to ensure they do not impact upon the topic under investigation.

We also recognise that our research cannot represent the perceptions and experiences of all HEP staff and disabled students across the sector. In certain phases of the research, such as the HEP staff survey, we had intended to use a snowball sampling strategy to boost responses but the outcome more closely represented a convenience sample, based on existing networks and contacts and the capacity of individual HEPs to complete the survey. It is therefore important to note that the central themes identified in the survey are based on a relatively small sample.

## 4. ANALYTICAL APPROACH

### Qualitative data analysis

Recordings of the in-depth interviews and focus groups with HEP staff and disabled students were professionally transcribed for qualitative analysis, and any information that might identify the individual or organisation was removed. Together with the open-ended responses from the staff survey, the qualitative data was analysed using an inductive thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Inductive thematic analysis is widely used and involves identifying patterns and themes that emerge from the data without any prior expectation of its contents, rather than starting with a preconceived theoretical framework. This approach is particularly useful for exploratory research questions. The process of inductive thematic analysis involves the following steps:

1. Data familiarisation: read and become familiar with the data.
2. Coding: generate codes into potential themes, identifying interesting features, patterns or ideas in the data.

3. Reviewing and refining themes: examine the themes and refine or reorganise as necessary based on the data and the research questions.
4. Writing up the results: write up the results of the analysis, including illustrative quotations or examples from the data.

Overall, inductive thematic analysis is a flexible and iterative process that allows researchers to remain open to the data and generate new insights. For this research, following the collection of data from each relevant phase, Advance HE's research team analysed and synthesised the findings to highlight commonalities and emerging themes. The process was completed using Atlas.ti software to record the frequency of each coded theme and extract illustrative quotations. The themes identified were then triangulated with the findings of the quantitative survey and desk-based review to produce a holistic overview of the support available to disabled students.

### Quantitative data analysis

All quantitative data from the HEP staff survey was cleaned and analysed using Microsoft Excel to produce descriptive statistics (e.g. frequencies, percentages, average scores) on the most frequently occurring types of transition support and reasonable adjustment. Survey questions relating to the number of students in receipt of support were converted to numeric tables and linked with Advance HE internal HESA student records to validate responses and fill any information gaps.

Sub-group analysis was also conducted to assess any differences in responses based on the size of the HEP, with a distinction made between small and/or specialist HEPs (fewer than 10,000 total students) and larger HEPs (more than 10,000 students). Any differences between small and/or specialist HEPs and larger HEPs have been noted in the body of this report.

It should be noted that HEP staff survey respondents from specialist providers or providers with fewer than 10,000 students were combined for analysis and labelled as small and/or specialist. There was significant overlap, with six of the seven specialist providers also classed as small. Thus, in total, 11 small and/or specialist HEPs participated.

## 5. FINDINGS

This section of the report outlines the findings from the four key strands of research:

- A desk-based review of English HEP's current provision, as communicated publicly on their websites.
- A survey of HEP staff who have responsibility for designing and implementing transition support and/or reasonable adjustments.
- Focus groups with disabled students which investigated their perceptions and experiences of transition support and reasonable adjustments.
- A mix of focus groups and interviews with staff identified from the survey, exploring novel or interesting approaches to transition support and reasonable adjustments.

Primary data arising from the HEP staff survey and the focus groups with disabled students was discussed in the round and is categorised into the following sub-sections:

- **Common approaches:** outlining the most prevalent approaches to transition support and reasonable adjustments, as well as those less frequently occurring.
- **Implementation – successes and challenges:** outlining the successes and challenges experienced by HEP staff in implementing and embedding support for disabled students.
- **Evaluation of effectiveness:** an overview of the evaluation methods used by HEPs to monitor the effectiveness of their approaches.
- **Disabled student experiences:** a summary of the feedback shared in the student focus groups, including students' perceptions and experiences
- **Suggested improvements:** suggestions arising from both the HEP staff and the focus groups with disabled students on ways to improve support.

Finally, this section of the report also contains a sub-section on novel approaches to transition support and reasonable adjustments, as shared in the exploratory focus groups and interviews with HEP staff.

### Desk-based review

The desk-based review highlighted a lack of uniformity in the labelling of disability services across the sector. In some cases, names such as 'Disability and Dyslexia Service' seemed in part to be driven by pragmatic factors, with webpages describing an existing specialism within the team, a specific targeted support initiative or a source of funding provided by the HEP. Departments offering multiple services often adopted umbrella terminology such as 'accessibility' and 'inclusion' (e.g. Accessibility and Inclusive Learning team) to holistically capture the range of initiatives they were seeking to implement. A total of 12 HEPs (14% of the total sample) used the word 'inclusion' within their disability services name. In contrast, a total of nine HEPs (10% of the total sample) combined their services with mental health and/or wellbeing, with the words 'mental health', 'wellbeing' or 'welfare' within the name of their disability services.

Given also that language around disability varies across contexts in the UK, with schools using Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) terminology, this inconsistency in the naming of services at the HE level may be increasing delays in putting support in place (Department for Education, 2022).

The range of reasonable adjustments outlined on an HEP webpage varied widely, and some webpages were more difficult to find than others. HEPs were most likely to list commonly available reasonable adjustments or those provided as part of their anticipatory duty (Equality Challenge Unit, 2010). This typically included signposting that disability services design many reasonable adjustments on an individual basis, working with the student and their relevant department to identify and implement the most appropriate accommodation. This extended to highly specialised or complex reasonable adjustments. Reasonable adjustments for students with mental health conditions were also likely to be accompanied by additional signposting to the HEP's counselling or mentoring services.

While it appeared less widespread practice among the sample to detail an overview of the types of transition support available to prospective disabled

students on the relevant webpages, some individual HEPs provided information on specific events or programmes. This included initiatives such as tailored workshops, summer schools or early induction, as well as events or programmes targeted at specific groups of disabled students, such as autistic students. In many cases, the discussion around transition on the HEP's webpages appeared to focus on the importance of the student sharing their disability with disability services as soon as practically possible.

## Transition support

### Common approaches

The following section outlines the findings from the HEP staff survey on the prevalence of transition support approaches. To provide context, the respondents were first asked to estimate the number of disabled students currently registered with disability services at their provider (Table 1). We can infer from the survey data that the proportion of students registered with disability services at English HEPs (17%) is what we might expect in the wider sector. Advance HE's Equality in Higher Education Students Statistical Report (2023) states that 16% of students in England have declared a disability.

**Table 1: Proportion of students currently registered with disability services in English HE**

Provider type	Proportion of disabled students
All HEPs	17%
Small and/or specialist HEPs	24%
Larger HEPs	15%

Respondents were then asked to estimate the number of disabled students currently registered for transition support at their provider. For the purposes of this research, 'transition support' approaches were limited to those that aimed to support disabled students transition into HE (TASO, 2023). This generally included:

- Working in partnership with multiple stakeholders (e.g. parents, supporters, schools, colleges)
- Providing explicit support for the transition into a new environment
- Engaging students in pre-HE skills development
- Helping students familiarise themselves with courses and places
- Self-advocacy skills development.

Table 2 summarises the responses to this question, outlining the number of disabled students receiving transition support as a proportion of the total number of students currently registered with disability services at each HEP. A mean total of 12% of disabled students who were registered with disability services were also registered for transition support programmes. It is worth noting that a higher proportion of disabled students at small and specialist providers were registered for transition support programmes (22%) than at larger providers (8%). Figure 1 outlines the distribution of the percentage of disabled students receiving transition support across the sample.

**Table 2: Proportion of disabled students benefiting from transition support in English HE**

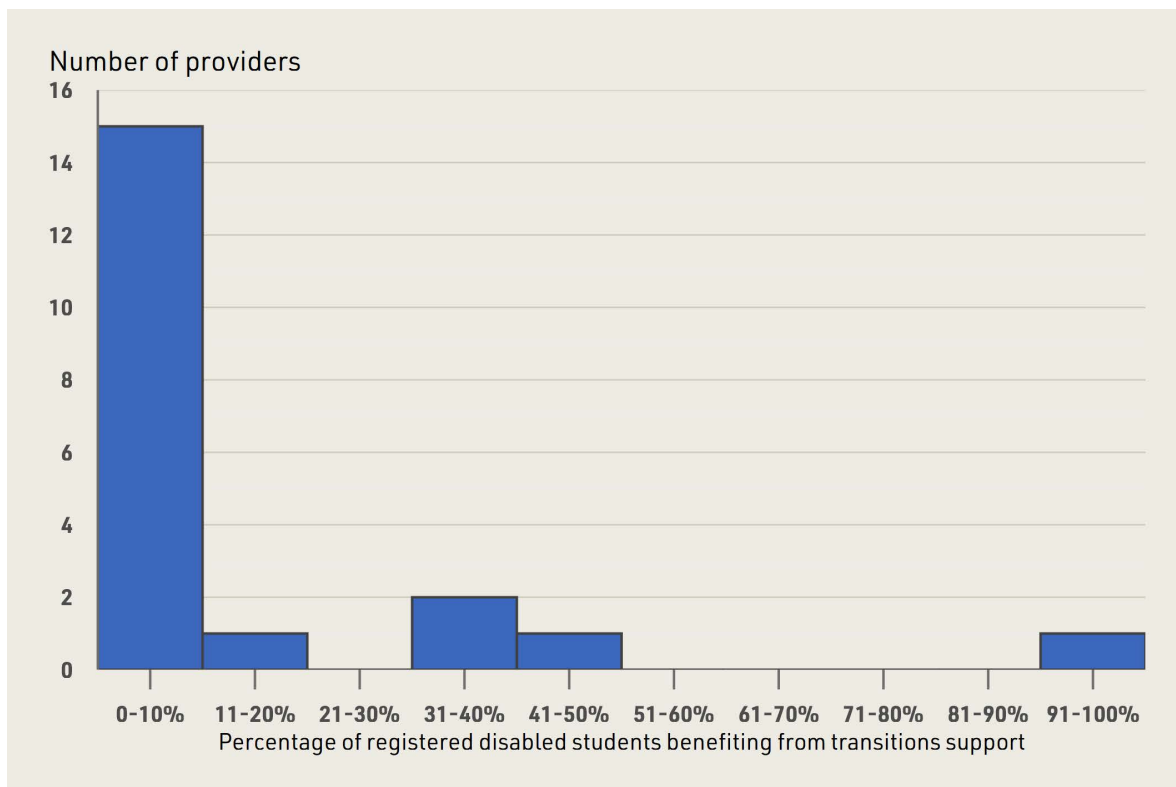
Provider type	Proportion of disabled students
All HEPs	12%
Small and/or specialist HEPs	22%
Larger HEPs	8%



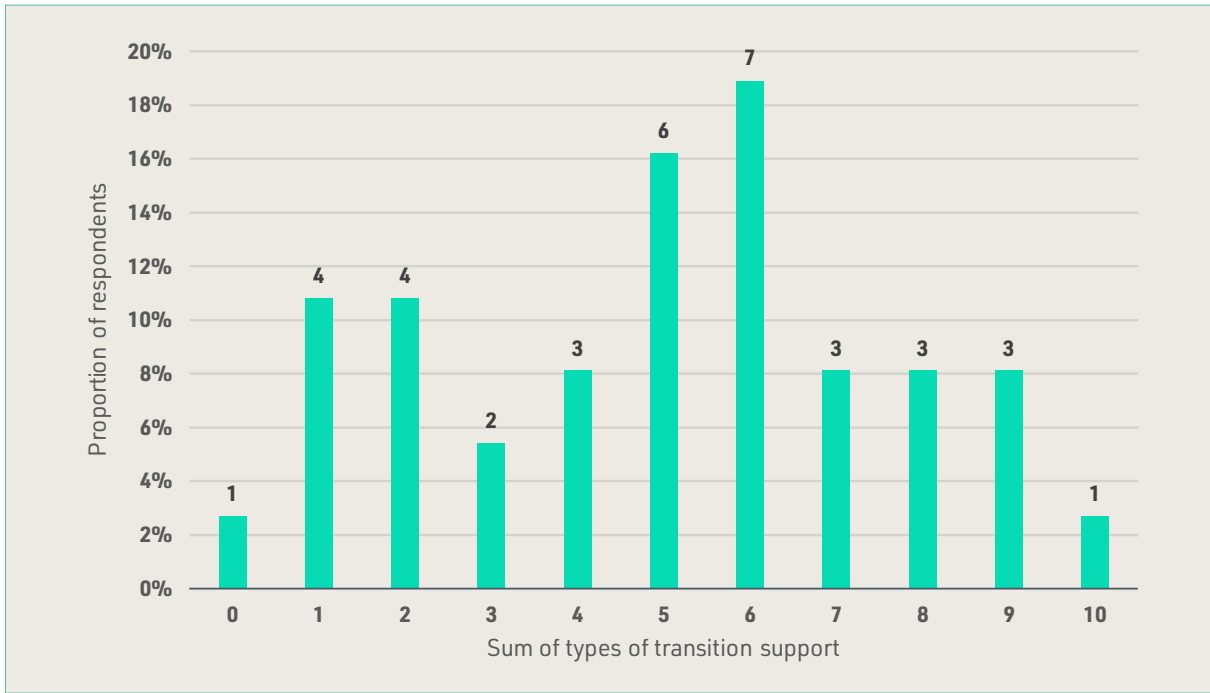
The respondents were then asked to indicate the kinds of transition support available at their provider from the 13 options provided. Respondents were also invited to outline any additional sources of support (including novel approaches) offered through a free-text response option, detailed in the commentary below.

Figure 2 highlights the number of transition support approaches offered by each HEP. Other than one HEP, which had a newly established disability services department, all respondents stated that their HEP offered at least one type of transition support to disabled students. Seven respondents (19%) offered six different types of transition support, and six respondents (16%) offered five different types of transition support. On the other side of the scale, one institution (3%) offered 10 types of transition support.

**Figure 1: Percentage of registered disabled students benefiting from transition support**



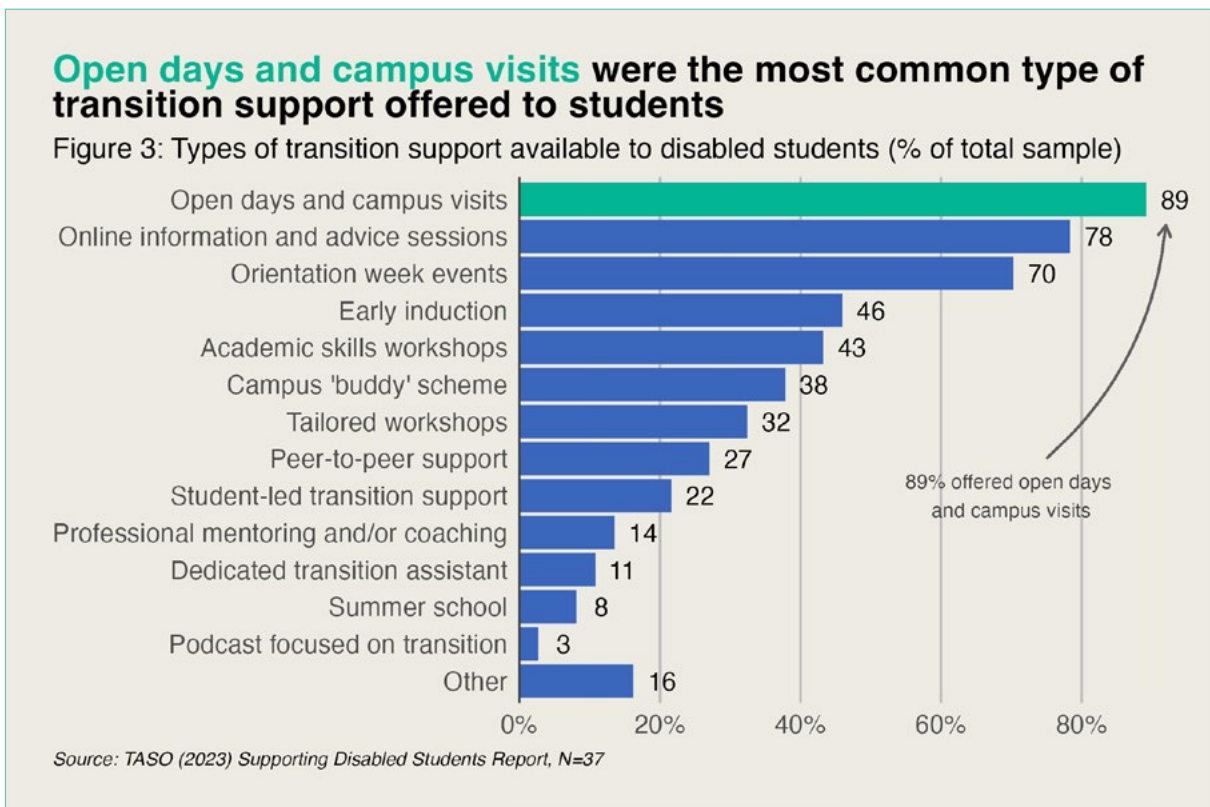
**Figure 2: Sum of types of transition support offered by proportion and number of respondents**



As outlined in Figure 3, the types of transition support most frequently offered to students were open days and campus visits (89%), followed by online information and advice sessions (78%), and orientation week events (70%). A total of three HEPs ran summer schools (8%). Notably, when

disaggregated by provider type, small and specialist providers were more likely than larger HEPs to provide approaches perceived as 'resource-intensive' (see section on 'Implementation: successes and challenges'), such as campus buddy schemes (44% vs 27%) and peer-to-peer support (36% vs 9%).

**Figure 3: Types of transition support available to disabled students**



According to most survey respondents, familiarisation with the university was the crucial aim of transition support, supporting disabled students to “visualise what it feels like ahead of arriving”.

*“We host an event where targeted applicants are contacted to attend an event pre-induction. The aim of this is an extra familiarisation event to support the applicants ahead of enrolment week.”*

[Survey respondent]

To support early familiarisation, several respondents also mentioned that their provider started transition support for disabled students over the summer, or even as early as spring, to ensure that the campus was quieter and to provide space to make one-to-one introductions. In comparison, transition events or programmes for disabled students that took place during enrolment week were often distinct from all-student transition support.

A total of 16 respondents gave details of targeted transition programmes intended to support specific groups of disabled students in their free-text responses. This included separate transition programmes or events for autistic students or students with mental health conditions, and orientation and mobility programmes for blind students. Activities for autistic students often included one-to-one meetings, meeting academic staff before the start of term, familiarisation with the campus and computer systems, and developing a wide set of independent study and independent living skills:

*“We offer transitional events and induction events for students with autism and/or social/communication conditions separately to our main disability induction events.”*

[Survey respondent]

*“We target students declaring a mental health condition, socio-communication difference or care leavers to attend our specific transition event.”*

[Survey respondent]

## Implementation: successes and challenges

The following section outlines some of the successes and challenges related to implementing transition support for disabled students, as cited by respondents to the HEP staff survey.

Interestingly, despite the recognised benefits of a long-term, integrated induction approach (Carroll & Ryan, 2007), many respondents appeared not to heed warnings against delivering standalone support (QAA, 2015). Very few respondents reported that their transition support for disabled students extended into the academic year or affected other parts of the student experience. These included respondents from a small and/or specialist HEP, who noted the importance of maintaining contact at regular touchpoints with the original cohort across the academic year, as it ‘helped with building a social community’.

Several respondents reflected on the lack of resources and funding available for the effective implementation of transition support, particularly at larger HEPs. This may be determined, in part, by the unequal ratio of disability advisers to disabled students at larger HEPs (with one adviser sometimes supporting over 750 disabled students) (Borkin, 2023). Two respondents from small and/or specialist HEPs commented that this was less of an issue for them, possibly because they had a smaller total student cohort. This could also be why small and/or specialist HEPs were more likely to offer more resource-intensive or longer-term programmes, such as campus buddy schemes.

*“There is incredibly limited capacity within disability services to provide packages of transition support. As such, what is provided is either universal or ad-hoc.”*

[Survey respondent]

*“Transition activities are planned with specific disabled students in mind, [this is] easier as we have a small cohort.”*

[Survey respondent]

*“We are small enough to make bespoke transition support based on student need.”*

[Survey respondent]

While in many cases approaches to transition support were designed and implemented by disability services, a few respondents also noted that they benefitted from working in partnership with other departments, such as their Student Union or widening participation teams, for support with resources and to deliver a “holistic transition support package”. One respondent also mentioned that they would like to establish a closer partnership with schools.

A final challenge raised by respondents was that providers were increasingly unable to support the growing number of disabled students (particularly autistic students) requiring transition support. Compounding this, although most disabled students shared their disability on their UCAS application, many only disclosed a disability “two to three weeks before arrival” or became disabled/were assessed while at university. Therefore, we can assume that the ability to engage with prospective disabled students within the desired timeframe was impeded. This may disproportionately affect students with complex requirements or those from lower socio-economic backgrounds who are less likely to share their disability with their provider (UCAS, 2022).

*“It is not uncommon for students with quite complex needs to not have shared sufficient information about their support needs or have applied for Disabled Students’ Allowance before they start.”*

[Survey respondent]

### **Evaluation of effectiveness**

This final section outlines the evaluation approaches that HEPs have taken to monitor the impact of the transition support they offer to disabled students. According to the survey respondents, the internal evaluation of transition support has so far yielded positive results overall. Less formal and anecdotal feedback gathered by respondents suggests that

disabled students who accepted transition support felt less anxious about starting university. More formal evaluation evidenced that transition support led to an increase in early registrations with disability support services and a reduced requirement for ongoing support.

A few respondents also noted that their attendance data showed that growing numbers of disabled students were taking part in transition support events or programmes at their provider.

*“Short term – some of those who have attended our transition events have cancelled previously arranged on-campus support prior to enrolment due to being comfortable attending alone.”*

[Survey respondent]

*“We are aware that our transition events have doubled in size for attendees each time we have done these.”*

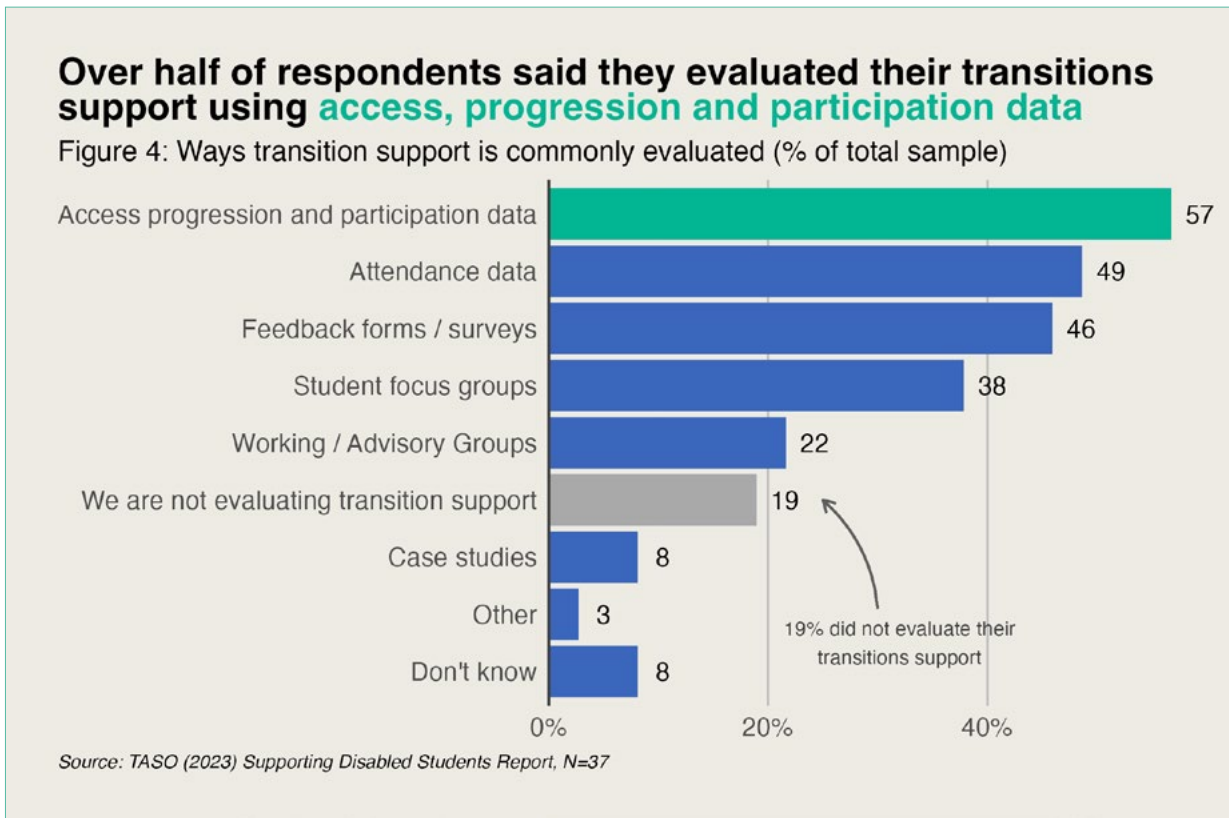
[Survey respondent]

While a few respondents elaborated further on their approaches to the evaluation of transition support, these were often in their infancy and evidence was, therefore, still emerging. Several mentioned that they would like to be able to conduct evaluation more effectively, and to use existing evaluation frameworks to support their approaches. Figure 4 shows that a total of seven survey respondents (19%) did not evaluate their transition support, while over half (57%) said they evaluated their transition support using access, progression and outcomes data, although this is unlikely to be Type 3 evidence.<sup>6</sup>

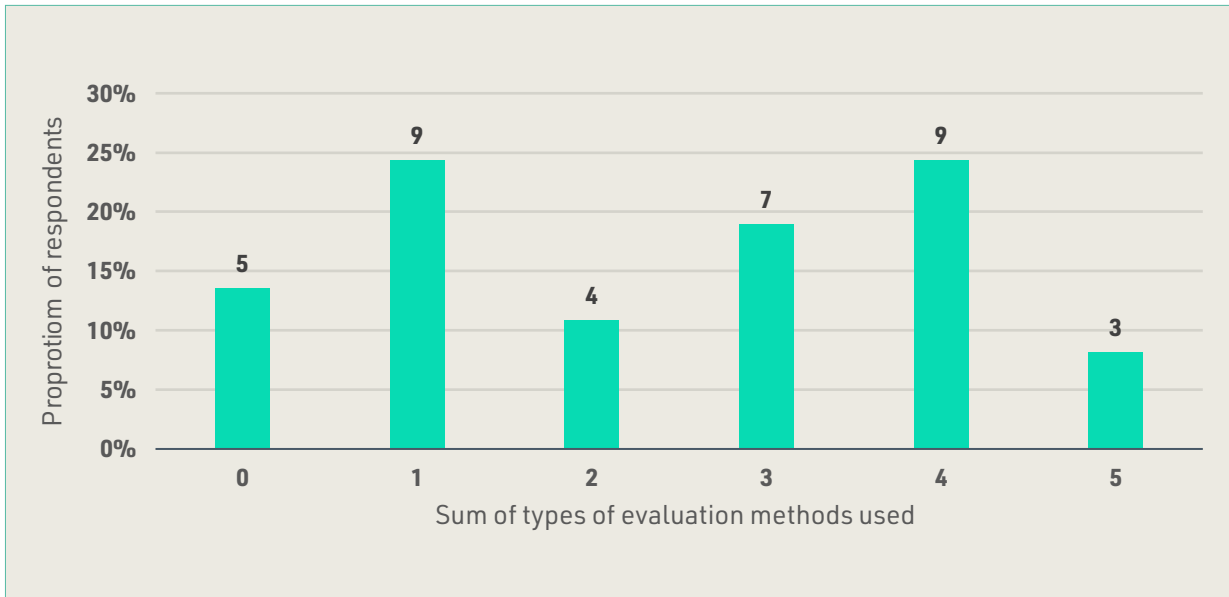
In total (as outlined in Figure 5), nine providers (24%) evaluated transition support using just one method, and a further nine providers (24%) used four different methods. No providers used more than five evaluation methods.

<sup>6</sup> Type 3 evidence (known as causal evidence) focuses on ‘causal impact’ which means it tells us whether an activity causes a difference in outcomes. See <https://taso.org.uk/evidence/toolkit/what-is-causal-evidence/>

**Figure 4: Ways in which transition support is commonly evaluated**



**Figure 5: Sum of types of evaluation method used, by proportion and number of respondents**



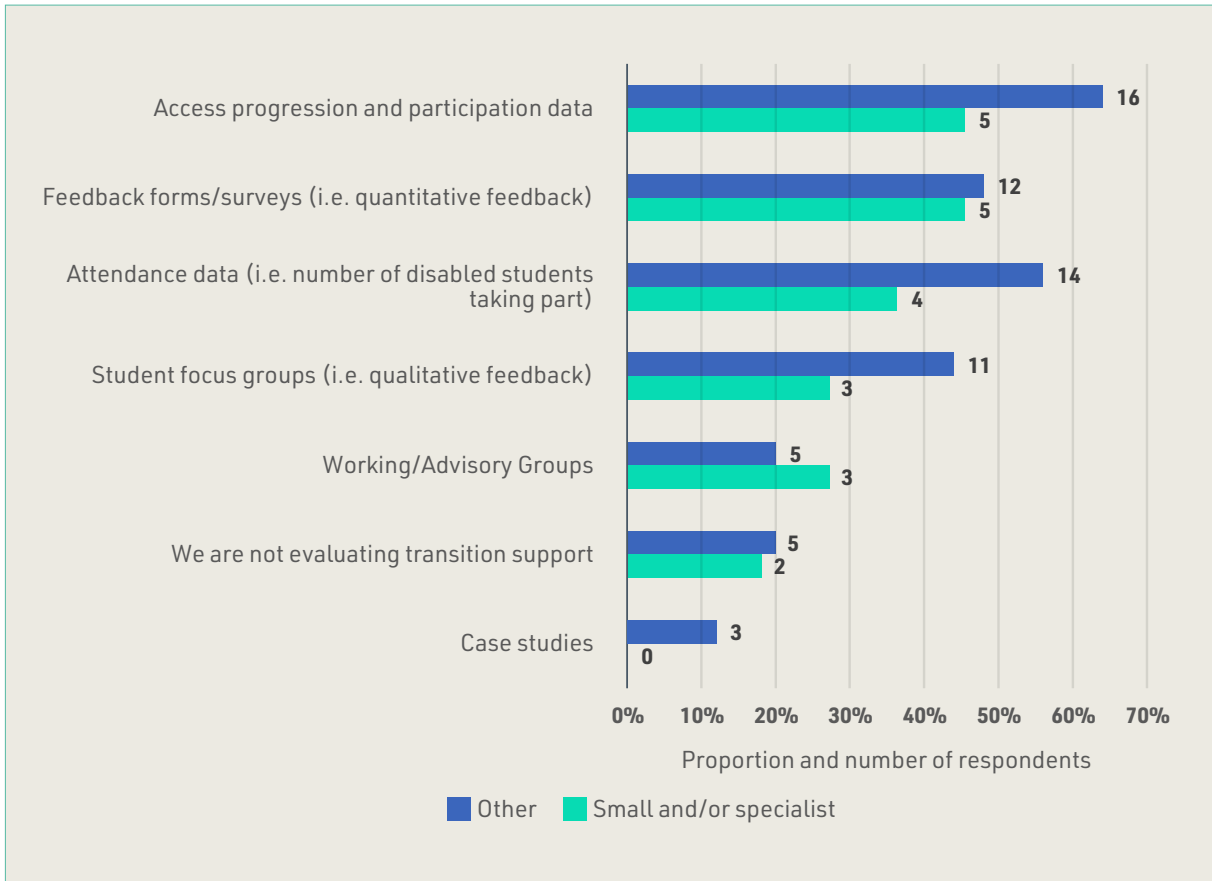
Evaluation activity around transition support occurred less frequently within smaller and/or specialist providers (Figure 6).

Finally, the survey responses suggested that HEP staff members did not regularly disaggregate data used to monitor disabled students' access to transition

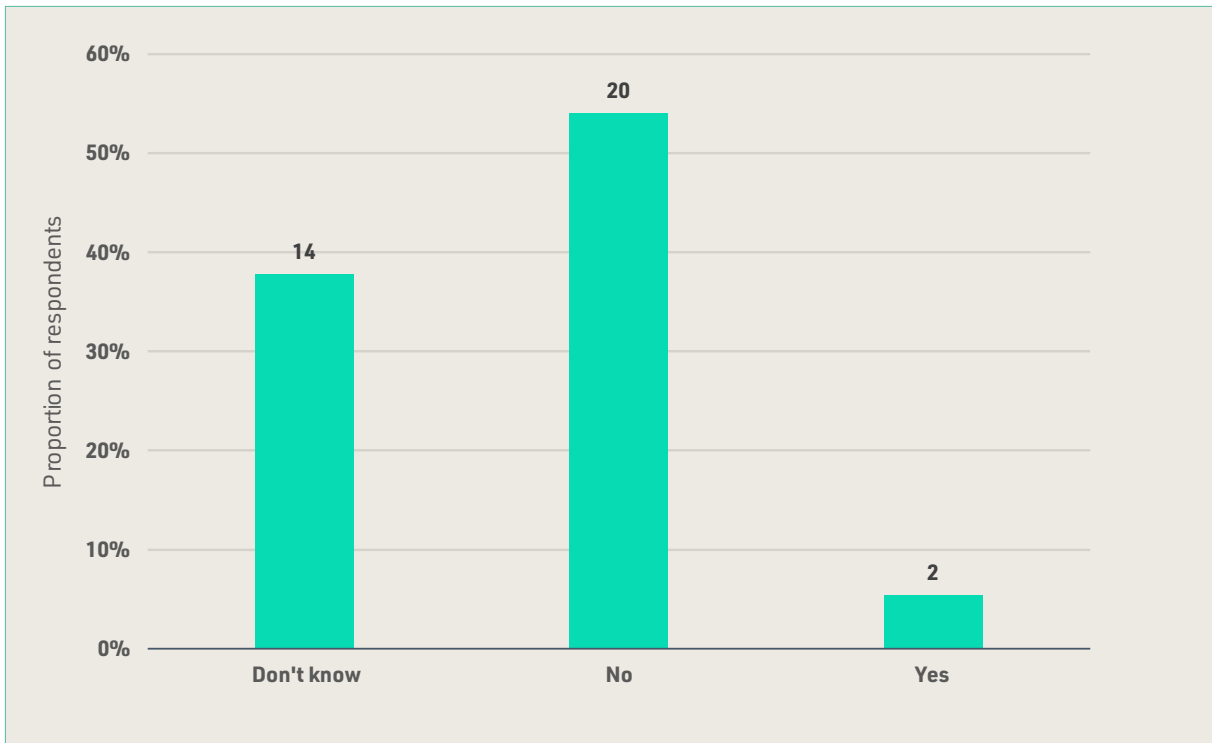
support by disability or any other characteristics, with Figure 7 showing that only two respondents answered this question positively while one did not respond. Overall, this may suggest that HEPs are not currently developing a detailed understanding of the types of transition support that are working for different groups of disabled students.



**Figure 6: Ways in which transition support is evaluated at small and/or specialist HEPs versus larger HEPs**



**Figure 7: Proportion and number of respondents who said their provider disaggregated data collection around transition support**



## Disabled student experiences

The following section summarises the responses from disabled students regarding their perceptions and experiences of receiving transition support, as discussed in the student focus groups. The themes most frequently mentioned by disabled students are outlined below:

- Transition support often included meetings with the disability team, including an introduction to disability services and how to plan support. Overall, this helped many disabled students to feel at ease before starting university.
- Signposting to relevant information, advice and guidance (IAG) on how to access support was regarded as a crucial component of transition support; often, this was not easily accessible.
- Like HEP staff, disabled students also recognised the benefit of separate transition programmes ahead of the start of the academic term. Several also discussed targeted support for autistic students.
- Several disabled students felt that their transition support did not meaningfully extend to other areas of the student experience, and that support tended to dwindle as the academic year started.

Disabled students highlighted the same transition support approaches as those reported in the HEP staff survey. These included virtual open days, quiet hours at events, early introductions, summer schools, university taster days and targeted transition support for specific groups of disabled students.

*"The week prior to university starting, I was invited to a programme that was specifically for disabled and care-experienced students. It was an opportunity to spend two days at the university and spend them overnight in student accommodation. On those two days, they really familiarised students."*

[Focus group participant – student]

It was also evident that the transition support received by disabled students succeeded – on the whole – in its intended aims of helping students familiarise themselves with the campus and adjust to university life, especially if delivered during a quieter period. Participants also mentioned that transition support helped them to understand the differences

between the disability support provided by a school/college and that offered by a university, such as different terminology and administrative processes.

*"It helped a lot, because obviously the difference between going from college to university is obviously different and how the system works. So, being able to find out beforehand instead of like the minute you start really helps prepare for that, for the future."*

[Focus group participant – student]

One challenge raised by students was that transition support could sometimes be burdensome and "stressful" due to the need to attend disability-specific events in addition to all-student induction events.

*"Everyone's got all the different induction events they have to go to, then there's additional induction events, sometimes they conflicted with what was on your programme induction."*

[Focus group participant – student]

Additional challenges cited by participants included a lack of consideration given to mature disabled students transitioning from the workplace or FE, and for disabled students living off-campus and travelling to the university. A few also mentioned that support tended to disappear once the transition support had ended.

*"They didn't really seem to know how it would support people who are a little bit older, maybe, who've been in the workplace and have different needs."*

[Focus group participant – student]

*"If you are entering university from outside FE, [transition information] should be flagged right at the start of the application process."*

[Focus group participant – student]

*"It gets you through the door and then once you're there, they don't seem to be as helpful."*

[Focus group participant – student]

## Suggested improvements

### Suggestions arising from the HEP staff survey

As mentioned previously, several survey respondents recommended working more collaboratively with other departments across their HEP to develop a more joined-up approach to transition support and maximise resources. One respondent suggested that transition support needed to be funded from an earlier stage to ensure a “comprehensive programme can be developed”.

“Resources are stretched trying to respond to the needs of current students which makes it difficult to apply enough focus to the needs of students who may or may not enrol at the university.” [Survey respondent]

Mirroring the comments made by disabled students within the focus groups, the survey respondents also suggested the need to consider carefully the balance between all-student transition support and support for disabled students. This includes thinking about the timetabling of disability-specific transition support events or activities that fall during welcome/orientation weeks, ensuring that they do not overlap with other induction activities or become overwhelming for disabled students.

### Suggestions arising from the student focus groups

A high number of disabled students participating in the focus groups agreed on the vital importance of signposting to relevant IAG before starting university. Drawing on their lived experiences, the provision of clear guidance as a component of transition support ensures that disabled students feel well-prepared and understand the support available. This should include information that is clear, accessible and proactive – ensuring that disabled students are not required to navigate new processes and systems alone.

*“When we talk about the transition into higher education, I always make it clear: ‘Stuff is not going to come to you. You have to go and find it.’”*

[Focus group participant – student]

*“It’s around the communication, or the clarity of the information that’s out there and making it clear where you need to go. I just think the signposting could be a lot clearer.”*

[Focus group participant – student]

## Reasonable adjustments

### Common approaches

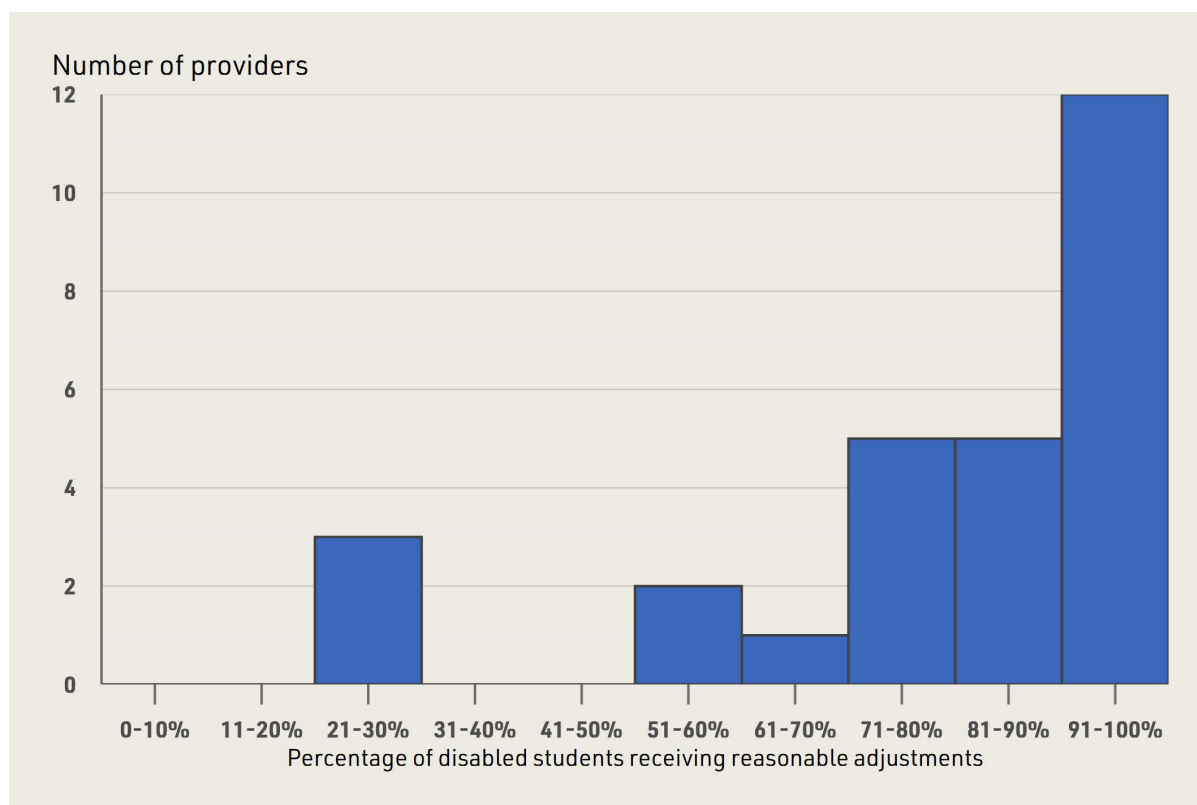
The following section outlines findings from the HEP staff survey on the availability of reasonable adjustments to disabled students. For context, the respondents were first asked to estimate the number of disabled students currently receiving reasonable adjustments from the provider. As described in the survey, reasonable adjustments include extra time in tests, assistive technologies, tutoring, mentoring and support programmes and financial support (TASO, 2023).

Table 3 summarises the responses to this question. An average of 81% of students currently registered with disability services received reasonable adjustments across all HEPs. The proportion was slightly higher proportion at small and/or specialist HEPs (93%). Notably, the percentage for all HEPs is much higher than that of disabled students currently registered for transition support (12%). The distribution of disabled students receiving reasonable adjustments across the sample is outlined in Figure 8.

**Table 3: Proportion of disabled students receiving reasonable adjustments in English HEPs**

Provider type	Proportion of disabled students
All HEPs	81%
Small and/or specialist HEPs	93%
Larger HEPs	79%

**Figure 8: Percentage of disabled students receiving reasonable adjustments**



Informed by the reasonable adjustments most frequently identified in the desk-based review, the answer options were separated into the following four thematic areas:

- Teaching and learning
- Assessment
- Physical accessibility
- Specialist/complex reasonable adjustments

Respondents were then asked to select which of the outlined reasonable adjustments in the above four categories were available at their HEP, by selecting the following options in relation to how it was provided:

1. Provided as standard, i.e. a reasonable adjustment has been put in place because it has been deemed to be necessary and is generally available to all disabled students.
2. Fully or partially funded by DSA, i.e. requires evidence to be put in place.
3. Not reported as currently provided.

Our analysis of the survey data highlighted some discrepancies in respondents' overall understanding of what can and cannot be funded by the DSA, with instances of respondents selecting a reasonable adjustment as 'fully or partially funded by DSA' when this is unlikely to be possible in practical terms. To therefore provide greatest clarity on the overall prevalence of reasonable adjustments across HEPs in the sample, the first two categories have been merged to create the following in our presentation of the data:

1. Reasonable adjustments provided as standard, i.e. a reasonable adjustment has been put in place because it has been deemed to be necessary and is generally available to all disabled students, and/or has been fully or partially funded by DSA.
2. Not reported as currently provided<sup>7</sup>.

Any discrepancies or misinterpretation of responses could be indicative of wider confusion around what reasonable adjustments are and are not DSA fundable. This is explored further in the Discussion section of this report, and a full presentation of the raw data is presented in Appendix D.

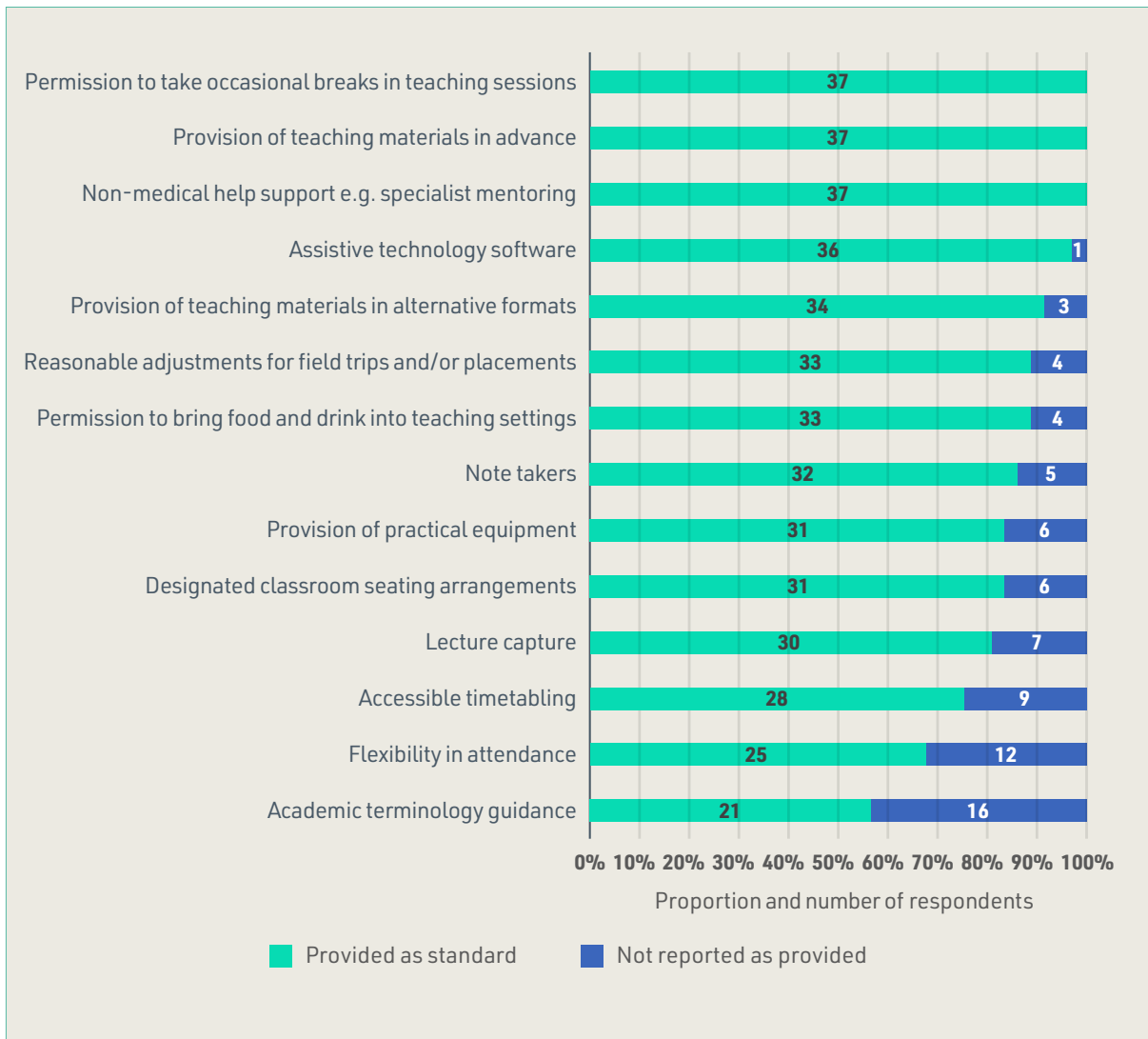
<sup>7</sup> This could include instances where the reasonable adjustment has not yet been requested by a disabled student or the institution has no prior experience/knowledge of providing this reasonable adjustment.

## Teaching and learning

In relation to teaching and learning, Figure 9 shows that the most prevalent reasonable adjustments across HEPs were permission to take occasional breaks in teaching sessions, provision of teaching materials in advance and non-medical help support, e.g. specialist mentoring,

e.g. specialist mentoring (100% respectively). Flexibility in attendance and academic terminology guidance were less prevalent across HEPs (32% and 43% of HEPs did not provide these, respectively); the reason for the former is expanded upon in the free-text responses.

**Figure 9: Proportion and number of respondents offering each type of reasonable adjustment related to teaching and learning**



The free-text responses to this question demonstrated the vast range of reasonable adjustments available to disabled students around teaching and learning. A common approach was for the disability services to be guided by the individual needs of the student, particularly when designing bespoke reasonable adjustments. Reasonable adjustments provided as

'standard' were closely aligned with those that would further support inclusive practice.

*"Bespoke adjustments are considered and implemented according to individual student needs."*

[Survey respondent]

*“We are currently working with departments to have standard practical equipment in labs such as height-adjustable desks and adjustable lab stools. This is part of our wider agenda for greater inclusion.”*

[Survey respondent]

In contrast, some reasonable adjustments were only available on a case-by-case basis. For example, flexibility in attendance was not readily offered, particularly as this would likely need to be accompanied by an understanding of competence standards or other external requirements.

*“Flexibility in attendance has to be looked at on a case-by-case basis depending on course competencies and professional registration requirements.”*

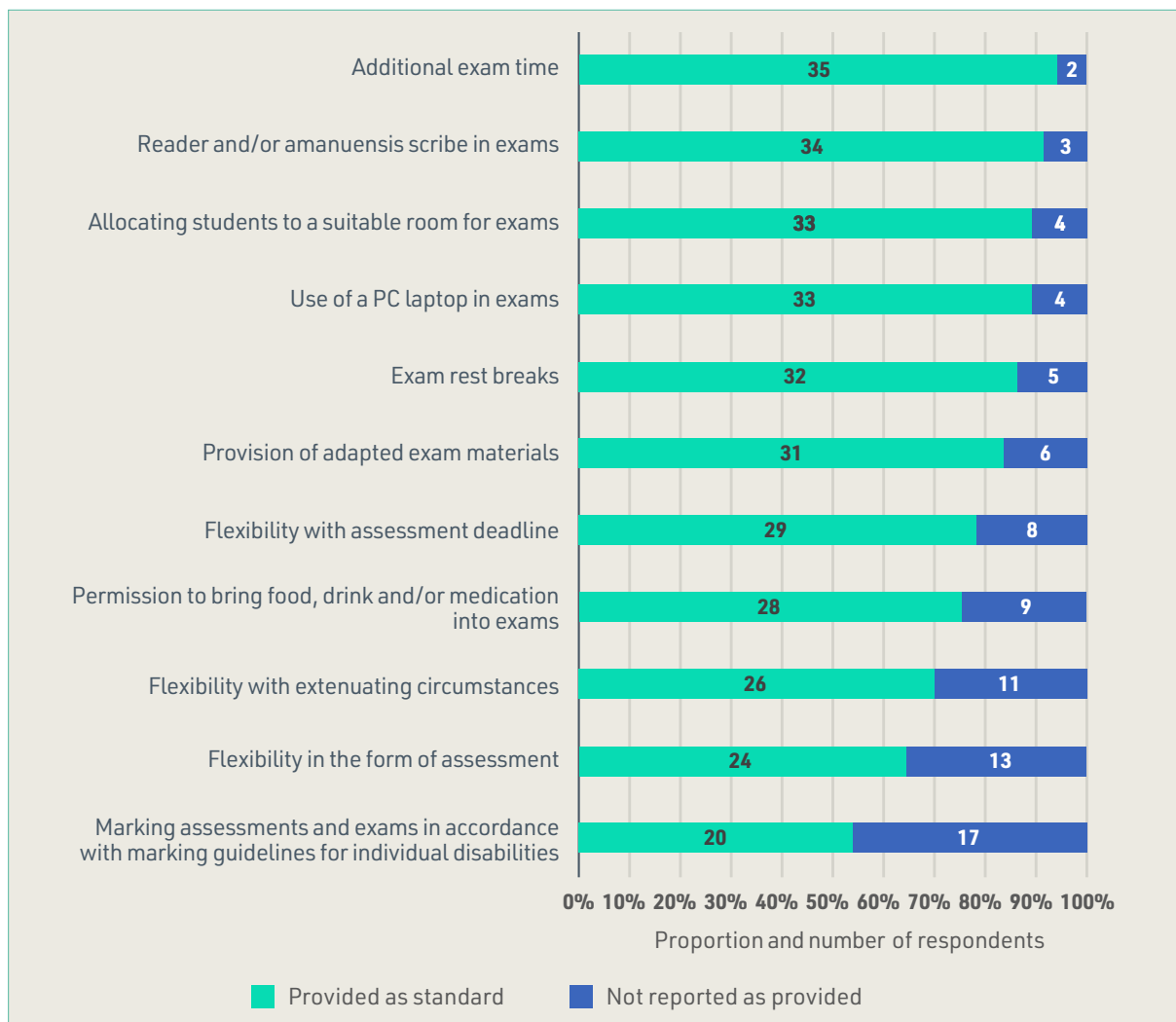
[Survey respondent]

### Assessment

In comparison to teaching and learning, where some reasonable adjustments were prevalent across all HEPs in the survey sample, the prevalence of reasonable adjustments related to assessment was more varied. It could be that this is, in part, influenced by levels of student need at each individual HEP, as one survey respondent noted that examination access arrangements at their HEP were by ‘some distance’ the most requested reasonable adjustment.

Figure 10 shows that the most prevalent reasonable adjustment related to assessment was additional examination time, provided by 95% of HEPs. In comparison, 37% of respondents did not offer flexibility in the type of assessment.

**Figure 10: Proportion and number of respondents offering each type of reasonable adjustment related to assessment**



The range of reasonable adjustments related to assessment was again large, with respondents offering additional examples such as noise-cancelling headphones within examinations, examinations timed to avoid early morning or late afternoon, and a reduced audience for practical examinations such as music performances. While it was more likely for reasonable adjustments for assessment to be provided as standard, ad-hoc or bespoke adjustments were still implemented based on individual student needs.

A total of five respondents used free-text responses to describe their HEP's standardised approach to flexibility in assessment, stating that they offered the opportunity for disabled students to apply to use an alternative format to demonstrate that their learning outcomes had been achieved.

*"We offer different assessment choices as part of our inclusive practice."*

[Survey respondent]

*"We offer alternative assessment format for exams (e.g. coursework, viva, etc.)."*

[Survey respondent]

Interestingly, a couple of respondents noted that their HEPs had policies to discount "simple" errors in spelling and grammar, similar to those identified within the Office for Students' report on assessment practices in English HEPs (2021). While the subsequent regulatory response has been to encourage HEPs to reflect the level of technical accuracy in assessment, the fact that these policies remain at some providers could indicate a lack of awareness either of the requirements or how the guidance connects with inclusive practices at their own provider.

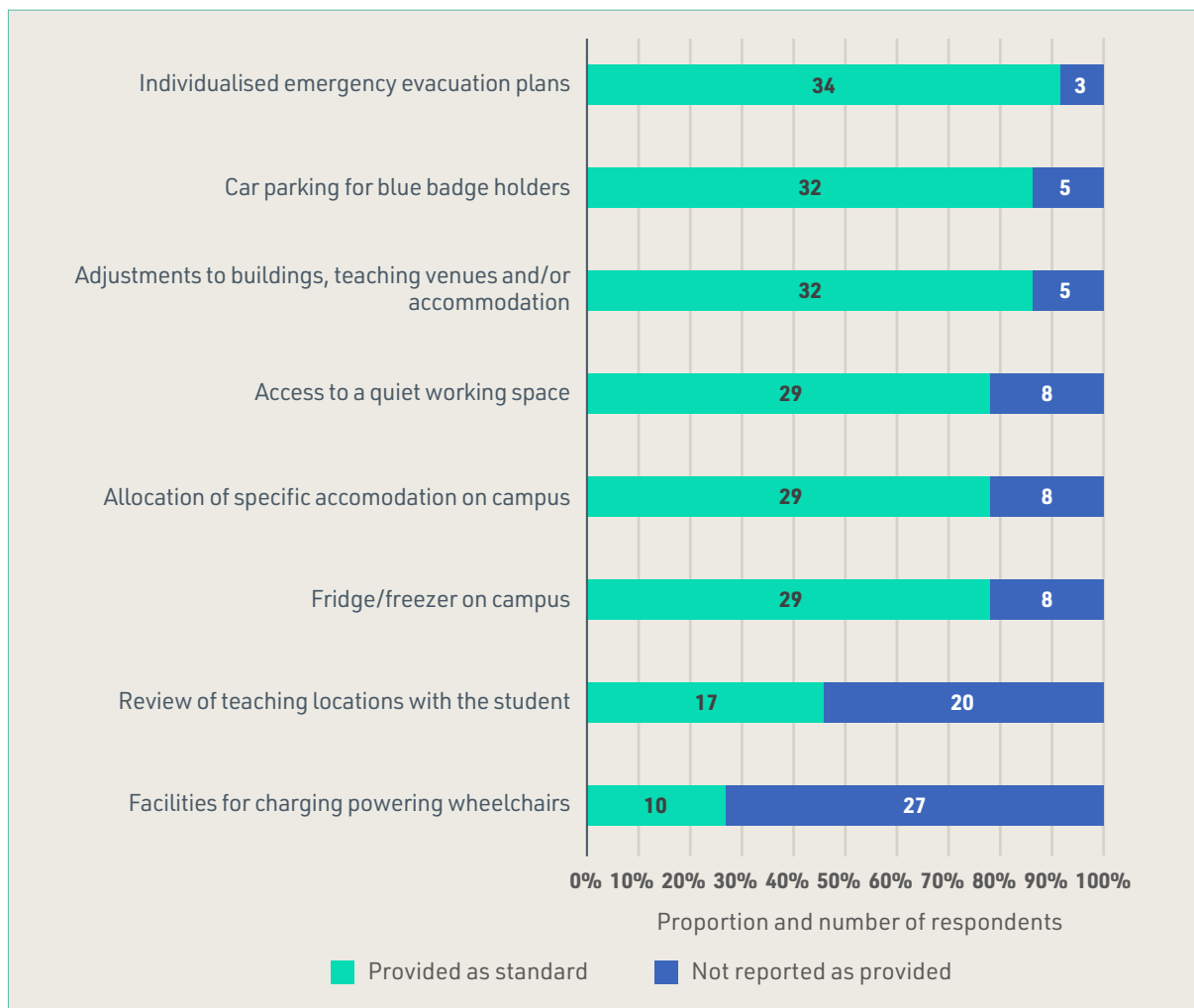
### **Physical accessibility**

Most reasonable adjustments that relate to physical accessibility were offered by the majority of HEPs surveyed, but again with some variance. It should be noted that funding streams such as the DSA do not typically provide funding for adjustments to the fabric of a provider (such as teaching facilities), and HEPs are also expected to provide anticipatory reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act 2010.

Figure 11 shows that the most prevalent reasonable adjustments related to physical accessibility included individualised emergency application plans (92%) and car parking for blue badge holders (86%). Nearly three-quarters (73%) of HEPs did not provide facilities for charging and powering wheelchairs.



**Figure 11: Proportion and number of respondents offering each type of reasonable adjustment related to physical accessibility.**



In the free-text responses, the survey respondents discussed the provision of ergonomic and height-adjustable classroom furniture to ensure that learning spaces were accessible. Several respondents emphasised the importance of working with both internal and external stakeholders to guarantee physical access. This could include cross-team committee working to review different aspects of the university and capture feedback from staff and students.

*“University accessibility standards (beyond building regulations) for procurement, contractors, refurbishments and new builds.”*

[Survey respondent]

*“Estates reporting form for staff and students to report accessibility issues.”*

[Survey respondent]

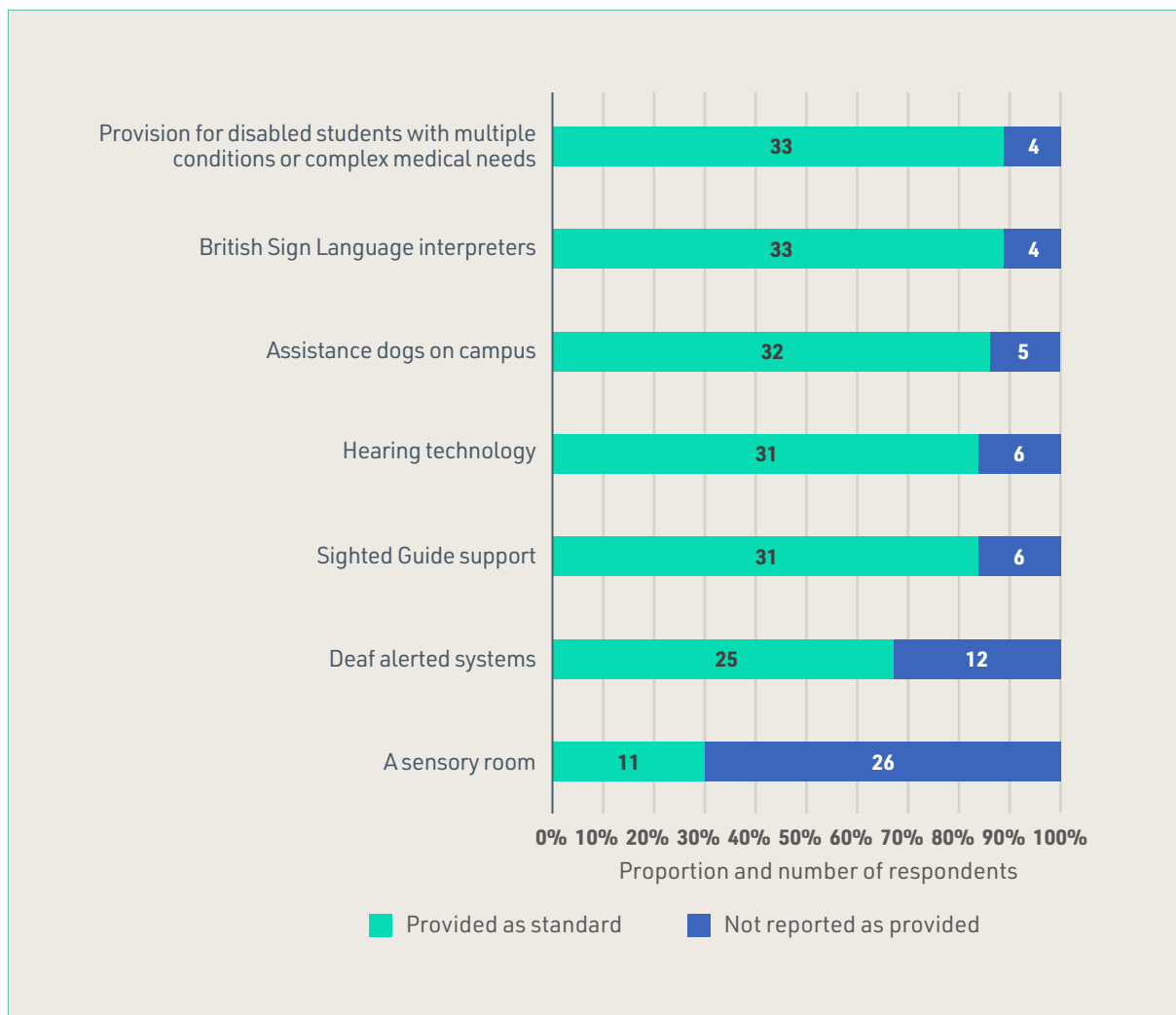
One respondent also mentioned that their disability service is promoted as a point of contact for other physical access issues “that are not taken up elsewhere”.

### Specialist/complex reasonable adjustments

Respondents were finally asked to select which specialist or complex reasonable adjustments were offered at their HEP. Figure 12 shows that provision for disabled students with multiple conditions or complex medical needs and British Sign Language interpreters were most prevalent (89% respectively). In contrast 70% of respondents stated that a sensory room was not available at their HEP.



**Figure 12: Proportion and number of respondents offering each type of specialist/complex reasonable adjustment**



Respondents reiterated that provision for disabled students with multiple conditions or complex medical needs (i.e. tailored reasonable adjustments responding to an individual student’s need) would always be made depending on the barriers faced by the student, often through the provision of an individualised learning plan.

*“Open conversation with academic team – nothing novel, but this collaborative approach encourages Universal Design for Learning and mitigates barriers at the point of delivery.”*

[Survey respondent]

**Implementation: successes and challenges**

To reduce the need for ‘so many individual reasonable adjustments’ in the longer term, several respondents detailed successful collaborations with and training of academic staff and individual departments to increase awareness around inclusive practice and competence standards. The eventual aim here is that inclusive practice should become “widespread as a standard”.

Staff in disability services increasingly look for 'creative' ways to design and deliver reasonable adjustments, including exploring in-house funding opportunities. In a similar vein, a few respondents had trialled ways to streamline and "package" reasonable adjustments into wider disability and mental health strategies.

*"We are trying to innovate new ideas – we have Caption.Ed<sup>8</sup> for students, we will pay the £200 DSA contribution cost, we will pay for GP letters so students can access DSA."*

[Survey respondent]

*"We provide holistic support to students with mental health challenges. So whilst we do provide disability-related adjustments we also offer therapeutic support as part of a package."*

[Survey respondent]

Finally, respondents noted gaps in the provision of reasonable adjustments for specific groups of disabled students, including disabled students at different levels of study and those studying remotely. To mitigate this, one respondent recruited a specialist team of disability advisers to respond to individual queries such as these.

*"An academic pointed out that most of our current reasonable adjustments are not relevant to PG students e.g. exam arrangements. As a result, we are currently agreeing on a new set of reasonable adjustments for these cohorts."*

[Survey respondent]

### **Evaluation of effectiveness**

As in the evaluation of transition support, several HEP staff stated that their approaches to the evaluation of reasonable adjustments were still in their infancy, with evidence still emerging.

*"We have only recently started monitoring/evaluation so are limited in our outcomes for far."*

[Survey respondent]

Combined with a perceived lack of knowledge or confidence about how to link the short- or longer-term impact of reasonable adjustments to disabled students' outcomes and experiences, the take-up of evaluation in this area was relatively low. While a few respondents were able to identify the relationship between the implementation of reasonable adjustments and outcomes such as awarding gaps, they were unclear about what methods they would use to monitor impact in these areas or to create Type-3 evidence.

*"It's very difficult to link impact to reasonable adjustments."*

[Survey respondent]

*"We know that, where reasonable adjustments are not correctly implemented, there is an increase in mitigating circumstances requests, complaints, academic appeals, and student drop-out rates."*

[Survey respondent]

*"There needs to be a university-wide approach to the consideration of reasonable adjustments within individual curriculum areas and a greater understanding of the need and impact of such adjustments."*

[Survey respondent]

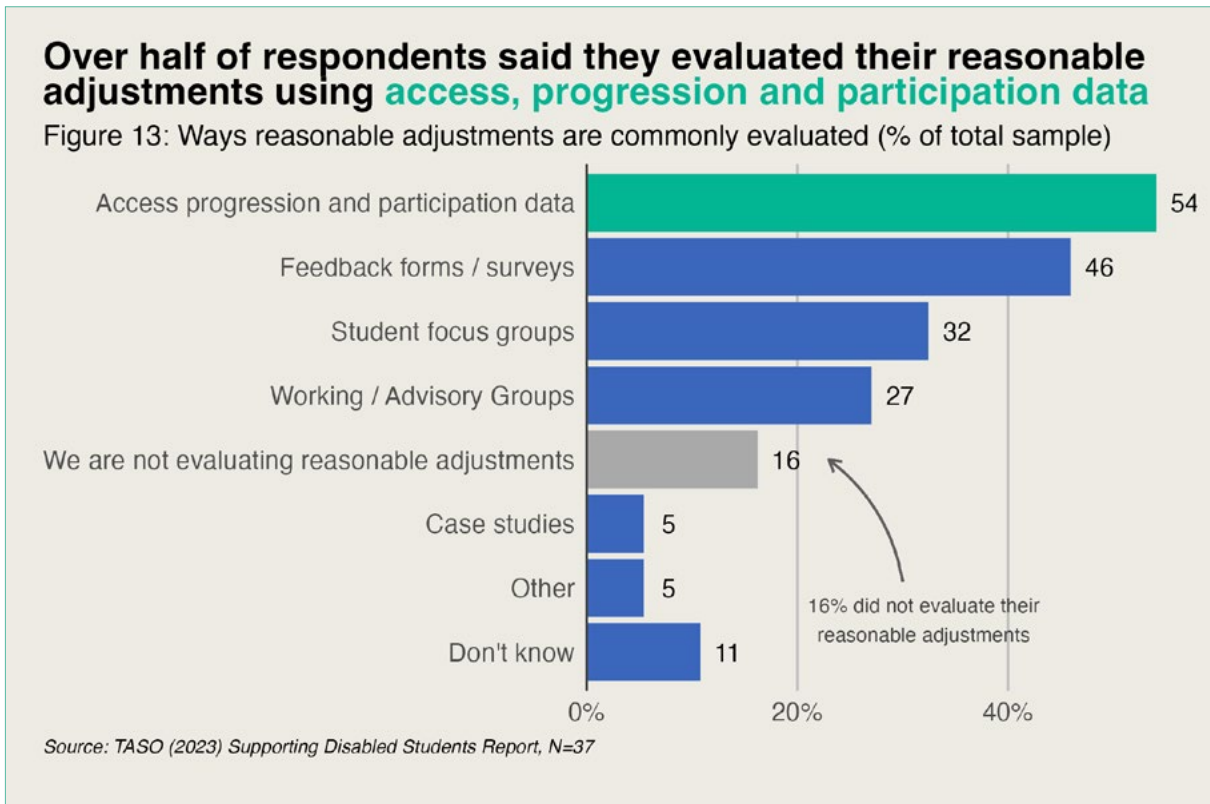
On a more qualitative basis, one HEP regularly collated feedback from disabled students to better understand which reasonable adjustments could be standardised.

Figure 13 further demonstrates the level of uncertainty among HEPs around the evaluation of reasonable adjustments. Four respondents (11%) stated that they did not know what evaluation activity took place at their provider, and a further six (16%) reported that they did not evaluate reasonable adjustments. Among those that did evaluate reasonable adjustments, 54% collected access and participation data, while 46% administered feedback forms/surveys (i.e. quantitative data collection).

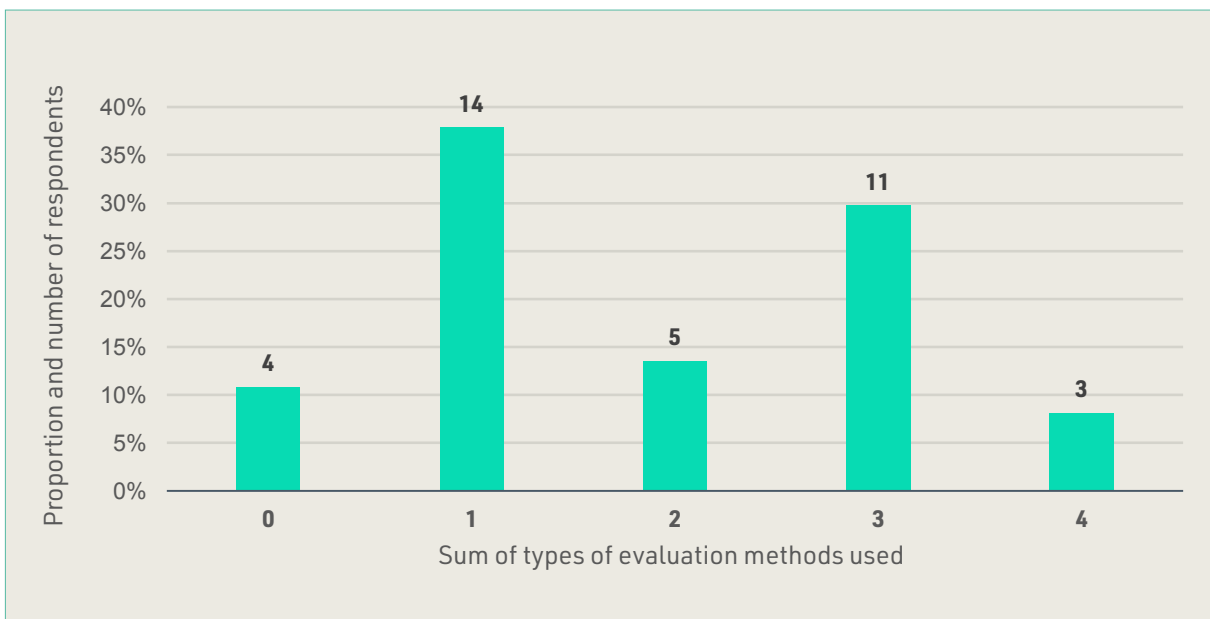
A total of 14 HEPs (38%) used just one evaluation method and 11 (30%) used four evaluation methods. No HEP used more than four methods, as outlined in Figure 14.

8 Caption.Ed is a live captioning and note-taking software. See <https://caption-ed.com/>

**Figure 13: Ways of evaluating reasonable adjustments**



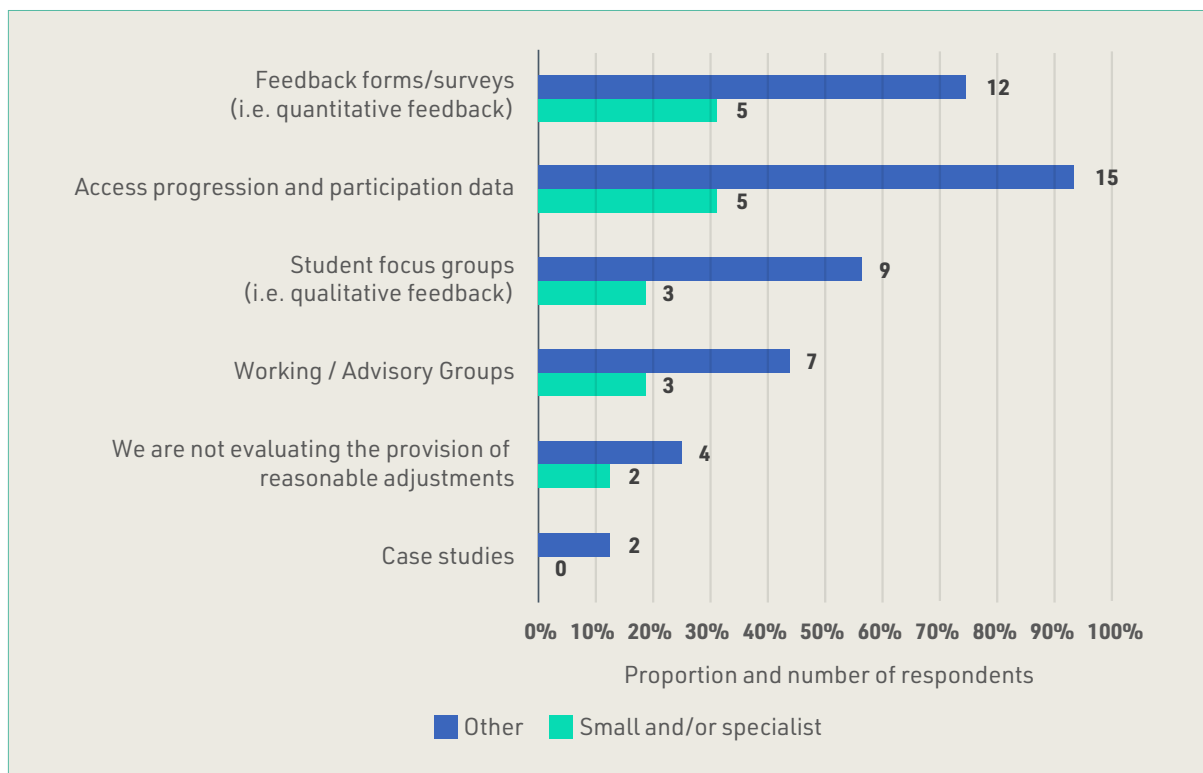
**Figure 14: Summary of types of evaluation method used, by proportion and number of respondents**



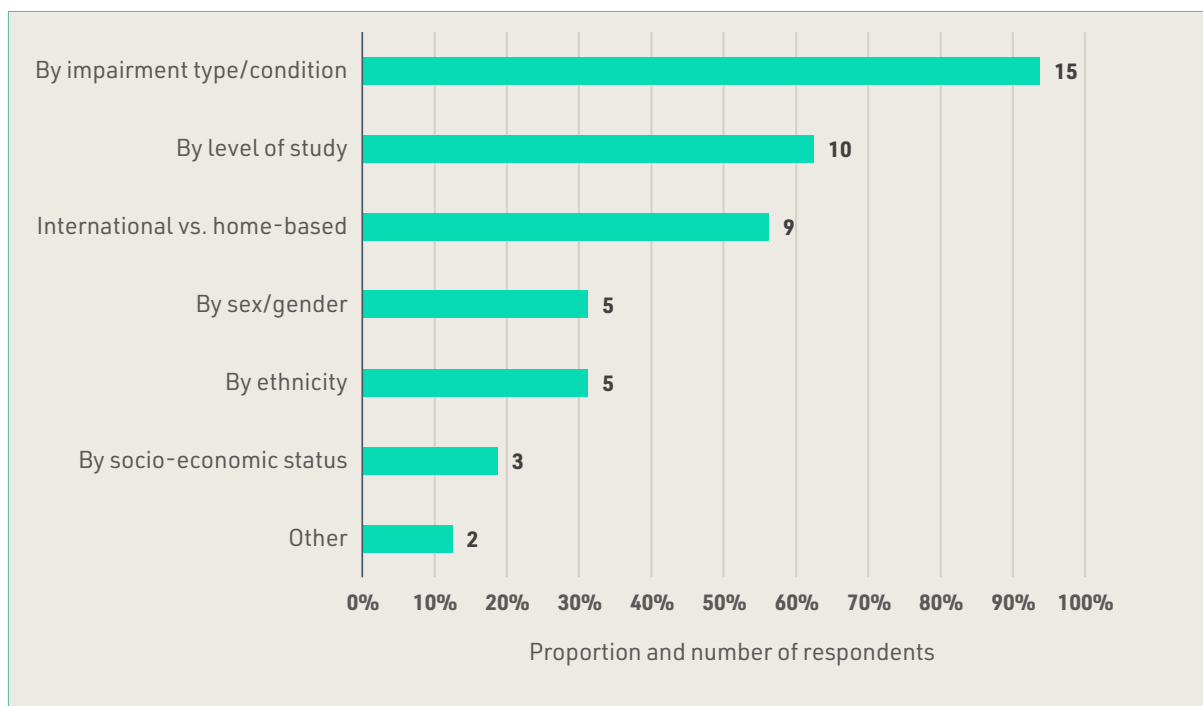
As with the evaluation of transition support, the evaluation of reasonable adjustments was conducted less frequently within small and/or specialist providers, as shown in Figure 15.

On a positive note, a total of 16 respondents (44%) engaged in evaluation stated that they disaggregated the data they collected on reasonable adjustments. Figure 16 highlights that the most frequent breakdown was by impairment type (94%), followed by level of study (63%).

**Figure 15: Ways of evaluating reasonable adjustments at small and/or specialist providers compared to larger HEPs**



**Figure 16: Ways in which respondents disaggregate their evaluation data on reasonable adjustments**



## Disabled students' experiences

The following section summarises the responses from disabled students regarding their perceptions and experiences of reasonable adjustments, as discussed in the student focus groups. The themes most frequently raised by disabled students are outlined below:

- Disabled students were aware of a variety of reasonable adjustments available to them, and those that were provided as standard were often implemented in a timely way through the support of dedicated staff.
- However, the challenges in receiving specialist or more complex reasonable adjustments were considerable. Disabled students described inconsistencies in communication and application between academic departments, and experienced delays before specialist or more complex support was put in place.
- Compounding these challenges, disabled students at different levels of study (e.g. postgraduate level) and students with a range of disabilities described delays or barriers to their provision due to a lack of understanding of their individual situation.

Disabled students first reflected on the array of reasonable adjustments from which they had benefitted, including additional time in examinations, separate examination rooms, lecture capture, access to assistive technology, flexibility in assessment and the provision of learning materials in advance. More novel approaches included moving lecture locations for all students if the room was found to be inaccessible.

Those who had had positive experiences of timely reasonable adjustments commended the openness and willingness of both academic and professional support staff in supporting this process.

*"The one thing which really stood out for me at the university was understanding of my situation. They assured me that they will help me as much as they can. It really, really stood out for me."*

[Focus group participant – student]

However, for many participants, this was not the case. A key challenge raised was the lack of information-sharing between departments, and the resulting onus on disabled students to follow up on their support. Furthermore, some students had experienced delays due to having to contact multiple people or share information about their disability more than once. Some were initially unaware of the support they could access, as key information was 'buried'.

*"I had to contact the general disability services and then it took several weeks for a reply. Then they forward it on to the person – head of disability support in my teaching. I had to wait for an appointment with them to then talk and go through the plan. Overall, it took quite a long time and during that time, I was already at university."*

[Focus group participant – student]

This delay was disproportionately felt by disabled students requiring specialist or more complex reasonable adjustments, rather than the reasonable adjustments provided as standard.

*"For things like exam deadlines, that's been simple. For anything complicated, like disabled student support or having a voice recorder or software or anything like that, it's repeatedly pushing. It feels more like a battle."*

[Focus group participant – student]

Several participants also observed differences in how different academic departments implemented reasonable adjustments, resulting in different educational experiences for disabled students depending on the course they studied.

*"I think consistency within school departments or course departments really is something that needs to be improved. I wouldn't know it if I didn't do a dual honours degree."*

[Focus group participant – student]

Compounding these challenges, a few participants also experienced delays or pushback to their reasonable adjustments due to a lack of knowledge and awareness of which reasonable adjustments would be appropriate for their level of study or type of disability.

*“One adjustment that I’ve been told is potentially possible is to have viva questions be given in advance for the PhD. But then nobody seems to know whether it’s possible. I spoke to the disability adviser, and it was like, ‘I don’t know if that’s a thing’. There’s no one else I can ask about that.”*

[Focus group participant – student]

*“Without the mental health specialist support from DSA, I don’t think that I would be able to finish the year because it was a lack of understanding of my needs when I missed the classes.”*

[Focus group participant – student]

However, despite clear challenges, the focus group participants reflected on the innovative ways in which their provider brought disabled students together as a form of additional support, creating safe, physical spaces and using social media to share more information regarding the support available.

*“I think one of the things that’s good about my university is that they do a student community scheme. One of those student communities is specifically for disabled students. It’s just a chance to be able to meet other people that are in a similar situation.”*

[Focus group participant – student]

## Suggested improvements

### Suggestions arising from the HEP staff survey

Suggested improvements to reasonable adjustments shared by HEP staff reflected the challenges facing the wider sector, overwhelmingly around the slow uptake and implementation of inclusive practice

and the Universal Design for Learning (UDL). If inclusive practice were rolled out more rapidly, the respondents felt that the need for ‘bolt-on’ reasonable adjustments could eventually be reduced. This would also enable disability services to place a greater focus on those reasonable adjustments that were perceived to have the greatest impact on disabled students’ experiences.

*“The focus should be on creating an inclusive environment and minimising the need for reasonable adjustments, so they are only in place when necessary. Universities should be challenging themselves to work towards this goal and reduce barriers.”*

[Survey respondent]

Other improvements suggested by the survey respondents included more frequent training for academic staff on reasonable adjustments, a greater “preparedness” around alternative and inclusive assessment approaches, as well as the need for modernised systems to help share information regarding reasonable adjustments with tutors and the relevant support staff.

### Suggestions arising from the student focus groups

Disabled students within the focus groups made similar suggestions to the HEP staff, including the need to better inform and train academic staff on supporting disabled students through reasonable adjustments.

*“The lecturers don’t know exactly how to support you because the training is not there for them.”*

[Focus group participant – student]

Finally, several participants suggested that effort should be focussed on modernising processes and systems to better support the timely implementation of reasonable adjustments and facilitate a more joined-up approach between departments.

## Novel approaches to disabled student support

The final section of the report details the findings arising from a series of in-depth interviews and focus groups with HEP staff, focusing on the novel approaches to transition support and reasonable adjustments that were identified in the desk-based review or HEP staff survey.

### Transition support

#### Overview

The participants spoke about offering various novel approaches to transition support including contacting prospective disabled students in the spring and summer to initiate learning support plans. In addition, online or in-person campus days were organised specifically for disabled students and included talks from current disabled students and teaching staff. Attendees and their parents/supporters were also invited to seek advice on these days about how to register with disability services.

*"[At open days] we have talks from students [who] will also be autistic students themselves. [They] answered questions, talked about how overwhelmed they felt, but what helped them in their experience. The students got a lot of positive feedback."*

[Focus group/interview participant – staff member]

Small and specialist HEPs discussed providing disabled prospective students with one-to-one support from a disability adviser who could guide them through the transition process.

*"Every student who registers with the wellbeing service is typically allocated a named adviser. So, it's a central point of contact and they will have the option to meet with us when registering, to have a bespoke chat around reasonable adjustments and what would work for them."*

[Focus group/interview participant – staff member]

In addition, some HEPs created student-facilitated social networking groups and buddy and peer-mentor schemes to offer disabled prospective students information about developing independent living skills (e.g. opening a bank account or going food shopping) and to support socialising (e.g. by attending a Students' Union event together). One HEP recalled a student-led WhatsApp group for disabled prospective students to give and receive advice.

Mirroring the findings in the HEP staff survey, the participants discussed in further detail the transition support available for prospective disabled students with specific disabilities (including social anxiety, autism spectrum disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder). Events such as summer schools were often organised in collaboration with other services, such as widening participation, Student Services and academics.

*"Every student that has disclosed that they're autistic or have got a working diagnosis on UCAS, we will email all of those students and invite them down to a pre-induction day. We do a mock lecture and go around to the key places on campus which works quite well."*

[Focus group/interview participant – staff member]

To support the provision of IAG, some HEPs also supplemented their transition support with online interactive toolkits on disability awareness, study skills, writing and referencing techniques, assistive technology and advice and support for specific disabilities.

*"When students are going through the diagnostic process we want [to] give them the tools and empowerment to understand the conditions they are exploring ... [the toolkits] shouldn't take students more than an hour or two to work through ... We have [specific conditions like] 'studying with mental health conditions', 'studying with visual and hearing impairment'."*

[Focus group/interview participant – staff member]

## Implementation: successes and challenges

For all participants, transition support aimed to ensure that disabled students had support in place before the start of the academic term. The participants talked about how they routinely modified their communication and engagement strategies for prospective students to ensure that they received timely support information. Strategies included personalised and automated emails, information on university webpages, content on social media and online registration forms. One HEP reported working in collaboration with the applications team to accelerate this process.

*“All of our students are offered the opportunity to come and connect with services early. So, let’s get together, do a student support plan, get your exam mods in place, make you aware of the support that’s available, help with applying for DSA.”*

[Focus group/interview participant – staff member]

As mentioned previously, however, an enduring challenge to providing transition support was that disabled prospective students did not engage with disability services at an early stage. The participants attributed this to schools and parents/supporters not preparing students to advocate for themselves or seek support, to students feeling overwhelmed, anxious or lacking in confidence, and to fear of prejudice or discrimination from university staff.

*“One of our major problems is our SEND students are still being told by their careers’ advisers and personal tutors that they cannot go to university... there’s concern around not wanting to tell your university that’s giving you a place that you’re disabled, because they might take your place away.”*

[Focus group/interview participant – staff member]

Another challenge to transition support cited was that disabled prospective students did not always have an official diagnosis of their disability following their education, health and care plan. Staff reported that many students are unaware of the relevant systems and funding bodies; assessments therefore have to be carried out internally.

Many participants reported a lack of available funds and resources, specifically staff time, to

run transition support programmes for disabled students. They described struggling to encourage senior management to invest in transition support programmes, despite high demand and need.

*“It is quite hard to run a successful transition event just on amazing, goodwill of other people and creativity. A bit of hard cash does come in handy and we are feeling the lack of that.”*

[Focus group/interview participant – staff member]

A final challenge cited was the lack of collaboration and sharing of resources and the conflicting commitments of disability services and other university teams (including widening participation, recruitment and admissions, and academic staff) in providing disability support. A few providers reported a level of prejudice from academic staff who did not want to initiate reasonable adjustments before the start of term.

*“Some students don’t get the same experience in terms of engagement with their departments as others. That inconsistency always makes [the disability services team] really frustrated at times because we really want to see that bar be really high across the [university].”*

[Focus group/interview participant – staff member]

## Evaluation of effectiveness

Many participants again reported that disability services have insufficient time and resources to collect, analyse and use student feedback or data to evaluate transition support. Some were aware that feedback was gathered by central university data analytics teams but had no access to specific data on transition support.

*“Feedback’s never at the forefront of our minds, because we’re getting on with all the other stuff.”*

[Focus group/interview participant – staff member]

*“As a member of staff in Student Services I haven’t got specific access to data around this.”*

[Focus group/interview participant – staff member]



Where evaluation of transition support was conducted, this was typically supported by academics or analysis teams across the provider, using tools such as surveys. Other HEPs mentioned using qualitative data such as case studies, student feedback via panels or staff observations of transition support to help understand what is and is not effective.

*"We do a pre-survey with self-rated measures, like have you heard of DSA? How would you rate your skills? What kind of concerns do you have? There is then an exit survey that goes to students and we ask them which [transition workshops] did they attend? How do they feel about those particular skills now? And if coming to those sessions improved their skills?"*

[Focus group/interview participant – staff member]

*"We have our disabled student panel ... they have 10 meetings during the year ... we get feedback on what was your experience of transition? And what did you need that you didn't get? They are really good at telling us what they think works and doesn't work. Then we pick that up as the focus of what we're trying to improve next."*

[Focus group/interview participant – staff member]

## Reasonable adjustments

### Overview

As mentioned previously, the most common 'novel' approach to reasonable adjustments was to promote and embed inclusive practice and UDL to support all students. This not only reduced the need for reasonable adjustments at an individual level but ensured that support was anticipated for those who had not shared their disability (including those who did not wish to) and those who were on a waiting list for disability assessment.

*"I see [reasonable adjustment support] like a pyramid model. At the bottom, there's inclusive practice, which all teaching staff should be using, and that's to reduce the need for separate reasonable adjustments. So, by actually designing our courses, programmes, buildings to meet the needs of the*

*students that we're already fully aware of, it negates that need to change things."*

[Focus group/interview participant – staff member]

Numerous participants reported providing in-house funding for disabled international students, or for those who could not access DSA for various reasons. One HEP also provided ad-hoc funding which has proved "popular with students", whereby disabled students are able to apply for an award of up to 10 hours of flexible support per year.

*"We supplement and support DSA offers, so, if a student needs mentoring, for example, and they have a health condition they wouldn't get that through DSA, we'll identify what is needed and request the university pays for that."*

[Focus group/interview participant – staff member]

*"We've got our own funding. One is international students, and one is students who just don't have access to any other funding, either because they're international or they don't meet the bar for DSA."*

[Focus group/interview participant – staff member]

HEPs further demonstrated their innovation in their flexible approaches to the types of evidence considered when offering reasonable adjustments. One HEP accepted evidence from students in different formats, including working diagnosis documents for those on waiting lists. Disability practitioners could also use their expertise to "reasonably assume" which reasonable adjustments should be offered.

### Implementation: successes and challenges

To support the implementation of tailored and specialist reasonable adjustments, several HEPs built "specialist" disability services teams to aid the design and provision of tailored or specialist support. In some cases, this included new or additional roles, such as specialist learning support tutors, enabling teams to be at the forefront of delivering reasonable adjustments. One HEP had partnered with a third-sector organisation to upskill their disability services team on reasonable adjustment support for individual disabilities.

*"We also do quite a lot of partnering with external organisations, so, for example, one of my team members, we noticed we were getting more students with cystic fibrosis. So, we knew a bit about cystic fibrosis, we knew the basic things, but he took himself off to talk to one of the charities and between them, they came up with what would be a good standard package for students with cystic fibrosis."*

[Focus group/interview participant – staff member]

A particular challenge was that HEPs were processing an overwhelming number of learning support plans which in some cases were "flooding departments". While the increased roll-out of inclusive practice would help to mitigate this and alleviate staff workload, progress was relatively slow. Barriers included inconsistent practice from academic staff as well as a lack of buy-in from senior leadership.

*"If we could just get better at doing the inclusive practice side of things, which is one of my other hats at the university. If we were just better at UDL and inclusive practice, we wouldn't be doing quite as much scrabbling around trying to make individual arrangements."*

[Focus group/interview participant – staff member]

*"We've got some academics that are great, and they get it. And other areas that they either don't get it, which it's our job to go out there and make them understand it as best we can, or they don't want to get it. I think there's still that, in some ways, it feels like a battle sometimes just to get the most basic reasonable adjustments in place."*

[Focus group/interview participant – staff member]

*"A lot of the limitations are around getting someone high enough up to champion something, so we're often pushing upwards from disability services, we very rarely get anything from above."*

[Focus group/interview participant – staff member]

Interestingly, a few participants reflected on the benefits of new academic staff who offered a refreshed

and reinvigorated perspective on inclusive practice and were more open to new ways of working to improve the implementation of reasonable adjustments.

*"From a positive point of view, we've got a group of academics that have come in, who are much more aware of being inclusive."*

[Focus group/interview participant – staff member]

One participant explained that it was about "harnessing the culture" that exists within a provider and ensuring that all staff have a level of accountability in ensuring disabled student inclusion.

*"It is also harnessing what's there in our communities. We do care and we do want to do the best for our students. Perhaps we have some resourcing challenges and we have some volume challenges, but it's about how can we harness that culture and really embed that culture. I have a stake in this, I have a responsibility in it."*

[Focus group/interview participant – staff member]

### Evaluation of effectiveness

Mirroring the feedback from the HEP staff survey, HEPs appeared to rely on ad-hoc evaluation methods, such as communication with individual academic staff, regarding student progress. Other sources of evidence included feedback from Students' Union officers and monitoring improvements in academic attainment. While the HEP quoted below monitored student complaints, it recognised that this was a "reactive" approach: once a complaint had been submitted, it was often too late to resolve it.

*"The way we monitor it is through complaints and through, you know, students telling us that things aren't working for them. And it's now we then respond to that that, sort of, ultimately determined what the outcome is for that. So, it is a real reactive way."*

[Focus group/interview participant – staff member]

Finally, some staff reiterated that there is currently no standardised way of monitoring reasonable adjustments or understanding their impact on disability inclusion.

## 6. DISCUSSION

As demonstrated by the findings in this report, HEPs implement a range of transition support to ensure that disabled students are supported in their early engagement with HE. The most prevalent support is offered through open days, campus visits, early induction, online information and advice sessions as well as events for disabled students with specific disabilities, and overall these seemed to be well-received by disabled students and familiarised them with the university setting. Novel approaches or less frequently occurring forms of support included student-led transition support, peer-to-peer support or a campus buddy system.

HEP staff noted that early engagement with disabled students was key in ensuring that prospective students felt empowered and equipped with the appropriate information on how to access relevant support. The findings also revealed the importance of engaging with the parents/supporters of disabled prospective students to help improve their understanding of HE support, a novel approach offered by a few HEPs in this study. The SEND review (Department for Education, 2022) highlights that parents and supporters are navigating an adversarial system and face challenges in accessing support for their children, seemingly mirroring the data in this report.

Challenges remain in ensuring that disabled students engage in transition support, with the research highlighting that an average of 12% of disabled students registered with disability services are currently registered for this type of support. This relatively low uptake may be due to the lack of clear information around transition support on provider webpages, or indeed the lack of any robust monitoring and evaluation process that would paint a more accurate picture of engagement. Greater investment in transition support and a more collaborative approach would enable HEPs, particularly larger providers with bigger student cohorts, to provide more tailored or one-to-one support. Transition support should also not be a 'one-off' activity, as disabled students stressed the need for meaningful engagement throughout the academic year.

Another key challenge raised was the lack of consideration for mature disabled students entering HE, as well as transition support tailored for specific disabilities. The timing and structure of transition support should also be considered, particularly as disabled students required to attend transition support programmes during induction weeks became overwhelmed by the volume of activities. Transition support that takes place ahead of the academic year,

such as in spring or summer, is beneficial for this reason but faces challenges in capturing disabled students who have not yet engaged with their disability services.

Regarding reasonable adjustments, the findings revealed that a vast range of reasonable adjustments was likely to be advertised on web pages; however, these were more likely to be standardised interventions, rather than complex or specialist measures which would typically be designed in consultation with the student.

Providers have a legal duty to provide reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act 2010, and this is an anticipatory duty. This means that providers must plan and take a strategic approach to addressing the barriers that potentially impede disabled students (Advance HE, 2010). The findings indicate that, while providers are meeting their legal responsibilities to make reasonable adjustments (particularly as all HEPs surveyed provide at least one reasonable adjustment across all categories), the extent to which the anticipatory duty is fulfilled differs. The HEP staff survey data also indicates that there is confusion around what reasonable adjustments are and are not fundable by the DSA. While the publicised reforms to the DSA hope to streamline communication for students, any misinterpretation around limitations of funding could continue to compound students' experiences of receiving delayed or inappropriate support.

On a positive note, disabled students praised the openness and willingness of staff, including disability advisers and individual academics, to support the implementation of reasonable adjustments, also reporting that reasonable adjustments that were provided as standard were relatively quick to implement. However, concerns around a lack of information sharing between departments persisted and, in many cases, disabled students were still required to repeatedly share information about their disability, leading to delays in support. These results are consistent with earlier studies such as that by the Disabled Students' Commission (2021).

The findings also revealed that increased collaboration between disability services and academic staff had improved consistency in the delivery of reasonable adjustments. This finding aligns with research investigating the workplace experiences of disability advisers, published by the National Association of Disability Practitioners, in which it was reported that actively reducing the distance between disability advisers and academic staff created a better understanding of inclusive practice and reasonable adjustments overall (Borkin, 2023).

The findings in this research expose gaps in support for specific groups of disabled students, for example, international students and mature students, predominately due to a lack of available funding. Although some HEPs discussed using in-house funding to plug these gaps, this approach was feasible only in a minority of institutions and depended on the local authority. As noted by Rowan (2023), common standards of provision and support for international disabled students should be set and funded, if necessary, by the HEPs themselves, so that these students are not at an unfair disadvantage in comparison with their peers. Charitable organisations such as the Snowdon Trust<sup>9</sup> have also cited the fragmented and often inflexible nature of funding, with geographical variations and shortfalls in support (Global Disability Innovation Hub & Snowdon Trust, 2021). The Snowdon Trust therefore seeks to address some of these shortfalls in funding for reasonable adjustments by providing financial awards to eligible disabled students.

A key finding is a desire among disability services and disabled students to progress the adoption of inclusive practices such as UDL, ultimately reducing the need for individual reasonable adjustments and freeing up valuable resources within teams to

further promote disability inclusion. It is, however, recognised that some students' requirements will not be met by UDL and that individual adjustments and appropriate systems and processes should continue. Crucially, initiatives such as the Disabled Students' Commitment (Disabled Students' Commission, 2023) call on the sector to ensure that inclusive practice is embedded in curriculum design. In turn, this will help ensure that anticipatory reasonable adjustments are provided with consistency and certainty in the delivery of learning, teaching and assessment.

The generalisability of these results is subject to certain limitations, and caution should be applied due to the sample size of both the HEP staff survey and the qualitative findings. The survey ultimately drew on a convenience sample based on the HEPs that had the capacity to respond and, in many cases, staff within an individual HEP worked together to submit one response. Notwithstanding the relatively limited sample, this research provides valuable and scalable insights into the prevalent support approaches currently offered to disabled students around transition and reasonable adjustments.

<sup>9</sup> See: <https://www.snowdontrust.org/>



## 7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Overview

Overall, the research demonstrates that while a wide range of approaches are adopted to support students in the areas of transition support and by offering reasonable adjustments, persistent challenges around their implementation lead to inconsistencies in the timeliness of disabled students receiving this support. Moreover, TASO's 'What works' report on reducing equality gaps for disabled students (2023) speaks to the dearth of evaluative evidence around both transition support and reasonable adjustments; thus, the sector is unable to reasonably assess whether these approaches achieve their intended impact. The sector's lack of confidence around evaluation and, in particular, understanding what works for individual groups of disabled students, continues to be reflected in this research.

Disabled students represent a significant proportion of the student population, and students feel more comfortable than ever before in disclosing their disability or mental health condition when applying to college or university: in 2023, the number of accepted UK applicants who had shared a disability increased by approximately 34% compared to 2022.<sup>10</sup> When disaggregated by level of study, approximately 14% of research postgraduates and 10% of taught postgraduate students in the UK disclosed a disability (Advance HE, 2023). Support that eases disabled students' transition into HE is, therefore, vital.

The sector can firstly feel encouraged that the transition support currently provided appears to be, to some extent, achieving its objective of familiarising disabled students with HE life. This report suggests that it helps disabled students better understand the support they can access and explains differences in disability terminology to help bridge the gap between school and HE. Approaches that support specific groups of disabled students, such as autistic students, are particularly prevalent, as are interventions that take place during the spring or summer to ensure that disabled students can visit the campus and receive one-to-one support at a quieter time.

The latter approach brings its own challenges, however, as many disabled students only register with disability services two or three weeks before the academic term. Thus, students with delayed diagnoses or limited access to diagnostic

assessments, and those who become disabled while, in HE, all risk missing out on this earlier engagement. Encouraging early disclosure is therefore valuable, and targeted engagement with disabled students from under-represented and intersectional groups is required. Information about transition support on provider webpages should also be improved to ensure that all prospective and current disabled students know what services are available to them before they commence or continue their studies.

In addition to transition support during the spring or summer, many more HEPs offer disability-specific transition support during the all-student induction week. However, disabled students can find this overwhelming, as it increases the number of events they are required to attend.

Transition support for disabled students is also perceived by HEP staff to be difficult to resource, particularly against a backdrop of stretched disability services. Limited resources may have in part influenced many HEPs to deliver 'standalone' transition support, that is, a one-off event or programme for disabled students entering HE, but with no extension into the academic year. This is at odds with disabled students' requests for a meaningful programme of transition support that is relevant to all parts of the student journey. Disabled students also reiterate that transition support can only be effective if it is complemented by the provision of clear IAG about how to access such support. Some HEPs provide online toolkits and use social media to connect disabled prospective students with current students.

Of note, small and specialist providers (who typically have a smaller overall student cohort) are seemingly more able to deliver 'resource-intensive' interventions such as campus buddy schemes and peer mentoring to support their incoming disabled students. For those not in small and specialist HEPs, collaborative working across the provider, such as with Students' Unions, could help to better resource transition support.

When considering the provision of reasonable adjustments for disabled students, HEPs offer a range of standardised and funded support interventions in the areas of teaching and learning, assessment and physical access as well as more complex and specialist adjustments. However, the challenges in accessing this support are varied and profound. Disabled students experience barriers such as the inconsistent application of reasonable adjustments

<sup>10</sup> See: [UCAS Undergraduate end of cycle data resources 2023 | Undergraduate | UCAS](#)

between academic departments, as well as delays in receiving support, which sometimes only arrives after the first year of their studies. This could be compounded by the fact that there is clear confusion from staff around what can and cannot be reasonably funded by DSA – all of which is contributing to a significant experience gap between disabled students and their non-disabled peers.

In relation to specialist or more complex reasonable adjustments, disabled students commend the willingness and openness of staff (including both disability services staff and academic staff) to work together to agree appropriate next steps. However, disabled students again encounter significant delays before non-standard reasonable adjustments are put in place and are often required to repeatedly provide information about their disability to multiple people before such adjustments are implemented.

As in the implementation of transition support, it is recognised that a more joined-up approach is required, particularly between disability services staff and academic staff, in order to facilitate a better understanding of the individual circumstances of disabled students when putting in place reasonable adjustments. This can be supported by the modernisation and streamlining of information-sharing systems, as well as by increasing training opportunities for academic staff on inclusive practice.

Ultimately, HEP staff and students are eager for the sector to move towards inclusive practice, whereby providers implement initiatives such as UDL more widely. This should then release time for disability services to develop an anticipatory approach and thus negate the widespread need for ad-hoc support for individual students. Progress is slow, however, and in some areas, staff continue to lack an understanding of what is reasonable within an anticipatory lens, such as flexibility around attendance or the format of assessment.

The sector's approaches to monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of both transition support and reasonable adjustments in disabled students' inclusion are still in their infancy, and evidence in these areas is only just beginning to emerge. HEPs' capacity to carry out robust evaluation is limited and, thus, the data collected often relies heavily on anecdotal student feedback rather than any detailed assessment of the approach's impact on academic outcomes for disabled students, aspects of their student experience or an understanding of their intersectional identity. HEP staff have requested greater guidance on which evaluation frameworks to

use to support their approaches, as well as support with Theory of Change development to identify outcomes for Type 3 evaluation.

In particular, TASO's ongoing work with participating HEPs – supporting the findings of the 'What works' review to reduce equality gaps for disabled students (2023) – is a positive and relevant step in creating an opportunity for HEPs to build their internal evaluation expertise and learn about the efficacy of current practices in supporting disabled students.

## Recommendations

### Promotion of disability support

- IAG regarding transition support and reasonable adjustments is sometimes hidden on webpages, despite being a main port of call for disabled prospective students to find out what support they can access. A designated disability services webpage, signposting relevant support, should be fully accessible to all prospective students, regardless of whether they have shared a disability with their provider or not.
- A separate webpage detailing the transition support available, and signposting how to register with disability services, could also be beneficial in aiding early engagement.

### Transition support

- Where possible, transition support should not be delivered in isolation but should support a more holistic approach:
  - Transition support should be accompanied by the provision of clear and accessible IAG for disabled prospective students. This may include information on the type of support they can expect to access while in HE, as well as information about the differences in terminology between school and HE settings.
  - The literature and our findings suggest that transition support that extends into the academic year, or is relevant to other parts of the student journey, may be more impactful for students. Where possible, and to foster a greater sense of community, transition support should not be a 'one-off' event.
- The data suggests that transition support for disabled students during an all-student induction week can result in an overcrowded schedule for disabled students. Where possible, HEPs should

endeavour to provide multiple transition support approaches: this may include events held during the spring/summer to support early engagement, as well as during induction weeks to offer disabled students a more varied choice.

- As the previous literature suggests, disabled students with complex requirements and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to share their disability with their provider, supporting early disclosure from these groups will help ensure they can be identified to participate in transition support.
- The delivery of transition support is perceived to be resource-intensive by many HEP staff. It is recommended that a more joined-up, cross-departmental approach is adopted, including partnerships between disability services, widening participation teams and Student Unions.
- Novel transition support approaches that engage parents and supporters may help to alleviate the concerns of these groups around putting support in place, particularly when providing information around the transition from school to HE.
- HEPs should endeavour to accurately capture the number of disabled students attending each transition programme or event, in order to monitor engagement and meet increased demand where required.

### **Reasonable adjustments**

- Findings suggest that there is confusion about what support is DSA fundable, what is not DSA fundable, and what reasonable adjustments should be made available by the HEP as a matter of course in order to meet legal requirements under the Equality Act. There also appears to be a gap between the stated reasonable adjustments available to students, and students' experience of receiving those adjustments in a timely manner. We recommend that the sector ensures there is clarity about sources of funding and provision of support for disabled students.
- To aid clarity and strengthen sector knowledge and awareness of which adjustments are DSA fundable we recommend that the DfE ensure that guidance is accessible and clearly defined, and that this is effectively shared within HEPs with all staff tasked with delivering adjustments.

- The delivery of reasonable adjustments is inconsistent, varying between individual members of staff and academic departments. Increased collaboration is needed between academic staff and disability services staff.
- HEPs should consider exploring how systems could be streamlined to support the effective sharing of information.
- HEPs should seek to progress, embed and evaluate an inclusive approach, such as UDL, to reduce eventually the need for so many individual adjustments and to improve the timely implementation of more complex or specialist adjustments.
- To support this, HEPs should explore the potential to offer comprehensive training to staff, including on topics such as inclusive practice and UDL and, potentially, on competence standards to increase the likelihood of HEPs embedding flexibility in forms of assessment.
- The collection of data at more regular intervals and feedback identifying the reasonable adjustments that are most effective or most frequently implemented would help HEPs to better plan which adjustments to standardise or feed into an anticipatory approach.
- Consideration of ways to fund certain reasonable adjustments in-house would help provide additional or anticipatory support for students who are not eligible for DSA funding or are experiencing a delay in their support.
- HEPs should seek to survey and monitor how far disabled students experience the process and nature of reasonable adjustments. They should seek to ensure that most if not all disabled students feel confident and included in how they access reasonable adjustments, and in how those adjustments are delivered.

### **Evaluation methods**

- Approaches to evaluating transition support and reasonable adjustments are in their infancy, and evidence is still emerging. To support a more widespread and robust evaluation, the sector needs to improve capacity and training, to help all relevant staff to regularly monitor what works for disabled students, and which approaches are most effective.

- Evidence suggests that HEPs with smaller student cohorts, such as small and specialist providers, evaluate their support approaches less frequently. Representative bodies, such as GuildHE, could extend this activity by producing case studies as examples of good practice, or by exploring the use of [TASO's small n guidance](#).
- HEPs have suggested that they are unsure whether certain educational outcomes are directly related to the implementation of transition support and reasonable adjustments. Further support provided by the development of enhanced Theories of Change, clearly indicating medium- and longer-term outcomes, would be useful to the sector in collecting more causal evidence. The sector should also actively promote and share existing evaluation frameworks to aid the design and evaluation of transition support and reasonable adjustments.
- Qualitative evaluation, such as gathering feedback through interviews, focus groups or case studies, is well-suited to understanding the experiences of disabled students. HEPs should explore such methods further to strengthen and triangulate their evaluation practice.
- Regarding both transition support and reasonable adjustments, the evidence suggests that HEPs do not disaggregate their data to understand types of disability or how disability interacts with other equality characteristics, or the impact of disability on experiences. Ongoing research is required to understand which approaches are most effective, and for whom.
- Building on the previous point, the sector should seek to systematically include less frequently represented disabled student groups in their evaluation approaches, such as postgraduate students and students with unseen disabilities.





## APPENDIX A: SAMPLE

### Desk-based review sample

The desk-based review included 88 unique HEPs: 16 (18%) Russell Group providers, 18 (20%) specialist providers and 43 (49%) post-1992 providers. Finally, the sample included two FE colleges offering HE. Table 4 gives further detail on each provider's affiliation and mission group status, noting that HEPs can be affiliated to more than one category.

Data on each HEP was sourced through HESA. Where data was available, an additional column compares the proportions included in the desk-based review sample to the overall English HE sector.

**Table 4: Number and proportion of HEPs included in the desk-based review across identified affiliations including mission groups**

Provider affiliations	Desk-based frequency		Frequency in the English HE sector	
	N	%	N	% represented in sample
<b>Post-1992</b>	43	48%	67	64%
<b>Specialist</b>	18	20%	128	14%
<b>FE institution</b>	2	2%	158	1%
<b>Mission Group</b>				
<b>Cathedrals Group</b>	7	8%	14	50%
<b>Guild HE</b>	11	12%	56	20%
<b>Million Plus</b>	16	18%	16	100%
<b>Russell Group</b>	16	18%	20	80%
<b>University Alliance</b>	12	15%	14	86%
<b>Other</b>	6	7%	-	-
<b>No mission group</b>	20	22%	-	-

**Table 5: Number and proportion of HEPs included in the desk-based review sample across the spread of English geographical regions**

Geographical region	Desk-based frequency	
	N	%
East Midlands	8	9%
East of England	7	8%
London	17	19%
North East	3	3%
North West	9	10%
South East	12	14%
South West	10	11%
West Midlands	10	11%
Yorkshire and the Humber	8	9%
Nationwide/remote/distance learning	4	5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>100%</b>

## HEP staff survey sample

The HEP staff survey was targeted at HEP staff members with responsibility for implementing reasonable adjustments and/or transition support for disabled students. A total of 37 staff members completed the survey, from 32 unique HEPs. The responses were drawn from a convenience sample, as outlined in the body of this report.

Data on each HEP was sourced through HESA. In total, seven (19%) responses were received from specialist providers, 18 (49%) from post-1992 providers and two (5%) from FE providers. These proportions reflected those in the desk-based review. A detailed breakdown of each provider's affiliation and mission group status is shown in Table 6, with the caveat that HEPs can be affiliated to more than one category.

Where data was available, an additional column compares the proportions in the desk-based review sample to the overall English HE sector.

Table 6 also includes a breakdown of student numbers at each HEP: HEPs with fewer than 10,000 students are labelled as 'small and/or specialist' and those with more than 10,000 students are labelled as 'larger' in the body of this report. A total of 10 (27%) responses to the HEP staff survey were received from providers with fewer than 10,000 students in total, while 26 (70%) were received from providers with more than 10,000 students. No information was available on HESA regarding student numbers for one provider, and this provider is therefore not included under this categorisation in Table 6.

**Table 6: Number and proportion of HEP staff survey sample across identified affiliations including mission groups**

Provider affiliations/student numbers	HEP staff survey frequency		Frequency in the England HE sector	
	N	%	N	% represented in sample
<b>Post-1992</b>	18	49%	67	27%
<b>Specialist</b>	7	19%	128	4%
<b>FE institution</b>	2 <sup>11</sup>	5%	158	1%
<b>Mission Group</b>				
<b>Cathedrals Group</b>	3	8%	14	21%
<b>Guild HE</b>	6	16%	56	11%
<b>Million Plus</b>	3	8%	16	18%
<b>Russell Group</b>	9	24%	20	45%
<b>University Alliance</b>	6	16%	14	43%
<b>Other</b>	2	5%	-	-
<b>No mission group</b>	8	22%	-	-
<b>Total student numbers</b>				
<b>Fewer than 10,000 students</b>	10	27%	-	-
<b>More than 10,000 students</b>	26	70%	-	-

Table 7 outlines the distribution of providers included in the HEP staff survey sample across the regions of England, including one provider (two respondents) that offered online/nationwide provision. As in the desk-based review, the highest proportion of respondents were from HEPs located in London (27%).

**Table 7: Number of providers included in the HEP staff survey sample across the spread of English geographical regions**

Geographical region	HEP staff survey frequency	
	N	%
<b>East Midlands</b>	1	2%
<b>East of England</b>	0	0%
<b>London</b>	10	27%
<b>North East</b>	1	2%
<b>North West</b>	1	2%

11 FE institutions have been linked to their degree-awarding university for analysis.

Geographical region	HEP staff survey frequency	
South East	3	8%
South West		19%
West Midlands	5	14%
Yorkshire and the Humber	7	19%
Nationwide/remote/distance learning	2	5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>100%</b>

### In-depth staff interviews/focus group sample

A purposive sample of 16 participants took part in HEP staff interviews or focus groups, representing 11 unique HEPs. It should be noted that one HEP in the sample is jointly owned by two individual HEPs, but is counted as one for the purposes of this report.

Data on each HEP was sourced through HESA. In total, four (36%) HEPs were specialist, and seven (64%) were post-1992. No FE providers were included in the in-depth/focus group sample. There was a higher proportion of HEPs with a 'specialist' or 'Guild HE' affiliation than in the HEP staff survey, particularly because one focus group focussed on the experiences of small and/or specialist HEPs. A detailed breakdown of each provider's affiliation and mission group status is included in Table 8.

Where data was available, an additional column compares the proportions in the desk-based review sample to the English HE sector as a whole.



## Student focus group sample

Disabled students were recruited to participate in three separate focus groups. During the recruitment phase, we collected data in several categories which were used to define the make-up of the sample.

A total of 26 disabled students took part in the focus groups, with a range of or multiple disabilities. Three postgraduate students participated, representing 12% of the total sample. A detailed breakdown of the sample is provided in Table 8.

**Table 8: Number and proportion of disabled students in the disabled student focus group sample**

Demographics		Frequency <sup>12</sup>	
Category	Sub-category	N	%
			35%
			58%
			4%
	Prefer not to say	1	4%
	White	19	73%
			8%
			8%
			12%
Level of study	Undergraduate	23	88%
	Postgraduate	3	12%
<b>Total</b>		<b>26</b>	<b>100%</b>

<sup>12</sup> Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

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## APPENDIX C: DISCUSSION GUIDES

### Student focus group

#### Perceptions of transition support (up to 20 minutes)

*I'd like to use the first part of this focus group to explore your views and experiences of transition support. As a reminder, by transition support, we mean any programmes or initiatives that specifically support disabled students entering higher education for the first time. Please don't worry if you have never participated in such programmes or initiatives, as your feedback and suggestions are still appreciated.*

1. Can anyone recall any transition support you may have received as a disabled student entering your university?
  - Prompt: If yes, can you describe this in more detail? In what way was it targeted at/ designed for disabled students, i.e. by impairment type?
  - Prompt: Was it a one-off initiative or did it extend into the academic year?
  - Prompt: How did this transition support, if at all, meet your requirements as a disabled student entering HE?
  - Prompt: If you cannot recall anything specific, what do you envisage transition support for disabled students might look like?
2. How aware, if at all, were you of the transition support available to disabled students at your university?
  - Prompt: How was the support communicated to you, and at what stage in your application journey? Did you find this information online, or through contact with your disability service?
  - Prompt: How easy or difficult was it to get transition support in place? Was your university proactive in getting this set up?
  - Prompt: Would any other ways be more effective in informing you about transition support available?

How important do you consider transition support for disabled students to be, and why?

- Prompt: What sort of impact do you think transition support programmes might have for disabled students transitioning into HE?
- Prompt: From a personal perspective, what impact has it had on you? Consider the short and longer-term impacts on your (i) study and, (ii) sense of belonging at university.

3. Are there any gaps in or improvements to transition support for disabled students that you can identify/recommend?

- Prompt: Can you recall any successes/what has worked well in relation to transition support?

#### Perceptions of reasonable adjustments (up to 20 minutes)

*Thank you for your contributions so far. In this next section, I am going to ask your views on reasonable adjustments while studying at university.*

4. Firstly, are you aware of the types of reasonable adjustment available to disabled students at your provider?
  - Prompt: Are you aware of what is provided as standard, versus those interventions available through funding such as the DSA?
5. If you feel comfortable sharing, please can you let us know what reasonable adjustments you currently receive.
  - Prompt: What was your experience in accessing these reasonable adjustments? Was it an easy or difficult process? What challenges did you experience?
  - Prompt: Have these reasonable adjustments been tailored to you or your specific requirements in any way?
  - Prompt: Have you received any reasonable adjustments that were deemed more complex, and if so, what was your experience in accessing these?

6. In your view, how effective are your reasonable adjustments in supporting and enhancing your access to study?

- Prompt: Can you single out any reasonable adjustments that have been particularly effective?

7. Are there any gaps in or improvements to reasonable adjustments that you can identify/recommend?

- Prompt: Can you recall any successes/what has worked well in relation to accessing reasonable adjustments at your university?

### **Concluding statements (up to 15 minutes)**

*In this final section, I would like to focus on the positive aspects of support provided to you as a disabled student at your university.*

8. I'd like each of you to describe one thing that your university does well in terms of disability support.

- Prompt: This could be either in transition support or reasonable adjustments, or support more widely.

9. Are there any other recommendations you would like to offer your university in terms of transition support or reasonable adjustments that you think would improve your experience as a disabled student?

## **Staff interviews/focus groups**

### **Transition support for disabled students (15/20 minutes)**

I would like to start by asking you to think about approaches to transition support for disabled students.

- Can you describe any general approaches to transition support that you currently offer to all students entering your university?
  - Prompt: Do any of these approaches contain specific elements for disabled students?
- Can you describe any novel approaches your university is taking to support disabled students' transition into HE?
  - Prompt: Can you describe this approach in more detail?

- Prompt: Is this designed for all disabled students or tailored to a specific impairment type?

- Prompt: What led to the implementation of this approach? Can you describe the background data or evidence that drove this?

• How do you typically communicate this transition support to disabled students entering your provider?

- Prompt: At what point on their application journey do you typically communicate?

• What are some of the challenges to and opportunities for providing transition support to disabled students within your provider?

- Prompt: Are any of these, in your opinion, unique to your context?

• What, if any, monitoring and/or evaluation approaches do you take to assess the effectiveness of transition support for disabled students at your institution?

- Prompt: Can you outline the methodologies you use?

- Prompt: Are your monitoring and evaluation disaggregated in any way to understand the impact on different groups?

- Prompt: To what extent are disabled students included in the monitoring and evaluation of transition support?

- Prompt: Can you outline in a little more detail what your evidence is telling you?

- Prompt: If you have not conducted any evaluation, what are the reasons for this?

### **Reasonable adjustment approaches (15/20 minutes)**

I am now going to ask you about your approaches to providing reasonable adjustments for disabled students.

• What are some of the reasonable adjustments you provide as a matter of course for disabled students?

- Prompt: Are any of these easier or more difficult to implement within your context?

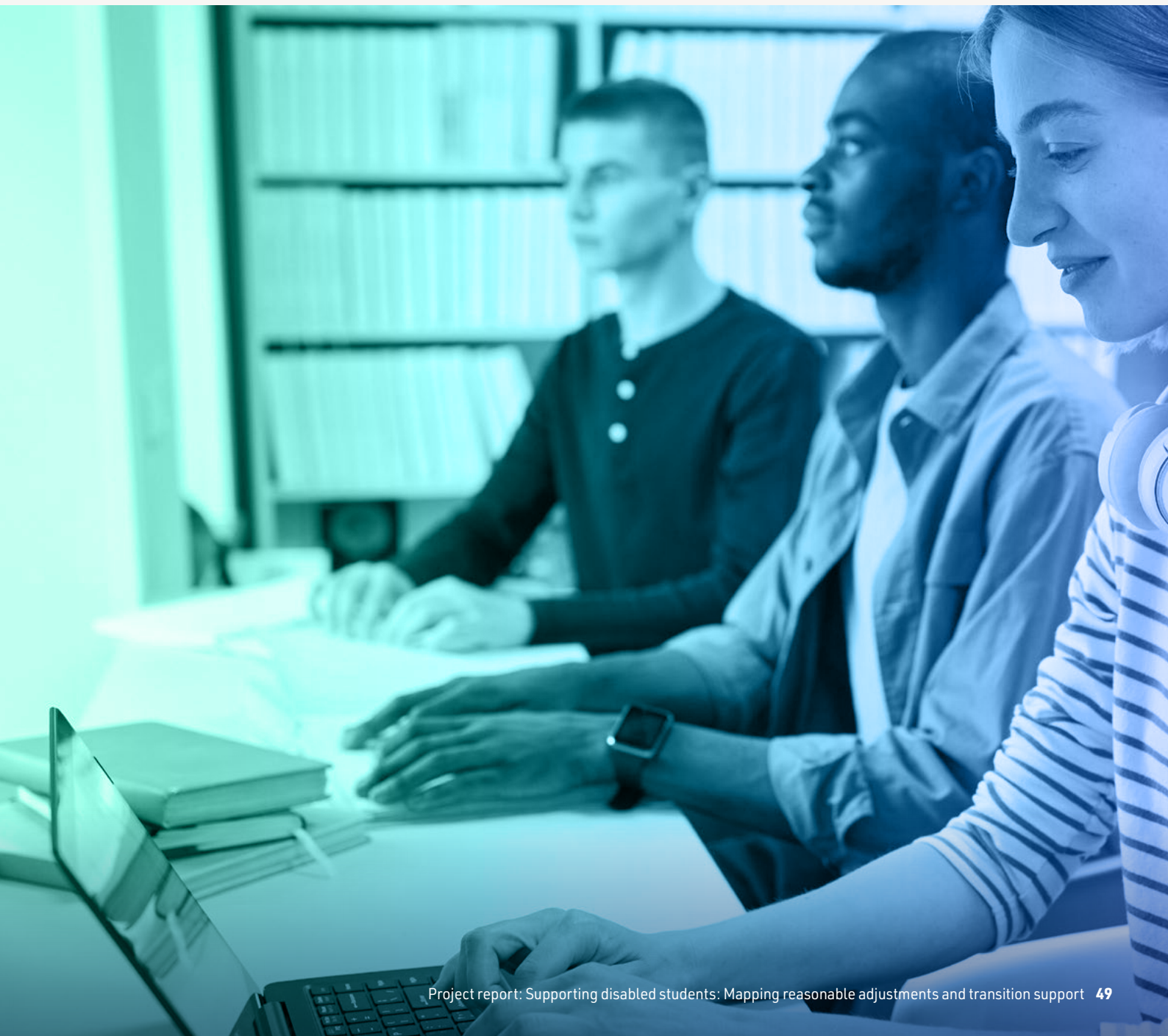
• Can you describe any novel approaches your university takes to provide reasonable adjustments to disabled students?



- Prompt: What led to this approach? Can you describe any of the background data or evidence that drove this decision?
- Prompt: Are any of these approaches tailored to individual impairment types?
- What are some of the successes and challenges you have experienced in developing new approaches to reasonable adjustments?
- Prompt: Are any of these, in your opinion, unique to your context?
- What, if any, monitoring and/or evaluation approaches do you take to assess the effectiveness of reasonable adjustments for disabled students at your institution?
- Prompt: Can you outline the methodologies you use?
- Prompt: To what extent are disabled students included in the monitoring and evaluation of transition support?
- Prompt: Is your monitoring and evaluation disaggregated in any way to understand the impact on different groups?
- Prompt: Can you outline in a little more detail what your evidence is telling you?
- Prompt: If you have not conducted any evaluation, what are the reasons for this?

### Concluding statements (5 minutes)

- Finally, are there any other key learnings you wish to share in developing support for disabled students?



## APPENDIX D: RAW HEP STAFF SURVEY DATA ON PREVALENCE OF REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS

The survey findings suggest that there is some confusion around which reasonable adjustments are funded through the DSA and which should be provided by the HEP. It is important to state that there is no suggestion that HEPs are administering DSA funding inappropriately. The point here is that staff may be unclear about reasonable adjustment provision. In order to demonstrate the confusion we have included the raw numbers of providers that offer reasonable adjustments, and their source of funding as understood by the person completing the survey. The findings of the survey align with similar research findings, and inform our recommendation that there needs to be greater clarity and transparency about reasonable adjustments so that disabled students have an inclusive, thriving experience in higher education.

For clarification purposes we have indicated where the HEP is expected to ensure that the adjustment is in place. Please also note that that provision varies in the four nations in the UK, and that while we have only surveyed English it is possible that, for example, a student from Scotland but studying in England will be supported by the provisions applicable in Scotland

Although the numbers may not seem large, inclusivity is essential and not receiving the support that they are entitled to will have a negative impact on the student journey into, through and beyond higher education. The risk is that students may be given incorrect information about reasonable adjustments, or not be directed to the appropriate department or person who can help organise support, and so support that should be provided as standard may be delayed.

**Table 9. Number of providers that offer each type of reasonable adjustment related to teaching and learning, and source of funding**

Type of adjustment	Both	DSA funded	Standard	None
	12			
				6
			33	
<b>Lecture capture</b>	3	6	21	7
<b>Reasonable adjustments for field trips and/or placements</b>	2	2		
				4
		1		
<b>Accessible timetabling</b>				
		1	19	16

## Clarification notes:

The adjustments below are expected to be typically provided by the HEP, unless specified:

- Designated classroom seating arrangements.
- Reasonable adjustments for field trips and/or placements.

**Table 10. Number of providers who offered each type of reasonable adjustment related to assessment**

Type of adjustment	Both	DSA funded	Standard	None
Reader and or amanuensis scribe in exams	4	4	26	3
Use of a PC laptop in exams	3	2	28	4
Provision of adapted exam materials	2	2	27	6
Exam rest breaks	2	1	29	5
Allowing students to bring food, drink and/or medication into exams	2	1	25	9
Additional exam time	2	2	31	2
Marking assessments and exams in accordance with marking guidelines for individual disabilities/conditions	1		19	17
Flexibility with extenuating circumstances	1		25	11
Flexibility with assessment deadline	1	1	27	8
Flexibility in the form of assessment	1	3	20	13

## Clarification notes:

- Reader and/or amanuensis scribe in exams. DSA stopped funding these roles for new students from the 2016/17 academic year, so there will be vanishingly few students remaining who are having this support funded through DSA.

The adjustments below are expected to be typically provided by the HEP, unless specified:

- Provision of adapted exam materials.
- Exam rest breaks.
- Allowing students to bring food, drink and/or medication into exams.
- Allocating students to a suitable room for exams.
- Additional exam time.
- Marking assessments in accordance with guidelines
- Flexibility with extenuating circumstances.
- Flexibility with assessment deadline.
- Flexibility in the form of assessment.

**Table 11. Number of providers who offered each type of reasonable adjustment related to physical accessibility**

Type of adjustment	Both	DSA funded	Standard	None
Allocation of specific accommodation on campus	3	1	25	8
Adjustments to buildings, teaching venues and/or accommodation	2	2	28	5
Access to a quiet working space	2	1	26	8
Individualised emergency evaluation plans	1	2	31	3
Fridge/freezer on campus	1	2	26	8
Car parking for blue badge holders	1	1	30	5
Review of teaching locations with the student			17	27
Facilities for charging powered wheelchairs		1	9	27

### Clarification notes:

The adjustments below are expected to be typically provided by the HEP, unless specified:

- Allocation of specific accommodation on campus – this is a matter for the HEP. Assuming this refers to HEP-owned accommodation, DSA is not available towards the additional costs of accommodation where the accommodation is provided, managed or controlled by the HEP or its agent. DSA is available for the additional costs of accommodation not provided by the HEP or its agent, but only where the additional costs are incurred solely because of the student’s disability.
- Adjustments to buildings, teaching venues and/or accommodation.
- Access to a quiet working space.
- Individualised emergency evacuation plans.
- Fridge freezer on campus – DSA can fund a fridge if a student needs it to store medication and communal facilities are not available, but this would generally be for the student’s own accommodation (not a general one on campus).
- Car parking for blue badge holders – generally the provision of car parking would be a matter for the HEP, but DSA occasionally funds this in exceptional circumstances (e.g. where the HEP has no car parking provision at all).
- Facilities for charging powering wheelchairs.

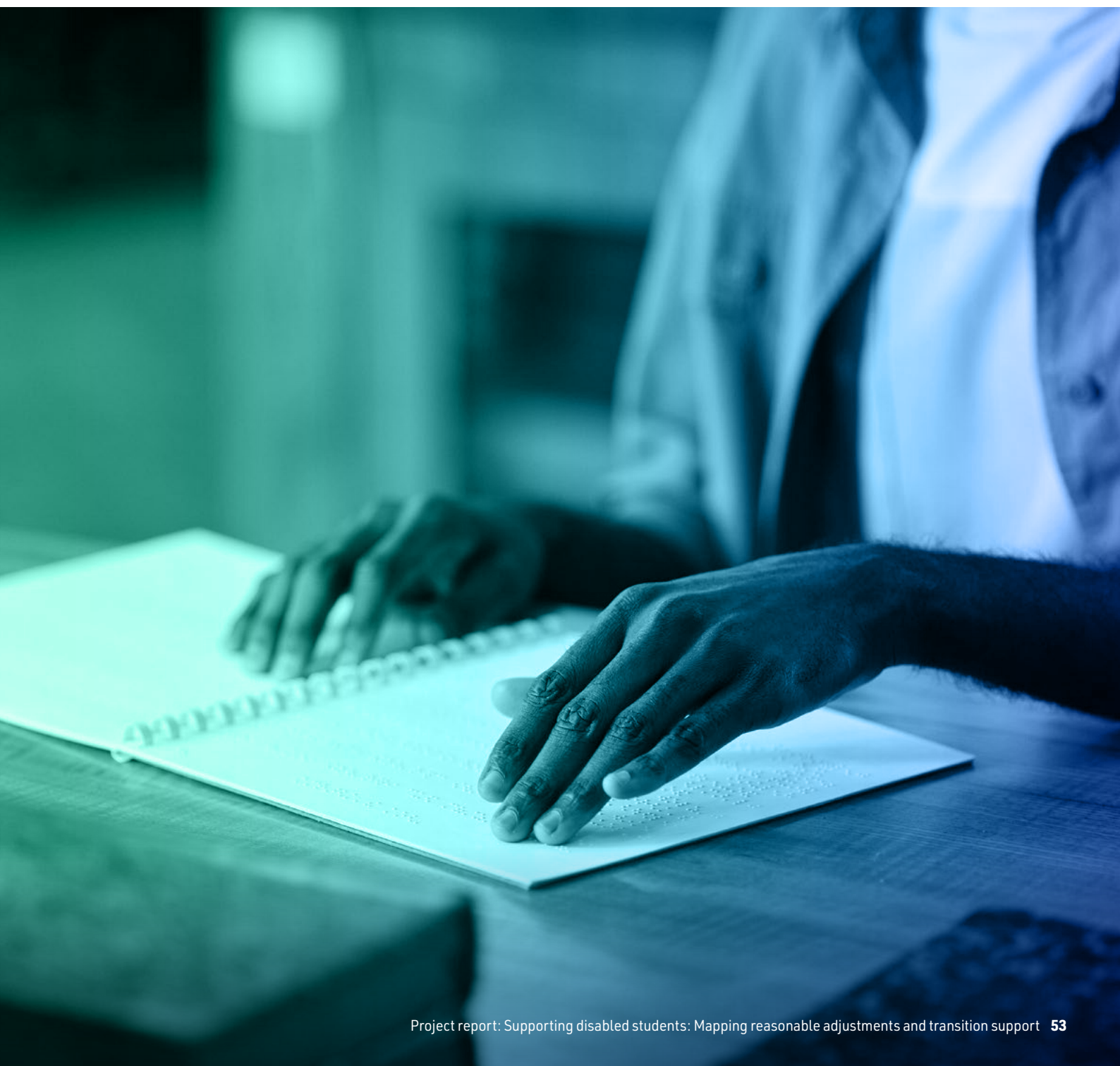
**Table 12. Number of providers who offered each type of reasonable adjustment related to specialist/complex reasonable adjustment**

Type of adjustment	Both	DSA funded	Standard	None
Provision for disabled students with multiple conditions or complex medical needs	15	4	14	4
Sighted guide support	11	12	8	6
Hearing technology	10	3	18	6
British Sign Language interpreters	10	16	7	4
Deaf alerted systems	6	2	17	12
Assistance dogs on campus	1	2	29	5
A sensory room	1	2	8	28

## Clarification notes:

The adjustments below are expected to be typically provided by the HEP, unless specified:

- Assistance dogs on campus – this is a matter for the HEP.
- A sensory room – this is a matter for the HEP.



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**TASO** is an independent charity that aims to improve lives through evidence-based practice in higher education (HE). We support HE professionals through research, toolkits and evaluation guidance on what works best to eliminate equality gaps. We inform practitioners of the best available evidence and produce new evidence on the most effective approaches. TASO is an affiliate 'What Works' centre and is part of the UK Government's What Works Movement.