

# **IHE Inclusive Practice Project report**

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**DATE**

December 2025

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# Introduction

## About the project and IHE Members

Student choice sits at the heart of IHE's mission—woven through our values of diversity, flexibility, innovation, student focus, and collaboration. Our IHE Members believe every student should be able to shape a higher education journey that fits their time, pace, and preferred environment. Choice is not a luxury: it is the foundation of equal opportunity, belonging, and inclusion. IHE's 2030 strategy commits us to championing student interests and ensuring public policy reflects the diverse and evolving needs of all learners<sup>1</sup>.

There is established recognition of the importance of inclusive practice in creating student choice. In 2017 the Department for Education (DfE) published their Inclusive Education Framework<sup>2</sup>, and since then we've seen a number of government and regulatory responses to supporting underrepresented groups, including the Higher Education Mental Health Implementation Taskforce (HEMHIT), the Access and Participation Task and Finish Group, and most recent Office for Students (OfS) proposals for a revised model of collaborative outreach activity which continues to place an emphasis on creating diverse and accessible routes into and through higher education to enable real student choice for those from all backgrounds<sup>3</sup>.

Across the IHE membership we see a high prevalence of students from 'at risk' groups<sup>4</sup>, a distinct part of our members' strategic aims is to deliver inclusive approaches to supporting their access into and success during and after higher education study.

39% of undergraduate students are from IMD Quintiles one and two at IHE Members, compared to 27% for the sector. A significant proportion are also mature - comprising 62% of students at all levels, and 66% at undergraduate level only<sup>5</sup>. Specialist institutions, like those in the IHE membership, are also more likely to have high proportions of disabled students. In 2023/24, 22% of students at specialist providers had a disability, compared to 18% for the sector as a whole<sup>6</sup>. Sector-wide data also shows that students with disabilities are more likely to study creative courses, with several IHE Member specialists in this field<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> IHE (2025) [2030 Strategy](#)

<sup>2</sup> Department for Education (2017), [Inclusive Teaching and Learning in Higher Education as a route to Excellence](#)

<sup>3</sup> Office for Students (2025), [Regional access partnerships – call for evidence](#)

<sup>4</sup> Student characteristics identified by the Office for Students as most likely to indicate risks to equality of opportunity: Office for Students [Equality of opportunity risk register: student characteristics](#)

<sup>5</sup> Data for 2023/24, taken from HEIDI+ July 2025

This project explores how our members build inclusive environments for students often underrepresented in traditional models—showing how, especially for smaller providers, inclusive design offers real choice and better outcomes. These models frequently challenge regulatory approaches that prioritise targets over effective practice. As so often in inclusion, practice runs ahead of theory. That is why this project focuses on the practical: the case studies and real-world examples of inclusive practice across our membership. We wanted to understand how the groups of students that members are recruiting influenced their practice, and how far their practice influenced the groups of students accessing their provision. Our aim was to identify the inclusive approaches being used by IHE Members and inform a deeper understanding of the role of these in achieving equality of opportunity and true student choice. We also aimed to explore further the barriers and enablers experienced by institutions, to support the further growth of these approaches both amongst our membership and more widely in the sector.

Our purpose was threefold:

- To understand the strengths of independent providers in removing barriers that underrepresented groups experience before, during and after higher education study; and therefore, the contribution they can make to achieving equality of opportunity and student choice.
- To support the further development of good practice amongst IHE Members and more widely.
- To demonstrate the impact that inclusive practice could have in addressing risks to equality of opportunity, providing an alternative to the current regulatory focus on targeted interventions.

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<sup>6</sup> As defined in the OfS consultation on an approach to world-leading specialist provider funding, specialist providers are those with at least 75 per cent of total full-time equivalent (FTE) higher education and further education student population in one broad subject area or at least 90 per cent of total higher and further education student FTE population in no more than two broad subject areas.

[Office for students \(2022\) Funding for specialist providers](#)

<sup>7</sup> UCAS (2022) [Next steps: What is the experience of disabled students in education?](#)

## Summary

This report sets out the findings of our research. We firstly outline three of the most distinctive characteristics of inclusive practice across the IHE membership and then explore what these approaches look like in practice through a series of examples and case studies.

## Method

Our research comprised of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussion with a total of 19 IHE Members. These were:

- The Academy of Live Technology
- Bloomsbury Institute London
- ICMP / AD Education UK
- The NDA Foundation
- ASU London
- Cambridge School of Visual and Performing Arts
- The Dyson Institute of Engineering and Technology
- The Academy of Contemporary Music
- Waltham International College
- Ruskin Mill Centre for Practice
- The Counselling Foundation
- The College of Osteopaths
- The Institute for Social and Educational Equity
- University Campus of Football Business
- Organisational Learning Centre
- The Chickenshed Theatre Trust
- Point Blank Music School
- Leiths Education
- The JGA Group

The areas we explored in discussion with participants were:

- Motivations for using inclusive practice and the impact of these.
- Examples of inclusive practice and how these are designed and implemented.
- The role of student engagement and partnership.
- How we know 'what works' in inclusive practice.

We would also like to thank the project steering group, who contributed their expertise and experience to shape the research design and identify the themes and conclusions presented here.

- Harriet Dunbar-Morris, Pro Vice-Chancellor and Provost, The University of Buckingham
- Becky Forbin, Higher Education Lecturer, Waltham International College
- Paul Miller, Professor of Educational Leadership and Social Justice, The Institute for Social and Educational Equity
- Kerstin Rolfe, Principal, BCNO
- Sarah O'flynn, MA Course Lead PSTE, Ruskin Mill Centre for Practice
- Edward Dimsdale, Head of the Graduate School, Cambridge School of Visual and Performing Arts
- Andrew Paterson, Senior Lecturer in Football Business and Marketing, University Campus of Football Business
- Rebecca Bouckley, Student Support and Engagement Manager, The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust

## Definitions

We based our discussion on two widely used sector definitions of inclusive practice:

**“Intentional development of approaches that support all students to thrive... practices that [work] for the diverse range of students at our institutions and treats them all like they matter”<sup>8</sup>**

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<sup>8</sup> Advance HE [Framework for Inclusive Learning and Teaching](#)

**“all students are given an equal opportunity to succeed, independent of their background or demographic characteristics. Adopting an inclusive approach recognises that some students are systematically disadvantaged by exclusive practices, and proactively ensures that all students have equal opportunities to succeed”<sup>9</sup>**

The project Steering Group drew out the following as essential elements of our understanding of what constitutes inclusive practice:

- Practice that is intentionally designed and delivered.
- Practice that recognises and seeks to address structural inequality / systematic barriers for groups of students.
- Practice that draws upon the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL).
- Practice that is for all students – but often designed with recognition of the barriers experienced by a particular group or groups.

## **Section 1: What’s distinctive about inclusive approaches in IHE Members?**

Our research identified three characteristics of inclusive approaches that we see in IHE Members. We also explored how the context of small settings and/or specialist providers contributes to these.

### **A. Strategic inclusive design**

What is distinctive about the practice at IHE Members is that inclusivity is strategically designed into the very foundations of a provider and its provision. For many, the intention to address systematic disadvantage and ‘create a level playing field’ for students is built into their very purpose and values. For some, this is externally driven too – with industry-embedded programmes built around an explicit purpose of diversifying a profession or sector.

What this results in is not taking an existing model and changing pieces of it to be more inclusive, but instead strategically designing the whole institution around the needs of a group or groups who would otherwise be excluded from higher education. As we have

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<sup>9</sup> QAA [Inclusive Education Framework](#)

set out already in the introduction, across the IHE membership there is a high prevalence of students from one or more 'at risk' groups – in particular mature students, those from low-income backgrounds, and disabled and neurodivergent students. A key focus is on removing barriers – across the entire student lifecycle - for those who might not meet 'standard' higher education entry requirements or have mixed prior educational experiences. This strategic design then attracts more students underrepresented in other parts of the sector, creating a positive circle that drives a continual commitment to doing things with inclusivity in mind.

**“[Inclusive practice is] finding the barriers that exist that keep people being educated separately, not having access to education at all in many senses, or access to the same education as people who are who are their peers, and who might live in the same communities”**

**“For us [inclusive practice] means making sure that everybody we come into contact with who wants to join our courses are given a level playing field in terms of being able to access and engage in the courses that we deliver, regardless of what their background or any particular learning needs are”**

**“Our focus is to... change lives through education because we focus on the students that get left behind by the traditional systems. So those who cannot access mainstream universities because either they can't travel to them, they can't commit to a random timetable because they have caring commitments, or they have work commitments, or whatever the case may be... it's making sure that they still have that same access of opportunity to be able to progress their careers and their lives”**

### **In inclusive design every part of the experience is included**

For IHE Members, inclusive approaches are built into all parts of the student experience. This is a result of their strategic inclusive design: not changing parts of a model but

creating it from the ground-up to meet the needs of the students they are recruiting. A key feature of this is recognising that all aspects of what a student experiences are important. The impact of inclusive teaching, learning and assessment will be undermined by student support or a wider student experience that excludes.

**“It only takes one part of the process to not be inclusive for the rest of it to fall apart”**

**“Inclusivity and equality and well-being is at the centre of everything we do, whether it be from the prospectus, admissions, student engagement and the actual programme and assignment and assessment tutorials... It starts at the design of our course”**

They also recognise that these different aspects need to be thought of holistically, and not as separate to the academic experience. The challenges and circumstances their students bring with them are not left ‘outside of the classroom’ and the most effective way to support success is by embedding student support within the academic experience. This is possible in smaller settings, where professional services and academic teams work more closely together and are often co-located; and where in some instances staff have both teaching and pastoral responsibilities. This facilitates individualised support and flexibility, also key features of the personalised approach we have already described.

**“You can never underestimate when a student is experiencing barriers in their personal life and their everyday life how many of those barriers come in mentally into everything that they're doing, including their educational life...”**

**“So everything that we do... whether it's programmes, curriculum, support... is all about inclusivity and making it accessible for people in the way that's accessible for them, not in a way we assume”**

## **B. Personalised approach**

For these providers, inclusivity means knowing your students and making learning and their experience accessible for them. Universal approaches that create accessibility for all have a place and indeed are built into the design of teaching and support. What makes this distinctive and effective is the emphasis on each student's individual experience and barriers, with flexibility and choice as the key principles for addressing them.

Smaller cohorts and an emphasis on one-one and small group delivery make this possible, resulting in an environment where students know and are known by members of staff. This approach recognises that many students recruited may not disclose a disability, learning need, or other life circumstance that could create a barrier to learning at the point of enrolment. Individual relationships therefore become pivotal, building trust to encourage disclosure and enabling a personalised approach to whatever need is identified.

**“[students] just need someone to see who [they] are”**

**“[students] feel part of something and that they have a voice... whereas elsewhere...you might feel like a tiny fish in an ocean full of people”**

**“We have a significantly mature group, and they do come with vulnerabilities that they don't want to express... When you ask a question about disability, they have significant [challenges], but they won't disclose it... [So we need to have a] constant vigilance and consciousness about identifying barriers or emotional sensitivity to certain academic and physical processes... What you're essentially trying to do is build a lot of trust so that students will start to disclose”**

## **C. Focus on transitions**

IHE Members recognise that their students need more time and support across the often-many stages of their student journey, and their first steps beyond. An embedded focus on transitions is a core part of providers' strategic design.

They take an 'applicant to alumni approach', addressing barriers experienced by student groups they are targeting and embedding transition support across the student lifecycle

for all. There is a unique emphasis on the pre-arrival period, centred on getting to know students and creating a supported transition into higher education. They continue this through proactively addressing barriers that exist at transitions on the student journey: assessment points, levels of study and post-graduation.

**“So we work really hard to anticipate a level of need from students from day one and ensure that everything is inclusive from day one. So we're talking from applicants and prospective students all the way through to end of the program with us, and then engagement with our graduates as well”**

**“We take an approach of applicant to alumni student journey, and how we look to try and embed inclusive practice through the very point of when we market our courses all the way through to when we're starting to communicate with our alumni networks and how we get them involved”**

Another distinctive aspect is that preparing for post-graduation is embedded from day one. In many cases programmes have been designed to equip students for a career, with transition at all stages designed to create the stepping stones towards this successful progression. This is often rooted in institutional mission: not simply removing barriers to education for its own sake but placing at the heart of their work the creation of pathways that enable learners from all backgrounds to achieve their goals.

**“I've seen a lot of students come through our system who have told me I never thought that this was something that I could do, because I've always been told I'm not the type of person who will be able to do this, and they've gone on to be really successful entrepreneurs or really successful careers within their own right, and having that inclusive environment is what made the difference”**

## Section 2: What does this look like in practice?

These characteristics of inclusive practice are seen across the range of approaches being used by IHE Members.

We have identified five areas of practice which most of these approaches fall into:

- Design
- Transitions
- Teaching and learning
- Assessment
- Support

For each of these we have identified common features across IHE Members and demonstrate impact through a series of illustrative case studies.

### Design

IHE Members design their provision to address the barriers a group or groups of students experience in traditional, exclusive, models of higher education.

There are three common aspects to this:

- Inclusive access and entry requirements
- Flexible programme structures and pathways
- Flexible delivery models

**“...[Inclusive design is] strategies you need to put in place within the structure of what you're offering before you even think about what you're delivering... To make it accessible for people at a time when it suits them, at a pace that suits them in a place that suits them”**

#### Inclusive access and entry requirements

Inclusive routes into study are designed to remove barriers that previous educational and life experiences have created. They anticipate barriers rather than test success and in doing so create a pathway into higher education for those who are not the demographic of the mainstream model: mature students, those without traditional

qualifications, or those who have not had opportunity to develop particular skills or subject knowledge. Alternative entry requirements are common, including portfolio/essay submissions and individual interviews. Bridging courses and modules are also a feature, enabling students both to meet entry requirements at level 4 and building the confidence needed to study at a higher level. Also common are clear and well-presented processes to recognise prior learning for admission or to proceed onto an accelerated programme, which enables them to still make the same progress (and have a lower financial and time commitment overall) than if they joined the programme at entry level.

## **Programme structures and pathways**

Flexibility is a core feature of IHE Members' inclusive design, starting with multiple and / or flexible enrolment dates that enable students to start their studies at a time that suits them. Mechanisms for students to pause their studies if needed are clearly signposted, with many IHE Members designing in or promoting exit qualifications at different stages on the programme pathway. Some programmes have a flexible duration, allowing extended periods of study to those who need it to meet academic or professional or clinical requirements. While these features may be evident in more traditional models, it is the transparency and clarity of the offer that differs; creating flexibility designed to maximise accessibility, rather than a consequence of failure.

## **Delivery models**

Flexibility is also seen in delivery models. IHE Members recognise that the question of how, when and where you study is as important for student choice as subject. Online, blended and evening/weekend learning options are common within members with inclusive missions to enable students to fit their studies around other life circumstances. They seek to remove geographic barriers, recognising that not everyone wants or can relocate to study, with flexible in-person requirements where these are needed (such as block learning or weekend attendance). As many programmes are industry-embedded or have a professional component, providers seek to make this accessible – for example by enabling placements or projects to take place in any location or structuring these so that students are only required to be in a particular location for set periods of time.

### **Case study: The NDA Foundation**

The NDA Foundation is a not-for-profit Education Foundation based in Nottingham, established over 35 years ago through the National Design Academy [NDA], and more recently, the National Motorsport Academy [NMA]. The NDA Foundation [the Academy] delivers online courses globally, from diploma to master's level, with a mission to widen access to flexible, affordable further and higher education, and is the only institution to offer fully flexible online Interior Design, and Motorsport Engineering

and Business education that is nationally and internationally recognised - thanks to courses that are accredited by Ofqual or validated by an established UK university.

The Academy predominantly attracts mature students, with a significant portion balancing study alongside personal and professional responsibilities. The Academy typically has between 1000 and 1200 students in study at any one time. Approximately 40% of these are aged 20-29, 30% are aged 30-39, and 20% fall within the 40-49 age bracket. Many of these students are either returning to education after a break or embarking on a new career path, valuing the flexibility the Academy offers to support their diverse life commitments.

The programmes and delivery model have been designed around meeting the needs of these and other students who want to pursue a specialist education and achieve their career goals, but who face barriers in achieving this in traditional settings – whether that's location, study patterns or entry requirements.

They firstly recognise the diverse prior educational and life experiences their students come to them with and have designed access to their programmes in such a way that allows students to join at a level that matches their readiness for higher level study whilst encouraging and facilitating progression through their qualifications. This starts with offering short courses and modules that act as a bridge for those not ready to study at diploma or degree level, so they can develop the knowledge and skills they need to go on to their chosen level in an affordable and accessible way. There are also fast-track blended learning options available for those students whose aim is to secure necessary recognised prior learning and progress at a quicker pace.

They offer an alternative to traditional models of higher education study through programmes with in-built flexibility, starting with enabling students to enrol and commence their studies on any day of the year. The Academy doesn't have student cohorts, nor standard academic years. Instead, students engage on a roll-on roll-off basis, each working to a personal learning plan tailored to their individual start date.

Teaching is delivered online through a responsive bespoke virtual learning studio that allows students to access content at any time and from any location, complemented by online one-to-one and group tutorials. Flexibility extends to academic support, which is designed to be highly flexible, with the tutor team collectively covering weekdays, evenings, and weekends to ensure students receive guidance whenever they need it.

The Academy offers a full progression pathway from level 3 through to level 7, enabling students to advance their qualifications within the same flexible online learning model. This continuity allows learners to build their skills and confidence over time while maintaining the flexibility that first attracted them - supporting their need to balance study with work, family and other personal commitments.

Access to student loans, fee payment plans, and progression scholarships, help to address financial barriers to continued study and create an environment in which all students are encouraged to achieve the highest level of qualification and achieve their personal and career goals.

### **Case study: Ruskin Mill Centre for Practice**

Ruskin Mill Centre for Practice (RMCP) is a higher education provider under the Ruskin Mill Trust, providing higher education courses for staff and external applicants including a Master of Arts (MA) in Practical Skills Therapeutic Education (PSTE) and soon to expand their offer to include an MA in Transformative Learning. As specialists in Special Educational Needs (SEN) education, inclusive practice is embedded in their ethos as an institution that shapes all aspects of the programme.

This starts with flexible entry requirements that enable learners of all backgrounds to access postgraduate study, and their admissions process is designed to ensure students understand and are prepared for the expectations at this level. They recognise and value the professional and personal experience and skills applicants bring, and having a first degree is not a requirement to study their programme. Students can demonstrate their suitability for master's level study through an essay or project, and small cohorts mean that every applicant is interviewed. This process not only enables students to demonstrate how their individual experience makes them suitable for the programme but also gives opportunity to ask questions about the course requirements and discuss their individual support needs.

The delivery model is designed to meet the needs of adult learners, most of whom are studying alongside their professional commitments. Each module is taught in two-week blocks, with accommodation and food provided to remove barriers to in-person attendance, with structured contact and engagement in between to support students to progress their learning independently and complete their assessments. Each student is allocated a tutor for personalised support with their learning, and two individual and one group tutorial is scheduled alongside an opportunity for formative feedback and assessment for each module.

They have also introduced academic skills workshops into each module, recognising the range of skills and prior educational experiences students come with and the need for an inclusive offer of academic support to all to enable a level playing field in preparing for assessment.

In addition to embedding inclusive practice within the programme, Ruskin Mill Trust has appointed a Dyslexia Assessor for adult learners. Whilst this is an initial cost, students who have received a diagnosis are able to apply for DSA and this includes specialist software and dyslexia tutoring by a specialist. It has greatly improved the ability of students with dyslexia to participate in sessions.

### **Case study: The Counselling Foundation**

The Counselling Foundation is one of the UK's leading providers of contemporary psychodynamic counselling training. They have designed a flexible, structured training programme that provides a pathway from introductory skills through to post-qualification courses, supporting individuals at different stages on their professional journey. Their three-year BACP accredited Diploma is delivered part-time and in person with a small element of live online teaching to satisfy basic online and telephone competencies. Saturday classes are offered as well as weekday options. The course offers a one stop shop approach – academic courses and the opportunity of a clinical placement within its counselling service. It recognises the professional, personal and work commitments of their predominantly mature learners and is fully aligned with the key professional competencies and skills framework (SCoPEd) needed for contemporary practitioners. A key feature too is enabling students to go at their own pace, in particular with the client practice they undertake. Students can take a further two years following the completion of the theoretical aspects of the programme to complete their clinical hours, offering necessary breathing space and ensuring that their students are confident and competent practitioners upon qualification. They also offer exit awards at the end of year one, two and three of the Diploma, which enables students to pause their studies but still leave with a qualification to enable them to progress in their careers. Post qualification courses offer even more flexibility and are designed to enable lifelong learning and the opportunity to develop further skills.

### **Case study: The College of Osteopaths**

The College of Osteopaths are specialists in delivering part-time, flexible Osteopathic training, with a unique Bachelor of Osteopathy (BOst) in partnership with the University of Derbyshire which has been designed to meet the needs of mature learners looking to retrain. The flexible blended learning model comprises 18 teaching weekends, some online and some in person. Alongside this, students complete their clinical practice hours, and the College is committed to making this as accessible as possible – with evening and Saturday slots, and an individualised approach to make sure that students can meet their requirements. The programme has been designed to ensure that students are receiving the quality, in-depth clinical training they need to meet professional standards whilst recognising the professional, caring and other commitments students have to balance with their studies. Further flexibility and “breathing space” is afforded by giving students the option to extend the four-year programme by one semester if they need more time to meet the requirements. Exit awards (a certificate or diploma in manual therapy) mean that those who can't continue to the full degree can still leave with a qualification to enable them to progress in their careers.

The College's commitment to inclusive design sees them seeking to further remove barriers that remain in the programme structure and requirements, in particular how they can further improve the accessibility of the critical "hands on" experience at the heart of the programme. This includes considering how they could work with clinics in different locations to enable students to complete clinical hours closer to home, and how they can be flexible with the requirements for clinical hours early on in the programme, to maximise the breadth and depth of practical experience students obtain. They are also looking at how they can further enhance the online aspects of the programme, in particular developing the use of their virtual clinic so that it more effectively prepares students to 'hit the ground running' when they begin their in-person clinic hours.

## Transitions

IHE Members use a range of inclusive approaches to supporting transitions into, through and onwards from higher education study.

There are three common features of transition activity:

- Pre-arrival engagement
- Paced and holistic induction programmes
- Proactive assessment of student skills and needs

**“We want to make sure we're getting everything right and giving enough time for them to digest what is an awful lot of information, considering they're going not just from school to university, they're actually becoming full-time employees... we noted they need a bit more time to do that”**

### Pre-arrival engagement

A common feature is a focus on the pre-arrival period, with proactive engagement with applicants and then incoming students before they join. They recognise that the induction period can be overwhelming for their student groups, with the amount of information given and new connections to make. Starting this pre-entry allows a phased approach to information which can increase confidence at the start of the student journey. Interviews for application are often designed to be a two-way process to support students to determine if the course and provider is the right fit for them. They help to create the sense of belonging and relationships with key staff that are essential to a successful transition. Many then offer post-offer visits or meetings, giving students

opportunity to meet their potential course or module leaders and, in some cases, experience a physical tour of the campus to build familiarity and reduce nerves upon arrival.

Pre-arrival mentoring, or opportunity to work and socialise with other applicants on post-offer days also helps students to begin to build peer connections early on. IHE Members often open co-curriculum programmes such as masterclasses, career days, and graduate showcases to applicants and offer holders up to a year before their start-date to provide the opportunity to engage with the wider academic and professional community prior to their course. This supports students to take advantage of these opportunities when they start and also raises ambitions before induction.

### **Induction programmes and activities**

Inductions are carefully planned, and in many cases have extended durations. This enables information to be shared gradually, and a paced approach to beginning academic study that builds students' confidence. Academic, personal and professional development are integrated, and induction activities often mirror those that students will experience throughout their studies. This can include opportunities to try out problem-based learning, work on real-world projects in groups, or practice using technical equipment to prepare students for the demands of their studies when their programmes formally begin. Opportunity to meet with industry professionals also builds confidence ahead of work-based elements of programmes, whether that is through projects, placements or employment in an apprenticeship.

### **Assessment of student skills and needs**

IHE Members are proactive in seeking to identify students' skills, needs and any barriers they are experiencing, as part of transition rather than after enrolment. For some, this starts at the application stage – with portfolio/essay submissions, assessment centres and interviews used to build a picture of students' strengths and areas for development. For others it is built into pre-enrolment activities such as post-offer meetings or visit days, or it is part of induction activities. In some cases this takes the form of a self-assessment, 'skills scan', or assessed academic activities that are designed to enable early identification of support needs. Short courses or tailored induction activities often follow, either before or after joining, or individualised support is put in place. Understanding individual needs is also achieved more informally and relationally, through building in early one-one engagement with tutors and course leaders and raising awareness of support and encouraging early disclosure of key areas for support such as mental health, disability or neurodiversity.

### **Case study: The JGA Group**

The JGA Group is an apprenticeship and training provider, offering flexible apprenticeships from level 3 to level 7 in corporate growth functions (business transformation, marketing, sales and communications) and public sector professions. They are committed to an apprenticeship offer which is learner-centred and inclusive, creating a level playing field to access an apprenticeship regardless of background and learning needs. They seek to do this right from the start of a learner's journey. Individualised support begins during the application process, including one-to-one careers information and advice so that from the start of their journey learners feel confident in the pathway they are choosing to meet their goals. Learners then have an extended transition period of six weeks of activity designed to build their confidence and readiness and includes a comprehensive assessment of skills and learning needs, including English, maths and digital skills and an in-depth Skills Scan, based on the knowledge, skills and behaviours development required for the Standard. This assures that the learner is working at the correct level and to enable targeted support where applicable.

Learners also undertake activities which mirror aspects of future assessments, enabling tutors to identify any skills they might need further help with, or learning needs which require specialist support or adjustments. Understanding individual needs and learning styles means apprentices can receive training and coaching tailored to these, right from the start of their programme.

### **Case study: ASU London**

ASU London is a new provider which aims to develop more diverse engineers, starting by removing barriers in the application process. Unlike traditional engineering degrees, students do not need a level 3 qualification in maths on entry – removing a significant barrier to access for some underrepresented groups (such as those who have discovered engineering as an option 'too late' to study maths at level 3, or mature learners seeking to retrain). Instead, this core skill is embedded in the curriculum alongside others such as drawing (CAD) and coding, creating a level playing field for students from all backgrounds. During induction students complete a maths strength test, to help identify which areas of maths they are confident in. The students then have structured maths scaffolding sessions to support them in their maths skills. The sessions are 'just-in-time' building the maths skills before they are needed to solve particular engineering problems. They also offer a welcome course to potential applicants, giving them early familiarisation with using maths and an introduction to their pedagogy, opening their eyes to a career in engineering and offering an alternative experience of maths to that which they might have had earlier in their education journey.

### **Case study: The Academy of Live Technology**

The Academy of Live Technology is a small and specialist institution whose goal is to promote, prepare and progress students' careers in the live events and creative industries. A high proportion of their students come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and / or identify as disabled or neurodiverse. Their inclusive approach to support spans the whole student journey – from applicants to alumni – and emphasises ensuring that all students regardless of their background, feel they belong and feel confident to progress through the different stages of their journey in higher education and onto their careers. This starts pre-arrival, with every student who applies having an interview with a course or module leader ideally, in-person, or virtually (to remove any geographic or access barrier preventing an applicant from attending an interview).

The Academy of Live Technology applicants are financially supported to attend interview with a 'Financial Support To Interview' fund available which can be claimed by applicants residing more than 20 miles from the Production Park campus in Yorkshire. Establishing relationships early with academic staff, having opportunity to ask questions and discuss individual needs, and familiarisation with the campus all helps to build student confidence on arrival and prevents the induction period from being overwhelming with the amount of new information and connections.

In response to feedback from applicants they have made their mentoring scheme available to students' pre-arrival, providing personalised peer support and a safe space to ask questions right from the start of the journey. Pre-Arrival mentoring has been of particular benefit to disabled and neurodiverse applicants as it has allowed them to build student connections earlier, encourages fact-finding skills and enables to build confidence in a digestible time-frame without stimulating any feelings of being overwhelmed at enrolment and induction.

The whole student journey approach continues through to supporting students for transition out of higher education and onto their chosen next steps. Their unique industry-integrated campus of Production Park in Wakefield means that from day one students gain professional experience and connections by studying and working alongside industry experts. This creates a level playing field for students from all backgrounds to access careers in the live events and creative industries, removing barriers experienced by certain groups – such as prior access to creative or technical education, industry connections, and confidence to develop professional connections.

While not every higher education provider can offer this immersive industry experience, the close partnership between Production Park and the Academy of Live Technology is at the heart of their inclusive design, enabled by their size and specialism.

### **Case study: The Dyson Institute of Engineering and Technology**

The Dyson Institute offers a unique model for engineering education that combines academic study with work-based learning in an institution fully integrated with a global technology company. Students combine working with studying and are required to develop and apply academic and professional skills in real-world scenarios.

The Dyson Institute's student-centric approach prioritises listening to its students and shaping experiences around students' needs. Inclusive strategies to support transitions to study and work include extended induction periods, regular reviews of the assessment framework, community-building activities, early engagement with engineers and industry professionals, proactive support models, and staff training.

The Institute is dedicated to fostering positive transitions for students as they enter, move within, and progress on from the Institute. Before arrival, assessment days are offered to give prospective students insight into what study and work will be like at the Institute, enable them to meet and start forming relationships with tutors and peers, and become familiar with the physical campus spaces where they will study, work, and live. These events also allow staff to develop an early understanding of each student's strengths and support needs.

Upon entry, all students are provided with the opportunity to undertake a digital cognitive assessment, generating personalised insights into their cognitive strengths, as well as areas where development or support may be helpful. Using these results, students can create effective study plans, access tailored support, and adopt strategies that enhance their learning experience. With student permission, cognitive profiles can be shared with teaching teams, line managers, and support staff, prompting open conversations and understanding around the range of needs and experiences students bring with them. This opportunity also supports a greater understanding of individual learning preferences.

In 2025, the Dyson Institute extended the induction period from three weeks to three months, offering scaffolded support and hands-on learning through the Engineering Discovery module. Though non-credit-bearing, this module equips students with key engineering skills, exposure to real-world processes, and practical experience in teamwork and problem-solving. This change to the induction is designed to ease the transition into higher education and professional environments for students ahead of joining their first work experience teams.

At every key point of transition, such as moving between semesters, starting a new workplace rotation, or beginning a new academic year, students have access to resources designed to equip them to manage these changes with confidence and resilience.

The Institute pays special attention to those who are likely to find transitions difficult (e.g. those with learning differences, disabilities, long-term health conditions, or mental health conditions). As of July 2025, at least 40% of students disclosed one or more of these circumstances. For these students, getting transition periods right is especially critical, as they may be navigating additional barriers such as accessibility needs, changes in routine support, or adapting to both academic and industry environments.

By providing tailored resources, including self-help tools, specialist advice and preparation, and personalised guidance, the environment aims to empower all students to feel valued and supported in moments of change.

### **Case study: The College of Osteopaths**

The College of Osteopaths prepares students for the world of work and professional registration as an employed or self-employed osteopath on graduation. 'Hands-on' experience is embedded in the programme in a way that builds students confidence as they progress through their studies – starting with the virtual clinic which builds familiarity with working with cases, and through to supervised and supported experience with patients in teaching clinics.

They recognise that the transition to practising independently can be challenging for students when they complete the programme, so are piloting a small graduate clinic in 2025/26 which will enable those who have achieved their qualification to continue to get hands-on experience in a safe space. Graduates will have increased responsibility for patient and clinic management but with a support structure still in place to aid their transition to independent practise.

## **Teaching and learning**

Approaches in the curriculum – both what and how students learn – were a key grouping in the inclusive practice IHE Members described. Our discussions highlighted the pedagogic value of inclusive teaching and learning as a central theme. It's not seen as something additional to 'add into' a programme but should be at the very heart of how it's designed. This authentic inclusivity creates learning experiences that all students can engage and thrive in.

**“We do it because our students can't learn and succeed unless we provide high quality teaching, which is inclusive teaching. You simply have to have inclusive practices otherwise you can't deliver this”**

Recurring features of inclusive teaching and learning approaches are:

- Personalised teaching and learning
- Online learning environments
- Practical and project-based curriculums

## **Personalised teaching and learning**

Personalised learning experiences are commonly achieved through small class sizes and one-to-one tutorials. The ratio of students to staff in the classroom is kept low, sometimes with additional support staff or student mentors present to offer individual support during taught sessions. This enables personalisation, addressing areas of challenge or specific learning needs. Small classes also foster peer relationships that support a sense of belonging and facilitate success in group work. It also helps to establish the classroom as a 'safe space' where all students can explore, ask questions, get things wrong and learn.

**“a safe environment where they can actually take that chance and grow and push their boundaries to a place where potentially, some of them thought they would never have that opportunity”**

## **Online learning environments**

Online learning is built into programme delivery. Rather than being offered as an 'alternative' for those who cannot attend, it is an intentional feature of how all students access their learning. Purposefully designed VLEs are used to provide flexible access to materials and allow students to study at their own pace, often supporting a 'flipped classroom' approach alongside providing opportunity to further develop practical skills through integrated virtual clinics, case studies or design challenges. Online learning environments also provide safe spaces, often with intentional anonymity, to ask questions and receive feedback. Significant resource is spent on ensuring learning environments are assessable and engaging, with content teams working closely with student support experts to test not only the platform but the material available.

## **Practical and project-based curriculums**

Many IHE Members specialise in offering project-based curriculums with an emphasis on students applying their learning to practical cases and problems. Individual and group projects enable personalisation, naturally providing opportunities to develop skills alongside knowledge according to students' needs and preferences. This is attractive to

those who have experienced challenges in more traditional school environments which favour teacher-centred instruction and a greater emphasis on memorisation and repetition. 'Real world' application, through case studies, industry speakers, and projects, makes academic concepts more accessible by widening delivery models, and supports all students to engage with learning. These models also bring professional experience into the standard curriculum by design to support progression after study.

### **Case study: ASU London**

ASU London seeks to teach engineering differently. Their project-based pedagogy and student-focused approach to teaching has been designed to ensure that every student can thrive, regardless of their background and prior experience. Over 40% of the active students have a declared disability and 50% of those students are neurodivergent.

In-person classes are dedicated to students working collaboratively on real-world projects and problems, developing their technical and professional skills. This creative and 'hands-on' approach enables all students to learn in a way that meets their individual needs and preferences and is particularly supportive of those who have experienced challenges in a traditional school environment, in particular those with a neurodiversity. A 'flipped learning' approach then provides students with the knowledge understanding they need to engage in the classroom – with online learning materials available in a range of content types including videos, podcasts, and interactive case studies. This is broken up into manageable chunks and self-paced, giving students control over when and how they engage with material. Learners can also customise the look and feel of the learning experience to meet their individual needs. The curriculum is industry-based, with live case studies and classroom and project input from industry professionals. The 'real-world' application of knowledge supports all students regardless of their background or prior experience to engage with the learning and creates a level playing field for professional experience to support their progression too.

ASU London have created a cyclical learning environment where students in their Master's Year mentor groups of first years. This is mutually beneficial to the Master's Year students develop mentoring and leadership skills and the first years benefit from lived experience and support from peers in adapting to the problem-based pedagogy.

### **Case study: The Chickenshed Theatre Trust**

The Chickenshed Theatre Trust offers inclusive theatre education with the aim of changing lives by bringing young people from all social and economic backgrounds, cultures, abilities and areas of underrepresentation to study creatively together. 60-65% of students on their higher education programmes have Education Health and Care Plans, or a disclosed disability, whilst 70-75% have multiple underrepresented equality characteristics. Their approach to teaching is to create an aspirational and supportive environment that enables their students to realise their personal potential and

contribution. They achieve this through team teaching and a 'cascade' model, which means that every session or rehearsal is delivered by a team of professional practitioners, comprised of a range of specialisms and teaching levels. This means that learners can access one-to-one support at any time during a session, and this can be provided quickly – enabling students to engage with their learning and meaning that the session doesn't need to be paused for other students. It also builds student confidence and aspirations, and enables them to see the potential journeys for them after they graduate, with the ethos that "if you see it you can be it".

Teaching and learning also recognises the diversity of the learning needs of students. Students are encouraged early on to identify their own preferences and join in discussion with staff about how teaching can be tailored to suit the needs of the group. Students take an active role in their own learning and develop an understanding of the needs of their peers, contributing to the creation of a supportive environment. Staff are proactive in meeting as many different needs as possible, with every session comprising a practical workshop, opportunity for group reflection and discussion, access to a printed text to follow, and written handouts afterwards for those who want to continue their learning. Anticipating the diversity of their students and how they learn best means they can create an environment in which everyone is able to engage and succeed.

### **Case study: The NDA Foundation**

The NDA Foundation (the Academy) provides practical, industry focussed learning that is accessible to all students. Their bespoke Virtual Learning Studio offers an interactive learning experience complemented by the support of industry specific tutors proficient in online teaching and assessment. This serves as an effective alternative to a more traditional in-person classroom approach and enables practical content to be delivered online, removing barriers to accessing this and achieving a professional education. Across the Academy, for example, industry-standard computer-aided design and simulation software is purposefully integrated into the curriculum, enabling students to develop practical skills in research, development and design. Students regularly engage with case studies drawn directly from industry, applying their knowledge to solve relevant challenges through hands-on, project-based learning.

As students progress through their course, they are encouraged to take on greater levels of independence and are increasingly faced with professional-level projects. This allows them to put theory into practice, starting with hypothetical design briefs and advancing to delivering work for real clients in response to sector-specific demands.

Wherever possible, students are offered flexibility and choice in how they respond to assignment briefs. For example, interior design students may select a real or imagined location for a project, while those in motorsport programmes can incorporate tasks from their current employment. This approach enables learners to draw on their own

experiences and professional contexts, making their work more relevant and personally meaningful. The approach is scaffolded and supported, building students' confidence and skills for working in a professional context, and provides a level playing field for students in accessing professional experience. Courses are designed to incorporate a work-experience module. However, given the profile of distance learning students, the Academy recognises that there needs to be a flexible approach to work-based practice, offering a range of experiences according to interest, availability and accessibility. Courses culminate in an individually negotiated major project that draws on the diverse range of knowledge and skills gained throughout the programme whilst also supporting the student's personal progression intentions.

## **Assessment**

Approaches to assessment follow on from the design and delivery of an inclusive curriculum, with three common aspects identified across the IHE Members interviewed:

- Diversity and choice of assessment
- Practical and authentic assessment
- Inclusive and supportive assessment structures

### **Diversity and choice of assessment**

Recognition of diverse learning needs and preferences leads to a commitment to reflecting this diversity in the types and formats of assessments used. In some cases this looks like offering a range of different assessment models across modules and programmes, so that all students experience assessments which match their strengths and preferences (as well as those which might challenge them). In some cases it extends to providing options within modules, developing assessment 'menus' or creating portfolio/evidence-based assessments which enable students to choose how they demonstrate their learning. Whilst these approaches are recognised as needing careful scaffolding and support, this can be facilitated through the small group and personalised teaching approaches described in the previous section, and have the potential to increase student agency, confidence, and success.

### **Practical and authentic assessment**

Across the IHE membership there is a prevalence of practical forms of assessment, such as project work, portfolios, video submissions, infographics, or blogs. These design choices reflect an understanding of the barriers certain students experience in more 'traditional' modes of assessment, such as exams and essays. There is also an emphasis

on authentic assessments<sup>10</sup> which enables students to apply their learning to 'real world' scenarios and draw on their own personal and professional experiences. These also motivate students to see the connection between their studies and their professional goals, supporting not just attainment but progression.

## **Assessment structures and support**

Inclusivity is also built into consideration of assessment structures, including volume and timing. A number of providers are actively seeking to reduce the volume of summative assessment and create a more effective balance with formative assessment and opportunities for 'low stakes' learning, assessment and feedback. Some offer anticipatory adjustments to all – such as giving 'extra time' to all students in written exams. Assessment support and adjustments are characterised by personalisation and flexibility. In many cases requests for extensions or alternative formats are supported without a requirement for medical evidence or a formal diagnosis of disability, recognising the range of reasons why adjustments may be necessary in some circumstances. Transparent self-certification requirements and strong relationships between staff and students maintains the fairness and integrity of these processes.

### **Case study: The Chickenshed Theatre Trust**

Assessment at The Chickenshed Theatre Trust is underpinned by a pedagogy of "Practice as Research", which puts students own lived experiences at the centre of their learning and how they demonstrate this. This means that every student can feel they have something to contribute, removing the barriers to confidence and engagement that a knowledge-based approach to academic study can create, particularly for those who enter with a vocational qualification at level 3 (BTEC or equivalent). All students are guaranteed professional-level experiences throughout their programme, which further enables the success of 'practice as research', as everyone has the same opportunities to gain experience that they can learn from and draw upon to meet the requirements of their assessments.

### **Case study: ASU London**

The approach to assessment at ASU London flows from their project-based curriculum with an emphasis on authentic assessment that provides opportunity for students to demonstrate their skills in tasks that mirror those they would experience in the professional environment. There is a diverse menu of assessment types across modules,

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<sup>10</sup> Assessment types which aim to replicate the tasks and performance standards typically found in the world of work. See for example Villarroel, V. *et al.* (2018) 'Authentic assessment: creating a blueprint for course design', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 43(5), pp. 840-854.

giving all students opportunity to undertake those that meet their individual learning needs and preferences. These use different media and focus on different skills, ranging from written reports to presentations, portfolio development, to videos and website creation. There is a mix of individual and group assessments, again recognising the challenges of both for different students. They recognise the additional barriers experienced by students with disabilities in traditional modes of assessment such as exams and have further reduced the volume of these so that they only form part of assessment in two out of 18 modules. They have also made those that remain more inclusive by giving 'extra time' to all students – extending the exam duration set by the course lead automatically by 30 minutes, to reduce time pressure and stress which is a key barrier to success in this form of assessment.

They are now going further in their approach to inclusive assessment by piloting a model of supported optionality in first and second year modules<sup>11</sup> – creating an even more student-led and personalised approach whereby students will have an assessment menu to choose from within a module, combined with support to enable them to make an informed choice about the assessment format that will both meet their individual needs and support them to develop the skillset they need for their future career.

### **Case study: The Dyson Institute of Engineering and Technology**

The Dyson Institute has taken a proactive and whole-institution approach to removing barriers to success and engagement in assessment. In 2023/24 they conducted a review of all assessment activity, which identified a few challenges in their current model, particularly a high volume of summative assessment. Students fed back that assessment intensity was causing stress, heightened by the demands of working alongside learning, and there was a detrimental impact on those with a neurodiversity for whom challenges in organisation and stress management can be particularly acute. The Dyson Institute removed approximately 30 summative assessments per student across the first three years of the programme. This reduction has given students the time and energy to go into more depth and be more creative in their assessments and places a greater emphasis on the value of formative assessment as a learning experience, creating more opportunities to try things out and get feedback without the pressure of a grade attached.

Other changes focused on clearer communication and guidance, including publishing assessment details earlier to aid preparation and providing sample

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<sup>11</sup> [ASU London secures innovation funding from the Office for Students](#)

assessments for reference. Where exams are still used, they are making the environment more supportive and reducing the stress these settings can create for students, such as by allowing food and offering more flexibility around rest breaks. There has been guidance introduced for students who are on their period during exams whereby, in addition to medication and food, a hot water bottle or cooling pack may be brought into the exam room. Plans to further improve the inclusivity of assessment include diversifying assessment types, emphasising portfolios and more evidence-based assessments. Giving students greater autonomy and choice in the form their assessment takes, supported by sufficient scaffolding, is an effective way to enable students to use and build on their strengths and meet assessment criteria in a way that they feel confident in, reducing pressure and increasing their enjoyment and success in their work. Staff have actively engaged in the new approach to assessment and have noted the benefits, particularly the significant reduction in preparation and marking hours. This efficiency gain has enabled academics to focus more on student interaction and feedback, and increase 'office hours', enhancing the overall learning experience. Staff recognise the positive impact this change has on students, noting improvements in student stress levels. And while some academics initially expressed concerns, preferring a syllabus-led approach, there is a growing acknowledgment that assessing the entire breadth of a module may no longer be sustainable and that the "threat" of assessment is not required to facilitate student engagement.

### **Case study: The College of Osteopaths**

The College of Osteopaths wishes to support its students equitably and where it can, anticipate and provide reasonable adjustments to all to support success in assessment. To this end, the College piloted a process where all first-year students attending for a classroom-based written exam in summer 2025 had an additional 25% extra time allowance that they could elect to use if required. This applied to all students who do not have extra time as part of their learning support agreement, to assist those who have an undiagnosed disability, are unable to evidence one, or are party to an unexpected event. The results of this pilot will be evaluated by the College's Student Support Working Group.

## **Support**

There are two defining aspects of the inclusive support structures and approaches across IHE Members:

- Personalised support built on strong relationships
- Seamless integration within the academic experience

## **Personalised support built on strong relationships**

We see an emphasis on strong professional relationships between staff and students, through higher-than-average one-to-one tutorials, small group teaching, and early engagement as part of transition activity. IHE Members described 'open door' environments, where students can access staff when they need to, either in person, online or by phone, and where individuals and their needs are known. Staff are proactive in monitoring individual engagement and attainment, going beyond data or formal interventions. The emphasis is on regular, individual conversations to understand what each student needs to achieve their potential in their own circumstances.

**“if they do need to speak to me, they can call me up or they can email me because it's about accessibility and also resources. It's about how accessible we are as a team. There's no bureaucracy between them and us”**

Peer support also plays an important role, with mentoring and buddying schemes, small cohort sizes, and intentional supported group work all forming part of how providers enable all students to build connections and learn from the experiences of others.

## **Integration with the academic experience**

Support is provided within, not alongside, students' academic experiences. In some cases, this looks like mentors or support staff being an active part of a teaching session, in other examples tutorials have dual academic and pastoral purposes, with staff trained for both roles. Staff work closely together, ensuring learning or support plans are jointly developed between academic and professional service teams and all aspects of a students' experience considered.

### **Case study: The Academy of Live Technology**

The Academy of Live Technology's Buddy Scheme was designed to provide students from any background with personalised peer-support from a student mentor. The scheme aims to build student confidence about higher education study, particularly for those who have experienced prior challenges in education or lack confidence about their academic and technical skills. It also supports students to make connections, with regular contact (weekly, then fortnightly, meetings) a distinctive feature of the programme and facilitates quicker access to wider resources and support. The scheme is inclusive in that it is open to all students, starting pre-arrival but also being open to those in later years of study – recognising the diverse needs and challenges experienced by students at different points in their journey. Mentors receive training, and ongoing support from the Student Support and Experience Team, who take a

hands-on approach to ensuring that mentoring relationships are having a positive impact by reviewing records of discussions and holding termly supervision meetings with all Mentors. The success of the scheme is seen in its growth – doubling in size for 2025/26 with around 1/4 of the student intake due to have a mentor and an increasing number of those who have participated in the scheme applying to now mentor new students (60% conversion of buddies becoming Mentors for the next academic year for 2025/26 academic year).

### **Case study: The JGA Group**

The JGA Group have a personalised and holistic approach to learner support, offering all apprentices a '360 learning plan'. This approach recognises the various parts of the apprenticeship journey, and the individuals and teams who will be responsible for support, including tutors, employers and support services. Bringing this together into one holistic plan helps learners and all those who work with them to have a clear picture of learning needs and the support in place. 360 plans have particular benefits for disabled and neurodiverse learners, but are offered to all, with no requirement for evidence or diagnosis – meaning anyone who comes to their apprenticeship with a learning need or challenge has a supportive plan put in place. Every learner is assigned a Learner Progress Adviser (LPA), who will conduct regular progress reviews where achievable targets will be agreed, monitored and reviewed where appropriate. The employer is part of this process. Where a learner has a specific plan to address particular needs, this is incorporated into the progress reviews.

The impact of their commitment to inclusivity is seen in an overall apprenticeship achievement rate of 70% (2023/24), with 65% of achievers gaining Distinction, substantially higher than the national average. For disabled apprentices, achievement rates have risen by 18% over the last three years, and apprentices from ethnic minority backgrounds complete their programmes at higher rates than the overall average. JGA has a target in 2024/25 to further reduce the gap between the achievement of disabled and able learners by 10% and as of June 2025, this had been achieved; there is now only 2% between the demographics.

### **Case study: The Chickenshed Theatre Trust**

At The Chickenshed Theatre Trust, student support is built into their academic experience. A distinctive feature of their model is an embedded alumni mentoring system, with two–three alumni mentors present in every mentoring session. This approach recognises that when students are experiencing challenges or barriers in their lives, these will impact their experience of and engagement in what they are learning. By having mentors accessible in teaching sessions themselves, students can get support when they need it, increasing the likelihood of their enjoyment of and success in their learning experience. Using alumni as mentors ensures that mentors understand

the curriculum and how students are progressing in their academic and professional journey, making their support more targeted and effective.

### **Case study: The Dyson Institute of Engineering and Technology**

The Dyson Institute takes a holistic approach to embedding inclusivity in all parts of the student journey, recognising that academic, professional, and social experiences are all intertwined.

The Institute is committed to recognising and compassionately addressing the diverse mental health and wellbeing needs of its community. Comprehensive support systems are in place for students progressing through academic programmes and workplace rotations or navigating life's challenges, which can have profound impacts on mental health and wellbeing. For example, student 'Development Days' are purposely designed to intertwine professional skills with personal development and wellbeing activities.

Each cohort has a dedicated Student Support Advisor, who remains a point of contact for the year group throughout the programme, and students have an individually assigned Student Support Advisor offering personalised guidance. Many advisors hold coaching qualifications, enabling them to offer specialist support that empowers students to set personal and professional goals.

There is an ongoing effort to reduce competitiveness among students. Excessive competition is recognised as a source of unnecessary stress, shifting students' focus on outcomes rather than genuine learning and intellectual curiosity. To address this, the Dyson Institute is actively re-evaluating the assessment and feedback mechanisms it employs. For example, feedback is being reframed, such as providing grade categories instead of precise numerical marks, to better support individual growth over comparison. This reframing supports the belief that the process of learning and personal development is equally as crucial as final outcomes.

### **Case study: The College of Osteopaths**

The College of Osteopaths small cohort and staff team mean that they can take a personalised approach to supporting students to meet programme requirements, recognising both the challenge of these (with a significant amount of self-study required alongside rigorous practical training and completion of clinic hours) and the range of life experiences and barriers that their students can encounter. They manage this through individual monitoring of student progress and embedded one-to-one discussions through the personal tutor system. They take a pastoral approach, focusing on what is going on for their students as individuals and the impact that it is having, and offering as much flexibility as they can – whether that's alternative patterns of attendance, or the option to pause and return to their studies. This includes having a clear process for those with additional learning needs to put a Learning Support Agreement (LSA) in

place, as well clearly communicating that support and flexibility is there for all those who need it whether they have an LSA or not.

## **Section 3: What are the barriers and enablers?**

An important part of our research was identifying the factors that support the successful development of inclusive practice, and the barriers that remain. We identified four themes:

- Inclusive culture
- Regulation and funding
- Student engagement and partnership
- Evaluating 'what works'

### **Inclusive culture**

IHE Members described a 'whole provider approach' as critical to success of inclusive practice, where an inclusive culture underpins all aspects of the organisation.

Inclusive culture often starts with institutional strategy and the commitment of senior leaders. Whilst individuals matter, especially in smaller providers where it is more possible to influence change through individual action, strategic leadership is fundamental. This is an area of strength for IHE Members, for whom developing provision for those excluded from traditional models of higher education is often part of their institutional mission and purpose.

However, a 'top-down' approach alone is not sufficient to embed inclusive practice. It requires the engagement of all staff: it is those that teach, communicate with and support students daily who will determine whether their experience is inclusive. The examples we have curated show that programme design elements and institution-wide policy and processes are foundations that won't hold if the relational aspects aren't also there.

IHE Members described the significance of the 'small things' in the student experience: how they are communicated with in class, how their disclosure of personal circumstances is received, how emails are written or the way guidance for an assessment is explained. Getting this right requires all staff to understand and be committed to inclusive practice.

**"If you don't have the whole institution on board with an inclusive practice methodology, it's not going to happen... because it only needs one part of that process to not be inclusive for the rest of it to fall apart"**

Building an inclusive culture is also necessary because inclusive practice is not something that is ever 'finished', there is always more that can be done. Student demographics and needs change, or feedback highlights issues providers have not considered.

**"it's about relentless practice but also that feedback loop - keep checking and checking. You have to keep at it all the time... it's day in day out practice"**

**"Inclusion is a never-ending story. It's something we have to do everyday"**

Achieving this continual effort requires all staff to be on board, and this needs time, investment in training and culture change. Our discussions identified challenges that remain in this area. Professional Services staff described ongoing barriers for them in sharing their expertise and influencing change. Academic staff and senior leaders described competing priorities, resource constraints and the need for commitment over the long term.

**"There's only so much one person can do. And you can just feel like you're you know, hitting a wall trying to get people to see it the same way you see it"**

Our research found however that IHE Members are making progress in embedding an inclusive culture. Successful strategies involve embedding inclusivity into existing processes—for example, using checklists or reviews within the curriculum design process to ensure the provider's inclusive vision is put into practice. IHE Members also seek to embed inclusive culture not just in process, but conversations, as part of routine meetings. The nature of relationships with students in small providers is also a natural enabler, as getting to know their cohort(s) and their diverse needs builds understanding and awareness amongst staff and creates a positive loop of commitment to furthering inclusive practice.

As the case studies below demonstrate, IHE Members recognise the importance of an embedded inclusive culture and invest in developing this at all levels as a key enabler of their successful inclusive practice.

### **Case study: The Academy of Contemporary Music**

The Academy of Contemporary Music (ACM) provides industry-focused contemporary music education across subjects including performance, production, music business and digital media. It has a diverse student population: approximately 85% of their students have one or more of the characteristics identified in the Equality of Opportunity Risk Register. It is taking a proactive approach to ensuring that all aspects of teaching, learning and the curriculum are inclusive. It has introduced the Equality and Inclusivity Impact Assessment (EIAA) tool which will assess all programmes against 22 evidence-based standards across four areas – belonging and engagement, content and resources, teaching and learning, and assessment and induction. The tool was created by Dr Antony Alexiev, Head of Development and Innovation at Specialist Evidence Evaluation and Research (SEER).

Critically, it will be built into the institution's Programme Annual Review, embedding it into existing work and processes to ensure engagement and build in inclusivity at the point of programme design and redesign. Each pathway and route will complete the EIAA before any decisions are made on the curriculum. This will purposefully bring together tutors, programme leaders, curriculum managers, and quality assurance teams to build whole institution understanding and ownership of inclusive practice. Training has been developed for new staff, and as a refresher for existing staff, on using the tool to ensure that all understand its purpose and can engage with it in a positive and meaningful way for their programmes. The outputs of the tool will provide valuable insight into areas of strength and areas for improvement in inclusivity, both surfacing good practice that can be shared and enabling the institution to identify target areas to work on.

### **Case study: The Dyson Institute of Engineering and Technology**

At the Dyson Institute embedding inclusivity at the core of staff development and practice is a key enabler in the success of their inclusive design and delivery. Academic Team Away Days provide staff with the protected time and space to collectively discuss various approaches to inclusivity and reflect upon recent pedagogical techniques gaining traction within the higher education sector. By creating a collaborative environment for sharing innovations and challenges, the Institute ensures that staff are kept abreast of sector-wide best practices and from these conversations, interest in exploring new inclusive strategies into their teaching and assessment methods can stem.

The Dyson Institute also runs workshops and dedicated sessions that focus specifically on design thinking and deepening understanding of the backgrounds and experiences of students prior to entering higher education. These workshops invite staff to consider the wide variety of pre-higher education experiences students bring with them, enhancing empathy and aiding the redesign of educational experiences to better meet the needs of all learners.

In addition to workshops for teaching staff, ongoing, regular training is provided for support staff and the Safeguarding Team. This ensures that all individuals on the frontline of student support have up-to-date knowledge and skills to identify and address a range of concerns, from everyday support requirements to complex safeguarding situations.

All staff at the Dyson Institute are required to undertake unconscious bias training to recognise and mitigate any potential for bias in their interactions and decision-making. Further, the Dyson Institute has tailored its approach to harassment and sexual misconduct training; this is delivered by qualified Sexual Violence Liaison Officers (SVLOs) and safeguarding colleagues, ensuring that content is both expert-led and specifically relevant to the challenges faced within the higher education environment. Through these multi-faceted training programmes, the Dyson Institute demonstrates a proactive and comprehensive commitment to fostering an inclusive and supportive educational community.

## Regulation and funding

We have seen that flexibility is a core component of inclusive approaches for IHE Members. However, this can sometimes be limited by factors beyond an institution's control.

In partnership contexts, institutions must comply with the policies and regulations of their validating or awarding bodies, as well as the requirements of accrediting organisations. Participants emphasised that the cultural attitudes of partners are crucial: genuine commitment to inclusivity makes a difference, particularly in supporting the innovation and flexibility needed to achieve it.

**“...when you've got validating partners sometimes there will be limits on how far you can go in terms of innovative approaches. You might have all the brilliant ideas. But if your validating partner isn't going to be on board with them, then you're stuck”**

A barrier is the availability of student loan funding, both in instances where students cannot access any tuition fee support or Disabled Students Allowance (DSA), and where they can only access a capped level of funding due to the registration category of their provider. Without access to adequate student funding, students face financial challenges beyond a provider's control, making it harder to address risks to equality of opportunity. Some IHE Members explained that the regulatory costs of the Office for Student (OfS) registration, especially entering the Fee Cap Category, can actually remove more funding for the student experience than it provides, especially for smaller providers. Access to and / or the shortfall in maintenance funding adds to this issue.

**“We can mitigate the barriers to those specific things as best we can. But the reality is those students still are disproportionately impacted by how low maintenance loans are ... There's a lot within the system of higher education that isn't accessible and isn't inclusive that we're trying to stick a plaster over it ... How can we get them to engage with the stuff that we're doing, when there's so many other barriers that we have no control over...?”**

Inclusive interventions that providers put in place to mitigate the challenges students experience cannot always solve this problem, as often they will require a level of student engagement and time commitment which can be difficult to achieve alongside necessary paid work commitments. An example of this is that many IHE Members have on average a higher amount of contact-time, including in many instances weekly or fortnightly personal tutor meetings. Whilst this is designed to provide additional personalised academic and pastoral support, it can be challenging for some students to attend all of these.

## **Student engagement and partnership**

Student voice and representation plays a central role in developing inclusive practice. When student engagement structures work well, they can be a powerful enabler of change. However, when they fail to connect with students' realities, they risk becoming a barrier.

IHE Members use a variety of formal mechanisms to involve students in shaping inclusive approaches. These include student representative structures or councils, anonymous student voice boards, student membership on institutional committees, and regular module or programme feedback.

Despite these efforts, many IHE Members reported low student participation. The main challenge is that traditional representation requires a time commitment that many students cannot make. While some providers have had more success with paid representative roles, problems remain—particularly where students see little visible impact from their contributions, or do not feel comfortable raising sensitive feedback in formal forums.

By contrast, IHE Members described greater success with a different approach: a culture of “continual conversation.” Smaller provider sizes and close staff–student relationships support an “open door” environment, where feedback is shared naturally and informally. Students feel comfortable voicing their views during tutorials, between classes, or even in social spaces. This relational style of engagement avoids additional meetings, fosters trust, and helps students feel that their input genuinely shapes the learning environment.

In this context, being part of a small cohort and having strong connections with staff and the institution encourages students to take an active role in improving their own and their peers’ academic and student experience.

**“It’s almost like a continual student voice due to the conversations and access students have to staff on a daily basis... It’s often in the more structured ‘now here is a meeting of student voice’ when it’s difficult to get students to attend, as they are thinking well why am I going to go to this meeting for another hour and go through an agenda just because it’s about laying down a trail of evidence for other purposes”**

#### **Case study: Ruskin Mill Centre for Practice**

Alongside formal structures for student feedback (such as module feedback surveys and team meetings) Ruskin Mill Centre for Practice (RMCP) use the strong relationships between students and staff to create an environment where student engagement is ongoing and responsive. This includes holding an informal student panel mid-module as an evaluation process where students discuss how they are finding the module and preparation for assessment, identifying any barriers that need to be addressed. This enables solutions to be put in place quickly, responding in ‘real-time’ to student concerns, and developing a culture of continuous improvement on inclusivity. Examples of actions they have taken because of this student engagement include:

- Accessible **teaching and learning resources** – improving tech and recording facilities, ensuring lecture recordings are uploaded promptly, and offering IT skills support where needed.
- Enhanced **assessment support** – clearer guidance, short online academic skills workshops (e.g. on argument building, paraphrasing, and structuring work), additional formative feedback points, and one-to-one tutorials.
- **Flexible delivery and scheduling** – adjusting start times to support students with travel or caring responsibilities and improving the delivery of practical activities through multiple tutors.

### **Case study: The College of Osteopaths**

The College of Osteopaths introduced a Student Trustee role in their governance structure, to improve the representation of student voice in decision making at an institutional level. Previously, student voice had been limited to issues related directly to the delivery of the programme whereas the new Student Trustee has been able to contribute to decision making and governance much more broadly, playing a significant role in ensuring the student perspective is considered at Board level.

Alongside this, staff maintain an ‘open door’ approach with students, enabling ongoing informal feedback on what’s working and what could be done differently. Students are known to staff, and trusting relationships built through a supportive and personalised environment enables them to effectively communicate issues and concerns and take an active role in contributing to discussion on how the academic and student experience could be improved.

## **Evaluating ‘what works’**

Measuring the impact of inclusive practice remains a significant challenge. On one hand, IHE Members feel confident that student numbers, retention, and performance against headline metrics provide some assurance that their approaches are effective. However, identifying precisely what aspects of their design and delivery are making the difference is far more complex.

Inclusive practice often involves subtle cultural shifts, changes to relationships, and small-scale interventions that are not easily translated into numerical targets. This challenge is compounded in smaller institutions by limited data sets, meaning that trends can be harder to identify, and by the absence of embedded evaluation expertise or dedicated capacity to analyse impact.

As a result, many IHE Members rely heavily on informal student feedback to understand what is happening on the ground. While this feedback is often rich and immediate, and

supports strong student–staff engagement, it can be difficult to capture systematically or translate into measurable outcomes.

Established practice in monitoring inclusive approaches suggests a need for multiple layers of evaluation:

- **Student experience data** – using surveys, focus groups, and qualitative feedback to build a fuller picture of how students engage with initiatives and whether they feel supported.
- **Progression and attainment analysis** – examining differences in outcomes across student groups to identify whether interventions are reducing gaps.
- **Process evaluation** – not just asking if something works, but how and why, by tracking implementation and exploring staff and student perspectives.
- **Feedback loops** – visibly “closing the loop” by showing students how their input has shaped changes, which in turn strengthens future engagement.
- **Benchmarking and external review** – using external examiners, professional bodies, or peer networks to test institutional self-assessment and provide an outside view.

What is emerging across IHE Members is that evaluation of inclusive practice requires a mixed-method approach—balancing quantitative data where it is available with the qualitative insights that small, relational institutions are often best placed to capture. Developing more systematic ways of recording, analysing, and sharing these insights will help ensure that inclusive practices are not only celebrated locally but also understood, evidenced, and sustained over time.

**“...we know that things are working, we know that they are improving... because of things like the NSS (National Student Survey), or because of the feedback that we get from students. That's very much anecdotal... None of that stuff is real evidence that is publishable or TASO could include in their evidence library. But it is, you know, enough for us to continue the work that we do”**

## Conclusion

### A growing case for inclusive models

This research has demonstrated the strengths of IHE Members in removing the barriers that underrepresented students experience before, during and after higher education study, through the intentional adoption of inclusive approaches to meet the needs of a group or groups of students.

The themes, examples and case studies we have identified demonstrate that it is the strategic basis for this inclusivity that makes their approaches so transformative. Rather than adapting a model or 'adding in' inclusive aspects, they have built inclusivity in from the very foundations. This manifests in all approaches we have identified: from programme design, the pathways into and through study that exist, and a higher education journey built around a recognition of the individual experience in education and how to support it. Through this IHE Members are creating a compelling alternative for those learners who are otherwise structurally excluded by the barriers that remain in traditional higher education provision.

Is there a case for this 'alternative' becoming the mainstream? As we set out earlier, these models are attracting certain cohorts of students – predominantly mature, and / or with learning needs or circumstances that draw them away from the 'traditional' university experience. However, we are seeing increasing numbers of students who want and need the kinds of inclusive experiences that we see being offered here. Growing financial pressures, a demand for personalised support, and emphasis on the career-value of a degree are being seen across the student population. Even more striking is the growing evidence that for some the choices they are making might not be the right ones. In the 2025 Student Academic Experience Survey 11% of respondents said that they would have made a different choice – nearly double the 6% who said this last year.<sup>12</sup> There's a growing case for the role of institutions like those in the IHE membership in creating true student choice through access to inclusively designed provision that can meet the needs of a changing learner population.

## Next steps

There is a clear case to support the further development of the inclusive models of higher education like those that are described in this research, and to ensure that prospective students – across all demographics – understand and can make informed choices about the diversity of routes available to them. As part of our project, we explored possible next steps for IHE Members, and the wider higher education sector.

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<sup>12</sup> Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) and Advance HE (2025) [Student Academic Experience Survey 2025](#)

### **Understanding impact**

Further work is needed on the evaluation of inclusive approaches to further support the development of good practice. We have seen the barriers to this for smaller institutions, with smaller data sets and the absence of expertise in or resource for evaluative activity. We also understand the complexity of measuring impact where inclusive design and delivery choices are embedded and often overlapping. This makes it challenging to set meaningful targets or determine causality.

There's a clear case for further focus on this, bringing together institutions with shared approaches or student demographics, to undertake collaborative work to create the evidence base that's needed to further embed and expand this practice.

### **A shifting regulatory focus**

We've seen the potential that inclusive approaches have to address risks to equality of opportunity, and there is a clear case for recognition of this in the regulatory approach. The current focus on targeted interventions is shortsighted and is leading to the exclusion of institutions like those in the IHE membership from the recognition and funding achieved through to Access and Participation Plans. This increases burden, creates disadvantage and ultimately is not in the interest of students. Recognition of inclusive practice in the regulatory approach would also lead to investment in evaluation, benefiting institutions and the sector through a fuller understanding of impact.

### **Policy and funding that supports flexible models**

Flexibility underpins inclusive practice. The Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) offers real potential to expand these models, but its impact will depend on the detail of policy design. To be effective, this means recognising and valuing online and blended provision, ensuring equal access to maintenance support, extending modular funding to include access courses, and reforming regulatory entry routes so that a wider diversity of providers—and their students—can benefit.

### **Supporting informed student choice**

Finally, for inclusive models to reach the diverse students who stand to benefit most, those students need to know what options are available and be supported to make informed choices about where, when, and how they study. Independent providers often have lower visibility: UCAS services remain unaffordable or inaccessible for many, and their courses are rarely featured in the national league tables that dominate discussions about higher education choices. To address this, institutions, sector bodies, and government all have a role in strengthening the support given to schools and colleges, ensuring that students are fully aware of the diversity of routes available—and can choose the environments where they will be best supported to succeed in higher education.

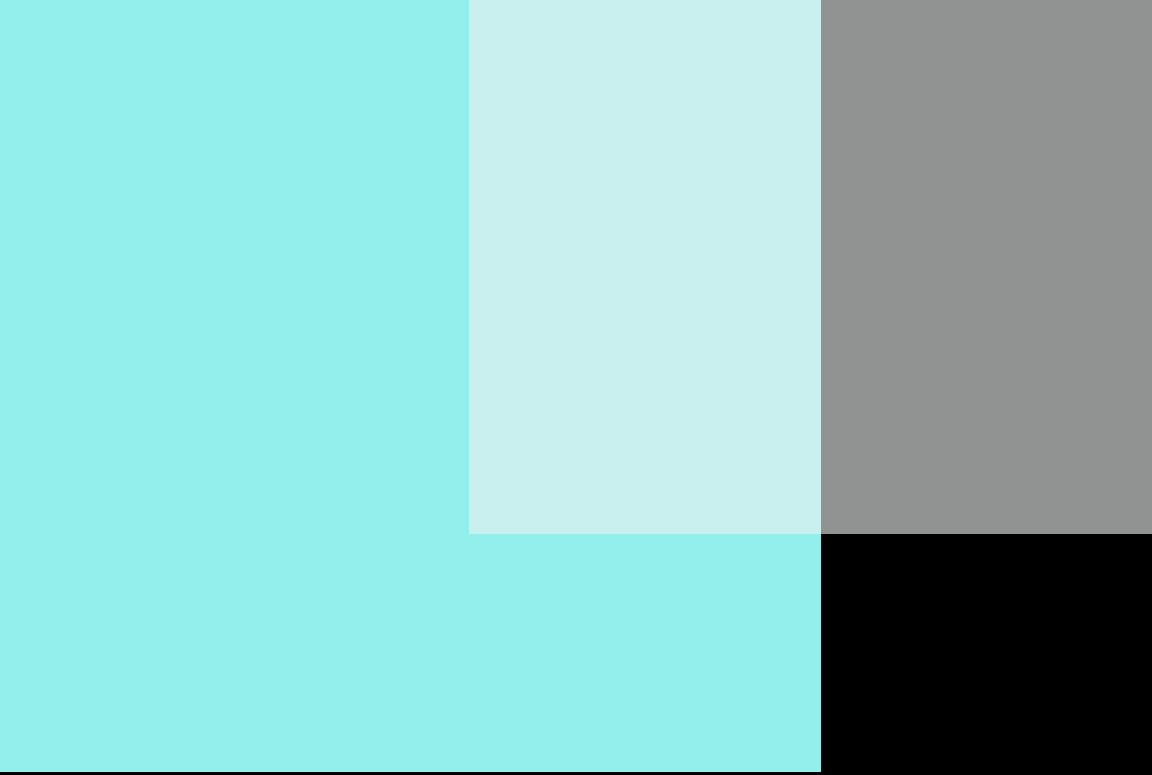
## Future work for IHE

This project has identified several areas of focus for the future work of IHE in furthering the development of inclusive practice:

1. **Strengthening the evidence base:** we will work collaboratively with IHE Members to support them to develop models to evaluate and share the impact of their inclusive approaches. This includes our ongoing participation in an OfS funded project on inclusive assessment<sup>13</sup>, led by ASU London for which one of the outputs will be a model and resources for the evaluation of inclusive assessment approaches. We will work with IHE Members to explore the application of this, and development of other evaluation approaches, to develop the evidence base that's needed to further embed and expand inclusive practice amongst the IHE membership and more widely.
2. **Raising the profile of independent providers:** we will continue to make visible and advocate for the strengths of providers like those in the IHE membership that have been evidenced in this project, to ensure that learners, schools and colleges, and policy makers understand the full range of higher education options. This will include through the dissemination of this research, and continued work with other sector bodies to create opportunities for enhanced visibility.
3. **Advocating for supportive policy and funding:** We will continue to advocate for policy and regulatory change that will enable the growth of flexible and inclusive models of higher education. This will include working with relevant government departments on implementation of the post-16 skills and higher education strategy and further development of the Lifelong Learning Entitlement. We will also continue to work with the Office for Students to advocate for approaches to regulating equality of opportunity that recognise inclusive approaches and through that the contributions of providers like those in the IHE membership to creating true student choice through access to inclusively designed provision that can meet the needs of a changing learner population.

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<sup>13</sup> [Equality in Higher Education Innovation Fund \(OfS\)](#)



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