

An exploration of inclusive practices for Disabled learners in UK prosthetics and orthotic higher education programmes

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Glossary

AHP	Allied Health Professional
BAPO	The British Association of Prosthetists and Orthotists. The professional body for UK prosthetists, orthotists, technicians, support workers, P&O learners, and associates
CPD	Continued Professional Development
Disabled learner	Someone studying in higher education with a condition or impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to perform normal daily activities.
DSA	Disabled Students' Allowance. Funding provided by the Department for Education for Disabled learners in higher education, helping to cover the additional costs they incur for the equipment and support they need to access teaching and learning.
EA	Equality Act
EDI	Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion
FOI	Freedom of Information
HCPC	The Health and Care Professions Council. The regulatory body responsible with whom all UK prosthetists and orthotists must register in order to use the title prosthetist/orthotist
HE	Higher education, tertiary education at level 4 or above
HEI	Higher Education Institution. Publicly funded universities and other institutions primarily providing higher education.
HESA	The Higher Education Statistics Agency
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training
OfS	Office for Students, the regulatory body for higher education for England
PSEA	Public Sector Equality Act
PBL	Practice Based Learning
PSRB	Professional and Statutory Regulatory Bodies
P&O	Prosthetics and Orthotics
SETS	Standards of Education and Training
QAA	The Quality Assurance Agency
RAs	Reasonable Adjustments
RAP	Reasonable Adjustment Plan
PRAP	Placement Reasonable Adjustment Plan

Executive Summary

This project aimed to examine current inclusivity practices and initiatives for Disabled learners within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) offering Prosthetics and Orthotics (P&O) qualifications in the UK. The research focused on understanding the support systems, policies, procedures, and other mechanisms that foster an inclusive environment, viewed through the lens of the social model of disability.

Key Findings

- 1 Support for Transitioning Disabled Learners**
 - Three of the four HEIs responded to Freedom of Information (FOI) requests, all confirming provisions for transition support for Disabled learners.
 - Support mechanisms included one-to-one discussions regarding diagnoses and reasonable adjustments, along with flexible options for learners to explore HEIs and P&O programmes.
- 2 Institutional Support Mechanisms**
 - Interviews with HEI representatives indicated that all P&O programmes referred new Disabled learners to Disability Information Services (DIS) or other relevant support systems.
 - Learners were encouraged to disclose disabilities early to ensure appropriate reasonable adjustments.
- 3 Data Collection Disparities**
 - There were inconsistencies in the data collected about Disabled learners across the HEIs.
 - Some institutions collected data on learner numbers, attainment gaps, attrition rates, and progression, while others were uncertain or unable to provide complete datasets.
 - The percentage of new Disabled learners varied significantly across programmes, ranging from 11% to 42% in the 2022/23 academic year and from 22% to 52% in 2023/24.
- 4 Inclusive Practice Frameworks**
 - Only one HEI specified adherence to an inclusive practice framework.
 - While some institutions implemented multimodal assessment strategies, none documented co-creation of inclusive practices with Disabled learners or shared best practices across programmes.
- 5 Barriers to Higher Education**
 - A poll of Disabled P&O learners and educators identified key barriers, including prior negative educational experiences (32%), a lack of guidance on accessing higher education (27%), self-confidence issues (18%), accessibility concerns (14%), and stress, anxiety, and discrimination (10%).
- 6 Disclosure and Placement Support**
 - HEIs varied in their approaches to supporting disclosure of disabilities to practice educators.
 - Mechanisms included placement induction sessions, email disclosure options, e-learning for practice educators, and formalised Placement Reasonable Adjustment Plans (PRAPs).
- 7 Financial Support Challenges**
 - While some learners acknowledged the importance of Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA), others found the process difficult to navigate.
 - Awareness of the upcoming enhanced DSA service model (set for the 2024/25 academic year) was low.
- 8 Protective Factors for Disabled Learners**
 - Stakeholder engagement highlighted the critical role of relationships between P&O programme staff and Disabled learners.
 - Trust and open communication were key enablers for Disabled learners to express challenges and receive tailored support.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings emphasise the need for standardised, data-driven, inclusive practices across HEIs offering P&O programmes. Key recommendations include:

- Implementing a consistent framework for data collection and reporting on Disabled learner outcomes.
- Enhancing co-creation of inclusive practices with Disabled learners.
- Expanding awareness and accessibility of financial support mechanisms.
- Strengthening disclosure and placement support procedures to ensure equity in reasonable adjustments.

By addressing these gaps, HEIs can further advance inclusivity and create a more equitable learning environment for Disabled P&O learners.



Language and terminology

Language is crucial in the social model of disability as it mirrors societal assumptions and influences perceptions, values, and behaviours. Past terminology and language used to describe Disabled people revolved around the medical model of disability and tended to disempower Disabled people. The social model of disability suggests that using person first language, such as the term 'people with disabilities' can create confusion between impairment and disability, and it implies that disability is an individual issue rather than a societal one. According to the social model, disability arises from society's failure to accommodate the needs of people with impairments. Therefore, the term 'Disabled people' is preferred to describe individuals with impairments who are hindered by societal barriers. Using the word 'Disabled' before 'people' can be seen as identifying with a collective cultural identity, and capitalising the 'D' highlights the term's significance. The term 'Disabled people' or 'Disabled person' is used to describe the shared experiences and societal challenges faced by people with impairments¹. Throughout this report the terminology used will reflect the social model of disability, in terms of referring to Disabled learners.



I had an interesting experience in which a lecturer refused to call me Disabled, [instead using] the terms, living with health conditions and neurodiverse. I would like to note that I do understand this individual's intent and appreciate the concern towards my feelings. I found this interesting as I don't see Disabled to be a dirty word, it's the societal preconceptions around Disabled people which lead us to feel that way and I feel that by using the word Disabled proudly, those preconceptions may start to change – I am Disabled and mentally ill and that is okay. For those who are not as confident in their diagnosis, the avoidance of using the word Disabled could further perpetuate their potential feelings of shame and repulsion towards themselves.

Disabled P&O learner



The term learner has been used in this report to represent all learners in P&O, not just those on undergraduate degree programmes. A student is an individual who is enrolled in a formal educational programme, such as school, college, or university, typically working toward a degree or certification for a specific career path. The term learner covers a wider range of people in education, including those undertaking apprenticeships.

¹ [Social Model of Disability: Language | Disability Rights UK](#)

Introduction

The British Association of Prosthetists and Orthotists (BAPO) is the professional body that represents P&O professionals and associate members in the UK.

As part of a wider commission of education and workforce reform projects, BAPO was commissioned and funded by NHS England to explore inclusive practices in P&O higher education programmes for Disabled learners, with a focus on reducing attrition.

Inclusive practice at its core is about removing barriers for underrepresented groups and reducing the cognitive and emotional load that is placed on individuals from minoritised groups, such as Disabled learners navigating societal and educational barriers. Inclusive practice provides learners with comprehensive, supportive learning environments and encourages everyone to reach their highest potential.

This report outlines the findings from that project which sought to explore the following:

- The background and recent policy changes that have impacted the Disabled Student Allowance (DSA), Reasonable adjustments (RAs) and inclusive practice in higher education
- The current provision of inclusive practice in P&O HEI programmes
- Disabled learner prevalence in P&O programmes in the UK
- The views and experiences of Disabled learners registered on P&O HEI programmes
- The risk factors and protective factors with regards to attrition
- Recommendations for inclusive practices on P&O HEI programmes

This report is divided into six sections:

- Section one introduces the project
- Section two outlines the context informing this project
- Section three outlines the project methodology
- Section four summarises the findings of the project
- Section five outlines key discussions and recommendations
- Section six outlines the key outputs from the project



Context

The following outlines some of the context directly informing the content of this report.

Inclusive practice in higher education

Inclusive practice in higher education came into sharper focus in more recent years when the Disabled Student Allowance (DSA) reforms in 2016 meant that much of the responsibility for funding would transfer to the HEIs, rather than the government through the DSA. The Office for Students (OfS) has distributed an increased level of funding to HEIs and colleges since the DSA reforms in 2016, increasing from £20 million in 2015 to £40 million annually from 2016 onwards. The funding has been allocated to support HEIs in developing inclusive teaching practices and implementing the social model of disability to create more inclusive environments for Disabled learners².

Challenges for the prosthetics and orthotics profession

There are four education providers delivering approved pre-registration education and training programmes which lead to eligibility to apply for registration as a prosthetist and orthotist with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC).

P&O represents the smallest of the Allied Health Professions in the UK with approximately 1100 registrants³. An analysis of first-time HCPC registrations from 2013 to 2018 published in 2023 indicated that deregistration rates amongst Allied Health Professionals (AHPs) were highest for prosthetists / orthotists, equating to one in eight or 12.5%, with strong evidence of a link between profession size and deregistration rate, whereby smaller professions appear more likely to deregister within four years³.

Reducing the attrition risk for P&O learners is important to help mitigate the workforce challenges the profession is currently facing. Reducing attrition risk requires robust pre-preceptorship and preceptorship protocols to boost confidence and support the development of resilience in learners and graduates. Increased awareness and availability of a greater range of career growth and development opportunities may also raise the ambitions of the workforce, which has the potential to contribute towards increasing the profile of the profession and improving the quality of care for service users. Reducing the attrition risk in Disabled learners will mean that a more diverse representation of society is reflected in the P&O profession, in addition to the profession benefitting from the unique perspectives of Disabled learners and staff.

2 [The Office for Students. Beyond the bare minimum; are universities and colleges doing enough for disabled students. Insight. October 2019](#)

3 Eddison N, et al. Profile of the UK prosthetic and orthotic workforce and mapping of the workforce for the 21st century. The British Association of Prosthetists and Orthotists. 2023. https://www.bapo.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/BAPO_Workforce_Mapping_Document_FINAL-TO-BE-RELEASED-6.11.23-compressed.pdf

Disability prevalence amongst learners in UK HEIs

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), collect, substantiate, and share data about higher education in the UK⁴. In 2021/2022 home enrolments included 451,495 learners with a known disability, compared to 2,406,260 learners with no disability. Disabled learners equated to 16% of home enrolments, this number has doubled since 2010.

- Between 2020/21 and 2021/22, the number of learners with a known disability increased by 34,190 or 1 percentage point.
- Learners with a specific learning difficulty or a mental health condition formed 61% of those with a known disability in 2021/22.
- There were 144,230 learners with a specific learning difficulty such as dyslexia, dyspraxia, or AD(H)D in 2021/22. This number accounts for 32% of all learners with a known disability.
- A further 131,900 learners reported a mental health condition, such as depression, schizophrenia, or anxiety disorder.

Disability prevalence within the prosthetics and orthotics profession

Data collected by the HCPC between September 2020 and March 2021 in a voluntary survey that represented 18% of the HCPC register reported 5% of respondents in P&O were Disabled⁵. However this data had a lower representation figure compared to data submitted via the HCPC EDI portal or survey, where 99% of prosthetists / orthotists submitted EDI data. From this data in November 2023, the HCPC reported that 7% of P&O registrants indicated they have a disability, compared to 5% of registrants declaring a disability across all allied health professions⁶. The P&O workforce survey published in 2023 with a 74% response rate indicated that 11% of respondents were Disabled, which was higher than average across the AHP workforce⁷.

4 [The Higher Education Statistics Agency. Who is studying in higher education? September 2024](#)

5 [The Health and Care Professions Council. Diversity Data Report Prosthetists / Orthotists. 2021](#)

6 [Diversity data: prosthetists / orthotists - November 2023 | The HCPC](#)

7 Leone, Enza; Eddison, Nicola; Healy, Aoife; Jackson, Caroline; Pluckrose, Bracken; Chockalingam, Nachiappan. The national profile of the prosthetic and orthotic workforce in the UK: Sociodemographics and employment characteristics. *Prosthetics and Orthotics International* 48(3):p 348-357, June 2024. https://journals.lww.com/poijournal/abstract/2024/06000/the_national_profile_of_the_prosthetic_and.14.aspx



Methodology

Desk based research was completed to understand the overall concept of inclusive practice in higher education and to enable identification of relevant stakeholders.

Following this research, inclusive practice in higher education was notionally divided into three stages of the Disabled learners experience.



Figure 1 showing the three phases of equality improvements for underrepresented learners used as a basis in this project, adapted from a briefing paper looking at equality in undergraduate education in England⁸.

This report will focus on the first two phases of equality improvements for Disabled learners on P&O programmes through the lens of inclusive practices, the third phase of graduate outcomes and success is an equally important area of focus, however it is outside of the scope of this project to fully explore.

The following stakeholders were identified:

- Regulatory bodies for HEIs in England (OfS) and P&O programmes (HCPC)
- Organisations providing links between further educator providers and HEIs (i.e Uniconnect)
- The University of Derby, University of Salford, Keele University, and Strathclyde University
- HEI admissions staff
- HEI Disability Information Services (DIS)
- P&O higher education staff
- Disabled P&O learners
- P&O Placement educators
- BAPO EDI focus group
- Other allied health professional bodies
- The National Orthotics Managers Association Group
- The Prosthetics Managers group
- The Scottish Orthotic Clinical Leads group
- The All-Wales Orthotic Service Managers Group
- Representation from Northern Ireland prosthetics and orthotics workforce

⁸ House of Commons Library.. Equality of access and outcomes in higher education in England. July 20124

Freedom of Information

A freedom of information (FOI) request was sent to the four HEIs providing a pre-registration prosthetics and orthotics programme. The FOI request included questions on access and participation plans, Disabled learner numbers, Disabled learner attrition rates and awarding gaps, Disabled learner progression, current inclusive practices, and information on disability training for staff and learners.

Listening sessions

A range of virtual group listening sessions were designed to allow Disabled learners an opportunity to share their lived experience. Four different dates were given, a poster was shared on social media and with identified stakeholders to promote the listening sessions to Disabled P&O learners in higher education and recently graduated Disabled P&O professionals. After the first round of listening sessions failed to generate interest, one P&O lecturer introduced a Disabled learner via email and email exchange followed by some one-to-one listening sessions were implemented.

The Disabled learner listening sessions were promoted again a couple of months later with an updated graphics poster and a doodle poll to decide on the most accessible time. This generated interest from seven Disabled P&O learners and staff. Those who could not attend a group meeting were followed up with virtual meetings or phone calls.

Interviews

Six virtual one-to-one interviews were carried out with staff from all four HEI P&O programmes, these involved interviews with P&O lecturers and placement coordinators. The interviews focused on inclusive practices, RAs, and challenges for Disabled learners. The interviews were followed up with a set of written questions.

Limitations

Some of the challenges in this project have included creating a psychologically safe and compassionate space for Disabled learners to share their experience within the project timeframe. Aside from the EDI focus group, BAPO does not currently have a disability focus group, meaning there was no existing P&O disability network to build from.

The initial Disabled learners listening sessions that were promoted through BAPO and directly to the identified stakeholders did not initially generate interest.

A decision was made to create a Disabled learners survey to ensure anonymity, fostering a safe environment and reducing attendance barriers. Due to the nature of the questions and the target population ethical approval was required, delaying the survey distribution and preventing its completion within the project timeline.

As P&O is a small profession with only four HEIs and three routes to qualification, there were some challenges around data enabling potential identification of individuals, therefore not all FOIs were completed, highlighting the challenges of a smaller profession.

Findings

The background and recent policy changes that have impacted Disabled Student Allowance (DSA), Reasonable Adjustments (RAs) and inclusive practice in higher education.

The barriers to Disabled learners accessing higher education include the systemic structures, processes, and barriers that learners may face. At age sixteen Disabled learners tend to have lower GCSE attainment than those without disabilities⁹. They are also less likely to be studying for Level 3 qualifications (including A Levels) at ages eighteen and nineteen and are less likely to have attained such qualifications. Estimates of young participation rates suggest that Disabled people are considerably less likely to be in higher education by the age of nineteen than people without disabilities, this reflects the lower number attaining at GCSE and A Level⁹. This may indicate that there are a significant number of Disabled learners not yet accessing higher education. Earlier interventions to enable Disabled learners to achieve their potential at GCSE and A level could increase opportunities to enter into higher education.

Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET) statistics for England are not broken down any further than gender, however the Welsh NEET figures show Disabled young people are more likely to hold NEET status than young people who are not Disabled, this difference becomes more pronounced for nineteen- to twenty-four-year-olds compared to sixteen- to eighteen-year-olds. The proportion of Disabled people who are NEET rises from 18.1% at age sixteen to eighteen to 41.2% at age nineteen to twenty-four¹⁰.

These NEET figures suggest that without suitable access plans for higher education or employment, Disabled learners could be more at risk of acquiring NEET status.

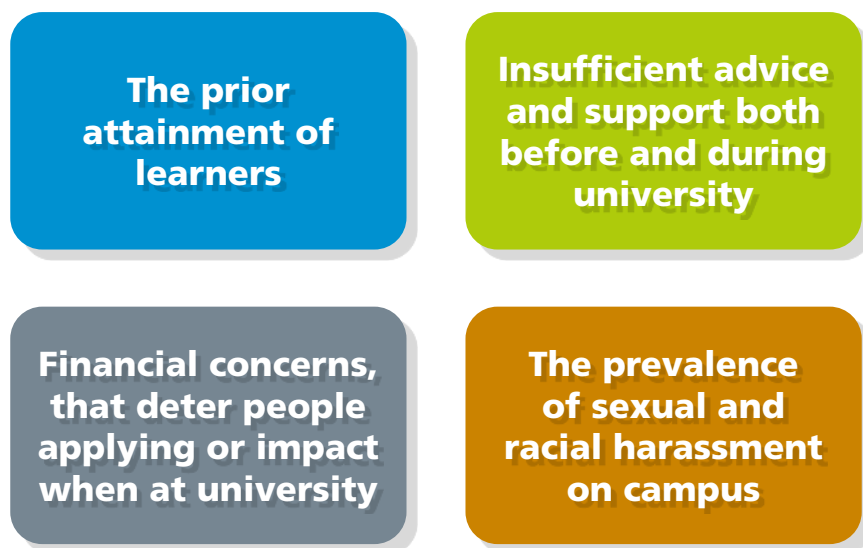


Figure 2: Barriers to access and participation for learners from underrepresented backgrounds in higher education, adapted from a briefing paper looking at equality in undergraduate education in England¹⁰

⁹ Department of innovation, universiti4es, and skills. Disabled students and higher education. May 2009

¹⁰ Welsh Government. Young people not in education, employment, or training (NEET). April 2020 to March 2021. Published September 2021

Disabled learners may face additional and unique challenges when navigating higher education. A 2022 systematic review of the access and participation of Disabled learners in higher education, indicated that several barriers limit access to and participation in higher education for Disabled learners¹¹. The review found that despite an increase in the number of Disabled learners in the classroom and the strategies developed to date, full inclusion has not yet been achieved. The barriers are classified into three categories:

- Infrastructure: Facilities not adapted to meet Disabled learner needs, consequently affecting Disabled learner mobility
- Teaching–learning process: A lack of higher education staff preparedness to employ inclusive methodologies tailored to the diverse needs of their learners, and the accessibility of material resources
- Institutional management: Offering limited services to address the enquiries and needs of Disabled learners, and insufficient funding for support programmes designed for Disabled learners.

A 2024 report into support for Disabled learners in higher education found that the evaluation methods related to transition support and RAs for Disabled learners in higher education are still in the early stages. Recommendations include the higher education sector enhancing capacity building to assist staff in monitoring effective practices for Disabled learners and adopting more qualitative evaluation techniques¹².

Quality assurances for HEIs and P&O programmes

The regulation and quality assurance of universities in the UK involve two independent bodies:

- The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)
- The Office for Students (OfS).

The QAA quality code for higher education¹³ outlines principles to secure academic standards and ensure quality in UK higher education. It is an important reference for quality approaches in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, however HEIs in England can engage with the code on a voluntary basis. In England HEIs must comply with The OfS, this body provides a regulatory framework for higher education¹⁴, with four primary regulatory objectives, to ensure that learners:

- 1** Are supported to access, succeed in, and progress from, higher education
- 2** Receive a high-quality academic experience, and their interests are protected while they study or in the event of provider, campus, or course closure
- 3** Can progress into employment or further study, and their qualifications hold their value over time
- 4** Receive value for money

11 Fernández-Batanero, José María, Marta Montenegro-Rueda, and José Fernández-Cerero. 2022. "Access and Participation of Students with Disabilities: The Challenge for Higher Education" *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, no. 19: 11918 <https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/19/19/11918>

12 Borkin H et al. Transforming access and student outcomes in higher education. Supporting disabled students: mapping reasonable adjustments and transition support. April 2024. <https://taso.org.uk/libraryitem/report-supporting-disabled-students-mapping-reasonable-adjustments-and-transition-support/>

13 *UK Quality Code for Higher Education*. June 2024.

14 *Office for Students: Securing student success: regulatory framework for higher education in England*. November 2022

The HCPC is the regulatory body for prosthetists and orthotists, it recognises and reviews the pre-registration P&O programmes. HCPC standards must be adhered to by P&O registrants and education and training programmes.

Within the HCPC Standards of Education and Training (SETs)¹⁵ there are several HCPC SETs that currently directly impact EDI, and within those inclusive practices in education and training.

Many of the SETs can be seen through an EDI lens, in our desk-based work there were only five out of the fifty-two SETs which didn't have some kind of link.

Jamie Hunt, Head of Education at the HCPC

Financial support as an enabling factor

The Disabled students' allowance (DSA) provides support with study related costs for thousands of Disabled learners. In 2019/2020 29% of the number of learners with a known disability were receiving DSA, with a 2022 report into the DSA recommending that the department for education must launch an information and awareness campaign about the DSA¹⁶.

DSAs can contribute to the decision to apply to higher education amongst learners who are aware of them, particularly those with certain types of disability¹⁷. Disabled learners with Education Health Care Plans (EHCP) cease support upon entering higher education. Therefore, DSA can be a key enabler to increasing Disabled learners participation in higher education in the UK. DSA is available via application for learners in England who have a disability that affects their ability to study¹⁸.

Legal compliance

The UK government has signed the United Nations (UN) convention on disability rights¹⁹. Article twenty-four of the convention states²⁰:

Parties recognise the right of persons with disabilities to education. With a view to realising this right without discrimination and based on equal opportunity. Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning directed to:

a

The full development of human potential and sense of dignity and self-worth, and the strengthening of respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms, and human diversity

b

The development by persons with disabilities of their personality, talents, and creativity, as well as their mental and physical abilities, to their fullest potential

c

Enabling persons with disabilities to participate effectively in a free society

15 [The Health and Care Professions Council. Standards of Education and Training. June 2017](#)

16 [Lord Holmes of Richmond. Report into Disabled Students Allowance \(DSA\). March 2022 https://lordchrisholmes.com/report-disabled-students-allowance-dsa/](#)

17 [Johnson et al. Evaluation of Disabled Students' allowances. January 2019. https://nmhproviders.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Evaluation_of_DSAs_Report_IFF.pdf](#)

18 [UK Government. Help if you're a student with a learning difficulty, health problem or disability; eligibility. March 2025](#)

19 [Disability Law Service. UN Conventions on the rights of person's with disabilities. 2010](#)

20 [United Nations. Article 24. Education](#)

Under the Equalities Act (EA) 2010²¹ it is illegal to discriminate against people with the protected characteristics that are specified in section four of the act, one such protected characteristic is disability. Protection from discrimination for Disabled people applies in a range of circumstances, including the provision of goods, facilities and services, the exercise of public functions, premises, work, education, and associations.

Section six of the act 2010²¹ states that a person is classed as Disabled if they have a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on their ability to perform normal daily activities.

Legal compliance with the EA 2010 involves providing RAs to ensure Disabled learners have equal access to education. UK disability legislation, shaped by the Disability Discrimination Act which merged into the Equality Act 2010, uses an asymmetrical approach. This acknowledges that Disabled people are a vulnerable societal group who need extra legal support to live and work equally compared with non-disabled people. It allows more favourable treatment for Disabled individuals compared to non-disabled people, but not among Disabled persons themselves²².

Professional and Statutory Regulatory Bodies such as the HCPC must also comply with the EA 2010. The HCPC sets the standards for professional practice which inform competence standards. These standards are an academic, clinical, or other standard applied for the purpose of determining whether or not a person has a particular level of competence or ability.

In terms of competence standards, the EA 2010 mandates adjustments for how individuals demonstrate meeting competence standards, but not to the standards themselves.

Competence standards differ from learning outcomes used by educational programmes but can help to clarify them. HEIs decisions on competence standards must withstand legal scrutiny with regards decisions to provide RAs or not.

On professional courses such as pre-registration P&O programmes, there could be a perception that specific methods or ways of meeting standards are necessary, conflicting with RAs. Differentiating between a competence standard (which are fixed) and common practice or the method of assessment (which are not fixed) is important to allow for provision of RAs within assessments.

The changes to DSAs had the potential to expose HEIs to risks of not fully complying with the expectations of the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) and EA 2010. Inclusive practice, which involves making anticipatory adjustments and the ability to provide approaches which meet the needs of the diverse learner body, provides a safeguard against this, in addition to reducing the need for individual RAs and potentially reducing costs²³.

21 [UK Government. Definition of disability under the Equality Act 2010](#)

22 [Office for Disability Issues. HM Government. UK Initial Report; on the UN convention on the rights of person's with disabilities. May 2011](#)

23 [UK Government. Inclusive teaching and learning in higher education as a route to excellence. January 2017](#)

The current provision of inclusive practices on P&O HEI programmes

There is a drive to increase the number of underrepresented groups in higher education, the healthcare workforce, and the P&O professional workforce, and this includes Disabled learners. Outreach initiatives are important to raise the profile of higher education in schools and colleges and to widen participation for learners in university settings.

To reduce the risk of lower attainment at GCSE for some Disabled learners and other groups underrepresented in higher education, the OfS coordinate and manage the Uni Connect programme across England to support outreach.

There are 29 regional partnerships that manage all the delivery, activities, and work with HEIs and young people. The programme is only available across England, the relevant partnerships for the P&O courses in England are listed below:

- University of Salford is a member of Greater Manchester Higher partnership (GMP)
- Keele University is a member of - Home - Higher Horizons partnership
- University of Derby is a member of the Derby and Nottinghamshire Collaborative Outreach Partnership (DANCOP).

All the above partnerships were contacted and invited to a virtual meeting to discuss the accessibility of higher education for Disabled learners, only the GMP responded.

GMP run programmes for underrepresented learners, including webinars and face to face open days, such as summer schools with specific activity days for Disabled learners, providing information and support. This includes information on available financial aid and support from the higher education Disability Information Services (DIS). They encourage early disclosure and connection with DIS before attending university, so Disabled learners have knowledge of and ability to access available support services, and secure financial assistance, ideally before starting higher education. This can be done by learners disclosing disabilities on UCAS forms and engaging with universities to ensure that support services are available from the beginning.



A consultation with one of the representatives from the Salford branch of the GMP partnership on accessibility for Disabled learners in higher education discussed some common barriers to learners being able to access higher education:

- 1** Learners who do not have specific diagnoses, not being identified and included in the training offered by GMP
- 2** The increase in the number of learners being identified as Disabled and the subsequent delays in official diagnoses impacting access to support
- 3** The subjective interpretation of disability, if a learner does not view themselves as being Disabled, they may not access the additional support available
- 4** Financial challenges faced by some Disabled learners aspiring to higher education means the need for financial assistance like the DSA is crucial
- 5** Some learners may not be able to secure accommodation until they receive confirmation of their DSA, potentially limiting their options. This issue is particularly significant for learners with mobility needs. Factors such as the location of accommodation relative to the university and available transport links must also be considered
- 6** Discrepancies across institutions can pose barriers, underscoring the need for proactive support during the learner's transition to higher education
- 7** Disparities in data collection about Disabled learners, compounded by a lack of formal policy for schools to provide the necessary details for the OfS, can create challenges around the knowledge of numbers of Disabled learners
- 8** Concerns around data protection issues between schools and further education colleges when sharing information about Disabled learners can result in delays in disclosure of a disability and potential subsequent delays in accessing appropriate support
- 9** Barriers to disclosure included negative experiences and a perceived stigma associated with seeking support
- 10** The perception of Disabled learners regarding the viability of higher education as an option could be a barrier
- 11** Some Disabled learners will not be in a formal school institution setting and may be homeschooled learners. To reach those learners, GMP offer in-person and web-based support and information sessions for parents and carers of special education needs (SEN) homeschooled learners, as well as the learners themselves

In total, 52 delegates attended a disability training session which was produced as part of this project, including P&O learners, higher education staff, and P&O professionals including practice educators and P&O managers. The P&O attendees were asked what they thought were the main barriers to Disabled P&O learners accessing higher education. The top two answers were prior negative education experiences (32%) and lack of advice or information on how to access higher education (27%). This suggests that the connection between P&O educator staff and the Uni Connect staff is a crucial enabler for access to higher education for Disabled learners entering P&O programmes.

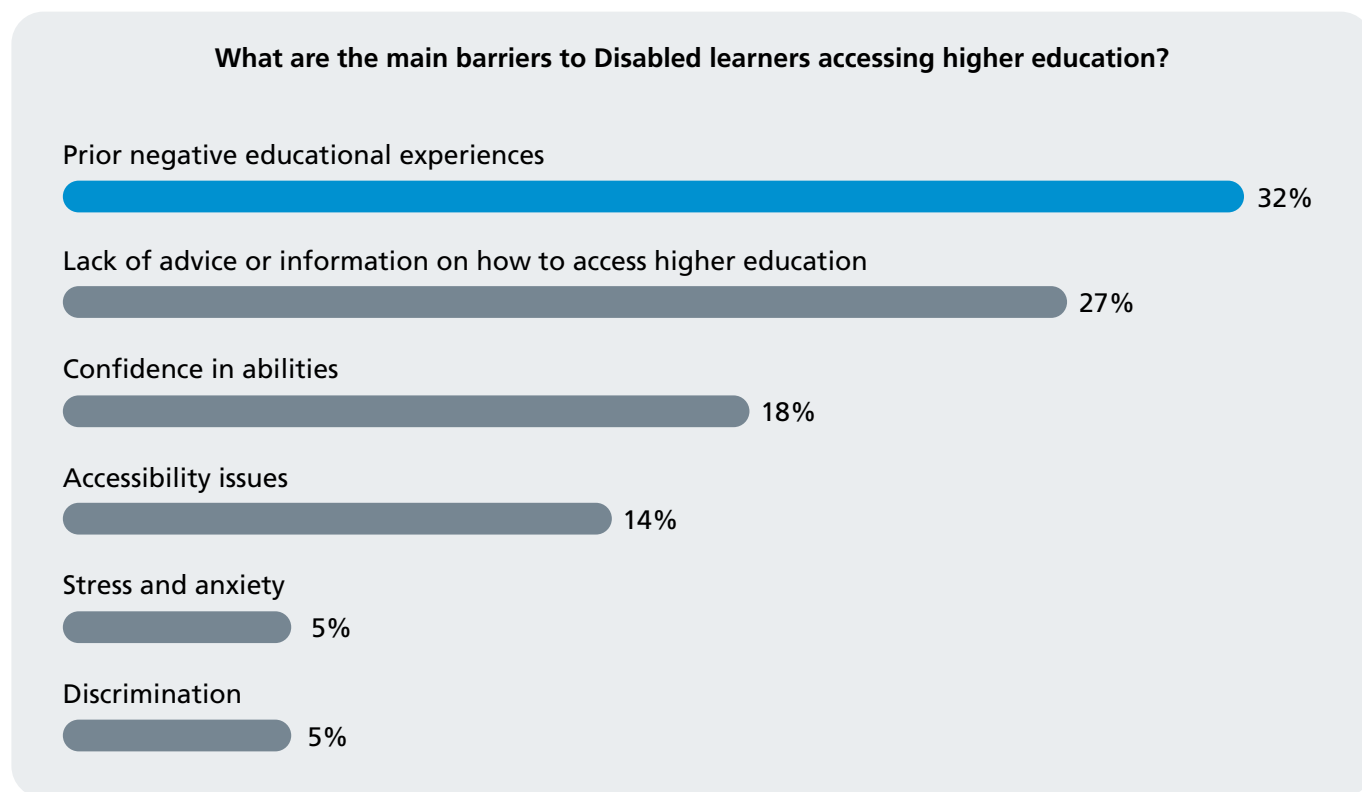


Figure three: Slido poll from BAPO disability training session showing the main barriers to Disabled learners accessing higher education

Access and participation plans

Access, and participation (AAP) plans set out how a university will improve equality of opportunity for underrepresented groups, as determined by the OfS in England²⁴. In Scotland, HEIs will refer to the QAA UK Quality Code for advice and guidance on admissions, recruitment, and widening access²⁵.

The OfS has regulation of access and participation plans, with a requirement for HEIs to analyse the position of learners reporting different types of disability and their intersection with other characteristics, to identify any gaps in relation to access, learner success, and progression into further study and work. Providers must then determine a five-year strategy including targets and plans to address these gaps, and to demonstrate how they will evaluate the success of the strategy. The OfS funding must also support effective and inclusive practice by adopting the social model of disability throughout the HEI, in addition to identifying and sharing best and effective practices.

²⁴ [Office for Students. Access and Participation Plans. December 2023](#)

²⁵ [UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment. UK Quality Code for Higher Education: Advice and Guidance; admissions, recruitment, and widening access. November 2018](#)

One P&O programme is situated in Scotland rather than England, so there may be variances in the requirements for widening access and participation in this programme.

Of the four P&O programmes surveyed, one programme did not complete the FOI request, two confirmed they had APPs specifically for Disabled learners, and one stated they did not. Responses to the request for sharing APPs varied, with one P&O programme sharing their HEIs APPs, and another sharing their HEIs Disability and Mental Health & Wellbeing Policy and links to webpages for equality and inclusion and widening access.

The P&O programme that shared their HEI APP, detailed that there was an identified risk of a difference in on-course attainment by learners with specific disability types compared to learners with no reported disability across the HEI's entire learner population, rather than specifically for the P&O programme. The HEI APP objective was to improve attainment outcomes for Disabled learners, specifically mental health disabilities and multiple impairments, with a target to reduce attainment gaps for learners with mental health disabilities to 5.6 percentage points, and learners with multiple impairments to 3 percentage points by 2029. Other APP objectives to increase the number of applications from underrepresented groups included:

- 1 Skills and myth busting sessions in schools
- 2 Years 10,11, and 12 academic taster days on campus with myth busting and activity sessions
- 3 More in-depth partnerships with colleges including admissions and outreach, networking, staff CPD, and course and portfolio development
- 4 Academic CPD masterclasses targeted at teachers and advisors to increase subject awareness within schools and colleges and improve understanding of admissions and transitions related issues
- 5 Review of applicant hub in consultation with learners and external partners. The hub provides information to prospective learners to ensure they are aware of what is available in terms of accommodation, funding, campus, and local community.

Transition support

In terms of transition support for potential Disabled P&O learners, all the programmes who responded to the FOI request offered a range of support. Examples included holding transition to study events specifically for Disabled learners, including provision of information to learners and their parents and guardians on what to expect from higher education, what support is available and advice on preparation for higher education. All programmes offered a tour of the campus and the opportunity to meet staff from the P&O programme. Focusing on inclusion, one programme ensures that, during interview days and open days for the P&O programme, a diverse group of current learners meet with applicants to discuss their experiences within the programme in a peer-to-peer environment, offering an opportunity to ask questions without staff present.

Inclusive support for new learners is evidenced on all four HEI websites showing marketing materials and website images that represent a diverse learner population, which include real lived experiences, and information on the Disability Information Service (DIS). Of the three P&O programmes who completed the FOI requests, encouraging potential and new learners to disclose disabilities early on, and linking Disabled learners to the DIS, was mentioned by all. One P&O programme also signposts Disabled learners to the HCPC disability document²⁶, and prioritises meeting learners, depending on disability and disclosures, to enable timely provision and implementation of any Reasonable Adjustment Plans (RAPs). At this same P&O programme, during induction week, the Chair of the HEI EDI committee provides a talk to new learners to signpost all resources and links available.

Another programme includes a transition into prosthetics and orthotics module in which all the support mechanisms within the HEI are clarified and clearly articulated, in particular mental health support and academic support within both the library and learner support services, in addition to induction week which includes talks by the learner experience support officer and the senior academic mentor. Another P&O programme mentioned orientation support which can consist of a variety of things, such as a support worker to show learners where their timetable classes are situated.

The three HEIs who completed the FOI requests all indicated that they provided anticipatory RAs, these included:

- 1** RAPs being used as a template before disability advisor meetings occur
- 2** Invitations for meetings prior to course start date to enable RAP support provision, prior to learners beginning their course
- 3** Signposting to self-referral form to the DIS on the university website.

One P&O programme mentioned that they were working under an Inclusive Education Framework (IEF) in which all teaching and learning takes place. The purpose of the IEF is to create a level learning environment which anticipates the needs of Disabled learners and their RAs so that the least number of RAs are needed within their education.

The IEF required that by September 2024, all programmes had introduced the minimum supportive mechanisms into all teaching and learning. The school of allied health, under which the P&O programme sits, has achieved all minimum requirements and most of the advanced requirements for teaching and learning by the given inception date. The areas covered by the IEF that have been introduced have included assessment and feedback, digital learning, placements, group work, laboratory work within the P&O manufacturing workshop, lectures, and seminars, learner presentations, and communicating with learners.

Staff and learner training

FOI responses confirmed that P&O programmes provide staff disability training covering topics including:

- Basic definitions of disability
- Disclosure action points
- Legal obligations, including the Equality Act 2010
- Reasonable adjustments
- Sources of support
- Unconscious bias
- EDI higher education specific issues.

These programmes also indicated that they provided learner disability training which included:

- Mandatory equality course with content about disability inclusion and an annual refresher requirement
- Mental health awareness
- Dementia training
- Learning disabilities via eLearning modules
- A training day on neurodiversity.

Accessible technology

FOI responses confirmed that accessible technology such as screen readers, screen magnification software, and speech recognition software were available to learners.

Two programmes provided text- to-speech software, and assistive listening devices. Only one of the programmes indicated that they provided closed captioning systems, and one programme provided tactile graphics. In the 'other' section, programmes detailed provision of real-time lecture recording, video recording of complex procedures, spelling and grammar support software, mind mapping software, and math support software.



Inclusive practice framework

Information was requested on what inclusive practices were in place, referenced against the university of Hull inclusive higher education framework²⁷. These were divided into six sections including: structures and processes, curriculum design and delivery, assessment and feedback, community and belonging, pathways to success, and practice-based placement. The following section summarises P&O programme FOI responses.

A Structures and processes

All responses confirm signposting of learners to the DIS and induction weeks are utilised to signpost learners to available support. One detailed that learners who have RAs at their institution are provided with individual recommendations by the DIS and teaching staff access these before the beginning of each module.

B Curriculum design and delivery

Two responses detailed that learners can personalise their curriculum by choosing an optional class and project topic during the programme to follow their specific interests and learners can generate their own project ideas or choose from a list generated by staff. One programme detailed that during case-based learning activities, language used in scenarios is carefully designed to be inclusive.

C Assessment and feedback

Responses included assessment design opportunities for supporting flexibility and learner autonomy. For example, by allowing learners to choose how they demonstrate meeting module learning outcomes or by giving learners choice over questions/topics, study areas, data sets, or types of submission. Consideration is given to the balance of both formative and summative assessments, and the design and sequence of formative and summative assessments, to provide learners the opportunities to use feedback effectively in subsequent assessments. One programme highlighted practical experiences in clinical modules being repeated to enable formative feedback prior to assessments, with teaching staff accessing individual DIS recommendations before commencing any assessments, including formal examinations. Another programme adhered to the code of practice for assessment and feedback from their IEF. This code stated that it encouraged the HEI to engage a diverse range of learners in the co-design of assessments, however no examples of how this was implemented were provided.

27 Hubbard K and Hawthorpe P. Inclusive Hiher Education Framework. University of Hull. https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/members/inclusive-higher-education-framework.pdf?sfvrsn=209aaa81_6

D Community and belonging

Examples include all programmes assigning a personal development advisor or mentor to learners, who regularly meets with them to monitor performance and discuss personal matters if required. One programme specified that the induction week included tours, information sessions, and social events to help new learners integrate, such as a staff and learner lunch and outings with other year groups. Learners received departmental access cards and information on timetables, vaccinations, and general department details. A biannual staff- learners liaison committee allows learner representatives to voice concerns formally. The "Learners Voice" provides feedback on modules, and class representatives bring up issues throughout the year.

E Pathways to success

Only one programme gave multiple examples for this section including using induction week to highlight the full range of learners support services available through presentations and key links, including a comprehensive library induction. A course handbook offers clear and consistent information regarding university policies and procedures. Upon completion of each clinical module, learners receive written feedback with an opportunity to meet with module staff for individual discussions related to learning. Learners autonomy and self- confidence are cultivated over the programme and learners are effectively prepared for practice placements through specific, relevant, and timely feedback, as well as opportunities for reflective practice.

The programme integrates external speakers throughout its duration, including alumni and potential employers. Whenever possible, potential employers are invited to the department to meet with learners and provide information about their graduate employment programmes.

F Inclusive practice for Disabled learners on practice-based placement

All placements should have a visit to assess suitability, which should include a risk assessment. All learners should have a placement handbook and a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check, and have an induction prior to commencing any practice-based learning activity.

When asked about policies or processes that ensure equitable access for Disabled learners with regards practice-based placement, only one programme specified a policy which was a code of practice learning, audited on a yearly basis.

In terms of provision of support for Disabled learners in disclosing a disability to the practice educator, one programme stated that placement induction sessions run by the P&O programme, encourage learners to disclose information early to practice educators, and practice educators are signposted to a training module for support. Mechanisms are provided such as via e-mail and a learner's placement passport. An example e-mail is provided to all learners during the induction. Link tutors can disclose relevant information to the practice educator on the learner's behalf, with consent from the learner. Learners are also signposted to the BAPO learner placement form²⁸.

Another programme documented that learners complete an annual consent and disclosure form requiring disclosure of any health conditions that may impact on their successful completion of placements and academic work. The third programme indicated learners are supported to disclose disability information to practice educators and they held a PRAP document.

The protocols for checking in with learners across the programmes ranged from a designated link tutor and a clinical supervisor with contact at key points through the placement via different communication modes, to physical visits to the practice-based placement location at least once and more often if required. One programme also provided contact details for out of hours support from the learner experience support team, in the placement handbook.

When asked if there were any barriers to provision of RAs on placement, one programme stated that one adjustment where learners needed to lay flat during parts of the day had struggled to be accommodated in a busy clinic environment. Another programme stated that if there were barriers to the provision of RAs, the code of practice learning advocates that the placement should not commence. The third programme stated they had not had any barriers to provision of RAs on placement.

All programmes indicated the provision for feedback regarding placement experience. All programmes indicated that feedback could occur through the clinical supervisor or university link tutor who could escalate issues if required. Learners also complete a placement evaluation form or survey issued by the HEI provider. One also noted that there is a university wide feedback mechanism available via the university's online learning platform. One programme shared that learners complete a mandatory training module on national whistleblowing standards and can follow the procedure outlined in the document, when reporting concerns. Another programme referenced their code of practice learning and detailed that after practice-based learning is completed there is a clinical group debrief session.



Disabled learner prevalence, attainment, and progression in P&O programmes in the UK

Available literature detailed in the 'disability prevalence within the prosthetics and orthotics profession' section of this report, indicates a relatively high number of Disabled learners in the P&O workforce. However, there is some uncertainty regarding the prevalence and demographics of Disabled learners in UK P&O programmes. FOI responses revealed that one of the three P&O programmes was unsure if data on Disabled learners was collected for the 2022/23 and 2023/24 academic years. The other two programmes reported significant differences in the number of Disabled learners admitted to P&O programmes: 11% and 42% for the 2022/23 intake, and 22% and 45% for the 2023/24 intake.

When asked about data collected on the number of specific declared disabilities for the current cohort of prosthetic and orthotic Disabled learners during academic years 22/23 or 23/24, the responses were mixed. One response was unsure if the data had been collected. A second response confirmed they did collect the data but were unable to disclose. Another response reported a similar profile across both academic years, they confirmed the most prevalent disability reported was multiple impairments, followed by learning differences and mental health, followed by physical impairments. Also noted were reports of impairments not listed in the response options.

Disability awarding gaps are inequalities in the number of Disabled graduates achieving First Class degrees and Upper-Second Class degrees compared to non-disabled graduates. Information regarding awarding gaps for Disabled learners on the P&O programmes was unclear. Data on awarding gaps could not be accurately calculated due to the limitations in responses and the data provided by P&O programmes.

When asked about data collected on Disabled learners leaving the programme without a qualification by year group the picture is unclear. One P&O programme was unsure whether data was collected on this. Another programme confirmed they collected this data but were unable to disclose it, and the third programme shared information indicating that in the academic year 22/23 less than five year one Disabled learners left the programme without a qualification, less than five year two Disabled learners left the programme without a qualification, and no Disabled learners left the programme in subsequent years. For the same programme in the academic year 23/24, no Disabled learners left the programme without a qualification in year one, less than five left in year two, and none left the programme in subsequent years. It is difficult to draw conclusions from this data without having the full data on the number of Disabled learners on the P&O programmes and without knowing what number 'less than five' refers to.

Regarding post-graduation employment for the academic year 22/23, one P&O programme was uncertain about data collection, another programme collected the data but could not disclose it, and a third programme provided data that indicated:

- All Disabled and non-disabled graduates were employed
- No graduates pursued further study

For 23/24 the P&O programme data indicated that:

- 100% of Disabled graduates gained employment
- 80% of non-disabled graduates gained employment, with 10% pursuing further study and 10% being NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training).

The views and experiences of Disabled learners in P&O HEI programmes

It was vital that this project included the voice of Disabled learners currently studying on P&O programmes in the UK, to understand their lived experience. The following information was collected from notes taken during the dedicated listening sessions, one-to-one interviews, and from a written summary provided by one Disabled learner.

Admissions to higher education

Disabled learners were asked if there were any barriers or enablers to admissions into higher education and the P&O programme.

Discussions with Disabled learners highlighted that some had previously felt that higher education would not be an aspiration for them. Practical considerations such as the locality to support networks, university location, impact on NHS treatments, available accessible accommodation, and transport links had to be factored into decisions about university location and attendance. Previous healthcare experiences, both positive and negative, were a motivation for some Disabled learners to enter a vocational healthcare career, to make improvements for service users.

Disabled learners expressed various admissions barriers and enablers to the P&O programmes. One participant who has previously graduated described that the higher education admissions staff were concerned that the learner would not be able to cope with the course, perhaps highlighting the importance of bias awareness and early supportive conversations in overcoming admission challenges for Disabled learners and reducing the risk of the lack of opportunities.



I was accepted onto the P&O programme after advocacy from a school teacher who was a former alumnus. There was a presumption that I may not be able to manage my studies effectively.

Disabled P&O clinician



Another Disabled learner discussed that at points they felt they would never be able to access or achieve in higher education.



Due to my health and the environment I grew up in, I never thought I would be able to study at University, I was enrolled at sixth form and had no plans for my life.

Disabled P&O learner



One Disabled learner shared that having awareness of the career of prosthetists and orthotists galvanised their ambition to train in P&O.



I was aware of the career due to being a patient, this meant I could research the qualifications needed and plan my route to training.

Disabled P&O learner



Another Disabled learner shared that they wanted to use their own experiences of the health service to contribute to improved service quality for service users.



I set myself the goal to use my experiences (both negative and positive) of a wide range of NHS services to do some good for the future of the management of my condition.

Disabled P&O learner



Financial support as an enabler in higher education

Disabled learners were asked how important financial support was to them in participating in higher education.

In discussions with Disabled learners, some felt the DSA support was important, however a theme of difficulty in navigating the DSA emerged. Overall, Disabled learners were unaware of the enhanced DSA service model being launched in the 24/25 academic year, with the aim of reducing the complexity of navigating the process for learners.



DSA make you go through and contact each company for what is provided, this is arduous and confusing. I've found it to be common among (specifically neurodiverse) students not engaging with their offers because of how complex it can get. I am glad to hear that this is to be changed soon.

Disabled P&O learner



Participation in higher education

Disabled learners were asked if there were any challenges to fully participating in their P&O programme.

Challenges that presented for some learners included physical barriers that were overcome by communication with university staff and RAs, these communications and relationships with university staff, in addition to any RAs, were an important enabler and resource for Disabled learners. One issue that occurred for a Disabled learner involved their P&O programme having to source an alternative placement with little notice before placement commenced, due to the learner being a patient at the placement centre. This had the potential to delay implementation of their required RAs at the new placement, in addition to creating stress for the Disabled learner.

It became clear through the listening sessions that due to the impact of COVID-19, some Disabled learners who commenced higher education study during this time missed out on practical in-person taster day sessions, which had the potential to impact on early discussions around P&O specific RAs.

During the listening sessions, the practical, and at times physical nature of the P&O programme was discussed along with the impact of these challenges on the Disabled learners.



Physical disadvantages became apparent in practical sessions which has an emotional toll, further affecting a student's mental health. As with most students, those with disabilities haven't completed the practical process yet (e.g. casting, pouring, rectifying etc). This results in us finding out we cannot do something in front of the rest of the group which can be rather humiliating.

Disabled P&O learner



The importance of one-to-one support with collaborative discussion was highlighted as a key enabler for participation on the P&O programmes when challenges occurred.



I found at one point I was unable to get on and off the floor due to an injury as a part of my condition. I voiced this concern to a lecturer who so graciously ran a session with me and a colleague where we worked on different postures and techniques to complete the needed task.

Disabled P&O learner



The discussions covered the significance of peer integration for fostering a sense of belonging and community, as well as some barriers faced by minoritised groups. Additionally, it was noted that this aspect of the Disabled learner experience is often overlooked.



I have received unpleasant comments regarding my physical health from students but never from staff. I think this is down to experience and understanding of disability as most lecturers have clinical experience or have worked with people with disabilities for a long time, so the likelihood is they are familiar with disability in some capacity. Whilst I was taken aback by the comments from students due to the nature of the course, this shows their character more than anything to do with myself, but I understand that to others who are less confident with their disability, this could have a huge negative impact.

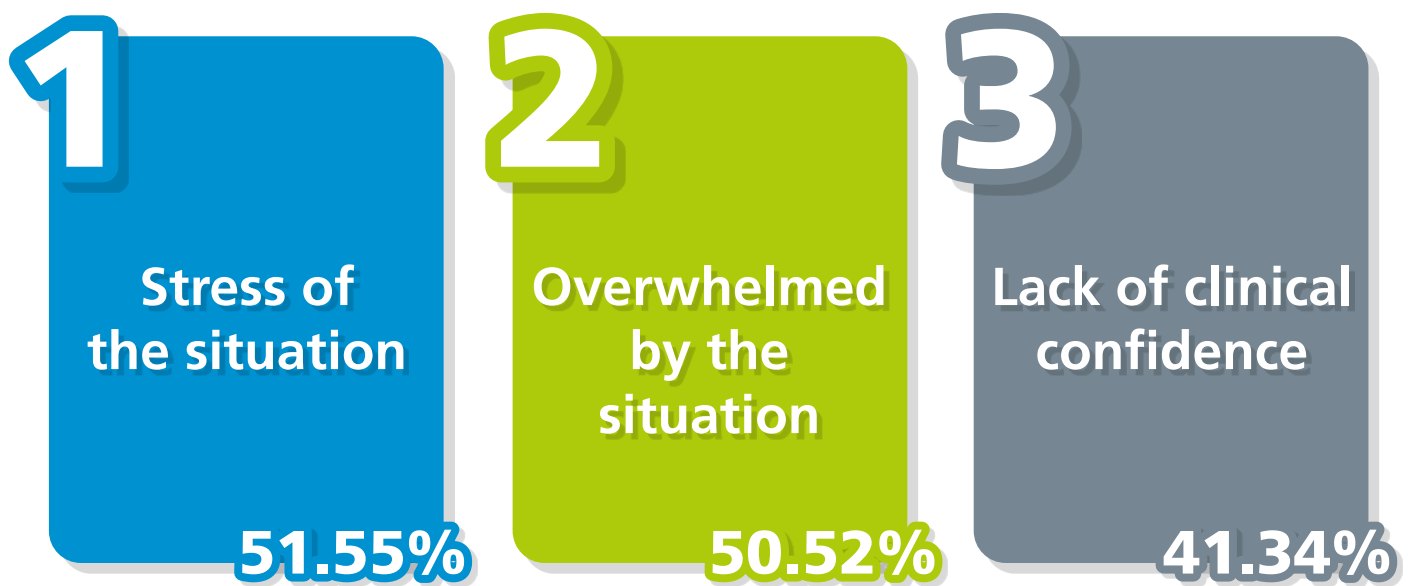
Disabled P&O learner



Discussions also highlighted that some learners were happy to share information and experiences publicly whilst others preferred to share experiences confidentially, in part due to the potential risk of future stigmatisation or discrimination.

The risk factors and protective factors with regards to attrition

It is recognised that learner attrition is a systems wide issue that is inherently complex and requires comprehensive solutions²⁹. The National Education Training Survey (NETS) is the only national survey that measures the experiences of the education and training environments of undergraduate and postgraduate learners and trainees undertaking a practice placement or training post in healthcare as part of their education. The 2023 survey³⁰ indicated that 32.29% of learners considered leaving their course, this was a slight improvement from 2022 (33.48%) and a decline from 2021 (28.92%). The top three reasons given by AHP learners considering leaving their course were: (learners were able to select multiple reasons when answering this question)



A 2023 study into Disabled learner attrition risk in higher education, found that Disabled learners are substantially more likely to intend to drop out than learners without disabilities, with higher rates of attrition risk for certain disabilities³¹.

Considering risk factors and protective factors for Disabled learners that have been discussed with stakeholders could help to inform inclusive practice strategies that contribute towards Disabled P&O learner retention.

29 Hamshire C et al. The wicked problem of healthcare student attrition. *Nurs Inq.* 2019 Jul;26(3). <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9286456/>

30 The National Education and Training Survey (NETS). *Education Quality Reporting Tool.* 2023

31 Rußmann, M. et al. Dropout intent of students with disabilities. *High Educ* 88, 183–208 (2024) <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10734-023-01111-y>

Mechanisms of support

FOI responses seem to indicate clear mechanisms of support available and communicated to Disabled learners embarking on P&O programmes, including referral to DIS and defining RAPs prior to commencement of the programme. Clear and accessible communication was a key feature of FOI responses documenting:

- 1** What is expected of Disabled learners, in relation to their P&O course including placement requirements
- 2** Accessing support and advice
- 3** Creating a safe environment to encourage learners who have not declared a disability to do so and the importance of this
- 4** Creating a supportive environment for Disabled learners to approach higher education staff about any challenges faced at any time during their programme.

Policies for transition support provided for Disabled learners during their course varied across the programmes.

Relationships with higher education staff

Through stakeholder engagement with Disabled learners and HEI staff a consistent protective factor was noted. The relationship and trust built between P&O programme staff and Disabled learners featured regularly in discussions. This relationship appears to unlock the ability to be vulnerable with, trust, communicate and engage in two-way feedback. Examples include collaborative discussions about the success of RAs implemented. This contributes towards Disabled learners being able to seek support when required, learn in an effective and collaborative environment, and participate fully in their P&O programme.

Practice based learning considerations

Practice based learning (PBL) barriers in P&O has been examined as part of the wider Professional Body Education Reform Commission (PBERC) NHSE funded work carried out by BAPO. It is out of scope to report on that work here, however it is important to note that PBL capacity has repeatedly been reported by the sector as one of the key barriers to growing the pipeline of entry to the profession and increasing the number of learners. As these challenges persist, the impact on Disabled learners, particularly regarding geographic location and timely allocation of placements, highlights an important area for improvement. Ensuring equitable access to placements is crucial for supporting all learners effectively.

Practice based learning is a key transition in a learner's journey, therefore transition support must be considered. Some challenges during this transition could be more enhanced for Disabled healthcare learners, such as the stress of a clinical placement away from home with implications for securing accessible accommodation or being allocated a placement far away from support systems. Protective factors include some clear existing support systems that are in place for Disabled P&O learners embarking on practice education. Disability and required RAs are considered and factored into the allocation of P&O placements, however, disparities in how Disabled learners are encouraged to disclose and are supported in disclosing RA requirements across the programmes should be considered.

While it was outside the scope of this project to explore the culture of practice education within P&O workplaces, this may be a factor in Disabled healthcare learner experiences. One study into the experiences of Disabled and non-disabled learners on professional practice-based learning in the UK, found that difficulties were exacerbated for some Disabled learners, in part because of the attitudes of others to disability³². Suitable preparation for practice education and ultimately the workplace along with sufficient support will provide a protective factor against attrition for all learners, including Disabled learners. There may be increased challenges during transitions in higher education for Disabled learners such as transition to practice-based learning, therefore support, inclusion, co-creation and preparation may enable Disabled learners to manage challenges and engage in effective communication with university and practice educators.

Elements of strategies, policies, and documents to support Disabled learners have been identified within P&O programmes. However, these elements are not standardised across the programmes. Therefore, a commitment to and mechanisms for sharing best practices between the programmes could be particularly beneficial.

Wellbeing and support

The number of Disabled learners in higher education with mental health conditions is increasing. Responses to the FOI requests indicate that, in addition to multiple impairments and learning differences, mental health conditions are highly prevalent among Disabled P&O learners. Furthermore, the learning environment can introduce stressors, and the practice education environment, with service user interactions, can add an emotional load for healthcare learners to manage. Stress management and resilience strategies during times of key transitions could be a protective factor towards the retention of Disabled learners. Examples of strategies offered to Disabled learners at key transition points on the P&O programmes include structured wellbeing conversations by educators and clear signposting to support.

Digital accessibility

There was a variable picture in terms of what digital accessibility is provided by P&O programmes, only one P&O programme stated that they offered closed caption systems which is quite an accessible and enabling feature for remote lectures. Another response stated that complex procedures were recorded, and videos were able to be reviewed. Standardising the digital accessibility across P&O programmes could help to reduce risk factors such as stress and cognitive load in the remote and digitised learning environment that all learners now navigate.

The disability data gap

There was limited data available on Disabled learner attainment and progression on P&O programmes. It is difficult to know whether comprehensive data is collected from the snapshot available. However, it is imperative that this data is collected. The OfS has previously reported on persistent gaps in access, success, and progression for Disabled learners². The OfS has a target to work towards eliminating the disability attainment gap (the difference between the proportion of Disabled learners receiving First Class and Upper Second class degrees in comparison to non-disabled learners) by the academic year 2024/25³³.

32 Hill, S., & Roger, A. (2016). The experience of disabled and non-disabled students on professional practice placements in the United Kingdom. *Disability & Society*, 31(9), 1205–1225 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09687599.2016.1236718>

33 Hector M. Arriving at Thriving; Learning from disabled students to ensure access for all. Higher Education Commission. <https://www.policyconnect.org.uk/research/arriving-thriving-learning-disabled-students-ensure-access-all>

Key discussions and recommendations

Discussions with Disabled learners have highlighted the significant emotional and cognitive burdens they often experience. These challenges stem not only from navigating societal barriers as a Disabled individual but also from the demands of higher education and practice-based learning within healthcare disciplines. These insights underscore the critical need for robust support systems tailored to Disabled learners.

Findings from Freedom of Information requests revealed that all participating P&O programmes had formal strategies in place to support prospective Disabled learners. Early disclosure emerged as a key factor in ensuring timely access to support. The research also identified a variety of support mechanisms within UK P&O programmes, including structured check-ins and discussions aimed at reducing undue stress on Disabled learners.

However, several challenges persist. Some learners may be unable to access support due to delays in obtaining a formal diagnosis, the potential for stigma or discrimination associated with disability disclosure, or a lack of awareness regarding their own condition. Additionally, the increasing numbers of Disabled learners in higher education and the changing landscape of general income for HEIs, funding and waiting lists further complicates access to necessary accommodations. While HEIs offer formal support structures, Disabled learners often face difficulties navigating these systems and engaging with multiple institutional departments.

To address these challenges, embedding inclusive practices within P&O programmes is essential. However, disparities exist in how inclusivity is implemented across different programmes. Notably, only one programme reported using a specified inclusive practice framework. Additionally, not all programmes provided multimodal assessment options, and access to assistive technologies varied. Furthermore, some programmes had more comprehensive documentation and procedures to support Disabled learners transitioning to practice-based education, while disability-related training for both staff and learners varied significantly.

A comprehensive report on inclusive teaching and practice in higher education, following government reforms of DSAs, makes several recommendations to enhance support for Disabled learners. Key recommendations include establishing clear processes to ensure that practice-based education providers understand and implement RAs²³. Additionally, mechanisms should be in place to guarantee compliance with these requirements. While all P&O programmes had systems for Disabled learners to communicate their required RAs to practice educators, these processes were not standardised across programmes. Some institutions provided more extensive support in this area than others, highlighting the need for greater consistency in how RAs are facilitated and implemented.

By addressing these challenges and standardising inclusive practices, P&O programmes can create a more equitable and supportive learning environment for Disabled learners, ultimately fostering their success in both academic and clinical settings.

23 UK Government. *Inclusive teaching and learning in higher education as a route to excellence*. January 2017

Recommendations

Recommendations have been broken down into sections for ease of reference:

Access to higher education for Disabled learners

- P&O programmes and BAPO should consider the local learner populations and create strong links to 'feeder' schools/colleges, working with those schools/colleges and Uni Connect programmes to raise awareness of P&O as a career option, with a specific focus on targeting learners who haven't previously considered higher education. They could utilise the resources created on BAPO's careers webpage³⁴, and the EDI webpage³⁵, to highlight that P&O is committed to promoting and supporting a diverse workforce.
- The educational experience of Disabled learners must be considered as learners may have struggled in their prior learning environment. P&O programmes might consider communicating and promoting the practical elements and varied nature of the course, as this may be attractive to some learners who have struggled in the traditional learning environment.
- Taster days that are already utilised by some of the P&O programmes could add an extension onto the day for Disabled learners and co-create this session with existing Disabled P&O learners to provide role models and discussion points about the accessibility of the course.

Financial support

- P&O programmes should communicate the 24/25 streamlining of the DSA process to new and established Disabled learners. In the case of Disabled learners who have applied through the previous DSA process and found it too arduous to navigate, the new process may offer a more accessible route to much needed funding.
- Considerations should be given to Disabled international learners as they cannot claim the DSA benefit, therefore hardship loans and other support may need to be considered.
- Disabled learners undertaking degree apprenticeships are not eligible for DSA, as their employer is responsible for making RAs. Tripartite collaboration between learners, employers, and higher education staff and consideration of the learning support fund for apprentices³⁶ may be a protective factor for retention of Disabled apprenticeship learners.
- Research from BAPO's wider programme of work related to this project has indicated a potential disparity with regard to whether all employers reimburse apprenticeship costs incurred during practice-based placement. This has the potential to disproportionately affect Disabled learners, this process should be reviewed for equity of provision.
- At postgraduate level, the maximum support a learner can claim via DSA is lower by a third than that available at undergraduate level³⁷, postgraduate P&O programmes should understand this may add an additional financial challenge for Disabled learners.
- Disability advisors and P&O admissions tutors should consider sensitively exploring with Disabled learners, whether a means tested assessment for the £200 mandatory learner contribution to computer equipment may be required, particularly due to the increased digitisation of the learning environment after COVID-19.

34 [The British Association of Prosthetists and Orthotists \(BAPO\). Career webpages. March 2025](#)

35 [The British Association of Prosthetists and Orthotists \(BAPO\). Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion webpage. March 2025](#)

36 [The UK Government. Support for apprentices for learning difficulties and disabilities. The Department of Education. August 2024](#)

37 [Disabled Students' Allowances: giving students the technology they need to succeed | Policy Connect](#)

Participation in higher education

- In the increasingly digitised environment, P&O programmes should review their digital accessibility offers and if not already doing so, consider changes such as closed captioning, lecture, and procedure recordings, with co-creation with Disabled learners and information sharing between the P&O programmes.
- P&O specific case studies such as examples of inclusive practices embedded into workshop, plaster room, and clinic room environments or transition support for practice education could be captured and used to promote best practice and showcase the high specificity and accessibility of the programmes.
- Potential work on case studies and inclusive education is currently being undertaken by the HCPC. BAPO and the HEIs providing P&O programmes should consider becoming involved with this work.

Practice education considerations

- Timely and clear mechanisms for sharing required RAs with practice educators should be given to Disabled learners, with clear offers of support for disclosure as required. Taking into consideration a Disabled learner's cultural capital³⁸, which can influence a learner's sense of belonging and occupational aspirations³⁹.
- A policy on Disabled learners who are P&O patients at practice-based placement locations should be held, to mitigate the risk of placement allocation delays or changes.
- Contractual considerations are required within P&O service contracts between Trusts/Health Boards and private providers to ensure protected time and provision of support between practice educators and Disabled learners on practice placement. This could be additional time in between standard placement reviews to ensure factors such as RAs have been implemented, are effective, and are being reviewed, in addition to structured wellbeing conversations.
- Higher education staff and practice educators should use the updated HCPC EDI and mental health Standards of Proficiency⁴⁰ to underpin inclusive practices to prioritise and embed these for learners.
- In terms of inclusive practices, further work with higher education staff, practice educators, and apprentice employers to capture the best practices of inclusive practices already engaged in, not limited to RAs, could be an enabler to educating the P&O profession on the concepts and benefits of inclusive practice, to further embed disability inclusion beyond higher education and into the workplace.

38 [Cultural Learning Alliance. What is cultural capital? July 2019](#)

39 [Tramonte, LJ and Willms JD, Cultural capital and its effects on education outcomes, Economics of Education Review, Volume 29, Issue 2, 2010, Pages 200-213. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0272775709000569>](#)

40 [The Health and Care Professions Council. Standards of proficiency; prosthetists and orthotists. 2023](#)

Inclusion by design

- Reviews and implementation of commonly requested RAs and annual Disabled learner feedback with regards to P&O programme practical work, assessments, feedback, and digital learning could be a step towards making the programmes more accessible by design.
- The BAPO Training and Education Network group could work collaboratively to collate and share Disabled learner anonymous feedback, to help develop best practice guidance built on the lived experience of Disabled learners.
- P&O programmes and/or BAPO could use the OfS 2024 data from the National Student Survey findings⁴¹ as a basis to run their own programme specific or member specific surveys of Disabled learners, to understand any key areas where positivity measures might be lower, this could help to inform areas of improvement for inclusive practice on the P&O programmes.
- BAPO should consider running the Disabled learner survey once ethics approval has been granted, to understand more fully the experiences of Disabled learners in P&O and feed these results back to the P&O programmes.
- Disability awareness training should be co-created with Disabled learners and should be evaluated for effectiveness.
- BAPO and/or the P&O programmes should consider providing guidance on the Equality act, to help support Disabled learners. For example, the Act does allow Disabled learners to be treated more favourably than non-disabled learners, if this means providing an equitable learning experience.
- P&O programme staff should familiarise themselves with the HEI APP to understand how widening participation and reducing attainment gaps can be contextualised within the P&O programme.

Wellbeing and support

- BAPO, higher education staff and practice educators should consider the HESA statistics⁴ relating to increased mental and physical health conditions in higher education learners to inform strategies for targeted support for learners, focusing on accessibility, stress management, preparation for practice-based learning, and community and belonging requirements.
- BAPO should ensure a full launch event to maximise the impact of recently developed resources such as BAPO's simulation-based escape room⁴², BAPO's learner pack⁴³, BAPO's learner placement form²⁸ and BAPO's learner hub⁴⁴, to help provide support for Disabled Learners.
- BAPO should consider creating a Disability focus group, to create a source of support for increasing numbers of Disabled P&O learners and staff.

41 [Office for Students. The National Students Survey. April 2024](#)

42 [The British Association of Prosthetists and Orthotists \(BAPO\). Simulated escape room. March 2025](#)

43 [The British Association of Prosthetists and Orthotists \(BAPO\). P&O Learner Welcome Pack. February 2025](#)

44 [The British Association of Prosthetists and Orthotists \(BAPO\). Learner Hub webpage. February 2025](#)

Raising the ambition and network of learners

- If not already doing so, P&O programmes should consider collecting data on attainment gaps for Disabled learners, to define if there are any gaps.
- If not already doing so, P&O programmes should familiarise themselves with their HEIs attainment gaps and how APP strategies can be utilised on the P&O programmes to close any attainment gaps.
- P&O programmes and/or BAPO should consider collecting data on employment rates and continuation to further education for Disabled learners and other underrepresented groups, to define if there are any gaps and then consider ways to address these gaps.
- P&O programmes, BAPO, and HCPC should collaborate to define strategies for increasing the ambition of and network opportunities for underrepresented groups within the profession, including Disabled learners and staff.

Conclusion

P&O healthcare education involves a diverse range of stakeholders, including learners, HEIs, P&O employers, practice educators, service users, and regulatory bodies such as the OfS and the HCPC. Given the potential risk factors contributing to learner attrition—particularly for Disabled learners—HEIs must implement robust support mechanisms to ensure equitable access to education and professional training.

Findings from this project highlight several essential support structures for Disabled learners, including RAPs for both university-based and practice-based placements, dedicated support services, clear and effective communication, timely feedback, digital accessibility, and appropriately sourced placement opportunities. While many of these challenges are not exclusive to Disabled learners, issues such as limited digital accessibility, placement shortages, and staffing constraints may disproportionately impact this group or present unique barriers.

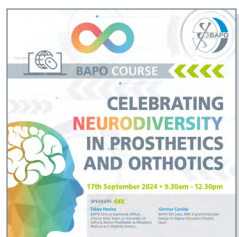
There is evidence of a broad spectrum of support available for Disabled learners across P&O HEI programmes; however, the level and consistency of support vary significantly. A shift towards inclusion by design—in which programmes actively integrate inclusive practices through co-creation with Disabled learners, continuous learning and improvement, and the sharing of best practices across HEIs—holds substantial potential benefits. Such an approach would not only enhance Disabled learners confidence, cultural capital, and networking opportunities but also improve information-sharing and collaboration on disability and inclusion within P&O education.

By embedding inclusive practices across all programmes, HEIs can work towards standardising the experiences of Disabled learners and potentially reducing the need for individual reasonable adjustments. Given the increasing number of Disabled learners entering higher education, this proactive strategy could prove to be both cost-effective and instrumental in fostering a more inclusive learning environment for all.

Key outputs

This section outlines the key outputs developed through this project to support Disabled learners, educate the P&O workforce, and foster a more inclusive and equitable learning environment.

The report examines inclusive practices across HEIs in the UK that offer P&O qualifications. Additionally, the British Association of Prosthetists and Orthotists has developed a range of resources aimed at supporting Disabled learners, strengthening professional networks, and promoting a culture of inclusivity and belonging. These initiatives include:



- ▶ A three-hour training session covering neurodiversity, the social model of disability, and frameworks for inclusive practice.

Digital badges celebrating neurodiversity, awarded to participants of the training session.



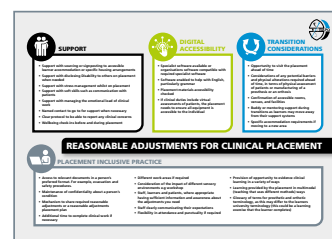
- ▶ EDI (Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion) badges – both digital and physical – representing various identities within the BAPO membership, including LGBTQ+ identity, Disability, Neurodiversity, and Ethnic and Cultural Diversity.

The creation of an EDI webpage on the BAPO website, providing access to project resources and educational materials for the P&O workforce.



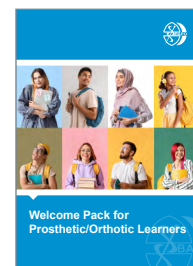
- ▶ EDI quote cards featuring lived experiences and insights into best practices for fostering inclusivity.

An infographic on inclusive practices and reasonable adjustments in placement settings.



- ▶ A guide on reasonable adjustments in the workplace to support both employees and employers.

A learners pack for practice-based placements, designed for educators to complete, incorporating clinic-specific information as well as guidance on disability, EDI, wellbeing, and inclusive workplace culture.



- ▶ An updated learner placement form featuring revised terminology and enhanced graphics, enabling learners to share their preferred learning styles and required adjustments.

Long-Term Impact and Future Considerations

Beyond the immediate scope of this project, the initiatives undertaken have contributed to:

- 1** Strengthening networks between BAPO, P&O programmes and the HCPC, particularly through the lens of EDI and inclusive education.
- 2** Enhancing engagement with Disabled P&O learners and staff, fostering a greater sense of community and support.
- 3** Expanding BAPO's EDI content and visibility, particularly through the introduction of EDI membership badges and the dedicated EDI webpage.
- 4** Informing future digital accessibility strategies within BAPO, ensuring that the organisation continues to evolve as a digitally inclusive entity.

These developments represent a significant step toward creating a more inclusive P&O education and professional landscape, ultimately improving the experiences of Disabled learners and practitioners alike.





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