

UNIVERSITY OF READING
**Disability and
Neurodiversity
Review 2022**



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VICE CHANCELLOR'S INTRODUCTION

In February 2021, we launched the Disability and Neurodiversity review. This was in response to colleagues in our Staff Disability Network telling me that our University could do better for disabled and neurodivergent colleagues, and colleagues with chronic or long-term illnesses.



The review has been timely. There is plenty of evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on disabled people. As we start to live with COVID-19, concerns remain about how this will

impact those vulnerable to the virus because of underlying health conditions. By holding up a mirror to our organisation, this review has shown us that, while we have pockets of best practice, we are quite some way from consistently delivering our ambition.

But what has given me real hope for change is the level of engagement from colleagues throughout this review. There has been a real desire to share experiences, and for dialogue. Our colleagues want to do the right thing.

Many of us need to learn more about neurodiversity, chronic mental health conditions, ableism, and more. Education is a fundamental building block for the much-needed change.

We certainly need to stop placing the burden on disabled colleagues to change and fit in with how the University does things. Instead, we need to remove some of the broader structural factors we have in place throughout our organisation, so that all colleagues can realise their potential in their place of work. In this report, we include recommendations for improving our processes for recruitment, making reasonable adjustments, promotion, and making our campus more accessible.

Line managers are key. They set the culture within teams and can ensure our policies and processes are followed. We all need to challenge our own biases, never assume we know best, have open conversations and, above all, listen. At times, we may also need to ask for compassion from others when we get things wrong, but as long as we approach matters with the best of intentions, forgiveness should be forthcoming.

As we start to implement [Smart Working](#) and learn to live with COVID-19, we must take this opportunity to share from some of the positive work experiences the pandemic created for disabled colleagues rather than simply revert to working as we did in the past and ignoring the impact for disabled colleagues. Some of this is not straight forward and we don't yet have all the answers. But just because it might be difficult does not mean we shouldn't shy away from the challenges. Over the next year we will be developing new estates and digital strategies, and these will provide real opportunities to put our ambitions into practice. And now and in the future, we must place the needs of disabled and neurodivergent colleagues right at the heart of what we do.

Professor Robert Van de Noort FSA
Vice-Chancellor

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Embracing diversity and inclusion is critical to the success of the University of Reading. We want people with diverse experiences working with us, to help us make better decisions and to foster a better working environment for everyone. We want to offer everyone an opportunity to fulfil their potential and feel more engaged with our institution.

To achieve this, we need to have principles of disability and neurodiversity inclusion at the centre of our practice. In July 2020, the University launched the Disability and Neurodiversity Action Plan Group which has articulated a clear vision for disability and neurodiversity inclusion:

- the University is nationally leading providing a welcoming inclusive and supportive environment for disabled staff and students
- the University is engaging with and acting on issues raised by disabled colleagues within the University
- we achieve the commitments of Disability Confidence scheme, progressing through the different levels of the scheme.

We need to identify organisational and structural factors which will have a significant impact for the experience of our disabled colleagues. We also need to take an individualised and tailored approach because, whilst principles of disability and neurodiversity inclusion support broader cultural change, tailored adjustments directly improve the individual staff experience.

In recent years we have taken steps to try and improve the working environment for disabled colleagues:

- committed to Level 1 of the Disability Confident Scheme, which supports recruitment and retaining disabled colleagues
- launched the Sunflower Hidden Disabilities lanyard scheme, which is one example of how we are raising awareness of invisible disabilities.

Our Staff Disability Network has a tremendously important role in this work. It is actively helping our University to become more inclusive and ensures that disabled colleagues have a voice here.

However, it is clear that we can be doing more to make the University a better place for disabled and neurodivergent colleagues, and colleagues with mental health conditions, chronic or long-term illnesses.

Review aims

This review set out to:

- Raise awareness of disability and neurodiversity, and chronic illness considerations within the University community.
- Listen to and learn from their experiences of disabled, neurodivergent colleagues, and colleagues with chronic conditions or long-term illnesses.
- Suggest changes on improving the working experience of disabled, neurodivergent colleagues, or chronic conditions or long term illnesses.
- Support the Disability and Neurodiversity Action Plan Group with its strategic priorities by providing insights into future directions.

How this report is organised

Across all stages of the review we focused on three key themes:

1. Representation in the workforce	recruitment, retention, and representation across all levels of our University
2. Staff experience and advancement	progression, reward and recognition of staff, training, personal development and allyship, and reporting and responding to ableism
3. Culture	communication, culture of equality, and sense of belonging

This report outlines the context and background of the review.

Part 1: considers where we are on our disability and neurodiversity journey, and reaffirms our commitment to the Disability Confident Scheme.

Part 2: charts some of the progress we have made in relation to our aims. For example, how we are raising awareness through staff briefings, panels and events.

Part 3: we talk about what we have learned from listening to our colleagues. The section also makes recommendations on each of the key themes.

Part 4: concluding remarks and recommendations.

We note that colleagues do not always see the benefit in, indeed may even see a detriment to, disclosing a disability.

Review recommendations

The need for more inclusive recruitment is highlighted with further training suggested for recruiters, and improved information for applicants. We also note the importance of disabled colleagues' representation in decision making at the University, and in enabling full participation in the workplace for all employees.

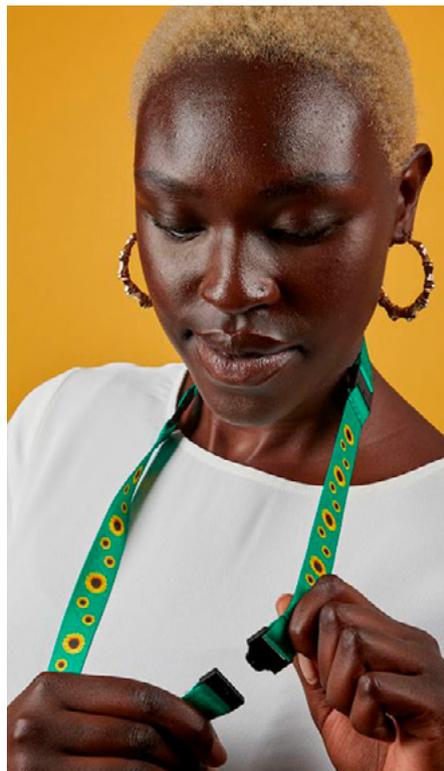
In order to retain colleagues, we need to ensure that we provide the right support and adjustments for staff who need it. The role of line managers was a strong theme in the review as well, owing to their role in ensuring a good experience for colleagues.

The development of a 'Disability and Neurodiversity Toolkit' will help to share good practice and ensure consistency. Awareness training about disabilities, neurodiversity, and chronic physical and mental health conditions will benefit all colleagues alongside the development of ally and active bystander training. This is essential part of our work to tackle ableism.

Ways to enhance support through promotion processes is also highlighted as a way to support progression.

Shared stories of lived experiences is emphasised as a way to enact culture change around disabilities and neurodiversity here at the Reading. The need for better support for disability and neurodiversity inclusion and for accessible digital working is also key.

This review makes 10 recommendations in total. These are set out alongside their lines of accountability. The implementation of the recommendations will be overseen by the Disability and Neurodiversity Action Plan Group.





OVERVIEW

The global coronavirus pandemic highlighted how disabled people's lived experiences can shape thinking and attitudes around structural barriers and inaccessible work processes. During the pandemic disabled people were over three times more likely than non-disabled people to die from COVID-19 ([Bosworth et al., 2021](#), ONS, 2021) and found themselves increasingly and multiply marginalised – fighting for access to support services, battling medicalised views around 'vulnerability' and judgments of who is worthy of critical care and forced to disclose their disability for access to support. Even recently (February 2022) it has been reported (ONS, 2022) that disabled people are almost twice less likely to think that their life has returned to normal (6%) than non-disabled people (11%).

The pandemic also shifted perceptions around flexible working and the role digital technologies play in assisting everyone, not just those who need accessible technology.

There is the potential now to acknowledge the harm caused by denying some of these inclusive opportunities earlier on. We should not go back to the old ways of working wherever possible, and we can work together to celebrate good inclusive practice and make anticipatory changes, but also address some of the accessibility challenges that these new practices still pose for disabled people.

We know that the language of disability is active and grounded in personal, professional experiences and wider socio-political drivers. The report has been compiled to address a more inclusive provision across the University and a part of this journey will also be in the actions regarding the language we use. Being aware of the language we use does not automatically mean that attitudes will change but it may increase that possibility. Much of this work is about the journey and the steps we take together to make positive changes. This report uses the term 'disabled' rather than 'with a disability' to emphasise how society (built environment, attitudes, stigma, etc) contribute to making us 'disabled', though we are aware of the emphasis on identity that the term 'with a disability' poses and how enlightening some people find it towards their life and professional journey.

This report at points also uses the term 'disabled' to encompass people who identify as neurodivergent, or as having a mental health condition, chronic illness, or physical or sensory impairment. It is important to acknowledge that not everyone identifies with the term, but the importance of intersectional, anticipatory and inclusive workplace arrangements is recognised by all.

This review is written with the social model of disability and the UN Convention of the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD) at its core. It recognises that environmental structures and social attitudes can enable full and equal participation – or prevent it. These principles emphasise the organisational drive to battle ableism, prejudice, and stigmatisation related to disability, alongside the mandate of the Equality Act 2010.

At the University of Reading, wider staff introspections around disability were supported with the launch of the Staff Disability Network in 2017. Set up by disabled colleagues, it articulates the concerns of disabled staff, and supports our institution's efforts to become more inclusive and disability confident.

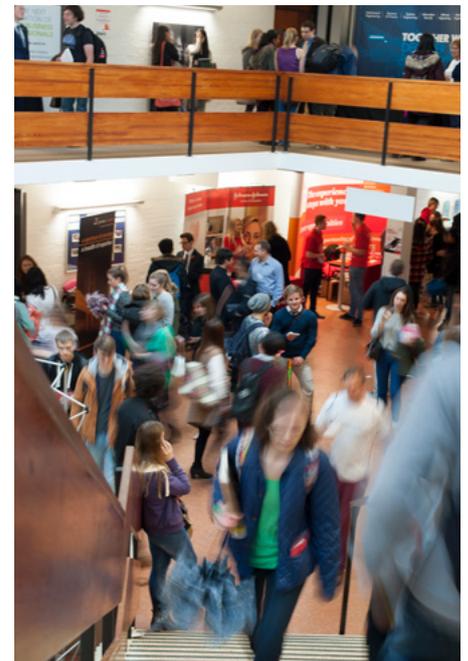
The network contributed to the development of the Tailored Adjustment Plan (TAP), the introduction of the Sunflower Hidden Disabilities lanyard scheme, and advocated for the commitment to the Disability Confident Scheme.

The acknowledgement in 2017 that staff disability disclosure was below the sector-average was also a starting point in discussions around inclusion. While the percentage is not yet sector-average (3.6% against the national average of 5.5%), we also recognise that disclosure should not be the only success criterion for a disability confident workplace.

Declaring a disability is a deeply personal matter. We must respect the legitimacy of those who choose not to disclose. However, declaration rates around disability are crucial to improving understanding and provision around staff experience and advancement.

As of March 2022, 62.6% of staff have disclosed their disability status, and the University aspires to reach 75% by 2024, and 90% by 2026. This aspiration is cemented within the University's 2026 D&I targets to improve our understanding and awareness of representation and staff experience & advancement.

Between May and June 2020, during the first COVID-19 lockdown, and following the National Association of Disabled Staff Network (NADSN)'s position paper, the Staff Disability Network set up an online survey. The survey invited disabled colleagues to share their lockdown work experiences with a view to further inform the University teams that were working on the post-COVID-19 response programme. The 14 recommendations that emerged from this data were shared widely in the Considerations for Disabled Staff During COVID-19 and Post-Lockdown report. They provided the framework for the Staff Disability Network's meeting with the Vice-Chancellor in January 2021, and the launch of the review.



Assessing the sector

The number of University colleagues declaring a disability has risen slightly over the years. For instance, for academic staff it increased from 4.05% in 2014–15 to 5.07% in 2020–21 while for non-academic staff it went from 5.3% to 7.02% (HESA, 2021). At the same time students disclosing disability increased from 11.7% in 2014–15 to 17.9% in 2020–21 (HESA, 2021).

These statistics highlight a discrepancy between the disclosure rates among staff and students, which may be partly linked to the higher availability and level of support systems for students. Such factors highlight the urgency to focus on disabled colleagues for this review, find out how diversity can be celebrated and supported, and further shape an inclusive work environment.

When we consider that 19% of working age adults are disabled (Scope, 2019–20) and the low numbers of staff disability declaration in Higher Education nationally, it begs the question: Are universities unwelcoming career places for disabled people?

There is also a level of staff uncertainty about the benefits of disclosing a disability, and concerns around contractual, work and progression consequences because of misconceptions associated with disability (Brown & Leigh, 2018).

Historically, disability has been less visible in wider inclusion debates. This omission contributed to assumptions that disabled people are few and far between and normalised assumptions that staff working in Higher Education are able-bodied.

Brown and Leigh's book 'Ableism in academia' (2020) offers scholarly debate and a collection of lived experiences on the topic, and discusses wider external pressures associated with perceptions of disability in higher education. Such pressures shift the attention to individuals to demonstrate their worth for being in academia, rather than institutional gaps in disability equity or ableist workplace cultures.

Some recently published resources that highlight key issues around disability in higher education include:

- [**COVID Post-Lockdown: Perspectives, Implications and Strategies for Disabled Staff – NADSN's Position Paper \(National Association of Disabled Staff Networks, May 2020\)**](#)
- Brown, N. & Leigh, J. (2018). [**Ableism in academia: where are the disabled and ill academics?**](#) *Disability & Society*, 33:6, 985–989, DOI: 10.1080/09687599.2018.1455627
- [**Disability STEM data for students and academic staff in higher education 2007/08 to 2018/19**](#) (Jisc, January 2021)
- Brown, N. & Leigh, J. eds. (2020). [**Ableism in Academia. Theorising experiences of disabilities and chronic illnesses in higher education**](#)

We have also included six research reports that share some wider considerations about what disabled people face at work and beyond, including perceptions around disability and reasonable adjustments.

- [**The Disability Perception Gap**](#) (Scope, 2018)
- [**The Great Big Workplace Adjustments Survey**](#) (Business Disability Forum, 2020)
- [**Disability Pay Gaps in the UK**](#) (Office for National statistics, 2018)
- Bosworth, M.L., Ayoubkhani, D., Nafilyan, V., Foubert, J., Glickman, M., [**Davey, C.**](#), & [**Kuper, H.**](#) (2021). [**Deaths involving COVID-19 by disability status: a retrospective analysis of 29 million adults during the first two waves of the Coronavirus pandemic in England.**](#) *The Lancet Public Health*, 6 (11): e817–e825 [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667\(21\)00206-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(21)00206-1)
- Office for National Statistics (2021). [**Updated estimates of coronavirus \(COVID-19\) related deaths by disability status, England: 24 January to 20 November 2020.**](#)
- Office for National Statistics (March 2022). [**Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): disabled people are more likely to feel life will never return to normal**](#)



Our approach to the Disability and Neurodiversity Review

The Disability and Neurodiversity Review focused on participatory action and personal involvement as important catalysts for change. Building our knowledge-base about disability matters, as do the choices we make to develop disability-based consciousness.

We aimed to reflect the philosophy of the Disability Rights Movement (DRM): *Nothing about us without us.*

We wanted colleagues to share their experiences and build up our institutional knowledge. However, we were aware that some may consider the stigma of disability, not identify as being disabled or choosing not to declare a disability.

For meaningful participation, we wanted to offer multiple ways for colleagues to come forward, capture their voices, and make the invisible visible. It was important that colleagues knew that we wanted to hear from them even if they did not consider themselves disabled. They could have seen themselves as neurodivergent, having mental health experiences, long-term health conditions, or a physical or sensory impairment.

The review was organised in two stages:

Stage One: The listening exercises stage (April to July 2021) included an invitation for disabled colleagues to share their stories. This was done through online focus groups or one-to-one discussions with the Staff Disability Network.

While the need for change was urgent, so too was the need to recognise the workload impact and life priorities that the COVID-19 pandemic created disproportionately for disabled colleagues.

Additionally, some colleagues had been on furlough and unable to participate during the initial time of the review. The decision was taken to extend the time for participation and to also offer colleagues who wanted to remain anonymous additional options to be involved.

An online anonymous survey was set up in the autumn term (November 2021) and remained open until February 2022, which generated additional data.

Stage Two: The second phase (November 2021 to January 2022) built on the listening activities and included a series of stakeholder focus group meetings. They were held online, and colleagues from schools and professional services were invited to explore ways in which the University can better support disabled colleagues.

The voices of colleagues who are carers for disabled people are not directly covered in this report. We recognise that they are sources of knowledge and allies for disabled colleagues. Their input and key considerations will be picked up through further listening events.

The review is structured around three themes that address the key challenges in relation to disability and neurodiversity, and identify the breadth of the University activities to support positive action:

- **Recruitment, retention and representation**
- **Staff experience and advancement**
- **Culture**

PART 1

Where is the University of Reading on its disability and neurodiversity journey?

In July 2020, the University launched the Disability and Neurodiversity Action Plan Group, which is co-chaired by the Dean for Diversity and Inclusion, Dr Allán Laville, and Assistant Director of Human Resources, Susan Thornton. The group will develop and monitor the implementation of a programme of actions to ensure that our University:

- is, and is perceived to be, nationally leading in the welcoming, inclusive and supportive environment that it provides for disabled staff and students
- is engaging with and acting on issues raised by disability communities within the University
- achieves the commitments made by the University as part of its membership of the Disability Confident Scheme, and to progress through the scheme's different levels.

The Disability and Neurodiversity Action Plan Group led our efforts to sign up to the Sunflower Hidden Disabilities lanyard scheme in November 2020. We have adopted the term 'Invisible Disabilities' as not all disabilities are visible, and no one should feel the need to hide their disability.

The Sunflower scheme supports individuals who want to indicate that they have an invisible disability by wearing a Sunflower lanyard or badge.

This signals to others that a person may require additional assistance or considerations, such as extra time or adjustments to work environments.

The Action Plan Group also supported the launch of the Tailored Adjustment Plan (TAP) for colleagues who identify as disabled, neurodivergent, or as having a mental health condition or long-term health condition. The plan template provides a framework for discussion about possible changes to workplace arrangements (which may also reflect reasonable adjustments) between a colleague and their line manager.

In February 2021, the University signed up to the Disability Confident Scheme (Level 1 – Committed) with the aim to complete all required actions by February 2024. The University already meets many of these commitments with regard to recruitment, there is considerable ongoing work to address activity around work experience.

Once this work is completed, the University can aim for Level 2. This includes a self-assessment against a set of statements about employing disabled people, which identifies what more needs to be done to become a Disability Confident employer. This commitment has been cemented within the University's new diversity and inclusion targets for 2026:

Target 3: Disability – Staff

Target	Supporting context
<p>By 2024, to have met all required actions for the Disability Confident Scheme (Level 1 – Committed).</p> <p>By 2026, to have applied for Disability Confident Scheme (Level 2 – Confident).</p>	<p>The target supports the longer-term implementation of recommendations from the institutional Disability and Neurodiversity Review.</p>

PART 2

What did the engagement phase of the review tell us?

All-staff briefings

In July 2021, Professor Elizabeth McCrum, University Executive Board Champion for Disability, and Dr Allán Laville, Dean for Diversity and Inclusion, delivered the first all-staff briefing for the Disability and Neurodiversity Review. This was attended by 250 colleagues.

The briefing included information on the purpose, approach and themes of the review, and invited colleagues to participate in the upcoming listening exercises. Questions ranged from the need to learn more about disability and neuro-inclusive language to terms within the neurodiversity umbrella to the difference between equality and equity within disability inclusion and how to learn more about ableism.

The themes arising from colleagues' questions informed the content of our Disability and Neurodiversity Panel and our Empowering Neurodiversity event, which are discussed in this section.

In February 2022, Professor McCrum and Dr Laville were joined by Dr Yota Dimitriadi, Chair of the Staff Disability Network, for the second all-staff briefing, which was attended by 310 colleagues.

This briefing included revisiting the purpose, approach and themes of the review, and informed colleagues about the main findings from the series of listening exercises (focus groups, surveys, and stakeholder meetings). The questions from colleagues focused on tangible outcomes from the review, including a resource directory for disability awareness, and practical steps everyone can take to support disability and neurodiversity inclusion.

Events

Throughout the review, it was deemed important to run a series of events, which provided the opportunity for colleagues to share their lived experiences. The events were aimed at supporting allies to develop their knowledge and skills in disability and neurodiversity inclusion. The first event 'Disability and Neurodiversity' panel was held in July 2021 and the aim of the event was to explore and share a diverse range of experiences among disabled colleagues, neurodivergent colleagues, and colleagues with long-term health conditions at the University of Reading. The event was hosted by David Hull-Watters, who is a Disability and Neurodiversity in the Workplace, LGBTQ+ and Unconscious Bias Specialist. David was joined by panel members from the University's staff community. These included:

- **James Church**, Assistant Research Development Manager
- **Professor Joanna Clark**, Professor in Environmental Science
- **Laura Davis**, Trust and Foundation fundraiser
- **Dr Yota Dimitriadi**, Associate Professor in Computing Education and TEL (Technology Enhanced Learning).

David introduced the topic by talking about the social model of disability, which departs from the medical model, recognising that society creates barriers through designing everything to meet the needs of people who are not disabled. Participants learned that the task of removing barriers is the responsibility of society, rather than the person with a disability. Reasonable adjustments were discussed, and it was reiterated that the individual is the expert about their requirements. This means that the person who identifies as disabled will know more about their unique experience than anyone else. In the words of Carl Jung, "Every individual is an exception to the rule", and this is important to consider in terms of disability. Well-meaning line managers may

make assumptions about a person's capacity or ability, based on their disclosure. The intention behind these assumptions may be supportive and compassionate, but any assumption can cause unintentional harm. It highlights the importance of holding open conversations where line managers take responsibility for asking questions, and colleagues are given space to explore their experience with their line manager. Panellists talked about representation for disabled people and shared their experiences around declaring their disability at work. Unconscious bias was discussed, as well as personal experiences shared, and the effect this has on colleagues was noted.

The panel also discussed recruitment, and ways this process could be made more inclusive. It seemed that colleagues were more likely to declare a disability once they felt secure in their role, or that they were in a permanent position. It was expressed that it was more likely that they were aware of disabled colleagues who are close to them. These experiences indicated that there is an avoidance of declaring disability out of concern that this will have a negative impact. This is often due to past experiences where colleagues have had a negative experience.

There were 72 attendees at this event and those who attended felt they had a greater awareness of disability and neurodiversity as a result. Some had identified ways in which they could support colleagues better and were keen to see more events like this in the future. Recording link: [Disability and Neurodiversity – panel event.](#)

Following the success of the Disability and Neurodiversity panel and the identified need for further events on neurodiversity, we run the Empowering Neurodiversity event in December 2021. In this event, we collaborated with Lexxic, who are experts in neurodiversity in the workplace. They work with organisations to develop environments where neurodiversity can flourish and share resources to learn about neurodiversity and the specific neuro-differences.

The session was led by Pooja Sudera-Gupta, a Senior Business Psychologist at Lexxic, who has been working in the field of neurodiversity for more than seven years in both private and government organisations. During the hour-long online event, participants learned about what falls under the umbrella term neurodiversity, ways in which the working environment can create barriers for those identifying as neurodivergent, and ways that employers and colleagues can help to create a neurodiversity-inclusive environment. 50 people attended this event and the recording link is available here: [Empowering Neurodiversity – A UoR \(University of Reading\) and Lexxic event.](#)

This event has already had a wide-reaching impact. One of the areas explored was how documents can be made more accessible for neurodivergent colleagues. Based on the accessibility information provided at the event, changes were made to the templates for University Executive Board, Senate, Council, and Council sub-committees papers. This provides a steer from the most senior levels of the University, demonstrating guidance for best practice in neurodiverse inclusion. While the best-practice guidance focuses on neurodiverse inclusion, it can be argued that this will make the papers and documents more inclusive for all, therefore having a huge impact on making these meetings more accessible for all participants.

Rachel Helsby, Executive Officer for the Vice-Chancellor, and member of the Disability Review Group, said:

“After hearing about some of the advice from the workshop, I took the opportunity to incorporate this into the templates for papers for University Executive Board and Council. We have adopted this immediately for these two groups and have also shared this with all committee secretaries and asked them to use the new template or something similar from August 2022.”

PART 3

Moving forward on disability and neurodiversity inclusion at the University of Reading

Recruitment

As mentioned previously, the University has signed up to Level 1 of the Disability Confident Scheme. One of the commitments within this is to ensure we are offering an interview to applicants who declare they have a disability, provided they meet the minimum criteria for the role. In practical terms, if there is a 'Disability Confident' applicant(s) the line manager can consult their HR Coordinator dealing with the recruitment who is fully aware of what the requirements of the scheme are and can advise accordingly.

Discussions in the review's focus groups raised a possible reluctance to declare a disability at application or interview stage as people felt it could affect the decision-making process. Others raised the possibility that some applicants may not declare a disability during recruitment as they do not see themselves as disabled, or that they manage their disability and do not want to declare it, or do not do so as they do not need any adjustments to be made at that stage in the recruitment process.

Being clear about why we collect data, and how it is separate from the application, was felt by some as a way of encouraging declaration. A greater clarity about who sees the data and what it is used for could also help applicants declare a disability.

Data collected during the application process is anonymised and only used to provide collated information about applicants as a group. Personal details are never included so it is not possible to identify any individual or which, if any, protected characteristics they have declared. This is separate from Disability Confident scheme information which just asks whether the applicant wishes to be considered under that scheme.

It was mentioned in focus groups that it could be helpful to have communication with applicants who disclose a disability when offered an interview.

It is part of current practice to contact applicants in these circumstances to see whether they need any reasonable adjustments. This could include additional time for the interview or any associated assessments, contacting Access to Work for assistance with this when needed.

The focus groups and stakeholder groups considered how our University could further assist those who disclose a disability, neurodiversity, or long-term health condition during the recruitment process.

Ideas included sharing key questions or topic areas in advance and using assessments to test skills, in addition to an interview, where appropriate. This approach is used by some at the University, but not always across our institution. Some mentioned exploring the use of filmed video segments from a line manager that talk about what a job is really about or offering Teams-hosted events for interested applicants.

The University's webpages and job adverts need to be accessible, which is part of the work of the Online Accessibility Group within Digital Technology Services (DTS). Additionally, all interview panel members should have undertaken unconscious bias training and apply this to how they interview (and sift) for roles. The chair of a panel is responsible for ensuring that all panel members have been trained and this will be flagged again to remind chairs of their responsibility.

Within the considerations around recruitment, line manager training is also relevant. There was a feeling that awareness-raising about disability, neurodiversity and long-term health conditions could also help to support line managers when recruiting, and to combat ableism.

Training to raise awareness is covered further in the section on staff experience and advancement in this report, and this could include signposting to the toolkit of resources proposed in recommendations 4 and 5.

The toolkit will include links to organisations that can help with more specific advice, such as the Business Disability Forum and the Employers Network for Equality & Inclusion. Mental Health First Aid training has been provided for all members of the University Executive Board and Leadership Group and is available for all staff on the UoR Learn portal, and has been well received.

Ahead of interviews, candidates being clear about where to go, timings, panel members, and interview format were all seen as important generally but particularly for those with a disability, neurodiversity or long-term health condition. Changes made to these considerations, particularly last-minute, could impact more significantly on disabled applicants, and recruiting managers' awareness of this – and how to mitigate the impact should these circumstances arise – would be a useful element to the awareness training.

Data gathered for the University's latest Diversity and Inclusion Annual Report does show a higher shortlist and interview success rate among disabled applicants who declare a disability when compared to applicants who say they are not disabled or who prefer not to say, or who do not respond to the question. It is important to note that our work to increase declaration of protected characteristics at the recruitment stage is part of Recommendation 2 in the Race Equality Review (2021).

The recent appointment of a Recruitment Manager in HR (Human Resources) is part of the actions already underway to improve our recruitment process for all candidates. This will include addressing areas such as language of job adverts, application processes, recruitment packs, and a more accessible applicant webpage, and full consideration of the above suggestions from colleagues taking part in this review.

The recruitment manager will work with a diverse range of colleagues, including the different staff networks, and is already liaising with colleagues at other universities that have shared best practice.

They are also working closely with People Development to update the University's recruitment and selection training, and information from this review will also inform that work.

Recommendation 1:

Continue to develop an inclusive approach to recruitment through updated recruitment and selection training for panel members and chairs, improved information for applicants, and more inclusive interview and selection methodology to ensure that improved practice is evident throughout the institution and is embedded into practice.



Representation and retention

We know a lot less about our disabled colleagues than we do about our colleagues with other protected characteristics. For example, in our [annual Diversity and Inclusion Report](#), we routinely collect and report data on committee representation, reward and progression by race and sex; we do not report by disability. We also do not report data about our retention of disabled colleagues. This makes it difficult to understand the extent of the representation gap for disabled colleagues and knowing whether, for example, our numbers of disabled colleagues reflect our local population. As we move towards becoming a disability confident employer, this should be a growing area of focus as it is for other protected characteristics of race and sex.

In the focus groups' discussion on representation, there was limited focus on traditional representation, such as the percentage of disabled colleagues on committees or in high-level University decision-making and a greater focus on how we can assure full participation in the workplace for disabled and neurodivergent colleagues, including the opportunity to contribute to University-wide initiatives.

Making meetings truly accessible were raised in focus groups and stakeholder meetings. Certainly, recent experience has shown how we can successfully operate meetings online, and the move to Smart Working at Reading gives us an opportunity to ensure our meetings and decision-making committees are accessible for all participants. The work of the Staff Disability Network as a consultative group to this process could be key, and this area of work falls into the culture section of this report as well as the recommendation on accessible digital working.

Similarly, disabled and neurodivergent colleagues told us that we have a long way to go to have accessible campuses, and that we needed a more joined-up approach to understand and tackle issues. Concerns raised included the absence of changing spaces toilets, the use/misuse of dedicated disabled parking spaces, the operation of automated doors, the inconsistent delivery of induction loops, and office and desk layouts particularly within shared office spaces which are often the norm particularly for professional colleagues.

With no major building programme planned for the near future, change in this area will be incremental and potentially slower than hoped. However, by gathering information together into one place, we can inform our future direction.

Some of these issues are already well-known to stakeholders, and others told us that we can draw on existing reports, data, and our considerable in-house academic expertise in this area to inform improvements. For example, the School of the Built Environment, Institute for Education, and Psychology can help guide improvements. Again, the role of the Staff Disability Network is critical as a representative voice at the University, and we should draw upon its expertise.

Recommendation 2:

To conduct an accessibility review of our campuses to establish the current position against an agreed set of baseline needs (information, physical changes, and so on). Determine gaps and identify remedial actions in conjunction with Estates and Facilities, and others. The prioritisation of delivery of any remedial actions should be undertaken under the University's Estate Strategy. The review should be undertaken by a multi-disciplinary team, including academic and professional colleagues and the Staff Disability Network.

Turning to staff retention, many disabled colleagues in the listening exercises had welcomed the flexibility that working from home had given them. Colleagues, particularly those with mental health conditions, reported their concerns that a full return to campus and/or a return to working arrangements pre-pandemic might impact their capacity to contribute fully to the workplace, as well as exacerbating their condition, with limited understanding from their line managers or the wider community.

Worries were also expressed about an inconsistent approach given that many decisions about returning to campus have been delegated to Heads of Schools and Functions, and that there may not be equity across the organisation.

More fundamentally, while we have established procedures for thorough consideration of someone's needs when joining the organisation, we could improve guidance or processes for when someone develops a disability or a long-term chronic health condition while in our employment.

While we do have examples of best practice in our organisation, it is reportedly often only when something goes wrong in the workplace that a referral is made to Occupational Health. This referral is required before actions such as reasonable adjustments are taken, and the line manager is central to this. There were concerns that if a line manager does not want to refer someone to Occupational Health, it becomes a barrier for the disabled colleague.

In addition, the needs of many disabled or neurodivergent colleagues can vary over time (known as fluctuating profiles), or on a week-by-week or even a day-by-day basis, something that is often ill-recognised. So a colleague might be able to attend meetings on campus on one day or in one week with limited impact; on another the situation may be quite different.

In summary, we need to be able to provide the right support in a timely manner to colleagues when they need it. Reducing the stigma about asking for support, or being courageous about starting conversations when it is needed, are key.

The Tailored Adjustment Plan provides employees and managers with a framework for conversation, to agree and document reasonable adjustments, and minimise the need to re-negotiate adjustments each time a colleague changes job or job role, is relocated, or works with a new line manager.

The plan is dynamic and can be reviewed when needed. While a relatively new development for the University of Reading, further promotion of the TAP will raise awareness of its use and benefits to colleagues, especially for those who may not consider themselves disabled but who might benefit from the adjustments offered.

A strong theme from the listening exercises and the stakeholder groups has been the high demand for provision of work-based support and adjustments. The small in-house Occupational Health Team, which is valued by colleagues, highlighted in discussion some of the inherent limitations of the system.

Occupational Health looks at how a person's work impacts health and vice versa. It works with other health professionals as relevant and supports colleagues to identify reasonable adjustments that can help them at work. Occupational Health may signpost where specialist support, such as assistive technology, is needed, or where a further specialist workplace assessment is required. There can be significant delays in securing the adjustments required because we do not have experts in-house, for example in assistive technology, nor do colleagues know what options may be available to them. This can have disproportionate consequences. For example, one discussion participant said: "It is hard for people to realise that people rely on technology, and if it does not work, it is like taking my hands away."

Similarly, management must make changes to working practices or arrangements, and these may have time, operational or feasibility considerations. In addition, it was reported that public provision in some areas – such as adult assessment for autism – is limited, which means that there can be further delays in understanding individual needs and arranging for reasonable adjustments.

Recommendation 3:

To conduct an analysis into how we implement reasonable adjustments for disabled colleagues with a view to identifying what the gaps are and agreeing recommendations and priorities for action.



Staff experience and advancement

This section examines staff experience and progression from the perspective of training, personal development, and allyship for all staff, as well as those with a disability, neurodiversity, or chronic physical or mental health condition.

Throughout the listening phase, it was evident that line managers play a pivotal role in the lived working experience of disabled colleagues. We heard examples of fantastically supportive line managers who enhance the working experience of those they manage, but also examples where this support is absent or could be improved. Having a good line manager was described in one focus group as “very much the luck of the draw”.

Line managers who took part in the stakeholder meetings were keen to be proactive and wanted access to resources and expert guidance to better support disabled, neurodivergent, and chronically ill staff. There was some hesitancy to speak with colleagues about their disability for fear of being perceived as patronising or inadvertently causing offense by using the wrong language.

However, relying on the staff member being comfortable in disclosing that they may need reasonable adjustments brings its own challenges, as we have seen elsewhere in this report. Feedback from the focus groups indicated that when line managers were better informed and more understanding about disability, colleagues felt more secure in bringing their authentic self to work. Being flexible and trusting staff to get the job done works best for both parties.

The overarching impression is that there is a lack of consistency in the experience of being line managed across the University, and that there is demand for more support for line managers at all levels. We recommend the development of a toolkit for line managers that covers disabilities, neurodiversity, and long-term physical and mental health conditions, and brings together both new and existing resources. The toolkit would offer a one-stop shop for support, including existing policies and guidance such as the Disability Confident Scheme, Tailored Adjustment Plan, managing disability-related absence, flexible and smart working, and so on. It would also include external resources such as the Business Disability Forum and Lexxic, as well as case studies and best practice examples from disabled colleagues and line managers, and signposting to HR expertise and training courses. It is important to develop a toolkit specific to UoR so the guidance is contextualised, rather than generic. There may also be scope to develop a line manager network for informal peer support, which would need to be on the basis that colleagues being supported remained anonymous to ensure confidentiality.

Recommendation 4:

To develop a toolkit for line managers that brings together a range of tools, resources, advice and guidance related to disability, neurodiversity, and chronic physical and mental health conditions, and to help embed a consistent approach to support and enhance the lived working experience of our staff.

Also evident from the listening exercises and all-staff talks was the demand for a programme of awareness training for staff. CQSD (Centre for Quality Support and Development) already provide a suite of teaching and learning-focused training sessions that are aimed at enhancing staff awareness and pedagogic practice in support of students with disability, neurodiversity, and chronic physical and mental health conditions, but this is not readily accessed beyond the teaching and learning community.

The University has recently partnered with Mental Health First Aid to provide training to staff at all levels of the organisation, including sessions aimed specifically at line managers. This is a very welcome development, and it is hoped it marks a long-term commitment to training and awareness that contributes to the removal of the stigma associated with mental health conditions, and makes the University a safe space to work and study regardless of a person's mental health. It is our recommendation that a similar approach is taken to provide comparable awareness training about disabilities, chronic physical health conditions, and neurodiversity.

While training in and of itself is not the endpoint, it can help all colleagues to develop shared and appropriate language and terminology, and feel confident in having conversations about living with disabilities, neurodiversity, and chronic physical and mental health conditions.

Recommendation 5:

To develop a rolling programme of awareness training for all staff about disabilities, neurodiversity, and chronic physical and mental health conditions.

In addition to awareness training, it is evident from the experience of some disabled or neurodivergent staff that instances of ableism are, at times, an unwelcome feature of working life at the University.

Ableism is favouring non-disabled people, and through the listening exercises, colleagues gave examples of both deliberate and what they considered to be inadvertent ableism in the workplace through the language and actions of co-workers. Experiences shared anonymously included:

- "People go on their knees to talk to me."
- "[Colleagues say] you look fantastic and [express] disbelief in my condition."
- "The way I cope with my mental health is to have routines."
- "People used to move stuff from my desk as a joke."

These examples indicate that training around allyship and what constitutes ableism would be beneficial for all staff.

The need to tackle discriminatory behaviour has also featured in work to improve the lived experience of LGBT+ and BAME (Black Asian Minority Ethnic) staff, and it is intended that the forthcoming Active Bystander training will address these intersections. Recommendation 16 of the Race Equality Review proposes that links to specific examples of discriminatory behaviours are included in related policies and training. It is recommended that a similar approach is adopted to support a shared understanding of ableism and specific forms of discrimination and harassment related to disability, neurodiversity, and long-term physical and mental health conditions.

Some colleagues who contributed to the listening phase are carers to disabled and neurodivergent people. These colleagues are likely to be natural allies to disabled colleagues given their own life experiences and are important in creating an inclusive culture.

Being carers shapes their working experience and while beyond the remit of this review, the group would welcome further consideration of the support that the University could offer to these colleagues in the absence of disability-related guidance for carers or package of support. This work could be organised with facilitation or input from Staff Networks. We are working with the Parent and Family Network to support and represent carers.

Recommendation 6:

To provide ally and active bystander training and resources, including how to address ableism, to all staff.

As mentioned in the section on staff retention and representation, it was noted that we do not currently report data on reward and recognition among disabled colleagues, in part due to low declaration rates. As a result, we are unable to quantify the proportion of disabled and neurodivergent staff who have successfully applied for promotion at the University.

However, feedback from the listening exercises indicates that there are improvements we can make to the academic promotion personal titles and the reward committee processes for professional services staff that would better support colleagues who wish to apply for promotion.

Comments received from colleagues during the listening exercise included:

- “There is the perception that I won’t be taken seriously or given responsibility for promotion [because I have disclosed disability].”
- “We are being overlooked for promotion [because of the disability].”
- “They are measuring you up against non disabled colleagues and not recognising what you are already doing but the need to do more.”

In addition, lack of confidence is often cited as a reason people do not put themselves forward for promotion, additional responsibilities, or line management roles.

Colleagues may feel reluctant or fearful of disclosing a disability, neurodiversity, or chronic health conditions in case it hinders their chances of progression or reward. For professional services colleagues, promotion is usually achieved by applying for a new role, which means waiting for a suitable role to become available or moving to a role in another department or function. HR is currently gathering data on progression for professional services colleagues across the University.

Once the data-gathering is completed, we will be able to analyse what this tells us about how professional services colleagues progress within the organisation, and it will help us to identify whether gaps exist, where these are, and what action might be appropriate to remedy any issues, in particular should the data show any difference in relation to colleagues with a disability, neurodiversity, chronic or mental health condition, or other protected characteristics.

We are aware that there is a mentoring scheme for academic staff in Grades 7 and 8 when applying for promotion via personal titles, but there is some inconsistency regarding when a mentor is assigned and in the level of support provided by individual mentors. We recommend that the University Personal Titles Committee look at ways to strengthen this provision.

In addition, we very much welcome the establishment of a buddy scheme by the BAME Network specifically to support BAME colleagues across both academic and professional services to apply for promotion, and would welcome a similar initiative by the Staff Disability Network.

The Academic Promotion, Professorial Review, and Professional Services Reward Committee processes give the opportunity for a statement of personal circumstances from the Head of School or Function, agreed by the applicant, to be included with the application. In each case, the reason for the personal circumstances should not be described. For example, a disability can be indicated but not defined. Instead, the impact of the circumstances on the achievements of the individual during the period in question should be highlighted.

During the focus groups, some colleagues indicated that they believe that their disability, neurodiversity, or chronic physical or mental health conditions should be detailed in an application as it is directly relevant to their lived working experience. We recommend that the guidance on how disability, neurodiversity, or chronic physical or mental health conditions are considered when Academic Promotion, Professorial Review, and Reward Committee applications are reviewed, with input from people with those conditions, to assess whether the current approach is sufficiently equitable.

Finally, focus group participants stated that some of the documentation supporting reward and recognition is not accessible. We are aware that the Online Accessibility Group is working to ensure that all University documentation complies with online accessibility requirements. In addition, we would encourage the University to make a more general statement about the use of accessible and inclusive language in all its written outputs and the guidance from Lexxic on writing for neurodivergent colleagues. This is explored further in recommendation 10.

Recommendation 7:

To enhance progression and promotion opportunities for disabled and neurodivergent academic and professional services staff. This should be done by ensuring existing promotion support systems – such as mentoring – are consistently offered; that a buddy system is developed to support staff seeking promotion; that a review of personal circumstances processes is undertaken to ensure an equitable approach; and that all reward and recognition documentation is made accessible.

Culture

Throughout the listening exercises, it became clear that many colleagues are motivated to support positive change in disability and neurodiversity inclusion. However, colleagues have also shared a fear of saying the wrong thing, particularly regarding terminology, and as a result, do not engage in action. As expressed by the Vice-Chancellor in the second all-staff briefing, the key point to supporting positive change is to have the right intentions and to engage in learning more. To do so, we need to identify practical steps that each of us can take. This can take the form of reading texts on disability and neurodiversity inclusion, completing training such as the [Invisible Disabilities training](#) on UoRLearn, or attending events.

A well-regarded framework for cultural change is the COM-B model, proposed by Professor Susan Michie in 2011. Professor Michie states that for behavioural (B) change to occur, three conditions must be met. The first condition is capability (C), which considers the knowledge one possesses to enact change. The second condition is opportunity (O), and whether external factors enable one to enact change. The third condition is motivation (M), and whether someone has intrinsic or extrinsic motivators for change. From the listening exercises, we are aware that colleagues are motivated to enact change, however, we need to address the considerations regarding knowledge and opportunity for change.

The listening exercises revealed a need for more prominent role models for disabled and neurodivergent colleagues, as well as the need to hear more success stories about promotion and progression among disabled and neurodivergent colleagues. The sharing of stories and lived experience will support normalising conversations about disability and neurodiversity, and provide insight into the lived working experiences of colleagues. It was felt that by sharing experiences, this will develop a sense of belonging for disabled and neurodivergent colleagues. For allies, listening to shared stories will develop their knowledge of disability, neurodiversity, mental health, chronic illness and can provide a shared language. Allies are encouraged to take responsibility for their own education as this supports the notion that it is not the responsibility of disabled and neurodivergent colleagues to educate allies.

There was also acknowledgement that conversations about disability and neurodiversity should happen at a local level as well as the central level. One example of good practice is the Disability History Month 2021 event hosted by the Institute of Education. In this event, a panel of four students and four colleagues shared their lived experiences with the aim to help others understand more about disabilities and neurodiversity. The talks included intersectional considerations of being carers, identifying as working-class academics, chronic pain, and young male students speaking about mental health. The feedback on this event overwhelmingly showed the need for it, and for similar events to follow.

To provide opportunities for colleagues to develop their knowledge on disabilities and neurodiversity, and to develop a sense of belonging for disabled and neurodivergent colleagues, recommendation 8 supports the facilitation of storytelling and lived experience.

Recommendation 8:

To promote lived experiences and sharing of success stories for disabled and neurodivergent colleagues through local and central events. This will include the launch of the inaugural Disability History Month Lecture in December 2022.

From the listening exercises, it is clear that in order to further support all colleagues in developing their knowledge of disabilities and neurodiversity, it is necessary for an online resource to be created that includes information on disabilities within the Equality Act 2010, details on what reasonable adjustments are, how to access support at the University, links to relevant resources on disability, neurodiversity, mental health and long-term health conditions, and the Sunflower Invisible Disabilities lanyard scheme. This online resource will also include the toolkit for line managers (Recommendation 4).

Recommendation 9:

To create an online resource for disability and neurodiversity inclusion. This resource will be signposted at the central staff induction and within the University's Diversity and Inclusion training module.

The listening exercises also highlighted the need for accessibility guidance that covers best practice in accessible digital working. This includes accessible documents (for further information refer to the [University Style Guide](#)), and interactive resources as well as accessible events and meetings. This should include developing standards for inclusive meetings with full consideration of the use of accessible language and templates, British Sign Language, captioning, and other adjustments as appropriate.

To achieve this, it is proposed that guidelines are created to support colleagues in implementing good practice within digital working. For example, for all-staff briefings and events managed by the University's Corporate Communications and Events Teams to meet all accessibility criteria outlined in the proposed guidance. The creation of the guidance will be informed by the project work completed by the University's Online Accessibility Working Group, which is chaired by the University's Chief Strategy Officer and University Secretary. For successful implementation of the guidance, it is proposed that an accessibility officer is appointed to implement and engage in regular updates of the institutional guidance for accessible digital working.

Recommendation 10:

To create, and widely disseminate via Heads of School and Heads of Function, guidance for accessible digital working, and to appoint an accessibility officer to ensure guidance is implemented and updated in line with legislative and institutional change.



PART 4

Concluding remarks and summary of recommendations

We want the University of Reading to be an equitable workplace. We know that we are happier and work better if we can be ourselves and work within a safe and inclusive environment. So we have work do if we want to continue making progress towards these aspirations.

This review aimed to:

- **Explore** the lived experience of disabled and neurodivergent colleagues, and colleagues with chronic or long-term illnesses, via listening exercises.
- **Raise** awareness of disability and neurodiversity considerations within the wider university.
- **Create** recommendations to improve the lived working experience of disabled and neurodivergent colleagues, and colleagues with chronic or long-term illnesses.
- **Support** the Disability and Neurodiversity Action Plan Group with its strategic priorities.

The focus groups and surveys of academic and professional staff have really helped us to appreciate the range of diverse lived experiences of our colleagues. These, alongside the stakeholder meetings, have provided a range of data that has informed and helped us to identify the 10 recommendations that you see in this report. This review and our discussion of it, alongside the update events, showcases and range of University-wide events, have helped us to raise awareness about disability and neurodiversity.

The findings and recommendations of the review highlight that we still have much to do in relation to recruitment, representation, advancement, and retention of colleagues. Our aim is to ensure the best possible working experience, with everyone well informed, and to create and nurture a supportive culture and sense of belonging.

So our work has only just begun. We have these 10 recommendations, each of which has clearly stated accountability for implementation. The implementation of recommendations will be overseen by the Disability and Neurodiversity Action Plan Group, and progress monitored by the University Executive Board. Achieving these recommendations and advancing disability and neurodiversity inclusion here at Reading is the responsibility of everyone. We can all now reflect on what we can next do to help move us towards these ends.

We are grateful to members of the review group, supported by the Staff Disability Network, for their commitment and hard work, on top of busy day jobs, in undertaking this review and coming to these recommendations. Particular thanks go to those of you who shared your personal lived experiences, which was not always an easy thing to do, and identified good practices and challenges. Thanks also to everyone who took the time to engage with all of the events and conversations, with reading this report, and working with us to achieve these recommendations. Thank you.



Recommendations of the Disability and Neurodiversity Review

	Recommendation	Responsible
1	Recruitment: Continue to develop an inclusive approach to recruitment through updated recruitment and selection training for panel members and chairs, improved information for applicants, and more inclusive interview and selection methodology to ensure that improved practice is evident throughout the institution and is embedded into practice.	HR for institutional measures; Heads of Schools and Functions for local measures
2	Representation: To conduct an accessibility review of our campuses to establish the current position against an agreed set of baseline needs (information, physical changes, and so on). Determine gaps and identify remedial actions in conjunction with Estates and Facilities and others. The prioritisation of delivery of any remedial actions should be undertaken under the University's Estate Strategy. The review should be undertaken by a multi-disciplinary team including academic and professional colleagues and the Staff Disability Network.	Estates and Facilities
3	Retention: to conduct an analysis into how we implement reasonable adjustments for disabled colleagues with a view to identifying what the gaps are and agreeing recommendations and priorities for action.	HR and Occupational Health
4	Staff Experience: To develop a toolkit for line managers that brings together a range of tools, resources, advice and guidance related to disability, neurodiversity, and chronic physical and mental health conditions, and help embed a consistent approach to supporting and enhancing the lived working experience of staff.	HR, in liaison with the central Diversity and Inclusion Team and Staff Disability Network
5	Staff Experience: To develop a rolling programme of awareness training for all staff about disabilities, neurodiversity, and chronic physical and mental health conditions.	People Development, with input from the Staff Disability Network
6	Staff Experience: To provide ally and active bystander training and resources, including how to address ableism, to all staff.	People Development, Staff Disability Network
7	Advancement: To enhance progression and promotion opportunities for disabled and neurodivergent academic and professional services staff. This should be done by ensuring existing promotion support systems – such as mentoring – are consistently offered; that a buddy system is developed to support staff seeking promotion; that a review of personal circumstances processes is undertaken to ensure an equitable approach; and that all reward and recognition documentation is made accessible.	University Personal Titles Committee/ Governance, School Personal Title Committees, HR, Staff Disability Network

	Recommendation	Responsible
8	Sense of belonging: To promote lived experiences and sharing of success stories for disabled and neurodivergent colleagues through local and central events. This will include the launch of the inaugural Disability History Month Lecture in December 2022.	Central Events Team, central Diversity and Inclusion Team and local diversity and inclusion committees
9	Culture of equality: To create an online resource for disability and neurodiversity inclusion. This resource will be signposted at the central staff induction and within the University's Diversity and Inclusion training module.	HR, Staff Disability Network
10	Communication: To create, and widely disseminate via Heads of School and Heads of Function, guidance for accessible digital working, and to appoint an accessibility officer to ensure guidance is implemented and updated in line with legislative and institutional change.	Digital Technology Services, Marketing, Communication and Engagement, and the Online Accessibility Working Group



Disability and Neurodiversity Review

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