Education brief
Inclusive education

Inclusive education is commonly defined as teaching that engages students in learning which is meaningful, relevant and accessible to all. Inclusive education embraces the view that individual difference is a source of diversity, which can enrich the lives and learning of others (Hockings, 2010).

What does inclusive education mean?

The **definition of inclusive education** has **evolved** over the last few decades. Inclusive education was **originally** associated with improving access for students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) to mainstream education. The definition has developed more recently beyond this initial focus on 'access' and now also takes into account the '**participation**' and '**progress**' of students.

Access ● ● ► Participation ● ● ► Progress

What is the theory behind inclusive education?

*   The original theory associated with inclusive education was linked to how to teach students with SEN. This was underpinned by the **medical model of disability**, which sought to identify, label and accommodate students with SEN into mainstream education settings.
*   The **social model of disability** has facilitated a **shift** away from the medical model and instead frames disability in terms of **barriers** created by society that **undermine** the **individual's ability to succeed**. Barriers could include, for instance, a lack of a lift or ramp access to a building, insufficient access to relevant computer software, or a busy and overwhelming learning environment. The scope of inclusion has now been broadened to include other groups, e.g. the elderly or those with lower incomes, who are in danger of marginalisation (Haug, 2017).
*   There has also been a further shift **beyond the social model of disability**, linked to the **World Health Organization's (WHO's) International Classification of Functioning (ICF), which focuses on the relationship between the individual and their environment**.

The ICF states that a person's level of functioning can change over time and is affected by a combination of factors, including their health, environmental factors and other personal factors (WHO, 2001). This therefore recognises that a person's level of functioning is fluid, rather than being fixed.

*   Inclusive education has increasingly become associated with the principles of U**niversal Design for Learning (UDL)**, which promote flexibility in teaching and learning by providing learners with:
*   **multiple means of representation** (various ways of acquiring information and knowledge).
*   multiple means of expression (for demonstrating what they know).
*   **multiple means of engagement** (to mirror learners' interests, challenge them appropriately and motivate them to learn) (Meyer et al, 2013).

The UDL approach ensures the curriculum and learning environment are usable by all learners to the greatest extent possible, reducing the need for individual adaptations.

What other terms are associated with inclusive education?

Other terms that are commonly associated with inclusive education include:

Special Educational Needs (SEN): used to describe a range of needs including specific **learning difficulties** (e.g. attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), dyslexia, dyspraxia), **visual and hearing impairments, mental health difficulties, chronic fatigue/ pain conditions**. This could also include **psychosocial challenges**, where students excel in specific areas such as the arts, but may find the social aspects of learning or communication challenging.

Reasonable adjustments/access arrangements: learners with SEN may benefit from specific exam access arrangements and/or adjustments to learning, such as allowing extra time or use of a computer.

- **Individualised Education Plan (IEP)**: a teaching and learning plan designed in collaboration with the parent(s), learner, teacher(s) and relevant multi-disciplinary team members specifically for learners with one or more identified SEN.
- **Differentiation:** adjustments to teaching and learning that take into account students' different learning preferences, strengths and challenges. Differentiation is most effective when we differentiate the **process of learning** itself rather than simply differentiating the outcomes of learning. Learning which enables students to develop their **self-regulation** and **metacognition** (see our Education Brief on Metacognition) will also enable them to **differentiate their own learning**.
- **Neurodiversity:** recognises the fact that our brains ('neuro-') naturally vary from person to person (are 'diverse') and are a part of human variation. Neurodiversity can lead to individuals seeing and perceiving the world differently. Recognising and appreciating this can help teachers understand why students react to learning cultures and environments in different ways.

What are the benefits of inclusive education?

Inclusive education has many benefits for schools, teachers and for both students with SEN and the wider student cohort:

- **Inclusive education is proactive** rather than **reactive**; it enables us to anticipate, plan for and mitigate challenges to learning, which in turn reduces the need for individual adjustments.
- Teaching and learning that is inclusive improves the learning experience for all students. Many SEN-based interventions can provide **effective strategies for the whole student cohort**, such as breaking down information into bite-size chunks or using visual reminders to back up instructions (EASNIE, 2020).
- Inclusive education aims to enable all learners to **fulfil their potential** (Naraian, 2019). The approach shifts the focus away from correcting areas of weakness to that of enhancing learners' **strengths** and using this to offset any challenges to learning (Masataka, 2017).
- Developing and implementing inclusive education can also be used as an opportunity for **collaborative planning and co-teaching**.
- Inclusive teaching and learning acknowledges and supports diversity, which **promotes innovation, problem solving and new ways of thinking**.

What are some of the misconceptions about inclusive education?

Ambiguities associated with the term 'inclusion' can lead to many common misconceptions, particularly when considering what inclusive teaching and learning may look like in everyday practice. Some common misconceptions include:

- **Inclusion is an add-on and increases the teacher's workload.** Inclusive practice can actually help to reduce workload over time as it is anticipatory and helps us to ensure learning is as effective as possible.
- **Inclusive education is about starting from a blank slate.** Instead, it is about recognising the good strategies you may already use and working over time to develop your practice in a way that is sustainable.
- **Teachers need to become SEN or inclusion 'experts'.** Inclusive teaching and learning is meant to complement existing provision for students with SEN and help to ensure a joined-up and holistic approach to support.
- **'Inclusion' just means the opposite of 'exclusion'.** While the earliest examples of inclusion focused on access to mainstream education in response to the exclusion of students with SEN, the term now also encompasses the importance of enabling learners to participate fully and progress in order to achieve their full potential.
- **Inclusion means 'dumbing down', reducing of educational standards or 'spoon feeding' of students.** Teaching, learning and assessment that is prepared with an inclusive approach should still lead to high, or higher, expectations of all students.
- **Inclusive teaching is simply about correcting deficit based on a diagnosis or label.** In fact, it actively draws on a student's strengths and uses this to offset any challenges they may face. Labels can be useful in terms of enabling a student to access relevant support. However, SEN labels only provide a 'snapshot' and do not capture the full picture of a student's abilities over time. A label can skew our perception of ability and mask positive learner characteristics such as creativity, innovative thinking and problem solving. Some students do not receive a label because they are considered to be below the 'threshold' for this. Some students may be below the threshold for several labels simultaneously and so not be diagnosed at all.

Barriers to learning are not only experienced by students with SEN. This is something that **we all experience**, and adaptations for this represent a natural and integral part of the learning process.

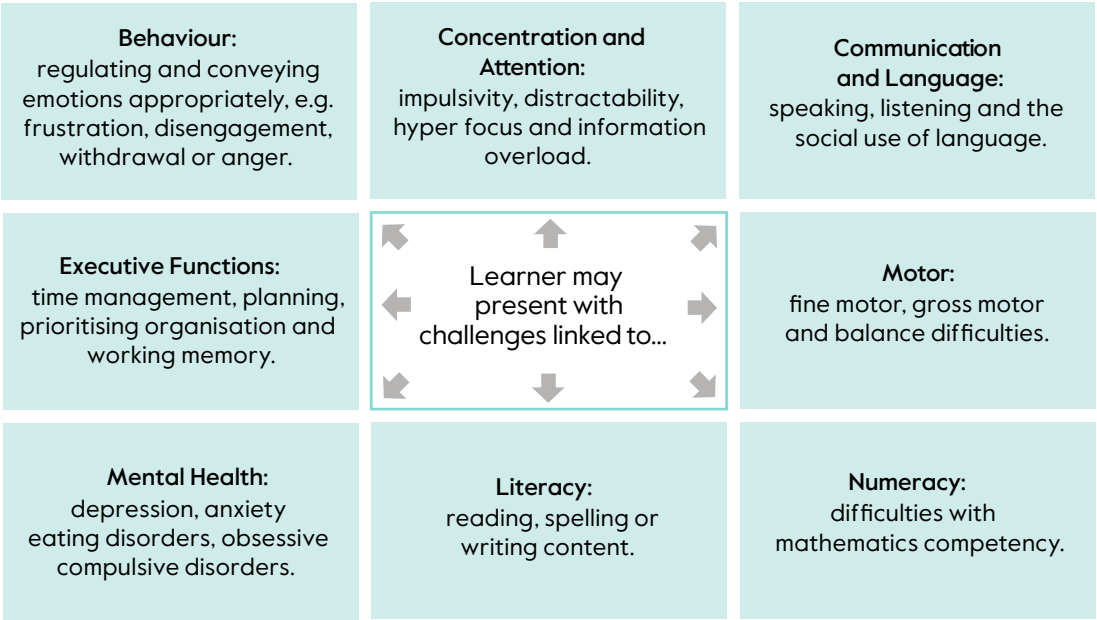# Education brief - Inclusive Education continued

Practical tips

While focusing on individual difference (as identified by Hockings) is a useful approach when considering interventions for individuals or small groups, it can be hard to manage and sustain in the classroom or across the whole school (see Fig. I).

Fig. 1: Focusing on individuals within a group
(Eaton and Osborne, 2018)
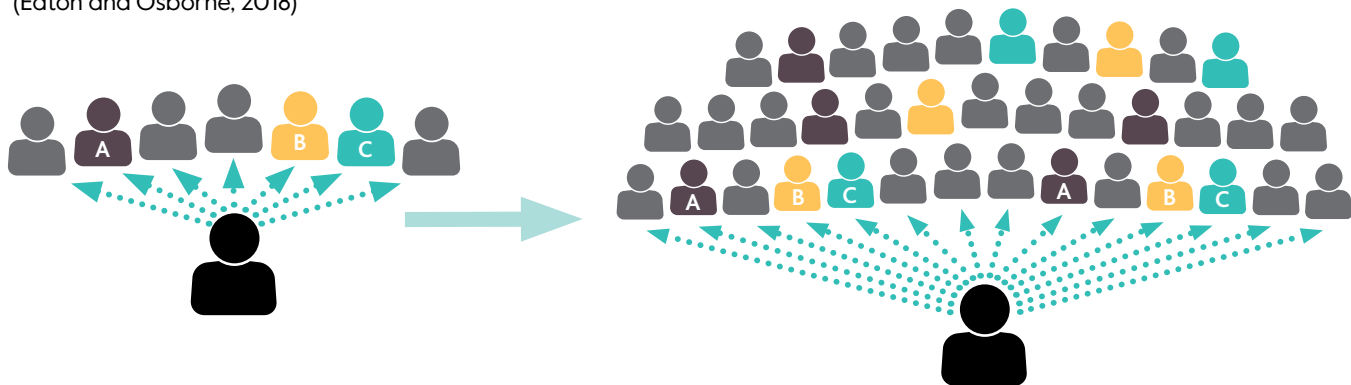
Identifying patterns in learner challenges across the student cohort can provide a useful approach that helps schools and teachers focus on the impact on learning, rather than individual labels (British Dyslexia Association, 2018). Listed in Fig. 2 below are commonly observable presentations of some of the key challenges students experience related to learning impact.

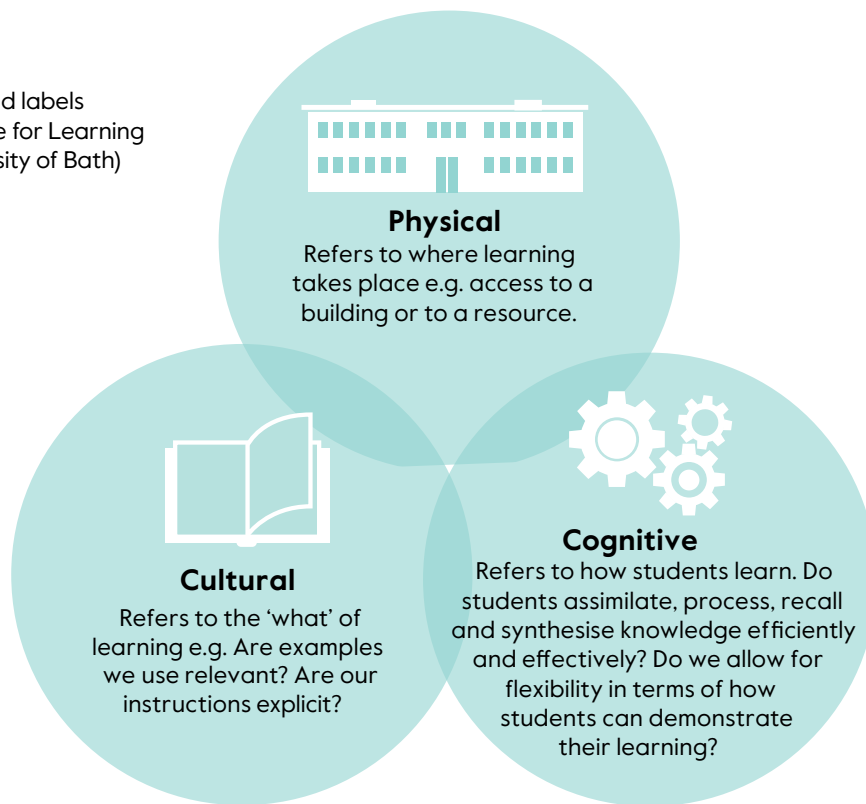Fig. 2: Commonly observable presentations

Behaviour: regulating and conveying emotions appropriately, e.g. frustration, disengagement, withdrawal or anger.	**Concentration and Attention:** impulsivity, distractability, hyper focus and information overload.	**Communication and Language:** speaking, listening and the social use of language.
Executive Functions: time management, planning, prioritising organisation and working memory.	Learner may present with challenges linked to...	**Motor:** fine motor, gross motor and balance difficulties.
Mental Health: depression, anxiety eating disorders, obsessive compulsive disorders.	**Literacy:** reading, spelling or writing content.	**Numeracy:** difficulties with mathematics competency.

Note: The key challenges often overlap. One form of observable presentation (e.g. behaviour) may be effectively managed when barriers more commonly associated with another aspect of learning (e.g. executive functions) are managed.

If we use these common presentations of difficulties as a starting point, we can then start to identify patterns in these challenges to learning. The 'patterns beyond labels' model identifies a number of lenses that can be used to conceptualise patterns in inclusive practice in terms of physical, cultural and cognitive contexts (see Fig. 3 below). The model can then be used to identify strategies to support learners to overcome these common challenges.

Fig. 3: Patterns beyond labels
(Adapted from Centre for Learning
and Teaching, University of Bath)

Physical
Refers to where learning
takes place e.g. access to a
building or to a resource.

Cultural
Refers to the 'what' of
learning e.g. Are examples
we use relevant? Are our
instructions explicit?

Cognitive
Refers to how students learn. Do
students assimilate, process, recall
and synthesise knowledge efficiently
and effectively? Do we allow for
flexibility in terms of how
students can demonstrate
their learning?

As an example, a common barrier may present as issues with concentration. The **physical lens** enables us to consider the space where learning takes place (e.g. Could factors such as noise or visual distraction be adding to a student's sense of information overload?). The **cultural lens** focuses on the relevance of the learning content (e.g. Could using a subject of interest facilitate learner motivation? Could explicit instructions support learner confidence?). Finally, the **cognitive lens** focuses on how students can process information and demonstrate their learning (e.g. Could bite-size steps or a writing scaffold better support learners to see progress and reduce information overload?). The lenses encourage a holistic approach to inclusive practice, which also develops students' **self-regulation** and **metacognition**.

How can schools make best use of inclusive education practices?

- Draw on your own knowledge and expertise of your students and your local context.
- Start small – developing inclusive practice is a process that takes time. Start with strategies that are easily adaptable to your situation. Aim to make incremental, but sustainable, steps.
- Identify some quick wins, as this can be a powerful way of making small changes that can have a big impact.

- Prioritise **professional development** in inclusive teaching and learning.
- Implement **policies** that address inclusive education, and work collaboratively across the school to ensure that colleagues are fully supported in providing a joined-up approach.
- **Evaluate impact** so that effective interventions can be scaled up and reproduced in different contexts.

How can teachers make best use of inclusive education practices?

- **Keep the big picture** in mind by having a clear **narrative**, as this will help students to make links; most students struggle with the **links between information** rather than the concepts or ideas themselves. Showing where a topic fits in with the bigger picture of a subject can provide vital **context**.
- **Manage the environment**. While it is not always possible to alter the environment, it can be useful for both teachers and students to be aware of how the environment may affect learning (e.g. lighting, noise and seating).
- Where possible, incorporate **learning activities and assessments** that are flexible and offer choice in terms of how a student can demonstrate their learning (e.g. a group or individual task, a poster, presentation or essay).

- **Avoid information** overload by breaking down information and tasks into smaller, more manageable steps. Use bullet points, space on the page and bold text to make information accessible.
- **Provide clear and explicit instructions** about 'how' to approach a task or learning activity, rather than just focusing on 'what' is being learnt.
- **Back up** verbal **instructions** with written ones as this will support working memory for students.
- **Balance** interaction between **listening and doing** so that students have the opportunity to apply new knowledge, practise new skills and reinforce their learning.
- **Use visual prompts** to break up text, reinforce new learning and support working memory.

How is Cambridge supporting schools with inclusive education?

Cambridge schools have access to a range of fair, valid and reliable assessments that measure student progress and give a true picture of their ability. Our assessments and marking are fair and accessible for learners who do not have English as a first language, and students with special educational needs and disabilities.

In section 1.3 of our annual **Cambridge Handbook** for exams officers we set out our range of access arrangements to support candidates who may face barriers to exams. Arrangements agreed before exams take place allow candidates to access the assessments by removing unnecessary barriers, without changing the demands of the assessment.

We provide support and guidance to centres, and we engage with other awarding organisations and accessibility user groups to ensure continuous improvement and best practice. We also offer regular training opportunities for teachers and school leaders to understand more about inclusive education.

Where can you find more information?

- British Dyslexia Association. (2018). Teaching for neurodiversity. **Every Child Journal**, 6(6).
- CAST. (2020). **Universal Design for Learning at a Glance and UDL Guidelines**. Wakefield, MA: CAST. Available at: https://www.cast.org/impact/universal-design-for-learning-udl
- Eaton, R. and Osborne, A. (2018). **Patterns beyond labels model of inclusive practice.** Bath: Centre for Learning and Teaching, University of Bath.
- Ellis, P., Kirby, A. & Osborne, A. (2023). **Neurodiversity and Education**. Corwin.
- European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE). (2020). **European Agency Statistics on Inclusive Education: 2018 Dataset Cross-Country Report.** (J. Ramberg, A. Lénárt, and A. Watkins, eds.). Odense, Denmark.
- Haug, P. (2017). **Understanding inclusive education: ideals and reality. Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research**, 19(3), 206–217.
- Hockings, C. (2010). **Inclusive learning and teaching in higher education: a synthesis of research.** London: Higher Education Academy.
- Masataka, N. (2017). **Implications of the idea of neurodiversity for understanding the origins of developmental disorders.** Physics of Life Review, 20, 85–108.
- Meyer, A., Rose, D. and Gordon, D. (2013). **Universal Design for Learning: Theory and Practice.** Wakefield, MA: CAST.
- Naraian, S. (2019). Precarious, debilitated and ordinary: Rethinking (in)capacity for inclusion. **Curriculum Inquiry,** 49(4), 464–484.
- Osborne, A., Angus-Cole, K., & Venables, L. (2023). **From Wellbeing to Welldoing**. Corwin.
- UK Inclusive Practice Network. (2018). **Re-visioning support for disabled students in HE**. London: Wonkhe.
- University of Sheffield. (2010). **The Inclusive Learning and Teaching Handbook**. Sheffield: The University of Sheffield. Available at: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.18989!/file/The-inclusive-learning-and-teaching-handbook.pdf
- World Health Organization. (2001). **International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF).** Geneva: World Health Organization.