

What works?

Developing a toolkit of best practice for the recruitment of disabled student participants in research, Dr Alex Reid

Project summary:

Students with disabilities often face challenges, such as anxieties, to being included in research. Meanwhile, conversations around disabilities can often feel awkward for people to engage with. This project looked to overcome barriers on both these fronts and improve accessibility to disabled students in research practice. In doing so, it aimed to enable academia to draw upon the value of their abilities. This was achieved through the development of a toolkit which imparts lessons on inclusivity of disabled students in research. It has been disseminated through networks at University of York and externally to make these insights available to others working in this space, including through conferences and personal networks. The toolkit will be reviewed annually to ensure long-term relevance.

[The toolkit can be accessed through the tool resources.](#)

What challenge did this project set out to address?

This particular project aimed to develop a toolkit to facilitate the inclusion of disabled individuals in research. The challenge area was organising 7 student interns (5 undergraduate, 2 postgraduate) with lived experiences of disability to facilitate project completion. The remit relates to a sensitive area regarding inclusivity which required careful management. Perhaps uniquely for this project a lot of lessons learned were integrated into the guidance we generated as part of the toolkit itself.

What worked, for who and why?

For the team:

- The use of G-suite to collaborate on shared documents, monitor progress, create presentations, keep meeting notes etc.
- The use of SLACK in comms for quick queries and general communication.

For the task:

- SMART objectives - Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound.
- The use of a Gantt chart to monitor progress for goals, subgoals, and individual tasks.

For the individual:

- Inclusive recruitment practices ([see section 5.4](#)).
- An active involvement of interns in the research project ([see section 2.3.3](#)).
- An emoji system for non-participation days ([see section 5.7.2](#)).
- Flexible working hours ([see section 5.7](#)).

We also recommend student interns keep a personal log of their responsibilities and write a collaborative reflective document at the end of a project. This is intended to help them with employability in subsequent job interviews and cover letters, as well as facilitating reflection on the part of the project lead on how to improve practices next time.

What didn't work and why?

- Although constrained by resources and time, more foresight and planning was needed regarding dissemination - things we should have considered more include:
 - Making simplified posters for people to share regarding outputs (as the document is so large).
 - Making a webpage to package the information for wider audiences.

- Fostering links for dissemination within and beyond the University.
 - Adapting the toolkit for in-house management training and professional development.
 - A way to track views (G-docs, the platform we used to build the toolkit has no way to do this due to university-level constraints - in the end we settled for a bit.ly link that allows us to at least track clicks).
- A mistake was made by the project lead regarding the disclosure of the general (not specific) disability status of students to our ethics committee when applying for ethics approval. This was incorrect information (our student interns involved had lived experiences of disability, but were not necessarily disabled). Even so, and particularly given the nature of this project, our interns should have been consulted about this. The issue was quickly corrected and addressed, and resulting guidance was actually incorporated into the toolkit itself:
 - Student interns were informed and then a discussion was had about how they wanted to be represented in future outputs (they selected 'lived experience of disability').
 - A subsection on being careful regarding disclosure was added ([section 5.5.4](#)).
 - A subsection on making mistakes was added ([section 5.8](#)).
- We advise keeping track of student collaborators after graduation for consultation and recognition in outputs. Upon graduation students can be hard to track down!

What changed as a result of your project?

- This project is currently being rolled out, but reception so far has been good, and it won a [University of York Impact Award](#) (in the Bridge Builder category).
- The project lead has received a positive reception from disabled staff in personal communications.
- The work was presented by staff and interns at the University of York EDI showcase in June 2025.
- Lessons learned from running this project were part of a presentation to a national audience

through the [T-FUN](#) (Teaching Focussed University Network) committee via a presentation entitled 'Developing collaborative relationships with student partners' in January 2026.

- The project has helped our interns with employability and professional development.
- This has helped staff involved with professional development and inspired the project lead to undertake management training.

What next?

- We have received additional funding to pay an intern to help write up a publication.
- We are making materials (slides and classroom exercises) for management training at the University of York.
- We are making posters for lab groups to put up in shared lab spaces to help facilitate best practice.
- We are seeking guidance on how to build a website to accompany the toolkit.
- We want to hire a d/Deaf intern for additional insights regarding communication to be added to a later version of the toolkit.
- We want to hire two of our previous interns to write a blog post regarding the project.

Progress towards equitable and responsible research practices

The toolkit itself is intended to help challenge preconceptions regarding disability, facilitate the inclusion of disabled people into research practice, and help researchers from all disciplines to navigate these sensitive issues for more equitable research practice. We discuss this more in our opening section ([1.1 Why inclusivity in research is important](#)), and address systemic issues regarding disability and equality throughout.