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Enhancing Disability Support Systems in Higher Education: A cross-cultural collaboration between the UK and Uzbekistan

The University of East London (UEL), through its Rix Inclusive Research Institute, is working in partnership with Tashkent State Pedagogical University (TSPU) in Uzbekistan to deliver a British Council-funded initiative that aims to strengthen disability support systems in higher education. The project focuses on building more inclusive institutional environments and improving outcomes for students with disabilities, particularly those facing intersecting disadvantages linked to gender, socio-economic status and other identities.

Titled 'Enhancing Disability Support Systems in Higher Education: A Cross-Cultural Collaboration Between the UK and Uzbekistan', this project brings together researchers, practitioners and institutional leaders to co-develop strategies that are both effective and adaptable across international contexts. It is led by Gosia Kwiatkowska, Director of the Rix Inclusive Research Institute at UEL, with Paul Watts and Mark Crossey (UEL), and Dr Shakhnoza Tokhtiyarova at TSPU.

Project Aims

The central aim of the project is to strengthen how higher education institutions create inclusive environments that enable full participation and success for students with disabilities. It does this by fostering institutional collaboration and knowledge exchange between the UK and Uzbekistan, and by developing a practical, scalable toolkit of inclusive teaching and student service practices. The initiative places a strong emphasis on gender-responsive and intersectional inclusion, aiming to address the compounded barriers that women and non-binary students with disabilities often face. Strategic planning is built into the project to ensure that inclusive practices become embedded and sustainable within both partner institutions and potentially beyond.

By drawing on lived experience, institutional knowledge and applied research, the project aspires to improve institutional responses to students with disabilities and also reframe higher education as a space where all students can participate equally and thrive.

Project Activities

The project spans 12 months and begins with a detailed baseline assessment to understand current practices and challenges. Surveys, interviews and focus groups will be conducted with students and staff across both universities, aiming to reach at least 30% of relevant participants. These engagements will generate both quantitative and qualitative data and will explore specific barriers related to gender and inclusion.

This foundation will inform a series of knowledge exchange activities, including two in-person visits – one in London and one in Tashkent – as well as a programme of online workshops



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and webinars. These sessions are designed to support dialogue and mutual learning, allowing participants to share perspectives on institutional responsibility, inclusive pedagogies, cultural attitudes toward disability and emerging tools and technologies.

Drawing from these exchanges, the team will co-design a practical toolkit of inclusive strategies, addressing areas such as curriculum design, assessment flexibility, accessible services and professional development for academic and support staff. The toolkit will be piloted by a group of staff members at both institutions, with structured feedback collected to inform refinement.

In the final phase, the effectiveness of the toolkit will be assessed and a strategic roadmap will be created for institutional use. This plan will include recommendations for broader application, potential integration into policy and future funding opportunities.

Outcomes and Impact

This project is designed to deliver both short-term outputs and long-lasting institutional change. One of the key deliverables will be a comprehensive report mapping existing disability support systems, identifying strengths and highlighting areas for development. The pilot-tested toolkit will be made available for broader use, offering practical guidance to other institutions within the UK, Uzbekistan and internationally.

Staff who participate in the project will gain greater confidence and capability to implement inclusive approaches, supported by accessible resources and a clearer understanding of how to meet diverse student needs. Students with disabilities, particularly those whose voices are often underrepresented in institutional planning, will have an opportunity to shape the future of support systems through their direct involvement in the research.

This collaboration is expected to lay the groundwork for future international partnerships, shared research agendas and sector-wide improvements in inclusive higher education. By addressing both systemic barriers and individual experiences, the project aims to transform how universities think about and deliver inclusive learning – making them more equitable, more responsive and better equipped to support success for all students.