



TRANSITION ISSUES: ENTERING AND LEAVING HE

Overview

The focus of this discussion paper is transition, specifically students' experiences of entering higher education and their preparation in terms of leaving university to enter employment. The paper explores issues influencing ➤🎓 Transition into Higher Education 🎓➤ And making the transition out of Higher Education from the perspective of students and highlights the implications for educational providers and employers. It also includes ✓ Recommendations and ? Questions for further research and debate.

DEIP: an introduction

This paper is one of a series of discussion papers produced by the Disability and Effective Inclusion Policies (DEIP) project that was funded by the European Social Fund. The DEIP project is a piece of collaborative research undertaken by Sussex and Lancaster Universities. The project aims to explore ways in which higher education institutions support disabled students through higher education and on into employment.

The research is shaped by four research questions (see **DP1**) which provided the opportunity for considering the influence of disability models with respect to: sector and institutional HE policy; practice as reported by disabled students and university staff at Sussex and Lancaster Universities; the experience of disabled graduates making the transition into employment and the views of employers.

DEIP discussion papers

The DEIP project contributes to an increasing body of institutional research surrounding the experiences of disabled students in higher education. For a list of current and future DEIP project Discussion Papers (DP) see: 🌐 <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/equalities/1-2-9.html> For details of the thematic topics emerging from an analysis of institutional policy see **DP1**, methodology **DP2**, and an annotated bibliography of other relevant research **DP13**.

➤🎓 Transition into Higher Education...

Transition into HE itself can be challenging... personally, socially, academically and financially. For students with impairments there may be additional factors to take into consideration, such as negotiating suitable living conditions, which may render their transition more difficult. In addition, some students may be in a transition process in terms of their identities (e.g. some students are diagnosed with dyslexia at university) and confront dilemmas in relation to the ways they present themselves to others.

Practicalities

Generally, once students had taken the first steps towards finding out about the practical support available then their experiences of this support were positive.

Morgan recalled that her parents and teachers had discouraged her from declaring her mental health problems and that she hadn't received much support at school. On entering university with low expectations she contacted the support services and had accessed valuable support

which had helped her deal with a range of practical issues. However, asking for support may be difficult for certain groups of students. For example, students with Mental Health Difficulties (MHD) may enter university and at that time feel okay with the way things are progressing and not feel the need to inform people of their problems. They may also have fears concerning the impact of disclosure.

The practicalities of physical access Amongst students with physical impairments, the accessibility of the campus had been a central factor influencing their choice of university. Nevertheless, practical difficulties were experienced. Paula recalled that:

[My] first experience was a disaster – nothing to do with any of the academic departments. I had said I needed a room that was big enough for two wheelchairs...the room was quite big but was a lot smaller than I was anticipating, so I couldn't get in and out without help and because I was wanting to be independent this was quite frustrating.

Socialising

'Fitting in' at university may be difficult for students in general, but for those students with impairments there may be additional obstacles. Susan, who had a hearing impairment, recalled the difficulty she had experienced in adapting to using spaces where there were several people:

I found it hard being in a kitchen of 16 with all that noise I couldn't follow everything. And then I had to explain please don't shout at me, I have a hearing aid – they are unobtrusive, people forget.

Moreover, students with MHD may find the transition period particularly challenging, as Mark explained:

The first week was alright. The second week because the term was starting but also because I was trying to fit [in] there I went through really stressful period where I was experiencing anxiety over the slightest little thing. I was in that state for a lot of the first term. I was really nervous about fitting in socially.

Academic

The transition into higher education may be difficult for students in general, needing to adapt to different styles of teaching and learning, but for disabled students there may be additional challenges. For example, Donald said:

When I got to university, it wasn't so structured you were teaching yourself, I mean my organisation is not the best lets put it like that, so all these little things ... I mean at school, you had everything structured for you 9 to 5 and you had this work, and it was all organised, and so in that sense it wasn't so much of an issue as when I came to university.

These experiences of difficulty in adapting to learning and teaching styles in higher education concur with evidence from other studies (NDT 2004).

Previous educational experience makes a difference with respect to levels of independent learning and readiness for HE study. For Debra the transition was smoother since she had attended college prior to entering higher education and had already become accustomed to a more independent way of learning:

I decided to go to college and it had less structure, it was organised in much the same way as a uni... So when I went to uni it was very similar, I had to read lots of books for English, but it was quite easy for me because I was used to it.

Financial matters

In relation to the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA), assessment procedures may be complex and the overall process can be time-consuming. Sally's comment was typical of many students claiming DSA:

It's taken me a long time to sort out, it's not been straightforward...things do get done but slowly

Moreover, while the DSA offers the means to obtain valuable support, the process may constitute an additional 'hurdle' for students to overcome during a period when there are many other challenges relating to their transition to higher education. The amount of paperwork relating to the DSA and the time taken to set up support networks may also be experienced as overwhelming:

I suppose I got this increasing sense of panic that I would be starting on the Monday and all the support I needed hadn't been sorted out and nobody was going to tell me about how long it was going to [take to] sort out. (Sally)

➤ **And making the transition out of HE...**

Plans for the future

In common with other students there remains a tendency to leave career planning to the final year. Pressures of exams in final year and a lack of time to prepare for the next transition impact on all students, but for disabled students there can be additional barriers, which may make the process more complicated.

Although all of the students had ideas about the jobs they wanted to do, for some these ideas remained vague.

Two main things I might do or can do, is some kind of management... the other thing is accountancy, which is less interesting – those are the two things. But now I am thinking of finishing my degree and then working for a few months and I think I'll just want to chill out for a bit and go to India.

Some suggested that in order to keep open a range of employment options and achieve career goals it was perhaps more important to have concrete plans. Megan implied that more importance should be attributed to employment and preparation for work in higher education:

...getting to the workplace or some kind of work is not really dealt with.

Work experience

One way of preparing for the transition into employment is via work experience. For those students who had work experience, this had provided a useful opportunity to sample a particular job as well as increasing awareness of the issues they may need to consider in relation to future employment.

The importance of work experience is highlighted by Skill Scotland who have argued that:

'This is particularly true for disabled people who may need to experience different types of employment to identify the career that would suit them best.'

<http://www.skill.org.uk/scotland/inquiryintodisability.doc>

However, fear of being overwhelmed with the demands of the workplace may prevent students from gaining this valuable experience, which may, in turn, dispel some of their fears. Maria said:

I am daunted at the prospect of going out into the world... I'm worried that I'll be already expected to know how to do [things] and I'll annoy people and not be good enough straight away... that puts me off from applying for things.

There were some examples of students arranging work experience for vacations. As for other non-traditional students including minority ethnic students and those who are the first in their family to study in HE, there were instances where the capacity to access work experience appeared to depend on having appropriate social networks (Moray et al, 2003). Access to high profile jobs such as those relating to media seemed particularly difficult. Desmond explained that he had arranged for work experience at the BBC through friends and family and said that *'once he had made that connection it was effortless'*. For other disabled students, needing time for extra study and dilemmas relating to the decision to disclose meant that the process of acquiring work experience was more complicated.

Disclosure and uncertainty

Amongst the DEIP students there was a diverse range of experiences and attitudes in relation to feelings about disclosing in employment situation. For some there was a sense of ambivalence around disclosure, as they recognised the potential benefits but felt uneasy about the potentially negative impact of others' attitudes. For instance, Sally believed that:

... anyone who is sick would be a less desirable employee, they'd probably see on my CV, I mean I have no CV, I've done lots of interesting things in my life, I don't know where I'd begin, I think I'd have to disclose because I haven't got a continuous work thing, I've got lots of things that are interesting, so I'd need to explain.

The differing attitudes appeared to be related to students' previous experiences and were informed by the opinions of significant others such as parents. Maria described the impact of her MHD and the experience of disclosing:

When I intercalated I phoned up for a p/t job and they asked me why I wanted to do p/t hours and I stupidly told the truth and she couldn't get off the phone fast enough. Obviously from now on with jobs I think I am going to be very wary about what I say. I know they are not meant to discriminate but they obviously will so...

Where impairment is not visible, the general advice for students is that it is a 'personal choice'. Despite legislation, hesitancy may be a result of advisors' uncertainty about how specific employers will react. Whilst this lack of specific advice is inevitable it is ultimately not of concrete help to a student facing the dilemma of having to make this decision. Often there is a 'vicious circle' that can only be broken by more people disclosing and thus helping to raise awareness and shift negative misperceptions. Skill provides a useful list of reasons 'for' and 'against' disclosing <http://www.skill.org.uk/info/getthatjob/getthatjob.asp> and **DP3** discusses the decision to disclose.

✓ Recommendations

- To encourage students to visit university prior to the start of their course to familiarise themselves with the environment and facilities
- To apply for the DSA prior to start of course and to find out about available support
- To stress the value of work experience in terms of sampling different jobs, building confidence and social networks and support through flexible work experience opportunities
- To place a greater emphasis on employment throughout degree to prepare for transition out of HE (e.g. compiling c.v. throughout rather than at end of degree)
- To encourage discussion concerning issue of disclosure and the potential impact of an impairment in future employment

? Questions for further research and debate

- How, if at all, can work experience be incorporated into degree programmes?
- What lessons are there from the transition into HE and how can these be used to prepare students for transition into employment?
- How do the actual and anticipated hurdles associated with transitions into work compare?

For further information about DEIP Project

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