

**Disabled learners and higher
education – barriers and enablers to
success**

Coventry and Warwickshire Aimhigher

“I was doing a nursery nurse course and all was going well. I was doing well in the course but when I had to take my exams it was upstairs in a building with no lifts. I asked if they could bring the paper down and I could take it in another room, but they said no because there were not enough adjudicators. So my chance of having a career went out of the window, with my dream of owning my own home. I never tried again, they took all my hope away on that day. They should have been more flexible.”

Mayor of London research

“All I really wanted to do was make a difference inspire people to go out there and fulfil their dreams really. When you come from the sort of circumstances that I’ve been in and got out of that you can become a line of hope for other people. Because I believe it doesn’t matter what difficulties you have you have to go out there and find out what skills you have so that you can help other people”

Disabled student in a further education college in the west midlands

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Mike Wray
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Executive summary

This report describes a research project which sought to examine the barriers and enablers that disabled learners experience during their journey towards and into higher education. The project was unique in that it compared the experiences of disabled students in higher education with their non-disabled peers and it examined the views of a group of learners who had not entered higher education and compared it with their peers who were existing higher education students.

The research found that disabled learners share similar experiences to their non-disabled peers during their education however, they also encounter a significant number of difficulties which are caused by factors within their environment which are generally beyond their control. In addition to these findings we also identified a number of enabling factors which disabled learners mentioned as having a significant influence on their educational aspirations and successes.

On the whole students found that the transition from college to university had been the most significant. They particularly mentioned the change in teaching styles and felt that this issue could have been dealt with better by university staff and teachers within schools and colleges. The financial arrangements within higher education were not seen as a major barrier to this group of learners and they actually reported that they saw the current arrangements as an enabler to entry.

Previous research was examined and significant findings summarised. Most of the existing research primarily focuses on the barriers which disabled learners face and these can be summarised into six distinct areas – pre-entry issues, physical access, disclosure, lack of information, access to the learning environment and access to learning resource facilities.

However, most of the existing research in this area has failed to compare disabled learners experiences with their non-disabled peers so it is difficult to make conclusive statements about the findings. Additionally, research into widening participation often neglects to compare the experiences of those who enter higher education with those that choose a different path. Our research attempted to rectify some of these issues.

Introduction

There is a significant amount of evidence to suggest that disabled people are discriminated against in their access to education. Recent commentary has focussed on the additional barriers that disabled learners face in their journey into and through higher education. However, much of the research in this area is flawed because it fails to compare the experiences of disabled learners against the experiences of their non-disabled peers.

This report describes a study carried out on behalf of Aimhigher Coventry and Warwickshire into the experiences of disabled learners on their educational journeys. Specifically it examines barriers to success in education as well as enabling factors and compares the accounts of disabled learners with groups of non-disabled students. We also examine the experiences of a group of disabled, FE learners who had decided not to enter higher education against a group of their non-disabled peers.

The aims of the research were to:

- Improve the entry of disabled learners into higher education
- Inform the ways in which professionals within education support disabled learners through their educational journeys

The objectives were to:

- Identify barriers and enablers to success for disabled learners in their progression to higher education
- Report on barriers and enablers to success identified within existing literature
- Compare the journeys into higher education of disabled learners with their non-disabled peers
- Compare the experiences of education of disabled HE learners with other disabled people who have not entered HE
- Make recommendations for practitioners within the Coventry and Warwickshire Aimhigher area to ensure successful transition to HE for disabled learners

The study was commissioned by the of the Coventry and Warwickshire LLDD Progression Group and forms part of the action plan for the group which was set up in March 2010 and had an operational period of 2010-2011.

Note on theoretical perspective

This research has been influenced by the social model of disability as espoused by writers such as Michael Oliver and Colin Barnes (cf: Barnes (1991) & Oliver (1996)). Although the social model cannot be described as a theory in the strictest sense of the word, it has become a central tenet of the disability rights movement in the UK. In more recent times it has begun to influence the way academics do research about this topic, how administrators within education articulate their responses to disabled learners and the ways in which policy makers write legislation. There is some way to go in the latter respects but it is fair to say that the model is beginning to find credence in many parts of the public sector.

In this research the social model has framed the way in which the literature review was undertaken – the primary aim of the review was to identify barriers and enablers within the research undertaken into the experiences of disabled learners; and it provided the starting point for the way in which the investigation and analysis was undertaken – we were interested in the experiences of disabled students and we chose to ask questions about the disabling barriers that emanate from within the educational environment.

Our approach can be contrasted with other studies that examine the individual's responses to disability such as the work undertaken by Armstrong and Humphrey (2008) into stances taken (and therefore barriers formed) by dyslexic learners upon diagnosis or Elliot et al's (2004) work into enablers such as individual learning styles and motivations of individual disabled learners. We have also chosen not to examine the perspectives of particular groups of disabled learners in the way that previous studies which focus on particular impairments have done (e.g. Elliott & Wilson (2008)). That is not to say that these studies do not provide valuable perspectives and have helped to move forward our understanding of the lives of disabled people but rather, to explain how the research has been framed and why certain decisions have been made along the way.

Current study

There were two parts to the study. The first part involved identifying barriers and enablers from within available research in order to provide an understanding of the context of the study and the second part examined the responses of disabled and non-disabled learners about their experiences in education. Due to constraints on resources the first part of the research was limited to a number of research reports which have been carried out within English institutions during the last 15 years. Each research report was scrutinised and any barriers identified recorded. In some cases the barriers were identified from direct quotes within the text made by respondents from the studies, in others they were identified by the authors of the specific piece of literature. Occasionally, it was necessary to paraphrase an overall point being made by the researchers, therefore, some of the barriers might be open to different interpretations by other studies. However, we have tried to keep these instances to a minimum wherever possible. A discussion of the overall conclusions made from within the existing literature is included below along with a short list of commonly identified barriers from the studies. The more complete list of barriers and enablers identified is included within Appendix 1. of the report.

Context

The first part of this report provides an overview of some of the research that exists to date, concerning barriers to access to higher education for disabled learners. The search for relevant research was carried out using the ERIC database and was limited to work carried out in the UK after 1995 when the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) came into force in England. In addition, a number of studies carried out by organisations within the sector were included although they may not have been listed within the ERIC databases. These were found by searching relevant websites and by scrutinising references from reports that had been analysed during the review. We were particularly interested in studies that examined the experiences of learners and studies that compared issues relating to disability across different parts of the education sector.

Barriers and enablers explained

All learners face barriers as they progress through education however, it has been suggested (e.g. NDT/Skill (2004)) that disabled learners are particularly disadvantaged in their journeys. Disabled learners may face entirely different barriers to non-disabled learners (for example in negotiating the process for claiming funding to pay for support in higher education (HE)

through the disabled students' allowances (DSAs)) or they may face additional difficulties in dealing with barriers that all learners face (for example, the move away from the parental home into university accommodation which might involve dealing with issues around the accessibility of the room and the halls they are staying in).

Additionally all learners encounter factors which enable their journey into higher education. Disabled learners will encounter similar factors to other learners (such as a particularly inspiring teacher) or they may encounter different factors which a non-disabled learner might not experience (for example, the transition planning process which exists for some disabled learners within the educational statutory framework).

A further point, which is worth considering, is that many of these enablers and barriers are experienced differently by different learners at different times and in relation to different issues. For example, whilst the DSA claiming process can present significant barriers to success at higher education it might also be experienced as an enabler since it pays for a good deal of support which might not have been previously available in other levels of the education system. Equally, an inspirational teacher might inspire a desire within the learner to want to study a particular subject at a higher level but a remark made about the learner's disability by a teacher might deter them from ever considering pursuing this course of action.

The following sections discuss these issues in more detail and describe specific issues which have been addressed in existing literature. As mentioned earlier particular emphasis was placed on studies that have examined the experiences of disabled people, although the discussion is by no means entirely limited to these studies. It is also worth pointing out that particular emphasis has been placed on issues related to transition between different levels of the education sector within many of the existing studies. Transition does present many problems for all learners particularly into more independent learning contexts such as those experienced in higher education. However, it would appear that issues are magnified for disabled learners and some transitions present many additional problems for this group of learners. These issues will be discussed separately below.

Comparing the educational journey of disabled learners with their non-disabled peers

In 2002 the National Audit Office reported that disabled learners were only 40% as likely to enter HE as their non-disabled counterparts. Despite this, we know that the rates of entry into HE of disabled learners have been increasing for some time (HESA, 2009). Furthermore, there is evidence to

suggest that disabled learners perform as well as their non-disabled learners in their degree attainment (Richardson, 2009) and that there are positive outcomes for disabled graduates upon entering the workplace (AGCAS, 2010). So there is some reason to believe that entry into higher education for disabled learners represents a positive story in recent years. However, there are also issues regarding this story which, upon further scrutiny, uncover a less certain narrative. For example, much of the increase in the proportion of disabled learners is due to increases in declaration and diagnosis of students with specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia. Additionally, a study undertaken by the National Audit Office (2008) suggests that without the support of the DSA (which some disabled students are unable to claim and which many are unaware of or chose not to claim) disabled student fare less favourably than their non-disabled peers. Also, despite the fact that many of the statistics within the AGCAS report mentioned above suggest that things are getting better in terms of employment levels, disabled graduates still achieve less well than their non-disabled peers on all the measures calculated (such as entry into management positions, employment rates etc.).

Other less encouraging signs seem to suggest that there is still a long way to go before any sense of equitable participation in education is obtained for disabled people. According to the Youth Cohort Study (2005) (cited in LSC, 2005) for example, young people with a disability are twice as likely to be not in employment, education or training (NEET) as their non-disabled counterparts. Similarly, disabled people are only half as likely to obtain good GCSEs grades as their non-disabled peers (DRC, 2004). In addition to these unfavourable outcomes some disability campaigners feel (e.g. Reiser, 2006) that whilst the quest for full inclusion into mainstream schooling has made great strides for a number of years, this progress appears to have stalled. The debate over whether the best place to educate a pupil with special educational needs is within mainstream or segregated settings seems to carry on unabated and in recent times even Baroness Warnock, who was a key figure in ensuring inclusion of disabled learners, has backtracked away from full inclusion. Whatever side of the debate you fall on there is a good deal of experiential evidence to suggest that many learners have experienced difficulties being educated within a segregated setting (cf. GLA, 2004, Reiser, 2004)

Progress towards HE

Before disabled students enter HE they face a considerably complicated journey which is fraught with barriers which can slow their progress and

even stop them completely in their tracks. Progress to higher education becomes much less likely if earlier experiences of education are negative and without the support to overcome additional barriers disabled learners face an uphill challenge. Fighting against barriers in one area of your life can result in disabled people feeling like they do not have the energy to battle on in another aspect such as education, and a considerable number of disabled people find their journeys through education take longer than their non-disabled counterparts (GLA, 2007).

A key aspect of successful progression is the extent to which teachers feel that this group of learners may progress to higher levels of education. Madriaga (2007) interviewed 21 current HE students about their experiences before entering HE and many of the respondents mentioned the approach of professionals, in particular tutors and teachers, within education, as being a barrier. Specifically, a lack of aspiration towards these learners was mentioned. In a related study Piggott & Houghton (2007) found that SENCOs within schools did not generally encourage attendance on summer schools for learners with SEN. Where there was progression it tended to be amongst learners with physical impairments or those learners who were identified as 'exceptionally bright'. Furthermore, a recent study (IPSOS MORI, 2009) found that teachers' attitudes to progression in general, vary considerably and can depend on the management and ethos of the school in which they are operating in. Progress to HE is not necessarily in the minds of teachers in schools who are concerned with more immediate demands such as GCSEs pass rates or attendance figures. Teachers often see themselves as just one influence in a complex system (IPSOS MORI, 2009). These are worrying findings since teachers hold the key to the progression of all learners and disabled learners need all they support they can get in order to achieve and aspire to HE.

Friendships are also an important part of schooling and friends and peers play a vital role in ensuring that learners feel included in educational settings. For example, in a further education setting Palfreyman-Kaye (1990) found that on Access courses, disabled students experience a good deal of informal learning support and mutual study aid from non-disabled learners. The authors suggest that this may be because learners on Access courses feel a sense of common identity related to barriers they have faced previously. However, disabled learners can experience difficulties in receiving support from other learners and even experience negative and hostile attitudes (GLA, 2007). The results from Palfreyman-Kaye's (1990) study were tempered by the negative attitudes of some non-disabled learners towards the disabled learners. It was also suggested that disabled

learners might form sub-groups within the student body – this was the case particularly with the deaf students on the course who encountered less prolonged support from fellow students and an inability of other students to communicate with these learners.

Some learners are able to use negative attitudes of teachers and other learners to their advantage and Madriaga's (2007) interviewees mentioned that a key motivating factor was a desire to prove self-worth in response to what had been, on the whole, negative previous educational experiences. However, support workers and disability professionals in further education were mentioned as enablers and some of the learners mentioned support workers as having had an influence on their desire to go onto higher education. Despite this support, there were also experiences of frustration when the support proved not to be appropriate. Learners mentioned patronising attitudes from tutors in FE when disclosing a disability and attitudes of staff had perhaps led to anxieties about disclosure in HE. Interviewees in this study (Madriaga, 2007) were concerned about what people would think and whether they would get the appropriate support from teaching staff. Although subsequently, the learners in this study found tutors in HE to generally be supportive, there were some negative feelings about tutors' attitudes as well. It should be noted that disabled students could be reflecting a general sense of the levels of demand that tutors face in HE. In Madriaga's (2007) study for instance one student complained that a tutor did not email them back when they requested support – this might be viewed as the tutor not responding with an appropriate reasonable adjustment but it could also reflect the difficulties in responding to multiple requests that tutors face. In recent times higher education has moved into a system of massification with tutors teaching hundreds of students each year. Some of the problems that disabled students face may be highlighting the difficulties that teaching staff face when faced with a large number of competing demands such as from policy directives (Braun et al, 2010) and it is questionable whether disability lies at the top of the list of priorities.

Transition

Moving from one type of education to another poses issues for all learners and has been linked with underachievement (Sutherland et al, 2010). Expectations are different, learning and teaching styles might change and the environment might alter significantly. Perhaps the biggest transition that many learners face is the move into a higher education since this can also involve a move to another part of the country and often represents the transition towards independent adult living. Particular attention has been

paid to this issue for disabled people in the research literature and this section highlights some of the additional difficulties that this group of learners experience.

In a review of 'grey' research the National Disability Team & Skill (2004) concluded that there appeared to be three main areas which were detrimentally affecting successful transition to HE for disabled learners. These were - accurate and timely information, the opportunity to acquire additional skills needed for successful entry to HE and unavailability of continuous provision (such as organisational procedures and support arrangements). Piggott & Houghton (2007) describes transition as 'the successful move from one context to another and the possession of skills and attributes to cope with the new environment'. However, NDT & Skill (2004) contest that disabled learners are not as well-equipped as other learners to cope with these transitions, particularly into higher education, because they face additional barriers to entry than other more traditional entrants.

As mentioned previously, one of the challenges of transition to HE is in raising the aspirations of learners and a significant driver for this is the attitudes of teachers. Summer schools at HEIs have been found to be an important activity in raising aspiration to HE (Lassell et al, 2009) however Piggott & Houghton (2004) found that disabled learners were not necessarily being included in these activities. SEN learners had particular concerns about attending such activities outside of school (such as access to support) and unless these concerns are not dealt with their attendance might not be guaranteed.

It is perhaps pertinent to the discussion to note here, that the NDT/Skill (2004) report reviewed the plans of Partnerships for Progression (P4P) at the time of their study and found that there was a paucity of practice within this initiative that purported to be focussed on the progression of disabled learners to HE. More recent plans and programmes have focussed on disabled learners but the Higher Education Funding Council for England's guidance to the sector was slow to make specific mention of disabled learners (they were only highlighted as a target group in the last round of these initiatives in 2007) and this is perhaps indicative of a general approach to disabled learners that neglects their concerns, particularly when they may be competing with other issues such as class or race.

Very few studies compare groups of students within different levels of the sector and this is to the detriment of the findings in this area. As Piggott &

Houghton (2004) point out, difficulties with transition to HE such as independent learning, occur for all students but they note that disabled learners face particular difficulties and each learner comes with a particular experience of previous education levels which may affect their ability to cope when in HE. Piggott & Houghton (2004) found that some learners were able to act independently in terms of finding support because they had studied in a college environment previously, but other learners are not prepared for changes in the teaching approaches (such as the amount of reading required). The researchers call for particular help to be put in place during transition stages for disabled learners and highlight the difficulties in moving between stages as a possible explanation for differential rates of entry into HE and subsequent employment.

In a similar study Sanderson (2004) interviewed a small sample of disabled FE and HE students and identified key issues which this group of learners experienced. Interviewees reported a lack of provision of information about programmes of study and also some disability-specific issues such as information about the decision to disclose disability. Anxieties were expressed about available support within HEIs and FE students were particularly concerned about the ability of HEIs to provide the necessary support such as one-to-one tuition. In this study (Sanderson, 2004), there was also an almost complete lack of knowledge about DSAs by both FE and HE students. This finding was replicated by Piggott & Houghton (2004) who found that learners were unaware of the different ways in which support is funded (in particular through the DSAs) and this is particularly worrying since application for the allowances can be a lengthy process which requires early application in order to mitigate any hold-ups in paying for support. A lack of understanding about funding is indicative of a wider lack of information about what was available in the HEI more generally and practitioners need to find ways in which to solve this problem. In Sanderson's (2004) study both FE and HE students expressed the need for a named person to which to address issues although the FE students wanted someone who was based within central services whilst HE students felt that a named person within the department was more appropriate. Also, some kind of pre-enrolment activity was seen as desirable in order to help with the transition into HE (it should be noted that many HEIs are now working on this type of activity in order to tackle these types of issues for disabled learners (see Action on Access publication on transition practices of HEIs under Appendix 3: Further Reading). Sanderson (2004) notes that there was a lack of communication between the HEI and the FE colleges in question

and even though some services which the respondents requested were in place their availability was not being successfully disseminated.

One of the difficulties that learners face during transition is that each level of the education sector has different ways in which support is organised. Parents and learners are required to negotiate different systems, speak to different staff and contend with changes in terminology and funding mechanisms. This can lead to misunderstandings on the part of the learners who may assume that the support they have received will continue in a similar vein as to before. Previous research has noted that there is a great deal of inconsistency between the levels of education in the way, for example, in which dyslexic and specific learning difficulties are identified and dealt with (May, HEA, 2000). Elliot and Wilson (2008) in their study of HE learners in the East of England found that this group of disabled learners did not receive adequate information, advice and guidance to ensure a smooth transition to HE. They also had to contend with substantial stress in arranging support such as non-medical helpers, adaptive technology and alternative formats. Where support was arranged at the pre-entry stage (whilst two of the learners were still in FE) the transition was reported as being less stressful and smoother.

Elliot and Wilson's (2008) study, which examined the experiences of learners with 'hidden disabilities' (namely dyslexia, Asperger's Syndrome and mental health difficulties), took a different approach to much of the previous research in that students were given a variety of research tools in order to express their opinions. This group of learners did not identify with the term 'disabled' which the report states would be a key issue at transition, since this is a preferred term in HE and might affect the learners ability to find relevant information about the support mechanisms including funding through the Disabled Students' Allowances. Sanderson (2000) reported a similar perception on the part of dyslexic students who did not identify with the term disabled. A lack of understanding of terminology may be one of the reasons that students fail to disclose their disability upon entry to higher education. Piggott & Houghton (2000) found that negative experiences around disclosure could affect whether the learner might do this again in the future but that non-disclosure of information can have significant detrimental impact on ensuring support is made available.

We have seen from the discussions above that there are a whole range of difficulties that disabled learners face before entering HE which are presumed to be additional to other learners. Transitions are difficult for all learners and disabled learners have a number of additional issues which they need to deal with in order to ensure that their transitions towards

higher education are successful. Failure to negotiate these issues makes it more likely that these learners may never go on to this higher level of study. If these learners do make it into a HE setting it is likely that they will experience difficulties which are similar to those during their study at other levels of the system and there is a growing number of research studies which have identified what these issues appear to be.

Barriers within higher education

As mentioned above, previous research suggests that along with the difficulties that all students deal with when living through a transition, disabled students have additional burdens which they face. So for example, we know that all students face difficulties financing their studies when they move into higher education but disabled students face additional difficulties such as organising their support arrangements. These arrangements are often different between different levels of the system or between different organisations and are usually begun afresh with each transition. In addition, the issues that all students face are, in effect, magnified for disabled students. For example, all students face the difficulty of moving away from home and into a new home if they are moving away to university since this presents the challenges associated with learning to live independently for the first time for many students. However, disabled students face increased difficulties such as ensuring that the accommodation is accessible to their needs, negotiating inaccessible public transport in order to return home and coping with misunderstanding or prejudicial views from other students. Housing presents particular challenges for disabled people (GLA, 2006) and failure to find accessible accommodation can have a knock-on effect into the areas of education and subsequent employment.

During the last 15 years a considerable amount of research has been undertaken which has explored the experiences of disabled learners within higher education. Many of these studies suffer from difficulties with generalisability because they are undertaken with small sample numbers or are within a particular context (such as within one HEI). However, more recent studies have rectified some of these issues and studied the student experience across a number of institutions and across a range of courses. This part of the discussion is a summary of some of the key barriers which have been identified in the research. A more comprehensive list is provided in the appendices but the list below should provide readers with an idea of the specific areas in which many disabled learners experience difficulties in the HE context.

- **Pre-entry issues** – there were a considerable number of issues related to difficulties and issues that disabled learners faced before they got to study in higher education settings. This could be due to a lack of information that had been provided by the HE providers or a lack of awareness on the part of FE staff. Students were unaware of the system of support in HE and information did not use familiar terminology or was not targeted at them. Many students experienced negative attitudes from significant others such as teachers or parents and some had been left feeling that university was not appropriate for them.
- **Physical access** – most of the studies report that there are still physical access issues for disabled learners and these impact upon the learners' experience of teaching because they may be unable to get proper access to rooms where teaching is delivered or to other learning facilities such as libraries. In the first instance, these are issues which a disabled learner will take considerable heed of before considering going into higher education or choosing a particular institution. When they get to university, there are numerous instances highlighted in the research of where access to the teaching room or related buildings such as the university library were far from suitable or in which transport or travel to and between campuses was difficult.
- **Access to the teaching and learning environment including teachers' attitudes** – in addition to the campus environment there are significant issues within the learning space. These included poorly designed acoustics in lecture theatres or break time problems when learners could not get to the canteen where the other learners were taking a break. There are also numerous mentions of difficulties with teaching delivery e.g. not remembering to look at a deaf learner when speaking so they can lip read. Many of the examples would be classed as reasonable adjustments that ought to be made within the terms of the DDA. Additionally there are issues over teachers' attitudes which were reported as less than ideal in many circumstances.
- **Access to library/learning support facilities** – the variability of support within the learning context is further exacerbated by poor experiences in accessing library and associated learning provision such as IT. Often rooms and buildings were quoted as being inaccessible or fully accessible computing facilities were not

provided. Universities were not providing computers which had assistive technology installed or had poorly designed websites.

- **Disclosure** – learners are reluctant to disclose as a result of bad experiences or worries over what support they might receive. This is a vicious circle as the learner will not receive the support they need if they do not disclose. Disclosure is supposed to be an enabling process but it can become disabling and there were also problems with having to disclose over and over again each time support was required. Students expressed surprise that they had to do this and they had to keep informing teaching staff. There were also instances of a lack of sensitivity around the issue of disclosure of disability for example, disclosure being made to other students about an individual's impairment by a member of teaching staff.
- **Information** – many learners reported that they were not getting the information needed to enable them to have a successful experience. This might be about the accessibility of the environment or about the process of applying for DSAs. Additionally, learners felt unprepared for the shifts in the way support was delivered in the university context and for the significant change in the way the course was delivered.

Enablers within education

In contrast to the significant number and types of barriers that were mentioned in the research literature, few studies specifically report on enabling factors. Most of the studies focus on issues and difficulties that disabled people face and it is difficult to know whether this is as a result of negative experiences or because the researchers have neglected to explore the opposing line of enquiry. However, amongst the reports of barriers there are several mentions of factors which have enabled disabled learners and many of the issues discussed are in a very similar vein to the barriers. For example, if one study mentioned particularly unhelpful teaching staff another study might mention that a student experienced receiving support from a particularly helpful member of staff.

The most frequently mentioned enablers to access to higher education amongst the studies examined are factors related to choice of course, personal motivations and support received from staff. There is conflicting evidence in terms of the factors that students considered when choosing a place of study with some mentioning that they were influenced by issues related to their impairments (e.g. dyslexic students choosing arts courses) whilst other studies mentioned that they were more strongly influenced by

factors within the environment such as proximity to the learner's home. Students were influenced significantly by the attitudes of others around them and it seems that negative attitudes of others can act as a motivator as much as a positive attitude. Not surprisingly perhaps, the approach of staff within the institution was quoted as having a positive influence on the progression of disabled students. There were examples of staff within departmental offices or within disability services being particularly helpful and of support received from external sources such as outside charities.

Rationale for the current study

We wanted to explore the experiences of disabled learners throughout their educational journey. However, we had limited resources so could not follow an in-depth longitudinal study which such an investigation might suggest. We therefore decided to interview current students about their previous experiences. We could find no studies that compared the experiences of disabled learners with their non-disabled peers and this is a flaw which is apparent within much of the research evidence in this area (Gorard et al,¹2005). It is difficult to know within many of the studies which explore the experiences of disabled learners, whether the issues discussed are as a consequence of the disabling barriers or are indicative of the general difficulties that all students face when undergoing transition. For example, Elliott & Wilson (200?) cite the finding that many disabled learners with hidden impairments choose to study close to home and within reach of existing networks of support. However, this could be indicative of a general move towards studying closer to home that is evident within the whole student body given the increased financial burden that has been placed on students in recent years. We therefore chose to interview groups of disabled and non-disabled students so that we could compare their responses. Similarly we wanted to find out whether the barriers mentioned were significant enough to put a stop to progression. Many previous studies are flawed in this respect because they only speak to learners who are within higher education (Gorard et al, 2005). Ideally, studies should compare these experiences with a matched group of interviewees who chose not to go into higher education but who nonetheless had the necessary qualifications. Due to logistical issues we were unable to track down groups of young people who were not in education against who we could compare our findings.

¹ This book examined the barriers to education for all learners and notes the methodological shortcomings of much of the work in this field of work (such as low numbers of participants and the lack of comparison groups).

However, we were able to find two groups of learners (one disabled and one non-disabled) who were currently studying for relevant qualifications in further education but who had decided not to apply for higher education.

Methodology

It was decided that a focus group method would be utilised in order to ensure a broader cross-section of experiences given the limited time that we had available. Focus groups can also work well with groups of younger participants in research because they can feel more at ease in a discussion group than face to face with a researcher. Groups of learners were identified by the disability offices within two universities in the west midlands. Each participant was paid to take part in the research and participants were emailed a brief sheet explain the purposes of the research and were asked in advance to think about the sorts of barriers and enablers they had experienced in their education. Groups of disabled learners and non-disabled learners were interviewed. There were no more than 6 learners in each group and the smallest group consisted of just two learners. In addition, two groups of learners (one group of disabled and one group of non-disabled) were interviewed in two further education colleges. Participants were identified through contacts within the colleges and it was vital that the participants were not considering applying to university although they needed to have the potential to participate. None of the learners had applied to university this year and all were on the second level of an FE course which would give them the necessary qualifications to apply to HE had they wished to.

Findings from Focus Groups

Non-disabled FE students

Due to the small number of learners in the group and the fact that we were only able to identify one group of learners we were at the mercy of sampling difficulties during this focus group. This group of learners expressed a high level of dissatisfaction with their course and this may well have led to the responses from this group being influenced in a very specific direction. They expressed their dislike for the way the course was being delivered and felt that they had been misled when they had chosen the course. However, they had mainly chosen the course because of their liking of the subject at school level.

Choosing a course

Teachers had played a role in advising the learners of which course they might want to undertake at FE. Additionally, the learners had made use of information provided by careers staff and resources such as prospectuses. One student was particularly vehement about their school experience and how negative she felt about leaving. She had had no dialogue with the school about her future and had just made her own decision to leave as soon as possible. Parents had also influenced them going to college with words of encouragement or because of the financial benefits such as claiming EMA or child benefits.

“I just decided I was going to college. They didn’t ask me anything else. I just went into school one day and said I’m not coming back.”

The group had also considered issues to do with future careers when choosing a course in FE e.g. long hours was mentioned as a barrier for a career in catering and therefore as a reason for not pursuing it in FE. Most of the group had decided that they would not like to pursue the subject they were studying as a career because they viewed the subject more as a hobby and not something they could be forced to do as a vocational activity. Their main reason for studying their course had been personal preference and they had picked a subject that they were committed to and liked more than any other. One student had chosen her course because she thought it might be fun and easy because of her liking of the subject. However, they had not really thought about any other options than going to college and one had thought it was something to do while they decided exactly what they wanted to do later in life.

Dissatisfaction with the course

There were particular issues with this group of students in terms of dissatisfaction with their current course in FE. They felt that it was not what they were expecting, that they were being asked to carry out work which they were not interested in and they saw it more as a chore than a subject that they had liked so much at school. It had become a functional rather than a pleasurable pursuit. They expressed dislike at the feedback from some tutors and that the work they produced was negatively criticised. They felt that they were being asked to carry out work on demand and too quickly or they felt that they were asked to repeat work which they felt had been of a high quality but had been told it was not ‘right’.

Additionally they felt that the demands of the course were not fully explained to them and that it had been ‘sugar-coated’ at an earlier stage

when they were considering their options. Part of the problem was that they thought they were going to be able to study subjects which they liked and actually there had been less choice of modules than they had expected. One student mentioned that she had looked at the college and thought that it looked professional and because it had recently been refurbished, thought it was where she wanted to go as opposed to carrying on at school in sixth form. Another was glad she did not go to 6th form because she was sure that she would have dropped out. Also there was a discussion about the costs of materials which they felt that the college had not provided adequately but they were not expecting this or been warned about it.

Despite their misgivings for the course they were still motivated to finish their qualifications and they felt that it would be a waste of time to drop out now. Even if they ended up with a 'PPP' grade in their BTEC it was better than dropping out. One student expressed the opinion that the most positive aspect of college had been meeting a number of very good friends. Furthermore, they now knew that they definitely did not want to pursue this subject any further so it had helped, in some respects, to write off that career path. When asked what else they might have done if they had not gone on to FE, all of them answered that they had not really considered any other options. They all upheld their original decisions to take this course because they had enjoyed the subject and had made a conscious decision to pursue it.

“There’s no point in quitting now. As far as I am concerned we have done two years now and it’s better to have a PPP than having I dropped out of college. But I wouldn’t of left anyway because of friends. What’s the point in leaving now.”

Money and work

Educational Maintenance Allowance had been a factor in choosing to carry on at FE and the group mentioned that parents were a pressure in this respect. One of the respondents said she had not been told that EMA was based on parental income. Also by carrying on education their parents could continue to claim child benefits. There were discussions about work at various stages. One student had been pressured by her mum and dad to get part-time jobs but now sometimes wondered what she was doing coming into college when she could be earning money. Another learner did not think she had been ready for going straight into work after school and was happy she had chosen to go to college instead and another had not thought about work at all whilst at school.

Attendance at university

Apart from the obvious misgivings about the current course this was not the only reason mentioned for not continuing on to university. Money issues were mentioned as a barrier and going into a lot of debt was seen as bad option. There was a discussion about the suggestion that if you go straight into a workplace you could end up ahead of your peers who go to university for three years. Part of the reason for this was because they had experiences of friends or close relatives who had been to university and were now in jobs which they perceived they could have gone straight into from school or college. So the additional qualifications or time spent studying was for little benefit.

“Whereas if I’d started working in the retail industry I could have three years of working in the job and worked my way up. If you go to uni you come out and you are at stage one again.”

Additionally, there was a feeling that the college had not been as proactive as it should have been and had tried to rush them into applying to university without high quality guidance about what courses were available or without information about how to make the decisions. They did not see the point of rushing into the decision and were happy to defer the decision to a later date if necessary. Also, they had been given advice about pursuing arts courses which they were no longer interested in.

There was a range of opinion on going onto university. One learner was undecided and thought she may well apply in the future. Three of the group had decided not to apply to university at the moment although one student did say that they still had the option in the future – almost a ‘never say never’ attitude. One of the interviewees was pregnant and was unable to see herself going onto anything else at the current time other than dealing with motherhood.

“I don’t know it never appealed to me. I know I should of wanted to but - like my mum said if you’ve got the opportunity then you should go.”

The students expressed dissatisfaction about the help they had been given with pursuing other options once they had chosen not to go on to university and they felt that staff wanted to just get them out of the door. Also, they felt that the support received from the college with finding work, was not helpful and they had been largely left to their own devices.

Disabled FE students

In comparison to the non-disabled FE group this group of students were much more satisfied with their current college situation and mentioned very positive things about their transition into their current FE college. All the learners were undertaking the same performing arts BTEC qualification.

Previous experiences at school

Although there was a range of experience in terms of their previous schooling all six of the learners interviewed had negative experiences before they had attended their current place of study. This came in the shape of poor delivery of education for most of the interviewees. They felt that the schools they had attended and the teachers had not met their needs. Interestingly, this was the case regardless of whether they had attended a mainstream school or a special school.

“I’m probably the world’s worst person to ask as I spent 16 years in the same place and towards the end I hated it so much that I didn’t care where I went as long as I got out of there. It was OK until I got to year 10 and I’m not going to say they didn’t know how to teach GCSE’s but I didn’t think it was right for me.”

For the learners that had attended special schools there were a number of issues raised. The learners became bored of being at the same school for a number of years (up to 15 years within the same educational setting) and by the end felt that they were not being stretched academically. They mentioned that one of the reasons for this was that the pace of the lessons was too slow and was moderated by the teachers trying to include everybody. Being at the same school for so long also had an unintended consequence in that these learners had never experienced a transition between different schools at the different levels of education. Obviously this would have lessened any impact that the transition experience creates but was offset by the inability of the learners to choose another place of schooling if they felt dissatisfied.

“The biggest barrier I faced even though I was at a special school somehow was how to deal with my disability. Because they had such a diverse range of disabilities I was either getting treated like a kid or totally ‘he can do all that by himself’.”

Two students who attended mainstream school mentioned bullying from other students and also being isolated. They also felt that the schools they had attended had not met their needs. However, one of the students was upbeat about these experiences and felt that it had made him more street wise and given him life experiences that he felt he wouldn’t have gained

from going to a special school. One learner had been motivated by his experiences at one school to which he had transferred and felt that one teacher had provided him with the opportunity to get into the subject area he was currently pursuing.

Transitions

Since most of the group had attended special schools for most of their educational lives they had not experienced a great deal of transition as mentioned above. However, there were a few instances of transitions between different schools and different levels of education. One learner had emigrated from another country where his formal educational experiences had been very poor and he was very positive about his experiences in the FE college where he was currently studying. Another student had experienced difficulties within his primary school but had managed to choose a secondary school that was more geared towards his needs and where he felt that the Head Teacher had made a real difference to his life.

“They thought I had a version of attention deficit disorder and they wanted to shove me off to the naughty boy’s school but I managed to get into a second primary school where the head teacher was absolutely brilliant. He worked really hard with me he got me reading got me my own personal assistant.”

Issues relating to studying in a bigger school were mentioned regarding the transition from primary to secondary schooling. Losing friends and going to a larger school were given as reasons for apprehension about this move and a general feeling of nervousness. Accessibility was raised as an issue because at primary school the learners with mobility issues had been in one classroom most of the time and had very little problems moving about in a smaller setting. One student’s family had been required to move house so that he could attend an accessible school and also mentioned that this had occurred so that he could be transported by taxi to the school gates. Another student had lost this transport option when he left primary school and was required to get to secondary school more independently on public transport.

Motivations

Most of the learners mentioned their motivations for studying in further education and were generally positive that they were still in education. They were particularly fond of the college they were currently studying at. Most had chosen their course because they enjoyed the subject at previous levels of study and some had been motivated by previous teachers or comments

made by their relatives or friends regarding their ability or relating to support that was available at the college they were currently attending. Some of the learners had been given help by the Connexions service and their experiences of this help were very positive. One of the learners had moved a considerable distance to become a residential learner at the college and had received significant support from Connexions in order to do this. In that particular case a key aspect of the move had been the availability of funding which was now under threat.

“Connexions were the ones that sorted out induction, they sorted out the funding, helped me out with the interview they helped with everything I couldn’t of asked for more.”

The learners within the group had thought about future work prospects and the implications of studying for this. Their opinions ranged from believing that anything could be achieved if you put your mind to it to a more negative view about the current state of the job market. One student had chosen to continue at college in order to get enough qualifications to be able to get a job and was keen to leave education so that he could earn some money. Another reflected on the fact that he did not feel that he could realistically get a job related to the current course and had started to undertake more vocationally orientated additional qualifications as well. There was also some awareness of national policy such as the Disability Discrimination Act and the need for employers to take this into account in a positive way although one learner did express some pessimism about this.

‘Even though we have got such a thing as the Disability Discrimination Act still the biggest thing we are going to face is discrimination’

University choice

All but one of the learners was generally not considering university as the next step. The one learner who was positively considering it felt that it was possible if he applied enough effort and persevered. He had also attended Aimhigher events and was aware of funding that might be available and did not see many barriers to entering university other than accessibility of transport systems. The others had ruled university out for a variety of reasons.

“I think for me I’ve spent too long in education. I just want to go and get myself a job. I think this place is kind of like a uni but the barriers to me if I was going to go to uni is accessibility. You’ve got to find the right access, the uni’s got to be able to cater for you and

you've got to have the right equipment. it's all about money isn't it?"

As mentioned above there were motivations to get into the world of work and to start earning money. Money issues were seen as a key reason for not attending university and the level of debt was seen as a demotivating factor. One student mentioned that university might result in a student being three years behind in terms of their career.

Discussion

It is difficult to extrapolate our findings to the wider population of young people because there were only 11 students in the two focus groups that were interviewed. However, there are a number of issues which are worthy of further discussion and provide an opportunity for further reflection in relation to previous work and assumptions made about this topic area.

Firstly, it is worth noting that within both groups of learners there were some very similar experiences mentioned regarding their educational experiences. Some of the barriers to progression within education were very similar regardless of whether the students were disabled or not and may be common to many learners. Both groups expressed dissatisfaction with aspects of their education and the way in which it had been or was being delivered. Within both groups there had been some disaffection with education – for one disabled learner this had started at primary school but the dissatisfaction was mainly aimed at the secondary school level. It is difficult to say within these findings whether this represents a general malaise which sets in within the teenage years and represents a challenge for teaching staff to overcome or whether there were specific elements of the delivery which were poorly delivered and is indicative of more systemic challenges.

However, it is important to point out that many of the reasons for this dissatisfaction for the group of disabled learners were related to issues of their support as disabled people and this is substantively different for this group. These difficulties were not raised by the group of non-disabled learners as factors in their disaffection or dissatisfaction with their learning experiences. Disabled learners had clearly experienced additional barriers within their educational journeys and these barriers were related to the fact that they were disabled. Issues of accessibility and discrimination were of central importance in the minds of these learners and they were consistently aware of this as a factor when making their choices about their future direction. Some of these learners had attended special schools where they felt that the pace of delivery had led to their dissatisfaction with their

education and this is a factor that non-disabled learners would never have to deal with. Although some non-disabled learners may feel their needs were not being met in the classroom this would never be due to a reason related to being in a segregated setting. Additionally, related to this issue, those students that had been educated in a mainstream setting had also mentioned negative experiences which were related to their disability – such as lack of disability provision within the school, bullying or lack of diagnosis of their condition. It is also important to point out that as a result of barriers these learners had faced considerable additional efforts in order to ensure that they had achieved successful progression. It cannot be underestimated how much additional resources are required in order to undertake these efforts such as moving house in order to be able to attend an accessible school or receiving out of hours support from friends of the family. Whilst these activities may be experienced by non-disabled learners they were not mentioned by the non-disabled research group that was interviewed in this study and in any case these activities were undertaken in order to overcome an issue related to the person's disability and the failings of the current systems for support.

Secondly, contextual factors had clearly affected the information gathered from the interviewees. The non-disabled learners group were under considerable pressure related to the demands of their course, at the time of the interview, due to the demands of the assessment period and the stress of having to finish off a number of pieces of work in order to achieve their qualification. In addition, most of these learners expressed considerably negative views towards their current study and this was due to a number of issues which ranged from misunderstandings within pre-entry information to dislike for teaching staff. In contrast the group of disabled learners expressed very positive views about the subject they were studying and were extremely happy about the college they were studying in.

Thirdly, both groups of learners shared similar motivations for continuing or discontinuing in education. As might be expected of a group of young adults thoughts about independence were a considerable factor within the ways they were making their choices. Many of them mentioned their desire to get into the world of work to start earning their own money and to become more independent. However, family issues were mentioned more often by the non-disabled group as a reason for considering their next step. There appeared to be a higher level of tension for these learners because of issues to do with being encouraged to leave the family home or to do with arguments with parents. One of the non-disabled learners was expecting her

first child so felt that this was the end of her educational journey for the foreseeable future.

Lastly, on the issue of progression to university the two groups shared many of the demotivating reasons for discontinuation at this level. There was a general feeling that they did not want to pursue any further study for many of the learners in the two groups. The learners wanted to begin work as mentioned above or had just reached the end of their tether in terms of further study, for the present time at least. Significantly, both groups mentioned issues of debt and the possibility that university might be a retrograde step in terms of the whole life trajectory. It is also true to say that there was still a sense that some of the learners may want to go on to university at some point in the future but they just had not considered it an option at the exact point in time. Although whether this ever becomes a reality given the negative attitudes that were expressed is open to question.

Non-disabled university students

Students were recruited from two universities within the Coventry and Warwickshire Aimhigher area and were generally positive about their experiences throughout education. Although, there was a broad range of experiences and backgrounds most of them had encountered a reasonably barrier-free journey into university study. One noticeable exception was a student who identified themselves as a care leaver.

Transitions

Many of the learners felt that the transition from college to university was the main transition point within their educational journey. During further questioning this was related to a number of significant factors such as the move into independent living and the change in learning styles. The other most important transition issue was related to choice of subjects at A-levels and some reflected further back to GCSE choice. The students who mentioned this felt that there was not enough explanation of the ways in which these choices might determine or funnel your choices at a later stage either in going to university or onto a chosen career path.

“GCSEs are quite important because that does effect what you can study at A-level and then what you can go on and study at uni so you’re not always really aware of what you want to do in four years’ time at that point so it’s quite an important decision.”

Students mentioned the change of learning styles and teaching delivery as a major issue in the transition to higher education. Interviewees felt that at school and college there was a sense in which the assessment method and

therefore the delivery method had become quite functional and had led to a 'tick-box' approach. Some felt that at A-level there was a certain amount of 'spoon-feeding'. Therefore, when the learners reached university they were unprepared for the independent nature of university study and felt like they were left to their own devices to develop a way of studying which would help them succeed.

"I think I found a big change in the way of learning. The sixth form I was at well they tried to encourage independent learning but I don't think they succeeded– it's very spoon fed."

Some of the students had been fortunate enough to have been given some additional help at school in order to cope with this transition. This had been in the form of additional sessions to help them understand how the delivery method and study methods might change or had been a change in the way their lessons were being delivered. Teachers had perhaps taught a session on higher level (university) level study or had begun to teach the subject at a level which was beyond their current level of study.

In addition, there was a feeling that the move away from home was a major factor and an issue which took a good deal of getting used to. Moving into halls and living in shared arrangements was mentioned several times. Again some of the interviewees had been fortunate enough to have been schooled away from home so had learned some independence skills.

Aspirational thinking

There was a significant driver in terms of academic achievement and this acted as a driving factor and motivator. Some of the respondents mentioned that they now recognised that whilst they may have been a high performer in their school they were now within a much larger group who were all high achievers. They felt that this required more effort in order to achieve the higher grades. Related to this point was the issue that most of their peers were following a similar route. The possibility of not entering university just did not appear to be an option for many within these groups of learners.

"It's the kind of school environment I was in was very competitive and nothing's good enough so you didn't feel good enough if you didn't get the best grades. And once you've achieved those grades you feel that a natural progression is to go to university."

"Everyone in my family has done it so I just followed the family expectations and the cultural issues (I am African) but I can't really say that I didn't want to myself."

Many of the students felt that there were significant expectations from everyone around them that they were going to go on to university and pursue a degree. Some also mentioned that because they had come from humble backgrounds they felt motivated to go to university and get a better life and to earn more money. There were also cultural expectations for some students with ethnic minority backgrounds. The students also felt under pressure therefore to obtain the grades they required to pursue their chosen courses and they mentioned friends who had applied for courses but missed out because of lower than expected grades. Students mentioned feelings of self-belief and pointed out particular interests in their subject area but also, for one of the groups, they had come from schools where there was a high level of achievement. They had been able to achieve the highest marks possible as had most of their peers. This had been almost a self-perpetuating spiral upwards. If everyone is aspiring to go to the best universities and achieve the best results you are compelled to do the same.

“I put as an enabler grades; mainly pressure and expectations for grades; I think my school, a lot of schools, the pressure and expectation that’s put on you by teachers and peers and your school environment to get good grades and to go to university is in the end an enabler”

Financial

On the whole students in this sample did not see the financial arrangements within higher education as a barrier to their progression. In fact, they saw the current system as an enabler. The fact that the monies were available from the Student Loans Company and Student Finance England was seen as a positive and they reflected that they would not have been able to attend if they had had to find the money themselves.

“That’s also been an enabler as well because of the student finance and the loans and grants and bursaries that I get it’s made me be able to do it and without that I wouldn’t of been able to do it.”

That is not to say that they did not reflect on the likely outcome of borrowing the money and they were more than aware of the need to pay it back, but this was balanced against the likelihood that they would be able to pay it back because they would be earning differentially more than others without a degree. The students in this sample also complained about the system of applying for loans and the hold ups and difficulties they had experienced in receiving the money. Although, they had reported that their more recent experience of this had been better than the previous years.

Career considerations

The students were conscious to a certain extent of their eventual career path. This has been mentioned above relating to their choice of GCSEs or A-levels. They were conscious that these choices may have had a bearing on their career trajectory. Some of the students also mentioned choosing a particular course because of a reason relating to wanting to pursue it further after university, but also relating to the possibility of a future career. Some of the students mentioned the trade-off between going straight into work versus coming away to university. Some knew friends that had gone into work and they were thinking about the opportunity that this might present versus sacrificing another three years of study. But then they were also aware that coming away to university had other benefits such as learning independence skills and widening your horizons. However, it was mentioned that there was a big difference between going to university and that many of those that do not are not likely to pursue a particularly successful career path:

“you either went to university or you worked in Sainsburys.”

Information sources

Students in our focus groups had relied on a number of sources of information in order to make their choices about which university to apply to. They had utilised information on the web such as newspaper league tables and had looked at prospectuses or had visited universities during open days. They had also received advice from careers advisers and teachers. However, it appeared that they had remained rather confused about how to make the choice in the end and by the amount and type of information available so they saw available information as a barrier to entry.

“There are quite a few independent sites as well that have a lot of information about different unis, courses - and you’ve got all the league tables. They can be a bit confusing though because every league table is different.”

Although some of the students had some awareness of Aimhigher many of the students had not received any help from this initiative or could not remember receiving it nor did they know the role that Aimhigher played in access to university. Only one of the learners could specifically remember attending an Aimhigher event and this was a summer school.

Significant others

There were many times when the interviewees mentioned the role that significant others had played in terms of encouraging them to go to

university or supporting them with their decisions. This encouragement may have come from teachers or parents and it might have been a small piece of advice, such as saying that they were good at a particular thing, or it may have been in the form of aspiration because of the inspirational role that the significant other had played.

Choice of university

The main reasons that the student mentioned for picking their university was the availability of the course they wished to pursue and the academic standing of the institution and department.

“They have been doing it for quite a while nearly 40 years and the course here is so much better than all the other ones.”

There was also a certain amount of discounting of some institutions such as Cambridge and Oxford as they felt they did not want to go there or that they would not fit in.

“I think there is a perception about Oxbridge and there are certain people who feel that’s right for them. I’ve taken school visits there and people who have had aspirations to go have come away saying absolutely it’s not for them having been there and met some of the students. I also know pupils that strive for that and achieve that so I think there is definitely a perception that you are or aren’t an Oxbridge type person.”

But equally some had rejected other universities as being not of a high enough quality and therefore that they would be wasting their ability if they had gone there. Additionally, factors such as geographic location played a part in their choice of institution.

Disabled University Students

The disabled students within this study were recruited by contacting the disability offices of the two universities where the non-disabled learners were recruited. Disability staff hand-picked participants who they felt would be able to provide an eloquent response to the issues which were being investigated. Obviously, there are issues in this approach in terms of sampling bias since the disability staff may have chosen only those students who would portray their services in a positive light. However, similar issues occur with self-selection since it is often those students who are aggrieved about aspects of their current support who tend to put themselves forward in such instances. In any case we were particularly interested in the issues which the sample faced throughout their education and not just with their current place of study. Also, we had a limited amount of time and resource

with which to find the sample and we were restricted by the fact that the researcher was not working in situ within any of the organisations.

Support before HE

Interviewees reported varying levels of support at school. Some had received no help at all and had gone undiagnosed whilst others felt that their support had been really positive. An example of the variability of support comes from the experiences of a visually impaired student who had felt extremely well supported by the specialist provision within her school but even here there had been equipment that was not available and the student had relied on her parents for support with typing and reading. Another learner had felt that their school was very accommodating and teachers really understanding of her condition but a woman with dyslexia in the same focus group had not received any support and reported really negative experiences of school.

“They just helped you with whatever you needed and they - well you didn’t get everything you needed but they were pretty much really good which was quite lucky because some schools you don’t get it quite as good.”

“I didn’t really get any support at school. I went to a state college and the only really disability support they really had was for dyslexia and that was the only thing they’d really heard of so they don’t really know about anything else.”

Alongside a lack of consistency in support students mentioned that the advice they had received from staff within schools and colleges had been less than inspiring. Interviewees mentioned that there was a tendency to place negative expectations on them at school placed on her at school. In some cases this had restricted their choices, for example when teachers had advised students to pursue a vocational route because they were perceived as not being academic enough. Surprisingly, this had proven to be a positive motivational influence for some of the students as they were inspired to prove these attitudes wrong.

“from early ages my mum’s favourite quote from going to college from school, I would of been probably year 9 and they said to my mum, “She needs to be realistic about her capabilities” and my mum said she was and I’d do what I wanted to do in life”

Students mentioned that their parents had played a role in helping to support them during their school years and that they had had to make

significant efforts to ensure that the students had pursued their chosen path and had not been restricted by their school.

Two learners mentioned that they felt that they were not being properly dealt with at school that teachers did not understand them. This changed for both of them when they were identified as disabled and the teachers' attitudes changed towards them in a positive way. Both these learners therefore felt that the teachers should have been positive from the start and that learners should not have to jump through hoops in order to receive support or for teachers to work with them in a positive way. They felt that there should have been more positive encouragement for people who are under-achieving rather than a negative attitude.

“That’s a huge benefit of having a title – like if you can have something officially wrong. Before it was difficult to ask for anything but as soon as you have an official status they became very accommodating. It changes perspectives a lot.”

Respondents' personal motivations were a significant factor in ensuring success. Some of the students felt that they had pushed themselves to succeed at school and had pursued areas where they knew they had strengths and a particular interest in that subject area and way of thinking. However, some of the learners did express negative thoughts and mentioned that at times they did not feel capable of studying at university.

“For me the biggest issue going into university was self-esteem. Like being a disabled person generally you don’t have quite as much self-esteem as other people so you might not feel as capable as other people and not so inclined to apply to university.”

Support at university

These students mentioned that the Disabled Students' Allowances (DSA) had been a significant enabler and that accommodations made by the university, such as providing extra time in assessment or additional tutoring and mentoring had been beneficial. Students were also positive about assistive technology and equipment they had received as a result of claiming DSAs. However, some of the interviewees had negative experiences when applying for the support. For example, one student had not received the equipment that had been recommended until well into the middle of their first year of study and another had not been aware of the support that was available for disabled learners until she had got to university.

“The forms are ridiculous. My equipment was late as well – two months late which wasn’t too bad because the uni had managed to

lend me things to help me get by but it was still annoying at that stage having to worry about that in terms of everything else that's on your mind when you're moving to a new place as well."

Students mentioned significant delays with the process which could partly be explained by the difficulties that all students faced during this academic year when Student Finance England took overall responsibility for disbursing funding off the hands of Local Education Authorities. Some of the interviewees were unhappy about the bureaucracy involved in arranging support mechanisms and in particular the DSA system. They were unhappy about being assessed several times during their lives.

"I think the DSA thing is rubbish. I mean all the paperwork for dyslexics. It's stupid. I got my dad to fill it all in. I just wouldn't have filled it out if I didn't have the help. There were other stupid things as well like the helpline – like they wouldn't speak to my dad they would only speak to me because it was my application."

Students were full of praise for the support they had received for disability in most levels of their education once their disability had been recognised. They mentioned the positive effects a statement can have and the positive support they received from the SENCO at school and the disability adviser within the university. Support proved particularly helpful when it was based on what they felt they wanted rather than what might have been recommended in a report.

Disability support was a factor that was considered when choosing university but other disability-related factors such as having more open space rather than being in a city centre were mentioned. These issues were considered alongside other factors such as the course or whether the student liked the university.

Advice received

Disabled students in our focus groups reported a range of experiences in terms of getting advice about studying at university. For example, one of the students had not received a great deal of help and felt that the process of applying had been rushed through but another had been made aware of university from their first year at college and had been given a number of advice sessions and on-going support. On the whole the students reported that they had felt encouraged by their school to apply for university and had seen this as the most logical next step. However, there was some variation in this experience and some had not been encouraged at all.

“Yeah the school were really encouraging. The one thing I’m really grateful for is they said start really early. So I started looking in January of year 12. And that really helped because a few universities that I looked at like Edinburgh was just lots of hills and stuff which for me was a bit difficult. And that definitely altered perceptions of things. It enabled me to make a clearer choice.”

Availability of support services and accessibility of the campus were key factors that the students used in order to choose which universities to apply to. Some of the students had made specific efforts to visit universities in order to ensure that there was support in place however, not all the students were aware that this was necessary. One student had never received any support in her previous education so did not think that it was going to be a factor. Other factors were important such as whether they felt academically capable of gaining entry and issues such as geographic location.

“I guess mine was an assumption really that there was going to be support at university. I didn’t really look at it in that much detail. I just assumed it would be there.”

One student mentioned how important it was having a friend group and peer support and that her primary school had been a small rural school where everyone had been accepting of each other. A couple of the learners had had bad experiences of interactions with their peers and one had even spent time at home for home schooling because of it. There were experiences of bullying at secondary school for some of the learners and they felt that this was because they were perceived as different. One student had avoided telling anyone at school in order to avoid this. The students said that there was a misunderstanding from peers about their disability and this even extended into the university arena.

Discussion of university students

On the whole these students were very enthusiastic about their experiences of studying at university. There was a noticeable level of self-motivation and most of the students were experiencing a high level of satisfaction with their current studies and with their decision to enter higher education. Most of the students were aware of the financial burden that they had taken on by entering university but were, in most cases, actually quite positive about the fact that any monies were available. It was not possible to delve into the economic circumstances of the students’ families so it is difficult to say whether this is completely representative of the whole student body but most of the students could see the potential benefits that studying in HE

presented. Perhaps this observation might be expected since they had all chosen to pursue a path of studying in HE and therefore had mentally settled on the idea that the benefits outweighed any downsides at this stage in their lives.

Whilst the non-disabled students spoke about similar experiences to the disabled students there were several noticeable differences in the experiences they related. Firstly, the disabled students mentioned considerably more barriers to their progress than non-disabled students. The non-disabled students mentioned very few difficulties in their schooling and came up with very few barriers to their progression. In contrast, many of the disabled students had experienced difficulties at some time in their educational journey. In particular the disabled students mentioned the attitudes of teachers and other learners as a significant issue. There was a marked contrast between these experiences and those of the non-disabled learners. In fact the non-disabled had generally had extremely positive experiences and they were almost experiencing an upward spiral of aspiration raising from amongst their peers, families and teachers.

Secondly, disabled students in this study had experienced significant difficulties in organising support at the various stages of their educational journeys. Some of the learners had actually not received any support at all during most of their schooling because they were either over-looked for support, were undiagnosed or were just seen as not capable of achieving. These learners mentioned that the different support systems, in the different levels of the education sector, were a barrier which they had to overcome and they had experienced particular difficulties with organising support at university. There had been a lack of information about how the system was organised in HE and they had encountered significant difficulties in applying for funding to pay for the support. Overall there was inconsistency in the support received.

Thirdly, disabled students were taking into consideration a number of additional factors when deciding where they would undertake their HE study. For example, most of them had researched issues around support they would receive at the institutions they had applied to. That is not to say that disabled students were not considering similar factors as their non-disabled peers because they did mention some of the same aspects as the non-disabled groups, such as whether they would be able academically to get into an institution and where the university was situated. However, even these similar issues sometimes had a disability angle to consider – students mentioned the issue of accessible public transport and choosing a campus environment that was quiet and away from the bustle of a busy town.

Overall discussion

Overall the research suggests that disabled learners do face significantly more barriers in their educational journey than non-disabled learners. There was a marked contrast between the two groups of learners in terms of the difficulties they had faced during their schooling and disabled had to deal with a number of issues throughout their education which non-disabled learners simply never encountered.

Although the questions which were asked during our focus groups remained the same for all the groups of learners, it was noticeable that the disabled learners were appreciably pre-occupied with issues related to their support. Many of them had experienced very negative attitudes and a lack of support during their education and it was clear that support was a significant issue within their minds when considering pursuing education into the university level. In comparison, non-disabled students seemed pre-occupied with issues such as their academic achievement or whether their department was a good department academically and with money issues.

Students who had chosen not to enter higher education had a range of reasons why they had decided not to carry on their education. Both groups of learners were finding their studies taxing and most of the learners felt that they would be glad to be earning money or attempting to find work rather than continuing their studies. The group of disabled learners had additional considerations regarding support systems in education and they shared anxieties with the non-disabled learners about finding work.

Most of the learners in higher education reported that the transition from further education to university can be a hugely daunting undertaking and is perhaps akin to the transition experienced by primary school children when they move into secondary school. This earlier transition can be a major cause of anxiety and lead, in extreme cases, to drop out and further difficulties later on in schooling (Sutherland et al, 2004). Similarly, the move into university is fraught with barriers but since this is not a compulsory stage of education and there are multiple factors causing stress, the pressure to drop out is significant and should be considered worthy of tackling by the sector. The students in our student predominantly referred to the change in teaching styles as a major cause of difficulties and this is an area which could be tackled from both sides of the HE divide – once students enter HE there could be additional support with this change and also schools and FE colleges could provide more experience of HE-type teaching before the transition occurs.

The learners in our study were influenced by significant others within their lives and many of them mentioned the influence of parents in this respect. However, the most frequently mentioned factor was the role that teachers played in raising or dampening aspirations. Some learners mentioned negative experiences with the delivery of their courses at school and others remarked that they felt that teachers had not pushed them enough. However, in many cases this can be counterbalanced by experiences of particularly inspiring teachers and many of the learners pointed out that when they had made a transition to a different level of education or had a different teacher they felt fully supported. Teaching staff should not underestimate the influence they have on young people and continue to inspire learners even if they feel that the learner is not achieving to the best of their ability.

One noticeable exception to the relatively barrier-free journey which non-disabled students experienced was the student who was a care leaver. This student had experienced noticeably different issues during their education. The student mentioned issues around lack of support and not feeling valued at school as well as explaining that going to university had been a major decision which had required considerable thought and planning. Although there were slightly different issues to overcome it appeared that this student had undergone a journey akin to the disabled students in the study.

Overall, the findings in this report are similar to that described in previous research. However, we feel that this research is particularly pertinent because we have begun to evaluate the qualitative differences between a comparator group of learners which is very unusual in this area of work. In addition, because we adopted a social model approach to our explorations we were able to also identify factors which learners find particularly enabling as well as barriers to their progression. More research needs to be carried out utilising this approach. Finally, we would recommend that research is carried out that explores the choices of those learners, disabled and non-disabled, that did not continue with education beyond school and GCSE-level. We had originally intended to compare our HE learners with young people who were not in education or training but unfortunately due to logistical issues this was not possible. However, we feel that our study did counteract this problem somewhat by finding learners who had expressly stated that they did not think that HE was for them but who, nevertheless, would be obtaining the qualifications necessary to enter HE should they have chosen to.

Advice to practitioners

We have decided to keep our advice to practitioners short in order that people who read the report do not feel inundated with advice. We have deliberately steered away from providing advice which may only be implemented with major changes to national policy direction so as to be of immediate and practicable use for the partnership sponsors.

All students

- Consideration should be given of all the options available to learners to ensure that all feel included in transition out of college/school.
- Ensure that all learners/leavers feel equally valued in their choices even if this means they are not pursuing higher education or further study.
- Give more information regarding the implications of subject choices at GCSE and A-level. Students who are undecided at this stage may be better taking a range of subjects in order to keep their options open.
- Consider giving practical advice and help that is grounded in the learners' experience e.g. ensure that terminology is used that the learners are familiar with.
- Teachers have a lot to give in terms of their personal experiences of applying to university and should utilise that experience to provide advice and guidance to learners who may be considering applying to higher education.
- Utilise current students as role models and mentors in order to smooth the transition into HE and to provide guidance to students considering applying to university.
- Universities need to consider the change in learning styles and give students a 'soft-landing' into higher educational study and assessment or at least an explanation as to what is required in HE compared to FE and some help with the change in study skills.

Disabled learners

- Additional support for disabled learners at transition points is required – this can only come from a collaborative approach between FE and HE.
- There is a general lack of understanding of the support arrangements in higher education for learners with SEN and additional learning

support requirements. HEIs should liaise with schools and FE college staff to address this issue.

- Universities should write to applicants who disclose disability as early as possible to inform them about the process of applying for Disabled Students' Allowances.
- Consider giving assistance to learners to apply for funding from the Disabled Students' Allowances at the pre-entry stage to HE.
- University staff should work with school teachers and managers to provide examples of learners with SEN who have entered higher education.
- Staff at all levels of education should implement early intervention with disabled learners in order to ease the transition points.
- Universities should implement outreach work into colleges of FE and schools to raise aspiration – e.g. offer taster-days and summer schools for disabled learners.
- HEIs should consider using different terminology i.e. avoid using 'disability' so that learners from schools and FE can relate to the information provided.
- Additional support should be given for care leavers since they face similar levels of barriers to educational success as disabled learners.

Appendix. 1

Barriers and enablers identified in research

Pre-entry to HE

Information not targeted correctly – because of use of ‘disabled’ & ‘disability’

Different terminology between sectors

Not classifying yourself as disabled on the UCAS categories

Lack of discussion pre-entry about disability

Aspirations of significant others is low

Discouraged by school because of perceived lack of ability

Concern about financial issues

The risk of losing benefits and/or amassing debts while studying was a deterrent for disabled people’s pursuit of education.

Course choice (e.g. too much written work)

Different course or university related features related to course choice not impairment issues

Choice of university (e.g. too large)

Inconsistency in levels of access promoted and advertised by different educational establishments.

Communication issues between different parts of the university at the admissions stage

Admissions criteria assessing ability to cope linked to disability

On-entry to HE

Students do not disclose

Disclosure (they thought it would be seen as excuse making)

Not wanting to because they thought they would be disadvantaged)

Not wanting to feel different or stand out

Wanting to appear normal and not asking for support

Information not passed onto relevant staff upon entry to university

Information not passed onto academic department

Extra time & effort required to reorganise external support arrangements

Additional time having to set up their own support arrangements such as registering for exams

Additional effort required to negotiate over disability and support

Having to keep informing everyone

Breach of confidentiality

Frustration that information had been disclosed on forms but not followed up

Lack of awareness of DSAs
Ineligibility for DSAs
Additional costs associated with paying for support (pre-upper limit changes on DSA and before means testing was dropped)
Setting up DSAs

Variable support from disability services
Lack of information about services available
Lack of awareness of support available
Inconsistency in levels of support, equipment and other access when studying
Delays in getting equipment were a problem
Limited access to note-takers and interpreters

Too fast transition to independent learning
Need specialist input to acquire independence skills
The importance & difficulties of creating friendships for mutual support
Other students being wary
Insensitivity and lack of understanding from students, particularly in relation to hidden impairment

Difficulties accessing library and learning services
Inaccessible library resources which need transcription, getting a consistent and meaningful service library loans etc.
Lack of access to IT facilities
Getting personal assistants through the institution's security procedures
No magnifier in the library
Not being able to access books and library materials
Lack of ergonomic keyboards
Poorly designed and inaccessible web sites

Lack of contact with personal tutor
No nominated member of staff in department
Lack of cooperation from lecturers e.g. not allowing recording of lectures
Access issues with teaching delivery (e.g. use of videos) in lectures and various other scenarios
Patronising teachers in this example it was a teacher who asking other learners in the group to speak up rather than facing the student so she could lip-read
Practical issues with course delivery (which was seen from the learners' impairments viewpoint i.e. they can't cope with particular elements of their course because of their physical limitations)
Teachers not being facing deaf students so they can lip read & having to tell teaching staff repeatedly, lack of help from teaching staff
Assessment e.g. written, exams
Failure to provide hand-outs and materials in advance and in different formats

Not being able to see OHPs and displays, with the material not provided in other formats

Interpreters who could not always keep up with tutors, especially those who had not been given any guidance on working with interpreters

Professional requirements for fitness to practice

Limited access to certain course for health & safety reasons or inaccessibility of building where department was based

Lack of accessibility of the environment (access between and into buildings e.g. parking spaces); within buildings; library

Transport

Not being allocated right room by accommodation staff and having to convince them of requirements for ground floor room

Access within teaching rooms (e.g. non-movable seating)

No specific monitoring of quality assurance for disabled learners

Lack of clear approach to reasonable adjustments for dyslexia

Not well attended staff development

Unhelpful and even hostile staff attitudes

Enablers

Long standing aspirations to get to HE

Engaging in pre-entry activities

Pre-entry contact and meetings with disability services

Course requirements (e.g. choosing arts course because of little written work)

Choice of university (e.g. good disability department)

Proximity to home

Admissions criteria based on academic performance only

Talking about disability at admissions stage with relevant staff

Information sent out pre-entry once declaration made of disability on form plus invited to see disability services pre-entry

Where services were in place the majority of students reported finding the services extremely helpful

Extremely helpful personal tutor; helpful staff; helpful teaching and support staff

Support in department from admin staff

Member of staff with disability in this case senior member with ME and someone with dyslexia in the family

Other staff in department

Support from outside providers such as RNIB

Support from students' union

Support from students with disabilities group

Other students

Family

Communication policy based on inclusiveness and ensuring disability information is appropriately passed on to relevant staff
Specific monitoring of quality assurance for disabled learners

Reasonable adjustments in assessments – double marking of scripts, exam scripts submitted in note form
Personal assistant to help in library etc funded by DSA
IT equipment paid for my DSA
Note taker in lectures and for assignments

Review of services
Commitment to continue improving the estates
Relatively good access
Parking space near to buildings

A belief amongst the students that there is a growing awareness of disability issues in UK HE

Appendix 2.

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