

**Disabled Working Group: Access and
Outreach for Disabled Learners
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**Good Practice - Five Top Transitional
Challenges Facing Disabled Students in
Higher Education (HE)
3rd Meeting
Summary of the Discussion and Useful
Resources
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The transition from school or college to a university setting is a challenging time for all the students however, this may be more thought-provoking for the disabled students' community. It is worth noting that each student may experience those challenges very differently. Therefore, it is vital to understand the value of students' lived experiences to develop cohesiveness policies, good working practices, and systems in supporting disabled students with their academic journey.

The common challenges that are experienced by disabled students when transitioning into Higher Education and how we can create a safe supportive environment for disabled students are as follows:

1st Challenge: Socialisation

The sense of belonging experiences of disabled students transitioning to and in higher education is essential. The "Fitting in" concept at university may be difficult for all students in the transitional process, but disabled students might consider this an additional challenge.

To help them adapt at university we may offer the students a mentoring scheme before they start their course. For example, a mentor could be a current student who may provide support and share experiences. This opportunity could be given to autistic students in their 2nd year to be trained and share their expertise with those transitioning from further education to higher education. Another good example that indicates the support provided for certain groups of disabled students is the [University of Derby – transition events for disabled students' cases](#).

Moreover, it provides disabled students with tailored advice and an opportunity to receive regular updates from the university at key times in the lead-up to transition. This can provide them with a chance to be signposted to useful services and resources to help make the process run as smoothly as possible. The success of this completely depends on, having a deep understanding of the individual's needs, and not providing them with overburdened information which could contribute to the lack of students' engagement at the earliest opportunity of the process (orientation stage).

2nd Challenge: Lack of Academic Support

The transition from higher education may take time, needing to adapt to different styles of teaching and learning. Students are sometimes anxious about failing due to increased course demands. Some of the main concerns that were observed and experienced by the disabled students are time management, meeting deadlines for the coursework and managing different demands of their programme of study.

In addition to the above, students felt that the academic team did not familiarise themselves with their individual needs by not providing them with accessible information. This might extensively apply to those who did not disclose their medical conditions which could lead to failing their assessments or missing sessions due to feeling overwhelmed or stressed.

3rd Challenge: Assessments

Different assessment practices in Further Education and Higher Education were also challenging for most students not for all. Especially, since there are differing levels of academic support across Further Education and Higher Education. Comparatively, this was about the type of assessment, with many university courses focusing on the use of academic essays and examinations for assessment, contrasted to the more diverse repertory of assessment types in Further Education. Providing the students with an opportunity to choose from a menu of assessments can be an excellent way to help the students voice their needs and remove barriers.

Further, providing disabled students with options to have alternative methods of assessment will provide them with autonomy to take over their learning by providing them with options, maintaining wellbeing while empowering students using the holistic approach. [The University of Bristol vs Abrahart](#) case is an excellent example of the importance of listening and understanding individual needs by considering their lived experience and using different approaches when assessing disabled students. The case itself is a repercussion of negative energy and a clear rejection of the student's requests which led to the tragic ending.

4th Challenge: Balancing Responsibilities

Young disabled adult carers are considered vulnerable just as other underrepresented groups in higher education such as care leavers or paid or unpaid carers. This is mainly due to the impact of the caring experiences and responsibilities or simply having dependants who are reliant on them, those who live in areas of deprivation, or who experience social exclusion. Not having a clear understanding of how to have a clear balance of responsibilities could be another factor which contributes to creating a barrier in the process.

5th Challenge: Health and Wellbeing

5.1 Disclosure

Despite having legislation and policies that advocate for disabled students' rights and regulate higher education establishments' actions and processes, some of the students may not have a clear understanding of how the student support services are bounded by the confidentiality policy and [Equality 2010 Act](#). In addition, students may be concerned about the impact of such disclosure on their application to study in the university of their choice.

Nevertheless, there is a perception within the disabled students' community that there are risks of being disadvantaged, or that stigma may arise from disclosing. Disabled students have been found to protect their self-concept through their limited investment in sharing their health concerns or disability with university support services at the transitional stage.

This helps them to avoid being labelled, differentiating them from their counterpart - non-disabled students. Having said that, this will harm their chance of accessing the relevant support package.

By creating more awareness of the benefit of disclosing their medical conditions and reassuring them that it is a safe environment for disabled students using different approaches and tools to support them.

Arguably, a few questions come to the surface while addressing the topic of the disclosure; have the universities created comfortable settings to share the students' lived experiences, and medical needs and removed barriers which could hinder their learning? Have the universities minimised the potential of the ongoing request of the disclosure and medical evidence request to prove their health concerns whether physical or mental? For example, adapting the Universal Learning Design (ULD) across the board could be a positive approach to removing barriers for disabled students.

5.2 Administrative and Financial Burdens

Heavy administrative burden created by applying for reasonable adjustments, [Disabled Support Allowance \(DSA\)](#) and organising and chasing up the support they need. Furthermore, struggling with the financial burden of extra costs relating to the student's disability.

For example, the cost of accessible accommodation; medical prescriptions; the £200 charge for Disabled Students' Allowance equipment; and the cost of medical evidence required for needs assessments or mitigating circumstances forms, such as doctor's notes which can cost up to £30 every time they are requested.

5.3 Disability Terminology

Some of the students may find it hard to understand the differences in disability terminology between school and Higher Education (HE). If no proper explanation is provided to the student, it may create a wave of confusion. Because of this, the student may not have the opportunity to exercise their right to access reasonable adjustments due to not having an evident understanding of their entitlements.

Conclusion

To conclude this discussion, hearing the disabled students' voices and their lived experiences should be a central tenet of successfully understanding their needs, and as such they should be proactively consulted and empowered to advocate their views and needs. Another point to consider is to provide a guide to disabled students before transitioning from further education to higher to position them positively. [Go Higher West Yorkshire's Disabled Learners' Higher Education Transition Pack](#) is a good exemplar of excellent working practice in providing a positive approach to supporting students at the earliest stage of their academic journey in higher education. Finally, adapting the Universal Learning Design (ULD) could be a good way to remove barriers for disabled students.