



Exploring the Transitions of Neurodivergent Access Students to Level One Study: Narratives of Study Skills and Support

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RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

The higher education journey of any student in a distance learning university is a challenging one but this is more so for neurodivergent students. Neurodivergent students have been found to require both academic (Jackson et al. 2018; Ness 2013) and non-academic support (Gelbar et al. 2015) around them to enable to achieve and reach their academic goals. Access programs in The Open University have a widening participation agenda and enrol many Neurodivergent students with diagnoses of autism, ADHD, Dyslexia, Asperger's syndrome, and Dyspraxia. The study focused on the following three research questions: 1. What forms of support do neurodivergent students transitioning from Access to Level 1 study value? 2. What barriers to success may the current access curriculum create for neurodivergent students? 3. How can neurodivergent students transitioning from Access to level 1 be better supported? Students from the three access modules moving to any level 1 module were included in the sample. This paper focuses on the findings from the five remotely conducted in-depth interviews and an associated photo-elicitation task. Through a thematic analysis, a number of key themes were developed: Finding their own way, Support, quality of tutor support, wider systems of support, understanding assessment, facing new systems, the jump, language of learning and referencing issues. The paper explores these with examples and highlights how these might inform future practice to improve transitions for neurodivergent students. The paper also highlights the limitations institutional focused research with these groups places upon the scope of this kind of research.

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The Higher Education (HE) landscape has changed over the years with the key agenda of widening participation and diversification. Students with diverse needs, varied educational backgrounds, learning styles, identities are participating in HE. The diversity of students attracted to HE is leading to increased research focussing on transitions for diverse students focussed on both participation and retention of underrepresented student population in HE.

WHAT ARE TRANSITIONS IN EDUCATION?

Studies indicate that the term transition in education is often used to gloss over system difficulties in education (Downes, 2019). According to Downes (2019), the term transitions include four different meanings-

1. System mismatch where at least one system needs reform—the transition bridge is not the problem.
2. Transition represented as system mismatch between two purportedly well-functioning areas displaces the problem as being one of contrast rather than system quality.
3. Transition as a system blockage and fragmentation in communication between transition environments.
4. A transition strategic focus on individual change to the foregrounded child/individual through supports in moving from background environment A to B.

According to Scott et al. (2014), in higher education there are four transition processes for students- from a pure to an applied disciplinary context, from an international to a British national context, from full-time work to full-time work and part-time study, and from an historically under-represented background in higher education to an academic setting. In the Open University, on Access modules many students are coming back to education after a gap, often having had negative experiences of education, resulting in lower academic skills. They may also present a matrix of complex social and mental health issues. This Open University study fits in the third category of transition and calls for more commitment, time, effort, and energy from all students. Transitions are nonlinear and in higher education should be conceived as, ‘entangled, nonlinear, iterative, and recursive process, in which students travel in irregular ways through the various landscapes of their experience (university, family, work, social life) and bring those landscapes into relation with each other’ (Taylor et al., 2018). For neuro divergent students, this nonlinear recursive process may be problematic and difficult to navigate.

WHAT IS NEURODIVERSITY?

The term neurodiversity has been in existence for two decades (Singer, 1999). It is an umbrella term that covers a range of conditions including dyspraxia, dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, dyscalculia, autistic spectrum, and Tourette syndrome (Singer, 1999). Neurodiversity has often been used inappropriately to refer to a single individual rather than a group or community. Diversity refers to a group and not to a specific individual. In this paper, we adopt the position of Fletcher-Watson (2022), who argue that each individual should be described as “neurodivergent” and the specific groups of neurodivergent individuals make neurodiversity in HE settings, highlighting that: “neuro diversity captures the individual differences between us all (sources of neurodiversity) and recognise category boundaries (sources of neurodivergence) in one unified framework” (Fletcher-Watson, 2022).

Previous studies argue that neurodiversity simply means being wired differently rather than wrongly wired (Armstrong, 2012). Therefore, this paper does not seek to position any of these students as in deficit but explores how they might be better supported to succeed within a system that is often not fully developed to meet their needs. Whilst anti-discrimination legislation such as the DDA (1995), since superseded by The Equality Act (2010), has led to many students applying for Higher Education Institutions in the UK (Griffin and Pollak, 2009). These students often face challenges in success after entering HEIs. Historically, these challenges have been termed “Learning Difficulties”, however in recent years, this has been changed to the more acceptable and often used “learning differences” to identify neuro diversity amongst

students (BDA, 2006). This is also aligned with the positive focus on the term neurodiversity, which focuses upon identifying differences among the learners rather than deficits (Kaplan et al., 2001).

Prior research highlights the impact of neurodivergence upon student's experiences. Griffin and Pollak (2009) highlight the complexity neurodivergence adds to the experiences of students. From their study of 27 current and previous HE students, they found that neurodivergent students are likely to come with prior negative experiences of formal education, which can shape their engagement with academic and support services. In contrast, their participants also displayed high levels of ambition and determination to succeed. Their experiences demonstrated a heterogeneous range of unequal experiences of support from both academic and support staff. Whilst much progress had been made in HE since 2009, the recurrence of issues in more recent research suggests some of what they found is enduring (Kapp et al., 2013; Fletcher-Watson and Happé, 2019; Rosqvist et al., 2020). Griffin and Pollak (2009) also highlighted how HE has become increasingly aware and accommodating of neurodiversity but that there are gaps in communication between academic and support services.

The label of neurodiversity can be controversial, and some individuals' express unhappiness of being labelled in this way (Griffin and Pollak, 2009). However, this term is commonly used to act as an umbrella for a range of differences that impact learning. Griffin and Pollak (2009) found a lot of similarities in the experiences of individuals with differing specific needs that fall under this banner. Furthermore, a recent narrative synthesis of the literature on neurodiversity in higher education was carried out (Clouder et al., 2020). This study suggests that dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD, and ASD can be co-morbid, but more importantly may go undiagnosed in some cases, due to having a formal diagnosis for another condition. Therefore, this paper adopts the term as an umbrella to explore the varied but often shared experiences of groups of students with different diagnoses in higher education.

SUPPORTING NEURODIVERGENT HE STUDENTS

The intersection of neurodiversity with many other factors has been well researched. Previous studies have highlighted key issues such as mental health issues (White et al., 2017), transitions, coping methods, and the importance of individualised support to neurodivergent students (Anderson et al., 2020). The Higher Education journey of any student in a distance learning university is a challenging one but this is more so for neurodivergent students. Neurodivergent students have been found to require both academic (Ness, 2013; Jackson et al., 2018) and non-academic support (Gelbar et al., 2015) around them to enable to achieve and reach their academic goals. Academic difficulties can lead to extreme stress and anxiety (Shmulsky et al., 2013). This can further progress into non achievement and non-completion of the modules or study for the neurodivergent students.

Due to possible barriers in communication and social interaction, most studies exclude neurodivergent students from their research design processes. This may then lead to lack of relevance for the research findings in facilitating comprehensive support around neurodivergent students. Participatory research designs and involvement of neurodivergent children and young adults provides a rich data. Multi modal participatory methods enable inclusivity in research design process and facilitate participation by neurodivergent students. Studies like those by Costley et al. (2022) highlight that the real inclusion of students with neuro diversity that can be achieved by comprehensively focussing on participatory autism research (PAUR). This means involving students with neuro diversity in research as an attempt to find the real solutions rather than tokenistic approaches support them. Ward et al. (2022) study highlights the importance of participatory research designs in allowing students agency and giving them a feeling of ownership of the research process and outcomes. In the present study, the use of photo elicitation technique was an attempt to enable students to exercise their agency and ownership in interview technique supported by photo elicitation.

The literature on neurodivergent students tells us that anxiety, self-efficacy and negative experience of prior education can impact them significantly (Clouder et al., 2020). For students on Access modules and courses, these might be compounded particularly by-stepping into education after a long gap, lack of academic skills and learning strategies, lack of confidence, work, and family commitments.

Although neurodiversity per se as a topic has been researched and evaluated by many studies (Hadley, 2007; Lindstrom, 2007; Seeman, 2010; Clinton et al., 2011), the link between neurodiversity and awarding gaps is an area of study that requires some more focus and detail. Research, studies, and practitioners have over the years assumed that the understanding neurodiversity and placing some relevant interventions is sufficient for Neurodivergent students to succeed academically (Gray, 1998; Sansosti et al., 2004; Kokina et al., 2010). The recent focus has been to evaluate the relevance of these studies to support Neurodivergent students (White et al., 2016; Ashbaugh et al., 2017; Jansen et al., 2017). Some recent researches have focussed on developing an understanding of the linguistic needs of individuals with autistic spectrum conditions while other studies have evaluated the relevance and validity of studies evaluating mentoring, transitions, academic skill development and social skills development in students with neuro diversity (Anderson et al., 2020). Research has identified lack of exploration of the role played by academic support in helping Neurodivergent students achieve and reach their goals (Anderson et al., 2020).

HEIs have been using the term “Attainment” which puts the onus on the individuals in achieving the degrees. However, the use of the word “Awarding gap” put the responsibility on the HEIs. The awarding gap challenges the deficit model of neurodivergent students. It brings the responsibility back to the HEIs to support neurodivergent students in successful achievement of modules. It may be useful to explore what is missing in the students support from the perspective of Neuro divergent students so that this awarding gap can be successfully bridged. Form a Neuro divergent student’s perspective it may be effective to capture “What I would like support on while studying? In understanding the relationship between the students experiences and awarding gaps, this project is likely to offer insights for exploration of other awarding gaps in a way which is currently limited through existing institutional datasets.

Studies of neurodivergent students indicate that HEIs should work to draw a fine balance of support from various angles- study advisers, recognising diversity, developing essential skills, and developing essential skills that link specifically to modules (Connor, 2012). Instead of a wide single, “umbrella support” that fits all neuro divergent students, support should be individually tailored to specific neurodiverse needs of each student.

Social interactions also play an important part in the relative success of this group of students. Lambe et al. (2019) who conducted research with 25 A-level students with a clinical diagnosis of autism transitioning to the University of Bath. Primarily the student concerns were focused upon social interactions and fitting in rather than the academic transitions or issues related to support. In many ways this is expected when focusing on a traditional residential university experience but is unlike the transitions in the context of distance learning study. In the context of this study, these issues are less relevant due to the distance learning nature of the Open University study. This section will therefore focus on the issues that translate into our specific context raised in other recent studies.

Whilst our study sought to address neurodiversity as a wide umbrella, research often focuses more narrowly on one type of neurodivergence such as dyslexia or Autism. In terms of transitions for students with dyslexia, O’Byrne et al. (2019) focused on four undergraduates and a graduate student with dyslexia in Dublin, Ireland. In this study, several of their participants were close to school leaving age so many of their comparisons were with school experiences. Their participants raised concerns about the lack of one-to-one support they had experienced in relation to their expectations and prior educational experiences. One of the themes related directly to transition, focused upon learning techniques and how their participants had developed specific individual coping strategies. This research also highlighted the need for students to have courage to ask for support from support services and the barriers to accessing these services a lack of confidence creates. Rowan (2014) also examined the transition experiences of students with dyslexia, in New Zealand. This small-scale qualitative study focused on in-depth interviews with four students at school leaving age. They found that the students perceived they had to put longer hours in than other students to make the same progress. They also highlighted the challenges of accessing student support in terms of the lag between requesting services and gaining the required resources. Additionally, some of their

participants highlighted not knowing where to seek the support they needed. Drawing upon other research such as Mortimore et al. (2006) and Pollak (2005) cited in Rowan (2014), Rowan argues this is a common issue amongst students with dyslexia who can be reluctant to seek support.

Similarly, to the studies focused upon students with dyslexia, many of these themes recurred in studies of students with ASD. Anderson et al. (2020) also conducted a qualitative study with 11 former students in Australia and New Zealand to reflect on their experiences. When looking at their findings relating to student support, there was much more use of support related to academic areas as opposed to non-academic support. As with Rowan (2014), this study also found that students often did not engage with support service, or in some cases delayed their engagement with them because of a perceived lack of need or that they did not deserve them. Additionally, a lack of awareness of the supports available was raised as an issue.

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Within the Open University, the issue of preparedness of Higher Education has been addressed through creating 30 credit modules at level 0 developed and run by the Access team. The Access curriculum offers flexible, accessible, affordable, preparatory study to students who face many obstacles – dispositional, situational, and institutional – which prevent them from accessing Higher Education (HE). The Programme has worked closely externally, with the Office for Students (OfS) (and before that the Office For Fair Access – OFFA), and internally, with the [Access, Participation and Success \(APS\)](#) team, to ensure student needs are met in terms of a supportive preparatory curriculum.

The Access Programme was developed in 2012/13 to offer students a coherent cross-disciplinary experience, intended to support tentative adult learners to engage with a range of cognate disciplines they may never have considered studying. This commitment was supported by locating management initially in the Centre for Inclusion and Collaborative Partnerships (CICP) rather than a single Faculty, or by spreading responsibility across all the faculties.

ACCESS PROGRAMME

The Access Programme is a key element of Access, Open and Cross-curricular Innovation (AOCCI), sponsored by Pro-Vice-Chancellor Students (PVC-Students) which in turn is part of the PVC-Students office. The Access Programme has a clear mission, closely aligned to the University's commitment to be 'open to all'. The aims of Access are threefold:

- To enable students to get a taste of what studying at the Open University is like, and to give them an opportunity to see if it is for them.
- To prepare students for successful study at Level 1 (FHEQ Level 4) by developing academic skills and confidence as a learner.
- To attract students on low incomes, and with low prior entry qualifications to the Open University and to mitigate the financial risk to those students via the fee waiver and the subsidised fee.

Access modules are positioned at HE Level 0, explicitly acting as preparation for Level 1 study. The focus is on preparing students for HE delivered through distance learning, and as such the Programme is distinctive from Access to HE Diplomas (assessed at FHEQ Level 3 with routes into local, vocationally aligned HE) and Foundation Years (embedded in existing UG qualifications). The Access modules have a common pedagogic structure designed to remove barriers and build confidence.

The three modules in focus in this study are Level 0 entry level modules.

Arts and Languages Access module (Y031)

People, Work and Society Access module (Y032)

Science, Technology and Maths Access module (Y033)

Access programmes in The Open University have a widening participation agenda and enrol many neurodivergent students. These students are supported by three-way support of an Associate lecturer, Student support teams and the Personal Learning Advisers (PLAS). As these student's progress to level one study in the Open University, there is an increased expectation of independent learning and engaging with the communities of learning. Furthermore, many other students that have not yet been identified as needing additional support may also face study barriers due to undiagnosed neurodiversity. Therefore, understanding what works for this group could help ensure that the findings feed into the timely reviews of the new modules being shaped in Access like Y034 and Y035.

RESEARCH AIMS

The study aimed to understand the varied needs of neurodivergent students in enabling the transition from Access to level 1 modules. It sought to capture the narratives of individual needs and to better understand what can be improved further to enable the effective achievement and transition for neurodivergent students. The methodology selected clearly addressed giving agency to neurodivergent students.

Research Questions- The study focused on the following three research questions in line with the key themes of the project.

1. What forms of support do neurodivergent students transitioning from Access to Level 1 study value?
2. What barriers to success may the current Access curriculum create for neurodivergent students?
3. How can neurodivergent students transitioning from Access to level 1 be better supported?

METHODS

A methodology was selected that provided space for neurodivergent students to share their own experiences. Through a combination of semi-structured interview questions and a photo elicitation task space was given to explore both issues raised by the students and through the issue highlighted by the research team.

For the present study the target population was comprised of neurodivergent students (ADHD, Asperger's syndrome, dyslexia, dyspraxia, and dyscalculia) enrolled in 2019–2020 who had successfully moved from Access modules to Level 1 study. The three modules in focus in this study are Level 0 entry level modules-Arts and Languages Access module (Y031); People, Work and Society Access module (Y032) and Science, Technology and Maths Access module (Y033). Students from these modules moving to any level 1 module in all faculties were included in the sample. Initially the focus was to be upon student in one faculty (WELS), however the potential sample population was too small. Based on these criteria, Student and Data Analytics generated a sample of 18 students (5/10/21) and a further 14 students with a later generation (giving 32 possible participants) which could be recruited from for this phase of the study. These students were contacted initially by email with a project information sheet and then by follow up phone call. A second round of more personal emails were sent. In the responses we had several students opt out of being contacted further. This was often because of workload reasons, or in one case because they were pausing their studies.

PARTICIPANTS

Five students consented to participate in the full interviews. The pen portraits of the participants are presented in [Figure 1](#). Four students opted for a telephone interview and one (Student 4) to use Microsoft TEAMS. Gaining agreement for audio recording of the interviews proved more challenging. Only students 4 and 5 agreed to a full audio recording. Therefore, the interviews with students 1–3 were not recorded but extensive field notes were made by the researcher which were then typed up and analyzed alongside the transcripts for students 4 and 5.

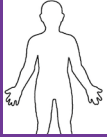




| | Access Module | Current module | Neurodiversity |
|---|---|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Student 1 | Y032 People, work and society Access module | Psychology | Dyslexia |
|  | | | |
| Student 2 | Y033 Science, technology, and maths Access module | Maths | Dyslexia |
|  | | | |
| Student 3 | Y032 People, work and society Access module | DE100 | Unspecified but mentioned MH issues |
|  | | | |
| Student 4 | Y032 People, work and society Access module | DE100 | Autism / undiagnosed dyslexia |
|  | | | |
| Student 5 | Y032 People, work and society Access module | DD103 (did DD102 last year) | Dyslexia |
|  | | | |

Figure 1 Pen portraits of the sample students in the study.

ETHICAL ISSUES

This project underwent all Open University ethical procedures in recruiting and contacting students, data collection, data storage and data protection. The ethical issues involving student participants in the Open University were addressed strictly and the researchers gained the Student Research Project Panel (SRPP) approval (SRP: 2021/1917) before the start of the data collection. Before receiving students' contact details from the Open University systems SRPP was in place. The project went through a rigorous ethical approval through the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) and was registered on the Open University's Information Asset Register (IAR: 3306147) for 2021/2022. Within the Open University, the project approval

from HREC provides a mechanism for assuring the ethical integrity of research carried out by OU academic staff an ethics review by HREC is required for research projects which involve the collection of data or biological samples from human participants. Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) for this project was done through DPIA screening questions that intend to identify if how processing of personal data will result in a high risk to the rights and freedoms of the data subjects. All participants were provided with a project information sheet covering details about the project, right to withdraw, confidentiality, risks involved, who have been invited to the participate in the study and why, how the findings of the study will be used. In the Informed consent sheet, given to all participants to seek their consent there was a clear indication of confidentiality, right to withdraw, how interview data will be stored and voluntary participation without any prejudice or negative consequence was indicated.

The timeline of receiving ethical approvals and various critical steps in the project are outlined below.

Timeline of the project.

June 2021–August 2021–Related studies and review of literature.

June 2021–July 2021–SRPP research proposal submitted. The project has received a **SRPP approval** in July 2021 and is now registered in **IAR** register as **3306147**.

August 2021–Panel decision on SRPP. The project has received a **SRPP approval** in July 2021(SRP: 2021/1917) and is registered in **IAR** register as **3306147**.

September 2021–Data analytics information about Neurodiverse Access students moving to WELS level one modules.

September 2021–Mid-Email contact with all seeking consent. Data released for 18 students with Neuro diversity

October 2021–Information sheets and consent forms through email.

November 2021–January 2022–Interviews with consenting students and recordings.

January 2022–March 2022–data analysis, transcribing qualitative data and report writing. Y032 feed forward into Y034 as new module.

April 2022–June 2022–Dissemination and article submission in peer reviewed journals and staff development events.

DATA COLLECTION

The researchers followed semi structured interview questions covering the two areas (of five questions each, **Appendix 1**) – Study skills and support. We also included a photo elicitation technique task- where students were asked to provide a picture of something that they found particularly useful in level one study that was not there in Access study. The interviews were conducted by phone, on Skype or TEAMS and audio recorded where consent was given and lasted 30–45 minutes. All data was transcribed and stored on to OneDrive in line with DPIA guidance and protection of data. All data will be stored for about 6 months after the study (GDPR, 2018).

Thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2022) was used to analyse the resultant data. For the participants who consented to audio recording, these transcripts were read through multiple times before line-by-line coding was conducted to identify initial exploratory codes. A similar process was undertaken with the detailed field notes from the unrecorded interviews. These codes were then compared and grouped to develop themes; that is the key issues raised from the body of data by the two researchers collaboratively.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The discussions and findings in this study have been integrated to provide a coherent narrative. Whilst the questions within the interview schedule were focused on specific issues of support and transition, across the body of interview data, there were several key recurring issues.

Whilst it is difficult to identify the extent to which these issues are the result of the participants neurodivergence, the narratives shared by the participants suggest that they felt that these issues were directly related to those issues, and this are worthy of further discussion.

FINDING THEIR OWN WAY

One of the key themes in the data was the extensive coping strategies these students had developed. This resonated with previous work by both Griffin and Pollak (2009) and O'Byrne et al. (2019) who also highlighted the way in which students spoke about their individual coping strategies. For the participants in this study, these strategies ranged from specific study strategies such as notetaking, essay writing and organisation, to more general coping strategies such as staying focused and on task. All participants demonstrated resilience here, which can be seen to both support their success but may also be a potential barrier to their engagement with some of the support on offer. Comparing two of the students, who were very different in many of their answers and their experiences, there was a clear overlap in the explanations of their approach to dealing with their neurodivergence:

I have already developed my own support. I've learnt through life experience about how to do things my way. I find support with these particular matters is a very generalised sort of support and it's not necessarily always going to be helpful to any one person, as I had to find my own way of dealing with these particular aspects, and so I had to develop my own skills and own ways of coping with everything, and it works for me. (Student 5)

This narrative was also represented clearly in the students chosen image, a physical representation of her coping strategies through a fidget cube (Figure 2), and a to-do list that helped provide structure.

Likewise, the image from Student 3 (Figure 3) was also a physical representation of coping. In her narrative, she talked about how the soft toys helped provide comfort. The image also included the markers and post-its which she used in her own study strategies.

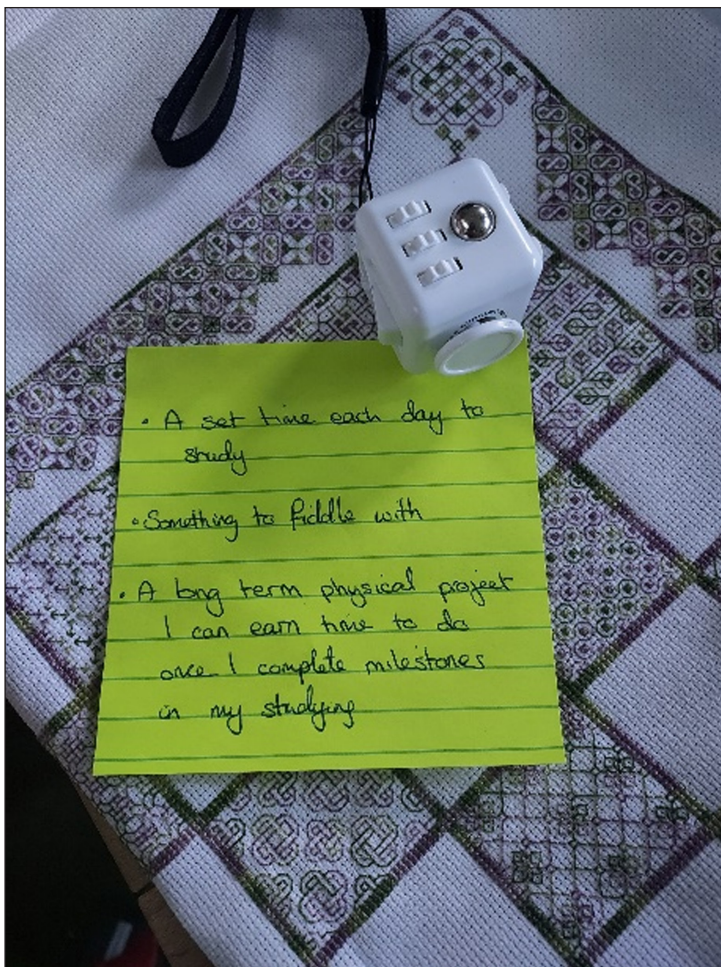


Figure 2 Photo elicitation by Student 5.



Figure 3 Photo elicitation by Student 3.

Whilst Student 4 was not quite as specific about his exact strategies, he commented that:

I think it's because I've got this far through life coping, that it's more about having a lot of coping strategies in place and not kind of going well I'm fine. I'm not sure, yeah, I think it's that, it's having, yeah, I think certainly some of us who are a lot older have got this far through life muddling through. (Student 4)

However, this could suggest that in some ways the offer of other strategies during the module were often dismissed rather than trialed. In fact, Student 4 expressly explained that she often skipped some of the activities on a module if she already had her own ways of doing something. This is in line with other studies on transitions indicate that the students are in a process of disassemblage, panic, chaos, and self-doubt when in transitions (Amundsen 2022). Transitions are not perceived as linear but entangled, nonlinear, iterative, and recursive process, in which students travel in irregular ways through the various landscapes of their experience (university, family, work, social life) and bring those landscapes into relation with each other' (Taylor et al. 2018) and find their own way.

SUPPORT

A second theme coming out of the data was the idea of support. In fact, student 4's image (Figure 4) they chose for the elicitation task was emblematic of how important support from people was in their experiences of transition.



Figure 4 Photo elicitation by Student 4.

The student described the image as representing their home of Norwich and the players being the students huddled together with the fans on the sidelines cheering them on. This is how they felt in terms of a slight disconnect between their experience and the support that the university provides. They felt that they had not been able to get the advice and 1-to-1 support needed. In some ways this was attributed to COVID, but it also demonstrated a gap in expectations between what they wanted and to what a distance learning institution offers. They talked a lot about face-to face support which, whilst provided on some modules is a small part of the way in which students are supported at The Open University.

QUALITY OF TUTOR SUPPORT

One of the overwhelming areas of commendation from all the participants was the quality of tutor support on their access modules and this theme came up across the interviews. They were variously described as “an angel in disguise” (student 5), “Brilliant” (student 4) and “Responsive” (Student 1) amongst other things. Unlike previous research by Griffin and Pollak (2009) which highlighted much more mixed experiences of support from academic staff. In part this might be due to the changing perceptions of teaching staff in HE and increased CPD for staff around these issues over the past decade. However, there was clearly a difference noted between the support at Access and level 1. As Student 5 stated: “My tutor that I have now is equally as good, Obviously I do not have to rely on him to the same degree”. This was a sentiment echoed by Student 3. This difference was often expected and in some ways Student 1 felt they were too “cushioned” by their Access tutor which made the jump to level 1 feel significant. In contrast, Student 2 felt that this difference was more problematic. Student 2 highlighted that having less conversations with their level 1 tutor had reduced their comfort and resulted in some miscommunication. This suggests that for different students, the expectations of the level of support provided seem to vary, as do their individual needs for support. In fact, this student felt that the “shock of level 1 hits badly on students with dyslexia”. Many researches highlight the systems lack communication and not keeping up with the changes can cause more chaos in the transitions. Downes (2019), explains this as a system blockage and fragmentation in communication between transition environments. and individual change to the foregrounded child/ individual through supports in moving from background environment A to B.

WIDER SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT

Whilst the participants talked extensively about tutor support, very few seemed to have engaged as extensively with the wider support offered by the university. Student 5 contextualised this by saying:

I haven't really had any need to contact the support team in any way, because, OK, the dyslexia is a big issue for me, but my tutors have been more than supportive towards that issue and understanding and provided the support that I need with addressing that and understanding that I find it difficult to do this.

This idea of only reaching out when needed was a common theme and only Student 1 mentioned regular contact with the Student Support Team (SST). In their narrative, Student 1 highlighted that whilst the SST were helpful, their response times were often long, perhaps in comparison to the efficiency the students expressed about their tutors. Support services were clearly very important to this student though and their photo elicitation images consisted of the software and physical items that help them cope with their disabilities (Figure 5).

When asked explicitly about Disability services, Student 4's response was quite extensive and merits further discussion:

I'm also one of those students who knows that Disabilities is there, but I haven't contacted them. Which I think happens actually in universities more than are supposed to, because we go, I have a problem, and then go yeah but I don't want to ask for any help. Also, I don't know what a reasonable adjustment looks like, so I don't know, there's still that sort of, but I'm coping so I don't want any help, or I feel bad asking for help or I feel I'm somehow cheating asking for help, which I know it isn't, I know it's a reasonable adjustment if something was put in place. But yeah I think if the OU could do anything with regard to support is if somebody put their

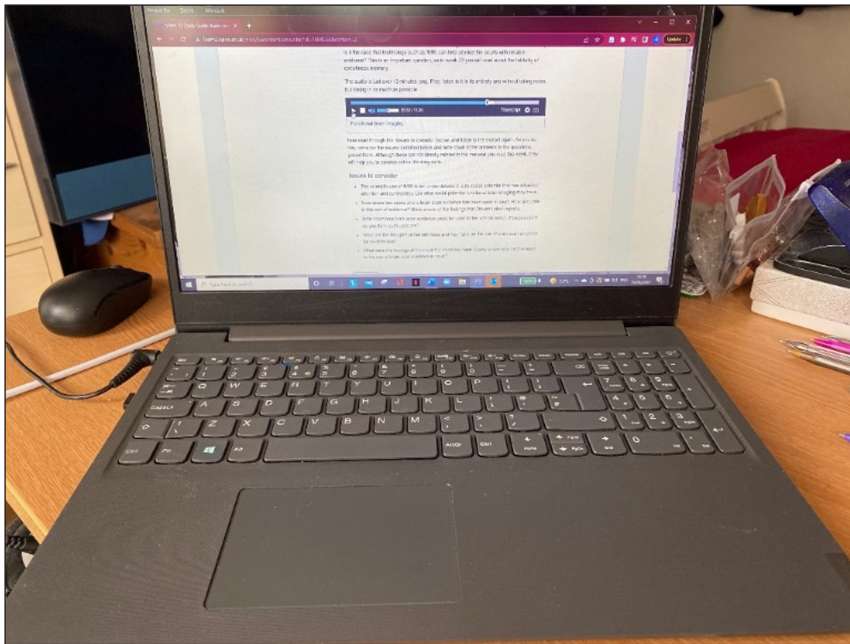


Figure 5 Photo elicitation by Student.

hand up and said I have a diagnosis or I think I might be something, if rather than waiting for that person to then make that next big step and I think, myself included, that is a massive leap to then go and tell somebody else, Disabilities could just drop us an email or something to make that contact rather than wait for us.

This also echoed Student 1's responses which focused on better understanding what support was on offer. Whilst the other students here did not expressly mention this, the focus they made upon already having strategies to cope, suggested they might not be aware of the support on offer that might help make their lives easier.

The issue of accessing support resonates with previous findings from previous research (Rowan, 2014; O'Byrne et.al., 2019; Anderson et al., 2020). This resonance with global scholarship both in relation to dyslexia and ASD suggest the issue is not just specific to The Open University but is a wider challenge related to the confidence and knowledge that these support services will improve their experiences. It also aligns with Clouder et al. (2020) who highlights the issues of stigma and disclosure, highlighting that the wider literature shows that students often only disclose when they can no longer cope. However, our findings suggest there may be another barrier for some students, not knowing what support is on offer. This issue was raised within our participants narratives and resonated with Anderson et al. (2020) study. As Student 4 highlighted, perhaps being presented with a menu of what the support services can offer and by them taking the first step, this might help. Of course, the resource to do this on an individual basis is likely to be prohibitive but it may be worth exploring one-to-many ways of doing this such as with module wide information sessions or even running them on a pan-university level. This also resonated with findings from a US based study which also highlighted the challenge of ASD students not knowing what support they needed (Accardo et al., 2018).

UNDERSTANDING THE SYSTEM

The university systems seem to create a challenge for the transitions of a number of these students. At Access, the focus on 1-to-1 support can sometimes negate students needing to navigate other services. However, this theme also raised gaps in understanding around assessment. Amundsen (2022) stated that many factors interplay in the process of transitions and making them complex and in a state of dis assemblage. ND students feel that "Dis assembled state" in the transition from Access to level modules especially around the guidance of assessments.

FACING NEW SYSTEMS

Although all HEIs tailor specific student support, the key systems in any University are inflexible and same for all. Studies indicate that this can be a critical issue for many neurodivergent students in the process of coping and getting to grips with the new systems. For several of the

participants, the issues of transitioning from Access to level 1 were less about the changes in their studies but being faced with new and different university systems. General processes such as applying for student finance were mentioned, in addition to more specific processes like applying for DSA, a process which student 2 described as “Awkward and long”. Time was a key theme for lots of the students. Student 1 who felt in particularly trying to contact the SST was hard, as was finding the contacts they needed for support and in the DSA process. They felt that having some proactive help here would have been useful. This resonated with the comments earlier from student 4 about wanting proactive support in this area.

UNDERSTANDING ASSESSMENT

All Assessment guides are online with the clear indication of the expectations of an assignment and the criteria for assessment ([The Open University, 2022](#)) and new students at Access level are given an overview of the assessment strategy in these guides along with the one-to-one tutorials with their tutor. The issues of understanding assessment seemed to recur across the data. For example, Student 1 mentioned not being sure what a TMA (tutor marked assessment) was. There was also significant misunderstanding by several of the students about the grading of assignments. Concerningly, several students still felt like they were doing poorly with marks in the 60s and 70s. To use the words of Student 4:

Fortunately, all of my marks have been, my grades, as it were, have been passing grades, but I would like to improve on them, because I sort of maintain A, I would describe it as like a C+ average, I’m in the mid-70s range for my scores. (Student 4)

When we consider this is the mark for a Pass 2 (upper second), or the equivalent of a “good” mark, something is clearly not being explained well. This also resonated with Student 4 who said:

I remember, I think it was on my first one I got something like 65 and I remember going to work and going I only got 65, and they went no that’s really good. And I’m going no it’s not, it’s 65, I’ve missed loads. And they’re going well no the pass mark’s 40, and going 40 because it’s less than half feels like it shouldn’t be a pass mark. And I think in most things you do in life you’re looking at 70 to pass or somewhere certainly above 50 and that understanding of what is good and with regards to that marking structure I found difficult to get round in my head. To be fair I’m still looking at getting 81 and going I’ve still missed some marks! I think I’m just born disappointed!

What these issues speak about is the taken for granted nature of some of the basics of Open University study that may not be explained clearly and are clearly resulting in misunderstanding even into level 1 modules. The information provided is not providing the guidance they need. To return to student 4:

I have seen marking schemes, but they all just seem to be a bit sort of, good understanding, adequate understanding, excellent understanding, and I’m just going OK.

THE LANGUAGE OF LEARNING

This theme of understanding of assessment also linked to a broader issue of language around learning. One of the comments made by Student 5 in relation to their feedback resonated with issues raised in other interviews, the technicality of language. Student 5 highlighted that sometimes it was

difficult for me to pick up on what tutors are saying sometimes because it’s full of technical language that is a bit alien.

This issue with language seemed to span both subject specific language but also language around assessment and university level learning. For example, Student 1 talked about how something she described as a “word base” would have helped her with her access study. She elaborated on this and described something akin to a glossary but that seemed to go beyond

meanings of words to also encompass “easy understandings and interpretations of ideas and facts” later in the interview this seemed to also expand to cover things like process words for assessment.

THE JUMP

The moving up in level from access to level 1 was, as might be expected experienced differently by the participants. Differences expressed included the amount of reading, the challenge of the academic content and the expectations in terms of writing and assessment. There was also felt to be a jump in terms of support as highlighted previously. This jump might be linked to the literature that emphasizes the perceived difference neurodivergent students experience that is part of their self-concept which makes the transition more difficult (Jackson, 2010; Vincent et al., 2017). Neurodivergent students may cloud their thinking with apprehension and past experiences that may make the negotiation of change, working towards achieving a university degree more challenging (Kwon et al., 2018).

The heterogenous group of students experienced this differently but for the one participant from STEM, their experience of this transition seemed much more acute than those moving into Social Science modules at level 1. There were two reasons articulated by this student. Firstly, the differing expectations for the presentation of work. The Access module was more focused on handwritten, or word-processed submissions compared to computer programs at level 1. Secondly, they felt there was a significantly higher expected level of skills, especially in their level 1 Maths module which they described as feeling like “2–3 levels up”. In contrast, they did not feel the jump in skills needed for their level 1 Physics module was as challenging.

However, this did not mean that there was not a significant difference felt by the other students though. For example, Student 3 felt that they weren’t fully prepared for the increased focus on essays in their level 1 module. In contrast, Student 2’s comments focused more on finding it harder to grasp concepts at level 1 mentioning they needed to revisit content again, which put them behind. Student 2 suggested that there should be more information about the expectations at level 1 to help prepare them for this transition. Not all students felt this jump though and Student 5 felt they were well prepared for level 1 study with Student 4 only commenting on the slightly more pressurized timescales and how much easier it was to get behind.

GETTING HUNG UP ON REFERENCING

Referencing was a recurrent theme through all the participants narratives. This is unsurprising given most students concerns about this but there was something worthy of exploration here in the ways these neurodivergent students discussed it. Whilst study skills like referencing, paraphrasing, word processing, and meaning making of words are key in all HE learning. Referencing as a part of the assessment can create a fear of being penalised for incorrect formatting. This in turn can lead to a low self-esteem due to a lower grade due to incorrect referencing (Jansen et al., 2017; Smith, 2017; Andersen et al., 2018).

For this study’s participants, it was highlighted that this concern from Access endured at level 1 (except student 2 who was now studying Maths, which may be a more discipline specific issue). Student 1 felt they needed more visual representations and explanations of why it was the way it was. For Students 4 and 5, they both reflected extensively on the issue of referencing. For these students, their confidence in this area was in tension with their emerging confidence in writing and it came down to the level of detail required. As student 5 expressed:

I find it a little bit tedious because you’ve got to get the exact commas got to be in the right place, the full stop has got to be in the right place and to my mind that is, as long as I’ve referenced the guy’s work, what does it matter if a comma is out of place, because I’ve referenced the guy, it’s there. (Student 5)

In contrast:

A lot of academic writing it’s you can make your argument even if your argument is slightly different to somebody else’s argument, as long as you can get it in your head and get it clear you’re OK, referencing is a right or wrong. And I think with me it’s a

bit like having to do anything where there's definitely a right answer, I feel far more pressured to get it absolutely right, which I'm not managing but I'm better than I was. (Student 4)

So, for both students, it was the worrying about being correct that was causing concern here. If we consider this in terms of feedback anxiety, Student 4 also reflected that:

I'm finding feedback really difficult because it just feels like I'm getting things wrong. And I take that to heart, and I know that's not what they meant, they're there to try and help and you can't correct things if somebody doesn't point out what's wrong.

Studies have indicated that for neurodivergent students the challenge of managing studying and along with the ability to achieve is a key to their self-concept. Neurodivergent students may worry that their lower grades is a clear indicator of the fact that they are unable to achieve, and it is a sign of failure. The anxiety and worry can therefore build into increased anxiousness more generally in their higher education studies (Jackson, 2010; Vincent et al., 2017). This is evident in the narratives above where the students describe that they worry and take the feedback given to mean something impossible to achieve and attain.

LIMITATIONS

- Scale of study – The small sample with in- depth narratives of students offer useful insights and sets the scene for future research with a larger sample of neurodivergent students.
- Challenge of participant uptake – The challenge of participants uptake was a key barrier that the researchers had to overcome. This was achieved requesting a wider sample parameter and offering consenting flexibility of time and medium of interview.
- Subject coverage – Only one STEM student consented to participate in the study. The four faculties were not adequately represented in the sample with only one student from STEM.
- Range of neurodiversity – The study tried to capture a range of neurodivergent students however the size of the sample limited this.

RECOMMENDATIONS

One of the key implications of this study is the need for a more joined up approach to support through a concentrated, cohesive approach to support. We propose offering joined up three-way support for students. This is likely to involve Associate Lecturers, Student support Teams and disability Services along with the module teams working together. This project recommends the following ideas to be embedded in Access and level 1 modules across all faculties. For neurodivergent students-

1. **To address the challenge of complex terminology** – All students should be provided with a simple word base/bank that gives students a clear definition and an example of what a word means. This might include both subject specific terminology and more general university terminology.
2. **To help students understand who can support them** – Clear indication and a written table or a chart describing the role and remit of support offered by the Students Support Teams (SST) and Disability support teams (DST) can do for students. Ideally this would include examples of specific types of support they can offer.
3. **To improve understanding of university systems** – The induction week of Access and level 1 modules should be giving students sufficient opportunities to understand the module related terminology, expectation, and guidance towards the support available.
4. **To help reduce referencing anxiety** – Guidance for plagiarism and paraphrasing and referencing should be encouraged from the start of Access modules itself. Many Neurodivergent students shared their anxiety around referencing, and this can be easily put at ease within the first few tutorials' sessions. Each tutorial should focus on some guidance about plagiarism, academic misconduct and referencing.

5. **To help improve staff understanding** – Guidance for staff about how to support neurodivergent students should be updated in Access and in Level 1 modules. Additionally, all associate lecturers and staff tutors and student support teams should be offered training on neurodiversity. Ideally this would be co-designed with the involvement of neurodivergent students.
6. **To help support staff** – Clear guidance and support along with Neurodivergent PALS in the SST should be developed to support ALs dealing with neuro divergent students.
7. **To ease transitional concerns** – In the moving on weeks on Access modules, the level 1 modules and the teams should be invited to give taster session to all neurodivergent students. Setting the future expectations in terms of phone contacts, tutorials, TMAs etc should be done in the moving on week.
8. **Tutor- student relationship** – Exploring the possibility of development of the same tutor relations in their transition from Access to level 1 modules. Ideally Access tutors should be present at least in the first tutorial of the ND students at level 1.
9. **Developing student self-concept** – Consider developing short induction sessions that build a positive self-concept before the start of the Access modules and at least two other critical points for neurodivergent students during their access module.

FUTURE RESEARCH

1. To repeat a similar study but with a larger number of participants within The Open University to capture a wider range of Neurodiversity in order to explore these themes in more detail.
2. Expanding this study beyond The Open University whilst retaining its focus on tutor support to explore the themes from this report with a larger sample of Neurodivergent students on access level study which also allows for comparison with other Access students in the HE sector.
3. Evaluating the effectiveness of the Self-concept tutorial sessions and their impact on neurodivergent student's understanding of differentiating assessment and systems from self-concept may be a useful focus of future research. This links into Recommendation 9 above in this report.
4. Exploring the technological enhancements that may enable more cohesive support from various units in the Open University for specific neuro divergent needs of the students.

CONCLUSIONS

The study concluded that there is no one fit for all neurodivergent students. Tailored support in SST, tutorials, and different points in the journey can support transitions. This study showed that even within a small sample, from their in-depth accounts of their experiences neurodivergent students have differing experiences of the transition from Access to level 1. Yet within this difference, there is also commonality. By getting to this level of study, many students have developed coping strategies and resilience. They also all seem to value high quality and effective tutor support, which they feel the Access modules provided them and see this as central to their success. However, there are parts of their experiences of transition they have found challenging. Some issues, such as referencing are common to many students. Others, more unique such as knowing where to go for additional support and what is on offer. Other key concerns for neurodivergent students are navigating the often-confusing world of systems, language and processes associated with Higher Education. As a result of this study, we have identified some keyways to address this such as developing a better understanding of these students' experiences, thinking how to ensure they have clearer information to support them and a more structured transition to their level 1 study.

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

The data are not publicly available as that could compromise the privacy of research participants and due to the sensitive nature of issues discussed.

The additional file for this article can be found as follows:

- **Appendix 1.** Interview Schedule. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/ijelt.38.s1>

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Both authors have contributed equally to the following tasks in this research; conception and design of the research work, data collection, data analysis and interpretation, drafting the article, critical revision of the article, final approval of the version to be published.

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