Transition Into HE: The Views and Experiences of Learners with Physical Needs

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ABSTRACT

This article draws on data gathered to explore experiences of students with a physical need in Higher Education (HE). Participants were recruited from several HE institutions using purposive sampling. Drawing upon Jindal-Snape's (2023) Multiple and Multi-dimensional Transitions theory the article acknowledges the complexity and diversity of individual experiences while recognising the role of dispositions and environmental factors in supporting successful transition. This scoping exercise delved into the personal experiences of 7 individuals who were either current or recent students at several HE institutions. Initial findings are that despite an increase in the numbers of students entering HE with a known disability, environmental and infra-structural barriers remain for these students both prior to transition and during their time at university. Findings from in-depth interviews led to 3 principal recommendations for reflection and change by HE institutions: a need for a systematic and comprehensive review of provision across University departments to ensure a joined-up approach with regards to accessibility needs; further considerations of both environmental and curricular barriers that create social and academic exclusion; and the engagement of those with lived experience to inform policy and support change in what can be considered a dynamic environment. Regular individual HE reviews and ongoing amendments to support learners with physical needs are recommended.

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INTRODUCTION

Increased participation in HE has resulted in a broad and diverse body of students entering university, with expectations around graduate level employment opportunities (Coertjens et al., 2017). This has resulted in a variety of demands and expectations of learners in their transition to university from further education (FE) and other 'atypical' points of entry. Briggs et al. (2012, p.3) described this phenomenon as a 'complex liaison' between learners enrolling on appropriate academic programmes, adapting to 'university life' and succeeding as learners. This can be a time of mixed and conflicting emotions, including feelings of anticipation, trepidation, and excitement.

Exploring transition experiences of learners into HE is a growing area of international study (e.g., Bowles et al., 2014; Cuevas, 2019; Rawlings Smith et al., 2022; Santelices et al., 2020; Smyth et al., 2012). Drawing upon a conceptual framework proposed by Meehan et al. (2018, p.1376) of 'being, belonging and becoming', it can be argued that what matters to students while at university includes the academic staff they work with, the nature of their academic studies and developing a feeling of belonging. Central to this is confidence in being able to manage a personal transition to university. However, navigating the move to university with a physical need may result in unexpected issues that higher education institutions (HEIs) may not fully consider, nor be aware of as part of their induction processes or in promoting the *student experience*. While some research has focused on the transition from post-secondary education of learners with disabilities in general (e.g., Riddell et al., 2014) or specific needs, such as autism spectrum disorders (e.g., Dymond et al., 2017), there is a dearth of recent literature exploring the transition experiences of learners with physical needs into HE, particularly in light of an extensive report undertaken by Advance HE (2009).

This article presents findings from an initial scoping exercise designed to explore current practices in the transition to HE from the perspectives of learners with physical needs. The definition of physical needs comes under the remit of 'disability' defined under the Equality Act (2010) 'if you have a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long term' negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities' (Gov.UK, 2010). The purpose of the research was to understand how HEIs accommodate the needs of learners with a physical disability using a retrospective qualitative approach; identify challenges; and explore what HEIs can do to improve the transition experiences of such learners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

STUDENTS WITH A PHYSICAL DISABILITY IN HE: THE CURRENT SITUATION

The number of UK students in HE with a declared disability has increased by 46% (HESA, 2022a) over the last five years making up almost 20% of home students (HESA, 2022b). This is a pattern that is being replicated internationally as countries develop more inclusive approaches to policy and legislation, thus providing greater opportunities for individuals with physical needs to access HE (Mays et al., 2020; Pitman et al., 2021). Inclusive education is recognised as a basic human right and a means of ensuring a more fair and equitable society (Ainscow, 2020; European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2023). Current thinking around inclusive education, in general, has moved away from a deficit model and towards providing high quality teaching. This places value on providing rich contexts for learning to take place, ensuring all learners can participate (Advance HE, 2018; Conn et al., 2020; Messiou et al., 2016). Within this paradigm is a need for continual reflection and identification of what can be done within the typical learning context to ensure equity and inclusion of all learners (Florian, 2019). With an increasingly diverse student population, HEIs have an obligation to ensure that anyone who chooses to study at their institution is neither directly, nor indirectly disadvantaged (Burke et al., 2016).

Despite a continued increase in the numbers of disabled students accessing HE in the UK, implementing the principles of equitable, accessible, and inclusive education within an HE environment is both challenging (Moriña, 2017) and a low priority on the HE agenda (Disabled Students UK, 2022). In 2009 Advance HE published a report entitled 'to promote inclusive practice in building design and refurbishment in HE, through outlining a process that will

ensure equality is taken into consideration at key stages of development'. While this report demonstrated initial steps in providing guidance when considering reasonable adjustments to facilities and estates, no further action has been taken since to address environmental barriers to accessibility. Ensuring inclusivity within this paradigm can be problematic, as Mays et al. (2020, p.23) assert, 'often inclusion has occurred where professors [university lecturers] act with invisibility towards a person's differences' with an indication that HE, in encouraging higher order thinking might lead towards a more inclusive and accessible environment. This supposition, it could be argued, has a propensity to lean towards complacency, reducing the desire for honest reflection and genuine audit of learners' experiences, resulting in inequitable practices. It does not allow for a comprehensive and consistent approach in attempting to both understand and overcome challenges that learners with different physical needs face.

HE POLICY AND REALITY IN PRACTICE

Research exploring the experiences of learners with physical needs in HE is limited, however there is consensus in barriers faced by disabled students in general and the disconnection between HE policy and personal experience (e.g., Hadjikakou et al., 2010; Hector, 2020; Langørgen et al., 2018). Berggren et al. (2016) compared experiences of disabled students in three countries from five institutions. Findings indicated that student relationships with lecturers predicated academic success (i.e., that individual lecturers were instrumental in making decisions about adjustments) and that, despite policy, there was an onus on students to compensate for their disability in overcoming challenges. Indeed, many chose not to disclose a physical need to protect their identity as 'ordinary students' (Breggren et al., 2016, p.352). Langørgen et al. (2018) found that students had to rely upon their own resources to ensure academic success without drawing attention to their disability. Biewer et al. (2015) stated that success, both in terms of transition and academic achievement was due to additional, extraordinary familial support, and not via an HEI. This is also true of disabled academics, as Brown et al. (2018) suggest, they need to increase work production to be on a par with able-bodied peers. It appears that despite a policy shift from a segregated to a more inclusive approach to education as identified by Hardy et al. (2015), there is a pervasive incongruity between HE policy and personal experience, particularly around disability impacting on transition. While there is a need for comprehensive, institutional change to ensure equity of experience for all learners, it appears that currently adjustments are implemented at an individual, micro- rather than a macro-level.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In exploring the transition experiences of learners with physical needs, viewing transition solely through an individualistic lens does not allow for the complexity of the transition process to be fully understood. All learners experience multiple transitions as they move through the education system and entering HE can prove challenging, particularly for learners with 'alternative needs' (Cage et al., 2021, p. 1081). Jindal-Snape (2023) argues that transition is a complex and dynamic process, and that any change or movement has ramifications across a range of areas which, in turn, can affect more than one person. These transitions are neither 'linear nor sequential' and are experienced daily across multiple domains (Jindal-Snape, 2023, p. 536). Conceptualising this within the Multiple and Multi-dimensional theory, Jindal-Snape (ibid, p. 540) proposes that individuals experience transitions across a range of domains (e.g. social, psychological, educational) both dynamic and evolving, which interact and impact on significant others. This is presented as 12 pillars, which interact and are interdependent of each other.

For a better understanding of transition experiences of US learners with physical needs, Mays et al. (2020) postulated for a greater validity to the transition experiences of individuals focusing on their narrative and analysis of what is said rather than researcher interpretation of their experience. Findings by Mays et al. (2020), identified a negative discourse (around the transition experiences for disabled learners) while arguing that in interacting with students they no longer are passive recipients within the institution. Mays et al.'s (2020) conclusions identified a need to learn about others (atypical students) to develop and model best practice. However, to apply Jindal-Snape's (2023) twelve pillars of successful multiple and multi-dimensional transitions to conceptualise the transition of learners with physical needs to HE, one must recognise that transitions are personal, ongoing, and dynamic. As such there is a need to present a more

holistic overview in not only identifying the challenges but exploring ways to address and overcome these. This will enable emerging discourse, possibly requiring disclosure, about what constitutes a successful transition for learners with physical needs into HE, to bring about meaningful and relevant insights to transform and improve experiences.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH POSITIONALITY AND REFLEXIVITY

A concern amongst the research team was positionality in terms of reporting and analysing the responses of learners with physical needs without personal lived experience. The representation of disability and research around disability by individuals without disabilities is a central concern of the disability rights movement. Kitchin (2000) and Peterson (2011) advocate the inclusion of disabled people as advisors and collaborators in research, as well as participants. Two advisors were consulted (disabled students at the authors' HEI) throughout the research process and participants were encouraged to voice further pertinent issues potentially unexplored during the interviews, confirm transcripts, and invited to comment on this article prior to submission for publication.

PARTICIPANTS

Due to the retrospective, scoping nature of this project, purposive sampling was used to recruit willing volunteers who were either current or former HE students (within the past 5 years) via the researchers' HEI and through professional and personal networks. Participant recruitment proved challenging for researchers, corresponding with current trends around disclosure as identified in the literature. There appears to be a reluctance to disclose or declare disabled status because of prior negative experiences (Berggren et al., 2016; Kendall, 2016; Liasidou, 2014) or some students might not consider themselves to have a physical need (Jacklin, 2011).

All participants self-identified as having a physical disability, but there was variety in the nature of the participants' disabilities. Table 1 summarises contextual information about participants. Approval for the research proposal was granted by the associated University Research Ethics Committee prior to data collection. Participants were given information letters detailing the purpose of the project, potential involvement and key ethical issues relating to their right to withdraw, data confidentiality and anonymity. Written consent was sought prior to data collection, and a verbal brief was provided prior to each interview to ensure participants had ample opportunity to ask questions and/or withdraw due to the potential sensitivity of the research topic. Data were stored on a secure cloud storage system accessible only to the researchers and retained in accordance with the HEI's guidelines (BERA, 2018).

PARTICIPANT (PSEUDONYM)	SEX	AGE	DISABILITY	AREA OF STUDY	HIGHEST LEVEL OF STUDY
Katie	Female	42	Spinal cord Injury (walker)	Education	Undertaking doctoral study
Isobel	Female	28	Cerebral palsy	Humanities	Completed bachelor's degree
Nicola	Female	20	Spinal cord Injury (tetraplegic)	Applied Sciences	Completed bachelor's degree
Paula	Female	20	Undisclosed (wheelchair user)	Humanities	Completed bachelor's degree
Anna	Female	23	Osteogenesis Imperfecta (Brittle bones)	Natural science	Completed bachelor's degree
Rachel	Female	23	Osteogenesis Imperfecta (Brittle bones)	Humanities	Completed bachelor's degree
Geraint	Male	49	Spinal cord injury (paraplegic)	Social Science	Completed doctoral study

Table 1 Summary of Participants.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The study adopted a qualitative approach, with emphasis on making sense and interpreting the social world through the perspective of participants, and to better understand the phenomena under investigation (Denzin et al., 2005). This approach enabled the research team to document and establish an in-depth exploration of students' lived experiences of HE, allowing rich and extensive data to be generated relating to perceived enablers and barriers to HE engagement and success.

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data to allow a degree of both flexibility and focus on the interviewee's viewpoint (Walliman, 2011). It is commonly viewed as a beneficial method to explore the lives and opinions of individual people to generate understanding about perceptions of experiences (Silverman, 2007). An interview guide was developed which included a general focus of inquiry and several areas to explore during each interview. Flexibility associated with semi-structured interviews allowed for further probing, elaboration, and clarification of participant responses. This ensured that participants were able and express what was important to them, directing the conversation, rather than being restricted to answering a set of closed and structured questions.

CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS

The interview guide consisted of eight questions with prompts to allow follow-up questions if required. Introductory questions related to demographic information, followed by questions which allowed participants to share their decision to attend university; support available during the transition; and their actual lived experience of studying within a HEI. All interviews (n = 7) were conducted on Microsoft Teams. Online interviewing was decided as the most effective means to collect data. For example, it allowed flexibility in terms of scheduling and organising interviews; reduced/eliminated traveling time and costs and eased the recruitment process and data collection of geographically dispersed participants (James et al., 2009). Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed *verbatim*.

DATA ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION

A thematic analysis approach was used to analyse the qualitative interviews. Thematic analysis is defined as a research method used for analysing large-scale qualitative findings, by examining the data to identify, analyse and record repeated patterns or themes within the data (Braun et al., 2006). The research team closely followed Braun et al.'s (2006, p. 87), six phase guide to conducting thematic analysis. This process is described as:

1. Familiarizing yourself with your data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

The research team worked independently to create codes and themes (stage 1–3) and then reviewed these both as a team and independently to ensure consistency in how the themes were interpreted and developed, linked to both intra and inter-rater reliability. One key advantage of thematic analysis is that it provides a systematic way of organising large-scale data into themes or categories (Braun et al., 2012), including a range of perspectives, experiences and interpretations generated by participants that is so often associated with qualitative interviewing. This approach allowed an exploration of both commonalities and nuanced experiences amongst the learners with a physical need.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section of the article provides data that explores the individualised experiences of HE learners with physical needs. The broad themes highlighted below indicate the transition of the participants (n = 7) through the exploration of initial factors contributing to decisions regarding where to attend HE, as well as the transition into, and actual experiences of HE.

The data provides a rich insight into their transition experiences into HE, giving an insight into how some barriers could have been mitigated. These are used to form practical recommendations for future potential learners with physical needs. The themes to be addressed include:

- Importance of Pre-transitional Factors
- Physical Accessibility of the University
- Reasonable Adjustments at Programme Level
- Support from Student Services
- Suggested Future Practical Recommendations

IMPORTANCE OF PRE-TRANSITIONAL FACTORS

Whilst all seven participants attended HE, different factors influenced where they chose to study. Most participants (4/7) stated that, there was a difficult balance between choosing their preferred course versus the physical accessibility of the HEI itself, which limited choices available to learners with a physical need from the outset. As Rachel explained:

> *"It was an experience in itself just trying to find the uni that would be accessible and the one with the course that you want…."*

Before entering HE, some experienced barriers that resulted in narrowing the choice of academic course. Whilst this did not deter participants from accessing HE, it was clear that their choice of institutions was limited due to a perceived lack of preparedness by HEIs to accommodate for their physical needs. In these circumstances, participants compromised their choice of academic course. For example, Geraint claimed he was rejected from some courses based on responses by HEIs that they could not accommodate his physical needs:

> *"The University of X turned me down and openly said they didn't have disabled access, and another University didn't want to know me because I was in a wheelchair."*

Isobel commented on the physical accessibility of the campus, in particular accommodation. Having attended some Open Days, she did not feel her needs could be met with the accommodation provided, therefore, decided to remain at home for her studies. The decision to remain at home created a different conundrum, between the choice of academic course and the proximity of the University. Whilst the physical accessibility of the University accommodation was a perceived barrier for Isobel, due to her disability she felt more dependent on her family support network than her peers, which created a personal barrier. Isobel described herself as *"emotionally immature, younger than her years…… a side effect of the disability."* This evidences consequent effects of not being able to access student accommodation and additional factors relating to the need to maintain, or depend upon, family support networks, as highlighted by Biewer et al. (2015), in choosing where to study.

Whilst some participants perceived the physical accessibility of HEIs to be a barrier when deciding where to study, one participant praised the perceived accessibility and support provided at different HEIs. Nicola stated she was sceptical about being able to attend University due to experiences of poor accessibility while at secondary school. This initially dissuaded Nicola from considering HE as a next step, however she soon discovered that the support and physical accommodations at HE surpassed expectations (Burke et al., 2016).

EXPERIENCES OF PHYSICAL ACCESSIBILITY

Whilst many of the participants above expressed initial perceived barriers relating to physical accessibility, limiting their choice of institution and academic course, all disclosed lived experiences whereby they faced restrictions within their environment and/or the facilities. Magnus (2009) asserts that there is a lack of tradition in HE for accommodating disabled students and a need to effect change through central policy (as identified by Hardy et al., 2015; Hector, 2020). Within this study, participants shared experiences of poor physical accessibility beyond the learning environments. For example, two participants disclosed experiences of student accommodation that was classed as wheelchair accessible; however, doorframes were too narrow and there was no room to manoeuvre, thus an impractical living space. It

was considered that often the online perception presented on university websites of suitable accommodation were inaccurate and exaggerated lived realities:

> *"… like the websites maybe show pictures [of the accommodation] that have diversity and present themselves as accessible, but when you actually go it's not the best" (Anna)*

Other participants focused more on the social implications that the adapted accommodations spaces brought with them. Nicola spoke positively about accommodation at her university however, due a lack of suitable private housing, Nicola was permitted to remain beyond first year due to her physical needs. Whilst reasonable adjustments were made to the HEI accommodation policy, there was no flexibility in allowing her peers to share accommodation with her (as in her first year) resulting in the expectation that Nicola would socialise with new Year 1 students during her second year:

> *"I've felt annoyed at the Uni because they are not letting anyone above first year live in Halls … so I can stay but everyone else has to go. There was one girl who I loved and I wanted her to stay with me and at least I would have one friend, but they said no… so I am literally going to be on my own with 1st years" (Nicola)*

These experiences reveal some of the restrictions with accommodation spaces, particularly for wheelchair users, and highlights the social implications and potential isolation learners with a physical disability can experience even when adjustments are provided.

Some participants (3/7) referred to challenges posed by physical inaccessibility of learning spaces, especially lecture theatres which were considered inflexible learning environments that created a sense of nervousness, particularly during the first week of lectures. For any student, this can be anxiety-provoking:

> *"I remember when I wheeled my chair for my first lecture, I was very unsure where to put myself … I went near the door to get out easily but then I found myself sat at the end and I didn't have a table to write at, so that didn't work" (Paula)*

This highlights how unprepared Paula was in knowing how to utilise the space effectively. Similarly, Nicola echoed the challenges of lecture theatre design as the entrance was to the rear of the theatre with stairs leading down to the front. This significantly restricted her access as she could only sit at the very back of the lecture theatre which meant she often felt excluded when teaching staff insisted other students sit towards the front of the lecture theatre. Sitting at the back of the lecture theatre meant that Nicola did not always hear what was being said, thus missing content despite having attended sessions. These examples highlight the inflexibility of lecture theatres as learning spaces, but also suggests that minor modifications to the space *i.e.*, use of assistive technology and/or the pedagogical approach of academic staff could reduce perceptions of social and/or learning exclusion.

Whilst the above examples provide insight into the restrictions of both disabled-specific living and general learning spaces, Katie also discussed how access to and use of specialist spaces for her course was not suitable for wheelchair users:

> *"I … wanted to be independent, but even if I was going to get public transport [there], there's no way I could have pushed myself up the driveway for a start. And then I was thinking, right, well, the lectures they're proposing are going to be on 3G. How am I going to push myself on 3G? Wheelchairs and 3G pitches do not go!"*

Fortunately for Katie, the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent restrictions meant that sessions using specialist spaces were cancelled. This was a relief for Katie who was internalising feelings of anxiousness about how to attend these sessions, let alone participate. Online learning due to Covid-19 meant that concerns about accessing learning spaces were quashed, nonetheless her interview revealed a lack of consideration of how specialist spaces could restrict accessibility for learners with physical needs (Disabled Students UK, 2022; Moriña, 2017). Other examples were given by participants where campus facilities were unsuitable. Geraint reflected on when using the lift to access teaching spaces he would often *"get stuck"*. This demonstrates that not only are the design of university buildings inflexible but also facilities intended to enhance

access are inadequate in meeting the access needs of learners with physical needs; particularly for, but not exclusively, wheelchair users.

REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS AT PROGRAMME LEVEL

Healey et al. (2006) argued that there is a clear relationship between impairment, obstacles to learning, and appropriate adjustments. During interviews, participants reflected on both the knowledge of and level of support that was provided on their specific programme courses. Two key reasonable adjustments were referenced during interviews which related to flexibility with attendance at lectures. Lecturers appeared to grant authorised absences during periods of time when participants experienced "flare ups" with their physical disabilities and the use of recording lectures using technology to ensure that participants could still access the verbal content of sessions which was appreciated by participants. Participant experiences appeared dependent on the type of programme/specific module that they were enrolled on; that is, some participants studied more theoretical-based degrees therefore seemed to have more positive experiences of reasonable adjustments to support their physical needs than participants enrolled on more practical-based courses.

In particular, 3/7 participants provided specific examples of exclusion from opportunities available to other students. Rachel explained that her course offered optional modules, but she was somewhat deterred from these due to the involvement of organised trips providing students with an enriched student experience:

> "I would have liked to have done the archaeology ones [modules] but I knew I couldn't."

Rachel's reluctance to engage with certain modules was based on previous experiences such as when students were provided with an opportunity to visit a museum. Rather than considering ways in which Rachel could participate, she was instructed by her lecturer to explore online museum catalogues instead. This calls into question how students, such as Rachel, are provided with equal opportunities at HEIs in making reasonable adjustments for their physical needs. It was clear, in this instance, that the onus was on Rachel to approach her lecturer with concerns about attending the trip, rather than the lecturer pro-actively considering the potential barriers this could pose and discussing with Rachel.

Anna echoed similar experiences stating she felt it was her responsibility to approach the programme team to discuss accessibility issues and considerations around reasonable adjustments. In these circumstances students were approaching individual lecturers on modules rather than having a designated member of the programme team, for example a personal tutor, to discuss any potential issues in a holistic manner:

> "It's like you have to talk to each person directly to find out about any accessibility options or alterations … It's just kind of awkward." (Anna)

For Nicola, the practical components of her degree course meant often she felt excluded in class and prevented from fully participating in some sessions. Nicola identifies one exercise session where she literally "sat watching" whilst other students undertook the task, with no effort by the lecturer to engage Nicola in the session. Unsurprisingly, this impacted on Nicola's motivation levels, and ability to learn as she was unable to experience how specific exercises should be completed:

> "But they didn't make any effort to get me involved. I was sat there for an hour and a half just waiting for it to be over … because I can't actually do any of this stuff and I'm not really learning anything."

Additionally, Nicola became aware of practical components to an examination and approached her lecturer to explore alternative ways in which she could demonstrate her knowledge. Nicola stated:

> "So, the lecturer just said well I don't know. There's a nutrition module you could switch to and that was it."

In this instance, Nicola pro-actively escalated the issue to senior management. After discussion, some straightforward reasonable adjustments were implemented, e.g. providing a

weekly schedule of sessions so that pre-planning could be considered, investment in assistive equipment to support the practical components, allowing Nicola to remain on her chosen module. These examples strongly suggest that students need to self-advocate rather than, Holloway (2001) suggests, University systems implementing reasonable adjustments following initial disclosure, thus enabling a typical student experience.

Nicola's narrative demonstrates how her course experience led her to feeling excluded and isolated, but, as with Anna and Rachel, she had to approach members of the programme team to seek support. Nicola argued that such adjustments need to be considered as part of the course design rather a reaction because of disabled students voicing their experiences, interfering with learning, and creating a sense of exclusion. This supports Hopkins' (2011) findings that disabled students must become assertive in addressing the challenges faced. The lack of a proactive approach at an HE level illustrates additional challenges faced by students in addition to responsibilities placed upon them to ensure their needs are met (Disabled Students UK, 2022). Lecturer attitudes towards adjustments may reflect a belief that such adjustments are an individual matter (a medicalised approach) rather than a sign that the wider system (social model) requires change (Holloway, 2001; Magnus, 2009). This would entail a change in HEI culture with greater understanding and knowledge of reasonable adjustments for individual students.

SUPPORT FROM CENTRAL STUDENT SERVICES

Centralised support mechanisms such as Student Services were referred to during interviews with participants. Student Services were praised by most students (4/7) for the initial support provided with dedicated time given to discuss individual needs and suggestions around a range of reasonable adjustments later documented on Individual Support Plans (ISPs) to ensure participants could engage in the theoretical components of their courses e.g., use of a note taker or assistive technology:

> "They [student services] were good, I had a support plan, and it was very structured … I remember having a meeting which lasted an hour or two while we went through and outlined all the things that could help. For example, if I'm in pain someone could go in and note take or there was some software that could read my notes out for me and a leaning desk" (Paula).

Whilst HEIs are more attuned with reaching and supporting students who disclose a disability, Tinklin et al. (1999) argue that the support is channelled towards equipping individuals to overcome obstacles that ideally should not exist. Despite examples of support during their first weeks at university, some participants expressed challenges in the communication between central student services and lecturers. While it was unclear why there was a communication issue, both Nicola and Anna highlighted the barriers that this created:

> "They [lecturers] just didn't know … I don't know if it's data protection or what, but they [disability support] didn't necessarily spread around that I had disabilities and would need extra support" (Anna).

Anna's statement questions why lecturers were not aware of her needs, and maybe explains the lack of reasonable adjustments made at programme level. It *perhaps* offers an explanation as to why the onus appears to be on the student to question whether reasonable adjustments can be made. This is further highlighted by Nicola who recalls that during her first week:

> "They're [ISPs] are supposed to get sent to lecturers before the first lecture and they're just not being sent. I'm showing up to lectures and they [lecturers] have no idea until I turn up and they're just like what do I do because they haven't got a plan."

Interviews with participants illustrated that while central Student Services provided early support and officially documented useful strategies to support the physical needs of learners, ineffective communication with relevant programme teams resulted in a lack of knowledge and awareness of students' circumstances. Inadequate information and insufficient coordination of information are other known hurdles for students to overcome (Brandt, 2011). Initial negative experiences cause disruption and inconvenience for individual students with physical needs

and re-emphasises the need for lecturers to prepare appropriately for learners to avoid longer-term disruption to studies and exclusion.

FUTURE PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Open Days for Disabled Students

Several participants mentioned the (would be) benefits of having an open day specifically organised for disabled students. Katie in particular spoke about how this would instil a sense of confidence amongst disabled students and ease concerns about encountering potential barriers and issues related to their physical needs. The ability to navigate their surroundings was something Katie viewed as being crucial: enabling students to familiarise themselves with physical spaces at the HEI; to identify accessibility facilities and amenities; and to highlight potential issues they might have *before* starting at the HEI. Katie did not experience this as part of an open day visit to her university. The proactive nature of this proposed approach identifies an additional layer of considerations that prospective students with physical needs face and must consider as an integral component of their transition. Studies have concluded that disabled students face more barriers than their non-disabled peers in their progression into university. Wray (2013) found that university campus accessibility and support for disabled students were influential factors in how disabled students decided where to study. Additionally, whereas disabled learners were concerned with issues relating to support, their non-disabled peers were concerned with aspects such as academic performance, for example. This could be mitigated/alleviated according to several participants by having designated open days for disabled students. As Katie explained:

> "I think it'd be good where any students with disabilities can have an open day on their own and meet other students with disabilities. They can … put themselves on campus with members of staff from the university and identify any accessibility issues straight away before the start of the course … The first few weeks on campus is absolutely bonkers … it can be quite daunting. So, it just gives them the opportunity to get a sense of your surroundings".

Geraint mentioned that open days for disabled students could encourage more disabled students to attend open days, thus increasing their visibility. Geraint felt this had potential to 'educate' universities on disability and the diversity of students with physical needs.

THE LIVED EXPERIENCE IN CREATING ACCESSIBLE AND INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS

Participants highlighted the importance of having representation and a voice in HE, especially in areas that directly affected them, *i.e.*, having disabled members of staff at senior levels and/or human resources. There was consensus around a lack of understanding by HEIs of the lived experiences and challenges faced by disabled students. Participants felt their experiences could be improved with greater understanding by HEIs of their situations. Compassion, empathy, and sympathy were key traits expressed by participants as essential when making effective decisions with regards to disabled students. In their study exploring the ideal university classroom for disabled students, Camacho et al. (2017) identified several recommendations by disabled students in creating inclusive and accessible classrooms. These included the consideration of the needs of disabled students as part of course syllabus and design; a shift in staff mentality and attitudes towards disability and disabled students; and staff awareness training to better inform lecturers about the needs of disabled students.

Referring to accommodating for accessibility, Nicola commented:

> "I think a lot of the issue is a lot of like the systems have been created by able bodied people, and so like no one actually thinks to consult with us about what is actually helpful. So, there's a lot of things in place that are useless, and there's a lot of things that need to be in place that aren't".

Geraint stressed the importance of having a senior member of management with a physical need to influence decision-making:

> *"It's no good putting an able-bodied person in a position... because what do they know about being disabled? If you don't start at the top how is anything ever going to change?".*

Not only has previous literature advocated the need for students with a disability to be pro-actively consulted in the Universal Design of universities (Mole, 2013), but it has been recognised that there is an under-representation of minority groups occupying decision-making and senior management positions (Advance HE, 2019).

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The way in which transition into HE is conceptualised by practitioners influences transition practice (Jindal-Snape, 2023). Findings from our study indicate that currently there is little consideration of learners entering HE with physical needs, despite evidence from a body of research over a significant period identifying the challenges that these learners face. (e.g., Advance HE, 2009; Hadjikakou et al., 2010; Langørgen et al., 2018). While recognising the limitations of this study (i.e., breadth of physical disabilities and areas of study included within a small sample size) as a scoping exercise, valid recommendations can be made. In the first instance, at a local level, HE institutions must individually consider what constitutes a successful transition for all learners. In this context, we recommend co-production with a diverse group of learners to elicit their collective voice as successful transition can mean something totally different dependent on who is asked, and when. This would support the initial transition of learners with physical needs into HE but also enhance retention of these students, thus drawing together how HE institutions promote themselves as diverse and inclusive entities with the lived realities.

Findings clearly indicate the need to develop and build an affirmative model of disability at HE whereby the disabled identity is valued with a concerted attempt to remove environmental and curricula barriers. HEIs need also to be reactive and agile where necessary, in response to the emergence of individuals' needs, with a comprehensive evaluation of whether they are effective and fully inclusive. Regular consultation to engage the voice of learners with physical needs in the co-production of 'good practice' is necessary, further extending this to other stakeholders with insightful, lived experiences. Case studies as examples of good practice providing a template or guidance for other HEIs could be used. Consideration is needed around all aspects of transition both prior to commencing HE courses as well as once the learner feels part of the HE community.

Considerations around accessibility needs of generic (*e.g.*, student accommodation and lecture theatres) and specialist (*e.g.*, laboratories and sport pitches) facilities need to be integral to all aspects of planning, particularly academic programmes which feature practical components, and should be a standing item in validation events, whereby accessibility is scrutinised by an independent panel as part of quality assurance processes. Beyond establishing and implementing general principles of accessibility and inclusion, support services and academic programme teams should work together to consider function, ambition, expectations and needs at an individual level. While generic adjustments can be made, individuals with other physical needs could require different provision according to the nature of their difficulty. Thus, it is not plausible to employ a "one size fits all" approach.

At the macro level, there needs to be further research and a systematic review of the experiences of learners in conjunction with HE policies on transition, disability, and inclusion to identify aspects of good practice in addition to non-alignment of policy with experience. A framework of good practice could be developed to support HEIs in implementing a holistic approach to transition. This could inform HE policy in this area to ensure change with opportunities for continual reflection and adaptation in response to both pedagogical and technological advancements in supporting the learner experience.

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

Data is stored at the lead institution. Data is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS AND CONSENT

Ethical approval was granted by the authors' institution.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Dr Rhiannon Packer is a member of the *Transitions from School and Beyond* special issue editorial team. She was removed from any decision making related to the abstract submission and acceptance as well as the review process to ensure independent review and editing.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors 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, and final approval of the version to be published.

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