TRANSITIONS INTO AND OUT OF HIGHER EDUCATION: THE EXPERIENCES OF ‘DISABLED’ STUDENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Transitions in and out of education and training are part of the lifelong learning agenda as citizens are now expected to engage in learning throughout the lifespan (Scottish Executive, 2003, Field, 2006). Traditional higher education students will, according to Ecclestone et al (2005), have experienced at least five transitions in their initial learning career, from first entry to school to leaving higher education. Non-traditional students may experience more transitions or find the transitions harder to cope with, for example, due to lack of knowledge and awareness of the norms and values of higher education. Universities have also transformed considerably and have changed from being institutions for a small elite to cater for a much wider range of students. Institutions are now managed differently which includes target setting in relation to widening participation (see e.g. Riddell, et al, 2006). Targeting and benchmarking offer one way of examining whether institutions are increasing provision for disadvantaged groups, however, it does not provide insights into the educational experiences of disadvantaged groups, including how they cope with transitions.

Transitions have to be seen in the light of an individual’s overall learning career. Bloomer, (2001) notes that to understand the choices a student makes in order to become and continue as a student, it is essential to take into account gender differences, family background, prior educational experiences and attainments and institutional cultures. Evans (2002), in examining the impact of transitions in different settings, suggests that choice and agency is bounded by contextual factors. Ecclestone et al (2005) also consider the relationship between structure and agency in both the processes and the outcomes of transitions. One aspect of the contextual factors could be considered the social capital that a student has access to. McGonigal et al (2007) referring to Bourdieu and Coleman as the founders of the concept describe it as a set of social and relational networks. Social capital is sustained because individuals within a particular network accept the norms and adopt certain types of behaviour.

This paper examines the nature of the transitions disabled students experience in higher education. Whilst legislation is now in place to ensure better inclusion of disabled students (Riddell, et al, 2005) they are still underrepresented in higher education and it could be expected that transitions may pose additional challenges to this group.

All students in higher education have to develop an understanding of what it is to be a higher education student. For many, including disabled students, this includes learning to live independently but in addition disabled students have to learn to deal with their particular impairment in a new setting. However, to assume that the challenges are the same for those students labelled as ‘disabled’ fails to recognise the enormous variety within this group. The differences are likely to depend on the extent to which their particular impairment impacts on their day to day life; however, other contextual factors are likely to interact with those relating specifically to the disability to create different outcomes for disabled students. For example, a recent report on students who committed suicide noted that those with mental health difficulties were particularly at risk and that periods of transition, e.g. at the beginning or the end of the year were times when this group of students were particularly vulnerable (Stanley, et al, 2007).

This paper examines the experiences of a group of disabled students. Data from a four-year longitudinal ESCR/TLRP (reference RES-139-25-0135) is used to examine the experiences of
students with different disabilities in one institution. In particular it considers:

- What are the students’ experiences of transition into the institution, during their passage through the institutions and as they prepare to exit the institution?
- What, if any differences are there between students with different impairments?
- How does the way that the process of transitions is managed by the institution impact on the student experience and how does this relate to the way that the student develops his/her identity as an HE student?

METHODOLOGY

The longitudinal project included an initial survey of over 1000 disabled students (Weedon & Riddell, in press) which was followed up by three-year case studies of between eight and fourteen students in four universities. The main qualitative data are semi-structured interviews with the students but this has been augmented with key informant interviews, observations in learning contexts and interviews with academic staff. This particular paper draws on data from one pre-92 university. A total of fourteen students were recruited for the longitudinal study and all of these were followed for a period of three years.

The institution has a high proportion of students from independent schools (around 35%) and a relatively small proportion of students from lower social class backgrounds (around 18%). However, its proportion of disabled students is similar to national figures at just over 6%. Out of those identified as disabled the majority fall into the category of dyslexia and the proportion of dyslexics in this institution is higher than the national. For further details on higher education UK statistics on disabled students see www.hesa.ac.uk.

The students

Table 1. The impairments, disciplines and outcomes for the students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name*</th>
<th>Impairment</th>
<th>Outcome to date</th>
<th>Discipline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Karrie</td>
<td>Cerebral Palsy; wheelchair user</td>
<td>On track to complete</td>
<td>Modern Languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euan</td>
<td>Mental Health</td>
<td>Hoping to complete 3 year non honours</td>
<td>Physical Sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean</td>
<td>Dyslexia</td>
<td>On track to complete</td>
<td>BEd Primary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fred</td>
<td>Dyslexia</td>
<td>On track to complete</td>
<td>BA Comm. Ed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesley</td>
<td>Multiple: mobility and hearing</td>
<td>Left after 3rd year due to pregnancy</td>
<td>Education: Primary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>Cerebral Palsy but not in wheelchair</td>
<td>On track to complete</td>
<td>Education: Primary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathryn</td>
<td>Diabetes</td>
<td>On track to complete;</td>
<td>Chemistry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teresa</td>
<td>Epilepsy</td>
<td>Year out 3rd year; struggling and</td>
<td>Biosciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>in danger of not completing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>Dyspraxia</td>
<td>On track to complete</td>
<td>English Lit &amp; History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiona</td>
<td>Heart problem</td>
<td>On track to complete</td>
<td>Zoology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>Wrist/writing problem</td>
<td>On track to complete</td>
<td>History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dave</td>
<td>Multiple: cystic fibrosis, epilepsy, diabetes</td>
<td>Forced to withdraw after third year</td>
<td>Geosciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>studies interrupted by hospitalisation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becky</td>
<td>Dyslexia</td>
<td>On track to complete</td>
<td>Architecture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>Dyslexia</td>
<td>On track to complete</td>
<td>Geography</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The students’ names are fictitious names to ensure confidentiality.

FINDINGS

The findings provide a brief overview of the relationship between the expected outcome for this group
of students and outcomes for an earlier cohort of disabled students. The issues for two of the case study students are then examined in greater depth. These two have been selected to explore the experiences of students with different impairments.

All fourteen students in our sample disclosed their disability on entry to the university; however, not all had been in contact with the Disability Office (DO). According to DO around 70-75% of students who disclose on their application make contact with them. Overall findings suggest that four out of the fourteen were unlikely to complete their intended course: two of these were likely to exit with a non-Hons degree (see Euan below), one who was pregnant seemed unlikely to return and Teresa with epilepsy was experiencing serious problems at the last interview. Figures from the institution for the year group that entered in 2000-01 and were due to complete in 2004 (later figures are not yet available) show that overall 72% of students completed their degree compared 69.5% of disabled students. As the 72% is an aggregate of all students the figure for non-disabled students will be higher. Equally the total figure for non-completion was 11.9% with a higher figure – 16.3% for disabled students. There was also difference in the number of Firsts awarded with 14% of students overall awarded this classification compared to 8.4% for disabled students. Disabled students were also more likely to get a non-Hons degree than other students (12% compared to a total awarded of 7.8%). Whilst these figures are for another year group, they seemed to reflect the outcomes of the students in our relatively small sample. The experiences of two of the students will now be examined in more detail.

Karrie

Karrie, a wheelchair user, lived in the Halls of Residence and had helper throughout her years of study. She did not see herself as working-class though said her parents considered themselves working-class and were not university educated. Her impairment meant that she had to make early contact with the institution to ensure that sufficient support was in place. She had been well supported by her secondary school and had learnt to make effective use of support such as scribes and her transition into the institution was eased by excellent support from the institution. Her language teacher had encouraged her to study Modern languages and Karrie hoped to qualify as a Modern Languages teacher. Karrie seemed to have accepted her disability and had learnt to live with it – ‘it’s always been part of my life’. She also explained that she did not mind the label ‘disabled’.

I actually don’t mind it [being labelled disabled] to be perfectly honest. Because if you take it literally, because if you are sitting in a chair you are dis-abled from doing certain things. In my case walking … (Karrie year 4)

If anything her identity as an HE student enhanced her experience and confirmed that she was of equal ability to her peers. She described the way she felt people viewed her in general and compared it to her experience within the institution:

Well obviously it affects the person [being in a wheelchair]. It affects people’s views of you generally. If people don’t know you they tend to … assume that you are a sandwich short of a picnic … which does hinder your socialising (Karrie, year 2)

For the institution, cases such as those of Karrie are perhaps the easiest to handle as there are no questions about diagnosis of disability. The institution responded with effective support and Karrie’s attitude to her disability helped her as did the fact staff within the institution had plenty of time to set arrangements in place:

Sometimes we haven’t been made aware by the student or anybody else. In the case of Karrie we are fully aware and it has been really good. And in her particular case, she is really so relaxed … she can make sure she tells me what her needs are … (Modern Languages Lecturer)

Interestingly one of the lecturers was perhaps more sensitive and worried than Karrie. The lecturer worried about using certain topics for discussion that may exclude Karrie, for example, participation in sports as Karrie would have no first-hand experience:

In language classes there are certain topics that are covered … I have personally felt
sometimes uneasy about dealing with certain topics such as sport ... I have been aware that Karrie could not share any of those ... she seemed OK with it ... (Modern Languages Lecturer)

Overall then the support provided allowed Karrie to develop an academic identity as an HE student. However, one constraining factor on her developing a ‘rounded experience’ was access to social events. She did not manage to take part in the social programme during freshers’ week because getting to events in a wheelchair was too difficult. Another factor which impacted on her socialising was that she needed to return home every weekend:

Yeah [I go home every weekend] because I need help with ... washing clothes and ironing ... I don’t really have much choice in the matter ... I’ll go for a coffee occasionally with some folk, but you know, you don’t really enough time to socialise properly because you’re busy working at night and stuff ... but I know some people quite well. (Karrie year 2)

It is clear that Karrie’s determination and attitude helped her make the most of her university career although she was not able to participate fully in all aspects of university life. This determination also showed through when it came to arranging her year out in Spain. At one point she thought she may not be able to go due to problems of finding accommodation and a helper. Financial support was available to pay for the accommodation of a helper but there was no funding for paying a helper. Her year in Spain was only possible because her father took a year out from work to accompany her.

Formal transitions were clearly well handled by the institution and they were assisted by the attitude and determination of Karrie. In spite of not being able to participate fully in the social life that can be part of the university, Karrie was not prepared to see herself as a victim of her disability.

Euan

Euan came from a middle class background, studied physical sciences and entered the university straight from school. He had mental health problems which had started at secondary school with panic attacks. His difficulties had prevented him from attending school for most of sixth year; he had instead been provided with support from school so that he could do his exams. When he applied to the university he had not disclosed his mental health problems. There were two reasons for this: he thought that mental health problems were not a disability and he hoped that he might be able to make a fresh start:

I remember when I actually got the form, it said ‘do you have any disability of any kind’ and I didn’t actually say anything because I thought, well, mental health is probably a bit of a borderline thing ... They are not going to take it seriously enough ... Disabled people are physically disabled. (Euan, year 2)

However, the fresh start he had hoped for did not materialise. The first attempt lasted only about six weeks and he prefers not to see himself as having started three times:

I don’t really think about it as my first year three times because that is not true. I wasn’t really here for the full time anyway ... everything just became too much for me ... the social side of it, having been at home a lot during my 6th year ... the new way of working as well ... my mum suspected I would probably fall backwards a wee bit. (Euan year 2)

When Euan struggled during his second attempt to start his course he was advised by a contact he had made in the Chaplaincy to get in touch with the DO. He did this but was so worried about not being able to explain his case clearly that he asked his father to go with him. He was provided with help to catch up and finally settled in on his third attempt. A range of support was put in place which included a personal helper to accompany him to lectures and study guidance support. By second year he did not require a personal helper but he was still using the study support.

Euan found the support provided and came to accept that mental health problems were a disability but he did not think that others would see it that way:

I still believe that mental illnesses of all kinds ...are a disability. Not a disability in the way
most people would see it. If I described myself as disabled most people would normally think 'it's a sight problem or a hearing problem' and they might not understand how the mental aspect can affect you in that way. (Euan, year 4)

He was concerned about others knowing that he had made several ‘false’ starts and did not want other students to see the number on his matriculation card (as this indicates year of entry). He did on one occasion mention it to another student who was supportive but this did not help him discuss it more widely. One main concern was that people would not believe him and he found it difficult to discuss this with his Director of Studies (DoS). In part this was due to the status of his Director of Studies:

‘my DoS is in quite a high position, he is a nice man … but I just felt that I couldn't [discuss it with him] (Euan year 2)

One aspect of Euan’s studies was that he spent a considerable amount of time trying to work out how to study. This came through in all the interviews and he seemed to be searching for perfection. There was a sense that this impacted on his ability to keep up with the course material. A phrase that captured this was ‘but I haven’t had enough time to really properly study it’ (Euan, year 4). He struggled and had to resit exams.

The formal transitions from school to university and also through the university clearly presented Euan with a number of challenges. By the end of third year it emerged that he had failed nine out of his ten exams. This included core courses and university regulations meant that he was not allowed to progress into his final (4th) honours year. He was offered the opportunity to resit in August but felt that two months was not sufficient for him to revise for all the exams. Another option provided was for him to return a year later to resit. Provided he passed the exams he could then exit with a non-Honours degree. Euan attributed his difficulties to his grandfather’s death which took place in February of third year. He explained that he had tried to discuss his difficulties:

I went to the DO and I emailed my DoS saying at the time, with the exams, that I was really struggling. I just couldn’t concentrate and I had just fallen too far behind … I did actually go and see him in February … saying I was struggling …[then] after the exam results came out … I went to the DO and they sounded as if they did actually want to try and do something … and they said they were going to try and get my DoS down to have a discussion …but it sounded to me that the department had basically made up their mind … According to their rules they said I couldn’t do the honours … they said that in the past … it wasn’t such a problem but the government came in and interfered and said we don’t want students doing honours years twice. (Euan, year 4)

Euan tried to take the initiative and had entered into considerable communication with the institution and his parents had also been involved in pleading his case. There is a suggestion that the department sees new quality assurance mechanisms as a barrier to flexibility. Overall for him transition into the institution had been problematic and his exit was also troubled.

EMERGING THEMES AND CONCLUSION

Clearly, whilst these students are part of the group called disabled students their experiences have been very different and they emphasise the ‘atypicality’ of the ‘the disabled student’. There is evidence for the whole group (see Table 1) that some of the students have not found transitions stressful and have coped with their impairment effectively. Karrie, it could be argued, is one of these students in that she exercised considerable agency in developing herself as a student and also in attaining her goal of becoming a secondary teacher. She had no difficulties in accepting her impairment and her entry to higher education was positive proof that she was of equal ability to her fellow students, it was just, in her own words, her legs that did not work as well.

Euan, on the other hand, struggled both to come to terms with the fact that his mental health problem may not go away fully. He had hoped that university would allow him to make a fresh start. In addition, he was concerned that people would not take mental health problems seriously.

The two students were similar in that they relied heavily on support from their families. Karrie lived in
Karrie’s transition to and through the university was well managed. Early contact allowed for all accommodation and support needs to be in place on entry. Academic staff were informed of all needs and, on the odd occasion when timetabling created access problems changes were swiftly made. The institution also supported her as well as it could in her arrangements for her year abroad. This arrangement presented considerable challenges, the main one was finding a support worker.

She faced potentially considerable barriers, especially in arranging her year abroad experience. However, it could be argued that had her support been less effective, both from the institution and from her parents she would have faced far greater difficulties. Her case then could be seen as an example of successful management of disability support by the institution.

The experience of institutional support differed for Euan and is similar to that of students in other institutions with mental health difficulties (Riddell, et al, 2005). His own reluctance and hesitation about disclosing meant that support was lacking initially. Once he had disclosed support was put in place. His helper clearly helped him overcome his difficulties in attending lectures but, whilst his study guidance support was seen as helpful, it may not have assisted him in focusing on the essentials of the course in such a way that he could progress effectively. Riddell et al also comment that support tends to be focused on the individual and not on changing institutional structures. This was also the case for Euan and it seems that an additional factor was that quality assurance mechanisms prevented a flexible approach to Euan’s difficulties in third year.

It could be argued that different practices within the departments of the same institution may have led to the different experiences. Euan commented on problems with attending lectures because he had to travel. However, he was also ambivalent about the value of lectures and his lack of attendance may have been affected by this. Karrie on the other hand, emphasised the need to attend all classes. She perceived all staff as highly supportive and they felt generally clear about how they had to meet her needs. Euan’s experience differed as staff generally were not aware of his difficulties and it was clear that he did not find it easy to discuss them with his Director of Studies. One aspect of departmental practice which is likely to have impacted on Euan is the format of assessment. The course had ten traditional exams at the end of third year, this is considerably higher than many of the other courses where there was more of a mix of coursework and end of module exams. For a student who suffers from anxiety and panic attacks the added requirement of only being allowed to tackle core exams once in order to be admitted into honours will increase stress and anxiety.

Bloomer and Hodkinson argue that when examining young people’s learning it is more relevant to consider ‘transformations’ than ‘transitions’ as learning careers include both continuity and change (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 2000). They define learning career as the development of dispositions to learning over time’ (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 2000: 590). Their study focused on school leavers moving into further rather than higher education and it found that the development of these students’ learning careers was generally unpredictable and non-linear and that events outside their formal learning impacted greatly on their learning career. This is markedly different from Karrie’s development. Although she came from a working-class background and had attended a comprehensive school her learning career seemed to follow a highly linear path into her post-graduate course. Exploring her situation from a social capital perspective would suggest that the relationships developed at school and the strong support of her family helped her transition into the university.

Euan also attempted to follow a linear path though his intentions post university were far less clear. He was also strongly supported by his family but his school experience had been considerably less positive. There is no reference to teachers that encouraged him or friends from school.

As can be seen transitions are experienced very differently for students with different impairments and an impairment, well handled by the institution can lead to increased confidence in the student. However, handling mental health difficulties during transitions seems to pose particular challenges for an institution and the rigid structure, for example in relation to examination timetables can pose a considerable barrier to students with a mental health problem.
References


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