Successful transitions? Disabled students’ entry into and journey through higher education.

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This paper draws on data from a research project funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council as part of its Teaching and Learning Research Programme (RES-139-25-013). The longitudinal study, conducted between 2004 and 2007, focussed mainly on the experiences and outcomes of a cohort of disabled students in four universities.

The concept of transitions is, according to Ecclestone (2007), fragmented and lacking in conceptual clarity. She identifies three different main perspectives, the first one exemplified by Lam and Pollard (2006). Their work focuses on children’s entry to kindergarten and it draws on conceptualisations using a ‘rites of passage’ approach augmented by sociocultural theory. They note that others have described transitions as the movement between different institutional settings and also referred to types of transitions as either horizontal or vertical. The term vertical transitions denotes movement between programmes or agencies over time; horizontal ones are within the same time frame but from one setting to another. In terms of students, vertical transitions could be viewed as movement from school to higher education or from one year to the next. Horizontal transitions could encompass movement from institution to work or home, or within the institution from formal learning setting to informal learning. Lam & Pollard note that much of the research has focused on transitions between contexts; however, later studies have considered shifts in identity such as ‘child’ at home and ‘pupil’ in kindergarten. In the HE context this could consider change in identity as ‘pupil’ at school to ‘student’ at the university, between ‘employee’ at work and ‘student’ or ‘parent’ at home to ‘student’ at university.

The impact of transitions on identity is emphasised to a greater extent by the second perspective outlined by Ecclestone. This approach is exemplified in research on learning careers such as that of Bloomer (2001), Bloomer & Hodkinson (2000) and Gallacher et al (2002). The concept of a ‘career’ in the non-traditional sense was developed by the Chicago school of sociologists (Gallacher et al, 2002). This was adapted into the concept of ‘learning career’ and has been used mainly to explore the experiences of students in further education both younger learners (Bloomer & Hodkinson) and more mature learners (Gallacher et al). Bloomer (2001) argues that to understand the choices a student makes in order to become and continue as a student it is essential to take into account structural factors such as gender, family background and ethnicity. In addition he sees previous educational experiences and institutional cultures as of importance. From this perspective transitions into an educational institution contribute to changes in social identity over a period of time.

A third approach, stemming from post-modernist views, sees life as a process of
transitions. This perspective, according to Ecclestone, questions the notion that there is a single entity that can be transformed. Rather, people have multiple identities, based on unconscious and sometimes contradictory influences, and these are affected by social structures such as class and gender.

These perspectives reflect different assumptions about the relationship between identity, agency and structure which, in the case of the third perspective is more difficult to disentangle. This paper focuses on the transitions of two students with unseen impairments and considers the following questions:

- What are these students’ experiences of transition into, passage through and exit from institution? How did this impact on their identity as students in HE?
- What constitutes and contributes towards successful transitions and for whom is it ‘successful’? What is the role of the institution in ensuring that transitions are successful?

The experiences of other students have been explored elsewhere (Weedon & Riddell, 2007). The students were enrolled on four year honours degree programmes and had identified themselves as ‘disabled’ on the application form; however, they did not initially contact the Disability Office to arrange reasonable adjustments. Both came from middle-class backgrounds, with Teresa educated in the private sector and Dave in a ‘good’ comprehensive school.

**Teresa**

Teresa had epilepsy which led to her suffering from severe migraines. She disclosed her epilepsy, which she described as a medical condition, on her application form but did not consider herself disabled. At the beginning of her course she hoped to carry on to post-graduate research. Being a student was very important to her as she explained in her final interview:

*Education, just being part of the group, I love being part of the group, wearing a university hoodie. That’s what I am going to miss the most.*

Her initial transition was unproblematic and she progressed into second year; however, she fell behind in second year. Her migraines led to her missing deadlines and she discovered that she had, incorrectly, assumed that disclosing on the application form would automatically alert staff to her epilepsy. She finally contacted the Disability Office during her second year and this improved matters considerably:

*This year has been good. I spoke to the disability services and they have been extremely helpful. They’ve made arrangements for if I am ill or at exams they will … [they] will write another exam paper which is fantastic … it’s an amazing thing … it’s been good, disability services have very, very helpful.*

She successfully completed second year and progressed into third year. We lost contact with her at this point and did not speak to her again until a year later. It turned out that her headaches had got worse and she had taken a year out, as she put it ‘to sort herself out’. She discussed this with her Director of Studies (DoS) who was very supportive and made all the arrangements for her return. She returned to start third
year again finally withdrew from her course as she could not keep up with the deadlines. During the final interview it emerged that Teresa also had mental health difficulties. She had not realised that she was suffering from depression – she thought that the way she was feeling was a side effect of the drugs that she was taking for her epilepsy.

**Dave**

Dave started university straight after completing his A-levels. He had multiple impairments: cystic fibrosis, diabetes and epilepsy and was doing a BSc in Environmental Geoscience. Like Teresa, he disclosed his impairment on the application form but did not make any contact with the Disability Office until the end of second year and was then given extra time in exams. He had been offered ‘disabled’ accommodation and assumed therefore that his disability was known to all.

*I assume so [that DoS knows about impairments]. I have never discussed it with him. He must know, it’s on the form.*

His initial transition was unproblematic and he did not experience any real difficulties with attending and generally keeping up with the work. However, he is far more ambivalent towards his studies than Teresa – being a learner does not seem to be a key feature of his life. Generally he sees himself as a lazy student who does not apply himself properly. He does not see his impairment as having an undue influence on his studies but admits that he has to spend two hours daily doing physiotherapy. He is also quite concerned about using any of his impairments as an excuse.

*...the CF doesn’t really [impact] – it’s just an extra couple of hours in the day, it doesn’t impair learning at all. The diabetes, I think it is mainly concentration, sometimes if I get too high blood sugars then it is very hard to keep my mind focused on one thing ... whether that is just an excuse for me not concentrating sufficiently I don’t know.*

Dave encountered a serious problem shortly after starting third year, a brain tumour he had had for some time suddenly got larger and he had to go in for surgery. As with his other impairments he played down the impact:

*Fairly major upheaval ... they were concerned that it was cancer. So they chopped me up, got it out, and it’s fine!*  

This interruption disrupted his studies considerably, added to this there was a lack of clarity amongst academic staff as to whether he could continue into 4th year without repeating a year. A key problem for him was that his Director of Studies did not respond to his request for information:

*I am still not convinced that it is going to be as easy as [name] was saying. That I can just sort of walk in and do it ... I’ll wait and see. ... it is slightly annoying that my DoS didn’t really consider that they could offer me special circumstances ... I thought my DoS would be sort of more ... a little bit more proactive. I don’t expect them to do anything for me ... just ... [be aware of the possibilities]. He has just ignored my emails.*
His request to continue was unsuccessful and Dave finally settled for an ordinary degree.

**Discussion: Disability and Transitions**

This section relates these students’ experiences to the questions identified in the introduction. The first one was:

- What are the students’ experiences of transition into, passage through and exit from the institution? How did this impact on their identity as students in HE?

There are similarities between Dave and Teresa. They declared their impairments on the application form, whilst at the same time not accepting a ‘disabled’ identity. They also assumed that academic staff would automatically know of their circumstances and thus did not contact the Disability Office. Neither managed to complete their intended programme of studies but they finished at different points. Both were offered a lower than intended qualification. They differed in their attitudes to learning and their course and also in their reactions to having to change their study plans. Teresa had adopted a strong ‘student as learner’ identity, whereas for Dave the most important thing was transition into adulthood, reflecting a ‘rites of passage’ approach:

> Just being out, looking after myself living independently – that seems to miss the point of being at university ‘cause one’s got to learn as well ...I obviously have knowledge that I didn’t have before. [I] probably have [learnt skills] but don’t feel I can’t quantify that ... it is such a drawn out process. (Dave)

Clearly the identities of both were affected by their transition through the institution. In spite of changed plans, Dave was positive about the outcome. Teresa was not, she felt denied the opportunity to continue developing her HE student identity and her learning career. Inflexibility in institutional structures and funding arrangements meant that part-time study, which she could have coped with, was not an option.

The second question concerned the nature of ‘successful transitions:

- What constitutes and contributes towards successful transitions and for whom is it ‘successful’? What is the role of the institution in ensuring that transitions are successful?

For the institution successful outcomes are those leading to students exiting with a recognised qualification. The most successful for an undergraduate would be a First Class Honours degree. However, there are now alternative exit points at the end of each year of a degree programme which presumably allow institutions to classify exits at a particular level as ‘successfully completed’ rather than as a ‘drop out’.

From the institutions perspective these students had successful transitions into the institution and their exit was partially but not fully successful as they had to leave prior to completing an honours degree but with an alternative qualification. Institutional procedures for supporting disabled students were in place but for the students there was a lack of clarity of how their impairment was communicated to staff within the institution. Neither understood the pivotal role of the Disability Office in the provision of reasonable adjustments and the communication of these to
academic staff. It could be argued that both are adults and therefore responsible for their own decisions and Teresa who described herself as a mature student would agree. However, Dave was more ambivalent and would have liked more support from the Disability Office and his DoS

*For somebody like me … things like making every student when they declare a disability go to the Disability Office in the first say month, I don’t know if that is possible, … but that would have been useful … you’re a lot younger in the first year … I hadn’t lived away from home … Similarly with your DoS – to say ‘I see you are registered disabled – let’s talk about it’. (Dave)*

With earlier support, Dave may have been able to progress through to honours year; however, in spite of this he felt that he had gained much from his university experience. The most important thing for him was that he was able to manage his impairment whilst living independently. He moved into a temporary job and had clear plans about where he wanted to move on to. His transition out of the institution was therefore seen by him as successful even it was not as initially intended. This was in sharp contrast with Teresa who saw her transition out as unsuccessful and did not feel that a Diploma in HE was useful. She had no clear ideas of what she would do next.

All conceptualisations of transitions include some focus on identity and changes in identity. The first approach (Lam & Pollard, 2006) described transitions as both horizontal and vertical and explored them as ‘rites of passages’. They considered identity change during this process but not to the same extent as that of the learning career approach of Gallacher et al (2002). The third approach argued that individuals do not have a single identity and that the process of shaping identity is not linear from one identity to another. It could be argued that these approaches are not mutually exclusive, for example the vertical transitions mentioned by the first approach could indicate that an individual holds several, multiple identities and that the social context elicits a particular identity; however, this possibly disregards the fluidity of the post-modernist approach. In terms of explaining the students’ transitions it could be argued that the ‘rites of passage’ approach does seem to encapsulate the experiences of many of the young middle-class students and this would include Dave. The social aspect of the university experience is as important as the learning; however, the students often mention the struggle of coming to terms with time management and not being cosseted to the same extent as they were at school. The learning career approach does not seem to offer a useful way of exploring the experiences of most of the younger students who came from a middle-class background straight to university. However, it potentially accounts for more of the older, mature and also the ‘non-traditional’ students’ experiences and exemplifies what Ecclestone (2007) refers to as ‘becoming somebody’ with the learning experience providing a transition from two states of ‘being’.

It is clear that the conceptualisation of transitions requires further examination and it does demonstrate that there is no single approach that can capture the transitions of disabled students. Another way of exploring the experiences of transitions amongst these students is to consider the role of social capital in transitions. The students obviously had different access to both economic and social capital (see Field 2005). Dave and Teresa were both middle class and could therefore be considered as having
similar access to cultural capital; however, family networks played a very different role in their lives. Dave described his parents as ‘brilliant really I can’t give them enough credit really’. Teresa did not have access to such support:

Family no good, they try, they would be there if I reached out to them but it is just my own psychological problem that I can’t do that … I just don’t know how to, I just can’t. I have issues there. But I do have good friends. (Teresa)

Social capital or lack of it played a vital role for both and is likely to have contributed to Dave’s relatively successful transition through and out of the institution. To summarise, disabled students are likely to face additional difficulties in relation to transitions. However, these difficulties are affected by type of impairment as well as factors such as age, gender and social class. The data for the whole sample not discussed here also shows that institutional factors have an impact with differences between and within institutions. The conceptualisations of transitions offer some ways of exploring these transitions but the impact of social capital on a student’s progression through university may offer another way of exploring the experiences and outcomes. For many, the family provide students with additional support not offered by the institution and students who do not have access to such support may well be at particular risk. Most of the students play down the impact of their impairment and are, in some cases, unwilling to seek support that they are entitled to. Institutions therefore face the difficulties of reaching out to some of the students as disclosure is seen as a matter for the individual student.

References


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