

**Transition and Accommodation Experiences of  
Students with Disabilities:  
A Qualitative Study**

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Despite these advances, a significant number of students with disabilities still have difficulties transitioning from high school to university. Francis et al. (2018) found that 30% of 109 students with disabilities said they felt unprepared for college. Participants also reported they wish they had better transition planning including instruction in navigating college life logistics, accessing disability-related support and meeting with instructors. Poor transition experiences may contribute towards the persistent gap in successful outcomes for students with disabilities compared with their peers without disabilities, as they are less likely to persist from years one to two because of low grades, and are less likely to graduate (Gil, 2007; Mamiashvili & Koch, 2011; Newman et al., 2011).

In an effort to address this gap, transition research has focused extensively on identifying the factors that support successful transitions for high school students with disabilities entering postsecondary education. Awareness of one's own disability, motivation to attend and succeed at postsecondary education, having a coordinated student-centred transition plan, and clear post-school plans are all factors found to influence successful transitions (Alverson et al., 2019). Analyzing data collected on more than 11,000 students with disabilities in the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2, D 14>>BDC12 0cC12 0 0 12 f

inner feelings about certain experiences (Caelli et al., 2003; Cooper & Endacott, 2007). Generic qualitative research is good for exploring topics that “focus outward” and in this case, the best way to elicit in-depth descriptions from students with disabilities of their experiences with accommodations and transition.

The study was conducted at a medium-sized university in southeastern Ontario. In-person interviews were conducted in a meeting room on campus. A semi-structured interview protocol was used first to build rapport with participants by inquiring about their academic plans and progress. Questions then shifted to gain in-depth answers from participants about specific topics while permitting further probing with follow up questions. For example, one question asked, “How did changes to your accommodations between high school and university affect your learning experience?” Follow up questions asked about how the changes impacted specific academic activi-

recordings. The researcher's supervisor was also enlisted to check codes against some transcripts, with which relative agreement was found. Finally, thick and rich description was used to convey the findings (Percy et al., 2015)

### **Results**

Analyses revealed four themes as prominent in the experiences of participants with academic accommodations as they transitioned from high school to university. The themes were (a) disability identity

in the classroom to highligh

Several other participants were concerned about the cost of obtaining disability documentation. For example, one participant said she and her parents were surprised by the \$150 fee charged by her doctor to complete the university's disability verification form. Another participant needed an updated psycho-educational assessment for her learning disability and said: "It was not until I was already at university and started my classes that I discovered I was eligible for provincial bursary funding to pay for my assessment. I also didn't know that I could have received this funding even if I had my assessment completed during the summer before coming to university."

### ***Meeting with Access Office Staff***

Most of the participants said they were apprehensive about meeting with access office staff. All of the participants said that while they heard a lot

unmet. One participant described receiving adaptive technology in high school that he did not use or want. Another participant described being always given the option to sit at the front of the class, even though her difficulties were mainly with grammar, writing, and reading. A third participant said, "There were no accommodations for me in high school as a student with a mental health disability. I was surprised and relieved to discover there were accommodations available to me at university."

Several students said that the specificity of their university accommodations made them feel better using them. For example, one student described the differences between high school and university with writing exams:

In high school, my extra time was not prescribed. I didn't really have a time limit and I took a long time to complete my exams. Here in university, I receive 20 minutes extra if my exam is one hour long. It took some getting used to and sometimes I wish I had more time. Being under pressure from the clock makes me work faster and I like finishing my exams more quickly.

Another student said:

After I got to university, I tried Kurzweil (text-to-speech software) again, and this time it was so much better because someone in the library put together my course materials in PDFs which made it easier for me to use.

### **Instructor Attitude**

The fourth theme underscores how at university, some students perceived that instructors reacted negatively to their requests for accommodations. All the participants described their interactions with instructors about accommodations as largely positive. Most of the participants described feeling comfortable meeting and emailing instructors about accommodations. One student said, "It's like they have taught students with LD before, they seem to understand." All the participants said that most of their instructors followed their accommodation letter and were genuinely supportive and respectful when doing so. Another student said, "If my professors had not been as supportive and helpful as they have been, I would be at a significant disadvantage."

Notwithstanding these positive reviews, every participant had at least one negative experience with instructors who, they felt, harboured negative attitudes towards students with disabilities. One student said, "I have encountered some instructors who think

I'm 'faking' my disability," while another said, "I have had a few professors who don't believe my disability is valid."

## **Discussion**



The experiences described by participants may be partly explained by previous research, which found that while transition planning is a requirement



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## Appendix

### Semi-Structured Interview

As explained in the research description, this study is seeking to learn more about the experience of students with disabilities with accommodations as they transitioned from high school to university.

#### *Transitioning to University with a Disability*

1. May I confirm first that you identify as a student with a disability?
2. What name do you give to your disability?
3. Approximately how long have you had this disability?

#### *Changes to Accommodations*

Based on the information you provided us, it's evident the accommodations you received for your 1st year at Queen's is different from those you received in high school.

4. Can you tell me in your own words how your accommodations changed between high school and university?

#### *Accommodation Changes and Student Experience*

5. What was your reaction when Accessibility Services informed you of the accommodations you qualified for at Queen's?
6. What effect did changes to your academic accommodations between high school and university have on how you see yourself as a student?
7. How did changes to your accommodations between high school and university affect your learning experience?
  - a. How did they affect your performance on midterms and tests? What about on final exams?
  - b. What about assignments and projects?
  - c.