

Parent Partnership Service Cheshire East

Spring 2014 Newsletter

For parents and carers of children who have special educational needs

12 Months in The role of Transition Officer

Written by Anna Dent, Transition Officer, Staffordshire Regional Access Centre

The Transition Officer is a new post to Staffordshire Regional Access Centre which is based on the Stoke Campus of Staffordshire University. Promotion of the support available to disabled students in higher education and the support of their transition into higher education are key elements of the role.

Making the transition to higher education can be a daunting process for even the most confident of students. Many disabled students are not fully aware of the support available and the process for putting that support in place. Others may not disclose their disability and are not able to access the support available. Research reveals that students who receive support in higher education do better than those who don't access the available support. It also indicates that those students that have their support in place at the start of the course have the best chance of reaching their potential.

I started in post in September 2012. My background is in further education, teaching Psychology, managing Student Support and most recently as Head of Sixth Form in Burslem, Stoke-on-Trent. I felt that I had a pretty good understanding of student support and applications to University through UCAS. I knew that the support that universities could offer to disabled students was extensive. I knew that universities wanted to attract and reduce any barriers faced by disabled students but I very quickly realised that there was much for me to learn. Disabled Students' Allowances were new to me (with the process of gaining support in Higher Education, being very different from that in a college or school). The process of application for Disabled Students' Allowances, to fund the support initially confused me and the discovery of the many and specific types of support (equipment, software, mentor, support worker etc) opened up a whole new world to me.

I needed to understand all of this pretty quickly and then start to share this knowledge with others to ensure that the disabled students locally could make informed decisions about their future. I started by contacting and working with key staff within the University that could share their knowledge and experience with me. I then worked to develop resources that would enable me to simplify all that I had learned in order to share with others.

I have contacted and visited over 60 local colleges and schools with sixth forms in the local area in order to work with the managers of level 3 programmes (e.g. A levels, Access courses, BTec etc.) and managers of student support. For me the biggest surprises have been:

- In only 2 of those institutions did staff have a clear understanding of Disabled Students' Allowances One manager understood, through personal experience
- The overall lack of awareness of what is encompassed within disability

During my visits I explain about disability within the legal context, the rights of disabled people and Disabled Students' Allowances. I work with the institution to develop a plan for supporting their disabled students. This can include 1:1 support, workshops for disabled students, workshops for parents of disabled students, staff development for personal tutors, attending Transition and HE events etc.

I support all students, regardless of the university that they hope to go to, which the schools and colleges particularly like. I like the fact that when I come away from a visit to a school or college, I do so

with the feeling that I have made a difference and that we can continue to work together to support the students of the future.

I am additionally forming strong working relationships with other partners. East Cheshire Parent Partnership is an example. The start of this relationship being the participation in the successful Transition event that they put on in March of this year.

Much of my work involves supporting students on a 1:1 basis. Supporting them in completing applications for Disabled Students Allowances, checking their evidence before it is sent, answering their questions and making further individual arrangements to support their transition to university. This is the best part of my job. I have met some highly driven, determined and inspirational individuals and many encouraging and supportive parents. I know that supporting students to ensure that support is in place before they start University is of great benefit to them and will leave more time for the important business of starting their course, settling in and making new friends when they arrive.

I have learned that for some disabled students it can be difficult to ask for and to accept support. The development of the disabled student peer mentor system at Staffordshire University is instrumental in making a start to overcome this. A small group of highly trained current students mentor new students in their transition to university, both on a 1:1 level and sharing information via their Facebook page. They are additionally available to support me with events (internal and external) and are excellent in engaging students, answering any questions and using their own experiences of transition and support to benefit others. The mentor scheme runs in parallel with Start Up – an individually tailored programme to engage disabled students early in their transition into higher education and support throughout their course. We are constantly monitoring and evaluating our support and new initiatives to improve the student experience. The "student voice" is essential to this process. All universities have a Disabled Student Support team. Similar support programmes and activities are offered in most universities and the staff in those universities will respond positively to students that are pro-active and contact the support team early.

My key messages to disabled students are:

- Universities actively work to remove all barriers that may exist in reducing a person's opportunity to fulfil their potential
- Disabled Student Support teams, within universities provide a free and confidential service for disabled students. Be pro-active, contact them, ask questions and if you can visit them
- Students that have a disability or suspect that they have a disability should disclose on university application forms and finance application forms
- Apply for Disabled Students' Allowances as early as possible with evidence of disability
- Take responsibility for your own support and regularly review your support
- Aim high
- Support is additionally available at University for the transition into work

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