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

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Abstract

Although more students with disabilities are attending university than ever before, many still have difficulties with the transition from high school. Transition research has extensively examined the factors and barriers that support or hinder successful transitions for students with disabilities. However, there has been little explicit focus on the *intersection* of experiences with transition and academic accommodations on the overall experience of students with disabilities at university. This study interviewed six participants with various disabilities who transitioned directly from high school to university. Thematic analysis showed that: (a) first-year students are unprepared for the bureaucratic nature of the accommodation process, but ultimately find it fair and non-stigmatizing; (b) first-year students discover that they have to play a more active role in their accommodation planning but ultimately find that this role, and the accommodations they receive, positively supports their autonomy and disability identity at university; and (c) some university instructors exhibit significantly negative attitudes towards students requiring accommodations. These findings have practice implications for disability service professionals in universities supporting the transition needs of students with disabilities.

Keywords: transition, accommodations, qualitative, students with disabilities

Between 2008 and 2017, the percentage of high school students receiving special education supports through individual educational plans (IEP) in Ontario grew from 16% to 28% (People for Education, 2017). In roughly the same time period, the percentage of students with disabilities who entered Canadian universities jumped from 9% to 22% (Canadian University Survey Consortium, 2019). This growth is partly explained by better identification of students with disabilities in elementary and high school as well as improved awareness and reduced stigma (People for Education, 2017).

Also during this time, government policies regarding transition supports for students with disabilities were strengthened. Transition planning involves a coordinated set of activities intended to support a student's academic achievement, health, and well-being during various transition periods in their educa-tional career. In 2013, the Ontario government issued a directive stating that every student with an IEP must have a plan to support their transition from high school to postsecondary education, employment, or the community (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017). These policies are supported by decades of research that has shown that the more successful a student's transition, the more successful their academic outcomes (Fleming et al., 2017; Gil, 2007; Naugle et al., 2010). The policies also are in response to knowledge that in addition to navigating the usual responsibilities when transitioning to postsecondary education, students with disabilities must also navigate for the first time the supports and accommodations they need to succeed while coping with the uncertainty of how their disability with impact their academics or campus life (Hadley, 2011).

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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; Mamiseishvili & 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, Newman et al. (2016) found that students whose transition plans listed accommodations suitable for the postsecondary environment were more likely to receive and use disability-specific supports at college. Participating in summer transition programs offered at university have also been found to promote successful transitions by helping students with disabilities obtain essential academic tools such as time management and self-advocacy skills (Peregrina-Kretz, 2015).

Recognizing the importance of academic accommodations for the success of students with disabilities at university, researchers and educators have also strongly emphasized better preparation about the accommodation process at university (Kelepouris, 2014; Madaus et al., 2011; Newman et al., 2016). Teaching students about documentation requirements, how to contact university accessibility offices, and preparing them for receiving accommodations different from the ones they received at high school have all been identified as central to transition planning for students with disabilities. However, research has shown that once at university, students do not always access or value the supports and accommodations that may benefit them even after receiving transition planning education in high school. Some students seek to shed the disability identity they had in high school and often wait until encountering academic struggles be-

fore seeking support (Lyman et al., 2016). Others do not sufficiently understand the quality and usefulness of student services and accommodations at university and forego them for fear of negative reactions and perceptions by instructors or peers (Kurth & Mellard, 2006; Lightner et al., 2012). To understand more about the experiences of students with disabilities who do use accommodation at university, Paton (2017) found that since students strongly desired a sense of belonging on campus, they tended to value accommodations and accommodations processes that were individualized, facilitated their independence and supported their academic success.

These findings provide valuable insight into the experiences of students with disabilities with accommodations at university. However, they do not provide insight into the *intersection* of experiences between transition and academic accommodations on the overall university experience for students with disabilities. Some students with disabilities arriving at university who received accommodations in high school view transition and the academic accommodation process as one and the same. Their transition and university experiences cannot be fully understood without simultaneously delving into their experiences with academic accommodations. Knowing more about these experiences together may bring into sharper focus the gaps in current transition programming and help to identify improvement needed to reduce the lack of preparedness and uncertainty with which many students with disabilities still arrive at university.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the experiences of students with disabilities as they transition from high school to university. The study addressed the following research question: What are the experiences of students with disabilities with academic accommodations and accommodation processes as they transition from high school to university?

Method

Design

This study used qualitative methodology as it allows for the exploration and understanding of meaning that individuals ascribe to a social problem (Creswell, 2014). Generic qualitative research was the framework used to construct the study and analyze the data. This design emphasizes participant experiences and their opinions about these experiences unlike phenomenology, which studies participant

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 activities such as exams, assignments, and group work. The complete interview protocol appears in the Appendix. Each interview lasted between 90 to 120 minutes.

Sample

Participants for this study were recruited from among 71 first-year students who participated in a separate research study that examined how academic accommodations change as students transitioned from high school to university (Parsons et al., 2020). Participants included in the original study met the following criteria: (a) they entered their first year of university studies in Fall 2014, 2015, or 2016; (b) they registered with the university accessibility office sometime during their first year of studies; (c) they entered university directly from high school; and (d) they were able to produce a copy of their Individualized Educational Plan from their final year in high school. All participants in the original study were emailed an invitation to participate in this current study and six agreed to participate. In a generic qualitative study, between 6 to 10 participants can be sufficient as long as rich and thick data is collected for each participant (Morse, 2016).

The participants consisted of five females and one male with four different disability types: learning disability (three), and one each of mental health, vision and hearing loss. All participants attended high school in Ontario, Canada. Three of the participants were enrolled in arts and science programs, and one each in engineering, nursing, and education.

This study was granted ethics clearance and procedures employed were in accordance with requirements for research involving human participants as set by the University's Research Ethics Board. Written, informed consent was obtained from all study participants, and they each received a $25 gift card as remuneration in recognition of the time they spent participating in the interview.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

In describing the analysis process, it is important to note my relationship as a researcher with the topic and the participants. While conducting this research, I also worked as an advisor in the accessibility office from which the participants were recruited. I developed accommodation plans and supported hundreds of students with disabilities over a 10-year period. None of the participants in this study were on my caseload nor I did not meet with them in my capacity as advisor. I am also a deaf person with my own experiences of transitioning to university with a disability.

Each interview was transcribed and checked for accuracy against the audio recording, and thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. Thematic analysis is a method of identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing and reporting themes found (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Both inductive and deductive analyses were used in this process (Creswell, 2014). Inductive analysis was conducted by building patterns, categories and themes, working back and forth between themes and the database until a set of themes was established, which was done by reading and re-reading the transcripts while being aware of preconceived ideas. Clusters and relationships within the data were noted, such as identity, accommodation experiences, relationships with educators, and transition experiences. Deductive analysis was conducted by continually comparing the themes with the data to confirm that no additional data was needed.

Using QSR NVivo© transcripts were coded, and a qualitative codebook developed. Codes included types of accommodations, use of accommodations, academics, self-advocacy, preparedness, voice, and transition. Using the coded data, categories and themes were identified. The study research question provided two broad categories for themes: accommodation and transition. From these two themes, codes were extrapolated to identify other major categories that explained the experienced phenomenon. Sub-themes were identified by repeated reviewing of transcripts for unique or repetitive responses.

Several steps were taken to support research rigour and trustworthiness. Half of the participants, randomly selected, were emailed copies of their transcripts and a summary of the themes identified in their transcript. Participants identified no errors with these materials. Codes and themes were checked and double-checked against both the transcripts and audio

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, (b) transition preparedness, (c) accommodations process, and (d) instructor attitudes. The findings associated with each of the themes are presented below.

Disability Identity

At university, disability accommodations supported a more autonomous disability identity than at high school, as exemplified by the following quotes: "I'm me here. I don't have to be (name) with a disability. I can just be (name), which I really value." "In high school, I think I was viewed more as a disabled student than I am at university."

Analyses revealed that two factors contributed to the differences students expressed about their identity in high school versus university: (a) systems and (b) teacher-administered accommodations.

Systems

Participants spoke of systems-level features within their high school setting that separated them from their non-disabled peers while lumping them in with all students with disabilities. One system was a guided learning education course in learning strategies called GLE. The other was the regularity with which teachers and counsellors assumed participants were best suited for college versus university.

Students who receive accommodations and other supports through an IEP are strongly encouraged, if not required, to complete the GLE course in Grades 9 or 10. Designed to help students become independent learners, the GLE course teaches them skills in literacy, numeracy, personal-management, interpersonal interactions and teamwork (Ministry of Education, 2006).

While the GLE is typically targeted for students with LD and ADHD in Ontario, all participants in this study took the course in high school, and they all described it as a free period for getting teacher help with assignments or doing homework. Two participants were required to take GLE in place of core French,

from which they were exempt for reasons of their disability. Despite these incentives, most of the participants recalled this course with disdain, with one participant saying, "I despised that class." With their sights set for university, all participants described feeling separated from the other students in the class. One participant summed it up as follows:

> I could see some students who like, who don't want to do work, and the teacher would try to get them to do anything and they refused, and she just rolled over and did nothing.

Four participants described feeling as if their teachers were streaming them towards college[1] and away from university studies. They suggested their teachers assumed this about their future plans because of their enrolment in the GLE course. All participants described having to speak up, often repeatedly, with teachers and other school personnel about their goals to attend university. One participant said, "My high school really pushed students who had accommodations to take college stream courses and I was in the university stream." Another participant said the following:

> I had some friends that also had learning disabilities and we would talk about this. The teachers and guidance counselors would often say, "people with disabilities usually function better… are more suited to college classes." And they tried to tell me that and I said, "Well, no, I'm more interested in university- level courses.

In various ways, all participants described that, once they arrived at university, their first identity was that of a university student, then a person with a disability. One student who is blind said, "Even though I am blind, and it is obvious, my instructors spoke to me as they did with any other student." Several participants commented on how much easier it was to blend in at university. One participant stated this clearly: "I have more confidence here. I am more confident in my disability and in myself as a person."

Teacher Administered Accommodations

The second factor that contributed to students feeling less conspicuous about their disability in university compared with high school was the differences in how their accommodations were handled by teaching and support staff. Three participants gave different examples of accommodation arrangements

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[1] The term "college" in Canada is similar to community colleges in the United States which typically offer two-year technical and training diplomas and programs. The term "university" in Canada is similar to private or public degree-granting institutions in the United States.

in the classroom to highlight this point: (a) large print, (b) using a computer, and (c) note taking support.

One participant with vision loss required her text materials in large print. She described the difference in how teachers and instructors arranged this for her.

> In high school, you were made to be the black sheep because, "Oh (name), here you go!" and they'd pull out this bristol-board sized paper, and I was like "Great, I don't feel different at all! Whereas in university, they rarely ever have handouts, and if they do, it's very subtle, so like my large print is on the same sized, regular paper as everyone else's.

Another participant described being the only student in her high school classes permitted to complete work in class using a computer.

> I'd be sitting there with my computer and my classmates would be using pen and paper. I felt like a bit of a sore thumb. I wasn't going to stop using the computer because I needed it. But it weirded me out sometimes.

She described being relieved when she entered her classes at university to see everyone else using a computer.

Differences in note taking arrangements were highlighted by a third participant. In her high school, she recalled being frequently put on the spot by teachers pointing her out in class when asking other students to voluntarily share their notes.

> Yeah, he'd say "(name) here needs notes from one of you. Please share them with her" and I'd be wishing a hole would open up. It's much more discrete at university. The instructor says the access office is looking for volunteers and from there, I go online to download them. Other students don't know it's me.

Transition Preparedness

The second theme, transition preparedness, highlighted that obtaining and using accommodations at university required more independent effort by students with disabilities than in high school. None of the participants in this study felt ashamed, fearful, or embarrassed about disclosing their disability to the university nor were any of them worried about the confidentiality of their information once they did disclose their disability. However, all of them described feeling uncertain about how to request accommodations at university. Insufficient information in three areas emerged as the main source of unpreparedness

for participants in this study: (a) availability of accessibility services at university, (b) disability documentation, and (c) meeting with access office staff.

Service Availability

Four of the six participants indicated that, despite attending university information nights and speaking with guidance counsellors at their high school, they did not feel fully informed about the availability of accessibility services at university. One participant said: "I wasn't aware of accessibility services until I was already here. Learning about the office when I was already busy in the semester made the whole registration process more difficult." Another participant said she sought accessibility-related information on social media: "Luckily, there's always Facebook groups such as (university) Class of 2018. I could ask any questions like, 'Hey, for students with disabilities, where do I go?' and there was always an upper year who was happy to answer." A third participant described her arrival on campus as: "I just saw this as a huge institution and said, 'How are they going to know what my needs are?'"

Besides availability, participants said they would have appreciated tips on how to best utilize accessibility services. For example, one student said: "I wasn't told I could have submitted my 25-page assessment in the summer before classes started." Another said she wished she knew that the access office staff were available to meet with students in summer. Not having this information meant that, for some participants, the ensuing wait for services made the start of their first term particularly challenging. One participant captured it like this: "My first two weeks of university were crazy. I don't think I did any of my coursework because I was getting things in order for my accommodations. It was definitely a little bit stressful, and I wish I would have done those things before my classes started."

Disability Documentation

Half of the participants said they had concerns about disability documentation when they first registered with the access office. Several participants indicated they learned why they needed documentation only after meeting with access office staff. For example, they did not know that the purpose of disability documentation was to confirm that they have a disability and to describe their functional limitations that impact on them at school. One participant said, "I was told in high school that, with my documentation, I would get accommodations," but she did not know how her documentation would be used in the accommodation approval process at university.

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 about self-advocacy in high school, they actually received very little guidance in preparing for this first meeting. One participant said, "I had no clue what to expect at that meeting," Another participant said she imagined the process would be like going through an accommodation checklist. She said she was surprised when staff asked her to talk about her experiences with her disability in school. "I thought they would simply give me the accommodations listed on my assessment. I was not expecting having to talk about my disability."

Notwithstanding the apprehensions summarized above, all the participants said that once their accommodations were approved and they were more comfortable with the process, they appreciated how it worked for them. One participant said, "I wish someone had said to me, 'Don't worry, it's easy here.'" Another said, "It wasn't until I went through the process that I understood how my accommodations and disability fit together." When asked what advice she would give to incoming students with disabilities, one participant said:

> I would tell them that registering with the access office is the best thing I did. Even though I was worried about how it was all going to work out, I have not faced any challenges when trying to get accommodations and supports.

Accommodation Process

The third theme highlighted the differences in the accommodation process that students experienced in high school compared to university. All the participants commented on how much more formal the accommodation process at university felt compared with their experience in high school. For example,

they talked about the greater focus on disability documentation at university. One participant, whose high school accommodations were based on her Grade 4 assessment, said she was surprised when asked to submit updated documentation at university. "I said, 'This is ridiculous, I need to give new documentation for my dyslexia, something I have had all my life.'" Others commented on having to submit documentation before they could request accommodations at university, which they said was not the case in their high school.

Some participants talked about the different roles that high school teachers versus university instructors play in the accommodation approval process. Noting that accommodations must be pre-approved by access office staff at university during scheduled appointments, some participants favoured the more casual contact with high school teachers about accommodations. One student said, "I found it very easy in high school to go to my teacher and change my accommodations." Another student described how much easier it was in high school to negotiate accommodations directly with her teacher, "but in university, there is no collaboration with my instructors about accommodations. There is no modification of anything." This same student admitted, "I was able to run the show a lot more in high school. High school teachers have no idea what the accommodations were, and they never questioned it. I find that in university, professors are a lot stickier about the boundaries of accommodations."

Accommodation Usefulness

Despite the apparent easier-to-use process at high school, all the participants spoke positively about the university process once they understood it. They also said their university accommodations fit their needs better compared with their high school accommodations. One student said, "I think the accommodations I get in university help me be more independent." Others described the differences between what they said were generic high school accommodations and tailored university accommodations. One participant put it like this:

> The supports I had in high school were simply generic ones that were not updated, whether they helped me or not. In my experience, the supports at university are much better for me because they are tailored and individualized to my needs.

Some participants described receiving accommodations in high school that they did not need, while others described accommodation needs that went

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." As evidence, participants described being questioned by instructors when asked to grant an assignment extension or demanding medical notes when seeking permission for an exam deferral.

Participants singled out one accommodation as being particularly frustrating to secure from instructors: copies of notes or slide decks used during class instruction. One participant with low vision said that instructors often cite concerns about use of intellectual property or copyright when asked for copies of their slide notes. She would tell them, "That doesn't matter to me. I still need your slides because I can't see everything in class." Even when they agreed to share their materials, instructor forgetfulness was still a significant barrier. One participant highlighted this by saying, "The most frustrating thing is I have to keep reminding them by saying 'Hi, I'm in your class and I still need those slides,' but they still don't listen."

Two participants told detailed stories about situations with instructors that affected them in very significant ways. One participant described an instructor who did not respond to emails from her or the exam office about her accommodation arrangements. One day she arrived to write her exam at the exam office, but the office had not yet received the exam from the instructor. The participant said that later, in class, the instructor yelled at her about needing extra time in front of other students. Other students were so upset by the instructor's behavior, they complained to the department head. When asked if the matter was resolved, the participant said, "Yeah, the department took care of it, which I wanted them to because I had a whole semester yet with this professor. He never did this again."

Another participant with vision loss described being dismissed as a lab assistant by one of her instructors. When she started work, the participant did not ask for accommodations. "Once I finally got the job, I was scared if I made too much fuss about my disability, she wouldn't want me to continue." The participant made computer adjustments, such as enlarging text on the screen, that she felt enabled her to do reasonably good work. After about four months, the instructor suddenly stopped communicating with the participant despite many emails and phone calls. The participant described feeling very disappointed and upset, not knowing if she lost the position because of her disability or poor-quality work. "Even if I wasn't doing the job that she needed me to do, communicate with me. Tell me my strengths, my weaknesses, where I can improve."

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the experiences of students with disabilities with accommodations and accommodation processes as they transitioned from high school to university. Interviews with six participants with disabilities revealed four main themes: (a) disability identity, (b) transition preparedness, (c) accommodation process, and (d) instructor attitudes. In this section, key findings from the themes are combined and discussed, and practice implications highlighted.

Disability Identity, Autonomy, and Accommodations

First-year students discover that they have to play a more active role in their accommodation planning but ultimately find that this role, and the accommodations they receive, support their autonomy and disability identity at university.

For the purposes of this discussion, the term "disability identity" refers to participant descriptions of how they perceive themselves as a person with a disability in high school or university. It does not encompass the full complexity of the disability identity phenomenon.

Participants described learning only after they arrived at university about the active role they were expected to take in their accommodation planning. For example, they talked about having to initiate the accommodation process themselves and being uninformed about what to expect in meeting with access office staff. They also expressed surprise at being asked to describe specific details about how they experience their disability at school as part of access office staff selecting academic accommodations that would facilitate their equitable access, but not necessarily academic success. This is different from what students typically experience in high school where the accommodation process that is initiated and led by parents and teachers focuses on accommodations that support both their equitable access and academic success (Patrick & Wessel, 2013).

Despite being unprepared for the additional responsibility they had to assume in the accommodation process, participants acknowledged feeling good about having self-identified to the access office and having spoken up for themselves and their needs. Furthermore, all participants in this study reported satisfaction with their accommodations, and with how the accommodations supported their autonomy and disability identity at university. Specifically, they described feeling less stigmatized by their accommodations which were more stream-lined and inconspicuous at university than they were in high school.

The comfort that participants felt about disclosing their disability is in contrast with research which has largely shown that many students are uncomfortable with disclosing their disability at postsecondary, fearing stigma, embarrassment, and discrimination. This is especially true when students must confirm their disability by providing documentation (Barnard-Brak & Lechtenberger, 2010; Devlin & Pothier, 2006). However, more recent research has found that the environment in which students disclose their disability may mitigate these feelings. Smith et al. (2021) found that students were more comfortable with disclosing their disability to staff or instructors who they sensed were respectful and positive towards them and in private settings where their confidentiality was protected. The comfort expressed by the participants in this study was in relation to disclosing to professional staff in the access office during private appointments. It may not extend to disclosing to instructors.

The satisfaction with accommodations that participants described is like findings of survey research in which students with disabilities reported high or very high levels of satisfaction with the services and accommodations they received at university (Francis et al., 2018; Kurth & Mellard, 2006). One explanation for this high level of satisfaction is that accommodations approved at university are more tailored to the student's access needs compared with the more generic ones often arranged in high school (Bolt et al., 2011). It is also possible that by primarily targeting improved access, the right accommodations may support a student's autonomy and disability identity. One participant supported this when they said that the specificity of their accommodations helped them feel more independent at university. In turn, greater independence may help students feel better about using their accommodations thus enhancing confidence in their identity as a student with a disability.

Transition Preparedness

First year students are unprepared for the bureaucratic nature of the accommodation process, but ultimately find it fair and non-stigmatizing.

Participants in this study spoke of feeling unprepared for the formality of the accommodation process at university. For example, participants described being surprised about the significant emphasis the university placed on having current disability documentation to secure accommodations. Participants were also unprepared for instructors who relied exclusively on approval by the access office in responding to their queries about accommodations, unlike in high school where they could negotiate some accommodations directly with their teachers.

The experiences described by participants may be partly explained by previous research, which found that while transition planning is a requirement with high school IEPs and associated with positive postschool outcomes, nearly 30% of students with disabilities have little to no involvement in their transition planning, including discussions about their accommodation needs (Martin & Williams-Diehm, 2013). Other researchers have found that students do not receive the information they need about how to effectively utilize the disability related resources and supports available to them at university (Martinez et al., 2012). This leaves many university students with disabilities learning about the postsecondary accommodation process through trial and error or with help from parents (McCall, 2015).

Despite their lack of preparation, participants in this study expressed appreciation for the accommodation approval process once they became familiar with it. One participant explained that going through the process helped them to better understand how their accommodations and their disability fit together. In reviewing their disability documentation and describing how they experience their disability at school with access office staff, students may gain a better understanding of how this information links directly to the accommodations they need, and how their accommodations practically support their access to the learning environment. This improved understanding may help students come to view accommodation services as being supportive rather than simply gatekeeping service eligibility. Together, this supportive approach appears to contribute towards students ultimately finding the process fair and appropriate, thereby helping to reduce feelings of stigma and self-consciousness.

Instructor Attitudes

Students experience significantly negative attitudes from some university instructors when they ask for accommodations.

Participants in this study described interactions regarding accommodations with university instructors as largely positive and supportive. However, every participant said they had a negative experience with at least one of their instructors throughout their studies and, for a few, these experiences had a significant impact on them. Their experiences are supported by the findings of previous qualitative research using reflective journaling in which students with disabilities described most interactions with instructors as positive, with a few negative ones having significant effect on their overall university experience (Hong, 2015). They are also reflected in student persistence research which shows that students with disabilities

who report positive experiences with instructors report a better sense of belonging (Fleming et al., 2017; Patrick & Wessel, 2013)

Instructors may not know how to be of help or may be uncomfortable asking how they can be of help, especially if they have had little experience with people with disabilities. This is especially true if instructors do not understand the connection between the student's disability and their accommodations (Bolt et al., 2011). The experiences conveyed by participants in this study also suggest that some instructors may not fully appreciate the vulnerability that students with disabilities experience when speaking with them about their accommodations. Legal rights notwithstanding, the ease and consistency with which students receive their accommodations still depends greatly on instructor cooperation. It is not surprising, therefore, that students approach instructors about accommodations hoping for a positive response that will make the process a smooth one, a response that significantly influences the student's experience.

Practice Implications

The findings of this study have practice and training implications for disability services professionals and university instructors supporting the transition needs of students with disabilities.

Disability Services Professionals

These results suggest that successful transition from high school to university would be enhanced by collaborative programming that better prepares students with disabilities for transition. Postsecondary disability services professionals should collaborate with high school educators to jointly develop and deliver transition programming. Using pedagogical theory in self-advocacy, resiliency, and academic skill development, this programming should be grounded in experiential learning so that students can practice the skills necessary for successfully navigating the accommodation process. For example, using role plays, video making or practice interviews, students can learn how to disclose their disability and how it affects them in daily life and at school, discuss their disability and access needs with disability service personnel, and negotiate accommodations with instructors.

Collaboration between high school educators and disability service professionals on transition programming can also help reduce student confusion about the role of documentation in accommodation planning at university. Together, they can instill confidence by inviting students to read their documenta-

tion about their disability and functional limitations and learn how disability professionals link this information to recommended accommodations. This approach should be combined with safe and supportive opportunities for practicing how to articulate their lived experience of their disability clearly and confidently. Students should complete this transition programming understanding how good documentation and a clearly articulated lived experience can help them obtain the accommodations and supports they need for success at university.

Training for Instructors

The participants in this study shared stories that were powerful, instructive, and poignant. These stories, and the stories of other students with disabilities at universities, should be used to inform sensitivity and awareness training for instructors. In the fast-paced, resource-strapped, and competitive environment of academia, some instructors forget the power they hold over the lives of students, especially those with disabilities. Universities should develop online training programs that strategically enlist the lived experiences of real students with disabilities to teach instructors not just about rights and responsibilities, but how to motivate and inspire students with disabilities towards achieving their best. Lessons should include how to (a) respect and protect the dignity of students with disabilities while interacting with them and responding to requests for accommodations, (b) use the same skills they apply to their research and teaching like creativity, ingenuity, and innovation to remove barriers and improve access, (c) use academic accommodation data to inform universal instruction design in their courses, and (d) address individualized student accommodations needs through collaborative partnerships with disability services professionals.

Limitations and Future Research

The generalizability of this study is limited by its small sample size of self-selected participants in first-year only and data collected primarily from high schools and a single university in one province. Having only half of the participants review copies of their transcripts and theme summaries may also limit its generalizability. Participants recall may have been affected as they were interviewed a year or more after they transitioned from high school.

Further research should expand the sample size to include participants from high schools and universities across Canada. To address potential recall issues, participants should be interviewed in Grade 12 and again shortly after they register with the access office.

Interview data could also be enhanced with other qualitative data collection methods such as reflective journaling or focus groups.

Conclusion

This qualitative study interviewed six participants about their experiences with accommodations and accommodation processes as they transitioned from high school to university. Results revealed that: (a) first year students are unprepared for the bureaucratic nature of the accommodation process, but ultimately find it fair and non-stigmatizing; (b) first year students discover that they have to play a more active role in their accommodation planning but ultimately find that this role, and the accommodations they receive, positively supports their autonomy and disability identity at university and (c) some university instructors exhibit significantly negative attitudes towards students requiring accommodations. Practice recommendations call for disability service professionals to collaborate with high school educators to offer enhanced transition programming, and training for instructors that strategically employs the expressed experiences of students with disabilities to encourage sensitivity and awareness.

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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. How about in-class presentations or group work?
8. How did changes to your accommodations between high school and university affect your in-class behavior, such as where you sit in class, how you interact with the instructor and other students, or your note taking?
9. How did changes to your accommodations between high school and university affect your study habits at home?
10. What effect did changes to your accommodations have on how you related to other students? What about with your professors?
11. Did you select different courses or drop courses because of changes to your accommodations?
12. Have changes to your accommodations had any influence on decisions about your study program or major?
13. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experience at Queen's in relation to changes to your academic accommodations?

Is there anything else you want to tell me about coming to Queen's as a student with a disability?