

University challenges

By **Annie Makoff** - 5 months 1 week ago

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Traditionally, university was a gateway to employment. Those with a degree stood a better chance of landing a job than those who weren't university graduates. But even though more people are going to university than ever before – despite the eye-watering rise in tuition fees – there are currently nearly three million people unemployed in the UK. In the disabled community, just 48% are in some sort of employment.

Of course, not everyone is lucky enough to attend university and not everyone is suited to it. But for those who are, having access to every aspect of university life is a basic requirement. Universities are now obliged to comply with various legal requirements to ensure that students with disabilities can have the same experience as non-disabled students.

But are universities doing enough? Are they simply paying lip service to disability provision or are universities ensuring that staff attitudes and accessibility are top of their agendas?

Wheelchair-user Daniel Blake has nothing but praise for his university. Currently in his final year at Northumbria University where he is studying Sport Development, Daniel's experience as a disabled student has been a positive one.

Right from the start, he was provided with a 24-hour support package and a personal assistant to take lecture notes for him and accompany him to and from lessons. His room in halls is also fully accessible and every building within the university has ramps or lifts.

"The university dealt with all my needs pretty quickly," Daniel says. "As a disabled person you always have to be prepared for problems and obstacles – it's part of being disabled. I was slightly concerned before starting that there would be an issue, but the university has always been amazing with their provisions.

"I guess I got used to being a guinea pig in the mainstream schools and colleges I went to before, so finding out that other disabled people had gone to Northumbria before me was a relief."

Even attitudes of the staff towards his disability have been positive. When Daniel's course leader organised an activity field trip at the end of the first year which involved a lot of sports, he was encouraged to go.

"It would have been easy for them to tell me that it wouldn't be worth my going as I wouldn't be able to do many of the activities, but they didn't," he says.

But did Daniel have an easier experience because he'd already been through mainstream education? Nicki Cockburn who had a mix of mainstream and specialist education because of her blindness doesn't think so.

"It can be difficult going to university if you've only been in specialist disability education," she concedes, "but it's more about the university's attitude and provision than anything else."

Nicki studied Contemporary Arts at Manchester Metropolitan University back in 2001. The fact that there had only been one other blind student at the university 15 years previously didn't faze her.

"I was more anxious about what the social side would be like: how my peers would interact with me, and how quickly I'd make friends," she admits. "And actually, that was the one thing that I

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found difficult at university.”

Nicki was assigned a support worker early on and stayed in fully-accessible student accommodation that was specifically for disabled students. The maintenance team even installed a dog toilet outside the flat for her guide dog. But because her student flat wasn't anywhere near the busy student halls, Nicki felt isolated from the rest of her year.

She found her peers unwilling to speak to her when she attended lectures and seminars which she believes was down to the presence of her support worker which may have put students off approaching her.

Although Nicki made a lot of friends outside of lessons, she found the attitude of the other students on her course “difficult”.

“I used to cry heaps because hardly anyone spoke to me. I think I relied too much on my guide dog, and of course my support worker being there, I guess it just put people off. I used to think that I wouldn't be able to go up to people and start a conversation because of my blindness.”

However, Nicki insists that rather it being an issue with people's attitudes, it was down to her own lack of confidence and shyness.

“It wasn't until I left university and reflected on my experience that I realised that I had allowed my blindness to define me,” she explains. “I used to get upset rather than problem solve. I even stopped doing one module because one of the tutors wasn't very supportive of my needs.”

Nicki is due to start an MA in Broadcast Journalism in a few months' time and is optimistic that her new-found confidence will enable her to have a much more inclusive and active time at university.

Actress and disability campaigner Genevieve Barr believes that the lack of confidence which Nicki experienced is one of the key issues affecting disabled students today. But according to Genevieve, it's not enough to improve access and attitudes towards disability at university, disabled students also need to be equipped for a better future when they leave university. As an ambassador to the Frontrunner for Disabled Students course run by leadership development organisation Common Purpose in association with Santander, Genevieve has seen first-hand the impact the courses have had on disabled students.

The three-day leadership course (details at frontrunner.commonpurpose.org/disabled-students) which is available free to disabled students currently at university anywhere in the UK, aims to empower students whilst encouraging them to reach for their potential.

Focussing each day on a different aspect of leadership, the course has inspired students to set up their own businesses, work as disability ambassadors within Parliament (both at Holyrood and Westminster) and many have become welfare and equality officers at their universities.

“With the recession and the problems with gaining employment, you need to do everything you can to make your CV as appealing as possible,” Genevieve says.

“Common Purpose offers leadership development courses that give people the skills, connections and inspiration they need to become better leaders both at work and in society. The relationships they form within the course – and their access to over 35,000 Common Purpose alumni worldwide afterwards – means there is a great support network to continue to motivate them beyond the course.”

Perhaps what is so refreshing about the Frontrunner course is that the content isn't disability-related, just specifically for disabled students in terms of access and disability provision. Students meet leaders from a range of organisations and sectors such as Santander, Oxfam and The Observer newspaper, as well as from the local police and fire services.

“The curriculum of the course is focussed entirely on leadership, not disability,” Genevieve explains. “It's up to every individual to determine what they want to get out of the course; whether their disability influences that or not is entirely up to them.”

Common Purpose has been running leadership courses for over 21 years and started offering these free courses for disabled students in early 2011, since partnering with Santander.

Wales-based Grace Quantock (pictured below) is one such disabled graduate who would have really benefited from the leadership course had it started several years earlier. Graduating with a degree in Medieval Women's History in 2009 from the University of Reading, Grace went on to start up her own business, despite a series of serious debilitating illnesses that had threatened not only her degree, but her life.

Diagnosed with several auto immune illnesses during her time at university, Grace was too sick to attend lectures, write and research her own essays, let alone sit up in a chair for even a few minutes at a time. But Grace says that the University of Reading bent over backwards to accommodate her needs: they allowed her husband to attend lectures and take notes for her, they got her a computer with dictation software and one lecturer even brought a camp bed into the room where she sat her exams.

“They did absolutely everything they could to support me,” Grace recalls. “Nobody made me feel like I shouldn't be there. Getting a degree was my childhood dream and I was determined

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to see it through.”

Grace’s decision to set up her own business was a brave one. Healing Boxes, a not-for-profit organisation which sends gifts to people in hospital with chronic illness, came from Grace’s desire to help others who have been in hospital for prolonged periods of time.

“I had no business skill whatsoever,” she says. “But I had no doubt that I’d manage it.”

Genevieve believes that the leadership course would have been ideal for someone like Grace who was already developing her own leadership style.

“It motivates and encourages students who are currently at university. Particularly in this climate of unemployment, it’s so important that students leave feeling motivated about their future. Thanks to Santander, who sponsored this course, disabled students are being given the aspiration to try and improve conditions at university, in the workplace and improve themselves. Over the course of the last few years, it’s been truly inspirational to see our Common Purpose graduates help benefit other disabled students at university.”

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