

Transition to University: supporting students who are new to university

Making the transition to University life can be hard for all students: getting used to living away from home for the first time, adjusting to a new learning environment and new academic expectations, the pressure felt to make friends, among many others challenges.

This time may be particularly challenging for students with disabilities. Students commonly have been used to parental support to help them with tasks related to the impact of their disability, and the increased independence of University life can be challenging – for e.g. liaising with new personal care providers, liaising with DAS to put in place study support, applying for DSA funding are all added burdens disabled students may have to manage which their non-disabled peers do not.

Principles

Some principles to be aware of when planning support for new students:

- Wherever possible adjustments to teaching, accommodation and access should already have been put in place by the time term starts with enhanced orientation planned where appropriate;
- Sometimes the transition support required will already have been recommended in the SSP prior to arrival at university, but the college and department should not wait for a finalised SSP document before putting in place appropriate support for the student;
- Before DSA funding becomes available, students can still access support via DAS that is recommended in their Study Needs Assessment Report. This might be a note-taker or a specialist mentor, for example.
- Mentoring and other non-medical help that is needed should be in place for the start of the course. For some students, this will be front-loaded to provide extra support with settling in to University. For example, the Disability Advisory Service may arrange for specialist mentoring for a student with autism to be concentrated in Michaelmas term, with less frequent meetings in later terms. What is appropriate depends on the student's preferences and also their needs. Students often prefer to begin with more modest support that promotes independence. It's important that the level of support is reviewed during the first term to check whether it needs to be increased, or can be scaled back.

Common adjustments

Common adjustments that are put in place to assist with student's transition to University are:

early arrival into their accommodation or

- an orientation visit as an offer holder.

Students may wish that a parent stays with them in this period to help them get used to their environment, especially where there is a sensory or mobility impairment, or other complex needs. Early visits as an offer-holder enable the student to get to know key people and places, so that when the course starts they have a strong base of familiarity on which to build. It can also enable them to identify, in conjunction with Disability Coordinators and their disability advisor, any additional challenges they have in their specific environment of the college and department, whilst there is still time for adjustments to be put in place prior to arrival.

Students with Visual Impairments often benefit from early arrival into their accommodation (up to 1 week early). This enables them to learn the key routes within college, and between teaching venues. If they have a guide dog, this provides time for the dog to be trained in the environment and for the student to meet with key individuals in the college and department, which will help them feel more settled in their first few weeks, when there are getting used to managing their impairment within a new environment (for example, using new equipment, accessing library catalogues, having building inductions for each building they will access, getting to know their study assistant).

- Some students will benefit from a tailored induction program: that might include 1:1 building inductions, access to a student helper/mentor, introductory meetings with Disability Coordinators and College Librarians, and tailored induction materials/documentation.

Students with the following conditions are mostly likely to need tailored support during transition to university:

- mental health disabilities, such as chronic anxiety and eating disorders
- visual impairments
- neurodiverse conditions such as autism
- mobility impairments

Decisions about early arrival or enhanced orientation should be made on a case by case basis: individual students will have differing needs (for example any two students with autism will have very different needs relating to transition to university).

Further resources

Good practice example: [Supporting students with the transition to University](#)

[Guidance on supporting transition to University](#) by the charity Student Minds