

Studying sports and exercise in England: exploring Level 5 students' lived experiences of the barriers to their progression and attainment

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Abstract This discussion piece is a summary of an investigation into the perceived barriers to progression and attainment in Level 5 sport and exercise students (SPO). The study aimed to contribute to the University of Northampton's (UON) strategic aims concerning access and participation, progression, retention and achievement. Using semi-structured interviews it investigated student interpretations of barriers to their progression and attainment. The study aimed to contribute to the gaps identified in the university's Access and Participation Plan (APP). The APP identifies characteristics that are more likely than others to, individually and in combination, impact attainment and progression in university. The APP specifically details access, non-continuation, attainment and progression. Furthermore, it highlights the at-risk groups: Global Ethnic Majority (GEM) students, mature students, disabled students and care leavers. The results of this investigation reveal a complex set of circumstances that contribute to progression, attainment and learning at university. These include balancing external commitments, access to and use of support services, and the need for teaching staff to be approachable and empathetic.

Key words Access and Participation; attainment; achievement

Introduction

This investigation used a phenomenological approach to data gathering and subsequent interpretations, offering a rich and unique account of the barriers perceived by students in sport and exercise. This lived experience allows understanding, from a first-person perspective, to develop a deeper appreciation of experiences. Phenomenology is the study of experiences

gathered from those who have engaged in them first-hand, and in understanding individuals' 'intentionality', or how experiences are directed through content or meaning, challenging assumptions and learning 'what it means to live, work, play and learn in our world' (Dall 'Alba, 2009, p.1).

To this end this discussion piece explores a study that aimed to investigate the lived experiences of Level 5 SPO students and their interpretations of barriers to progression and attainment.

Background and context

The University of Northampton (UON) is in the East Midlands, in England. UON's undergraduate portfolio encompasses approximately 170 courses, including higher national diplomas, foundation degrees and single honours degrees.

UON has a commitment to improving opportunities for students from the wards of Northamptonshire that are within the lowest 40% indices of multiple deprivation (IMD) and those located in Participation of Local Areas (POLAR) Q1 and 2 wards. POLAR groups see the UK divided into 'local areas' used for collecting statistics. In this context POLAR measures are used to indicate how likely young people are to participate in higher education; Q1 represents the lowest rate of participation.

The University of Northampton's 2020-25 APP presents some stark statistics regarding the gaps between GEM and white students and the challenges faced by white males from IMD Q1 and Q2. The University's student body consists of 39.3% GEM students which is 5% higher than the sector average. The data highlights that outcomes for GEM students across multiple intersections of disadvantage, especially IMD Q1 and Q2, are significantly below those of white students. White males from IMD Q1 and Q2 face significant barriers to continuing in higher education, with long-term negative trends in the proportion of UON students from these groups that withdraw.

UON's priority for APP student success is to improve the attainment rates for all home GEM (UK citizens of global ethnic majority heritage) students by closing the gap with home white students' good-degree outcomes. In addition, reversing the

negative trend in IMD Q1 and Q2 GEM continuation rates remains a priority.

Improving levels of continuation for males from IMD Q1 and Q2 requires targeted investment that will contribute to improving GEM continuation and provide white working-class males from IMD Q1 and Q2 with additional support to overcome barriers to success.

Research approach

Level 5 students were selected for this study due to their experience of one year in higher education and an understanding of the teaching, learning and assessment practices associated with university study. Semi-structured interviews were used to understand the complexities of success in higher education and to offer a first-hand, lived-experience account of student perceptions and interpretations of the barriers. The sample of this study is small but representative of the wider population of SPO. The total sample was 15 Level 5 SPO students (two females and 13 males) and the age range was 19-24 years. Nine students lived at home while studying and 13 were the first to attend university in their family. All entered university via BTEC sport route. Two participants identified as GEM and two had been diagnosed with dyslexia.

Data analysis

This investigation yielded qualitative data in so much that it reported feelings, reflections and opinion. The project used member checking and participation ratification of their accounts. This is commonly used in phenomenological research to validate and confirm the accuracy of the recount.

An inductive coding procedure completed independently by three researchers, then subsequently via a second round of coding, aimed to consolidate and agree the overarching themes. The coding structure was intended to emerge from the data in line with an interpretive paradigm.

We aligned to the analysis approach of Braun and Clarke (2020) using reflexive thematic analysis; this allows a pragmatic and flexible approach to analysis, encouraging reflexivity in the

development of themes. The analysis yielded five overarching themes: **transition, emotions, communication, balance and support.**

Results

The underlying principle of phenomenological research is to present the participants' data in a way that is as closely aligned to the participants' responses as possible; it is the participant's account with as little influence by the researcher as possible (Willig, 2013). As a research team we elected to present the results as vignettes that amalgamated the responses of our participants into the five identified themes. They are written in the first person, using our participant's words and aim to demonstrate a range of student types, challenges and experiences.

Theme 1: Transition

This vignette represents students' approaches to and expectations of moving to university. It represents those students in our sessions who feel unable to ask questions and who feel they do not understand, and the anxieties that accompany transition to and through university.

'I went to a local college, and I studied a BTEC sport qualification. I wasn't going to, like, join uni at all. And then it kind of got to about two months before and I was like, I think I want to do something. I thought everyone else seems to be doing it - so I'll follow suit. I applied through Clearing. It was the closest university, so it helped with costs of living.'

'I had been told about what to expect from "lectures" from friends and I was [a] little worried about whether I would cope with them. So, it's been, it's been a challenge. It is quite hard sometimes you feel like you're holding people back if you keep asking questions. The context and understanding were not always clear...and I thought that I was being stupid.'

Theme 2: Emotions

This vignette represents many of the anxieties our students described relating to assessment and achievement. These focus on meeting deadlines, confidence in their ability and understanding the structure and content of their degree.

'I was a little bit worried and nervous... a fresh new start. I didn't do very well. I think the word was "scraped through" sixth form. My mum was surprised, and proud, no one in my family has been to university before so we were excited as a family. In terms of assessment, I was concerned when I came to university about the submission rules, before a deadline could easily be moved but now that's not the case. I had to adapt very quickly and I am still anxious with this aspect of the course. It does begin to influence my confidence during sessions when I don't understand something straight away. Moving on to third year I have found it frustrating not being able to see exactly what is included in the modules from both content and assessment perspectives as I like to feel prepared.'

Theme 3: Communication

This vignette demonstrates the ways in which students communicate with their peers, lecturers and wider university community. Our students were clear that they all valued face-to-face sessions over online learning and how the lecturer's role is vital to reassure students, to guide and consolidate learning and identify misconceptions.

'I didn't realise how much I valued being in a room with lecturers and classmates and thinking about it I have learned so much more from conversations in the corridors after sessions than I did in my entire first year, I like interacting with the lecturers. I enjoy interacting with my classmates. I prefer having open discussions and they don't happen online. I consider myself technology literate, but I am still anxious about using it as it is such an important part of being successful.'

Theme 4: Balance

This vignette represents the ways in which our participants described 'balance'. Most of our students work either part-time or full-time and this impacts upon the time they can commit to their degree. This vignette also represents the ways in which our students describe their achievement and aspirations.

'The locality was the overriding factor as it would allow me to keep costs down due to transport needs. I want to do as well as I can on the course, but I've got a job. The truth is that I am just happy to do okay as I need a proper life. Family friends having time, social life, that kind of thing. Listen, I'm not really a high achiever. I think that's mainly because I'm,

I know, it's bad. But I set myself just that to get a pass. Third year worries me though with how much everything counts, and I can't mess up. When I am in Northampton it is entirely for uni purposes. My family lives in London, I make sure to get all my assignments done while I was still in Northampton, because I still see my home was my place of rest. So, I see Northampton as, just about my academics and I see my home as that, my rest place.'

Theme 5: Support

This vignette is designed to represent students who have additional needs, the challenges they face and the support they seek. Many of our students do not make use of the support services available to them and often seek support from their friends and families.

'When it comes to help and support, I mainly go to my friends. I can also count on my family, my mum's always there to kind of reassure me again. If unsure still, I would more likely go to a module lecturer. I would not choose the Personal Tutor at uni as I don't know them very well. I am dyslexic, it's been a massive life change. I was diagnosed in my first year at uni, and it's been like so much more difficult than I thought. I hadn't reached out to any sort of learner support services until I was diagnosed with dyslexia, but everyone has been really kind and helpful. My course mates are great – we've got a very good relationship in the fact that we can support each other and because we're doing the same course.'

Conclusions

This investigation aimed to contribute to UON's strategic aims concerning access and participation, progression, retention and achievement. It investigated Level 5 SPO student's interpretations of barriers to their progression and attainment. Findings demonstrate a complex set of circumstances that influence student experience: managing workload, use of support services and aspirations of students that conflict with university priorities. Barriers to progression and attainment are numerous; our students tell us they are balancing several commitments, and often their degree is not their main priority.

Our students tell us that they measure their achievement differently to the university, and for many just completing a degree is accomplishment enough. They tell us that they value

face-to-face learning and approachable staff, who are knowledgeable and offer reassurance, and who acknowledge effort and success. The sport and exercise course uses a culture of no assumptions whereby key words and phrases, specialist language and concepts are explained, applied and used in a context to support understanding.

Students will seek support from people they know and trust, and they do not make good use of support services, either through lack of awareness or reluctance. Sport and exercise have a 'green-lighting approach' that involves accompanied referrals and provides introductions to the support services that our students are reluctant to use.

In sport and exercise we have introduced three leadership roles: these academics work together alongside our support teams and students to plan a personal tutoring curriculum that aligns with pinch points in the year, involves student mentors to support peers, and uses the achievement data to identify 'at-risk students' for support.

The intended outcomes of this investigation were to raise awareness of the complex set of circumstances students in higher education may face, and to offer colleagues the means by which they may be able to support their students and represent their voice in their teaching, learning and assessment practices. Our conclusions centre on the role of academic and pastoral support, assumptions about the priorities of students and practical interventions to support achievement. *Jackson, Capper and Blake, (2022)* describe ways in which students experience a sense of belonging, which includes support systems that are inclusive and a shared responsibility across the university community. The results of this investigation have informed institutional practice in sharing barriers and solutions across faculties.

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