Podcast: Supporting Access to University for Young People with Additional Needs (Transcript for Part 1)

Alice: Hi, thank you very much for joining us. I'm here with two people who I'm hoping we can have a little chat about university for people with additional needs in particular, because our project Time to Talk where we've been meeting a lot of young people from across the country who are applying to uni regularly facing that big issue about having interviews or finding out more about which universities are going to be best for them and most accessible.

So, I'm Alice McColl and I'm the Development Lead for Children & Young People at NDTi. Good morning, Laura, Laura Kendall. Really glad to have you here from Staffordshire University. And Ikra thank you for joining us. You are, I think we could call you a consultant now because you are someone who knows a lot about Time to Talk and has had lots of good ideas about how we can develop the work. Ikra, do you want to just introduce yourself briefly before.?

Ikra: Hi, I'm Ikra. I am applying for uni for next year. It's interesting at the same time, but I'm nervous.

Alice: Yeah, you're applying for uni. Have you had any interviews yet?

Ikra: No, I need to wait on all my offers first.

Alice: Yeah. So, you and I met through Time to Talk and it was our chats that made me realise that some of the questions you were asking about university and finding out about university were really useful ones that other people could use as well.

Which is why we've invited Laura here today. So, Laura, would you like to tell us a bit about your work and the project that you're working on before we sort of go on to specifically look at questions for young people to ask before they go to uni.

Laura: Yeah, no problem. Hi. So, my name's Laura and I work for a project called Start to Success.

So, what Start to Success is: it's a joint project between Staffordshire and Keele University. And we are looking specifically at improving student mental health across FE and Higher Education. So, by doing that, we're looking at supporting transition. So supporting transitions from college or into university, we're

looking at then the journey through university and what's needed. And then further to that, the transition out of the university alongside that we also have a number of other strands and focuses. So we also have a strand which focuses on working with the NHS and creating better opportunities and links between mental health services in particular for students.

So improving the access into those services, we've got a stream of work looking arts. For an activity, so looking at sport and exercise for wellbeing, we've got an officer for peer support. We've got an officer for coaching, and we've also got an officer for foundation year and another officer for progression and success throughout university.

So we do have quite a wide range of different focuses, looking at a kind of whole community approach to how we can tackle student mental health, but also how we can get all the parts of the community involved. So whether that be the local council, whether that be or NHS, whether that be other local charities and services. We don't want this just to be, well, the student services at the universities are doing a couple of bits. We do want to look at this as a whole and we can be quite objective. So it's really interesting to have this meeting today because we can really go through all the perspectives of what might need to be looked at.

So my role specifically is working with FE students. So students looking at transitioning into higher education. So I look at support in the wellbeing of students in college, so general day-to-day, building that knowledge base of mental health, looking at resources that can support their wellbeing and then also look at how I can best support that transition into university.

I do also look at how students in our FE can look at a transition maybe into work or into, kind of, general life, whatever they're choosing to do. I believe that those resources should be universal. So some of the things that I've looked at specifically in my role are things like declaring your mental health on your UCAS and reasons to do that and what the benefits of that can be. I've looked at making it clearer about disabled students allowance and DSA applications, because there can be a little bit of confusion around that. So debunking some of those myths and also looking at making support services at university a bit clearer for students.

Personally, my background is more in mental health, over education. So even me just coming into our student support services team, at times I thought, "oh gosh, you know, who's what, who's where" has been really important for me to look at how we not only choose a university on a course, for example, which obviously is really important, but actually how we make decisions on university

based on our mental health, on our wellbeing, through annual the additional needs we might have, to really know what questions to ask, to know how to kind of look, look at how universities might advertise those services and to feel really confident in making those connections with the university before you start, and then really putting you in the driver's seat of your own support really, and really empowering that person to make informed decisions about university.

So, what's important to say is I don't have any ulterior motive to try and just get people to Staffs or Keele, my motive is simply and just really filling in the gaps between, wellbeing and mental health and really support in that transition for a wide range of needs.

So hopefully that gives you a bit of an idea. I could probably go on and on, but I won't do that!

Alice: Useful. Thank you. That gives a good overview of what you do. And when we met, we talked about that Time to Talk is online support for young people during COVID-19. And a lot of the focus has been on mental health and building their resilience, helping them feel motivated.

I think at a time when it's actually really difficult for all of us to stay motivated and actually having these targets to fill in UCAS forms and to apply to uni is really hard, really hard. Ikra, I don't know if you want to say anything about your experience?

Ikra: Yeah, it was interesting to see what you do. COVID has been hard for everyone. But how does a young person with a disability pick which university would be best for them?

I can't, I can't decide because having anxiety it's going to be hard. So I can't decide.

Alice: That's a really good question. It takes us right back to the very beginning about where do you start? Laura, have you got any thoughts about that?

Laura: So I think your question is in terms of how do you start even make those decisions or what to look for?

So for example, I think what I would say first and foremost is look at the information that the universities that you have applied to will send out to you. So I'm imagining that in regards to your UCAS application, you will have ticked the box that has asked about any additional needs. So I know that at Staffs what we do is anybody that has texts that on their UCAS, they will

automatically get sent to them from the university that's even before they have decided to accept that place. So that isn't dependent on if you're going there, it is simply to give you information about additional needs, the disability services, how we can aim to best support you. So that will be giving you a first overview. So I'm not sure what stage you're at, whether any universities have sent you any information.

Ikra: I got the email from two universities saying that we're going to give you and offer it's best to book an appointment with the disability team. I did that but they said because of COVID we aren't inviting anyone in. So, it's most likely in the summer, if we are allowed to invite anyone in, we will invite you to have that look around. On my, when I did my statement, I wrote on my personal statement that I am visually impaired, I was thinking that's not a good idea because they might not offer me, but that has helped and some have offered me a place.

Alice: You put that you're visually impaired in your personal statement, but weren't sure, but you did do that in the end, is that right?

Ikra: Yep. I did.

Alice: And you, your feeling is that that's been a good thing.

Ikra: Yeah.

Laura: That's quite an interesting point for me as well, Ikra. So what made you kind of decide to take that step to declare about those additional needs in your personal statement? Just from my point of view, it's something that I've been encouraging students to do to not only tick a box, but to actually kind of ingrain that in their personal statement as well, and not feel kind of that they shouldn't.

Ikra: The top part was my story like what I experience, why I want to do this course and then somewhere in there I wrote that going through all this on top I am visually impaired. Even if I don't get a place is better for them knowing they not.

Alice: That's really good to hear and exactly what I'm hoping we can encourage other people to realise when they listen to this. Laura, what's your thoughts on that?

Laura: I mean, I personally believe it should be encouraged for a couple of reasons, like you said, so first of all, it's, it's about outlining, you know, you know, your story and those things that do have an impact on your life, whether

that be positive or negative. And it's about then giving that information over so then that university gives you that control over what, what you want. You can be more then in control of what support you one. I think a lot of the time people I've spoken to will shy away from being open about their needs in their personal statement, because they're worried about any kind of discrimination or they're worry that it might impact on them being getting through to the course when that's absolutely not the case, you know, you cannot be discriminated against in what you put on that personal statement.

And I think it really shows a lot about your personality. And I think it shows a lot of confidence. I think it shows that way that, you know, some people do hold these things back that might then become a little bit of a difficulty to them. And then actually later down the line, it's harder to address. Alongside it being a really empowering decision, I think, to be able to share your story, to share, you know, those experiences you've had. I think it shows that it's really empowering to other people that there won't be a discrimination against that.

And actually, it helps then the course leaders and who might be delivering that course to support you in the best way possible and go, okay so I've seen your personal statement and you wrote this and how would you feel about X, Y, and Z? And you can have a more honest conversation then about the support instead of just the basic, oh, we offer this, do you want that - it's then a bit more personal and tailored to you?

I think it's really brave because it's easy to say write all this in your personal statement, but there can be nerves and there can be worries about that. So I think you, as an example, to doing that and how you made that decision to write that information, I think, I think it's really important. I think it's something that universities will start to see more and more, and I think it should very much be encouraged to include that information, not only in just the tick box, but in that personal statement as well.

Alice: *That's fantastic. I mean, Ikra, you are to be congratulated for how, and I happened to know through working with you through Time to Talk, just how much you keep going at things when barriers are put in your way.*