

Assessing social work students' satisfaction with educational transitions within reasonable adjustments

Paula Beesley^{1,*} , Ged McGurn¹ , Anna Walkden²

¹ School of Health and Community Studies, Leeds Beckett University, Leeds LS1 3HE, UK

² Lancashire County Council, Preston PR1 8XJ, UK

* Corresponding author: Paula Beesley, p.h.beesley@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

CITATION

Beesley P, McGurn G, Walkden A. Assessing social work students' satisfaction with educational transitions within reasonable adjustments. *Forum for Education Studies*. 2026; 4(2), 4090. <https://doi.org/10.59400/fes4090>

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 25 February 2026

Revised: 7 May 2026

Accepted: 14 May 2026

Available online: 21 May 2026

COPYRIGHT



Copyright © 2026 Author(s).
Forum for Education Studies is published by Academic Publishing Pte. Ltd. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license.
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Abstract: Transitions in social work education constitute the process of change when starting a new university, course, year, module and placement. It is important that transition planning work is embedded in the support provision for professional students and is well-coordinated to enable students to engage effectively with all learning opportunities. This research was funded by Leeds Beckett University Teaching Excellence Project with the aim of exploring barriers and good practice to understand optimal transition support to enhance engagement and positive outcomes for students requiring a reasonable adjustment. The data was collected through completion of a mixed-methods survey in the form of a written questionnaire or an interactive interview based on the questionnaire, with 19 social work students from one English university responding. The data was thematically analysed and the themes of 'preparation', 'staff understanding' and 'student coping strategies' emerged. It is recommended that teaching staff, tutors and practice educators receive specific training on localised reasonable adjustment policy and on the impact that being neurodivergent, having a physical disability, physical health or mental health issue has on students' ability to engage with learning opportunities. In addition, teaching staff should provide reasonable adjustment-friendly practice, where tutors and practice educators take time at the start of working with a student to familiarise themselves with the individual student's reasonable adjustment needs and support students in developing coping strategies that enable them to be prepared for transition.

Keywords: transitions; social work education; learning; support; communication; reasonable adjustment

1. Introduction

It is important that transition work is embedded in the support provision for professional students and is well-coordinated and effective. Whilst the need for effective transition work is known [1], there is relatively little written in this field on students' experiences of transition and their satisfaction with the process on professional courses such as social work. Indeed, it is recommended that individual universities develop their own exploration of programme specific transition work for students with additional needs and cultivate adaptive in-house systems that address disability, health and wellbeing [2].

The research team were granted a small research grant by Leeds Beckett University Teaching Excellence Project, which funded a recent alumnus with a complex reasonable adjustment as an expert to participate in research development, data collection and

a conference presentation. The aim of the research was to contribute to knowledge of current practices in support at key transitions for social work students requiring a reasonable adjustment by exploring students' experiences. This included consideration of students' transition to university, between levels within a social work degree, and when starting placement. The research explored barriers and good practice to understand optimal transition support to enhance engagement and positive outcomes for students requiring a reasonable adjustment. The research was timely as it responded to the Advance HE and Disabled Students Commission [3] call to work with students requiring a reasonable adjustment to develop a more robust support mechanism in higher education and university provision.

There is a growing research base on the impact of student transitions within higher education and limits that transition work can have on student success. There is significant consideration of the institutional complexities and challenges that are faced. A report by TASO [4] highlights limitations of transition support, exploring institution level concerns of resources, reduction and restrictions placed on funding to meet the needs of a growing number of disabled students. It is reported [4] that a full evaluation of transition support is still emerging, and there is still a perceived lack of confidence among researchers to link reasonable adjustment plans to student short- and longer-term outcomes. Furthermore, a recent evidence review [5] found that disabled people, including students at university, should have individual support to enhance confidence and outcomes.

Research examining transitions within professional programmes like social work is strengthening, but there is clearly a need for further enquiry. The strengths of neuro-diverse students in social work education have been explored, which highlighted the stigma and barriers this group faces [6]. This research maintains that transition support is underdeveloped, and many students feel underprepared, with universities focusing too much on individual adaptation rather than a social approach that removes disabling barriers. It is noted that effective learning support needs to be co-produced and institution-wide [6] provided in a way that is responsive to change and allows fluid supportive movements between key transition points in the student journey. Professional and vocational programmes span both university and external placement provision, increasing the numerous complex movements to a state of almost continuous transition, making transition an intersection between individual change and wider strategic and institutional elements.

This study addresses this research gap by exploring key transition points within the social work training journey, focusing on students' experiences of transition and their support planning. In doing so, it highlights the significance of well-managed preparation and self-advocacy and offers practice recommendations to enhance transition support within social work education.

1.1. Transitions

Change can be difficult for people and, whilst underlined by excitement at new possibilities, can also be tinged with fear and anxiety about what might or might not happen. Transition here is defined as the process of change from an existing situation

to a different and new situation that involves a change in practical, environmental, and social circumstances. The transition from a school or work environment to university is a significant change in most students' lives; it is this transition that most of the literature focuses on [7]. Students often report finding it difficult to embrace the pedagogical demands of university, including independent and less structured learning, and value a period of support in their transition [8]. Nevertheless, transitions within university can be challenging, as there will be different expectations in each new year or module [9].

The 'Three Phases of Transition' [1] provided a useful theoretical understanding of human response to change. The first stage of transition is seen as that of 'ending' the previous situation. It is not unusual for a person to feel safe and knowledgeable in known surroundings, routine and position. As such, students may not want to leave a space where they feel confident and comfortable and may need support to move forward or reassurance that they will learn new knowledge and skills, and experience personal growth [7] by challenging themselves with a new phase.

When beginning a transition [1] argued that people move into the 'neutral zone', where they are likely to be anxious, confused or uncertain as they have new systems to understand and familiarise themselves with. Bridges [1] argued that a person can become stuck in the neutral zone where they feel overwhelmed by new information or reluctant to engage with it as they wish to return to the endings stage. It is here that the support for transitions is critical. Finally, people in transition enter 'new beginnings', where they have accepted the new stage in their life and are embracing the transition. They will often be building on existing skills and addressing areas for development and are likely to be enthusiastic and open to learning.

This model supports the need for effective guidance throughout the practical, environmental, and social change along with recognition of potential trepidation that needs to be supported to allow the required progression from 'endings' to 'new beginnings' when transitioning to a new course, year, module or placement. Social work's philosophy toward continuing professional development in the Professional Capability Framework [10] is based on ongoing transition through social work education and social work career progression, so it is particularly relevant.

Transition into and through social work education is nuanced and individual. No two students experience transition in the same way. The ongoing nature of transition from pre-entry through to final placement occurs within a context of continual change and is shaped by tight time schedules that require repeated adaptations. At each point, the significance of transitions shifts as expectations, roles, and requirements grow, including during key movements such as pre-entry and admission, early academic engagement, progression points between years, readiness for practice, first placement, and final placement. This process is further influenced by time pressures, resource constraints, and wider logistical and organisational factors, all of which can disrupt what should ideally be a managed and supportive journey.

Transitions for students requiring reasonable adjustments

Transition support is more important than ever for students requiring a reasonable adjustment. Disabled students can excel in their studies when their support needs are met through the use of reasonable adjustments [3], which help students to remain

engaged with their learning and free of preventable distractions, for example, anxiety about transitions. However, students requiring reasonable adjustments often have to overcome more obstacles and invest more time and effort to achieve their goals [11]. Where additional support needs have been considered, understood and accounted for in the early stages of university life, students feel more able to access learning effectively [12]. Students requiring a reasonable adjustment want communication, consistency, certainty and choice, each of which can be applied to transitions [13]. Furthermore, transition planning is crucial to student continuity, completion and attainment [12], each an important indicator of academic success [14].

“For disabled students to excel, their needs and support requirements should be met so that they can fully engage with their learning and achieve positive outcomes without unnecessary and stressful distraction” [3] (p. 11).

In the academic year 2024/2025 in the United Kingdom (UK), 20% of home students declared that they had a reasonable adjustment [15]. The Equality Act 2010 [16] requires education service providers to make reasonable adjustments to enable students to engage with learning. It is recommended that universities provide focused, tailored and well-coordinated adjustments to students, with attention given to individual needs and the normalisation of wellbeing issues [2,3,17]. This is achieved where students requiring a reasonable adjustment self-advocate their needs, while being guided and supported by university staff [18]. This is implemented by assessment of need with Leeds Beckett University Disability Support Services, where the student’s Reasonable Adjustment Plan (RAP) outlines the support and reasonable adjustments recommended to enable the student to engage equally with peers without a reasonable adjustment within learning and assessment. This can also be referred to as a Learning Access Plan (LAP) or Academic Accommodation (AA). However, it is important to note that for a student to request a reasonable adjustment, they do not need to have a diagnosis, nor indeed to have been assessed, as the case of *The University of Bristol v Dr Robert Abrahart* [19] established the precedent to provide reasonable adjustments to all students where requested.

Professional qualifications are difficult to access for people who may need a reasonable adjustment, yet these groups bring much-needed knowledge and strengths to any course [20], and this should not be constrained. Effective transitions work is a prerequisite for any reasonable adjustment in professional courses, yet little is written. Peer mentoring has been found to support transitions in social work education [21,22], but this has been in relation to all students without specific consideration of the needs of students requiring a reasonable adjustment. Reflective accounts by students requiring a reasonable adjustment reflect on the importance of preparation and the impact of shame of having a reasonable adjustment [23] and the importance of disability inclusion and equitable social work education [24].

The social model of disability [25] maintains that it is the environment, society and attitudes that disable the person, in this case, the social work student. It is argued that transitions support addresses the student’s individual needs within a wider system

and empowers the student to engage effectively; and hence, appropriate and effective transitions work must be sought to ensure equal access [25, 26], including in our example, access to social work education. An effective transitions approach needs to be developed that accounts for and embeds a more knowledge-based and effective service for those with a reasonable adjustment [3]. However, this knowledge base needs to be developed by and with students requiring a reasonable adjustment to ensure that their voice is heard as it is their perspective that will inform practice.

2. Methods

This study adopted a mixed-methods survey design, whereby quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently through a single survey instrument. It is noted that it was, however, a predominantly qualitative research project. This approach enabled the researchers to gain both a broad overview of students' satisfaction with transition support and more direct insight into their experiences of transition. The quantitative component consisted of Likert-scale responses relating to satisfaction across key transition points, while the qualitative component invited participants to reflect on what worked well and what could be improved. Quantitative data was summarised using frequencies and percentages to show patterns of satisfaction across different transition stages.

The research team were mindful that the research sought to gather the responses of students requiring a reasonable adjustment, often including students who might find it difficult to access or concentrate on a written questionnaire, or alternatively may not wish to engage in an interactive interview. As such, it was agreed that research participants would be offered the choice of accessing the questionnaire independently or working through the questionnaire with a researcher who would ask the questions and record the answers on the research participants' behalf ($n = 8$ independently, $n = 11$ with researcher).

Research ethics were maintained throughout the study, with approval obtained from the university's internal ethics review board. Due diligence was taken to ensure that the research was conducted in line with the principles of consent and confidentiality set out in the institutional research code of practice. In particular, interviews were not undertaken by the lead researcher as they taught and tutored many of the participants.

All responses were recorded on Google Docs. This facilitated qualitative, reflective, thematic data analysis [27]. We undertook the following six phase analysis: 1) familiarisation with the data through transcribing, reading and collaborative meetings; 2) generation of initial codes; 3) collaboratively searching for themes and ordering them; 4) we then reviewed the themes and tested them against the data; 5) after review, we felt confident to name the themes; 6) and then we produced data findings, which are presented in this research article. Using this process, the themes of 'preparation', 'staff understanding' and 'student coping strategies' were developed. In addition, descriptive quantitative data analysis was used to identify that satisfaction increased as the course progressed.

Limitations

This was a small-scale research project conducted within one university's social work education provision. The limited statistical data reflect the exploratory nature and scale of this study, and this level of analysis is appropriate within this context. The quantitative data provide an overview of general patterns in student satisfaction, while the qualitative data offer more detailed insight into the reasons underpinning these patterns. It is anticipated that future research with larger cohorts could build on these findings and enable comparative analysis across different settings with increased statistical elements.

The sample was overrepresented by students with a Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) heritage and male students compared to the population. The sample was an availability sample, and it may be that students who felt they wanted to express strong opinions volunteered to be research participants in order to be 'heard'. As such, the findings provide insight that can be used to inform practice but do not claim to be representative of all students with a reasonable adjustment's experiences of transition in higher education. Finally, the researchers were insider researchers, and it should be considered that their knowledge of the university's procedures and practices may potentially have both enriched and limited the findings.

Despite these limitations, the findings enhance the very limited existing body of knowledge about transitions in social work education.

Research participants

The course data demonstrated that 25.8% of social work students (which includes apprentices) at Leeds Beckett University had a RAP, which is above the 20% national average [15]. In total, nineteen responses were recorded ($n = 19$), which was 43.2% of social work students with a reasonable adjustment plan (RAP) at Leeds Beckett University. Of the research participants, $n = 15$ female, $n = 4$ male; $n = 10$ White British, $n = 9$ BAME; $n = 10$ under 30, $n = 9$ over 30.

In relation to research participants' reasonable adjustments, students were asked to self-diagnose, with $n = 11$ stating that they are neurodivergent, $n = 6$ experiencing mental health issues, $n = 6$ experiencing a physical disability or health condition that impacted them, and $n = 3$ having multiple reasonable adjustments, as illustrated in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Research participants by self-diagnosis.

Diagnosis or condition	Number of participants
Neurodivergent incl dyslexia and dyspraxia	8
Dyslexia plus mental health	1
Dyslexia plus physical health	1
Dyslexia plus physical health and mental health	1
Mental health	4
Physical disability	1
Hearing impairment	1
Health condition	2

3. Results

It is helpful to identify that student satisfaction with their social work education transitions was reasonable but not exemplary.

Table 2 provides a descriptive overview of patterns of student satisfaction across key transition points, which are further explained through the qualitative themes of preparation, staff understanding, and student coping strategies. It illustrates that research participants' satisfaction with their transition increased as they progressed through their course. This may correlate to feeling more confident as they understood the course requirements more, as indicated in previous research findings [12], and out of the neutral zone [1]. Nevertheless, the most statistically significant numbers from those who did respond to the question were in the neutral to lower positive range, demonstrating the ongoing need to enhance transition support [2–5].

Table 2. Research participants' (RP) ratings of transitions within social work education.

Rating	1 Not satisfied	2	3	4	5 Very satisfied	Not applicable	Did not respond
Preparation for starting the course	5.6%	11.1%	38.9%	33.3%	11.1%		1
Starting the course	0%	15.8%	31.6%	42.1%	10.5%		0
Transitioning to the second year	0%	0%	23%	46%	31%	3	3
Transitioning to the third year	0%	0%	50%	25%	25%	11	4
Starting first placement	0%	14.3%	28.6%	35.7%	21.4%	3	2
Starting second placement	0%	0%	16.66%	33.33%	66.66%	9	4

The qualitative data collected was subjected to reflective thematic analysis [27]. Three primary themes were identified from the data as 'preparation', 'staff understanding' and 'student coping strategies.' Below are verbatim comments from participants with minor grammatical and spelling editing for readability.

Preparation

When asked what their priorities were when transitioning, the research participants identified that they wanted to feel prepared so that they could process the information that was provided to them. This preparation is seen here not only as a mechanism to support and manage anxiety, but also as a means through which students can navigate the challenges of the 'neutral zone.' Preparation is seen as a way to reduce uncertainty and enable a quicker movement toward comfort and progression into 'new beginnings.'

"Making sure I know what I am going to be doing in the next period. That's how I do transition preparation" (RP16).

"Settle down into the year as swiftly as I can. Understand what each module is all about and get books that are helpful for my assignments" (RP19).

"Being made aware, having all the information available and accessible. I do not like having lots of emails coming through as this can be very overwhelming for someone with dyslexia. I feel a face-to-face conversation would be better" (RP12).

This highlighted the importance for students of good timing of transition planning, accessible information, which linked to the second theme of staff understanding, so that they could take responsibility for their own preparation and transition, which linked to

the third theme of student coping strategies.

When considering the first transitions, course application and starting the course, research participants identified that there had been delays with engagement with disability support services (DSS) as they were required to share information to trigger service provision. However, most research participants agreed that once they were able to access DSS service provision, the service was supportive and knowledgeable.

When reflecting on induction, research participants felt that induction should include a more robust provision of information about reasonable adjustments and potential available support.

“The induction is very intense. It would have been nice to have a separate session with a tutor to go through everything with me. A debrief/drop-in session would have been really beneficial” (RP17).

“I feel that having a RAP, knowing what a RAP is and how to get the support needed should be further talked about in the induction. If I knew in my induction this support was out there, I do not feel I would have been as stressed in my first semester” (RP8).

Research participants highlighted that they wanted more information to enable them to access the support that was on offer. The lack of information impacted students’ preparation, stress and ability to engage equally with students without a reasonable adjustment in the first semester. However, students were also able to reflect on the importance of their own preparation for and within transition.

“Having a clear plan of what is coming—making my own notes of what is happening and when” (RP6).

“Ample amounts of time. I need time to get hold of resources and process these” (RP12).

“I organise myself and write everything that is important down” (RP13).

Students were aware of the importance of preparation and time to enable them to complete the preparation to engage with the learning activities. Where students were not facilitated time to prepare, they felt that it impacted their engagement.

“You are supposed to get PowerPoints in advance, which is crucial to my learning. However, there are times when they have not been uploaded to the portal until the last minute, leaving me feeling behind as I like to take notes before the lecture so my full attention is on the live lecture” (RP9).

In summary, research participants reflected on the importance of preparation in reducing anxiety and feeling knowledgeable to enable them to engage more effectively in transitions in social work education. The research participants were then able to reflect on the importance of staff understanding and their own coping strategies in supporting their preparation for and within transitions.

Staff understanding

When asked if their tutor gave them support with their individual reasonable

adjustment, twelve participants (63%) said that they did. Where they received support, this was overwhelmingly positive, and most of the research participants felt that they received a high level of dedicated support for their individual needs and reasonable adjustments.

“The tutor has been amazing throughout the course. If I needed to make changes, disability services and the tutor communicated well with each other. I have an adjustment for assignment deadlines, and my tutor reminded me to use that extension. When my anxiety was really high, we would talk about it, and I felt supported. If I needed to talk to him, he was there. If I needed any advice, he was there. He has looked at assignment plans and given me advice on how to develop them. We have a variety of different assignment types, and he helped with them. He gave me advice on reflective writing. He is supporting me with job applications to reframe to a more positive approach” (RP1).

“I was given clear and precise instructions along with links on how to access support. I also felt that having face-to-face discussions and telephone discussions provided more clarity at times, and this was much appreciated” (RP13).

However, there were research participants who had not experienced as good a transition and support from their tutor.

“I feel I could have had a more supportive tutor and more involvement from my tutor. It would have been nice to have a tutor who has a base line knowledge of a RAP” (RP4).

“I would have appreciated more explanation on things that I did not understand. ... I also would have appreciated it if tutors did not say different things, as when I asked one I received another answer to the other, which really confused me” (RP7).

“Knowing that there is support there and not having to explain my diagnosis over and over to new tutors and lecturers” (RP8).

This highlights the importance of consistency and of all staff having a working knowledge of university procedures, reasonable adjustments, and disability support. The identified inconsistency reflects not only individual practitioner differences but a more structural issue in how reasonable adjustments are understood and implemented. While some staff demonstrate awareness and skill in applying these practices, this is not consistently embedded across the programme or institution. This inconsistency in transition provision can prolong the ‘neutral zone’ and create additional complexities for students’ progression. In these cases, where there is reduced knowledge of student needs and the benefits of effective transition support, further burden is placed on students to cope and re-explain their needs, creating increased tension between institutional responsibility and student self-advocacy.

Similarly, when reflecting on transitions to modules, research participants

reflected that teaching staff did not always implement the reasonable adjustments.

“The RAP set out a plan to meet my needs, but these were not always provided in course delivery” (RP3).

“I think all the points in my RAP were good and stated just what I wanted. However, I believe the (module) tutors do not apply them as they should and I have struggled a lot with some of my assignments and placement due to this” (RP7).

“Because I like to know pre-reading and timetables, and I had to chase them up. I felt like I was forgotten ..., which heightened my anxieties and then I would stutter when I was stressed and tired. Powerpoints in advance as I print and read off pink paper. I have a coloured overlay and special glasses to aid me. This would have enabled me to prepare and engage with the teaching” (RP2).

“I feel some lectures are information overload. There is too much information on PowerPoints, and I feel lecturers do not accommodate for people’s different learning styles. It feels very much as though I am being talked at rather than using different teaching styles, i.e., videos, games, group work, etc. It would be nice to have different options and different styles of learning within lectures” (RP7).

This highlighted that research participants identified that it was about the application of the RAP, rather than the RAP content, placing it clearly at staff responsibility for its application. There was a clear identified need for social work education staff to have knowledge of the basic requirements of reasonable adjustments, including clear and early communication and resources to enable students time to prepare for their transition to module or lecture. Furthermore, consistency of support and advice was valued by research participants.

When asked if they had received support from their tutor in relation to their reasonable adjustment in preparation for placement, twelve of the research participants said they had. This means that seven of the research participants did not receive support in preparation for their transition to practice placement. Those who did discuss their reasonable adjustment needs with the tutor before placement felt it was advantageous.

“The positives were knowing what type of support I could receive while on placement; this made it less nerve-racking” (RP2).

“I discussed with tutor in person. It wasn't just a form but interactive. Being able to have a conversation was really important” (RP11).

These research participants highlight the importance for them of talking through the situation so that they felt that they understood everything and therefore felt prepared, which prepared them and supported their anxiety about the transition.

When asked if they felt that the practice educator (PE) was aware of their reasonable adjustment and had made adjustments to support their ability to engage with learning opportunities on placement, 80% felt that they had. However, the research

participants had different experiences of the practice educator's knowledge of their needs. Some research participants felt it was a positive transition.

“My PE had a 1–1 and gave me different recommendations which I can use for my dyslexia. She also stated that if I required any further support, then I should let her know straight away” (RP10).

This enabled effective support throughout placement.

“My PE asked every supervisor if we needed to adjust, rather than me bringing it up, which was really helpful. She was conscious of it, which made me feel valued and that she wanted to support me, that I wasn't a nuisance” (RP8).

Research participants reflected that specialist equipment was discussed, arranged and delivered before placement started, and taken into account during the placement. However. Other research participants did not feel that the PE either knew about or addressed their reasonable adjustment with RP5 summarising this by stating that “these needs were not taken on by placement.” This did not enable effective support throughout placement and potentially impacted students' ability to engage with the placement learning opportunities.

“With dyslexia, processing lots of information is really hard; thinking about how it is presented is important” (RP3).

“Where it ‘feedback’ was not put on the agenda, it did not give me time to prepare and get my head around it. I felt blind-sided when a criticism was brought up without notice” (RP5).

Where transition to placement was not planned and knowledgeable, students indicated that they were unable to prepare and felt disadvantaged, which was summarised well by a research participant who simply said.

“Placements should be encouraged to always take into consideration the student's needs” (RP4).

Furthermore, a research participant suggested a way that transition to placement could be enhanced to support them.

“Better communication. I would have benefitted from an additional check in meeting after two weeks into placement so that we could review and I could have expressed my feelings and advocate for my own learning (which I found so difficult to do). Even if it was a tutor check in, I think the expectations of what I thought I would be doing and what the PE thought I would be doing were vastly different, and a meeting after two weeks would have resolved this. It would have helped me feel a lot less alone at the time I was on placement” (RP1).

In summary, research participants valued where the educator (be that a university, individual tutor, module teaching staff, or practice educator) understands both their individual needs and good practice in relation to supporting students requiring a range of

reasonable adjustments. They most valued educators who were proactive in discussing their needs, as they felt that a need to do so themselves was restrictive to their engagement with learning. Variability in staff understanding highlights a gap between institutional policy and practice, which can prolong uncertainty during transition.

Student coping strategies

While students reflected on enhancing staff understanding to support their transition, they also reflected on their own coping strategies. When asked if they were aware of their own learning needs and coping strategies when making transitions, 89.5% said that they were. Research participants were able to reflect on their own coping strategies in transitions, and a theme of feeling prepared emerged.

“Being prepared—the RAP (Reasonable Adjustment Plan) is updated year by year to keep track of changing circumstances. So I know what I need to do. Sometimes this can be challenging within the university systems. Plans and prompts would have helped ... (and) processes could be simpler” (RP8).

“Having confidence to ask for ‘advice’ in written form so I have a clear picture of what is expected and what I need to achieve” (RP1).

This seemed to be coupled with a resilience and determination to survive despite having the need for a reasonable adjustment.

“I will research so that I know what they do and what might happen: mentally prepare myself. I just take it on, just do it. I like to prepare, but I also know that I just need to get on with it and accept what happens, as I can’t prepare for everything” (RP3).

“I just get on with it. If someone says I can’t do something, I find a way to do it. It may take longer as I find it difficult to break things down sufficiently and analyse situations. ... When I have given up, I take a break and come back to it. When I am tired, I don’t process anything, and when I come back to it, it makes sense. I strategize in different ways, but I can’t tell you how. It is rethinking situations and finding solutions. I don’t necessarily think about it. I just get on with it and reflect on it later” (RP2).

However, there was a sense of the impact of having to discuss a reasonable adjustment, which influenced research participants’ confidence, identity and self-esteem. Furthermore, those coping strategies reflected a need for personal adaptation that was necessary due to insufficient support.

“I can communicate when I feel comfortable with the person, and always on an individual basis or via email. I have anxiety about how people view me” (RP4).

“I prefer not to need to ask for help, but I will when it gets to the worst case scenario, which I need to work on. I can ask for clarification happily, but in terms of asking for time or asking for proofreading I struggle. I prefer

software so that I can alleviate the need to ask busy people for help” (RP2).

“People feel embarrassed about being dyslexic. We think differently. It impacts my self-esteem and confidence, which comes from childhood experiences” (RP4).

“Advocate for myself, ask for help, and be proactive. It is about me doing everything I can to support myself to succeed. If it doesn't work, I know I have done everything that I could” (RP15).

Finally, research participants identified the importance of self-care.

“Going to the gym, having a routine, being organised, getting plenty of rest, healthy eating, not using alcohol as a tool for coping, talking it out with people, not putting too much pressure on myself” (RP17).

“I know myself and take breaks. I know I am better in the evening to do the work. I plan my studies for evenings now as I am more productive. I am so much kinder to myself now. I know to work at Starbucks is not a quiet space where I am distracted. I set myself small goals and keep myself motivated with positive notes to myself” (RP19).

“I used to over-prepare and get in a tizz, but then learnt that I could go back for further information or clarification. When I am anxious, I forget things, so being OK with this reduced my stress” (RP2).

In summary, research participants knew what they wanted from universities to support them in transitions but ultimately reflected that they needed to take responsibility for their own learning. They saw this as an emotionally intelligent mix of understanding of self and of self-care. Coping strategies are hence understood not only as adaptive behaviours but also as responses to gaps in institutional support.

4. Discussion

The qualitative data illustrated the need to strengthen existing transition support within social work education. That transitions are shaped through the interaction between institutional structures, including staff and systems, and individual strategies of preparation and coping [18]. When relating to the neutral zone [1], it can be seen that social work students felt stressed when there was uncertainty and valued an understanding of what was happening to them. The research findings mirror findings [13] that students requiring a reasonable adjustment want communication and consistency in transitions. The research participants reflected on differences in the level of support and information that they received at different transitions, but there was a unanimous opinion that being informed facilitated understanding and enabled them to be prepared to engage with the new stage in their social work education. Preparation enabled social work students to move to the new beginnings stage of transition [1], where they are able to engage with the learning opportunities effectively.

The research findings then focused on how students could be prepared for and better negotiate transition points, which was seen as impacted by both staff's

understanding of reasonable adjustment needs and students' own preparation and coping strategies. The research findings highlight a significant need for lecturers to develop a clear understanding of reasonable adjustments. Research participants reflected on the importance of tutors and practice educators being knowledgeable about the impact of having additional needs on students' ability to engage with learning. As such, a recommendation is that university staff and practice educators receive specific training on both localised reasonable adjustment policies and on the impact that being neurodivergent or having a physical disability or mental health issue has on students' ability to engage with learning opportunities. By enhancing staff knowledge in relation to reasonable adjustment procedures, practice and learning needs, it is anticipated that students with a reasonable adjustment plan would receive a more understanding and consistent response from teaching staff and practice educators, which in turn would make their neutral zone transition [1] more effective.

This need for greater uniformity in staff engagement with the planning and implementation of reasonable adjustment plans is consistent with the findings of researchers [5], who highlight the role of education professionals in ensuring that disabled students are effectively supported. Their work identifies mentors and lecturing staff as significant in providing coordination, advocacy and effective support. Furthermore, there is a need for shared institutional responsibility rather than the remit of just specific and specialised disability staff, mirroring previous research findings [14]. This report draws attention to the importance of inclusive practice and of reasonable adjustment, including adequate systems to record and share reasonable adjustment requirements.

Where teaching staff are more knowledgeable and understanding of the needs of students requiring a reasonable adjustment, the facilitation of reasonable adjustment friendly practice can be utilised as a standard procedure [6]. Indeed, reasonable adjustment friendly practice benefits all students, so it enhances outcomes for students requiring a reasonable adjustment and those who do not [24]. This included the provision of learning materials and powerpoints to be provided in sufficient time to facilitate student preparation so that they could engage fully with the learning provision. Students requiring a reasonable adjustment need both longer to engage with learning materials and time between engaging with learning materials and the learning provision to enable them to rejuvenate, as engaging can be emotionally and physically exhausting for students requiring a reasonable adjustment [23]. Furthermore, the research participants reflected that a creative and varied delivery style supported their engagement in lectures early in their transition. Finally, clear and consistent communication was advocated by research participants so that they understood what was expected of them during the transition.

Whilst reasonable adjustment friendly practice is recommended, the research participants reflected that they value where this is supplemented with an individualised approach by teaching staff and practice educators, mirroring previous research findings [5]. This was seen as the tutor being accessible and knowledgeable about reasonable adjustment procedures and practice so that they received student-centred advice and support that was relevant and appropriate. In addition, research participants

saw tutors knowing the recommendations from their RAP and practice educators knowing their support needs for placement as critical to enabling them to be confident in transitioning into a new year, module or placement. It is therefore recommended that tutors and practice educators take time at the start of working with a student to familiarise themselves with the individual student's reasonable adjustment needs, which can be done through accessing the student's RAP or individual support plan and by seeking a handover where possible from a previously involved person. However, staff understanding needs to be developed through engagement from the students.

Research participants all reflected on their own coping strategies. Firstly, they reflected on the importance of allowing themselves time to read and understand transition information and documents, in addition to organisational skills to ensure that they had this time available to them. Secondly, they reflected on the importance of clear communication within transitions. This included both advocating for their needs and asking for clarity on transitional requirements and expectations. They identified that communication was dependent on confidence, both their own and in the teaching staff or practice educator's response. Finally, research participants highlighted the importance of self-determination and being open to the transition, while also being clear that it was their responsibility to help identify a personal solution. Whilst this can be considered in the context of learned behaviour of needing to be self-reliant as a student requiring a reasonable adjustment, andragogical principles argue that it is important that adult learners engage with their own learning needs [28]. Indeed, it can be highlighted that learners who respond well to balancing self-determination with appropriate guidance and support can more quickly enter the new beginnings stage of transitions, where they are embracing change and new learning experiences.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, social work students undergo a number of transitions, starting the course, year, module, and placement, where they may feel anxiety about understanding what is expected of them in the new beginning phase of their transition [1]. However, this is compounded by students requiring a reasonable adjustment often needing more time to engage with and process information. The research supports Bridges' [1] model that transitions can be challenging in the neutral zone, where there is uncertainty. Effective transitions to new beginnings come from preparation, staff understanding and student coping strategies.

The research identified the importance of preparation to support social work students requiring: First, a reasonable adjustment through transitions that were facilitated by teaching staff and practice educators being knowledgeable about reasonable adjustment practice and individual students' reasonable adjustment requirements. Second, students use organisation, communication, and finding solutions to enhance their engagement with transition uncertainty and anxiety. Finally, that transition is an intersection between individual change and institutional structures, which are best navigated through planned and wider coordinated means. It is recommended that teaching staff, tutors and practice educators receive specific training on the impact that being neurodivergent or having a physical disability

or mental health has on students' ability to engage with learning opportunities. Furthermore, tutors and practice educators should take time at the start of working with a student to familiarise themselves with the individual student's reasonable adjustment needs, and students should be guided to develop personalised coping strategies that enable them to better prepare for transition and change.

Author contributions: Conceptualization, PB, GM and AW; methodology, PB; software, PB; ethical validation, PB; formal analysis, PB and GM; investigation, PB, GM and AW; resources, PB; data curation, PB; writing—original draft preparation, PB and GM; writing—review and editing, PB and GM; visualization, PB; supervision, PB; project administration, PB; funding acquisition, PB. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This work was supported by Leeds Beckett University Teaching Excellence Project Funding application, under the title “Effective transitions for social work students with a reasonable adjustment.”

Institutional review board statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Research Ethics Policy and Procedures of Leeds Beckett University (protocol code 110325).

Informed consent statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data availability statement: Data results can be requested c/o the lead researcher, Paula Beesley, p.h.beesley@leedsbeckett.ac.uk. Archived results are held by Leeds Beckett University for ten years in line with GDPR requirements and [upig_research_participant_privacy_notice.pdf](#) (leedsbeckett.ac.uk).

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AI use statement: During the preparation of this work, the authors used Grammarly for checking spelling and grammar in certain sections. The authors subsequently reviewed and edited the content as necessary and take full responsibility for the final content of the published article.

References

1. Bridges W. *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*. Addison-Wesley; 1991.
2. Cage E, Jones E, Ryan G, et al. Student Mental Health and Transitions into, through and out of University: Student and Staff Perspectives. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*. 2021; 45(8): 1076–1089. doi: 10.1080/0309877X.2021.1875203
3. The Disabled Student Commitment. 2023. Available online: <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/equality-diversity-inclusion/disabled-student-commitment> (accessed on 10 February 2026).
4. Borkin H, Rowan A, Stoll N, et al. *Supporting Disabled Students: Mapping Reasonable Adjustments and Transition Support*. TASO; 2024. Available online: <https://taso.org.uk/libraryitem/report-supporting-disabled-students-mapping-reasonable-adjustments-and-transition-support/>
5. Simmons B, Read S, Parfitt A. *Disabled People's Lived Experience of Education in the UK: An Evidence Review*. HM Disability Unit and Office for Equality and Opportunity; 2026. Available online: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/disabled-peoples-lived-experience-of-education-in-the-uk/disabled-peoples-lived-experience-o>

f-education-in-the-uk-an-evidence-review

6. Salisbury Y, Foster R, Hill S, et al. Neurodiverse Inclusive Social Work Education Considered through a Student Partnership. *Social Work Education*. 2025; 44(5): 1215–1230. doi: 10.1080/02615479.2024.2378915
7. Brooks R, Gupta A, Jayadeva S, et al. *Constructing the Higher Education Student: Perspectives from across Europe*. Bristol University Press; 2022.
8. Leese M. Bridging the Gap: Supporting Student Transitions into Higher Education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*. 2010; 34(2): 239–251. doi: 10.1080/03098771003695494
9. Trigwell K. Transitions in University: Concepts and Cases. In: Kyndt E, Donche V, Trigwell K, et al. (editors). *Higher Education Transitions: Theory and Research*. Routledge; 2017; pp. 103–112.
10. Professional Capability Framework (PCF). 2018. Available online: <https://basw.co.uk/training-cpd/professional-capabilities-framework-pcf> (accessed on 10 Feb 2026).
11. Mullins L, Preyde M. The Lived Experience of Students with an Invisible Disability at a Canadian University. *Disability and Society*. 2013; 28(2): 147–160. doi: 10.1080/09687599.2012.752127
12. Andrews J, Clark R, Thomas L. What Works? Student Retention and Success Programme. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*. 2012; 14(1): 1–3. doi: 10.5456/WPLL.14.S.1
13. Disabled Students' Commission: Three Months to Make a Difference. 2020. Available online: <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/three-months-make-difference> (accessed on 10 February 2026).
14. Access and Participation Dashboard: Findings from the Data. 2023. Available online: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/findings-from-the-data/> (accessed on 10 February 2026).
15. Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2024/25—Student Numbers and Characteristics. 2026. Available online: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/27-01-2026/sb273-higher-education-student-statistics/numbers> (accessed on 10 February 2026).
16. Equality Act 2010. 2010. Available online: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/introduction> (accessed on 10 February 2026).
17. Briggs ARJ, Clark J, Hall I. Building Bridges: Understanding Student Transition to University. *Quality in Higher Education*. 2012; 18(1): 3–21. doi: 10.1080/13538322.2011.614468
18. Kiesel L, DeZelar S, Lightfoot E. Challenges, Barriers, and Opportunities: Social Workers with Disabilities and Experiences in Field Education. *Journal of Social Work Education*. 2018; 54(4): 696–708. doi: 10.1080/10437797.2018.1507365
19. Neutral Citation Number: [2024] EWHC 299 (KB), Case No: KA-2022-BRS-000012: In the High Court of Justice King's Bench Appeals Bristol District Registry on Appeal from the Bristol County Court (His Honour Judge Ralton and Mrs Christine Price). 2024. Available online: <https://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/The-University-of-Bristol-v-Dr-Robert-Abrahart.pdf> (accessed on 10 February 2026).
20. Van Herpen G, Meeuwisse M, Hofman A, et al. A Head Start in Higher Education. *Studies in Higher Education*. 2020; 45(4): 862–877. doi: 10.1080/03075079.2019.1572088
21. Cree V, Hounsell J, Christie H, et al. From Further Education to Higher Education: Social Work Students' Experiences of Transition to an Ancient, Research-Led University. *Social Work Education*. 2009; 28(8): 887–901. doi: 10.1080/02615470902736741
22. Bleasby C, Douglass M, Forster R, et al. Peer Power: Implementing a Social Work Peer Mentoring Scheme. In: *Proceedings of the JSWEC 2023: Social Work Education, Research and Practice in Turbulent Times*; 15–16 June 2023; Glasgow, UK.
23. Beesley P, Walkden A. Supporting a Social Work Student with a Complex Reasonable Adjustment Plan. In: *Przeperski J, Baikady R (editors). Routledge International Handbook of Social Work Teaching*. Routledge; 2024; pp. 548–555.
24. Coriale L, Larson G, Robertson J. Exploring the Educational Experience of a Social Work Student with a Disability: A Narrative. *Social Work Education*. 2012; 31(4): 422–434. doi: 10.1080/02615479.2011.564611
25. Oliver M. *Social Work with Disabled People*. Macmillan; 1983.
26. Oliver M. The Social Model of Disability: Thirty Years On. *Disability and Society*. 2013; 28(7): 1024–1026. doi: 10.1080/09687599.2013.818773
27. Braun V, Clarke V. *Thematic Analysis. A Practical Guide*. Sage; 2022.
28. Knowles M. *The Adult Learner. A Neglected Species*. Gulf Publishing; 1973.