Executive Summary

Non-Medical Helper (NMH) Support refers to the one-to-one support provided to students with disabilities. The aim of the current study was to investigate how NMH support impacts on inclusive learning and the student experience in terms of transition, retention, engagement, progression, attainment, aspiration, empowerment and employability. These factors were measured via quantitative and qualitative methodology. The participant groups involved were students, Support Providers, School Disability Advisers and Disability Services Staff.

Key Findings

Significant associations revealed that support usage was linked to disability type. Students with dyslexia were less likely to utilise high levels of Tutor support in comparison to those with other disabilities. Conversely, students with Mental Health Conditions were more likely to use high levels of Tutor support than those with other disabilities.

The qualitative analysis uncovered five key themes – Person Support, Student Acceptance, Communication, Procedures and Systems, Mainstreaming Support. Person Support demonstrated that support worked well when a consistent and sensitive approach was in operation between students and Support Providers. Student Acceptance highlighted the importance of students' positioning on the process of acceptance and their subsequent utilisation of NMH support. Communication was key to a positive support experience, however often many intermediaries involved in the support process resulted in ambiguous communications. Procedures and Systems revealed that many aspects are working well within the current procedures however, it was noted that complexities within systems can be detrimental to NMH support experience. Finally, Mainstreaming Support refers to the process of making NMH support completely integrated into the normality of University life. The consensus between participant groups was that NMH Support needs to become more mainstreamed within the University. All of the aforementioned findings led to the following suggested recommendations.

Suggested Recommendations

Potential improvements are presented within three categories – NMH Support, Systematic and Procedural, and Mainstreaming.

NMH Support suggestions include the exploration of collaborative working options between the Careers Service and Disability Services in order to support the transition of students with disabilities from University into the workplace. Another suggestion was the possible extension of the ASD Tutor role into the realm of "employability". It was proposed that tailored support packages are

extended to all types of Tutor support. In addition, where possible, Note Takers with the appropriate specialised disciplines, should be assigned to STEM subject students.

Systematic and Procedural suggestions include making Support Providers aware of their assigned student's disability. A Review System, would involve contacting students half way through the first semester and this would determine how well students are progressing with their NMH support, thus promoting the optimal service. It was proposed that Support Providers engage in a thorough recruitment and vetting process, involving the implementation of a new assessment procedure for new Support Providers that requires the completion of mandatory practical tests. In addition, the implementation of an electronic Work Record sign-off system would mean that Work Records are easily confirmed remotely, eliminating the need to meet face-to-face and non-communication issues. The potential of a support weaning-off system has been postulated so that as the student progresses through their studies, their NMH support is scaled down. Due to the nature of some disabilities, the system would need to be selectively implemented. Additionally, the opportunity for students in receipt of NMH Support to communicate with other students in the same position was recommended.

Mainstreaming Support recommendations involve the promotion of acceptance in order to diminish the stigma attached to NMH Support. Moreover, the provision of services for Support Providers such as access to Wi-Fi, Queen's Online and Queen's email addresses would demonstrate the importance the University places on NMH Support. Additionally, one suggestion was that academic staff should be given access to information regarding whether or not their students are using their NMH support and this would allow informed decisions to be made with regards to coursework extensions.

Discussion

As outlined in the Introduction, the purpose of this study was to assess the service supplied by the Queen's Register of the Support Providers over a six year duration from 2008 when the service first came into being. The research question addressed the impact of NMH support on inclusive learning and the student experience in terms of transition, retention, engagement, progression, attainment, aspiration, empowerment and employability. The following two hypotheses were put forward in order to investigate the research question:

1. NMH support utilisation will lead to better student experiences and academic outcomes which will be evaluated by impact on the eight key factors
2. NMH Support utilisation will be influenced by factors such as disability type, age and gender of student.

These hypotheses were tested directly by the quantitative analyses and indirectly explored via the focus group analyses. As the findings have already been discussed within the Results section, they will only be briefly outlined here, together with further explanation for the outcomes. To support the recommendations for the future development of the service, references will be made to relevant literature. In addition, as no research is conducted within a vacuum, every study will have its limitations so these will also be addressed within this section.

Summary of Findings

Hypothesis one was supported by the qualitative analysis which allowed the construction of five key themes which were contingent upon the initial eight key factors. Under the theme of Person Support, it was noted that when support worked well, a consistent and sensitive approach was in operation where a rapport had been developed and both parties were aware of the support boundaries. These factors were of utmost importance for students with ASD who preferred to work with a familiar person and required a structured approach. Person Support was also very important for students in receipt of Note Taker support which was optimal when they were afforded subject-specific note takers.

The theme of Student Acceptance was addressed by the process of acceptance. The less advanced a student was on the process of acceptance, the less likely he or she was to take ownership of their support needs or to utilise the recommended NMH support. This is supported by Richardson (2009) who noted that students with disabilities do not want to be seen as any different to other

students. Less accepting students were also likely to believe that disability disclosure would have a negative impact on his/her studies or career.

Within the theme of Communication, students suggested that they would benefit from communicating with other students who have disabilities. However, the most prevalent factor within this theme was that there are many intermediaries contributing to the miscommunication of information. Fuller et al. (2008) highlighted the importance that communication between intermediaries holds and they suggested that better communication would lead to more effective support for students with disabilities. The current study revealed that the means of communication used by Support Providers was not always appropriate and that student non-communication could lead to Support Providers not getting Work Records signed. Poor communication may therefore be linked to complex procedures and systems which other authors have noted prevail in disability support (Hopkins, 2011). Support Providers also felt that the procedures and systems do not shelter them from being subject to unfeasible expectations. All participant groups were in agreement that a more integrative learning environment needs to be created and suggestions to achieve this were online Work Record sign-off, a more thorough recruitment and vetting process, a review system for Support Providers, a weaning-off system and the use of NMH utilisation data to judge requests for extensions at the School level. The latter example demonstrates how NMH support needs to be more mainstreamed. Mainstreaming support would empower students because the study demonstrated that when students were educated about their support requirements, they had good outcomes. However, there is still a way to go in terms of mainstreaming NMH support and this is the case in many institutions (Hockings, 2010). Such developments would require a 'holistic approach' (Madriaga, 2007) and normalising the idea of NMH Support within the University and the potential of giving Wi-Fi and QOL access to Support Providers would go a long way in mainstreaming support.

There was much overlap between the qualitative and quantitative results but both types of data helped to provide some backing for Hypothesis Two. It was found that disability type related to the level of support usage. Students with mental health difficulties were the group most likely to use high levels of support. This suggests that by registering with Disability Services, students with mental health conditions ignore the possible stigma attached to their disability as they are aware that they need help to overcome their issues. This was backed up within the key theme of Student Acceptance where it was noted that students were more likely to engage with their NMH support when they had accepted their disability as part of their identity.

In contrast to other types of support, Dyslexia Tutor support usage was more likely to range from no support to low/medium levels of support use as opposed to high levels. However, Figure 3

highlighted that those who used a high level of Dyslexia Tutor support were more likely to achieve a higher 2.1 degree classification than those who used a medium level of support, and those who used no dyslexia support at all were likely to achieve a 2.2 classification. This is a very important finding as high levels of competition in the current job market mean that graduates who achieve a 2.1 are likely to gain better employment more quickly than those with a 2.2. It is necessary to uncover the reasons why students with dyslexia do not use a high level of support and one possible explanation is that, like many students with hidden disabilities, they do not see themselves as having a disability (Fuller, Healey, Bradley & Hall, 2004).

Despite the support for hypothesis two in terms of disability type, the quantitative analysis highlighted no support with regard to two further factors, age and gender. However, the key theme of Student Acceptance revealed that maturity is an important factor in support utilisation and this can be linked indirectly to age. Students noted that they attached less stigma to their support as they progressed through the years and this demonstrates the impact of maturity on a student's stage on the process of acceptance.

Earlier in the section, it was acknowledged that students with mental health difficulties are significantly more likely than other students to use a high level of support. It is important to state that despite this group utilising support, they actually tend to achieve much lower degree marks than those who use a medium level of support or no support at all. It was anticipated that this is because students using the highest levels of support experience their disability as having an intense impact upon their daily functioning and as a result, their difficulties impact negatively on their academic outcomes. The positive here is that, despite achieving the lowest academically of all students receiving tutoring support, the support allowed them to remain at Queen's to complete their degrees. This is noteworthy because often due to the fluctuating nature of mental health conditions, students with this disability tend to drop out of their studies (Richardson, 2010).

In spite of the lack of statistical significance, it is important to note the interesting graphical displays derived from ASD and Study Skills Tutoring support (Figure 3). The fact that students with ASD Tutor support have the best outcomes when they received a high level of support but the poorest outcomes with a medium level of support may relate to the fact that those with ASD need structure to develop their skills as was noted by MacLeod and Green (2009). With only a medium level of support, it was unlikely that the users in this group were using their support in a structured way, unlike those high level users who tended to meet their Tutors on a weekly basis. Another reason why students with ASD may not use support is that if they have a negative experience with a Support Provider, they tend not to ask for a new Support Provider (Fleischer, 2012). The explanation given for this by one student was the feeling that their Disability Officer would misunderstand his reasoning

5

(Fleischer). A more serious finding was that of Knott and Taylor (2014) who stated that those with ASD did not value all of the support they received at university. Some students with ASD felt that social mentoring led to them feeling less included whereas the unofficial support services, like games societies, provided them with a better, more inclusive style of support.

Those who received Study Skills Tutor support tended to achieve lower marks with higher levels of support utilisation. The study revealed that those using a low level of support tended to achieve 2.1s, whereas those using a high proportion of support were more likely to achieve 2.2s. Perhaps this is because students receiving Study Skills Tutor support are a much more diverse group, with disabilities that range from visual impairments to dyspraxia. As such, Study Skills Tutors are presented with a much greater challenge, they may not have the experience necessary to work with students with mental health issues or dyslexia for example. In addition, many students within this group have dyslexia and they may have opted for this form of support as they believed lower levels of stigma are attached to Study Skills Tutoring in comparison to Dyslexia Tutoring. Study Skills Tutoring is not tailored to the specific needs of students with dyslexia as Dyslexia Tutor support is. Hence, students with dyslexia may be disadvantaged by deciding to take Study Skills support instead of Dyslexia Tutor Support. Needs Assessors should therefore encourage students with dyslexia to opt instead for Dyslexia Tutoring support as it provides students with more appropriate support tailored specifically to their disability.

Recommendations

The aforementioned findings have provided the basis for the following recommendations that will now be outlined under the subheadings of NMH Support Recommendations, Systematic and Procedural Recommendations and Mainstreaming Recommendations.

NMH Support Recommendations

The first recommendations link to "employability". One suggestion was that the Careers Service and Disability Services could explore collaborative working options in order to support the transition of students with disabilities from University into the workplace. Another suggestion was the possible extension of the ASD Tutor role into the realm of "employability". The ASD Tutor would be permitted to work with their students on various issues relating to placement and graduate employment. The main reason for this suggestion is because of the nature of their disability, students with ASD may have difficulty working with an unfamiliar person. Students' with ASD will have already formed a rapport with their Tutors by the time they start thinking about placements/graduate employment,

and as such, ASD Tutors are in a prime position to provide support in this area. Moreover, as experts on the sensitivities of those with ASD, ASD Tutors, alongside the Careers Service, would be able to tailor interview awareness specifically to the needs of those on the autistic spectrum. Other institutions, for example the University of Cambridge, already operate systems involving specialist careers advice for students with ASD. This development is of particular importance because students with ASD find it extremely difficult, and in some cases, impossible to secure work placements and graduates with this disability are more likely to be unemployed than other graduates (Hastwell, Harding, Martin & Baron-Cohen, 2014).

Secondly, research has suggested that individually tailored support packages could provide the necessary structure and flexibility needed for those with ASD (MacLeod & Green, 2009). The current study documented that consistency and stability are crucial for a successful outcome from ASD Tutor support. Therefore it is recommended that the notion of tailored support packages is extended to all types of Tutor support. This would mean that staff would be able to monitor more easily and closely the progress of students, plus, having a more targeted approach should help to improve the outcomes associated with Study Skills Tutor support. Additionally, Needs Assessors should be advised that because students tend to perform better when provided with a more specialised type of support, Study Skills tutoring should not be recommended if another option is available such as Academic Mental Health, Dyslexia or ASD Tutor Support.

Thirdly, it is recommended that, where possible, Note Takers with the appropriate specialised disciplines including science, mathematics, technology and engineering, are assigned to STEM subject students. Without the appropriate STEM subject background knowledge and expertise, Note Takers were unable to take comprehensive and accurate notes. As a result, the playing field may not have been levelled for some students because the notes were not sufficiently comprehensive for examination and coursework preparation. In addition, the mathematical and formula-driven nature of these disciplines means that a Note Taker is a more appropriate recommendation than a Dictaphone. Again, this is something Needs Assessors should keep in mind as it was suggested that a Dictaphone may actually hinder a student's performance in such disciplines.

Systematic and Procedural Recommendations

In line with Fuller et al. (2008), a better system of communication should be established between intermediaries. The following suggestions would help to improve communication channels. Firstly, Support Providers should be made aware of their student's disability. This means that they could take

disability-related issues into account when meeting their student for the first time and through constructive questioning Note Takers, for example, would be better able to tailor their notes to the student's needs. Currently, the Queen's Register requires Tutors to produce an Interim Report for each of their students but the evaluation process could be advanced by the implementation of a review system. This would involve contacting students half way through the first semester to determine how they are progressing with their NMH support. This would mean that students could report any issues discreetly for resolution at the earliest possible stage, prior to examinations. This converges with the monthly progress reports on Support Provider performance that the University of York implements. Even adding an area to the website or QOL where students could discreetly feed back on their support at any time (as has been done by other institutions) would allow the provision of ongoing feedback.

It was also suggested that Support Providers are more closely monitored. For example, the University of Leeds operates a system whereby notes are randomly checked and Tutors are required to do several supervised sessions per year. Furthermore, Support Providers could potentially engage in a more thorough recruitment and vetting process, involving the implementation of a new assessment procedure for new Support Providers that requires the completion of mandatory practical tests. For example, under test conditions, Note Takers would be required to take comprehensive notes and demonstrate high levels of spelling and grammar and those providing Tutor support would need to demonstrate effective interpersonal skills and an ability to plan comprehensive support sessions.

Moreover, it is suggested that procedures are put in place so that Support Providers are not subject to unfeasible expectations. The implementation of an Electronic Work Record sign-off system would mean that Work Records are easily confirmed remotely, eliminating the need to meet face-to-face, meaning that students are no longer singled out at lectures. Electronic Work Record sign-off would also eliminate non-communication issues which can lead to payment delays or non-payment. Such a measure has already been sanctioned within other universities, including the University of Cambridge. Furthermore, it is suggested that the paid type-up time for Note Takers is increased to one hour because Note Takers reported being unable to complete their notes in the thirty minutes designated for each hour of note taking. Increased type-up time should mean that notes are of better quality as diligent Note Takers will have more time to write up their extensive notes.

The potential of a support weaning-off system has been postulated so that as the student progresses through their studies, their NMH support is scaled down. The aim of NMH support is to equip students with skills to be self-sufficient, independent learners. However without a weaning-off

process they may become overly dependent. The objective of the weaning-off system would be to produce independent graduates equipped with the transferrable skills required in the work place. However, because of the nature of some disabilities, the system would need to be selectively implemented.

In addition, students have noted that they would like the opportunity to communicate with other students with disabilities, particularly those who have experience of the NMH Support system. Manchester Metropolitan University for example, has instigated a peer mentoring service whereby current students help with the transition of peers with disabilities, while simultaneously developing their own transferrable skills that will be beneficial to them in their search for graduate employment (Equality Challenge Unit, 2014). Taking a slightly different approach, the University of Liverpool has a forum where students with disabilities can discuss their support and get advice and guidance from peers.

Mainstreaming Recommendations

Mainstreaming support is the key to ensuring wider acceptance of NMH support. Promoting student acceptance would result in a variety of beneficial outcomes including diminishing the stigma attached to NMH support. This should result in students taking greater responsibility for and ownership of their support packages, this in turn ensuring that the NMH support is tailored specifically to their needs. As the study revealed, using a high level of structured support can make the difference between students achieving a 2.1 or a 2.2 so enhancing student acceptance is crucial for job market competitiveness. Another suggestion is the provision of services for Support Providers such as access to Wi-Fi, Queen's Online and Queen's email addresses which would demonstrate the importance the University places on NMH Support and would allow Support Providers to perform their roles more effectively. Additionally, one suggestion was that academic staff should be given access to information regarding whether or not their students are using their NMH support. This would allow them to make more informed decisions with regards to coursework extensions.

Limitations

In spite of the range of recommendations that have come from this project, every study has limitations and these must be highlighted. Firstly, the focus group participants were recruited via email and as a result would have included a large number of individuals who already had acceptance of their disability. Also, this method of recruitment meant that certain disabilities were underrepresented, for example ASD students because of communication difficulties or students who perceived stigma

attached to NMH support. When interpreting the survey results, it was also necessary to remember that many of the individuals who responded to the survey tended to have had either a very good experience or a very bad experience. Therefore, at this point, it is essential to mention that as the researcher, I was able to ignore incongruent responses, although in some cases these may have arisen through communication or language difficulties.

A methodological short coming with the statistical analysis meant that the same student may have appeared several times from having used the same type(s) of NMH support each year over the duration of their degree programme. The year that the student was in while using the support may have also had an impact on usage. However, as data recording the precise level each student was in while using the support was not kept, it was not possible to break down the support usage by stage. There was no record of whether a student was repeating a year for example. If such data was available, perhaps there would have been more significant results. Furthermore, no baseline scores indicating how students were performing prior to support implementation were available for interpretation. Even for future research, such a baseline would be almost impossible to obtain unless the students had taken the exact same qualification previously. The idea of having a control group who did not receive disability-related support would be unethical and would fail to take account of the premise that each individual, regardless of their disability, has a different starting ability.

Conclusions

Regardless of the limitations, this study provided an excellent insight into student and professional perceptions of NMH support. The overall consensus was that NMH support is very important to the academic achievement of students with disabilities and so the work of the Queen's Register of Support Providers, over the six year period must be highly commended. It is suggested that this research is updated on a yearly basis by small-scale consultations with students conducted by staff.   In conclusion, the core premises of the current report are that the views of the students and the associated professionals will be considered alongside the recommendations and that NMH support is delivered as efficiently and effectively as possible, facilitating optimal student achievement and experience, in line with Vision 2020.

Summary of Suggested Recommendations

- Extension of ASD Tutor Role
- Implementation of Support Packages

- Subject-specific Note Takers for STEM students
- Support Providers informed about their students' disabilities
- Review System for Support Providers
- Support Provider recruitment and vetting process
- Electronic Work Record sign-off system
- Increase in Note Taker type-up time
- Support weaning-off system
- Promotion of student acceptance
- Provision of services for Support Providers e.g. Wi-Fi
- Link between NMH support utilisation and in School academic extensions