

# Transitioning to Postsecondary Education With a Learning Disability: Identifying Similarities and Gaps Between First-Hand Experiences and University Transition Programs

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## Abstract

The transition to postsecondary education is accompanied by several social, emotional, and academic challenges, but poses a unique challenge for students with learning disabilities (LD). There is a dearth of research examining the mechanisms that support a positive transition from the perspective of those with LD. Eight first-year university students diagnosed with an LD participated in individual interviews on several key themes: (a) LD and self-esteem/image; (b) accommodations; (c) support networks; and (d) mental health vulnerabilities. In addition, 10 university transition programs across Ontario, Canada, were analyzed. The programs' main objectives included access to resources, social connections, and time and stress management. Results indicated several overlaps between student perspectives and those of universities. However, gaps remain regarding the importance of self-esteem, stigmatization of disability, and mental health. By understanding the mechanisms that contribute to a positive transition, university programs can adopt useful strategies to help support students with LD.

*Keywords:* Learning disabilities, transition, postsecondary education, university

The transition to postsecondary education is a critical stage in an one's academic, social, and emotional trajectories, and can be especially challenging for students with learning disabilities (LD). Emerging from the 1960s, intensive research on LD has generated immense bodies of knowledge regarding its manifestation within the body, brain, genome, and social structure (Denhart, 2008), resulting in increased awareness and identification of individuals with LD.

The number of university students with LD has grown each year from 5,620 in 2008-09 to 7,064 in 2014-15 (Learning Disability Association of Ontario, 2018). The primary objective of university transition efforts is to support students to be successful in their higher education journey (Learning Disability Association of Niagara Region, 2021). Positive outcomes regarding grades and retention have been reported (Reed et al., 2011), which is important for success, yet psychosocial benefits are of equal importance. Students with LD are a unique population that may be particularly disadvan-

tagged in higher education, leading to low popularity rates (Cavioni et al., 2017), hesitation to self-advocate (Peters, 2011), and being less likely to recognize when faced with an issue that requires support and assistance from others (Martinez et al., 2011).

To address some of their academic, social, physical, and emotional barriers, students with LD should be integrated into university preparation programs. While students with LD experience many of the same types of academic/non-academic stressors as their peers without LD, there is limited research comparing the objectives of current university transition efforts with the actual first-hand experiences of students with LD.

The purpose of this study was to begin to fill this gap in the literature by exploring the transition experience of first-year students with LD in Ontario, Canada, as they move from secondary to postsecondary education. Further research is needed that encompasses the ability for young people to reveal, challenge, and redefine the preconceived notions of their disability during their transition process. Overall, the

objective of the current study was to foreground the underrepresented experiences of students with LD to provide valuable knowledge to educators, parents, case workers, and other support staff to inform a smoother transition from high school to university. The narratives within this study will be used to first, understand the experiences of students with LD, and second, delineate 10 Ontario university transition programs. By doing so, it will be revealed how these transition programs work to support the students' needs as well as identify any gaps between students' opinions and the university transition efforts.

### **The Transition to Postsecondary Education**

In *Ensuring a Smooth Transition From Elementary to Secondary School* (2012), the Ministry of Education Quebec (MOEQ) defines transition as a "time during which children gradually adapt their new physical, social, and human environment" (p. 1404). Periods of transition are often stressful and impact one's psychological adjustment and well-being (Rice et al., 2011). The move from high school to postsecondary education is widely considered a significant life transition (Connor, 2012) – an intense period of adaptation, in which young people are faced with several psychological, social, environmental, and physical challenges due to the simultaneous changes in school environments, social interactions, and academic expectations (MOEQ, 2012). Nevertheless, research suggests that transition supports can support students' success and foster a more positive move from one school to the next (Morgan & Hertzog, 2001).

Although a successful transition is difficult to define, it is generally measured across multiple dimensions, including social relationships, academic performance, eased parental concerns, increased interest in school-related work, and improved self-esteem (MOEQ, 2012). Gill (2007) found that positive self-concept, supportive peer relationships, and positive thinking significantly impact students' ability to cope with the postsecondary education transition.

Intervention efforts and research focusing on the high school-to-higher-education transition are necessary as this transition period encompasses anxiety and stress, which is correlated with concurrent psychological issues, future adjustment concerns, and attainment issues (Rice et al., 2011). The risks of a poor transition pose a special threat to those who are most vulnerable to academic underachievement, poor self-esteem, anxiety, and school-dropout, such as students with LD (Connor, 2012).

### **Learning Disabilities and the Transition to Postsecondary Education**

Learning disabilities are typically defined as lifelong neurological dysfunctions that interfere with one's ability to store, process, or produce information (Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, 2007). According to the *Learning Disability Mental Health Handbook* (Integra, 2016), learning disabilities affect 5-10% of all Canadians, with 43% of students in Ontario having been diagnosed with educational exceptionalities. Throughout the past 70 years, the field of LD has aimed to support these individuals by generating definitions, understanding neurological contributions, and creating policies and practices.

The often-low popularity rates among students with LD means these adolescents may lack social connections amongst peers at a crucial developmental period (Cavioni et al., 2017). When attending postsecondary education, a student's self-image is often complicated due to the influence of new academic knowledge and exposure to diverse peer groups (Connor, 2012). Therefore, students with LD are faced with the choice of self-disclosure about their disability to new peer groups, and many opt to not self-disclose (Connor, 2012). This social exclusion makes the transition process even more concerning for those with LD.

Students with disabilities make up a unique group of individuals, as they face different methods for receiving academic services during their transition from secondary schools to higher education (Burdge, 2012). Peters (2011) proposed that students with LD may not possess necessary self-advocacy skills, hindering how they receive services and accommodations. When transitioning to postsecondary education, students with LD often avoid seeking academic accommodations for various reasons. For example, they may (a) feel that they are no longer impacted by their LD, (b) be trying to prevent others from knowing about their disability, or (c) simply be unaware of university services or how to access them (Burdge, 2012). Developing self-advocacy skills will allow students with LD to feel confident and comfortable disclosing their disability, thereby helping to alleviate feelings of stress or anxiety (Herridge, 2017). Kimberlin (2009) also found that by improving their self-advocacy skills, students with LD are more likely to seek out reasonable academic accommodations and services needed for success.

While all students encounter different kinds of stressors when beginning postsecondary education, the literature suggests that students with LD report experiencing lower levels of social support, higher peer victimization, lower self-esteem, and higher internalizing and externalizing, putting them in one of the most at-risk groups for mental health concerns (Burdge, 2012; Her-

ridge, 2017; Peters, 2011). "Students with LD often see postsecondary as a new beginning, an opportunity to redefine themselves, including reframing their disability and its relation to their identity" (Connor, 2012, p. 1007). Considering the concerning correlation between LD and mental health, the importance of positive transitional efforts that target not only academic concerns but also social and emotional issues is imperative.

## The Current Study

Personal accounts from eight participants guided the current study. Students were asked about their transition in terms of academic concerns, as well as social and emotional concerns, and their impact on mental health, and the major findings were analyzed in an effort to understand how they are reflected within current university transition programs. To that end, 10 transition programs in Ontario, each tailored specifically to students with LD, were analyzed. The transition programs' major objectives were analyzed as direct examples of areas where the programs address students' needs and where any identifiable gaps may be. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the academic and socioemotional needs of students with LD that must be acknowledged to ensure they experience a smooth transition to postsecondary education?
2. What are strategies and efforts that benefit incoming postsecondary students with LD during their transition?
3. What areas of the transition experience from firsthand accounts of students with LD coincide with those of current university transition programs in Ontario?
4. What are the gaps or missing objectives between the students with LD and current transitional efforts in Ontario universities?

## Methods

### Primary Author Positionality

As an academic, my research experience has focused on a wide range of exceptionality-driven, sociocultural, and developmental understandings of young people. I have realized that while I respect the value quantitative research adds, I have more of an interest in the lived experiences that shape the world we live in. Being able to speak to others, physically see their world views, and understand their perspectives on a given topic is something I strive towards. However, this involves much more than simply interviewing others in the hopes of completing a task or research project. Researchers must challenge

the feeling of wanting to ignore or dissociate themselves from the research, and instead, acknowledge their positionality, emotional responses to participants, and personal artifacts, that might enhance the research process (Mosselson, 2010).

I uphold privilege, whether I want to or not, by conducting research with others on a topic of my choosing. "As researchers we belong to a moral community. Doing interviews is a privilege granted us, not a right we have. Interviews transform information into shared experience" (Denzin, 2001, p. 24). Although I may think I am studying one topic, for instance, the transition from high school to university for students with LD, it would be naïve to ignore how even amongst shared experiences, these are still uniquely different. Although two individuals may both have a diagnosed LD, their family histories, social backgrounds, cultural beliefs, gender, class, and/or race make their experiences exceptionally distinct. Therefore, when conducting research involving sensitive topics with vulnerable populations, it is crucial to first establish rapport and trust to minimize anxiety and distrust (Pillow, 2003). As a qualitative researcher in an area built upon power, status, and historical understandings of disability, there is analytic work that needs to be done. I have a responsibility to identify shared themes amongst participants, while also highlighting and prioritizing each interviewee's unique perspective. I truly believe that being reflexive involves a methodological alertness to how knowledge is coproduced (Court & Abbas, 2013).

### Participants

The Research Ethics Board at Brock University granted clearance for the study and the participant recruitment strategies (File # 19-171). Participants were recruited in January 2020 from a mandatory first-year introductory child and youth studies course with approximately 900 students at Brock University, a moderately sized public research university. At the beginning of the in-person lecture, a verbal invitation was given that informed students of the purpose, methodology, and procedures of the study. Students were also told that they must have a diagnosed LD to participate. Research invitations were also posted on the students' university online portal. Interested participants were asked to email the primary researcher.

A total of eight participants, two males and six females aged 17-18, volunteered. Participants' race and ethnic background was not reported. The participants had no direct relationship to the researcher, other than attending the same university. Participants were informed of their right to skip any questions that made them feel uncomfortable and were told that their answers would

remain confidential. No participant expressed concerns over any of the questions or withdrew from the study.

## Procedure

### *Student Participant Procedures*

The qualitative approach provides rich, in-depth information that enabled exploring both the similarities and differences in the transitional experience of students with LD. Data collection strategies were focused on gaining information about the personal experiences from the perspectives of those with LD, as the voices of this marginalized group are not typically considered in this area of research (Connor, 2012). Such interviews reflect more of a conversation, whose purpose is to gather detailed descriptions of one's reality with respect to an interpretation of the meanings of a "described phenomenon." However, the value of interviewing is that it empowers interviewees to express their own thoughts while speaking in their own voice (Alshenqeeti, 2014). For people with LD, who are often silenced by an ableist society, interviewing can enable opportunity to voice personal experiences and perceptions. Due to the sensitivity of some questions (i.e., some participants discussed traumatic experiences), in-depth interviews created trust between the interviewee and interviewer. The individual in-depth interviews were semi-structured in nature and conducted by the primary researcher at Brock University in the researcher's private lab. The interview questions (see Appendix A) were developed to obtain information about the perspectives of students with LD regarding the transition experience. Interviews lasted approximately 35–45 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded on a passcode-locked computer, with the participants' consent.

### *University Program Procedures*

Ten university programs were selected from the Ontario Universities' Application Centre (OUAC; Ontario Universities' Application Centre, 2021) list of university student transition resources. Of the 27 universities listed, 10 offered programs that had a specific focus on incoming students with LD. Several other postsecondary institutions had universal transition programs that focused on the general population of incoming students, but did not include a specific focus on student with LD. Therefore, the former 10 were well suited for this study, due to their primary focus on LD.

## Data Analysis

### *Student Participant Data Analysis*

All eight interviews were transcribed verbatim by the primary researcher. Pseudonyms were used and randomly assigned to protect participants' identity and

privacy. Each transcription was read several times for accuracy and consistency and to also become familiar with the content. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not possible to member-check the transcriptions. However, to ensure trustworthiness of data, all interviews were audio recorded by two separate devices and cross-checked following the interviews. In addition, throughout the interviews, the primary researcher continuously repeated what the participant stated to ensure that each member was heard and understood correctly.

An inductive approach was used for three main reasons: (a) to condense extensive raw data into a summary format; (b) to establish clear links between the research objectives and the summary findings derived from the raw data; and (c) to develop theory regarding the underlying structure of experiences which are evident in the raw data (Thomas, 2003). Transcripts were transferred into NVivo to assist with analysis. A rigorous and systematic reading of the transcripts allowed major themes to emerge. These themes were created from phrases used in specific text segments. Phrases or texts were coded into major categories based on similarities, with the research questions in mind. Although no other members examined the raw data for emergent themes, the selected inductive approach to data analysis helped eliminate researcher bias.

### *University Program Data Review*

The OUAC website list of transition resources (2021) highlights the major objectives of each postsecondary institution's transition program, while also providing links to the programs' information sites. Gaining information from students who are enrolled in each program was expected to generate further themes, but for the purpose of the study, information was gathered from what is made available to the public via the postsecondary education's websites. The main themes and components of each transition program were organized into a table to highlight the similarities and differences amongst programs. Only themes that were consistent amongst at least two programs were included for analysis.

## Results

The results will be categorized into two sections. First, we will discuss the major themes that emerged from the personal narratives of the students with LD. Specifically, how these students work to resist the preconceived notions of what LD entails to thrive mentally, physically, academically, and socially during their transition. Although each participant shared their own unique stories, similar experiences emerged for all eight. Four major themes were identified: (a) LD and Self-Esteem/Image, (b) Accommodations, (c) Support Networks, and



(d) Mental Health Vulnerabilities.

Second, the 10 university transition programs will be described and categorized based on their main objectives (see Table 1). Objectives that were discussed by at least two universities are listed by the number of times they were discussed amongst the 10 programs (see Table 2). This information was used to demonstrate the overlaps and gaps between the student data and the university transition objectives (see Table 3).

## LD and Self-Image/Esteem

### Societal Views

Six of the eight participants spoke about feeling that others would solely define their image based on their diagnosis. This can affect one's self-image and embody the negative connotations many people have about an LD. Participants felt discouraged about how others would view them.

*I believe it's a way of categorizing people that struggle. So, people that learn through different means, and the minorities, are seen as incompetent in our society.* Rebecca

Some students expressed how their LD quickly became the sole image of them once others around them knew about their diagnosis.

*I just feel like people thought I was weird in high school because of it [LD]... that's how people define you, or that's how people knew me by.* Brittany

Participants revealed a feeling of not being "good enough" or expected to fail, because of the expectation's society uphold around LD.

*I've been told a lot that I'm not smart because of my disability. It put me in the mindset of not feeling smart enough to do university and think I was going to waste my family's money on tuition, fail, then be upset with myself for failing and embarrassed.* Rebecca

**Consequences for Self-Esteem.** Several students expressed how their LD complicated their self-confidence, ultimately raising feelings of self-hatred and remorse. Devin expressed this when stating:

*I've had horrible self-confidence for a while. I think it's related to having an LD ... it is a bit harder to maintain that self-esteem because there is always that self-loathing.*

Brittany connected their self-esteem struggles with their disability by saying:

*I can't even count the times I've cried over school. Doing work you don't understand right away is so difficult, especially when everyone else gets it ... It puts a damper on self-esteem because you feel like you aren't doing as well and start to internalize that.*

Most participants had similar experiences of not being accepted by others and embodying feelings of shame regarding their diagnosis.

## Accommodations

### Benefits of Accommodations

Responsibility is placed upon students to disclose their disability prior to entering university. Many students responded positively regarding their current accommodations.

*In university, accommodations are even more important. I have noticed I have gone over time on every exam. Having that ability has saved my academic life.* Thomas

Accommodations vary depending on the student's needs as well as the university's access to certain resources, support networks, and assistive technologies.

*I have use of computer, extra time, quiet rooms, and then I have the use of the software that can read to you and note-taking.* Alanna

Most participants expressed that accommodations provided a space for them to feel more at ease regarding their learning. Note-taking, extra exam/assignment time, access to certain technologies, and a quiet workspace, were among some of the accommodations students benefitted from.

### Stigma Associated With Accommodations

Although accommodations can provide immense support, participants expressed concern that others see them as a privilege, making students with LD feel guilty, self-conscious, and unworthy of the necessary resources and services provided to them.

*People think "is she so stupid she needs help with spelling?" Even if you need help with something everyone does, where does that put you on a level of intelligence?* Brittany

*When people think I'm lucky, I feel guilty... I think other people think that because I have an LD, I am stupid, or not worthy or that I'm taking advantage of a system.* Rebecca

Although some knew their accommodations would benefit their learning, the stigma associated with this assistance was not worth the social consequences to them.

*The computer for me is a symbol of stress s... as a symbol of my failure and shame.* Devin

Elizabeth voiced the same concern, refusing to take extra time on assignments or exams out of fear of the negative perceptions of others, despite truly needing the accommodation for support:

*I was worried that when they [professors] are grading, because I got extra time, that it would need to be so much better than everyone else's.*

The balance between accommodations providing necessary support and acting as a marker for disability was a constant juggle for students.

## Support Networks

### Family and Friends

The role of family and friends as a protective factor was apparent for all participants, indicating that these support networks hold an essential role in aiding a positive transition.

*My parents are good about not letting me label myself with having an LD, they don't let me use that as an excuse. Samantha*

*Finding a friend group that I knew I could trust and confide in was super important for me. Elizabeth*

However, without these crucial support networks, individuals may be at risk for a poor transition.

*A good friend group, which is what I was lacking in and that contributes a lot to the anxiety I felt, but if I had someone to talk to it may have been processed better. Elizabeth*

### Support/Case Workers

The appropriate support services available for each student was identified as key factors in helping them navigate the academic, social, and personal demands of university.

*Knowing your services at university because they are so helpful. Alanna*

This includes having a specific individual, such as a case worker, from the university that can help communicate the student's needs and wants to ensure a smooth transition.

*My case manager also helped a lot. Claire*

### Lack of LD Knowledge

Every participant expressed that there was a clear lack of knowledge regarding what an LD is. Elizabeth described this feeling by stating how:

*Some people aren't necessarily defining it, because they don't know, but they will say that someone with an LD is dumb, or has a low IQ, a lot of negative stuff.*

*If somebody doesn't know someone with an LD, they don't really know what it is. It's almost your job to educate them. There is this unknown bubble around LD unless somebody tries to learn more about it. Claire*

The lack of LD awareness for those diagnosed and the general population raises apprehension.

*We are constantly trying to blend in ... Sometimes people can't handle being different. I feel like you notice your own flaws more... and then you start to internalize that. Rebecca*

### Self-Advocacy

University often reflects an independent environment. Therefore, students may be required to reach out to the necessary support systems on their own.

*I did suffer with anxiety and depression knowing that*

*I was alone and had to do all this work by myself or reach out myself, which scared me. Claire*

Preparation for postsecondary education should go beyond curriculum-based needs. The necessary skills may include self-advocacy to communicate to support staff what accommodations are necessary.

*You need to advocate for yourself and know what works and what doesn't. Samantha*

However, self-advocacy does not only provide benefits for individuals with LD; others can relate to them as well.

*By sharing my own experiences, it educates other people and helps people who also struggle with the same things I do. You might as well be your own self-advocate. Rebecca*

All participants agreed that support is an important factor to their overall well-being – whether from family, friends, university resources, self-advocacy, or a combination.

## Mental Health Vulnerabilities

### Mental Health and High School

All participants expressed having faced some form of mental health struggles because of their disability. Elizabeth noted her anxiety-related symptoms when stating:

*I had them [anxiety symptoms] in high school, that's where it started ... again in university, it just hit me, and I hadn't felt it for months and suddenly I was waking up in the middle of the night with a panic attack ... university definitely set it off.*

Similar thoughts about mental health were present when Samantha shared:

*I have my own fair share of mental health ... I was diagnosed with anorexia, and after, anxiety and depression ... my therapists and doctors said I need control, I didn't feel like I had control in my academics ... I think because an LD takes that control away from you.*

These comorbidities were quite common amongst participants, which could indicate that individuals with LD are more vulnerable to mental health concerns.

*I struggle with anxiety and panic attacks. It could be co-occurring because I was more vulnerable to having worries. Elizabeth*

### Mental Health and the Transition to University

The transition may be identified as a period of increased physical, academic, social, and emotional challenges for students with LD. Devin described the transition as an experience of reliving deep-rooted struggles:

*I've never been good at transitions ... a lot of self-aggression and harm started to come back, it's all little things I haven't seen in years came back because of my transition.*

Specifically, the transition itself brought feelings of hardship for seven of the eight participants, including the change of pace, social networks, and increased academic pressure.

*I have been struggling this first year ... I was struggling finding a good friend group ... and obviously academically ... I wasn't enjoying it and having lots of anxiety.* Elizabeth

### **Impact of LD on Mental Health**

When asked if they thought that having an LD put someone at a greater risk for mental health issues, most of the participants acknowledged a susceptibility.

*There is a lot more strain on you to do better and you work harder ... you get stressed and that leads to anxiety and depression, more so than people who don't have an LD.* Claire

A common theme amongst responses was the pressure felt from societal standards that seemed to conflict with the characteristics of LD.

*You wish you could be "better" by societal standards. As a result, you dig yourself deeper and deeper. That's what I attribute to leading to my depression.* Devin

This powerful statement seemed to mirror similar feelings from others as well.

*I think it plays a role; it can cause bullying which can cause depression. I think majority of kids with LD also struggle with mental health.* Samantha

This constant internal and external battle can become detrimental for one's future trajectories, mental health, and overall well-being. Devin was passionate and shared this idea within his interview, which provides a fitting conclusion to this presentation of the testimonies.

*The problem is because there is something different about you, society tells you you're broken. That's probably one of the main reasons I became depressed ... I wanted to do everything perfectly because I knew I couldn't be.*

All participants provided incredibly passionate and meaningful responses. These findings point to the complexity of the transition from high school to postsecondary education for those with LD.

### **Main Objectives of University Transition Programs**

An informal review of universities across Ontario demonstrated that several hold objectives that correlate well with the results of the student interviews. The public transition documents and information from 10 universities were organized into major themes (see Table 1). The main objectives were referenced from the OUAC (2021) University Student Transition Resource guide. Many transition programs included core objectives of getting students connected to others on campus, exploring university services and accommodations, and gaining valuable strategies such as study skills and note-taking. However, programs rarely addressed issues surrounding self-advocacy, mental health, and societal perceptions and stereotypes of disability, which are known to make the transition from high school to postsecondary education difficult.

After analyzing the transition programs, we assessed the main objectives that were consistent amongst at least two of the universities. Table 2 presents each objective as well as how many universities out of the 10 that touched on the given topic. By visualizing the objectives in this way, it becomes clear what universities value most when thinking about students with LD transitioning to postsecondary education. By analyzing both student data and university transition programs, areas of overlap and improvement emerge.

As illustrated in Table 3, none of the 10 transition programs included main objectives that addressed uncovering societal views and stereotypes of LD, which was shown in the student data to complicate students' self-esteem and/or self-image. However, all programs included the benefits of accommodations and how such services and programs can aid in a positive transition for students with LD. Further, all universities except two discussed meeting other peers or family support as being a main objective during the move to postsecondary education. What raises the most concern is that only three programs included discussions around self-advocacy and only three programs addressing the role of mental health such as anxiety or depression.

## **Discussion**

After analyzing both the first-hand experiences in narratives by first-year university students with LD and existing university transition programs, it is apparent that while there are areas in which transition efforts are indeed providing support, there are also gaps within these transitional supports. The findings from this study are situated within the university in which the student participants were enrolled, but also unmask a larger concern for students with LD as they make the complex transition to postsecondary education.

The following discussion is arranged around the four major themes of the study.

### **Self-Esteem/Image**

According to the Transition Planning Resource by the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario (LDAO; Nichols, 2003), to achieve a successful transition from secondary to postsecondary education, students must be able to understand their LD, present a positive self-image, develop positive personal strategies (such as self-motivation), and develop positive social and prosocial skills. Based on the student interviews, support in these areas must include a general aware-

**Table 1**  
*University Transition Programs for Students With Learning Disabilities*

Program	University	Main Objectives
Students Taking Academic Responsibility (STAR)	Algoma University	Become familiar with assistive technology, learn different strategies, adopt concrete tools and resources, understand professor expectations
STARTonTrack	University of Guelph	Goal setting, planning, and motivation. Getting connected to people, a community, and groups on campus. Access resources and campus supports. Improve problem-solving
Easy Start Transition Program	University of Guelph-Humber	Explore services, learn about academic accommodations and meet returning students registered with Accessible Learning Services. Learn the differences between the expectations for students in high school compared to college and university. Learn about note-taking, time management, coping with anxiety. Meet other students starting their postsecondary journey and discover the common questions you all have. Learn about what academic accommodations are and how to prepare for university
Laurentian Initiative for Transition (LIFT)	Laurentian	Test-taking strategies, note-taking, study skill strategies, time management tools, understand what services are available and how to access them, time management skills, accessible technologies, how to manage your learning challenges successfully, meet other students
MyStart	Ontario Tech University	Understand differences between high school and postsecondary, self-advocacy, how to use your strengths, how to use accessible software, meet key staff for academic and learning support
On-Line to Success (OLTS)	Queens University	Strategies to deal with increased demands of workload, self-advocacy, and stress management. Identify strengths and challenges, understand personal learning profile, time management, stress management, self-advocacy, and how to navigate accessibility services
Student Heading into Full Time (SHIFT)	Ryerson University	How to register with Academic Accommodation Support, talk to current students with disabilities, understand learning strategies for academic success. Guidance on assistive technology, online lectures, learning strategies, and self-advocacy. Parent information sessions also available
Summer Academic Skills Institute (S.A.S.I)	University of Toronto – Mississauga Campus	Factors of resiliency and why it is important, wellness tools and strategies to manage stress, how to read a course syllabus, how to build a personalized study plan and a weekly schedule, how to take effective notes in lectures and from readings, test-taking strategies for math, essay, and multiple-choice tests, how to write an effective essay, Q&A with volunteer peer mentors
Bridge to University for Students with Learning Disabilities (BUILD)	University of Windsor	Explore the unique opportunities and challenges faced by students with learning disabilities, learn about the variety of services and supports available on campus and through Student Accessibility Services, discover valuable techniques, strategies, and technology to maximize learning potential, and meet fellow students, colleagues, and university staff and faculty
Student Community & Leadership Development (SCLD)	York University	Peer-to-peer programs, support healthy living and well-being, opportunities to develop or enhance academic and leadership skills, community building and making meaningful connections. Student engagement (helping students jump into university life with resources, tips, and services), health education & promotion (offering services that help support your health and well-being), student leadership (focuses on increasing student's leadership capacity, community engagement and social impact), and learning skills services (help develop new academic skills or refresh existing ones, from time management and effective studying skills to school-and work-life balance)

From "Policy/Program Memorandum No. 8: Identification of and Program Planning for Students With Learning Disabilities," by Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014. Retrieved from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/extra/eng/ppm/ppm8.pdf>



**Table 2**  
*Transition Programs' Main Objectives*

Transition Program Objective	Number of Times Mentioned
Accessible Technology/Software	5
Access to Resources/Services	7
Building Connection to Others	6
Problem Solving/Goal Setting	2
Understanding University Expectation	3
Note-/Test-Taking, Study Skills	5
Time/Stress Management	7
Coping With Mental Health/Well-Being	2
Self-Advocacy/Recognizing Strengths	3

ness of the stigma associated with LD and the association between LD and mental health concerns many students tend to experience. Such awareness can include specific difficulties students with LD encounter and how to become more sensitive and understanding toward them. Yet, this cannot be done without a recognition that these students are able to achieve their full potential. That is, the focus must resonate with their competencies and abilities ahead of the barriers represented by the label of being diagnosed with an LD (Nichols et al., 2003).

Several universities did include some of these key features within their transition programs. For instance, York University discussed the importance of providing student leadership and community engagement opportunities for a successful transition. Similarly, Ontario Tech University discussed the idea of teaching students how to recognize their personal strengths and challenges for an optimal university experience (see Table 1). Overall, transition programs should reflect a culture of participation and awareness that enables those students with LD to combat the stigmatizing stereotypes that view disability and "difference" as a natural and integral part of identity (Connor, 2012).

#### *Lack of LD Awareness*

One common theme expressed by participants was a lack of knowledge surrounding LD. Although LDs are common, there is a concerning lack of consistency and knowledge in the general population regarding what LDs are, what they entail, and how individuals are impacted by them. All the subjects in this study expressed a concern over the lack of education surrounding the nature of LD further perpetuating negative connotations and stigma. This lack of knowledge and awareness acts as a barrier to a smooth transition as many feel it creates negative connotations. Therefore, one of

the most influential and moving takeaways from this study should be the need for further awareness in an effort to help individuals with LD to feel at peace with their diagnosis.

Several universities recognized this, such as Queens, University of Toronto, University of Windsor, and York University, by including key features in their transition programs that involved students understanding their learning profiles and being given opportunities to meet with other students with LD (see Table 2). However, ways to address the lack of knowledge surrounding LD should go beyond just educating the student with the LD to include more awareness among their university staff and students. Indeed, a lack of understanding of LD among the general public was one of the largest issues during the entire transition experience, as related by the participants.

#### **Accommodations**

All 10 institutions discussed the use of accommodations – whether providing information about access to resources, services, or accessible technology or just information about the accommodations available. For example, the Student Heading Into Full Time (SHIFT) Program at Ryerson University focuses on how to register with academic accommodation support services and provides guidance on assistive technology. Similarly, the Easy Start Transition Program at University of Guelph-Humber ensures that students are given an opportunity to explore services and learn about note-taking and how to access academic accommodations.

Accommodation policies and disability programs can make postsecondary education more accessible (Waterfield & Whelan, 2017). However, although accommodations were a key feature identified by the participants for a successful transition, they also pointed out that use

of accommodations often leads to negative connotations and stigma. That is, although being identified with an LD enables access to accommodations, negative social and political implications that are attached to such labeling remain (Waterfield & Whelan, 2017).

Banks (2014) found that, because of the stigma associated with disability culture, many students choose not to disclose their disability or seek the necessary accommodations until after they have experienced academic failure. This was illustrated within the current study when participants expressed how they proceeded to take a full course load, knowing that they had the option not to, but wanted to “fit in” with their peers and undergo the “typical” five-course university semester. While many expressed experiencing academic difficulties, they resisted seeking disability services or utilizing the appropriate accommodations due to the disability stigma they had previously experienced in high school.

Knowing that the current ableist society is not always understanding of those with a disability, some students feel shame, embarrassment, and regret surrounding their accommodations (Ryan, 2007). This notion was supported within the current study as every participant expressed feeling guilty or as if accommodations were “cheating” when using their accommodations. Some participants acknowledged that they knew this was only creating a level playing field and equity for them, but they still struggled to feel equally as “successful” as their peers with additional help, such as extra time on assignments or exams.

These findings are supported within the literature when Hall and Webster (2008), for example, note how students often feel uncomfortable within a merit-based system while relying on accommodations. It could be argued that these underlying feelings of guilt or “cheating” a merit-based system may be due to the underlying construction of disability culture. To combat this, transition programs should ensure that the discourse of dependence and incompetence that surrounds students with LD is deconstructed or, at a minimum, acknowledged in some way.

## Support Networks

Family and friends were reported as one of the largest support networks during students’ postsecondary education transition. Support from those closest to them provided encouragement that helped students develop and maintain self-confidence and perseverance. The young people within this study greatly valued the role of peer relationships and friendships during this transition period. Social networks of people with LD have been found to be smaller, with proportionately fewer friends, when compared to those without an

LD (Hughes et al., 2013). Several students expressed knowing the importance of social networks but had a difficult time creating and maintaining such connections during their transition.

The current findings support previous literature showing that stability in social, emotional, and physical support networks acts as a key factor during the transition process (Martínez et al., 2011). Several programs also reflected the importance of meeting other students and being able to share experiences and concerns with others. For example, University of Guelph (and Guelph-Humber), Ryerson University, University of Windsor, and York University all included aspects of peer support programs and opportunities to meet other students within their transition programs. Hughes et al. (2013) recognized peer support as a protective factor during the transition process as these relationships help students cope with stress and protect one’s emotional well-being. More transition programs should focus on the importance of peer relations, especially during adolescence where relationships are often prioritized.

## Self-Advocacy

Many individuals with LD lack the self-determination necessary to effectively self-advocate to obtain the reasonable accommodations needed in college (Herridge, 2017). Nearly every university mentioned time and stress management as key features of their transition program (see Table 3). Students also discussed the need for help with organization and time management. Although some knew that it would take them longer to complete certain tasks compared to their peers, they often did not acknowledge it when starting on work that had to be finished on time. Thus, being able to successfully plan assignments and course workloads and understand their personal learning style acted as an academic protective factor (MOEQ, 2012). Developing self-advocacy skills prior to entering postsecondary education is imperative for a positive transition (Geller & Greenberg, 2009) since these allow students to feel more comfortable disclosing their disability and requesting the appropriate supports and accommodations (Herridge, 2017).

Since university is an increasingly more independent environment than high school, it is the responsibility of the individual student to take charge of their overall learning and well-being. Most participants in this study discussed previously suffering from low self-esteem and how, although sometimes it is still present, they have learned about their personal strengths and needs to become the best version of themselves. Yet, these experiences can lead to negative feelings, including anger, sadness, worry, frustration, and lower self-esteem (Integra, 2016). Self-esteem was not explicitly stated as a key feature by any of the 10 university transition programs. Universi-

ties must recognize the unique challenges faced by individuals with LD, which include societal views and their consequences for self-esteem, and work with students to provide them with tools to challenge the definition and stereotypes associated with a "learning disability."

Although self-advocacy was identified as a key feature by participants, only three programs specifically reflected on this within their transition programs (Ontario Tech, Queens, and Ryerson). Findings of the transition research on students with LD generally emphasize the need for external support networks rather than self-initiated efforts to ensure success (Connor, 2012). Preparation for higher education often focuses solely on curriculum-based needs, while failing to prepare students with LD to develop the skills needed to be successful (Burdge, 2012; Herridge, 2017). Therefore, it is the role of all stakeholders involved in the transition process to recognize

that there are far more challenges than the commonly acknowledged academic realm. Without the proper coping and self-confidence skills, students with LD find it more difficult to live a positive and fulfilling life. Through obtaining a more comprehensive understanding of students labeled as LD and identifying ways to alleviate their concerns, postsecondary institutions would be better able to assist students in need of academic, social, and emotional support (Herridge, 2017).

### Mental Health-Related Difficulties

According to previous research, students with LD are more susceptible to experiencing mental health-related difficulties (Piers & Duquette, 2016; Wilson et al., 2009). This was supported by the current study's findings, which suggest that students with LD are at a greater

**Table 3**  
*Overlaps Between Student-Identified Themes and University Transition Program Aims*

Student-Identified Themes	University									
	Algoma U	U of Guelph	U of Guelph-Humber	Laur. U	Ontario Tech U	Queens U	Ryerson U	U of Toronto (Miss.)	Windsor U	York U
LD and Self-Esteem/Image										
Societal Views										
Consequences for Self-Esteem										
Accommodations										
Benefits	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	sX
Stigma										
Support Networks										
Family and Friends		X	X	X			X	X	X	X
Support/Case Workers		X	X	X	X	X			X	X
Lack of LD Education										
Self-Advocacy					X	X	X			
Mental Health Vulnerabilities										
Mental Health and High School										
Mental Health and the Transition			X					X		X

Note. U = University. Laur. = Laurentian. Miss. = Mississauga Campus. X indicates that the theme identified through student narratives was identified in the university program aims.

risk for mental health concerns following the transition to postsecondary education. It is common for LD to be comorbid with other conditions, including emotional, behavioral or attentional disorders, sensory impairments, or other medical conditions (Integra, 2016). All participants expressed struggling with issues such as anxiety, depression, and social skills. Specifically, the construct of their LD was felt by the participants to include constantly feeling “different.” Further, aggression, bullying, peer victimization, self-injury, self-hatred, and other antisocial behaviors have been statistically linked to LD (Piers & Duquette, 2016), and were all mentioned by the participants within this study.

Only three transition programs, Easy Start Transition Program at Guelph-Humber, Student Community & Leadership Development at York University, and the Summer Academic Skills Institute at University of Toronto-Mississauga, referred to mental health or mental health-related areas as being a topic of focus. Anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and poor social relationships all coincide with the overall transitional experience. York University identified health education and promotion, including offering services that help support the student’s health and well-being, as a key method for a successful transition, while Guelph-Humber included topics such as coping and anxiety. The University of Toronto-Mississauga mentioned resiliency and wellness tools to manage stress.

Individuals with LD often feel as if they are not meeting others’ expectations, that they are letting down their loved ones, and not working hard enough, despite trying their best (Integra, 2016). The findings of the current study reveal a concerning gap in this area. Every single university should be focusing on at least one area of mental health related difficulties for students with LD. Transitional efforts must work to include the impact of mental health more directly, especially when focused on vulnerable populations, such as those with LD, who will otherwise continue to struggle in silence.

## **Limitations**

The present research provides insight into the experiences of eight first-year students with LD. The students chose to participate as they wanted to create awareness of the LD experience and reflect on their personal perceptions, thus encouraging more emancipatory research. While the findings provide in-depth insight into the transition experience for university students with an LD, several limitations must be considered.

While the small number of participants provided for an in-depth analysis of these students’ experiences, they were recruited from one university course at the same educational institution and, therefore, the

findings cannot be generalized. Further, the interview data represent an understanding of a small sample of students who have disclosed their disability to student accessibility services on campus. Research has suggested that 70% of students with accommodations in high school do not disclose their disability upon graduation (Newman et al., 2011). Additionally, many students with suspected LD are not formally diagnosed for several reasons (e.g., receiving a private assessment being too costly for some families or the waitlists to receive a psycho-educational assessment being months or even years long). Therefore, we acknowledged that the experiences vary depending on the individual and that a greater number of student participants may have provided other perspectives. That is, this study does not “speak to” or represent the voices of every student with an LD or other disabilities. In addition, the interpretations of others involved in the transition experience such as parents, peers, educators, and other professionals would have offered more diverse findings.

The outcomes and analysis of the identified transition programs also offer some limitations. That is, since the participating institutions are all located within Ontario, Canada, the results and accompanying interpretations cannot be generalized to other North American or worldwide transitional efforts. Finally, the reliability of results could have been made stronger by having an additional researcher engage in the student data analysis, including data cleaning, to help prevent any inherent bias. Nevertheless, the study provides a rich understanding of the way students with LD navigate the first-year university experience.

## **Implications for Practice**

The transition to postsecondary education for students with LD is a complicated process because of the confluence of individual, peer, family, institutional, and societal-related factors that directly and indirectly impact the experience. The objective of this study was to provide a space for students to share their stories and experiences, including their accomplishments and challenges faced while transitioning from high school to postsecondary education. The findings provide a unique and significant perspective on the high school-to-postsecondary-education transition experience – that of first-year students with LD. This type of research redefines how young people with LD experience and adjust to university, and thereby assist educators, case workers, support staff, and accessibility services in improving transition efforts and informing interventions. In addition, not only do the findings provide insight into the postsecondary education experience for incoming students, they can also offer information for current secondary students regarding



what is needed to support a positive move. In addition, findings can benefit family members by demonstrating the critical role support systems play during the transition and, therefore, enable them to provide adequate support at all stages. Finally, the findings may also offer clinical relevance for identifying types of support that can promote positive resilience and psychosocial adjustment for students with LD.

Transition efforts should be implemented as early as elementary school to provide comprehensive support. Along the way, such support must include a general awareness of the physicality of the transition experience, how to access accommodations and reduce stigma, as well as strategies for maintaining a positive mental health. Reducing barriers is crucial for students with LD transitioning to postsecondary education. From this study it is evident that some students managed to overcome certain barriers with the support of significant stakeholders (i.e., family, friends, case workers), which enabled a positive transitional experience. However, despite accommodations, students with LD continue to experience mental health-related struggles, which are intensified due to the stigmatization of disability. Therefore, services and resources should include input from students with LD. Such input is necessary for productive agency so those with disabilities can communicate their needs not only for university culture but for the larger disability culture as well.

## Conclusion

The goal of the present study was to give voice to the experiences and perspectives of students with LD

while they transition to postsecondary education. As a result, secondary and postsecondary education personnel can gain insight into how to best support students with disabilities to represent themselves during their transition, instead of being the objects of others' representation (Ashby, 2011). What makes this study unique is the link drawn to current Ontario university transition programs for students with LD. Many programs address the transition experience as a combination of physical, academic, and socio-emotional challenges, yet the larger mental health aspect cannot be ignored. If individuals are unable to maintain a positive self-esteem, create and maintain peer relations, and receive adequate support services for anxiety and depression, we are ultimately failing to ensure the basic needs of those with LD are being met. Although accommodations, meeting other current students, and self-advocacy are key features of a successful transition, other areas require more attention. A focus on reducing disability stigma and a greater emphasis on social supports and mental health advocacy is needed. That is, the ideal transition program would focus not only on the acquisition of basic academic skills but also self-efficacy, relationship skills, self-confidence, and mental health-related factors known to hinder academic performance and overall well-being.

The empowering stories presented here act as a testimony to the individualized experience of students with LD while they transition to university. As a result of having facilitated agency for individuals with LD, this research has led to findings that will help transition programs to more accurately reflect the direct needs of first-year university students with LD.

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## Appendix A. Semi-Structured Interview Guide

1. Tell me about your LD (diagnosis, history, etc.). When were you diagnosed, and can you tell me about that process?
2. What made you want to participate in this study?
3. How do you define learning disabilities?
4. Do you like university? Why/why not?
5. How is university different from high school?
6. What were some good things about coming to university?
7. What were some challenging things about coming to university?
8. What expectations did you have from university?
  - a. Where did these expectations come from?
9. What was your experience like transitioning from grade 12 to university?
  - a. Do you think the transition was easy/hard/both? Why?
10. Do you feel that your high school prepared you for university?
11. Do you have accommodations in high school? If so, what were they?
12. Do you currently have accommodations in university? If so, what are they?
13. Did your accommodations in high school transfer to university?
  - a. Were there barriers to getting the support you needed in university? If so, can you talk about those?
  - b. Were you told by anyone to seek out accommodations? If so, who?
14. Were your accommodations in high school effective?
15. Are your accommodations in university effective?
16. Were there support networks or specific individuals who helped your transition?
17. Were you concerned about coming to university because of your learning disability? Why or why not?
18. Can you talk about any potential barriers that you faced specifically, because of your learning disability?
19. Do you think university does a good job with people who have LDs?
  - a. Can you give me an example of what went right/wrong with your accommodations?
20. Do you feel as if having a learning disability made it harder for you to transition to university?
21. Did you feel there was a stigma associated with your LD/having accommodations?
22. Do people ever see your LD as the sole definition of yourself?
  - a. Do people have a hard time seeing the strengths/positive attributes of your LD?
23. Are you open to telling people about your learning disability? Why or why not?
  - a. What about your Professors/TAs?
  - b. What do you tell people?
  - c. Do you change the story depending on who you are talking to?
24. Have you ever regretted disclosing to someone about your LD? Why/who?
25. When has talking about your LD been useful?
  - a. When has it been hurtful/harmful?
26. How have other people defined your learning disability?
27. Would you say that other people's understandings of learning disabilities are similar to your own? Why or why not?
28. Does having an LD ever cause individuals to perceive you in a certain way? If so, how?
29. Did you experience any social or emotional stress or hardships during your transition as a result of your learning disability?
30. Does having an LD make it any harder for you to maintain a positive self-esteem?
31. Has your LD ever made it difficult to maintain social relationships or friendships? If so, why or why not?
32. Do you think that having a learning disability puts an individual at a greater risk for mental health concerns? If so, why do you think?
33. What do you wish people knew about learning disabilities?
34. Would you say that having an LD makes you any more vulnerable to issues like peer victimization, and a negative self-esteem and self-confidence?
  - a. In what ways?
35. Have you ever experienced feelings of anxiety or depression during your transition as a result of your LD?
36. Has having an LD created a stigmatization of academic underachievement? How?
37. What do you wish you knew prior to your transition to university that you know now?
38. What are some things that would make your transition process more successful or positive?
39. What would you say to someone who is struggling with their learning disability?
40. Is there anything you wish to share to the field disability studies that you wish everyone would know?