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# **Higher Education experiences of elite student-para-athletes in the UK.**

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## **Abstract**

This paper presents the narrative accounts of 6 elite student-para-athletes attending Higher Education full-time in the UK. Whilst literature concerning the student-athlete population in the UK is growing (Sagar, Boardley and Kavussanu 2010; Henry 2013; Aquilina 2013; Anderson and McCormack 2014; Zhou, Heim and O’Biren 2015), there is no research at present that brings to the fore the voices of student-athletes who represent their country in Paralympic sports. In addition, research concerning the experiences of higher education students with disabilities in the UK is heavily concerned with the experience of learning as opposed to the more nuanced experiences of ‘being’ a university student. Accounts concerning the lived experience of higher education were gathered via semi-structured interviews and analysed through a process of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis producing an intricate, intimate and personal theme for each participant. Analysed and presented as individual case studies, the research demonstrates the uniqueness of experience despite the existence of common and shared life environments. The accounts explore three life-worlds – university, elite sport and disability – and expose the difference in meaning-making by each participant to the identities of ‘athlete’, ‘student’ and ‘disabled’, specifically within the context of higher education. The accounts are presented as three themes that illuminate the contrast in experience: 1) University as a normative and positive experience; 2) University as a disappointing and hindering experience; 3) University as an experience of personal salvation and purpose. Findings are mapped to the Social-Relational model of disability (Thomas 1999; 2004) to better understand the relationship between individual perception, impairment and environment.

## **Introduction**

In 2006 the European Commission offered a commitment to develop, implement and support the notion of a ‘Dual Career Programme’ for full-time student-athletes across Europe, with a number of initiatives being developed across Europe in Higher Education Institutes (HEIs). The Dual Career Programme recognized the need for “high quality training centres to safeguard the moral educational and professional interests of young sports men and sports women” (Commission of the European Communities White Paper 2007, 6). The result in the United Kingdom was the evolution of universities identifying themselves as High Performance Centers (HPCs) that offered flexible learning, financial support and world-class sports training facilities allowing talented athletes to engage in the higher education system. Despite the increase in structured support for full-time student-athletes in the UK, research exploring the life experiences of such individuals remains somewhat limited. Whilst a number of salient issues have been explored by academics in the UK - antisocial behavior demonstrated in student-athletes (Sagar et al.. 2010), correlated links between educational and sporting performance (Henry 2010) and examined the hazing and initiation ceremonies of university level sports teams and clubs (Groves, Griggs, and Leflay 2012) - a rigorous search of literature pertaining specifically to the lived experiences of student-athletes in UK higher education (HE) who participate in Paralympic sports (as opposed to able bodied sports) is missing. Thus demonstrating that research communities (in both Education and Sport) have undeniably ignored engaging in studies with the ‘student-para-athlete’ group.

This paper will detail the university experience of 6 elite level student-athletes with a disability who were enrolled on a full-time degree course in HE whilst simultaneously training full-time on a Paralympic sport performance pathway programme. The purpose of this article therefore is duplicitous; 1) to initiate academic discourse with the student-para-athlete, thus beginning literary commentary in the area and; 2) to question how a student with a disability consumes university life through (performance) sport. The accounts presented were extracted from a wider study (Campbell 2013) that examined the negotiation of multiple self-defined identities of ‘student’, ‘athlete’ and ‘disabled’, exploring the varying life-worlds each participant

occupied. The central focus of this article, therefore, is to present the unique narrative of each Paralympic student-athlete in regards to the meaning participants attached to their HE experience that goes beyond the concerns of learning.

### **Higher Education experiences in the UK: Students with disabilities**

In response to the ascent of neo-liberalistic political considerations towards education during the 1980s and 1990s, via the implementation of the Further and Higher Education Act (1992), the Conservative Government initiated the transforming of universities from establishments reserved for academic knowledge, to pseudo-egalitarian centers for accessible life-long learning. As such, literature exploring the subjective social and learning processes of HE students within the UK has been increasingly prevalent, with significant phenomenological research presented towards understanding the psychological and emotional experiences associated with engaging in HE. Moreover, studies focusing specifically on the implications of transitioning to university and the associated emotional risk/reward as self-identifying as a student in HE (within particular social contexts) have been popular within academia (Hughes 2004; Askham 2008; Christie 2009; Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2010; Taylor and Scurry 2011). These studies challenge discourse based on the normative ideal of the expected linear educational progression for the young white, middle-class, and bring to the fore more complex and multiple socially constructivist notions of identity (re)creation at university through non-traditional diverse cultural prisms.

The Further and Higher Education Act 1992 was introduced primarily to abdicate the exclusivity and exclusionary conditions within traditional HEIs which prevented pupils from lower socio-economic groups or 'othered' communities to enter higher education; people with a disability being one such example of an 'othered' group. Whilst there are encouraging signs of progression, "there are many areas that still need much further development; areas needing particular attention included teaching and learning, monitoring and evaluation, staff development and quality assurance" (Tinklin, Rindell and Wilson 2004, 655). Consequentially, as Barnes (2007, 136) notes, there is now a burgeoning literature on the complexities of the disablement process within (and outside of) the educational environment from a variety of academic disciplines, especially considering the inclusion of those deemed "worthy but without".

Although somewhat broad in nature and sporadic in appearance, recent literature examining experiencing university with a disability has looked to advance studies exploring the pedagogical expectations of participating in HE. Goode (2007) encountered that, due to the lack of institutional foresight, students with disabilities begin university with a substantial proportion of their time (relative to their peers) exhausted in identifying and employing strategies for the physicality of scholarly practice, as opposed to immediately engaging in the progression their academic studies, placing them at an instantaneous disadvantage. Exploring this, Gibson's (2012) socio-cultural study of the move to university and subsequent learning experiences of first-year students with disabilities echoes the work of Vickerman and Blundell (2010). Both studies concluded that whilst there is evidence for limited institutional disablement within the university, the two most reported difficulties for students with disabilities in higher education was 1) the initial transition into HE (due to a prior lack of information and clarity surrounding study options and support available); and 2) failing to gain disability-specific life skills to assist in future employability. Recently, Riddell and Weedon (2014) suggest that the introduction of

the supposed policy-for-pity aimed at students with disabilities has actually imposed further stigmatisation by removing an individual's authority to self-identity as having a disability (especially for those with a non-visible disability) by enforcing institutional pressure to disclose in order to access support. However, Bauchamp-Pryor (2012) mapped the trajectory of absent to active voices within disability specific literature concerning university, yet argues that instigating change can only be achieved via an effective participatory process which is wholly dependent upon the willingness of academics in a position of influence to ensure a genuineness of involvement by disabled people.

The author argues that the overarching commentary across these studies is that student accounts of favorable university experiences depend largely on the attitudes, relationships with, and personal knowledge of particular staff members, as opposed to particular institutional policies and provisions. Consequently, it can be identified that the relationship between lived experience and practiced scholarship is individually constructed between each different university and the student concerned. This is supported by Healey, Andrew, Fuller and Hall (2015, 8) who report that 'using a catch-all category "disabled students" is problematic and that devising generic policies to support their teaching, learning and assessment may not always meet the specific needs of individuals'. However, this observation appears to have gone unrecognized in current research, with many scholars still attempting to generalize findings to the 'disabled student' population as a whole. Furthermore, academics are yet to explore an individualistic consideration of 'identity' for UK-based university students with a disability that transcends the issues of scholarship as a 'disabled student'. This recognition of individual agency, interdependence and personal perception of condition (and also impairment) lends itself to a paradigmatic shift away from one of absolute institutional responsibility akin to the Social model of disability (Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation 1976 [in Oliver 1996]; Oliver 1983) to that of the social-relational model of disability (Thomas 1999; 2004) which allows for both social and psychological association between the person and their surroundings:

Disability is a form of social oppression involving the social imposition of restrictions of activity on people with impairments *and the socially engendered undermining of their psycho-emotional wellbeing* (Thomas 1999: 60; *emphasis added*).

Whilst it is beyond the scope of this article to meta-analyse the rise of studies within this area, these few aforementioned examples ameliorate and inform as supplementary considerations of the university experience that may be relevant to the student-para-athlete participants in this study.

### **Higher Education experiences in the UK: Student-Athletes**

The European student-athlete community was pushed to the forefront of the sociology of sport research initially through the work of Lavalley and Wylleman (2000). Although primarily concerned with athlete transitions within elite sport, their studies have been seminal in progressing the need to acknowledge and give consideration to the additional psychological and lifestyle support required for athletes in full-time education (Aquilina and Henry 2010). In response to their work, a number of studies have emerged analyzing a manifold of concepts of which the student-athlete must contend. Examples include the validation of the Italian version of the Student-Athlete

Motivation Questionnaire (Guidotti, Minganti, Cortis et al. 2013), the dual-career experience through the eyes of Slovak athletes (Geranosova and Ronakinen 2015); Swedish student-athletes experiences of the dual-career programme (Stambulova, Engström, Franck et al. 2014) and the barriers associated with the dual-career programme for Spanish student-athletes (Lopez de Subijana, Barriopedro, and Conde 2015). As such, these studies have contributed to driving of the development of the European Athlete as Student (EAS) consortium. Established in 2004, the EAS consists of university partners, academics, practitioners, sporting bodies and the European Commission with the aim of creating and furthering opportunities of combining high performance sport and HE. However, at present the EAS has not attended to, nor addressed, the specificities required for the Paralympic student-athlete dual-career and have failed to advance connections and possibilities for such individuals within its programme. To date, the United Kingdom has had minimal academic correspondence with the EAS. Moreover, contrary to their European peers, British academics have published limited research concerning the student-athlete, despite the significant number of talented and elite sport performers attending further and higher education institutions<sup>1</sup>.

As Brown, Fletcher, Henry et al. (2015) acknowledge, the years of age 18 to 21 demonstrate a normative transition from a junior to senior aged competitor for a number of Olympic sports, which marries well to the commonly considered normative transition from further to higher education. However, despite the increase in transition literature and the development of potentially relevant conceptual models, Park, Lavallee, and Tod (2013) observed that relatively few studies conducted on athletes' transitions in the UK have employed a theoretical framework, with even fewer focusing specifically on the transitions to university. Although a small number of UK studies have employed the Athlete Developmental Model presented by Wylleman, Alfemmann and Lavallee (2004) on which to scaffold student-athlete transition inquiry, this model is not representative to the complications of the student-para-athlete. Whilst a small number of studies have explored the issue of transition into UK HE for students with disabilities both through the vantage of experience (Yorke 2000; Madriga 2007; Weedon and Riddell 2007; Taylor, Baskett and Wren 2010) and through legislative policy and process (Sanderson 2001; Riddell, Weedon, Fuller et al. 2007), research is yet to explore to what extent the additional pressure of being a high performance para-athlete contributes to the stresses of transitioning to HE, as well as associated sport specific transitions. This paper draws attention to some of these considerations.

To date, no UK studies have explored explicitly the transition of high performance athletes with disabilities into HE study. Furthermore, the overall exploration into the identity nexus of such population has been entirely omitted from the literary landscape. This paper (and the work of the wider study) aims to address this gap in knowledge by exploring the narrative accounts of 6 student-para-athletes, with specific interest paid to their experiences of their sporting and holistic participation in higher education.

## **Method**

The material presented in this paper is drawn from a project (Campbell 2013) exploring the negotiation of the identity through differing life worlds, via the sociological lens of Bauman's Liquid Modernity (2000). Hurst (1996) noted that the

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1 <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/highereducation/Pages/UniversitiesWeekTeamGB.aspx#.VeCWgkKlmb8>

lived experience of students with disabilities has been missing from previous studies, and called for increased research that focuses on *their* perspectives as opposed to the perspectives of the institutes or the teaching staff – however few studies have yet to build on such call. What follows therefore, is a collection of extracts that pay particular attention to the participants’ experiences of self-identifying as a university student with a disability.

### ***Participants***

Purposive sampling was employed as the project sought individuals who met specific criteria. Recruitment of the participants was achieved via convenience sampling through the author’s personal connection with the Talented Athlete Scholarship Scheme (TASS), which has a network of over 20 universities across the UK. Sport Scholarship Managers at each institute were asked to forward on a pre-written email outlining the study to all student-athletes with a disability at their university. Individuals who would qualify for participation needed to be of 18 years or older and enrolled full-time on a degree course at an HEI in the UK (or to have graduated no more than 12 months prior to participation). In addition, participants were required to present with a physical disability, with no accompanying cognitive impairment or diminished mental capacity. A final requirement was that participants needed to be training as part of a Paralympic sport Performance Pathway and to have represented Great Britain at least once.

In total, 13 student-para-athletes who met the criteria were identified, with 9 of these individuals choosing to self-selected to participate in the wider project. The participants attended a range of universities, with each university having a varied focus on high performance sport as part of the overall university brand and identity. Universities were geographically spread across the UK with each participant attending a different university. From the 9 participants, the accounts of 6 participants have been included in this paper as these accounts provided greater voice towards exploring their ‘student’ identity and their overall university involvement.

### ***Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis***

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 participants that covered four specific topics: 1) Participants’ routes into their sport; 2) Experiences of student life; 3) Experiences of being a young person with a disability; 4) Perceptions of the intersectionality of elite sport and higher education. Interviews lasted between 90 minutes and 145 minutes, with recordings being transcribed verbatim and subject to the associated processes of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers and Larkin 2009). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is an approach to qualitative research concerned with exploring and understanding the lived experience of a specified phenomenon (Smith 2004). As a methodology in its own right rather than simply a means of analysing data, IPA involves the detailed examination of participants’ ‘lifeworlds’; their experiences of a particular phenomenon, how they have made sense of these experiences and the meanings they attach to them (Smith et al. 2009). From such analysis, the detail of the participants’ experiences is used to illuminate the complex and interconnected dynamics of being an HE student with a disability, including the emotional interplay between self-identifying versus the social labeling of three different distinctions; student, athlete and disabled. These accounts provide a previously unavailable nuanced account of the underpinning considerations to the lives of student para-athletes.

As aforementioned, very few UK studies have produced rich, idiographic studies concerning the everyday lived experiences of the student-athlete, of which none have incorporated the student-para-athlete. This paper addresses such void. What follows are extracts from the interviews conducted with 6 of the participants which highlight the meanings each attached to being at university and how each experienced this life-world in regards to both their disability and their Paralympic ambitions. For the purposes of this paper, analysis relating to that of Bauman's Liquid Modernity (2000) has been removed.

## **Narrative Accounts**

The following section presents the narrative accounts of 6 elite level student-para-athletes and explores their reflections on university life in regards to their negotiation of higher education, elite sport and disability. Drawn from a larger study (Campbell 2013) the below texts explore three overarching themes which represent 6 unique stories. Each account from the original study provided five to seven themes of contemplating disability, elite performance and higher education. This paper brings forward considerations of the aforementioned research question of '*how does a student with a disability consume university life through (performance) sport?*' Here, similarities in experience are married together whilst still ensuring the participant's individual experiences are grounded in personal particular circumstance and perception. This facility for highlighting unique perspectives as well as shared realities is one of the cornerstones of IPA (Smith and Osborn 2008).

From the 6 accounts, three themes have been identified: 1) university as a normative yet fundamentally positive experience (Emily and Helen); 2) university as a professionally disappointing and hindering experience (Amy and James); and 3) university as an experience of personal salvation and purpose (Beth and Chris).

### ***Theme 1: University as a normative and positive experience: Emily & Helen***

#### *Emily*

Emily (19yrs) is a swimmer and was in her second year studying at a HPTC university. She was born with Osteogenesis Imperfecta (commonly referred to as Brittle Bones Syndrome).

Emily self-identifies as being an elite athlete:

*If someone said to me, you know like 'oh what do you do?' I would say 'oh I'm a swimmer' (...) and at the risk of sounding really big headed, yeah, I'm pretty good*

As well as being an elite athlete, Emily self-identified with a number of different roles – the work-hard / party-hard student; the content girlfriend; the sociable employee. It seemed that Emily had very much embraced her student identity and all that came with it, choosing to become as involved in her university life as she possibly could. Consciously disallowing swimming to galvanize her university experience, Emily had a balanced attitude to her current situation where her academic aspirations were just as important to her as her swimming ambitions. Additionally, she appeared to understand the need to evaluate the costs of the choices she made when creating both her student and her athletic identity:



*Obviously it's all really important - like my degree and my swimming - it's all kind of quite high pressure <pause> but you just have to kind of relax about it all really and know when which [identity] has priority*

Emily's sense of self-fulfilment did not seem to be explicitly linked to her athlete identity. Her sense of self-acceptance paradoxically seemed at odds yet also complimentary to her sporting achievements. Emily acknowledged that she accepted herself (in her present situation at least) regardless of her athletic performance with a positive sense of self emerging by valuing herself independently from her race times and medals won. Although Emily attended a HPTC, it is not a Paralympic specific center, and at 4ft 9in tall, with scoliosis and misshapen limbs, Emily's body is visibly different to the athletic bodies of her peers in the pool. Indeed, Emily experienced her difference as an athlete with a disability as a positive contribution to her university experience:

*I'm like the first disability swimmer they've had in years and years and years (...) but I quite like standing out a bit, not blending in (...) I'm kind of quite lucky coz I'm quite recognisable*

Swimming was of exceptional importance to Emily but it did not provide an exclusive definition of who she was. Emily's most important attribute to the experience of her identity at university was her understanding of and willingness to accommodate her differing life-world situations. Emily seemed to understand the importance of experience outside of her swimming culture, allowing herself to widen her boundaries and experience the difference of her peers at university:

*You'll find a lot of the swimmers don't know anyone else apart from swimmers (...) but I've made the effort and I've met a lot of people now and made a lot of friends which I'm really grateful for*

As a result of Emily making the 'effort' she now experienced a sense of belonging at her university that transcended far beyond the swimming pool. As our conversation progressed, Emily gave examples of how her self-esteem had grown due to her experiences at university. The position she had found herself in at university was of such belonging that perhaps she would not have experienced it so strongly had she attended a university that put less of focus on sport, or conversely had a more para-athlete focus. Emily's sense of belonging in her university's sporting culture came from feelings of achievement, success and support:

*When we were at BUCS and I broke 2 world records (...) everyone went crazy [laughs] I was like 'the' person to be that weekend*

As I asked Emily about what her time at university had meant to her she gushed with such overt enthusiasm:

*It's just <pause> I just love it <pause> it is absolutely amazing (...) I owe everything I am now to this university*

Emily was thriving in higher education. Her course was challenging, her swimming was exceptional and her social life was at its peak. So far, her 18 months at university appeared to have been an outstandingly worthwhile and positive experience in regards her identity development and negotiation.

### *Helen*

Helen (18yrs) is a wheelchair Table Tennis athlete and in her first year of study at a non-HPTC university. At 8 years old Helen was diagnosed with Juvenile Arthritis, which was so severe she was in a coma for several weeks. The result was complete loss of function in her lower limbs.

Throughout her account, Helen made numerous references to experiencing her university life-world as a 'normal' student, with 'normality' being based on identifying the actions and behaviours of her peers and then measuring herself by comparison. It was evident that Helen was enjoying her university experience, outwardly demonstrating that she has earned her spot at university and was proud of her academic achievements. She enjoyed identifying herself as a university student:

*I mean it's nice to know you're a university student <pause> not everyone can say that can they?*

Helen alluded to feeling pleased that she was now living without the previous support structures she had perhaps relied upon at home. She did not appear to be overwhelmed by this, nor did she express that she was necessarily experiencing any difficulties being at university:

*It's nice to know that you can be on your own and still survive, still cope with life, with 'university' life*

Helen's positive experience of university appeared to be intricately linked with her attitude towards having a disability. Whilst she aware that her disability played a part in her university experience, she still considered her experience to be 'normal' and expressed that she was able to participate in everything that her peers did. Certainly her disability did not cause her to experience any feelings beyond difference whilst at university:

*If you're willing to go out and do things then you're fine you know (...) if you want to go [out] you can still go, it's not a problem you just have to give it a go you know*

Helen continued to demonstrate that she experienced the majority of her time at university as the same as those around her. The examples she provided were typical of any student, regardless of physical capability:

*I'm managing alright you know <pause> I'm eating, keeping the place fairly tidy, washing (...) I'm managing to do both - go out and get a degree and do what everyone else does here*

The strength of Helen's conviction was evident throughout. She considered that she was able to engage in all that her university peers did, highlighting that she in no way felt that her disability restricted or prevented her from participating in university culture:

*You know you can go bowling, you can go to the cinema, you can go to the pub you can do, you know you can do anything really, like anything a [makes quotation marks] normal person would do*

Indeed, the only aspect of her university life-world where Helen explicitly recognised her difference was in relation to her sport. She acknowledged that her dedication to her sport prevented her from participating in some of the expected and assumed behaviours at university. Yet she understood that this difference was a result of the choices she makes, and more importantly, that she has control over to what extent she moderates these behaviours and actions that contribute to her difference:

*If you've got an early morning training session or an early morning competition then it makes sense that you can't go out all night drinking (...) but it doesn't bother me you know, it's my choice*

For Helen, university was an environment where she very much considered herself equal (but not necessarily the same) to those around her. Whilst her disability was a contributing factor to the way she negotiated the practicalities of being at university, she did not allude to any consideration of having an identity as a 'disabled student':

*Some people exclude themselves from it [university life] because they use it, they use their disability as an excuse not to do things and I think that's really wrong, you can still do the same stuff as everybody else*

Helen appeared to fully consume and enjoy her university student experience with positivity and pride. She spoke determinedly on the importance being at university and the extent to what her 'student' identity meant to her:

*If I came that close to dying and the doctors managed to save me I don't want their efforts to be for nothing, I want them to see that I was someone worth saving*

***Theme 2: University as a disappointing and hindering experience:  
Amy & James***

*Amy*

Amy (23yrs) is a swimmer and graduated from a HPTC university 12 months prior to the interview. Born with the condition Amelia (commonly referred to as congenital amputation), she was on track for 2012 selection and already attended the 2004 and 2008 Paralympic Games.

Having already attended and medalled at two Paralympic Games (once before university and once during), there was no question that Amy was an elite athlete, however she did not necessarily share this whilst at university:

*I was never very good at going into my uni department and being like 'look I'm a Paralympic athlete – support me' you know, I would just blend into the background*

Amy admitted that she chose her university based on its links to elite level swimming. Yet despite attending a top sports university, she recalled how different she felt from her peers in identifying as an elite athlete:

*I felt like I missed out a lot on the social aspect of university, even the other athletes didn't seem to take it [training] as seriously as I did*

Of note, Amy made only one reference throughout her interview to her experiencing her disability as a point for difference at university, implying that there was no identity of 'disability' that led to embedded feelings of distance:

*Someone was like 'Oh can't you just use your other arm or something?' (...) she was absolutely mortified but [everyone] realised that I was comfortable having one arm and it just never came up again*

The missed yet expected social experience of university culture came through quite regularly when Amy described her time in higher education. She spoke candidly about her university experience, but without a reflection of nostalgia or warmth, rather as a period of necessity in order to achieve her sporting ambitions:

*I would miss out on so many things (...) but they don't really mean that much, when you're standing on that medal podium, with that medal around your neck I don't care I missed nights out.*

Amy alluded that her time at university was quite isolated and unfulfilling. She peppered the interview with experiences of difference and separateness, yet knew that these experiences were self-administered due to her choosing to compete at such a high level of sport:

*My life was definitely different, (...) you know I'd be going out for training as they were all coming in from a night out*

It seemed apparent that the level of sport at which Amy participated very much prevented her from identifying herself as a university 'student', especially in regards to cultural considerations. The inherent expectation that university provides a platform for identity development and social opportunity was not available for Amy, leaving her feeling disengaged and detached:

*University is actually the stage where I feel I didn't make many friends (...) Quite often people say it's the biggest time of your life and it's the most exciting thing but I personally wouldn't say that it was, not for me*

Now a university graduate and training full time, Amy expressed her disappointment at the lack of opportunity for personal development offered to her by university. It seemed that outside of her sporting environment university did not contribute towards Amy's current identity of self. When asked about how higher education had helped her prepare for her future after swimming, Amy was rather negative and felt that her university failed to provide her with the practical knowledge and life-skills required for transitioning into employment:

*I suppose if I'm honest I don't think being at university taught me anything (...) you know what most people learn at university like independence and responsibility I think I'd already learnt it*

It was evident that the 'athlete' identity placed more restrictions and limitations on Amy's experiences at university than her disability ever did. When I questioned Amy about what her time at university meant to her, she concluded by saying:

*I don't know really <pause> it didn't mean anything at all to be honest <pause> no wait, it meant I could get better at swimming*

*James*

James (23yrs) is a middle distance runner and had attended a N-HPTC university. At the time of interview he had been a graduate for nearly 12 months. James was born with Amelia (commonly referred to as congenital amputation) and missing his left forearm and hand.

James openly admitted that his process for choosing his course and place of study was done with little forethought:

*I chose mine [university] whilst I was in the Himalayas on a little computer in a shed*

James spoke of his academic life-world with an underlying sense of loss and disappoint, and this deficit of satisfaction was present throughout. He alluded to the idea of university providing ‘life experience’ as becoming an inherent understanding of what is to be an expected outcome of higher education:

*From the start I didn't have a huge passion for it [university] and I thought it would get better, but it really didn't. It was so far from what I had hoped for*

James gave a reflexive indication of what the ‘student-athlete’ identity should have been like. He had hoped to join a university athletics club with the anticipation of enjoying the expected social camaraderie he had heard about from friends:

*When I went to uni I thought I'd go along and be part of a sports team [and] combine this sort of heavy drinking with a competitive schedule <pause> and it just never happened*

As a regional level runner competing in able-bodied events, James had hoped to develop his athletics further whilst at university however there was no club for him to join. Although James found himself the fastest athlete at his local running club, he failed to develop the speeds required for high-level competitions:

*In my last 4 months of uni I was told I was good enough to maybe compete in the Paralympics which was odd because I'd never really thought of my like that. I'd always thought maybe Olympics, but not Paralympics*

This sense of loss as himself as an ‘able’ athlete was prevalent throughout James’ account of his time in higher education. His expectations of university sport and the associated culture it creates was also lost and went unfulfilled:

*In retrospect university could have been a lot more beneficial towards my sport had I gone to university that actually had an interest in athletics*

What was lacking from James’ account was any sense of excitement or joy in his experience of university, reverting back to a discourse concerning what he felt he missed out on, rather than what he enjoyed. Indeed James did not seem to embrace any identity at all – he was losing his ‘athlete’ identity, he did not recognise a ‘student’ identity and was reluctant to consider ‘disability’ as an alternative identity, even if linked to elite sport. The below extract highlights the considered essentials of any student-athlete experience at university – the need for a supportive social and athletic network; both integral aspects seemingly absent to James:

*Maybe in different circumstances I could have had more support on the friendship side of things and sort of for the competitive side of things, or maybe they would have gone hand in hand, but I'll never know*

James' account of his experience of university seemed to be one of loneliness and disappointment and alluded to the loss of his athletic identity as being a catalyst for him to take on an alternative identity at university:

*I probably didn't do as much studying as everyone else because I was probably known as someone that, like, pursued every other part of their life apart from the academic*

James' lack of interest in his course, coupled with the loss of university sport culture he had hoped to gain suggested that James was deprived of a particular university experience he had anticipated. By all accounts James appeared to spend a lot of time on his own:

*I didn't have people there who were similar to me so I just did it all by myself really, training and studying, yeah I was a bit of a loner*

James began university with many hopeful expectations and assumptions of how the experience would enrich his athletic, academic and social life-worlds. Regrettably this was not the case for James as he considered that university left him disconnected from both his peers and his sporting ambitions.

### ***Theme 3: University as an experience of personal salvation and purpose: Chris & Beth***

#### *Chris*

Chris (28) is a wheelchair fencer. At 18 years old, Chris underwent a medical exam for the Royal Air Force (RAF), which revealed a tumor on his brain that needed immediate extraction. The operation left him with partial paralysis of the left side of his body, occasional difficulties with his balance and severe Palsy to the face. Despite being a wheelchair fencer, Chris did not require a wheelchair for everyday mobility.

Chris's journey to becoming an elite student-para-athlete was fraught with both severe psychological and sociological difficulties, especially in regards to him being denied a much longed for career in the RAF:

*To have that [RAF Career] suddenly taken away from me at 18 was devastating (...) to not have a clue about what to do next - that was hard to deal with*

Chris described how he found university an exceptionally troubling experience. As is commonly expected, higher education can be a daunting event for any individual – an environment that seems to magnify and intensify the need for belonging and identity creation. Experiencing himself as different from the person he had been just 12 months previously, attending university was a painful process for Chris:

*I had to completely start from scratch again with that label [disabled] and um and I became very depressed because of that (...) I just wasn't able to do the level of study required for university (...) so I became more depressed*

Chris spoke of how he felt attending university for the first two times to be the most isolated and emotionally damaging time of his life; unable to resolve the feelings of difference he experienced, unable to acquire nor create a 'student' identity. Exploring further, it appeared that Chris felt utterly alone in his quest to re-build his sense purpose and was unable to cope with the everyday 'disabled' identity he felt his face invited:

*I was a social recluse but no one sort of checked on me (...) I was mentally unstable, I couldn't look at my face (...) and like no one helped me*

Chris attempted his undergraduate degree 3 times. The first two times were at a N-HPS university where he undertook two different degree subjects, however he failed to complete the first year of either. Chris' third attempt was at a different N-HPS university where he successfully completed a 2-year undergraduate programme in music:

*I wanted to be a jazz drummer even more than to join the RAF (...) I'm not surprised I ended up coming back to music. It's the only thing that makes me feel like 'me' again*

Through music, Chris' 'student' identity was welcomed and embraced. 4 years had now passed since Chris first attempted university and he found himself returning to the activities that contributed to his former sense of self. Although markedly recovered, Chris still had to maintain a routine of physiotherapy and rehabilitation. It was through this routine that Chris was encouraged to attend a multi-sport classification day held at the university:

*There were lots of sports there (...) and I was much stronger than before and there was a lot offered to me right at the beginning (...) Fencing they wanted me straight away and fortunately I just fell in love with it quite early on*

Despite the use of a wheelchair not being part of his everyday life, Chris adapted to the identity of being a wheelchair athlete relatively quickly and without reservation. Perhaps, this is in part due to Chris' fatalistic understanding of his pathway to performance:

*One way or another, all this was meant to happen, absolutely meant to happen. (...) I was meant to end up at this university, doing music, to go to the Games [Paralympics] (...) everything happened because I needed to end up here*

It was evident from his account that Chris has a very complex consideration of his initial years at university. Instead of talking about university in terms of a collection of social experiences, Chris chose to express that university unearthed feelings of loneliness never before experienced, but that these feelings contribute to the self he experiences today:

*[University] has given me massive amounts of life experience and a knowledge of myself that I never had before (...) but more than anything, now, here, it's where sport, where fencing, found me <pause> this university gave me my life back*

For Chris it appears that 'life experience' has brought him full circle almost. Before higher education, Chris identified as an able bodied drummer with ambitions of representing his country as an RAF recruit. However, 4 years later and entering a period post-traumatic growth, Chris has chosen to walk a different path for himself as a

university student-athlete, focused now on representing his country through Paralympic success.

*Beth*

Beth (21) is in her first year at a HPTC university, training in Para-Sailing. At 13 years old Beth was diagnosed with the neurological illness Complex Regional Pain Syndrome, resulting in fixed dystonia in one leg and permanent use of a wheelchair. Over the course of 7 years, she spent her teenage years in and out of hospital, battling with losing her physical strength, her ability to communicate and, at times, her life.

Beth contemplated her identity as being entrapped between two physical states:

*It's kind of weird, <pause> I know technically I am, but I wouldn't say that I am disabled <pause> I'm ill, like my body is like this because of my brain*

From ages 13 years to 20 years old, Beth rarely spent more than a couple of months out of the hospital. She spoke of how she would often lie in pain for hours contemplating the possibility of one-day attending university:

*It's weird to think I was trying to do my A-levels in a hospital bed whilst my brain was constantly being operated on and I had all these drugs and tests – no wonder I failed them all [exams] miserably I just thought 'well I'll never get in now'!*

For Beth, the principle meaning of her university experience is that it enables her to live a life she often thought was beyond possible:

*I'm living independently but I have people just to kind of help me and support me from the agency (...) it's fantastic as I get on well with all of them really and I can choose how much or little help I want*

Beth described the challenges presented at university and how being able to do the simplest of things were of such huge significance to her self-esteem and identity away from her illness:

*Being at uni I feel a lot more confident in myself (...) its helped me and I think I've developed as a person*

She spoke with such joy and enthusiasm for the everyday tasks she was now able to complete, drawing attention to how acquiring a disability can transform 'normal things' into 'life challenges':

*I'm meeting friends up in town on my own which I couldn't really do before (...) [doing activities] that most people think are just normal things are life challenges for me but I can do them now!*

What was of most importance to Beth was how her time at university had benefitted her, providing a purpose to her life:

*I feel like I've got a direction in my life (...) I kind of feel like it's given me direction, it's definitely a positive experience. And with sailing getting better too I just feel like there's absolutely no stopping me*



For Beth to describe university as giving her a '*direction*' in her life accents the divide she felt between the life she leads now against the life she had in hospital. Where she once felt aimless, purposeless almost, she was now experiencing herself as fulfilling with a sense of intent and course. She continued to express how proud, confident and mobile she now was at university, experiencing such breakthroughs, and how these all contributed positively to her self-esteem:

*The first week I was like an emotional wreck because I was doing things that I'd never done before, on my own, in a new city like shopping and exploring and taking the bus places*

What Beth seemed to be so exuberant about was her ability to be mobile, to be free to move and explore her capabilities in her new surroundings. Despite her level of environmental security being reduced, attending university allowed her sense of individual freedom to flourish – both in university and in her sport.

## **Discussion**

The extracts presented above uncover the processes by which the participants negotiate the overlapping worlds of elite sport, university and disability that contribute not only to the development and understanding of what it 'means' to be an elite student-para-athlete, but also grapple the shaping of their self-identity through experiences within each world. Although identity is by its very nature elusive and ambivalent, what is clear is that despite knowing that all the participants broadly share similar life environments (sport, university, disability), the accounts provided regarding personal identity were thoroughly diverse. Thus, this highlights that the participants are not a 'group' of elite student-para-athletes, but rather a collective of individuals; all experiencing their multiple yet individual and social identities very singularly within the communal understanding of 'university' and 'sport' and 'disability'.

The vast majority of literature that aims to locate the voices of students with disabilities within higher education frequently promotes a collective or shared experience, most often rooted in a narrative of disappointment, isolation and struggle. Furthermore, very little is attributed to experiences of university life which go beyond that of experiences of scholarship and learning; whereas studies involving student-athletes or able bodied students as a population will research any matter of relevant aspects of the university experience beyond the lecture hall. Worryingly, a large number of papers fail to differentiate the impairments of the students, which only serves to fuel the concept that the term 'disabled' is an all-encompassing social and personal identity. At best, this concept is highly deridable, and at worst is severely handicapping (Campbell 2013). Of significance to this particular paper is the verity that UK researchers have neglected to critically explore the primary regard of higher education for student-athletes with disabilities; what does attending university *mean*? What else do HE students with disabilities consume *other* than a learning experience? The data within the wider study aimed to elicit answers to such questions, of which partial data is presented above.

The interviews undertaken explored the life-worlds of university, elite sport and disability for each participant, and as such the sentiment of identity capillarised each account. Anderson (2009) argues that personal identity is concerned with an individual's core characteristics, whereas social identity is a definition of oneself in relation to others. The important issue of the overlap, or junction of the psychological and the sociological can be explored at length when discussing the creation and/or

imposition of each identity for each participant. The accounts show that there *is* in fact the shared identity for the label 'athlete', with each providing examples of what they consider to be the similar core characteristics displayed by individuals who claimed ownership to the title, presenting a unified and shared identity. However, the identities of 'student' and 'disabled' did not bring forth a conviction of solidarity. It would appear that these identities were less personally derived and more understood through social construction of capability. Indeed, whilst participants demonstrated there was a shared understanding of the cultural expectations of attending university, the significance of the 'student' identity was unique for each participant, with the meaning of this identity rooted in personal circumstance and self-esteem. The identity of 'disabled', whether independently or linked to the 'student' or 'athlete' identity, demonstrated least parity across all accounts. Arguably the experience of disability is ephemeral and changeable according to the individual and their surroundings, however the accounts demonstrate that the experience of disability (and not exclusively within university) is different for each individual. And yet, regardless of the reported physiological, psychological and sociological experiences of their disability, the only shared element of this identity was the impetus for their sporting career. It is the creation, acquisition and strength of the 'athlete' identity that allows for such diverse meanings attached to the participants' experiences of higher education as a student with a disability.

The social-relational model of disability (Thomas 1999; 2004) purports both structural and psycho-emotional dimensions of oppression whereby it is the interobjective relationship between the individual and their immediate environment that creates the experience of disablism, and therefore not necessarily the restriction of agency (as is argued in the social model of disability). The accounts in this paper offer six varying narratives of the extent to which each participant experienced feelings of disablement specifically related to their university life-world. Of significant interest in contributing to the literature in this area, the author argues that it was not the impairment per se that disabled the individual, nor was it the structure of the higher education environment. By aligning the accounts to the social-relational model of disability, a more authentic, intimate, voice can be heard; one that allows researchers to postulate that it is the state of individual psychological wellbeing that will substantially determine to what extent disablement is encountered, as opposed to fixating on (dis)ability being caused by physical surroundings and structure alone. Finally, the author proposes that by employing the social-relational model of disability as a framework on which to scaffold narrative inquiry of disability, future researchers can explore further the relationship between individual psycho-emotional health and shared life-worlds to better understand the experience of disablement.

### **Recommendations to Universities**

Previous research concerning the identity of the 'disabled student' has been overwhelmingly confounded to the notion of struggle, difference and neglect, concentrating on structural inadequacies that promote the negative binary of 'normal student' experience and 'disabled student' experience. However, the voices presented in this paper demonstrate a much richer and more complex discussion about how students with disabilities experience university; especially with the added life-world of high performance sport. This therefore supports Thomas' (1999; 2004) consideration of the Social-Relational Model of Disability in that it is the interaction between the person, their impairment and their environment that determines the extent to which

they consider themselves 'disabled'. Moving forward, it is suggested that academics work with students with disabilities to explore their meaning-making of the HE experience and go beyond that of the pedagogical and legislative process. In agreement with Healey et al. (2015), students with disabilities need to be included in much broader sociological explorations of the lived experience of 'being' a university student. Higher Education Institutes should ensure that the needs and wants of students with impairments are included across the spectrum of university life, from external facing objective strategies through to much subtler and nuanced cultural practices of the everyday assumptions of 'being' a university student (and all that falls in between). Specific to the results presented in this paper, the author argues for a need for universities to invest further in understanding the unique needs of a student-para-athlete attending their institute and to consider fully to what extent they consider the combination of their impairment and their athletic ambition may diversify their overall student experience.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has illuminated, albeit with extensive condensing, the accounts of 6 elite student-para-athletes of whom seldom have the opportunity to have their voices heard in any sporting domain, least of all scholarly work. Working within the methodological boundaries of IPA, the author does not intend to promote shared or common experiences across the accounts of the participants as a form of generalizing; rather acknowledge that each account is exclusive and unique in regards to how, in using the social-relational model of disability each participant experienced, consumed, internalised, made sense of and spoke about their life-worlds.

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