

## ESCalate Student 2010 Grant Project Final Report

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| <b>Date submitted</b>     | 4 October 2011                     |
| <b>Project Title</b>      | Is University really for everyone? |
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| <b>Institution</b>        | Bath Spa University                |
| <b>Project Start date</b> | 1 September 2010                   |
| <b>Project End date</b>   | 29 July 2011                       |

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## **Is University Inclusive? A case study of a disabled student at a UK university using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory.**

### **Final Report**

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### **Top line Summary**

Although university is mainly concerned with furthering one's academic career, a large part of university life is about gaining new social experiences. The inclusion of students with disabilities at university level is under-researched. This research project aimed to redress the balance through a single case study, funded by ESCalate, which highlights the physical and social needs of Tom, a disabled student studying in the UK, and the key issues facing the university he attended. The data includes personal accounts and interviews. The research adopts Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory as a framework for understanding the complex social interactions within and between each of its nested systems. This research found two main areas of concern – communication and awareness of disability – and one area of strength, that of a caring human nature within the microsystem. The findings suggest an urgent need to redress how disabled students are included at university on a national scale. This is both to improve the provision offered by some institutions, but also to ensure the availability of uniform provision and services.

### **Overview and Aims**

This project aimed to redress the issue of inclusion at university through the lens of a single case study, funded by ESCalate. The research highlights the physical and social needs of Tom, a disabled student studying in the UK and the key issues facing the university he attended.

The research questions were as follows:

- What is the dominant model of disability found in the University?
- Is Tom 'included' in all aspects of his course?
- What are the barriers to Tom's inclusion?

## **Methodology**

A single case study was used as it allowed for more direct focus on an individual, which affords a better understanding to readers regarding how ideas and abstract principles fit together (Nisbet & Watt, 1984), with the additional benefits of being illustrative, accessible, attention holding, vivid and of value in teaching (Wellington, 2000).

The case study was selected due to its potential to illustrate a significantly under-researched area (Riddell, 1998). This may initially be seen as a convenience sample (Cohen *et al.*, 2007), as Tom's selection was neither methodological nor random. It is recognised by Gilbert (2008) that case studies are not usually selected randomly, but for their own sake, for example, if they are interesting. Furthermore, Devlin (2006) suggests that researchers make use of the connections they have. Although the researcher did have somewhat 'easy access' to the subject, he was still chosen due to the fact he was 'interesting'. In addition, the existence of a prior relationship enabled rapport to be built more quickly, which arguably creates more valid research than a larger sample could offer.

Data was collected through interviews with Tom during his first year at university. Interviews ranged from the unstructured to structured and were conducted face-to-face, via email and on the telephone. Three short discussions also took place with Tom's mother.

The research adopted Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory (EST), providing a framework for understanding the complex social interactions within and between each of its nested systems. This framework is particularly appropriate as it takes into account the holistic impact of a situation. The EST framework provided a contextual map to help understand the many different factors contributing to Tom's overall experience of university. EST has the

additional advantage for case studies of comprehending and incorporating the knowledge that all disabled students are individuals. The framework further helped to identify where interventions could be made or where connections and relationships could be improved.

## **Results**

The university experience that Tom has had so far has been mainly positive, though it appears much of the negative experience has been dictated by his disability. The university states on its website that it believes in equal opportunities for those with disabilities. Despite this, there are many barriers impacting Tom's attendance. These have resulted in him having unequal opportunities to learn in comparison to his peers.

Figure one helps to illustrate how the EST framework incorporated Tom's experiences, with the arrows representing the uni and bi-directional influences of the systems.

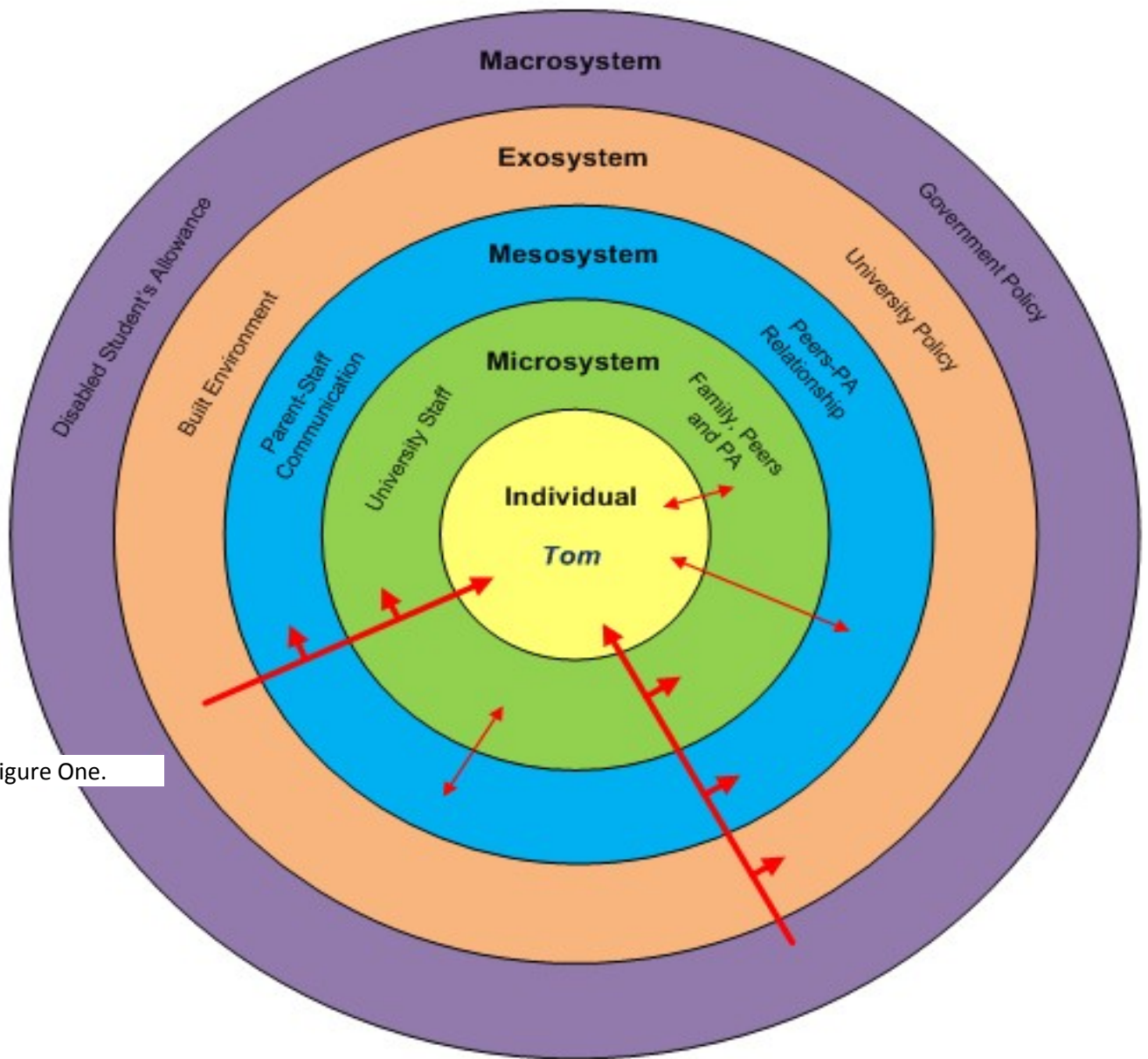


Figure One.

Within this research Tom represents the individual at the centre of the ecological systems. This research recognised the bi-directional influences in the microsystem and mesosystem, also noting the uni-directional influence of the exosystem and macrosystem. Tom could both influence and be influenced by systems when those systems were bi-directional, but in the case of uni-directional, he could only be influenced by them.

## **Conclusions and project impact**

This research has highlighted that key barriers are still present for the inclusion of students with impairments, leaving them disabled and unable to be on a level playing ground with their peers. The barriers are put up by the exosystem and macrosystem; this is through poor communication and a lack of staff awareness. Points that highlight this are the lack of adequate provision for the personal care and staffs assumptions about disabilities. This research was a case study of a single individual, this does not make its findings any less valid. As it was a single case study, the researcher was able to probe more deeply and examine the route causes of Toms exclusion. The problems faced were not because of Tom, but due to the inflexibilities of the exosystem and macrosystem.

*'...my tutor told me not to do the drawing as I can't draw.'* Tom was told by a university tutor not to do a drawing exercise as he would not be able to do it. Tom was not asked if he could do it, or even if he would like to try.

*'Most of the automatic doors at my campus don't work'*

*'My friends have been amazing; they have helped me so much'*

It is hoped that this research can be replicated on a larger scale. When this project began, the desired outcomes were unclear, though such clarification was necessary through the research process to ensure that a fully holistic approach was taken. This did, however, lead to some unnecessary avenues being explored. It is hoped that this research can help prompt further study with the eventual aim of the exosystem and macrosystem becoming bi-directional and truly embracing of the social model of disability. It is hoped universities will begin to self-reflect to improve their provisions for disabilities, and look at how other institutions are being inclusive and strive to do better.

## **Dissemination**

This research has been presented to students at Bath Spa University in 2011 and was included in a poster presentation at BERA 2011.

## **Expenditure**

Submitted to ESCalate

## **6. A 300 word (approx) summary in journalistic style – suitable for the ESCalate Newsletter or Bulletin**

Although university is mainly concerned with furthering one's academic career, a large part of university life is about gaining new social experiences. The inclusion of students with disabilities at university level is under-researched. Examples from the US include Ben-Moshe et al. (2005). There is however, little published in the UK; what is available tends to focus on educational rather than social need (Borland & James, 1999; Holloway, 2001; O'Conner & Robinson, 1999). Furthermore, the difficulties of social inclusion for disabled children have been examined (Knight et al., 2009). There is limited focus on preventing young people's social exclusion as they approach adulthood and entry to university, despite multiple case studies expressing this as a problem (BBC, 2009). This research aims to redress the balance through a single case study, funded by ESCalate, which highlights the physical and social needs of Tom, a disabled student studying in the UK and the key issues facing the university he attended. The data includes personal accounts and interviews. The research adopts Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory as a framework for understanding the complex social interactions within and between each of its nested systems. The paper has relevance to further and higher education institutions in facilitating the transition of disabled young people to university. This research has found two main areas of concern and one of strength; the areas of concern are that of communication and awareness of disability and the area of strength that of a caring human nature within the microsystem. The areas of concern appear to be due to the inflexible nature of the macrosystem and exosystem. The findings of this research suggest an urgent need to redress how disabled students are included at university on a national scale. This is both to improve the provision offered by some institutions, but also to ensure uniform provision and services are available.

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