



Learner journeys: young people's experiences of the This-Ability programme

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Introduction

1.1. The This-Ability programme

This-Ability is a programme (2018-2024) funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, led by the Humber Learning Consortium (HLC). It aims to provide tailored support and training for young people aged between 18- 29 (from Hull and East Riding) with a disability, learning disability/difficulty, long term health condition or mental health condition, to enter employment and remain in employment.

The three stages of the This-Ability programme are:

1. Ready, Willing and Able. During this stage the focus is on learners on This-Ability developing the ten soft skills, known as core capabilities.
2. World of Work. Having completed the first stage, learners gain sector specific employability skills with This-Ability providers of training/work experience. The providers are from different sectors across Hull; creative and digital sector; health and social care (and wider jobs in this sector); retail, catering and hospitality; and the sports sector.
3. Good to Go. Moving onto the final stage, learners work with This-Ability's Job Club to search for jobs, writing CVs and or covering letters, completing job applications, practising their interview skills and techniques, and attending interviews.

1.2. This-Ability evaluation

Researchers from Sheffield Hallam University, working with staff from the Humber Learning Consortium, have co-produced a range of research and evaluation activities since the programme began to understand how well it has worked, the outcomes, and what could be improved. One aspect of the evaluation has focused on developing case studies that track the journeys of three learners on the This-Ability programme.

1.3. Why case studies?

Case studies allow us to follow the journeys of individual learners from initial involvement in This-Ability to capturing their progress through the programme by catching up with them (every six weeks) over a six-month period. This method is suitable for exploring each learner's job aspirations, the barriers, and opportunities they experience, including health and personal circumstances, and to understand how the This-Ability programme might identify and provide support to meet complex and individual needs.

Methodology (how we did the research)

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In March 2023, This-Ability staff identified three learners for potential involvement in the case studies. Each learner was provided a pictorial information sheet and pictorial consent form with key information presented using images and simple language, in an easy read format. The participant information sheet outlined the research aims, what participation would involve, participant rights, and how the data would be stored – allowing learners to decide if they wanted to take part. Sheffield Hallam University provided ethics approval for this research.

Researchers began with an initial face-to-face in-depth qualitative interview to build rapport and gain information on each learner's background (personal, educational, employment, health etc.), their experiences and perceptions. Thereafter researchers did short (10-20 minute) catch-ups over Zoom with each learner, at approximately six-week intervals, to capture any progress and or change in learner circumstances.

Additionally, short interviews (over Zoom) were conducted with four This-Ability Mentors – all were staff with the This-Ability programme or partner providers who had worked closely with the three learners. This was to gain contextual information about the learners' circumstances, to clarify specific information that the learners provided, and to explain any perplexing issues that they raised during the research. Staff input helped create a rounded picture of learner needs, expectations, and experiences on the programme.

Once the case studies were complete in draft form (in November 2023), learners were given their case studies to check for any errors (to validate the information) and to add any presentational features (such as imagery) – providing a personal stamp that would make the case study their own. In the event, only one learner added artwork to their case study; the other two expressed that theirs remain as simple text versions without any additional features.

Learner Case Studies

In this section we present the case studies of three learners recently involved in the This-Ability programme. They share personal information about their disabilities, learning disabilities/difficulties, and any health conditions they experience. In addition to their educational and employment histories, insights are provided into their housing situations, and any additional challenges experienced by them, to convey the complex realities of their lives when searching for and or securing employment. Fundamentally, their journey on the This-Ability programme, the support provided, the reasons behind it, and the impact of this support, as well as any lessons for the programme are drawn to the reader's attention.

3.1. Ian

Ian is 19 years old and lives in Hull with his partner. He is autistic, has social anxiety, a panic disorder, and suffers from low mood and depression. Having left school with poor GCSE results due to mental health issues, he went into art and design for a year, followed by a photography course and then musical theatre for one year – he described feeling uncomfortable and not 'fitting in' with fellow students and the learning environment. His autism was misunderstood, leading to accusations, and bullying which was traumatising. As a result, Ian did not complete the courses. He obtained a BTEC qualification for partially completing the theatre course. After this he undertook a supported internship to help people with learning disabilities into jobs:

It was very slow and methodical ... it stopped a lot of us from pushing into what we wanted to do because it felt like it was like a safe hold.

He explained that students were not pushed outside their comfort zones to address their fears nor to manage the challenges presented by their autism. Following this disappointing experience, Ian undertook a 6-month, government funded, paid work placement on the *Kickstart* scheme. His placement with a content creation company as a graphic designer went well, leading to an offer of an apprenticeship. This was perceived as a positive experience which promoted independence, unlike his previous courses. However, the move to Hull to live with his partner prevented Ian from taking up the apprenticeship.

Before Kickstart he was sofa surfing at a friend's house (having moved around, living with various relatives) and living off benefits for a few months; the insecurity of this situation was a turning point for Ian. He started to go to the gym as well as working on his mental health. Eventually, the relationship with his mum was rebuilt and he returned to live with her.

When asked about his career aspirations, Ian shared that his dream job was to become a professional athlete, which he was training for, but he kept his options open by seeking alternative employment in a career that he was passionate about:

As a career goal what I want is to become a graphic designer or digital marketer because once I entered that I felt so comfortable, and I felt I could just do with something that I was good at and that I could understand.

He explained that only a few graphic design placements were available in Hull, but there were a lot of digital marketing placements. However, many of these opportunities were secured through interviews over-the-phone rather than in-person. Ian perceived this as preventing him from showcasing himself, his strengths. He hoped that involvement in the This-Ability programme (attending twice weekly) would help him “to get back into work” and have a routine again. During our discussion, Ian reported that a digital marketing professional was visiting This-Ability learners – a visit perfectly aligned with his interests.

Week one on This-Ability had focused on icebreakers, getting learners comfortable with each other. Ian was learning about labour markets and the different sectors before exploring work opportunities. Given he had a portfolio of work, a CV, and commissions, he hoped to get an apprenticeship soon after completing the core capability skills in his ‘Employability Passport.’ When asked about what he wanted to achieve over the next six weeks, Ian stated that he hoped to have a job interview and ideally be in a work experience that worked around his athletics training. He seemed highly motivated to achieve his aspirations.

The This-Ability mentor recounted Ian’s contribution in the classroom (during the first six weeks). She commented, he “*did contribute good things to group sessions ... he was probably an all-rounder in a group, he did work with everyone ... I do think he had a lot of knowledge*”. His written work was comprehensive and well evidenced to support his thinking and when confidently sharing his views, he was conscious of allowing others the opportunity to share theirs.

Six weeks later, Ian reported that having completed his core capability skills, he had moved on to the ‘World of Work’ component of the This-Ability programme to gain sector specific employability skills – in his case with a provider in the creative and digital sector. He reported that he had felt unsupported in their Job Club when attempting to find jobs in the digital sector. This is because he had expected them to speak to employers on his behalf rather than leaving him to job search on an employment website. However, this expectation contradicted the programme’s principles of promoting learner independence – perhaps there is some learning here for the programme to clearly set out the principles and expectations associated with This-Ability. Further, their suggestion that he do IT support, in his view, would not lead to a career in the creative and digital sector – the creative aspect that Ian was most passionate about. Programme staff explained that despite the availability of work placements with the provider, there wasn’t a large digital sector within Hull, and the few jobs available were highly competitive.

Their recommendation that he freelance wasn’t perceived as a practical option either, Ian clarified:

[This] demotivated me because I do not feel it works well for me due to having autism and needing a routine. I had already told them that I had tried this before and that it did not work out because I need structure and routine.

The frustration of having to develop a CV again (having produced one at college) was evident during our discussion. Moreover, the CV building session focused on groupwork rather than working with the individual which Ian felt was less beneficial – preventing the provider from working out each learner’s next steps. We later learnt that limited resources prevented the provider from offering focussed one-to-one support, and again, This-Ability staff reiterated that at this stage of the programme, the

principles of This-Ability were based on developing teamwork and communication as essential employability skills. Stage two, in Ian's understanding, should have included work experience, which at this point hadn't happened.

When asked if any changes had occurred in his personal circumstances, Ian reported that he had a better routine being on the This-Ability programme and regularly going to the gym. However, his experience so far on This-Ability had left him frustrated. He explained:

When I am at home because I feel like I am sat in limbo. It feels like there is lots of pathways to get into something, but I don't feel like I am moving towards them.

By the next case study interview, Ian was keen for progress to be made in terms of having had some interviews with employers; possibly getting underway with the Create to Change employment initiative; and in a best-case scenario, started an apprenticeship or paid work.

As Ian had mentioned Create to Change for the first time during our catch-up but provided little information about the initiative, clarification was sought from a This-Ability employee. She explained that Create to Change is an employment initiative aimed at young adults aged between 16 and 29 who live in Hull. The initiative provides participants with six-week paid work experience placements within the creative and digital sector. Ian had inquired about the opportunities but had not received any news on whether he could access the initiative. The This-Ability employee was chasing the employment initiative for a response – her understanding was that Ian would be able to receive the required funding to take up paid work as part of the initiative.

Six weeks later, during our catch-up, Ian reported that the Create to Change employment opportunity had not yet materialised, and that he hadn't received adequate updates to let him know whether it would happen at all. His job search was continuing with the provider, which was described of little benefit because he was able to “do that at home”. However, support to update his CV to make it more professional and “more polished” was perceived as helpful. Ian felt some mentors understood him and his ability better than others and this was a source of frustration for him.

Ian's narrative revealed that **learners benefited from exercises on how to present themselves when going for interviews and on what to expect in the world of work** – this was a vital aspect of the programme as some learners had huge gaps in their knowledge about the reality of working. The discussion ended with Ian stressing that he was desperate to secure employment as he was relying on his partner financially to pay the bills, for food etc. Thus, ideally, he was hoping to be in the Create to Change position when we next spoke.

A mentor for the provider offered some clarification about the delays in providing Create to Change opportunities – explaining that human resourcing issues had prevented effective engagement with businesses, hence slowing down the process for setting up paid work opportunities for learners like Ian.

The mentor went on to explain that whilst Ian had initially struggled to take on board “constructive criticism” about his portfolio of work and CV – perhaps having never received such feedback before – the following week he “cracked on and he made improvements to his CV”. Ian was described as “a leader”, someone who engaged with, and contributed to, learning, but also allowed others to take the lead too:

Ian [pseudonym] is definitely a leader, we've seen that in the sessions and discussions ... and he does put a lot of pressure on himself not just with his professional stuff but also his hobbies...to be the best (Provider Mentor).

The mentor pondered whether Ian's frustration arose from trying to be the best at everything – drawing on a recent example to demonstrate his point, *“we did a session last week about smart targets and setting goals and he, out of all of like the cohort in the class, he was the one who, that absolutely like nailed it...he does set himself big targets”*. Whilst his current circumstances and his past were perceived as drivers, they were also potentially sources of stress.

When we next caught up, six weeks later, Ian shared his good news – he had secured a full-time (30 hours) paid, Community Coach apprenticeship (assistant level) for a year and half, working with young students in a school. Although Ian's career aspirations lay in graphic design, his other interest, in fitness and sport, was closely aligned with his role as a Community Coach with the coursework being Sport Science based. Once completed, the apprenticeship would allow him to go onto a level two personal training or a full-time teaching position. Given previous advice during his placement at the creative and digital training provider, Ian perhaps realised that his route to his chosen career required some flexibility to realise his ambitions.

When asked about the Create to Change opportunity through This-Ability, he explained that another learner on the This-Ability programme had secured that opportunity. Around the same time, Ian had found the apprenticeship, independently, whilst looking on an employment platform. Upon sharing his news with This-Ability staff, they made him aware of the in-work support he could access through the programme whilst doing his apprenticeship, but Ian felt he did not need it as he didn't anticipate requiring much support at an assistant level. Ian reported that the This-Ability programme had helped other learners but had not helped him as much.

Having settled into the apprenticeship when we caught up seven weeks later, Ian outlined the demanding nature of his role. It involved coaching many children, supporting teaching, sports activities, and bike-ability sessions. Session plans and coursework were a key part of his job. He stressed that although the job was not what he wanted to do career-wise, it provided a route to becoming a personal trainer, and gaining a valuable qualification. When asked if he had been in contact with staff from This-Ability, he explained that he had been too busy since starting his apprenticeship – so much so, that he had not had the time to send evidence of starting his apprenticeship over to the This-Ability team.

During our last catch-up Ian reported that his busy schedule arranging and delivering various physical activities had continued, although on some days he would only observe the delivery of activities. He found it stressful travelling to different places far away, spending considerable time travelling back and forth. Despite these challenges, Ian explained that he would persevere knowing that once his apprenticeship finished, he could use the experience and qualifications gained to access more opportunities.

3.2. Jasmine

Jasmine is 18 years old and lives with her parents in a small village – an hour’s journey from Hull city centre. She was diagnosed with autism when young, and later with hypermobility. She also reported undiagnosed dyspraxia and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Leaving school at 18, medicated for severe mental ill health due to gender dysphoria, coming out as a transgender woman, and autism related stigma, Jasmine’s challenges prevented her from achieving the A level results she had hoped for. Isolated in a small village, when searching for jobs, Jasmine found that few jobs were available locally. After spending some time doing very little, she eventually found a job in a local call centre. Given her autism, the demands of working full-time in a call centre became too much. Leaving the job after only a few months, she explained, *“I was unemployed, and my confidence was absolutely shattered”*. And so, the search for employment began again. Most of the time she didn’t hear back from employers, which she suspected was due to disclosing her disabilities in her CV – deterring employers from taking her on.

Jasmine reported volunteering one day per week for a charity shop and supporting a charity for people with neurodivergence issues and autism. It was whilst volunteering with the latter charity that This-Ability was recommended to her. She embraced it and at the point of our first interview, was in her second week on the programme. Her early impressions were positive – the environment was described as very supportive and adaptable to individuals’ needs. She had already recommended the programme to a friend. The following feature of the programme was emphasised:

People with mental health conditions, people with disabilities struggle to keep their jobs ... just putting them into work isn’t enough, you need to keep them in work, which is why I thought this course (This-Ability) ... [is] amazing because they make sure they support you until you’ve got at least six months of employment and even after that they still keep in contact to make sure that you are doing okay.

She explained that individuals dropping out of employment, were supported back into work, unlike with other employment support services. When asked what she would like to achieve through This-Ability, she explained that she would like to find part-time work but was unsure what job she wanted to do. Although it was early days on This-Ability, Jasmine felt that she was *“flourishing”* in the *“small safe space”* provided to learners during **stage one**, focusing on developing her core capabilities. Seemingly, the programme was consistent with her own commitment to inclusivity – providing a voice to those usually on the margins of society.

During our six-week catch-up, Jasmine was continuing to volunteer with both charities. Importantly, she reported having completed the first stage of the programme, which had provided a range of experiences. She commented, *“we went on this employability trail, we’ve been to an allotment ... we’ve also done a lot to do with the labour market”*. She valued learning about Hull’s labour market – particularly as this is where she anticipated working due to the lack of jobs in her village.

Stage one was described as *“very well structured”*. She had got to know a few members of staff individually, and developed a good understanding with them, so much so, that she appreciated their openness and honesty for example, in challenging any behaviour that was socially unacceptable. She explained:

[They] were very understanding of my situation, for example if I did something wrong socially ... they’d be like, you just did that, that’s not how it’s supposed to go, which really helps me with some of the social difficulties ... I prefer direct communication not avoiding what’s going on.

During our interview with a This-Ability Mentor, Jasmine was described as very talkative, but as someone who *“takes feedback really well if you’re honest and direct [with her]”*. The mentor reaffirmed that she did have a few candid conversations with Jasmine about allowing other learners in the classroom, particularly the quieter ones, the opportunity to speak. Jasmine expressed appreciation for being made aware of this issue and had made concerted effort to address this by being mindful of others in the group, which helped her to build better relationships with them. By the time they were ready for stage two of This-Ability, Jasmine, and a few others, demonstrated a positive change in being able to develop rapport with classmates and form genuine friendships.

Given that in her initial interview Jasmine had no idea what job she wanted to do, she felt that stage one of This-Ability had been invaluable, she explained, *“It’s taught me what job roles I’d be best suited for”*. She spoke positively about undertaking a test to determine her personality type which helped her to narrow down her career choice to tourism and this led to her 24-week placement with a provider of retail and hospitality experience – **stage two** of the This-Ability programme. During her first week with the provider, Jasmine described them as friendly and supportive, and hoped her placement might lead to a job.

Having to get two buses to Hull to participate in the programme and learning how to navigate Hull’s transport system had led to an unanticipated outcome of getting *“out and about more”*. Jasmine explained:

I had no idea how to just get another bus from the bus station, but now I’m much more aware of it because now I know how to use the interchange ... I’d be much more confident in getting buses to other places.

Her narrative revealed that she had not only got to know and socialise with new people on the programme, but getting out and about more was helping her to reconnect with people she knew previously at college.

Six weeks later, Jasmine reported that her placement with the provider was going well, having worked in the control rooms – gaining practical experience – and done more classroom-based activities, focused on teamwork. She was doing a Prevent training course and had taken up an opportunity to undertake two-day Peer Researcher training (delivered by Sheffield Hallam University) interviewing previous participants on the This-Ability programme. Jasmine was excited by the prospect of gaining skills and certification that might help her progress towards employment.

Again, she stressed that travel from her village to the placement provider involved two bus journeys – a routine that had helped her build confidence travelling and familiarity with bus routes, which was benefitting her social life outside the programme. As a next step, she hoped to use a train with friends, learning how to book tickets, and where to get off – Jasmine commented, *“I’ve never been on a train without my parents”*.

During the discussion, we learnt about the pressure (albeit small) from her parents to get a job, but equally her drive to achieve financial independence – eventually leaving home to live with friends. Her heavy reliance on medication was also revealed in her account – a reminder of Jasmine’s history of mental ill health. When asked if involvement in This-Ability helped manage her health and wellbeing in any way, she reported the following:

It helps because I’m actually getting out of the house. If I wasn’t doing this, I’d be laying in my room right now ... I’d probably be still asleep.

The programme gave her a reason for getting up in the morning, helped her to meet people, to remain occupied, and escape the boredom she had experienced previously. She recognised that without the programme, including opportunities to learn and socialise, she would be lonely and feeling low – exacerbated by the isolation of living so far away.

Seven weeks later, Jasmine recounted that she had undertaken the Peer Researcher training and enjoyed it – doing some additional training afterwards, conducting mock interviews with This-Ability staff to help prepare her for the role. When asked about her provider placement, she spoke positively about it, explaining:

I feel quite good about that because it gives me extra experience as I go into stage three [job search].

For the foreseeable future, Jasmine intended to continue attending the placement twice weekly. Besides this, she reported an achievement – she had completed her Employment Passport. When asked further questions about the passport, it transpired that she had not seen the physical passport since starting the programme in March 2023. She was happy to see her passport “*at the very end*”, although she recognised that other learners might benefit from seeing their passport whilst on their learner journey because, “*it gives them motivation ... to see the actual progress that their doing*”. Jasmine stressed that This-Ability was a flexible programme, accommodating everyone, although each learner was different, even those with the same learning difficulties and or learning disabilities/long-term health conditions.

During our next catch-up, Jasmine reported that she had moved onto the final stage (three) of the This-Ability programme – the **Job Club**. Here, she received support searching for jobs – something she hadn’t had since leaving college. She recounted her experience of having gone from receiving significant support at school to no support (when initially job searching) and the resulting anxiety this created:

To go from full-time TA [Teaching Assistant support] to [a] job without any sort of support ... was a bit daunting really ... when you go from literally being supervised and supported on everything to doing life completely on your own ... I was like what do I do!

This-Ability staff addressed the gap in employment support. On her first day at the Job Club staff worked closely with Jasmine to search for jobs in retail (her chosen sector) with disability confident employers – jobs specifically suited to her requirements. Jasmine stressed, “*It’s got to be part-time ... I’ve got to be able to get to work [travel to], the shifts be compatible with life [a work-life balance]*”. She described perusing various job opportunities in a paper bulletin – a process instigated by the This-Ability programme – rather than electronically on an employment website featuring filters that proved difficult to navigate. This format was “*much more easier to process*” particularly for those with learning disabilities/difficulties. At this stage she had already identified a job of interest that she intended on applying for, but required a CV, which she had forgotten to bring in to be updated.

Towards the end of the interview, when asked if she had eventually seen her Employability Passport, Jasmine confirmed that she had and that she had found it interesting looking back at her journey on the programme.

During our last catch-up, Jasmine reported that she was attending the Job Club once weekly, where she spent the day searching for, and applying for jobs with guidance from This-Ability staff. Without this support she was at risk of stalling her search, procrastinating, or getting sidetracked, partly due to her autism. She explained:

If I'm looking for jobs on my own, I don't have any support, nobody's there to see what's actually happening, if anything's going wrong or ... if I don't know how to do something, I will, I will just freeze ... I just won't be able to continue.

At the Job Club she received help updating her CV and writing a covering letter, she commented, *"I had no idea how to write a cover letter for myself"*. Ongoing support was usually provided by the same person, but she had become familiar with most people running the programme. Having applied for several jobs, one had resulted in a face-to-face interview, although Jasmine was yet to hear back from the company. When reflecting on the level of support she had received from the programme, Jasmine commented, *"I genuinely don't see how I could be supported any more than I have been"*. Despite the regular catch-ups coming to an end, she agreed to provide updates on any significant progress with her job search.

3.3. Owen

Owen is 18 years old and lives mainly with his mother and stepfather in Hull, but also spends time at his father's home. After leaving full-time education Owen started a traineeship in engineering but did not complete it as the programme was cancelled. Additionally, the traineeship work placement was unsuitable for him as it involved manual labour which he was unable to do due to his cerebral palsy. He started the traineeship to understand what it was like to go to work, but with less pressure. Owen had no other work experience, as he did not undertake any at school due to COVID-19. Struggling with severe anxiety and depression he missed out on potential apprenticeship opportunities on leaving technical college:

I was really ill, the last year when I was at college. Like, I got to the point where I couldn't even, like, get up in the morning. I was just throwing up, and, like, even thinking about going for interview with a, for a job, was, not even like, I wouldn't even be able to process it at the time. I was just so anxious about it all and stuff.

Owen wants to work in engineering, but something desk-based working with software such as Computer Numerical Control (CNC) or Computer Aided Design (CAD). He completed a Level 3 Diploma in engineering at college but recognised that his lack of work experience may be a barrier. Although he applied for jobs since leaving school, and was offered interviews and job roles, severe anxiety prevented him from taking up these offers. Transport also presents a barrier, as his only transportation is buses, leading him to turn down one potential job opportunity two hours away. He is learning to drive and hopes to sit his test next month, which will enable him to explore opportunities further afield.

At this point in time Owen has been on the This-Ability programme for one week. He is hoping to undertake the Traineeship option at a local fish and chip restaurant when he has finished the first stage of the programme, to gain understanding of being in a workplace. So far, he has found the programme engaging, and the structure and routine helpful.

I struggle without a routine, so if I'm not doing anything, then, I get quite depressed. So, I need, like structure to my day and like if something changes, then I'm quite, I get quite upset about it.

As well as attending the classroom sessions, Owen is being supported by a Making Our Business Yours (MOBY) mentor (an arm of the This-Ability programme) to complete an application for an apprenticeship at a nearby power station. Owen found out about the opportunity from his mum, as his relative already works at the power station having begun employment as an apprentice.

At our first catch-up six weeks later, Owen was still in the process of applying for the power station apprenticeship but had decided against pursuing the traineeship as part of his This-Ability journey. He explained this was so he could concentrate on apprenticeship options. He felt he had enough experience from his previous traineeship and volunteering at his college doing administration tasks to understand the requirements of a workplace. Unfortunately, he missed an open day with a local engineering apprenticeship provider due to ill health but hoped to attend another at the end of May.

When asked what he had been doing in the This-Ability classroom sessions, Owen recalled exploring the local labour market, job searching and CV writing. He had been attending a This-Ability partner provider for two weeks. Owen decided to go to a provider which focused on the creative and digital sector, having identified skills that he could transfer from the engineering software he was familiar with, to graphic design.

He found managing his anxiety with the transition to the provider *'weren't too bad to be honest, because I was quite familiar with the building and stuff'*.

A This-Ability mentor described Owen as reserved, staying close to the people he was sat with – *"one of those kind of people that like to sit back and see what's going on first. I don't think he plunged in with both feet"*. She commented that Owen was very focussed on what he wanted to do and although he missed some sessions (presumably due to his anxiety) he contributed well to the class.

Our next catch up was seven weeks later, as Owen missed an appointment due to illness. When asked about his illness, Owen explained that he had passed his driving test a month ago, but this had taken a toll on his mental and physical health. The stress and anxiety of his driving test made him physically ill, and he also developed an infection.

So, my mental health hasn't been the best recently. I've been, I was real stressed about driving, and then with that I was just really worn down from just being stressed for about a month. I was like, so hyper focussed on getting my driving done. And then I, unfortunately got ill, so I went on a course of antibiotics. So, I finished the course now, so I would say I'm recovering.

He felt that he had put a lot of pressure on himself to pass, as he already had a car funded through his mobility allowance, and this was his second attempt at his driving test. He also described how expectations from people around him added to that pressure. Having passed his test, Owen felt he was now recovering and able to move onto other things. He continued job searching, even while he was unable to attend sessions, and so didn't feel that his illness negatively impacted on his progress on the This-Ability programme.

Owen explained that he had attended an open day at a local engineering apprenticeship provider, and this had made him realise that a lot of the engineering apprenticeship opportunities would not be suitable for him as *"a lot of it is manual work, and if you're doing stuff on a computer you're probably going to be doing manual work anyway with it"*. He tried to apply his transferable skills to other roles and had applied, with some help from his brother, for three more apprenticeships in the last week. These were in admin and logistics (at the local port authority where his relative works), CAD and Health & Safety.

He felt he was unlikely to be successful with the power station apprenticeship application, as he had not heard anything back. He described it as always having been a bit of a stretch, as he felt he was not really qualified. Owen was optimistic about trying out different roles and sectors *"even if I get a job, I might like it more than I would like an engineering job so, I guess it's just trying to see what best fits me really"*.

Six weeks later, Owen explained that he had been busy with the interview process for the port authority apprenticeship. He was not successful in the application as they told him the role was too junior and he should look for something different. *"I feel like kind of like a kick in the stomach really, of obviously I wasted four weeks when they could've told me in the beginning that that I was technically overqualified for it."* Owen received good feedback for his interview, but this left him feeling confused and frustrated as to why he didn't get the role, rather than seeing the positives of having gained the interview experience:

I asked for feedback, and they said my communication was very good. He was very impressed with my interview, and I showed good leadership skills during the team task. No negatives, so just all positive what he said. So, I was like how is that feedback?

When questioned about the apprenticeship level, Owen stated it was a level three as level four apprenticeships are very hard to find. However, as the funding rules for apprenticeships state that a learner cannot do an apprenticeship at a level they have already achieved, Owen could not be taken on for the roles he had been applying for. The This-Ability team realised that this should have been identified earlier in Owen's journey and discussed how such errors could be prevented in future, recognising the need for learning from this experience. Given Owen's family involvement in helping him find employment, evidence suggests that Owen searched and applied for roles outside of the This-Ability programme. This perhaps explains how Owen applied for positions he would not be eligible for without This-Ability staff or his partner provider being aware of potential funding issues.

Despite this set-back Owen still felt positive about his time at his chosen partner provider. He explained he had been learning about taxes, loans and credit cards. The provider team sent a tailored list of jobs every week to each learner, and he had continued to develop his understanding of the workplace environment. *"If I didn't come here and I just went straight into work, probably wouldn't have kept the job to be honest. So it's good to know more things".*

At our next catch up ten weeks later, Owen was no longer regularly attending This-Ability provision, although they were still in touch and had offered support with job search. Owen had declined this support – *"I don't really need any help when it comes to applying and interviewing stages as well. I think I'm pretty confident with it now, because I keep getting interviews."* He expressed that he felt able to message or call the partner provider if he needed any extra support.

Owen had attended several interviews over the last few weeks, applying for roles in administration and customer service, although he had not yet been successful. He expressed frustration at the lack of feedback offered by employers, as this was perceived as vital for learning from his experiences and improving his chances at future interviews. Despite this, he still felt positive about the experience he was gaining *"It's just getting past that [interview] stage. There'll be a job out there where I can get past it."*

This intensive period of job search had impacted his mental health. He described himself as having been *"all over the place"* with his anxiety – building himself up for an interview, then crashing afterwards. He expressed resilience in his attitude towards these setbacks, as he picked himself up to try again with his next application:

I kind of like, put a bit of pressure on myself to, like, succeed in a way. But then I don't. But it is what it is and then I try again.

When asked if he had discussed his barriers and reasonable adjustments with potential employers, he related that he had told them about his Educational, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) and some manual adjustments, and they had all seemed understanding. He explained his adjustments were to have a chair, as he cannot stand for long periods, and to be close to a toilet in case his anxiety makes him physically sick. He felt positive about making the transition into employment as once he is used to a new place and new people his anxiety fades – *"It's just taking a bit more time for myself to adjust to things, which is normal for me in most situations anyway."*

During our last catch-up Owen was no longer engaging with the This-Ability partner provider, as his mum was supporting him with his job search at home and he felt he did not need any extra support. When asked if there was anything that could have been improved about the programme, he related *"maybe like a one-on-one like thing to help with jobs. To just like double check if everything is ok"*. This is something offered by the This-Ability Job Club, and learners are informed of this during their induction.

Partner providers may refer learners back to the Job Club if they require further support the provider does not have the resources to provide themselves. This raises questions (and perhaps some learning) about how the This-Ability programme reiterated this message through partner providers.

Owen reported he had started volunteering two to three days per week as an assistant coach for a local football club. This was a very different field from other opportunities Owen had explored, and he explained he had always loved football and had enquired about volunteering while attending his brother's Sunday League match "*I was like I'm not really doing anything at the minute, I'm just waiting to hear back from like jobs and stuff. I was like I'll just ask him if he needs help.*"

The role involved assisting the coach to set up and run drills with up to fifteen players aged between ten and twelve. When asked what he felt he was gaining from the experience he related communication and leadership skills "*being able to tell people what to do and them understanding it*". Owen was still job searching for administration roles, although he had not had any interviews for a couple of weeks. His volunteering had given him a new focus and he was thinking of getting his coaching badges through the club.

We discussed whether Owen would have considered this volunteering opportunity back when he first started on the This-Ability programme. He related that he would not have, as the programme had increased his knowledge of the different roles and sectors available:

I think, I'm being more open-minded about everything. So, it's just like I found something, I enjoy it so it's just like why not see where it goes with whatever.

He expressed that his early interest in pursuing opportunities in engineering "*was just because I had the qualifications. It's not really something I was just like; I need to be doing or I want to be doing.*" Having recently left college and not really knowing what he wanted to do, his family had influenced (somewhat) his choice of the apprenticeship roles he had applied for, but his failures when applying for them had spurred him to look for something different. Although he was still unsure what he wanted to do, he was more open trying something different.

Owen felt that his mental health had improved. Although his anxiety was still bad "*I think I've been able to handle everything a bit better*". He was no longer anxious to the point where he became physically ill. He attributed this partly to having the volunteering placement, which he enjoyed, understanding more about his own mental health, and also being able to drive to interviews and new places:

When I wake up, I'm anxious, but when I get in the car and I'm driving, because I'm so focussed on everything else, it's like it goes away and when I get there, I'm like, oh I'm here now ... Cos when I'm on a bus it's like oh I'm going somewhere, I'm going somewhere.

Although no longer engaging with the This-Ability programme, Owen agreed to provide updates should he find work in the near future.

Findings

Having thematically analysed the data for all three case studies by pulling out the main themes and interpreting them, we arrived at the following headline findings, as well as identifying some lessons that might be learnt in preparation for future delivery of a similar programme.

All three **learners experienced more than one disability and or learning difficulty / disability**. This included: autism, cerebral palsy, and social anxiety, with depression being a significant issue for each young person. Indeed, research suggests (Penney, 2013; Mukherjee & Beresford, 2023) that autism, for example, co-occurs with conditions such as depression. Baseline quantitative data (August 2019 to July 2023) collected from all This-Ability participants, indicates that 49 per cent had a disability limiting their daily activities and 20 per cent were involved with mental health/counselling services on entry to the programme. These figures point to the complex support needs of some learners on the programme and the substantial resources required to support them.

Professional mental health support was not provided by the programme, with learners instead being referred to relevant provision. **Nonetheless, the poor mental health of learners impacted their own progress, that of other learners on the programme, and drew on resources** such as staff time, providing advice, guidance, preventing/dealing with mental health crisis, making referrals and so on. As part of this case study work, we spoke to This-Ability staff who provided contextual information about learner experiences of mental ill health whilst on the programme. Given that during an Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) session only basic information is garnered about a learner, once getting to know them better, staff knew when a learner's behaviour or appearance was not as it would be normally, for example, showing poor personal hygiene, not attending the programme, and failing to engage with learning. At times, learners displaying signs of poor mental health were taken out of classes and given **one-to-one support** from a mentor, to avoid disrupting the learning of the rest of the group. In such instances, This-Ability Mentors dedicated time to finding out what was going on – as one mentor commented, **they would, “dig deep and find out what the issues were”**. She reported that another mentor with prior knowledge of working in a mental health charity was particularly useful for supporting learners – **finding them information, knowing where to get them support and where to refer them**. Where learners showed a reluctance to accept a referral for support, to provide reassurance, the This-Ability mentor would spend time explaining the stages involved when taking up specific mental health support. Importantly, we learnt that learners struggling with mental ill health **required substantial support, drawing on additional resources from within the This-Ability team**.

After leaving full-time education Jasmine eventually found a job but **struggled to sustain it** for more than a few months and Owen began a work placement which he was unable to continue – both gave **their disabilities as reasons for not remaining** in their positions. Ian, also, only partially completed his course. The **low educational achievement** of two learners prior to joining the This-Ability programme was attributed to their disabilities coupled with mental ill health. Ian, for example, described feeling uncomfortable and **not fitting in** with fellow students and the learning environment. Misunderstandings led to bullying and trauma. Grappling with gender dysphoria, transitioning, and autism related stigma led to Jasmine's severe mental ill health. **Feelings of not belonging** were strongly expressed in the learner narratives. However, the This-Ability programme learning environment was conveyed as being a **"small safe space"** where Jasmine described herself as **"flourishing"** and Ian reported that group activities had focused on icebreakers, helping learners to **become comfortable** with one another.

Insights from learner journeys suggest that the This-Ability team **fostered good relationships between learners** and with learners and staff members. Indeed, Jasmine had got to know staff and developed a good understanding with them – an understanding based on openness and honesty. This allowed staff to discuss and **challenge aspects of Jasmine's behaviour that were socially unacceptable – conceivably preparing her for future working relationships**, which might help sustain future employment. Jasmine expressed an appreciation of the candid conversations. Principles of openness were apparent in other aspects of the programme too, for example, when conveying feedback on the quality of work produced by learners. Although the feedback was not always well received, in the first instance, it was eventually taken on board. We learnt from Ian's mentor that he had initially struggled to accept **constructive criticism** about his CV, however, he determinedly revised it and eventually acknowledged the improvement.

Transport and travel emerged as important themes in the case studies. The **distance to work / work opportunities** concerned all three learners. Owen's eagerness to pass his driving test put him under immense pressure and led to significant anxiety – however, by driving (rather than relying on buses) he felt he would be able to explore job opportunities further afield. Ian conveyed the stress of travelling great distances back and forth to different places for his apprenticeship, and Jasmine emphasised the importance of finding a job that she could travel to and from using public transport. The underlying issue giving rise to these concerns for the three learners stemmed from there being **few jobs locally in their chosen sectors**. Nevertheless, Jasmine reported her **improved confidence navigating the transport system as an unanticipated benefit** of taking two return bus journeys to Hull to participate in the This-Ability programme – also benefitting her social life outside the programme.

Stage one of the programme focused on developing the **core competencies of learners** providing a range of experiences, promoting problem solving, leadership, group work, and effective communication, amongst other competencies. In addition to classroom work, learners ventured out to do an employability trail and working on an allotment – developing skills within the core competency framework. All three learners reported learning about the labour market during this stage of the programme. Jasmine **valued learning about Hull's labour market**, particularly as this is where she anticipated working due to the lack of jobs in her village. She spoke positively about **learning which job roles she would be best suited to**. Ian shared that he was **learning about the different sectors** of the labour market before exploring work opportunities. Owen also having increased his knowledge of the different roles and sectors went on to take up a voluntary position providing football coaching for young people. This was a different field to the one he had his mind set on for paid employment and his decision was attributed to the influence of the This-Ability programme.

Evidence from the three case studies suggests that the foundations of familiarity and trust were also laid during this stage.

During stage two – the **World of Work** component of the This-Ability programme – all three learners began a 24-week placement with providers of sector specific employability skills and experience. Jasmine described the retail and hospitality organisation she was placed with as **a friendly and supportive environment** where she was gaining **practical experience** as well as doing classroom-based activities, focused on **teamwork and professional development**. At the time, she was undertaking two training courses to help her to progress towards employment. Ian had moved on to a placement to gain sector specific employability skills in the creative and digital sector. Whilst he experienced difficulties during this stage on the programme, he acknowledged that **learners benefited from undertaking activities on presentation (physical) and conduct when attending interviews** and on what to expect when in work as some learners had **huge gaps in their knowledge about the reality of working**. Whilst initially reluctant to change his CV, he stated that with support from the provider, his **updated CV was more polished**. Owen decided to do his placement in the same creative and digital company as Ian. In preparation for employment, he had learned about taxes, loans, credit cards and the workplace environment more broadly. He acknowledged that if he had missed this stage of learning and gone straight into employment, he might have struggled to sustain his job.

Evidently, **the This-Ability programme provided a routine** for all three learners – something that was clearly beneficial to them. For Jasmine, the programme gave her a reason for getting out of bed in the morning, helped her to meet people, and to occupy her time – necessary for improving her fragile mental health. Similarly, Owen **associated having a routine with better mental health**, and although this comment was made in his first week on the programme, he clearly appreciated the structure and routine provided by This-Ability, acknowledging that without it he was likely to be depressed. Ian also reported that he had a better routine since his involvement in the programme.

Designed as a tool to record learner progress, for example, to demonstrate their core competencies, the **Employability Passport** was envisaged as accompanying learners throughout their journey on the This-Ability programme, including, when attending job interviews, to remind and help learners to articulate their strengths, achievements, and in some instances, their needs for reasonable adjustments. However, the case studies reveal little about learner perceptions of their passports, how they used or intended to use their passports, and whether the passport was an effective tool. This may be due to researchers not asking direct questions about the passport and or focusing on more pertinent issues encountered by learners. Nevertheless, some information was gleaned from Jasmine about her Employability Passport. Whilst it transpired that she had only seen her passport towards the end of her journey on the programme and was happy to reflect on her progress at this stage, she recognised that **other learners might benefit from seeing their passport whilst on their This-Ability journey** for a sense of progress and motivation.

Potential learning emerged from the case studies on the need for This-Ability programme staff **to communicate and perhaps negotiate more resolutely with learners about their work readiness or, their unreadiness** for the work they wanted to secure. Both Ian and Owen began the programme with job aspirations which although achievable, required flexibility and a willingness to develop work experience in different sectors to reach their long-term employment goals. Evidence suggests that their frustrations and disillusionment whilst on the This-Ability programme potentially stemmed from their own high expectations (and in Owen's case, others' expectations of him), which were eventually managed by considering and or taking up opportunities outside of their chosen employment sectors.

A connection was apparent between the pressure to secure a job, anxiety, and or feelings of frustration. For example, Ian stressed that **he was desperate to secure employment** as he was relying on his partner financially. His drive to get a job quickly led to significant frustration. Owen **felt immense pressure** (and the expectations of his family added to that pressure) to pass his driving test as he already had a car funded through his mobility allowance, and his entire narrative conveyed what seemed like **an impatience to secure a job**. During a routine catch-up with Jasmine, she revealed the pressure from her parents to get a job, but equally her drive to achieve financial independence – eventually leaving home to live with friends.

Both learners, Ian and Owen were **offered additional support** from provider mentors **when leaving the programme** to ensure that their job-related outcomes were positive, however, they both declined the offer. For instance, when Ian shared his news about securing an apprenticeship, This-Ability staff made him aware of the in-work support he could access through the programme, but he refused it as he did not anticipate requiring much support at an assistant level. Both learners **did not accept and benefit from the full resources, especially support**, provided by This-Ability, particularly at the stage of securing a voluntary position/apprenticeship. The apprenticeship related stresses reported by Ian would perhaps have been less if he had engaged more fully with programme provision.

Overall, the case studies provided rich insights into the experiences of three learners on the This-Ability programme: their backgrounds, disabilities, learning disabilities/difficulties and or mental health conditions, as well as information on their personal circumstances – **underscoring how all these factors combined to increase the challenges for young people** attempting to move closer to finding and sustaining work. Importantly, by tracking learner journeys, **we learnt about the complexity of their lives and needs**, calling for a response from the This-Ability programme which **drew on significant resources and expertise**. Whilst the programme did not result in hard outcomes (employment) for the learners, certainly, evidence suggests that by **building their core capabilities and understanding of the different sectors, learner aspirations and goals became more realistic** over time, and this was reflected in them taking up opportunities outside of their chosen job sectors to **gain transferrable skills and experience**.

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Learner journeys: young people's experiences of the This-Ability programme

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