

## **Pathways Podcast, Season Three, Episode Five**

**Tom 00:07**

Hello and welcome back to the Pathways podcast. My name is Tom Ritchie. I'm Director of Student Experience in the chemistry department, and with me today I have Adam Alcock and Ollie Smith.

**Adam 00:18**

Hi everyone.

**Ollie 00:19**

Hello.

**Tom 00:20**

So today we are going to speak to Ollie a little bit more about his experiences studying chemistry as a student with a disability and a little bit more about his journey to coming to Warwick.

## Ollie 00:29

Sure, well it's, it's quite an interesting one because, kind of getting to a levels, I had quite a few options kind of available to me, but my first love was, was music really, and it was quite easy for me to do. So my first idea of a levels were, maths, further maths and music. And I remember rocking up on, the kind of open day just before I was about to enrol in my college.

Head of sixth form kind of just said to me, look, your chemistry's best grade, you've not considered it. And I kind of just said, well, you know, I'm, I'm visually impaired and you know, experiments are really difficult for me to do and, and a lot of other things in that area that I'm kind of just worried about and I just don't really think I can do it. And it was quite funny cuz the head of sixth form kind of just looked at me and kind of almost

just said, you'll be fine. And then, a chemistry teacher came in and kind of just said, you know, don't worry about it. You will have support and I thought, okay, let's change music for chemistry and, and see what happens.

You know, I can, I can change if I need to and, and go from there. And it was really interesting because I had a really good chemistry teacher who actually got me really inspired into chemistry. And even though I still struggled with a lot of stuff, visually, I was managing to, to get on with it. And, I think that love of chemistry was, just started from, from there. And I kind of just thought, well, that's the option then, and I'll just think about support and access, later.

**Tom 01:54**

Brilliant. Thank you for that Ollie so can you tell us a bit

more about how your disability affects studying chemistry?

**Ollie 02:00**

Sure. So yeah, I said that I was visually impaired. I, I'll kind of just explain a little bit more of that so you can get an idea. I have a retinal dystrophy. So essentially the, the rodner cones in my retina over time, it's gender, they degenerated, kind of the last 10 years. So my eyes are also very photosensitive as well. So from day to day in terms of actually studying chemistry, it's quite difficult because there is a lot of context, and there's a lot of reading, and textbook's quite hard for me to scan as well.

So in terms of like studying I find it quite difficult having to use a lot of magnification and, inverted cause to make it easier. And then I think really going into lectures now, I

can't really do either. It's a little bit annoying, but because Warwick have lecture capture, I can easily go through the content at my own pace so my eyes don't get tired. And it was quite a hard decision I had to take this year. Last year, I kind of rebelled against it, being able to have the lectures recorded you know, when they go up, I can watch them as slowly as I can and it really helps. So I think in terms of like studying and stuff, it really affects my work rate because I only really have a few hours wise work well, and then I start to get fatigued very quickly.

So I have to take many breaks. And especially when you're in third year, you have so many lectures in a row. So yeah, I see that kind of come up quite a lot.

### **Tom 03:22**

Thanks Ollie I mean, it's really interesting to kind of hear your experience and it, and it gives me a different kind of outlook on, you know, the way we timetable things and kind of the importance of really trying to support students with that to not, you know, create extra issues in, in your time here, you're now in your third year, so what support have you had in the department? What have you been able to access and, and I guess within the university generally?

### **Ollie 03:47**

Um, well, I think, the department have been been incredible with the support that they've, they've had an offer. Um, when I got here, I kind of was linked, to

disability team to a specific person, which I thought was really helpful because I had an actual person to speak to. It wasn't just like an email to, to a random person. So I've been in contact with, with the disability support team since I got here. So they would then kind of speak to the department so they could understand my needs when it came to certain things like exam arrangements or, you know, the way I study and other areas like that. And then what was great is in the first few weeks when I got here, I was also able to speak to kind of senior tutors here and the, the head of labs as well. Because I had a specific meeting with them, I could really explain what my kind of eyesight was like and the support I've had up until now and what was needed, what, what was really good is that they, there were, there was never any kind of sympathy towards me. There were, it was, it was always about right. What, what do you need? Um, and this is

how we'll do it, and if it needs to get better, please get in contact with us. I think like that's the, the thing that I think is the most beneficial here is that there's a really good open contact between students and the department.

### **Tom 05:01**

I think that's great. I, I think it's really interesting to kind of hear about your experience and what's available from, as you say, the day that you arrived and the kind of consistency of that support over the last few years. I think one of the things that I think a lot of people would be nervous about if they were gonna come to study chemistry and have a disability is what's it like in labs? What's your experience within labs? Because obviously that's such a, a physical and, and, and quite intense component of, of what you study.

## Ollie 05:28

Yeah, I I think, like you say, it's, it's quite nerve wracking anyway. And, you know, when I, when I'm just working out on my monitors that I can get rid of so many variables. I can have loads of magnification, invert, cause takes as many rest as I want. In a lab, it's such a live environment where you've got so many variables going on at the same time, and that can be nerve-wracking for anyone. I've covered that with the fact that essentially I'm blind in a lab. I can't see glassware, uh, I can't really see any readings on stuff when I'm doing analytical methods.

A lot of it I can't really see. , I think, um, you as chemists will know a lot of organic chemistry is, is white, which again, white and white, it's not gonna happen. And because of my cones being degenerated, my color

reception's not great. So a lot of the times like reactions, I may not see a colour change and I may not be able to write it down. So that may sound like quite a lot of things where this made labs quite scary. And I remember the first time coming here, um, for the intro labs in first year, I was, I was just terrified that I was gonna, Break something or knock something over and like if you just knock over a bottle of water, it's fine. But when you've got gas where you can't see with concentrated acid in, or you know, things that are carcinogenic, it's quite scary. So I made sure to, to speak to the, to kind of head of labs and, and, uh, a few other people to kind of ask, you know, what support is available for someone who's essentially blind in a lab. And what was great is, is that they said what we can do is have, you can have a lab assistant. So essentially it's mostly PhD students and they essentially are my hands. A lot of the times I can

still do stuff. Uh, I can maybe see things a little bit, but not well enough to be able to, to do them in the way they should be done or why other people do them.

So essentially a lot of the times I'll ask my assistant to do stuff, and I think that's the distinction, is that I'm still doing the chemistry and I'm still using my brain to work out what to do. They're not doing it for me. And, you know, in terms of actually the chemistry part of it, they're just there for safety. So if it means doing something a slightly different way, if it means using funnels to, to make openings, , that's fine. And what's great is is that because all the demonstrators know I have an assistant, they fully understand that things are gonna be harder for me. Um, things may not actually even possible. And it's quite a hard thing to go through when you are getting to labs and you're kind of thinking, well actually there's probably like 50, 60% that I'm not really doing here. And

yes, I am doing it. I'm actively thinking about it, but my hands aren't doing. and I thought maybe that kind of would hold me back.

And in my second year when we having weekly labs, I actually noticed I was getting more competent as a chemist. I was becoming a lot more comfortable with the experiments and the machines, even though I couldn't see a lot stuff I was doing because I had the correct support. Um, it was, it allowed me to be able to progress as any other student. And there are times where I look around and kind of just think, I wish I could just do this as anyone else and, and be able to do. Or myself, but I know that's not possible and, and, and that's quite hard to accept. So I'd say for all, disabled students becoming quite scared about labs, I think the main thing is, is here that in the first few weeks, there's kind of like a form you

fill in to outline your specific disability and support you need.

Then you have that open contact and whether it's an assistant, whether you need rest breaks, whether you need adaptive equipment, the technicians here are amazing at sorting that. So I think even though I was, I was probably the most scared, especially going into the labs thinking, I'm gonna break something here.

I'm gonna hurt myself or, or someone else. Actually, that's not happened at all, and that's cause I've had the correct support.

### **Tom 09:10**

I think that's really interesting, Ollie because I know from my experience of going to university and Adam, I'm sure it's the same with you, university's scary enough without that extra layer of fear added on top of, am I going to be

able to do this? You know, and particularly within chemistry, you know, going into a lab context, I think, I think it's really, it's, it's such a powerful story. I think that you're, you're telling us about how you've managed to overcome, you know, the, the challenge that you've got and, and still do incredible things within chemistry and within the department.

So we know that chemistry is a really challenging degree anyway. I guess in your experience, what do you think some of the biggest barriers are for, you know, why do you think people choose not to come and study chemistry and, and, and what do you think those barriers are and how can we work to remove them?

**Ollie 09:52**

Sure. So I think there are a few kind of understandings that a lot of people with disabilities kind of have, and I

think. The, the main thing is, is people find it quite difficult to accept the situation they're in; a lot of the times when I'm out the bat and I can't see anything, I, I kind of just think why I wish I could just see and just do things without any difficulty. So I think having that as a mindset of, I wish I could be this in terms of not having disability or not having, to live with it as, as much as you are. I think that's one of the bigger barriers because it makes you a lot more closed minded to things. Because if you kind of just think, oh, it's gonna be very difficult cause I have a disability, you are almost like closing yourself off.

Anything you can really do difficulty wise that you could just think is generally like hard to do. Like you say, chemistry is quite a difficult degree anyway, but if you can grapple with the side of, okay, I know I have this disability, I've lived with it for however, , I can almost put

it to a side and kind of think, well, as long as that's being supported, as long as I have the support have that requirement, then actually I can just get on with the difficulty of the degree.

So I think a lot of people just think that the support maybe isn't there as it as it needs to be. And to be honest, I I, I did think that as well. I think through high school and college, I didn't really have anywhere near as much support and it kind of made me think. , I know universities have to have this support, they have to do these things, so they include everyone, but there was that little part of me who was thinking, what happens if I rock up on day one in my labs and I don't have an assistant? Or, you know, the, the placements aren't in, in, in the right order. Or a certain fear that I've had is actually become true. But in actual fact, none of that was the case. And I think that's the main thing is the mindset

of that extra layer of fear or difficulty. That can easily be resolved by the support the universities have. And I think a lot of people have to have a better understanding of that because I don't think it's really talked about the work, Warwick really does for disabilities.

I'd never really found on the websites or anything, so maybe if they'd had kind of put that out there more, I would've been more comfortable. And all the times that I found out are much more true.

### **Tom 12:11**

So what made you choose Warwick? You know, out of all the universities we've spoken about the challenges and the, and the worries that you had beforehand, but obviously what was that application process like for you?

## Ollie 12:21

When I, when I was going to the university? Like a application process? Yeah, you're linked with certain disability services. It's like DSA and stuff with student finance, all that kind of stuff. So I already knew that my general support for study was gonna be in place. So the next step was, okay, when I go to the open days, when I go to the off holidays, maybe I can try and find someone in the disability department and kind of speak to them.

So I think that's the thing I would encourage the most is look at the universities you want to go to. Um, and for me, work was one of them and I was really excited when I, when I got in and I was thinking, right, okay, that's the first part. Now the support is, is the next part. So I think

emailing before you get here is the, is the most important thing because you get a really good insight of what that support is, is available. And because they're linked departments as well, they can tell you the kind of support that's available. So when I got in touch, with Warwick's team here, I was just kind of blown away with the support that they just had and almost acted like it was just casual. This is, this is the support we give you that don't worry about it. And I never really had that before. It was a lot of the time, the support I had, it was kind of, I had to push for it and I had to really ask for it. Whereas here I kind of just said, look, I'm visually impaired. This is the support I've had before. What do you offer? They said don't worry about it. This is it. Almost as you were. Let's, let's, let's go. Go for it. So I think for me Warwick was, was phenomenal with the work that they were doing because even before I got

here, I had a sense that they, they were gonna include me in, in a, in a much better way.

### **Adam 14:03**

It'd be really interesting to actually delve into how you find student life at Warwick. Kind of the accommodation, the societies, and just how you've integrated into being a student at Warwick.

### **Ollie 14:14**

Sure. So I think again, it's, there was quite a lot of fear when it came to that because a lot of the times I've not really had much independence because my parents or friends have kind of looked after me and almost made everything safe and removed all those variables. So it was quite kind of concerning that, oh, I'm now gonna be going away for, for a year and it's gonna be with people I've never met before. Are they gonna understand my

condition or. What's gonna, what's it gonna be like getting to accommodation If something goes wrong, what can I do? And, what's really good is that I've actually lived on campus now for all three years in the same accommodation.

And that's, become possible because the disability team here, will guarantee you accommodation, on campus.

So you can have the specific requirements you need, whether that's meaning you have an ensuite by, for instance, you're not having to get up in the middle of the night and kind of fall around in the dark as I would, or if it's kind of wheelchair access or other, requirements you need, they will guarantee that. So that element almost, you don't have to worry about. And that was really good that I knew I was gonna be in a good place. And then I think once I got to, to kind of into my accommodation and start to meet people, I think it was quite interesting

because obviously I kind of joined when the Covid pandemic was so, I couldn't really actually do much outside of my house, so I had to kind of really, at least 12 people I'm living with, they need to understand that my vision's not great and I need a little bit of help where I'm doing stuff.

And for me it was just kind of thinking about mini goals.

So it was kind of like, okay, so this is a campus uni, right? Let's see, can I. Can I walk from here to the chemistry department? Can I walk from here to the library? And then can I do that in the dark? And then, and it was just kinda little goals like that. And I think every day I was starting to get more confident with not only the people I was living with, because I kind of opened up to them and explained a little bit about certain things that I struggled with, but also just in, in terms of like campus life, I was able to move around.

And that may not sound like a massive thing to other people, but when you can't see anything, just walking from here to say a 15 more minute walk to Tesco's, it's a big thing for me. And it was so important for me to finally become more independent. And that was quite a big jump, but because I managed to set myself many goals of. What am I doing today that can progress me? I, I, I was a lot more confident when it kind of was ended the first year, and then because I was in the same accommodation for second year and for this year, I, I had so much confidence because all the variables had been removed.

### **Adam 16:48**

So it's great to hear about your accommodation. How about things like societies on campus? Are you involved in any of those?

## Ollie 16:55

Yeah. So, at the start of this year, I joined the Barbell Society, which is kind of part lifting, weightlifting, general kind of lifting, and it's done at the gym on campus. So, what I found was really good is that, we have two weekly sessions where we all train together and for me, the gym is, is a really, um, helpful thing for I think just for my mental health in general because it's one of the only places where my vision doesn't actually really affect much. I can lift with other people, and have that feeling of, of kind of a society of people that are just enjoying lifting. And, that's why I kind of love to show the people that, for me strength is, is maybe not as much of an importance. It's more for me just kind of lifting weight in general. But the fact that here at work, they have a good society of people and a really good gym, which has a lot of great, advantages to it for, for my mental health in

terms a place where I can just go switch off and enjoy with, with other people.

### **Tom 17:56**

I think it's really interesting because, so I've seen on your Instagram, Ollie about, I've seen about your barbell lifting, and I think it's, it, it looks like such a good community and, and, and I agree with you about how it doesn't have the same impact, you know, your, your visual impairment when you're in the gym because it's about lifting what's in front of you. It'd be interesting to maybe hear a little bit more, your music because music I know is a big part of your life as well.

### **Ollie 18:18**

And so yeah, so, I kind of started off saying before chemistry music wasn't my kind of, my kind of my thing. So I've been playing music now for 10 years and it's

been quite interesting because over that 10 years my sight kind of has deteriorated. But the great thing about playing piano is that a lot of the times I don't have to really use my sight. I can't really see a lot of keys, especially kind of one's lower and higher up in on the piano because my, visual field is, is a little bit smaller than most people's. But because I've been playing for so long, muscle memory really kicks over. So, again, kind of the mental health purposes, it's another place where I'm not having to use my vision. So what's really good is that when I'm doing chemistry, and I start to notice since I'm getting quite fatigued, I think well, , let's just try and switch off my eyes and that's when I start to play music because I can completely switch off. I don't have to look at things. I can just let my fingers take over. And yeah, I make a, I may make a few mistakes or you know, I may not be able to learn as many pieces as I want, and kind

of have to focus on my study. But, I don't particularly care. I'm just playing because I enjoy it and especially when I'm playing my own songs that I've made that feeling of, of no matter what my sight is like, even if I can't see what I'm really doing or I hit the wrong note because I think it's further away than it is, I can have a lot of fun with what I'm playing.

So I think for me, it's one of those places again.

Because my sight isn't a factor or as much of a factor, I can really get into it. And I think it's been really cool to see, even though my sight has digressed over time, I'm still able to play and actually in a much better way.

### **Adam 20:02**

So Ollie you are graduating, this coming summer, in summer 2023. What's next for you?

## Ollie 20:09

Well, what's interesting is that, up until this year I didn't fully know I had a few areas that I wanted to go into, but, this year I've actually decided that I want to stay here to do a master's in research and I wanted to do in analytical chemistry. And I think it'll be quite interesting to see because in my head that I know I'm, I'm want to do that and I think I'm good enough to do that. But there's the part of me that's going, you know what? Your vision's not good enough to use a certain machine or to, to do a certain technique. So part of this year, and especially when it comes to third year labs, I'm gonna try and go into a different mindset of, well, you are good enough. You are confident enough. You know what you're doing here. The only problems you have is actually what your vision is doing. I've been in a lot of contact with the postgraduate office and like, certain

possible supervisors kind of say, look, this is what I want to do and I'm interested in it. But there are a lot of kind of factors that I can't really control, but I really want to do that.

And I think that's, that needs to be kind of the message that I think for a lot of people is stuff you want to do.

Think about the barriers next. It's almost like get to that point that you're good enough and then, Okay, maybe this version may make it a bit harder, but what's the support needed? Who, who can provide those and, and get 'em solid?

### **Adam 21:27**

So if you've got one piece of advice for somebody thinking of applying to Warwick and specifically Chemistry at Warwick that has a disability or a visual impairment, what advice would you give them?

## Ollie 21:39

I, I'd honestly say to them, just, just go for it. And the reason why I say that is that I think we live in a world where a lot of people, they look at the negative, they look at the barriers towards things. They try and think that I'm not good enough or I can't do certain things, and I kind of put it like this. It's like, what's stopping you from being the next level? What's stopping you from being that generational talent? And I think. . A lot of people just think I'm not good enough. And in the case of, uh, people with disabilities, they kind of just think, well, it's gonna be too hard.

I think it's life hard in general. I think that's what a lot of people understand and I think, okay, yeah, it's gonna be a little bit harder, but who cares? You, you know the support you need. You know what requirements you

need. So find those people who can provide them. As long, as long as they're in, in place, you'll be okay. So I honestly think just, just go for it, because yes, it's gonna be very difficult. Yes, there's gonna be a lot of hardship in terms of thinking, why can't I just do this as other people? And you're gonna see that every single day. But my, my advice is, is just go for it and see what happens.

### **Tom 22:46**

Yeah. And I think that's, it's such an inspiring way of, of approaching, you know, those challenges and I, I think listening to you today, Ollie like your, your story is incredible. You know, what you, what you've done and what you're planning to do, you know, the listeners can't see, but we are nodding along. Adam and I are nodding along, nodding along as you're talking and kind of just,

you know, in awe of what you've managed to achieve in your three years here.

So I think it's a great piece of advice to end on. So I'll say, Thank you to you and thank you to Adam. Uh, and thank you to you, the listener. Uh, and we look forward to joining us in the next one. Thanks so much guys. Bye-  
Bye.

**Ollie 23:19**

Bye.

**Adam 23:20**

Thank you.