AUVISION PEER-TO-PEER EDUCATIONAL ENHANCEMENT (CLAD-FUNDED)

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OUR PRESENTATION WILL COVER:

- Background to project
- Participatory methodology
- Our findings from the project
- What went well
- What didn’t go as planned
- Headlines for UoB and for other HEIs
AIM: TO DEVELOP AND ENHANCE EXISTING SUPPORT TO BETTER ANTICIPATE AND MEET THE NEEDS OF AUTISTIC STUDENTS AT EACH STAGE OF THEIR STUDIES AND ENSURE BEST OUTCOMES.

- Peer-to-peer project led by academic staff and an independent mentor from Student Support Services from the University of Birmingham
- Current autistic students (‘the student group’) consult with their peers and alumni from the University of Birmingham via one to one interviews and focus groups
- ‘Snapshot’ design to capture their experience at key stages
- Started summer 2015 to cover a full academic year 2015-2016
PLANNED TIMELINE:

Term 1
- Interviews October 2015
- Focus group November 2015

Term 2
- Interviews March 2016
- Focus group April 2016

Term 3
- Interviews June 2016
- Focus group July 2016
INTENDED OUTCOMES

- Development of a student-led participatory model which could be adapted for replication with other user groups across the University of Birmingham, especially those considered ‘hard-to-reach’

- A recommendation report and multimedia learning resource produced by the students involved, to inform UoB staff about how best to support their UoB students
Eight paid PAs recruited, including two alumni and six current students

As part of training and induction – piloted interview process using autistic alumni contacts. This gave us baseline info for first interviews

PAs informed methodology: questions in advance, spider diagram to prompt discussion points, choice of ways to participate

Online area set up where information, ideas and resources could be shared – project team area and participant areas

Process evaluated

PA roles evaluated
CONSULTATION DESIGN

- Research and not research!

- Interview questions to give a snapshot of student experiences over the year:
  Term 1 – transition in and getting support
  Term 2 – settling down into uni life – do things getting better?
  Term 3 – exams, achievements, looking ahead and reflecting back

- Focus groups (online): first open, then led by key themes from interview findings
  Term 1 - Open
  Term 2 - Finding information AND
    - Developing autism awareness resource (running for 1 month on canvas)

Option to email co-ordinator for anonymity
WHO WERE OUR PARTICIPANTS?

- 20 students who had disclosed autism (out of approximately 120 autistic students at UoB)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comparison with UoB Population</th>
<th>AuV</th>
<th>UoB</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity reflective of wider student population</td>
<td>76.5%</td>
<td>74.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGBTQ</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Started course over 21 yrs</td>
<td>64.7%</td>
<td>14.5% (UG)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
<td>58.8%</td>
<td>41%?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance Education</td>
<td>35.3%</td>
<td>7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Have repeated a year</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other disabilities</td>
<td>58.8%</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In receipt of DSA</td>
<td>88.2%</td>
<td>?</td>
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REFLECTIONS ON THE PROCESS

Marianthi Kourti
Challenges

Keeping a group as large and varied as ours organised was not easy, especially with minimal time for meetings, but things run more or less smoothly so far

Managing to time everything with everyone’s busy schedules (both participants and interviewers) and communicating everything back in time with Andrea, Caroline and Liz

Putting together interviews that satisfy the participants’ needs and get the most out of them in terms both of format and especially way of interviewing (most preferred face to face that wasn’t anticipated)

Successes

The participants found a voice in the university they haven’t had before

Bringing together many different people on the autism spectrum from different departments who wouldn’t have met otherwise
WHAT WE FOUND OUT FROM THE FIRST ROUND OF INTERVIEWS
POSITIVE ASPECTS

- Enthusiasm for academic studies (11 students)
  - “Exploring topics I am really interested in and indulging in writing and producing pieces that are unique about women and autism”

- Extra-curricular activities (7 students)
STRUGGLES

- Managing workload (9 students)
  - they feel that they don’t pace themselves very well and they overwork themselves and burning themselves out as a result
  - spending a lot of time to look for certain things, mind can’t switch off

- Lack of clarity regarding course requirements (8 students)
  - “Unclear deadlines lead to anxiety when work had to be handed in months later.”

- Social isolation/difficulties forming links with other students (6 students)
  - “Regarding the Guild and the groups I did experience discrimination by exclusion and I found it hard socialising.”
HELP PROVIDED

- Mentor (9 students)
  - “Mentors are quite helpful in helping arrange and unpack essay tasks which is something [I] would neglect and let fall to the side otherwise.”
  - “Having a mentor is really helpful and helps structure plans and adhere to them they feel that they can confide in their mentor and they wouldn’t have a biased opinion.”

- Personal/welfare tutors (5 students)
SUGGESTIONS

- Better staff awareness for the needs of autistic students (12 students)
  - “A guide that supervisors with autistic students could consult”
  - “For the professors to be aware that some students are on the spectrum and as a result require a bit more clarity and that the professors knew that they are on the autism spectrum.”

- Help finding information (8 students)
WHAT WE FOUND OUT FROM THE FIRST FOCUS GROUP
DSA delays, particularly related to equipment and filing the forms – lack of appropriate support

Mentors – their role, the consistency of support they provide, the importance of trust, their expert knowledge and understanding

Student hub – students found it busy and noisy and made them disinclined to access student services

Managing information – participants often felt overloaded with information, videos were suggested as more appropriate forms of sharing information

Autism awareness – students wanted individuals (both staff and peers) to be more aware of autism and the challenges that students face, either on an individual level and more generally.

Physical environment – noisy computer rooms and classrooms, confusing maps and layout and desire for “safe spaces” within the university, such as “autism only” accommodation
WHAT WE FOUND OUT FROM THE SECOND ROUND OF INTERVIEWS
GENERAL FEELINGS COMPARED TO THE LAST ROUND OF INTERVIEWS

- Things got better (11 students):
- Help managing workload (6 students)
  - “I went to see my welfare tutor and I was able to get extensions on my essays for a month – because I had three essays to do and I was just completely overwhelmed”
- Supportive staff
- Mentor support
HOW HAS THE UNIVERSITY PROVIDED EFFECTIVE HELP?

- Positive comments for support from mentor (9 students)
  - “My mentor has been very helpful and comforting, as she helps proofread my essays and helps plan how to manage my time effectively. I also feel I can trust her with any personal problems I am facing.”
  - “So things haven’t been that good mentally, so I decided to stay with my mum (not in Birmingham) […] So my mentor agreed to do Skype sessions in the evening instead. It’s been really helpful because it has enabled me to stay at home while communicating with my mentor. She has been able to sort everything out with the department (so that they don’t think that I’m just skipping lectures) and help me to deal with university pressures - keeping up with deadlines and staying organised away from campus.”

- Helpful/supportive department staff (7 students)
  - One student spoke about going to his tutor directly when he felt that the feedback on one his assignments was unclear and reported that “that made me feel a bit better in knowing what I had to do to fix it” but was frustrated as to why this feedback wasn’t available without him having to specifically ask for it.
WHERE COULD THE UNIVERSITY HAVE BEEN BETTER IN THE HELP THEY PROVIDED?

- Inadequate communication within/with the department/Need for more advice/confirmation/communication (12 students)
  - “If I just knew who to ask!”

- Nothing comes to mind (4 students)

- Department being inadequate/poorly organised/unsupportive (3 students)

- Problems with SSA (not being communicated, taken into consideration etc)/SSA coordinator (3 students)
WHAT WE FOUND OUT FROM THE SECOND FOCUS GROUP
Finding information focus group (6 participants)

Online Interface not user-friendly
- “I frequently ‘get lost’ because I don’t know what it is that I am looking for, what it is called, if it exists, or where to look for it.”
- “You need to know exactly what something is called before you search for it. If I don’t know something exists, I won’t look for it.”

Room and building floor plans
- [Online floorplans] would take a lot of stress out of finding new places and prevent having to make rehearsal trips.
- “In first year I ended up missing a certain lecture every week because I couldn’t find the room and I found it difficult to approach people to ask.”

Advance information about what to expect at events (e.g. graduation)
- exactly where to walk to collect your certificate (online)
- annotated diagrams of the hall and the path you need to take (online)

Too many emails being received resulting to important emails being missed

Autism awareness resource focus group (9 students)

- “In my experience [staff in my department] do not have a clue when it comes to autism. Some of my lecturers have been more understanding than others, but with several of them, including welfare tutors and SSA coordinators, half of the battle has been getting them to understand what it is I need.”

Format of resource
Who would it be aimed at?
General Aims of the resource
Resource topics
Challenging stereotypes, assumptions and generalisations
WHAT WE FOUND OUT FROM THE THIRD ROUND OF INTERVIEWS
WHAT DO YOU CONSIDER YOUR BIGGEST ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT OVER THE LAST YEAR?

- Getting through exams/year (5 students)

  “One of my main achievements was to finish the final year project at the university and to be present for the examinations in May”

- Academic success (4 students)

  “It’s the improvement in my grades. I’ve been getting higher grades, mainly the result of going to my lecturers.”
WOULD YOU HAVE LIKED TO HAVE DONE DIFFERENTLY?

- Different organisation methods/revision tactics/time management (7 students)
  - “I feel like I need to update my work method a bit so I can fit into more academic knowledge, like transcribing as soon as I get the information”.

- Attending more societies/be more sociable (4 students)

- Nothing/Nothing would have done differently (4 students)
WHAT ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS YOU WOULD LIKE TO LET THE UNIVERSITY MEMBERS OF STAFF AND FELLOW STUDENTS KNOW ABOUT BEING AN AUTISTIC STUDENT?

❖ Apprehension
  ❦ “I stopped going to a whole module because I was told by someone that there was a presentation at the end which was compulsory and we couldn’t pass without it, and I found the idea so stressful I decided it was pointless going to the module”.

❖ Fear of uncertainty
  ❦ “the unknown is terrifying/ stressful! So the more info they have that they can pass on the better, and as early as possible. […] Change can be very stressful!”

❖ Difficulty (but desire) to make friends
  ❦ “I don’t dislike socialising, I just struggle with it at times”
OUR REFLECTIONS: WHAT WENT WELL

- Bigger team helped to keep project to time
- Peer to peer aspect well received
- Students disclosed more easily than they might have
- Strong messages coming through for UoB to work with
- PAs developed skills and confidence, useful work experience (this is no small thing)
- Participatory aspect greater than planned — more input into analysis, report-writing and induction especially from alumni PAs
WHAT DIDN'T GO AS PLANNED

- Lower initial take-up – accessing potential participants and also perhaps UGs less able to take on something extra
- Juggling with other demands on students – studies had to come first. This meant a lot of changes, causing stress for all concerned!
- High level of administration especially dealing with different payment systems
- Flexibility needed around study commitments of PAs – keeping to a project timetable when everyone is busy with studies and other work
- Online communication was less utilised than anticipated – face to face and one to one seemed to be preferred
- Regular surgeries needed for troubleshooting and reassuring
- Co-ordinators needed to invest more time than anticipated to facilitate and support
REFLECTIONS FROM THE PA TEAM

Short questionnaire evaluated how PAs found the experience:

- Best thing about involvement – working in a team and the contacts involved
- Most challenging thing – managing time
  “Realising that I can’t do everything”
- Skills developed – time management & interpersonal skills
  “Interview skills – they now exist!”
Anything that should have been done differently? – some of the scheduling

“I would be concerned if a similar project involved first years without allowing flexibility”

Has the role influenced your attitude to autism? – yes

“It has widened my view of autism, and I have come to realise that even autistic people are sometimes only limited to their personal experiences as something to judge autism.”

Have you made peer contacts you will stay in touch with - yes
HEADLINES FOR PARTICIPATORY PROJECTS

- Peer-to-peer model is more effective in engendering trust and identifying most relevant issues for students
- Need for availability of co-ordinators (practicalities like rooms, de-briefing)
- Ethically students need to be encouraged to prioritise their studies but this can lead to challenges in meeting targets
- Significant indirect benefits for PAs and potentially participants
- Using the natural skills of PAs led to unexpected benefits (eg. Callum’s artwork; John’s training experience; Marianthi and Ken’s experience in data analysis)
HEADLINES FOR INCLUSIVE CURRICULUM

- Many issues common to other student groups
- Our autistic students are not just autistic students!
- Need for transition in to anticipate and respond to needs from start of course – most students had a challenging first term and many did not have support in the initial weeks
- Students tend to be passive within RAP process and unsure of their rights/responsibilities
- DSA processes can be slow and need support to, eg. Get equipment sorted out
- Distance and part-time students had different experiences and needs (but similar to each other)
- Departments need to ensure effective sharing and use of RAP information
- ‘Checking-in’ with students is important as those struggling most may not be able to flag it up
- Communication between academics, welfare tutors and support services currently variable across departments, needs to be more consistent, led by systems rather than individuals.
OUTCOMES FROM THE PROJECT:

- AuVision online resource for UoB staff supporting autistic students
- Recommendation report available July
- Developing Autism&Uni resource for UoB to support students and their families
- Some useful changes to our own teaching practice based on our findings.

QUESTIONs?
THANK YOU FOR LISTENING!