Supporting autistic students during their transition to university

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1 in 100 people are autistic (apparently)
What about university populations?

• 1 in 100 students?
• More than that? Less?
• What if they don’t tell us?
• What if they don’t know?
• Under-represented at entry?
• Over-represented in drop-outs?
The Autism&Uni project

Autism&Uni aims to support greater numbers of young adults on the autism spectrum to gain access to Higher Education (HE) and to navigate the transition successfully.

Two main strands:
1. Help the Higher Education environment adapt so that it becomes more inclusive and supportive
2. Give students the tools and strategies they need to navigate Higher Education effectively
Project Partners 2013-2016

- Leeds Beckett University, UK
- The Academy of Humanities and Economics in Łódź, Poland
- Autismo Burgos, Spain
- Technical University Eindhoven, Netherlands
- Keskuspuisto Vocational College, Helsinki, Finland
Challenges faced by autistic students

The social and physical environment
- difficulty picking up unwritten social rules when interacting with tutors and fellow students
- difficulty tolerating background noise, lighting, crowding or other sensory aspects of the university environment
- handling the social isolation that often comes with living in a new environment

Challenges concerning assessment (even when mastering the subject matter)
- difficulty interpreting ambiguous and open assignment briefs correctly
- lack of understanding why something needs to be done
- difficulty planning studies and revision
- uncertainty how much time to spend on a given task

Transitioning to adult life requiring more effort than it would for the average student
- moving away from home for the first time
- time management and establishing routines
- an unfamiliarity with advocating effectively for oneself

Unrealistic expectations by the student
- what university study is really like
- content of study subject or course
- performing at the same high standard as in secondary education
- fellow students’ interests and dedication

Lack of appropriate support
- lack of access to appropriate support right from the start
- a focus on the ‘deficits’ of autism, rather than the strengths students can bring
- lack of consistency in reasonable adjustments, autism-specific services and personal support
A more positive view: Typical strengths and enabling traits

- expertise and passion for their subject
- desire and commitment to be accurate
- a drive to seek knowledge
- adherence to rules and instructions
- ability to maintain intense focus
- rational and logical thinking
- adopt unconventional angles in problem-solving
- spot errors that others may overlook
Autism&Uni outcomes

1. Help autistic students navigate the transition from school to university

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<th>Participatory Design of an Online Toolkit</th>
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2. Help academics and student services teams to support autistic students effectively

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<th>Co-Creation of 3 Best Practice Guides</th>
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Participation throughout

- Penny Andrews (now Sheffield University) and Heta Pukki (Keskuspuisto College Helsinki and Autscape) are autistic researchers who set the project direction and co-published findings.
- More than half of the survey respondents were autistic, and they set the themes of enquiry.
- The toolkit was developed using a participatory design approach
  - User-centred, Design Thinking stages
  - 3 workshops in the UK and Finland
  - Autistic students co-designed the layout, navigation, look-and-feel and content of the toolkit.
• Practical tips and prompts for reflection
• Encourages positive action and the development of self-advocacy
• Interviews with students and professionals
Autism&Uni Best Practice Guides

GUIDE 1  For HEI managers and senior academics
GUIDE 2  For HE lecturers and tutors
GUIDE 3  For professionals supporting autistic students within or outside HE Institutions

download free guides at www.autism-uni.org/bestpractice
Autism&Uni Best Practice Guides

• Introduce autism and raise awareness
• Outline the challenges AND the strengths
• Share good practice
• Positive calls to action – “quick wins”

download free guides at www.autism-uni.org/bestpractice
Key recommendations for inclusive practice (UDL inspired)

• Adopt an inclusive and socially-just approach that understands problems AND desires of students

• Avoid retro-fitting the learning experience to individual students (which is the current model of “reasonable adjustments”)

• Instead, provide suitable support to ALL students by default – not just to those with a diagnosis
  • provide options and multiple pathways through learning and assessment
  • Re-think learning outcomes and how students can evidence their achievement
Some examples

Communicate ideas and solutions effectively in an oral format
• As alternative to a presentation in front of a panel, offer a chat over a coffee

Effectively describe the differences between translating, transliterating, and interpreting.
• As alternative to an exam, offer an essay that asks equivalent questions

Operate effectively and collaboratively as part of a team, demonstrating an understanding of roles, leadership and group dynamics
• As alternative to group work, offer pre-planned engagement with tutors or industry professionals
Reflections on our idea of “participatory research”

- Autistic researchers designed the survey, analysed the results, formulated findings and co-wrote the guides

- Autistic students actively co-designed the toolkit (we were lucky that we had graphic designers, English graduates and web developers in the workshops)

- The general research agenda was written before the project started

- Autistic researchers were equals within the project team – but no more in control than others

- Autistic survey participants set the themes of enquiry – but did not actively shape them
Thank you

Download our Best Practice Guides or take a copy today
www.autism-uni.org/bestpractice

Adopt our Online Toolkit
www.autism-uni.org/toolkits

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