

# Supporting Autistic University Students

## What We Found

*Autistic students would like more academic supports including coaching, but these are less well studied in research.*

There are a few different kinds of supports which are available to autistic university students, to enable them to get the most from their studies.

Academic supports include extra time in exams, deadline extensions, provision of lecture notes by instructors, and the option to undertake exams in a private room. These are uncommon in the literature, although autistic students would like more of them, including academic coaching. There's little insight into which kinds of supports are most effective, partly because the answer to this question may vary with the ability of the student.

Non-academic supports primarily focus on:

- Peer mentoring: this can be very successful because it is tailored to the individual student but it depends a lot on the match of mentor and mentee – one participant found mentoring “humiliating”
- Transition programmes: successful transition programmes for new students arriving into higher education are a key determinant of student success
- Group supports: students often report enjoying being part of a group with other autistic students, which has academic, wellbeing and social benefits. However some prefer one-to-one models which are more private.

In surveys of Universities, many report no support for autistic students beyond a generic package available to all disabled students. Supports often need to be proactive, requested and arranged by students – proof of diagnosis and long wait times present barriers during which time students may suffer.

Most supports are cheap to implement and yet funding barriers are still cited as a reason why supports are not more widely available. Students also raise wider concerns about autism awareness and acceptance on campus.

## What We Suggest

*Evidence suggests that UK Universities are failing to adequately support many of their potentially high achieving students*

Universities should have a general package of academic supports for disabled students, which is augmented for autistic students with resources more tailored to their needs.

Tailored supports like coaching or mentoring should be available, and well-planned with autistic input to their design, to maximise benefit and avoid harmful effects. Group options should also be part of the menu, and students should feel free to choose between these kinds of supports, and to switch at different stages of study depending on their needs at that time.

Campus acceptance of autism is also crucial to create an environment where students feel minimal pressure to “mask” being autistic, and are able to both disclose their diagnosis and request support without fear of judgement.

## What We Did

This policy briefing is based on an undergraduate student project which took place in 2021.

The student reviewed the research literature, screening over 2000 records to find 18 studies with data relevant to their research question, which were published between 2021 and 2020. Across all of these studies, 302 students took part and they were conducted in the USA, UK, Australia, Canada and Spain.

Most studies drew on survey data from autistic students, and some also surveyed the Universities themselves. Most studies only capture information from one term, or one academic year. Students surveyed were mostly men, and, where race was reported, most were white.

Risk of bias was moderate to low, and mostly arose from studies failing to capture information which could have affected scores, like IQ, and the fact that they were reliant on self-report data.

The student evaluated what each paper could tell us about which supports are **available** to autistic students, and which of them are **effective**.

*Eighteen studies featuring just over 300 autistic students revealed which supports are available at University, and whether they are beneficial*

## Why We Did It

Enrolment of autistic students at University is on a steep upward trajectory [1], with about 1% of students reporting being autistic at University matriculation [2].

This is good news, but presents challenges for Universities who are not prepared for such a large body of known-autistic students. Autistic students are more likely to drop out of their degree [2], and have poorer graduation and employment outcomes [3].

Autistic students report finding it hard to make friends, and that University social life can be unpredictable and overwhelming. Sensory issues, like trying to concentrate in echoey, brightly-lit lecture halls, are another source of difficulty. Autistic people also experience high vulnerability to mental health problems and students are no exception here.

The social, sensory and mental health challenges experienced by autistic students may be temporarily masked by strong academic abilities, making it hard for instructors to see a need for adjustments.

1. Chown, N., & Beavan, N. (2012). Intellectually capable but socially excluded? A review of the literature and research on students with autism in further education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 36(4), 477-493
2. White, S. W., Ollendick, T. H., & Bray, B. C. (2011). College students on the autism spectrum: Prevalence and associated problems. *Autism*, 15(6), 683-701
3. Gobbo, K., & Shmulsky, S. (2014). Faculty experience with college students with autism spectrum disorders: A qualitative study of challenges and solutions. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 29(1), 13-22

*University is a daunting experience for anyone, but the academic and social adversities are even more evident for autistic students*

## Thank you

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