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Widening Access to Higher Education: Listening to Autistic Students' Voices for Developing Inclusive Curriculum Approaches

Guidance and Recommendations

Dr Sarah Wall, Dr Chrissy Mangafa & Lucie Wheeler, School of Education, Anglia Ruskin University

About this briefing

This briefing provides an overview of findings from a research project: Widening Access to Higher Education - Listening to Autistic Students' Voices for Developing Inclusive Curriculum Approaches at a higher education institution (HEI). The underpinning research was led by Dr Sarah Wall and Dr Chrissy Mangafa, and supported by Lucie Wheeler. The research project explored autistic students' experiences and needs, as well as staff's current knowledge and practices around autism in Higher Education (HE) contexts. This policy paper offers recommendations for adopting inclusive, andragogical approaches from students' and staff's perspectives and aims to inform practice development.

This policy briefing is based on the findings from student interviews and staff survey responses conducted throughout 2021/2022. It presents recommendations for HE policymakers at national and institutional levels, and for academic practitioners, so that they can work towards making universities a more inclusive space for autistic students.

Background and key findings

The number of autistic individuals, and those with Aspergers Syndrome, is growing; however, disabled students are underrepresented in HE. Autistic individuals may experience anxiety and mental health challenges that are greater compared with the general student

Why is this an important issue?

- Despite the increasing number of disabled students (including autistic and Asperger Syndrome students) in Higher Education Institutions, their voices are often ignored.
- Studies about the training of faculty staff in areas related to disabilities like autism, and inclusive practice, are limited.
- Likewise, research examining the views of autistic individuals regarding transition to university remains scarce.
- There is a need for academic staff to work in partnership with student services, adopting a proactive role in detecting early signs of anxiety, depression, or decline of student performance.

population, and the transition to adulthood may be fraught with difficulty. They are also at high risk of failing to complete their degree programme.

The study was prompted by the results of a recent module evaluation survey (MES), and informal conversations with the Disability and Dyslexia Support Team at Anglia Ruskin University. The feedback suggested that disabled students have three main areas of dissatisfaction: learning material accessibility; cuts to the Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) and a lack of awareness regarding reasonable adjustments.

The research demonstrated that student and staff relationships are key, with even a small number of supporting staff making a significant difference to their experience. Having emotional support regularly ranked higher than academic support when studying the literature and it also presented highly in the data collected. If students feel comfortable with their teachers, they are able to ask questions and ask for support when needed. The research also shows that links between academic staff, students and support services is relevant. However, a common theme, emerging from both the literature and the data analysis, is that staff are unaware of how to suport their students and students are worried that, by asking for help, they will be seen as incapable of continuing their studies.

The recommendations below are based on findings from the project: Widening Access to HE - Listening to

Autistic Students' Voices for Developing Inclusive Curriculum Approaches at a HEI and are also informed by the literature surrounding autism in HE.

Recommendations

This research project has generated recommendations for HEIs and academic practitioners regarding the development of an inclusive environment. Overall, in a truly civic university, disabled (including autistic) students would be provided with an experience that is equitable to their non-disabled peers: one that is built upon the social model of disability. All staff are responsible for providing such an environment and it should be woven into the fabric of university life, not catered for as an optional extra, provided by a small number of specialist staff.

For HEIs:

- Teaching classrooms should be smaller, where possible, to accommodate fewer students and create less noise disturbance.

- Course leaders should give advance notice, when possible, of any changes to staffing or the teaching environment to support students through the transition process.

- Adjustments made for the Summary of Reasonable Adjustments (SRA) document should be specific to the user (the disabled person in this case), not generic statements that could apply to any individual, as everyone differs in their requirements. The strategies should be discussed and fully agreed with the student.

- HEIs should support the students' educational journey and provide equity of experience for them, through eliminating negative encounters that may lead to non-completion of their degrees.

- HEIs should train staff to ensure that they are both knowledgeable about autism and have a positive (non-deficit), flexible approach to autistic students.

For staff:

- Providing lecture notes prior to the session will enable students to prepare accordingly and relieve the stress of the unexpected that some students experience.

- Staff should consider allowing students to present in small groups rather than large cohorts and, in addition to this, allow students to choose the peer groups they conduct any group work in. This will support those students with any social anxieties and ensure that they have an equal opportunity to perform well in the task.

- Where the student is a distance learner, the use of online discussion to foster peer relationships should be encouraged and easily accessible.

- Staff should actively seek to make themselves aware of the support available to their students to enable them to signpost students to appropriate sessions when needed. Relevant information should be shared with staff through meetings with support teams. A continuous agenda item at team meetings would facilitate this, with the relevant information disseminated either by support staff, or on behalf of them, in line with the ethical procedure of the university

- It is important that staff and students identify needs and communicate them through an 'open door' policy. Such an approach requires staff expertise and time; therefore, time to train and deliver such support should be built into staff's workload allocation. It is also worth noting that many academic staff have similar disabilities, and additional time may be required to take into consideration their own needs.

- Regular 'progress checks' run by a designated member of staff would be useful to allow students who are uncomfortable with asking for help. This would facilitate the identification of any anxiety, depression, or decline in performance, early in a student's university career.

Contact the research team

We would love to hear feedback on this briefing and invite discussions with policy makers and practitioners in organisations that are using the recommendations or that are interested in doing so.

Dr Sarah Wall
Email: sarah.wall@aru.ac.uk
Twitter: @DrSarahWall1

This policy briefing draws on the following report:

Wall, S., Mangafa, C., & Wheeler, L. (2023). *Widening Access to HE - Listening to Autistic Students' Voices for Developing Inclusive Curriculum Approaches at a HEI.* Anglia Ruskin University.