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"Seeing the Value of Who We Are": Understanding and Supporting Autistic University Students

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Abstract

Background: The number of autistic students enrolling in universities is increasing, yet many of them face significant challenges in navigating academic, social, and environmental demands. Existing research often focuses on autistic students' strengths and weaknesses. While insightful, the dichotomizing of individual characteristics may limit our ability to identify systemic barriers within higher education.

Methods: Guided by social and human rights models of disability, we adopted a participatory approach to identify factors hindering autistic students' success in university settings. Our team of autistic and non-autistic researchers conducted a qualitative study to explore the experiences of autistic university students in Australia and how universities can create conditions that enable them to thrive. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 21 autistic adults who either had completed at least one university course, or were studying a university course, or had previously enrolled in but discontinued at least one university course in Australia. We deployed reflexive thematic analysis in analyzing our participants' transcripts.

Results: We identified four key themes as follows: (1) "Fight[ing] really hard to get through," highlighting the challenges autistic students face; (2) "[Taking] a lot longer to try to make sense of the system," describing difficulties navigating university structures; (3) Fostering an enabling environment, suggesting ways universities can better support autistic students; and (4) Building a sense of belonging, emphasizing the importance of meaningful connections and acceptance.

Conclusions: Based on these findings, we provide 10 recommendations for universities to create more inclusive and supportive environments for autistic students. This study underscores the need for universities to actively engage with autistic students to understand their needs and implement appropriate support strategies.

Keywords: autism, coproduction, higher education, inclusive education

Community Brief

Why is this an important issue?

The number of autistic students enrolling in universities is increasing, but many face significant challenges in navigating academic, social, and environmental demands. Understanding their experiences is crucial for developing effective support strategies. Existing research, however, often focuses on autistic students' strengths and weaknesses, but this approach does not fully address the barriers that universities create.

What was the purpose of this study?

Using a disability rights perspective, we worked with autistic people to explore how autistic students navigate university environments and how universities can create conditions that enable autistic students to thrive.

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What did the researchers do?

Our team of autistic and non-autistic researchers interviewed 21 autistic adults who had attended university in Australia about their experiences and analyzed their responses to identify common ideas or "themes."

What were the results of the study?

We found four main themes: The first theme talks about how autistic students face numerous challenges within and outside of university settings. The second theme talks about how they struggle to understand and navigate university systems. The third theme describes how universities can foster more enabling environments through various strategies. The fourth and final theme stresses that building a sense of belonging is crucial for autistic students' success.

What do these findings add to what was already known?

This study provides in-depth insights into autistic students' experiences and offers 10 specific recommendations for universities to improve support and inclusion. The recommendations are:

(1) Developing autism and neurodiversity training for staff and students
(2) Providing sensory-friendly spaces
(3) Promoting support services
(4) Developing transition programs
(5) Streamlining and demystifying university processes
(6) Implementing flexible pedagogical and communication options
(7) Celebrating neurodiversity
(8) Adopting trauma-informed practice
(9) Investing on building relationships with autistic students
(10) Embracing participatory approaches

What are potential weaknesses in the study?

There are three potential weaknesses. First, the sample was limited in diversity, particularly lacking cisgender male participants and detailed socioeconomic information. Therefore, not every autistic person will relate to these experiences. Second, because we wanted to use an analysis method called "reflexive thematic analysis" which focuses on common themes across our participants, we could not directly compare between participants from different backgrounds—for example, the experiences of those who were diagnosed early on versus those diagnosed later in life. Third, the study also did not include perspectives from university staff.

How will these findings help autistic adults now or in the future?

These findings can guide universities in creating more inclusive and supportive environments for autistic students, potentially improving their academic success and overall wellbeing.

Background

Efforts promoting inclusivity in higher education have gained attention worldwide. Initiatives like *Widening Participation* in the United Kingdom and compliance with the disability legislations aim to create more equitable opportunities for all students, particularly those from marginalized communities. Despite these efforts, universities often struggle to offer accommodations specifically tailored to the needs of autistic students.[1–9] As the number of autistic students enrolling in universities continues to increase,[10–12] there is a growing imperative to understand autistic students' unique experiences of engaging with universities and how universities can better support autistic students' ways of learning.

An emerging body of research has shown that autistic people often face significant barriers and difficulties in navigating the academic,[13–16] social,[13,15–19] and environmental[15,20] demands of universities. Numerous studies have identified a lack of understanding about autism and autistic people as a key barrier.[4,7,21,22] At its worst, autistic students have reported experiencing stigma and discrimination at universities.[7,23] The fear of discrimination has led to many students feeling hesitant in disclosing their autistic identities, leading to delays in accessing university support services—or avoiding them altogether.[3,8,24,25] For those who have accessed these services, many found them to be unhelpful, often attributing this to university staffs' poor understanding of how autistic students approach universities.[4,7,26]

Many studies on autistic students' university experiences, however, do not provide a nuanced account of autistic students' ways of navigating universities. Specifically,

these studies have focused on autistic students' strengths and weaknesses[1–3,15,25,27] and, as a result, have overlooked the complexity and variability of their abilities that can be modulated by environmental factors.[20,28] For example, Gurbuz et al.[15] categorized autistic students' academic functioning into dichotomous subthemes of "academic challenges" and "academic strengths." Similarly, Ward and Webster[22] emphasized autistic students' determination and perseverance as primary factors influencing university success while positioning environmental factors as secondary mediators rather than fundamental determinants. Furthermore, recent studies on "autistic advantages" have highlighted notions of autistic strengths and weaknesses as "false dichotomies,"[28,29] largely because whether autistic traits are experienced as beneficial or detrimental predominantly depends on the context. There is, therefore, a need for further research into the nuanced ways in which contextual factors influence autistic university students' experiences.

The variability in autistic students' abilities across contexts underscores the importance of supportive environments in shaping their experiences. This aligns with the social model of disability, which highlights societal barriers in creating disability,[30] and the human rights model, which emphasizes the need for equitable conditions for everyone to realize their full potential.[31] Building on these models, our study is uniquely guided by both models in two ways. First, we adopted a participatory approach by involving autistic people as equal partners throughout the research process, challenging exclusionary practices and centering lived experiences. Second, we focused on the role of environmental barriers and supports in influencing autistic students' experiences and the responsibility of institutions to create equitable conditions for inclusion and participation. Specifically, we addressed two research questions: (1) How do autistic students navigate university environments and (2) how can universities create conditions that enable autistic students to thrive? These questions aim to extend existing research by shifting the focus from individual characteristics to systemic changes that promote accessibility and empowerment.

Methods

Participants

Participants were recruited from social media (X and Facebook) in November 2021 to share their university experiences in Australia through a semi-structured interview. We included those who: (1) were 18+ years, (2) were able to communicate in English, (3) diagnosed or self-identified as autistic, and (4) had completed, had enrolled in but discontinued, or were currently studying a university course in Australia. Twenty-six eligible individuals were invited to complete the interview; of whom, five either did not respond to our invitation or were unavailable.

Twenty-one autistic people were interviewed between November and December 2021. At the time of interview, participants were 23–56 years old ($M = 36.3$ yrs; $SD = 9.1$; Table 1), mostly domestic students ($n = 20$; 95%) and were of European descent ($n = 16$; 76%). Our sample was gender diverse as follows: most identified as women or transfeminine ($n = 13$; 62%), with the remaining identifying as nonbinary or gender diverse ($n = 8$; 38%). Twenty participants

received their autism diagnosis before ($n = 4$; 19%), during ($n = 7$; 33%), or after ($n = 9$; 43%) commencing their university courses. One participant was seeking a diagnosis and self-identified as autistic during university. Eleven (52%) were current students, whereas the remaining were either graduates who had completed at least one university course ($n = 8$; 38%) or nongraduates who had commenced but discontinued at least one course ($n = 2$; 10%). Specific information on socioeconomic status was not recorded. See Supplementary Table S1 for further participant information.

Interview schedule

During our interviews, we covered six primary questions regarding participants' (1) autism diagnosis or self-identification, (2) transition from school to university, (3) interactions with peers, (4) interactions with university lecturers and staff members, (5) experiences navigating university systems, and (6) any *negative experiences* that stood out to them during university (see Tan et al.[7]). If required, prompt questions were asked to generate more details (see Supplementary Data S1).

Procedure

Ethics approval for this study was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Macquarie University (Project ID: 10835). All participants provided informed written consent before participating.

Participants first completed an online survey administered on LimeSurvey[32] to provide information on their demography, history of higher education, and communication and language preferences. Ahead of the scheduled interview, each participant (1) received the primary interview questions, (2) was given an option to complete the interview with an autistic (M.R.) or nonautistic researcher (D.W.T.), and (3) chose their preferred way of completing the interview via web conference on Zoom (using video and/or audio), live text-based chat, email, phone call, or any other method requested by the participants.

Six participants (29%) opted to be interviewed by M.R., whereas the remaining 15 (71%) expressed no preference and were interviewed by D.W.T. All were interviewed via Zoom with video and/or audio ($n = 20$; 95%), except for one (5%) who completed the interview via email exchange. One participant who did not wish to be recorded completed the interview with one interviewing researcher (M.R.) and a notetaking researcher (D.W.T.). Interview length ranged between 26 and 107 minutes ($M = 67.4$ minutes, $SD = 22.0$). All participants received a voucher worth AUD$25 as an appreciation for their time. Where possible, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by a transcription service. All participants were then given an opportunity to edit their transcripts. Nine participants made minor changes or provided further information, whereas the others did not respond to our request.

Data analysis

Following Braun and Clarke,[33] we deployed reflexive thematic analysis within an essentialist framework. We adopted an inductive approach to identify patterned meanings within the dataset. D.W.T. and L.H. familiarized themselves with all transcripts and met with M.R. to discuss any compelling

TABLE 1. PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

Participant[a]	Age group (yrs)	Autistic identity/ diagnosis timing[b]	Current student (level of study; helping[d]/ nonhelping major)	Number of degrees[c] completed (% helping major[d])	Number of degrees[c] discontinued (% helping major[d])
Asha	35–44	During	Yes (postgraduate; helping major)	1 (0%)	0
Avery	35–44	During	Yes (postgraduate; helping major)	2 (100%)	1 (100%)
Blake	45–54	After	Yes (undergraduate; nonhelping major)	2 (50%)	1 (100%)
Casey	35–44	Before	Yes (postgraduate; helping major)	2 (50%)	4 (25%)
Clare	25–34	During	No	1 (100%)	2 (100%)
Emma	45–54	After	Yes (postgraduate; nonhelping major)	2 (50%)	0
Erica	25–34	Before	No	1 (0%)	0
Ethan	25–34	Before	No	2 (0%)	0
Hannah	25–34	After	Yes (undergraduate; helping major)	2 (50%)	0
Jamie	25–34	During	No	0	3 (0%)
Jennifer	35–44	After	No	1 (100%)	0
Jessica	35–44	During	Yes (postgraduate; helping major)	1 (100%)	1 (100%)
Julia	25–34	After	No	1 (0%)	1 (0%)
Laura	35–44	After	No	2 (100%)	2 (50%)
Rachel	45–54	During	No	3 (0%)	1 (0%)
Riley	18–24	During	No	0	2 (50%)
Ryan	25–34	Before	Yes (undergraduate; helping major)	2 (0%)	2 (0%)
Sam	25–34	After	Yes (undergraduate; nonhelping major)	0	0
Sophie	18–24	During	Yes (undergraduate; nonhelping major)	0	0
Susan	55–64	After	Yes (postgraduate; helping major)	1 (0%)	2 (100%)
Taylor	25–34	After	No	1 (0%)	1 (100%)

[a]Pseudonyms.
[b]For participants who had an autism diagnosis, this information reflects whether they received their diagnoses before, during, or after university. For those who self-identified as being autistic, this information reflects whether they identified as such before, during, or after university.
[c]Degree(s) from an Australian university.
[d]Helping majors were defined as those related to providing health, education, and social services, including nursing, paramedicine, medicine, psychology, and social work.

observations, potential codes, and interpretations in detail based on two transcripts. D.W.T. and L.H. then applied the codes to all transcripts using NVivo.[34] Next, D.W.T., L.H., and M.R. generated a draft thematic map based on the codes and participants' quotes, which were reviewed and discussed with the whole research team. Finally, a draft of the results section and thematic map were sent to all participants for member checking. Participants were also invited to choose their own pseudonyms if they wished.[35] Four participants responded and agreed that our findings aligned with their own experiences, and three chose their own pseudonyms. The remaining participants did not respond.

Author positionalities. This study was conducted by a diverse team whose academic backgrounds in psychology, education, social work, and disability studies, combined with professional roles as academics and a learning designer, enriched our approach. Our perspectives were further shaped by experiences as international and domestic university students in Australia and lived experience as autistic people.

Guided by the neurodiversity paradigm and the social and human rights model of disabilities, we believe that our collective diversity[36] enhanced the study's richness and fostered a holistic, neurodiversity-affirming exploration of the topic.

Community involvement

The current study was conducted by a team of autistic (M.R. and T.H.) and non-autistic (D.W.T., L.H., and E.P.) researchers who shared decision-making power throughout the process. Further details and reflection on the participatory process are detailed in Supplementary Data S2.[37]

Results

In this study, more than half of our participants ($n = 13$; 62%) had dropped out of and reenrolled into a university course several times. This meant that they had "done a lot of university" (Casey) as they "tried a few times to get different degrees" (Jamie). The findings presented here is a

culmination of our participants' "understanding of how I work" (Casey), making "my study work for me" (Ryan), and learning "how to do university" (Blake)—"each time I've learned a little bit more about what I can and can't do... but it's a very expensive lesson to learn" (Jamie). One participant hoped that "my experience will help other autistic students" (Erica). From our analysis, we identified four themes (see Fig. 1).

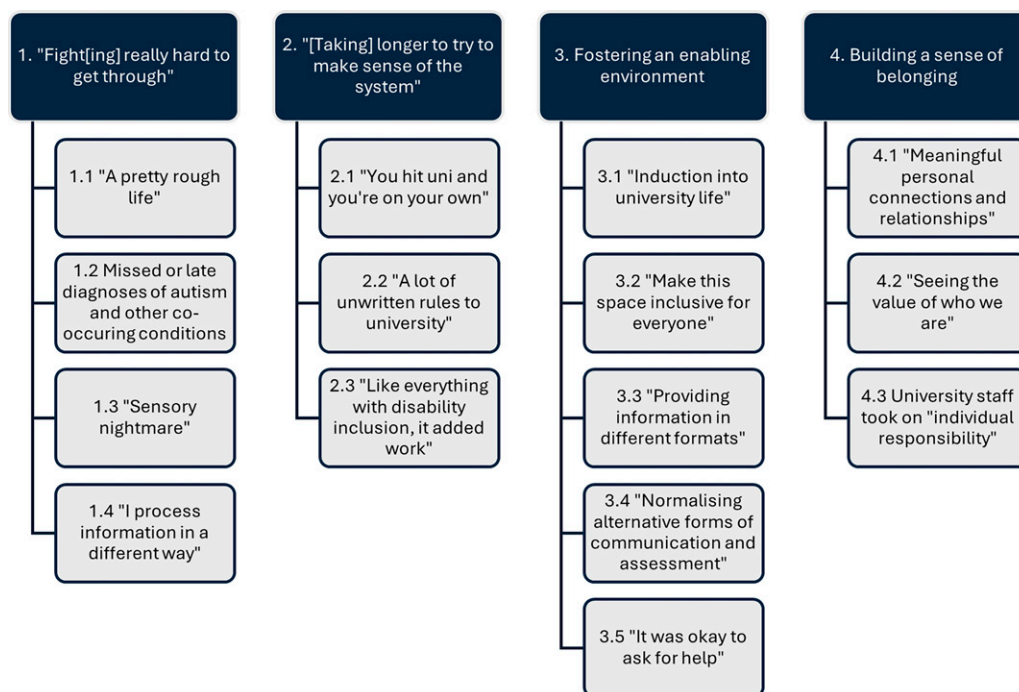*Theme 1: "Fight[ing] Really Hard to Get through"*

Subtheme 1.1: "A pretty rough life". Many of our participants divulged that they have had "*a pretty rough life*" (Hannah; subtheme 1.1). They were "fight[ing] really hard to get through" (Sam), being "homeless" (Rachel, Hannah, and Sam), and in "unsafe living situations" (Hannah), dealing with "harassment and discrimination" (Hannah) and processing "a lot of trauma in childhood" (Riley), "shame and self-hate" (Ryan), all while going through university. Several participants spoke about entering university "from a high school experience that was pretty horrific" (Rachel) where they "weren't accepted into any friendship circles" (Blake), were "chronically bullied" (Sophie), and "felt lonely" (Julia). The profound impact of these experiences "carried on to uni" (Sam).

Subtheme 1.2: Missed or late diagnoses of autism and other co-occurring conditions. They also often experienced *missed or late diagnoses of autism and other co-occurring conditions* (subtheme 1.2). On top of the "mental health challenges that stuck with me for many years" (Asha), such as depression and anxiety, many autistic students also reported having co-occurring conditions such as Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, dyslexia, chronic fatigue, and autoimmune disorders (see Supplementary Table S1). Due to the missed or late diagnoses of autism and other co-occurring conditions, not only were participants unable to access support services but also they felt that "everything seemed to be coming to my peers at university so easily... so, I always felt that there must be something wrong with me or that I wasn't trying hard enough" (Jennifer). One participant described how having a diagnosis was instrumental in them getting through university: "If I didn't have the official diagnosis, I wouldn't have been able to get the good grades at uni. I needed a lot of adjustments... I think the diagnosis enabled me to thrive at uni" (Erica).

Subtheme 1.3: "Sensory nightmare". The *"sensory nightmare"* (Hannah; subtheme 1.3) of campus environments also made university life hard. Several participants experienced "so much difficulty around class sizes and lecture halls" (Jamie) with "so many people, so many smells, it was so loud, and the acoustics were bad" (Casey). All these felt "enormously overwhelming" (Susan), so much so that they could not "process the auditory stuff" (Hannah) or "hear what the lecturers were saying" (Sam)—they just "couldn't be in that space" (Casey). Furthermore, "visually confusing environments" (Jennifer) also made wayfinding "really hard" (Clare) and "stressful" (Riley). Built environments were particularly important for examinations. Many autistic students found that examination venues that were "in a smaller location was better" (Sam). Others found "fluorescent lighting, the pen scratching and just people breathing... really distracting" (Clare). Crucially, for one participant whose grade "wasn't a reflection of my ability, it was a reflection of my intense anxiety when I am in a bad sensory environment" (Hannah).

Subtheme 1.4: "I process information in a different way". The everyday struggle did not stop there, however. Most participants also felt that people did not understand

1. "Fight[ing] really hard to get through"	2. "[Taking] longer to try to make sense of the system"	3. Fostering an enabling environment	4. Building a sense of belonging
1.1 "A pretty rough life"	2.1 "You hit uni and you're on your own"	3.1 "Induction into university life"	4.1 "Meaningful personal connections and relationships"
1.2 Missed or late diagnoses of autism and other co-occuring conditions	2.2 "A lot of unwritten rules to university"	3.2 "Make this space inclusive for everyone"	4.2 "Seeing the value of who we are"
1.3 "Sensory nightmare"	2.3 "Like everything with disability inclusion, it added work"	3.3 "Providing information in different formats"	4.3 University staff took on "individual responsibility"
1.4 "I process information in a different way"		3.4 "Normalising alternative forms of communication and assessment"	
		3.5 "It was okay to ask for help"	

FIG. 1. How do autistic students navigate university environments and how can universities create conditions that enable autistic students to thrive: Themes and subthemes.

that "*I process information in a different way*" (Emma; subtheme 1.4). Often there was "no processing time" (Susan) provided during lectures and seminars, even though "it takes me a bit longer to process things" (Rachel). Some experienced "slow processing of verbal information" (Jennifer) and "problems with memory" (Blake), "retaining information" (Casey), and "sustaining attention" (Jennifer). When "my executive function's not the best" (Avery), "there's only so many [steps] you can hold… to do next level multitasking" (Jennifer).

Many participants felt that they "spend so much time covering up" (Casey) these challenges that other people always see the "high achiever…[but] none of them ever saw the burnout" (Hannah): "they don't see the work underneath" (Rachel). One student explained, "it takes me about 200 hours to write 2,000 words. And I'll get a HD, but it's just such a slow process" (Avery). For another, "I graduated with a distinction, but I worked seven days a week for two years straight. I was so exhausted and so anxious by the end" (Casey). Ultimately, many students felt the "overall autistic fear that I can pretend as much as I want, [but I] can't quite do this, and I'm going to get caught out at some stage" (Susan).

Theme 2: "[Taking] Me a Lot Longer to Try to Make Sense of the System"

Subtheme 2.1: "You hit uni and you're on your own". Many autistic students initially felt excited about going to university as they saw it as "an opportunity to reinvent myself" (Hannah) in an environment that was "less restrictive than at school" (Ethan). Their transition into university life was nevertheless "really difficult" (Avery). Most of our participants felt that "*you hit uni and you're on your own*" (Emma; subtheme 2.1) to "figure out what's the norm" (Riley) in a "completely different environment" (Jamie) and "form of studies" (Laura) to high school. Many autistic students "didn't really know much about how uni worked" (Sam) and "didn't really have a good frame of reference for what you're supposed to do" (Riley). Furthermore, "being autistic probably took me a lot longer to try to make sense of the system than other folks" (Blake). Several participants discontinued their studies very early on because they were "just overwhelmed by how to make it work, how to access the lessons, and how to talk with people" (Laura) so "I just left university completely" (Jessica). As Emma explained:

> It was like life was turned on its head. The whole way of learning at university is so different to how you learn at school. At school, you're stepped through every process along the way… the teacher guides you through everything. And you hit uni and you're on your own.

For many, "it was not only the transition in learning environment, but it was also the transition to living independently and having to self-manage so many aspects of my life" (Emma). Several students "felt totally unprepared to move away from home" (Hannah), including moving interstate, without "a lot of support from family" (Jamie) or "my group of friends I had grown to know very well" (Jennifer).

Subtheme 2.2: "A lot of unwritten rules to university" Autistic students found that there were "*a lot of unwritten rules to university*" (Jamie; subtheme 2.2). These include "expectations from lecturers and tutors" (Emma), "how to do tut[orials] and lectures… or even turn up for exams" (Blake), and how to manage "group projects and a lot of different types of classes" (Jamie). Many participants also struggled with university websites and online portals, which "is so confusing, it always looks different" (Casey). One participant even "had to pay out of my own pocket for somebody who had recently finished their own study using the Moodle platform, who was able to spend a couple of hours with me and take me through" (Emma).

Subtheme 2.3: "Like everything with disability inclusion, it added work". While most students interviewed appreciated the disability support services available, they nevertheless felt that "*like everything with disability inclusion, it added work*" (Jamie; subtheme 2.3). This is particularly relevant for interviewees diagnosed as autistic before or during university, as their diagnosis made them eligible for formal disability support services. Many students found it "really hard to know what [accommodations] to ask for" (Riley) or "what adjustments were considered to be reasonable" (Erica). The process of accessing support services was also inaccessible, often involving "a million forms that you need to fill out. It's hobbling… because it takes so much energy to push forward, and usually the people who are needing the help don't have the energy to spare" (Blake). Oftentimes autistic students reported not only being asked to provide diagnostic documents which felt like "a lot of disclosing of personal information" (Rachel), but also, bizarrely, a "GP [General Practitioner's] certificate" (Asha, Riley, and Ryan), as Ryan explained:

> I only requested two weeks [extension], but the admin still required some sort of documentary evidence. They wanted me to get a doctor's certificate, despite the fact that I wasn't sick. It was a personal family issue—why should I go speak to a GP about it? It was like there was an expectation that I would be lying… Fancy having a system that requires documentation. Life is complex, things happen that leave no paperwork. If I'm lying to admin, what would stop me from lying to a GP?

Theme 3: Fostering an Enabling Environment

Subtheme 3.1: "Induction into university life". So, how can universities better support autistic students? Many interviewees viewed universities to be in a good position to foster an enabling environment for everyone because "if that's something that's done at university, then that's something that's going to follow through with graduates and to the workforce" (Clare). Several students thought that an "*induction into university life*" (Emma; subtheme 3.1) would have been valuable because "knowing the right people and knowing the systems and stuff, that's very integral to me staying at uni" (Sophie). There should be a "transition process where all of the ins and outs and all of that unwritten, that hidden curriculum stuff, was explained" (Emma). One participant suggested having "some kind of mentor in a higher year who could guide me through or walk me through step-by-step what the main goals of the assignments and units were" (Jennifer) and "someone to show me around initially would've been good [for the] wayfinding stuff in the university" (Jennifer). Another proposed having "more open days where it wasn't the full open day, for less people"

(Jessica). These strategies were especially important for autistic students because "sometimes the biggest step is getting to know the people and the uni, and feeling comfortable in your environment, not actually your capability of doing the study" (Jessica).

Subtheme 3.2: "Make this space inclusive for everyone". Several participants felt that university settings should be designed to "*make this space inclusive for everyone*" (Hannah; subtheme 3.2) but "a lot of the time it is an afterthought" (Hannah). They discovered that "quiet nooks and crannies" (Ryan) were "neurodivergent-friendly social spaces" (Hannah) and were "really good for concentrating because you just had no external input" (Riley). One participant's university library had "lowered lights" (Susan), which enabled them to be in a study environment where "my brain and my body knew this is learning time" (Susan). Particularly for examinations, many students found "small rooms" (Riley) that were "well-ventilated" (Hannah) with "natural light" (Sophie) to be helpful.

Subtheme 3.3: "Providing information in different formats". In terms of pedagogy and structures, our interviewees wanted to see lecturers "*providing information in different formats*" (Jamie; subtheme 3.3) because "everyone learns [in] different ways" (Jamie). Many students have been through universities during the COVID-19 global pandemic which saw universities taking unprecedented measures to ensure student access—and retention—such as providing online access to lectures and tutorials. For many autistic students, "if it wasn't because of COVID, I wouldn't be able to do university" (Blake) because "having it online lets me pause the lecture and rewind and understand what they were saying" (Blake). It is "much easier to be in my own safe home environment" (Susan) and study "in my time, take as many breaks as I needed" (Laura). Having online options allowed some students to reduce the stress of commuting, leaving them with more energy for their studies. As Susan put it, "I had all my reserves, I hadn't spent anything, everything I had I could use for the study." For Blake, online options removed "barriers for people not being able to get to class." Furthermore, many participants preferred "visually presented material" (Blake) and were "much better at reading" (Sam) so learning would have been easier if they had "written text of the lecturer's material" (Jennifer), "auto generated captions for online lectures" (Blake), and "transcripts" (Jamie). Jamie suggested that if these accessibility options were "available for everybody, it would make things a lot easier."

Subtheme 3.4: "Normalising alternative forms of communication and assessment". Our participants also felt that "*normalising alternative forms of communication and assessment*" (Clare; subtheme 3.4) was important because "we see the world differently, we produce differently, so having the option to present our work differently would be wonderful" (Asha). Several participants reported feeling "stressed out if we had to do group assignments and make oral presentations" (Clare). Some would rather be "allowed to choose my group members" (Sophie), whereas others "really wish the teacher would just assign" (Jamie). Many students felt that "lecturers are not very flexible in general.

Systems aren't very flexible" (Sam). Nevertheless, some students were able to negotiate "extra writing time and flexible deadlines" (Sophie), "priority timetable preferencing" (Sophie), flexible marking rubric for oral presentation that does not "penalise for intonation and eye contact" (Sophie), and early access to "the entire semester's reading, course notes at the beginning of the semester" (Susan). In addition, acknowledging communication preferences was important to students. For instance, some students appreciated being asked about their communication preferences: "would you like us to text you, email you or are you comfortable with having a meeting" (Susan). One student was unable to access support services due to limited communication options as follows:

> I'm struggling with the disability support services. To get on their books, I have to apply and then do a phone interview. I struggle a lot with phone calls. They require a large build-up of mental and actual preparation (writing down things I intend to say etc.) and then a recovery period afterwards. I've now been at this uni for four trimesters, and I still haven't been able to face dealing with that phone call. (Ryan)

Subtheme 3.5: "It was okay to ask for help". Most of all, autistic students wanted to feel that "*it was okay to ask for help*" (Hannah; subtheme 3.5). Many participants were not "aware of access and inclusion which is the disability service, and the idea that I could get help like extensions" (Julia) because universities "didn't talk about it anywhere near enough. There is this unspoken perception that you just don't [access services]" (Hannah). Some students emphasized the importance of "educat[ing] and explain[ing] to people that deadlines are flexible and negotiable" (Julia) and to help students "gain confidence in asking for help" (Erica). One student shared a positive experience: "I had a tutor tell me that more than half the people in psych had an EAP[1] and she herself had an EAP and that normalised it for me and made me feel like it was okay to ask for help" (Hannah).

Theme 4: Building a Sense of Belonging

From our autistic students' perspectives, universities need to build a sense of belonging at universities for all students, through investing in a "massive cultural shift" (Asha) and "accepting and encouraging people from all walks of life to come and study" (Rachel). One participant had a positive experience at a university as follows:

> It was built into the ethos and the spirit of the school that there are lots of different people with lots of different lives and lots of different reasons and lots of different challenges. And so, it was just the done thing to be understanding. (Rachel)

Subtheme 4.1: "Meaningful personal connections and relationships". "*Meaningful personal connections and relationships*" (Asha; subtheme 4.1) at universities were extremely important to autistic students. Many students struggled with feeling "really lonely" (Jamie), "misunderstood and isolated" (Emma), and "so, so homesick" (Casey).

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[1]Education access plan.

One participant explained that "there was a sense of isolation that had always been there, but I think became more intense through university because there was the lack of [social] structure" (Asha). Many students eventually found other "neurodivergent people" (Sophie) who were "more neurologically similar [and] we got each other's humour and general sense of dread" (Blake). These connections afforded our participants "the freedom to just be" (Asha) where "there's deep acceptance and lack of judgement... [and] no pressure to meet these unspoken needs" (Asha). Friendships with other neurodivergent students were "life affirming" (Casey), "easy" (Erica), and "much more relatable" (Avery). Some participants suggested a "support group run by the disabilities department" (Taylor) because it provides "a ready-made social group" (Ryan). Jamie explained as follows:

> I could have connected with some other people who were having difficulties for similar reasons. Because I think that even if I hadn't been able to make friends in my class, if I had at least been able to make some friends on campus, it would have made it easier. It just felt like spending, say, eight hours without connecting with anybody and being in an unfamiliar place that I didn't like, that was overwhelming... it just felt too much.

Subtheme 4.2: "Seeing the value of who we are". Many autistic students also wished that universities can be open to "*seeing the value of who we are*" (Emma; subtheme 4.2). While it is important to create "peer groups" (Sophie) amongst autistic and otherwise neurodivergent students, it is equally crucial to extend such "psychological safety" (Asha) to the broader university settings where "you have to be in an environment for most of the time" (Jamie). Many autistic students just wanted to be "taken at face value" (Rachel) and be taken "for who I am" (Jessica). Beyond being "accepted for yourself" (Rachel), some students felt seen and valued when they had "autistic tutors" (Emma), were invited to "guest lecture on neurodiversity" (Asha), and were told that their "insight into autism is refreshing" (Jessica).

Subtheme 4.3: University staff took on "individual responsibility". While many autistic students would like to see "more people being trained in how to deal with people who might be neurodiver[gent]" (Taylor), students benefited most when *university staff took on "individual responsibility"* (Casey; subtheme 4.3) to support them. Some of the most fulfilling experiences came from lecturers who were "really proactive and reaching out to me and making sure those needs were being met rather than just [letting me] sink or swim" (Riley). Others were "willing to take time out to explain things to me" (Ryan) and "willing to go away and do a bit of [work to] understand how to support them" (Taylor). Asha described the sort of support she received from her PhD supervisor as follows:

> With [my PhD supervisor], I was totally transparent, totally unmasked. She got the way I worked. And her way of working complemented mine. There were times when I was nonverbal, when I could be with her, which has happened with maybe just a handful of people. So that degree of comfort knowing that it's not going to come and bite me in the backside later. Where my work doesn't get dismissed. Where I'm

accepted fully and valued. It's really, really precious when it does happen.

Discussion

This study drew on the social[30] and human rights[31] models of disability and extended existing research by shifting the focus from autistic people's strengths and weaknesses to the contextual factors influencing their university experiences. Akin to previous research,[4,6,8,17] participants described significant challenges navigating the university environment. Their entry to university was initially marred by a history of negative life events,[38–40] including persistent bullying and ostracism,[24] and the added stress of delayed or misdiagnosis.[41,42] These challenges were further compounded by a lack of person–environment fit our participants reported encountering at university, including sensory environments that were largely inhospitable to supporting autistic students' learning,[3,4,20] as well as limited understanding from university staff and peers about how autistic people learn and process information differently.[16] As a result, autistic participants often felt like they had to work much harder than their nonautistic peers to compensate for the lack of appropriate support and accommodation[43]—which ultimately had a negative impact on their self-worth and sense of belonging.[4]

Many challenges, such as understanding university cultures and systems, are often experienced by students, regardless of neurodivergence.[44,45] According to Lizzio's "five senses" model,[46] successful transition entails developing five affective components—sense of capability, connectedness, purpose, resourcefulness, and academic culture. The experience of developing these senses is not straightforward—for any student.[44,45] But it can be especially challenging for marginalized students, including first-generation,[47] international,[48] culturally and linguistically diverse,[49] and disabled students.[50,51] Autistic students, in particular, are disadvantaged by having to learn the unwritten rules of university—also known as the hidden curriculum—which are usually socially mediated.[16] Autistic students' different social preferences coupled with unconducive environments may therefore exclude them from accessing this information.

These challenges were compounded by the difficulties our participants faced when accessing formal support services. Some barriers were practical, such as the administrative burden of navigating demanding tasks like completing numerous forms and providing extensive "evidence" of their needs.[7] Other barriers stemmed from the rigid bureaucratic nature of the process, including the requirement for a doctor's certificate, regardless of the nature of the academic disruption. In addition, some participants were unaware of support services[1,3]—the lack of visibility and encouragement to seek support may perpetuate the stigma that seeking assistance is discouraged or seen as an inconvenience to others.[1,3,7,52] Overall, these experiences are similar to those of disabled people navigating the benefit system, which is often described as onerous, inaccessible, and dehumanizing.[53,54] Consequently, with a lack of support, many interviewees resorted to a time-consuming "trial-and-error" approach to learning about the system.[55] Many attempted university multiple times before understanding how it works, investing excessive time and effort to level the

playing field or develop their own strategies to manage these demands.

Notwithstanding these often-considerable challenges, our participants agreed that universities could be places where autistic students can thrive. Universities play a crucial role in society by serving as places for education, research, and social change.[56,57] They not only contribute to the development of a skilled workforce but also engage in knowledge generation and transfer that addresses societal needs and challenges.[56,57] Universities should, therefore, take seriously the need to foster inclusive and enabling environments for all students, especially marginalized students. Encouragingly, there have been positive attempts to include autistic students in some universities around the world, especially in supporting university transitions[58–60]—an issue emphasized by our participants. University transition programs seek to provide supports for students to adjust to university life, including academic, social, and daily living.[51,61] Consistent with previous studies,[13,61] our participants felt strongly about university transitions being critical to their retention.

Our participants stressed that efforts to make university environments more inclusive must extend beyond the initial transition. They called for universities to create inclusive physical spaces and adopt flexible pedagogical and communication strategies. The physical environments of universities were identified as problematic, often being sensorially overwhelming and uncomfortable,[20] which discouraged many participants from attending in person. This not only deprived them of important socially mediated information but also hindered opportunities for meaningful connection. To address these sensory challenges, our participants recommended improving built environments, such as replacing harsh fluorescent lighting, expanding the availability of aids like closed captioning, and creating sensory-friendly spaces where students could find relief from overstimulation.

In addition, offering flexible pedagogical and communication options as standard practice is essential. For instance, providing lecture recordings, remote attendance from home or smaller on-campus classrooms, and materials in multiple formats (e.g., transcripts and audiovisual recordings) can help some autistic students to learn in environments where they can better manage sensory inputs. However, as previous studies caution,[21,62] online access is not a panacea—if poorly designed, it can create additional barriers. Equally important are flexible communication options, which send the message that no single mode of communication is superior.[63,64] These flexible options can be perceived as *microaffirmations* that different ways of learning and communicating are recognized, valued, and normalized in universities[65,66]; thus providing a powerful counterbalance to the microaggressions autistic students often experience.[7]

Autistic students ultimately want to feel welcomed, supported, respected, and safe at universities, where they can experience a true sense of belonging. Yet, many encounter a deep sense of "otherness" in these environments.[4,67] Belonging is a fundamental human need.[68] Research consistently shows that students who feel they belong in higher education demonstrate greater self-confidence,[69] improved well-being,[70] higher academic motivation and enjoyment,[71] better academic performance,[72] and are less likely to drop out[71] than those

who do not. This highlights the critical need to cultivate a genuine sense of belonging for autistic university students.

Meaningful connections are crucial to fostering belonging for our autistic participants. A common misconception is that autistic people do not desire friendships.[73] Far from disinterest, many participants expressed a deep need for social connections[74] but struggled to find inclusive social spaces accommodating their communication styles and needs.[18] With few opportunities for supportive interactions, many interviewees felt isolated, reinforcing the misconception that they preferred solitude. Creating frameworks that promote engagement, inclusion, and understanding is essential to improving the university experience for autistic students. Peer mentoring programs,[75] facilitated social events,[18] and sensory-friendly environments[20] can offer the necessary scaffolding to help autistic students form meaningful connections and feel valued within the university community. These efforts would ensure that autistic students have access to the same social opportunities as their neurotypical peers.

Equally important is ensuring that access and accommodations are meaningful for autistic students. Disabled disability scholar Aimi Hamraie emphasizes that "meaningful access is relational accountability... an *ongoing commitment* [emphasis added] to social and material transformation which requires holding space for redesigning our strategies for access."[76], p265 This means university disability support staff and lecturers must recognize that no single accommodation works for all autistic students. Effective support programs require ongoing relationships with autistic students to understand their evolving needs. Central to this is the collective responsibility of the university community to foster greater acceptance and inclusion. Our autistic participants spoke powerfully about the positive impact of active allyship—when individuals intentionally support autistic students. This contrasts with earlier findings that highlighted power imbalances between staff and autistic students,[7] demonstrating the profound effect of inclusive practices.[26]

Strengths and Limitations

Our study has two key strengths: a commitment to coproduction with autistic researchers, promoting inclusivity, and a theoretical grounding in social and human rights model of disability, highlighting environmental and societal barriers faced by autistic university students. We believe that these strengths enabled us to identify themes such as the impact of traumatic events, the normalization of support and accommodations, the valuing of neurodiversity, and the importance of allyship. These findings go beyond the existing literature, which has tended instead to locate autistic students' challenges with university life as primarily rooted within themselves, rather than within the broader university structures and systems.

There are, however, three limitations. First, our sample lacked diversity, with mostly White European students, no cisgender males, and limited socioeconomic data; therefore, not all autistic people will relate to the findings. Second, our analysis did not explore differences between groups, such as formally diagnosed versus self-identified autistic people or early- versus late-diagnosed, which future research should address. Third, we focused solely on autistic students, excluding teaching and disability support staff, whose perspectives warrant further study.

TABLE 2. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR UNIVERSITIES TO CREATE CONDITIONS ALLOWING AUTISTIC STUDENTS TO THRIVE

Recommendations

1. *Developing autism and neurodiversity training for staff and students*
   While studies have shown that trainings can improve autism understanding,[77,78] research also highlights an "attitude-behaviour gap," where staff with inclusive attitudes do not always adopt inclusive practices.[9] To bridge this gap, training should include opportunities for learners to identify practical ways to enhance accessibility and inclusivity for autistic students. Additional opportunities for ongoing reflections on challenges—and successes—with supporting neurodivergent students can be achieved through establishing a "Community of Practice."[79] Ideally, these trainings should be coproduced with autistic students (see Recommendation 10) to ensure they reflect lived experiences.[80]

2. *Providing sensory-friendly spaces*
   Sensory distress from environmental encounter every day is a common experience for many autistic people,[81–83] and often difficult for those without sensory sensitivities to fully understand. Universities should collaborate with autistic students to improve campus environments for accessibility (see Recommendation 10). Proactive strategies include creating sensory-friendly places of learning, blended learning modalities (e.g., online and face-to-face) so students can choose how much they are exposed to sensory environments perceived as hostile, allowing—and normalizing—personal adaptive (e.g., headphones, tinted glasses) and self-regulatory (e.g., stimming and movement breaks) strategies, offering sensory maps to highlight or caution specific areas, and organizing sensory-friendly events such as quiet Open Days, orientations, or Career Fairs.[84]

3. *Promoting support services*
   Help-seeking behaviors should be encouraged and actively promoted to reduce the stigma surrounding disability support services.[85,86] These services should be introduced during orientations and regularly highlighted by lecturers and tutors within classes.

4. *Developing transition programs*
   Nuske[87] has proposed 10 key recommendations for developing effective programs to support autistic students in their transition to university life. These include working with schools to better prepare autistic students for university life, connecting prospective autistic students with relevant disability services early to discuss tailored transition strategies, developing programs that are responsive to their evolving needs, and helping students build skills in help-seeking and disclosure.[51]

5. *Streamlining and demystifying university processes*
   In collaboration with autistic students (see Recommendation 10), review and streamline university processes to reduce administrative burden that disproportionately affects them. University administration and teaching staff should also reflect on and proactively clarify the hidden curriculum in their areas of work.

6. *Implementing flexible pedagogical and communication options*
   While there is no one-size-fits-all solution for supporting autistic students, university lecturers should offer as many equitable choices as possible in learning and assessment modes. Following the principles of Universal Design for Learning,[88] particularly Guideline 4: "Provide multiple means of representation", ensures that differences in how students perceive and comprehend information are accommodated. Making these options available to all students reduces the administrative burden of autistic students in submitting formal accommodation requests (see Recommendation 5) and normalizes cognitive or communicative differences (see Recommendation 7).

7. *Celebrating neurodiversity*
   The diverse ways in which autistic and otherwise neurodivergent students think, communicate, and engage should be celebrated as valuable contributions to the university culture. Embracing these differences can foster open discussions about neurodiversity, normalize neurodivergence, and help autistic students feel more valued within the university community. Visible signs of support might include displaying pride flags, showcasing the work of autistic scholars, and hosting events or workshops focused on neurodiversity.

8. *Adopting trauma-informed practice*
   As highlighted in this study, many autistic students have a history of negative life events, such as school bullying, that affect their university experience. Staff should be informed about the impact of trauma, recognize potential triggers, and improve their ability to support these students. Preliminary evidence shows that this approach fosters a psychologically safe, more inclusive university environment.[89]

9. *Investing on building relationships with autistic students*
   Given the importance of building meaningful connections and providing effective support, universities should invest in developing relationships with autistic students. This could involve expanding disability support services to assign a consistent point of contact or a "service navigator" throughout their time at university,[65,90] fostering ongoing relationships rather than dealing with different individuals. In addition, resources should be allocated to support peer mentoring programs, offering autistic students structured opportunities to connect with their peers.[75]

10. *Embracing participatory approaches*
    University administration and support services should leverage the practical insights of autistic students to develop effective support strategies. The "Students as Partners" initiative, which positions students as active collaborators in shaping university processes, is gaining traction in higher education worldwide.[91] Applying this approach to autistic students could be particularly empowering and lead to more inclusive responsive support.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, we developed 10 recommendations to guide universities in creating conditions for autistic students to thrive (Table 2). These include improving staff training, creating sensory-friendly spaces, and celebrating neurodiversity. While further research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of these recommendations, they should serve as a foundation for university administrators, who should continually work with the autistic student community to adapt them to each institution's unique culture. Furthermore, these recommendations have implications for national reforms or policy changes that prioritize inclusive practices across higher education.

Authorship Confirmation Statement

Conceptualization: D.W.T., M.R., T.H., and E.P.; Methodology: D.W.T., M.R., T.H., and E.P.; Formal analysis: D.W.T., M.R., L.H., T.H., and E.P.; Data curation: D.W.T. and M.R.; Writing—original draft: D.W.T.; Writing—review and editing: D.W.T., M.R., L.H., T.H., and E.P.; Supervision: D.W.T. and E.P.; Project administration: D.W.T. and M.R.; and Funding acquisition: D.W.T. and E.P.

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The authors have no competing interests of which they are aware.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary Data S1
Supplementary Data S2
Supplementary Table S1

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