

Sue Fletcher-Watson
and Natalie Jenkins

Enabling Autistic Students to Thrive at the University of Edinburgh

Who are we?



Outline for today

- Part One: Principles

- What we're not going to talk about...
- The problem and the solution
- Overcoming common issues
- Fundamentals for autistic thriving

- Part Two: Specifics

- Access to teaching
- Assessments
- Well-being and mental health
- PhD supervision
- Digital Learning

What we're talking about

clinical
definitions of
autism

theoretical
models

research
evidence

centering on
the individual

best practice
principles

lived
experience

The problem



- The autistic student experience is complicated
 - Major life transition
 - Under diagnosis
 - Co-occurring conditions and mental health
 - Masking or camouflaging
- Poor post-graduation employment stats
 - less likely to be in work 6 months after graduation than any other group of disabled students

The solution



- Reasonable Adjustments
 - changes that can benefit everyone
 - ongoing *process* not a one-off event
 - must be enforced and maintained
- Language & Attitudes
- Disclosing diagnosis
- The sensory environment
- The social environment
- Project management
- Communication styles
- Wellbeing & work-life balance
- Trouble-shooting

<https://uoe.sharepoint.com/sites/AutisticPeersAllies>

They don't seem to need adjustments...

- Don't judge an autistic student by their capacity to seem to cope
 - Effective and skillful **masking**
 - **Burnout** and collapse at the end of the day / term / etc.
- Adjustments are there for the bad days - if effective they appear less necessary
- **These are still NEEDS**, even if they're also WANTED by other folk
- What if you think you're being taken for a ride?
 - This is a great time to seek advice from an autistic colleague!



Who identifies reasonable adjustments?



- Not just you & not just them - it's an ongoing process
- If resources are an issue, **be honest** but also commit to finding that resource – it's the law!
- They are not trying to catch you out: open and honest communication will always help
- Sometimes they will know
- Sometimes they won't know:
 - Help autistic students connect with other autistic people
 - Connect with University services (but maintain a critical eye)
 - Social media has loads of ideas – prioritise autistic experiences
 - Checkout our sharepoint page!

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Fundamentals

- *Make adjustments in partnership with your student and enforce them*
- Not all autistic students will be diagnosed, or disclosed
- Many of your colleagues will be autistic too!
- Create an environment where all kinds of differences are respected and support is freely given

- Understanding >> awareness
- Autistic experiences >> your degree

**Time for
some
discussion**

Please post questions
in the chat

Access to teaching

- Lectures
 - Content in advance to allow for more processing time and less note-taking
 - Structured lectures
 - Highlights for key information
 - Limit content per slide
 - Keeping to time
 - Recorded lectures in case the theatre is unwelcoming
 - Low contrast, no flashy gifs
- Small group teaching
 - Check lighting, background noise, smells, seat texture
 - Space to sit apart
 - Time to process and respond
 - Post-it notes, whiteboards
 - Provide fidgets
 - Finger voting systems
 - Permission to leave

Assessment

○ Assessments

- Clear instructions
- Open office hours; invite queries
- If you can't say, explain why
- Exams: check for reasonable adjustments
- Extension pro formas

○ Feedback

- Clarity on timing
- Constructive feedback in plain language
- Critical insights even for high-scoring assignments
- Open office hours; invite queries

Q: why do you need an extension?

A: because otherwise my essay will be late

Wellbeing

- Conscious of the challenges
 - Navigating a new city
 - Finding their identity as a young adult
 - Challenging sensory environments
 - Meeting new people
 - Adopting new routines
- Common time for onset of new mental health problems
- Take the pressure off in the early days
- Pro-actively propose wellbeing strategies to all
- Be prepared
 - Information about Student Disability Service
 - Information about local GP; encourage all students to register
 - Information about mental health support

PhD supervision

- The relationship
 - Recognise differences in communication
 - Check your meeting space is comfortable and make adjustments
 - Provide fidgets
 - Don't require eye-contact
 - Separate check-ins for project and personal development
 - Be prepared to change your practice
- The project
 - Non-linear project planning?
 - Time management
 - Perfectionism
 - Providing the purpose / context for feedback
 - Explicit agreements about deadlines, timing

Digital and blended learning

- Might level the playing field somewhat?
- Delivering digital content
 - Low-contrast slides, avoid flashing gifs
 - Still share slides in advance
 - Think about your audio, lighting and clothing at home
- Video calls can be awful
 - Let people turn off their camera
 - Flag opportunity to interact via the chat or just take part in silence

Take home messages

- It's a conversation
- Reflective practice = best practice
- Believe your students and trust that they want to learn and succeed

Natalie.Jenkins@ed.ac.uk

@NatalieDJenkin1

Sue.Fletcher-Watson@ed.ac.uk

@SueReviews

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