Enabling Autistic Students to Thrive at the University of Edinburgh

Sue Fletcher-Watson and Natalie Jenkins
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!

https://uoe.sharepoint.com/sites/AutisticPeersAllies
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
Time for some discussion

Please post questions in the chat