

Submission to National Autism Strategy
Autism, social inclusion and academic success and Australian Universities

Authors of this submission: Dr. Stephen Edwards (contact), Mr. Liam Frost-Camilleri, Mr. Kieran Thorpe, Mr. Ben Debney, Dr. Ma Regina de Gracia, Professor Gerard Kennedy

Who we are: Academic researchers at Federation University Australia in the Institute of Health and Wellbeing and the Institute of Education, Arts and community.

Why are we making a submission:

- a) We reviewed the literature and found that there are significant barriers to social inclusion and academic success for students on the autism spectrum in Higher Education.
- b) We believe that the National Autism Strategy should address the significant challenges to social inclusion and academic success for neurodivergent students who are looking to transition in and out of Higher Education.
- c) Enhancing the experience of autistic students is critical but staff on the autism spectrum are a forgotten group within Higher Education institutions. Their needs are rarely articulated.
- d) Using an online survey, we asked past and present students and staff at a regional university about their experiences, and what they think would help inclusion and success for autistic students. We would like to share early data with the National Autism Strategy.
- e) We have some specific recommendations about how to enhance academic success and social inclusion in Higher Education.

How is our submission structured:

The submission is organised according to five key reasons for submission.

1. Summary of our review of the literature

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) [1] estimates 0.7% of the Australian population had Autism in 2018, a 25% increase from 2015. While identification rates have increased considerably amongst children and adolescents, rates drop off dramatically in adulthood, such that reliable estimates could not be produced over the age of 40.

Of the identified autistic sub-population, only 8.1% had a degree, compared to 16.1% of people with a disability and 31.2% of neurotypical adults. Similar proportions of adults on the spectrum participate in the workforce [1]. International consensus suggests that autism is under-identified in adults. Due in part to this, interventions to assist autistic adults with across life domains are lacking [8,15].

Australian universities have long had formal assistance strategies at an individual level for students with impairments, or who might be disabled in the learning environment. These strategies, however, rely on student disclosure and require a formal diagnosis the cost of which is prohibitive for many. Consequently, neurodivergence, including adults with autism, has been significantly under-identified and unnoticed in Higher Education.

Associated with this lack of visibility is the fact that knowledge and attitudes toward autism amongst neurotypical (NT) students and staff are significant barriers to social inclusion [2,6]. Under-identification, under-achievement, and social exclusion are compounded by a lack of knowledge and at times, attitudes amongst NT staff and students [14]. These aspects serve to impede the case for further research, or for university leadership to commit resources to the task.

Increasingly, active members of ND groups are advocating for a social rather than deficit-based model of their abilities. In an autism-inclusive world, individuals are accepted and supported based on their strengths and weaknesses, rather than being sorted into categories of 'normal' and 'disordered.' This more inclusive approach has broad implications in Higher Education, where strategies are needed not only to help individual students adapt but also to create an organisation (or community) capable of maximising opportunities for academic success.

Early signs of accepting the need for individual- as well as organisation-level strategies are emerging within Higher Education: Autistic staff are offering advice to fellow academics [9]; libraries are adapting for a range of abilities [12]; resources are being developed for students and Universities [7] collaboration is occurring between academics and specialist service providers [3]; some Universities have co-developed projects which address strategies at all levels [15] and; autistic researchers have collaborated with student disability units to produce and publish recommendations for ND-inclusive Universities [16]; The advocacy of autistic students and staff mirrors the increasing involvement of autistic individuals in academic research with an autism focus [10,11].

Legislated mandating 'reasonable adjustments' may be seen as an attempt to address the barriers neurodivergent students and staff face by invoking the 'medical model' of disability. That is to say, by treating neurodivergence as a disorder to be fixed, rather than a divergence to be adapted to. Under the medical model of disability, the neurodiverse student or member of staff is made the problem.

2. Importance of the National Autism Strategy addressing Higher Education

The Australian Government funds higher education and in relation to neurodivergent students, will require institutions to: "*provide targeted individual literacy, numeracy and other academic supports are required*" as specified in the Australian Government Consultation Paper on 'Support for students policy' requirements. In relation to the transition out of higher education, the Australian government also has responsibility for employment and training. Liaison with the state-funded secondary schools is essential for developing satisfactory transition to university programs.

3. The Neurodiversity, Inclusion and Success survey

3a) Development and recruitment

The Neurodiversity, Inclusion, and Success survey was co-developed with students, staff, and community stakeholders. Academic consultants with lived experience were engaged to provide advice on content, presentation, and accessibility. Past and present students and staff were recruited through physical and digital messaging on campus as well as through radio and print media.

3b) Early results

While most respondents did not report an autism diagnosis (319), a large minority either did report a diagnosis (80), self-identified as autistic without a formal diagnosis (57), or believed they might be autistic (71). The total of 128 from this latter group suggests that prevalence is far more widespread than diagnoses suggest. Forty-three respondents were also unsure if they had autistic traits, which is not many less than those who reported self-identification.

Out of the total responses received, 251 individuals indicated a possibility of being autistic. This number excludes those who stated they are 'definitely not autistic.' The undiagnosed individuals outnumbered those with a confirmed diagnosis by a factor of 3:1. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that only 80 out of 128 respondents, who either self-identified as autistic or believed they might be without an official diagnosis, reported having a diagnosis.

3c) What autistic students think would help academic success

Based on our survey of participants, the following interventions were rated by the sample for their perceived value in supporting academic success.

- Professional development for staff: 92%
- Customises transition to university for autistic students: 88%
- Skills training in self-advocacy with staff and peers: 82%
- Study skills training tailored for autistic students: 82%
- Peer mentoring program: 82%

The majority of participants highlight the importance of tailored interventions for academic success. A significant 92% highlight the need for professional staff development, suggesting that well-trained staff can greatly benefit student outcomes. Furthermore, custom transition programs to university and specific study skills training for autistic students received strong endorsements, with 88% and 82% respectively. Peer mentoring, with its direct academic support, also had a high approval rate of 82%.

4c) What autistic students think would help social inclusion.

Based on our survey of participants, the following interventions were rated by the sample for their perceived value in supporting social inclusion.

- Sensory room/quiet space/resource centre: 82%
- Skills training in self-advocacy with staff and peers: 82%
- Case management by student support staff: 77%
- Assistance in managing shutdowns/meltdowns: 75%
- Referral to external counselling: 72%
- Training in Building and Sustaining Peer Relationships: 68%
- Training in handling personal emotions, behaviours, and relationships: 65%

Social inclusion is vital for well-rounded student development. Over 80% of participants valued skills training for self-advocacy, indicating its significance in promoting better integration and communication in various settings. Sensory rooms or quiet spaces, crucial for catering to unique sensory needs, received 83% approval. Other important measures include case management, external counselling, and specialised training for relationship building and emotional management, all of which further underscore the importance of a holistic approach to student support.

5. Recommendations

States have responsibility for delivering primary and secondary schooling, some have autism plans (e.g., Victoria) but the Australian government has responsibility for tertiary education which includes TAFE (Technical and Further Education) and higher education.

Recent policy initiatives (see 2024 submission) increase the expectations on higher education institutions for facilitating the success and inclusion of neurodiverse students.

From our preliminary findings, it is recommended:

5a) National Education Training & Transition Initiative

Launch a comprehensive national initiative that combines professional development for educational staff with the creation of custom transition programs for autistic students entering tertiary institutions. This responds to the strong endorsements of 92% and 88% respectively from participants.

5b) Infrastructure & Environment Improvement

Provide federal grants to educational institutions, encouraging them to develop sensory-friendly spaces like sensory rooms and quiet spaces. This initiative supports the 82% of participants who see the value in such spaces for autistic students.

5c) Integrated Support & Wellbeing Services

Strengthen student support services across the board by promoting case management in educational institutions and fostering partnerships with existing mental health services for external counselling. These measures directly address the support needs voiced by 77% and 72% of participants.

5d) Skills Development & Awareness Campaign

Launch a comprehensive national initiative that combines professional development for educational staff with the creation of custom transition programs for autistic students entering tertiary institutions. This responds to the strong endorsements of 92% and 88% respectively from participants.

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