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Supporting autistic people at university

In this article we will explore different strategies for supporting autistic people at university or college. Please see our [Supporting autistic people into university](#) article for information and advice on choosing a university and preparing for the transition to university life.

Firstly, it should be noted that colleges and universities will not pass on any details or liaise with anyone except the student regarding their support, unless permission to share has been given by the student. This is for confidentiality and data protection (GDPR) reasons as the student is usually over the age of 18. As such, it is often a good idea to ask the student if they would like to give consent for at least one family member/carer to be able to share information about them, and to contact the university on their behalf.

Reasonable adjustments

Colleges and universities (like all education providers) have a legal duty under the [Equality Act 2010](#) (and the [Disability Discrimination Act 1995](#) in Northern Ireland) not to discriminate against potential, current or former students. It is unlawful for universities and colleges to discriminate against students with disabilities (which includes those on the autistic spectrum) by treating them less favourably.

The main way that Equality Act is applied is through the making of 'reasonable adjustments' so that students with disabilities are not put at a substantial disadvantage. The duty to make reasonable adjustments requires colleges and universities to take steps to ensure that disabled students can fully participate in all aspects of studying, including education and other benefits such as social activities and the use of student facilities and services. The education provider has the right not to make reasonable adjustments if it is seen to be:

- “not reasonable”
- too costly

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- too time consuming

If the education provider refuses to make an adjustment then they should detail the reasons why.

All reasonable adjustments should be made in a person-centred way rather than a “one size fits all” approach, and the student should be involved in the process.

Reasonable adjustments for autistic students can include (but are not limited to):

- an induction event prior to starting at the university
- additional time to get used to the campus or site
- a support worker or immediate access to a staff member if there are any concerns
- autism awareness training for staff
- alternative ways of completing group work
- materials available in literal language, including exam papers
- digital recorder for recording lectures, notes, etc.
- access to a quiet room.
- “quiet” or low-arousal accommodation if provided by the university
- alternative arrangements for students to be assessed instead of unseen exams and/or group work e.g. 1-1 presentations with the tutor
- lectures notes provided electronically prior to lectures
- extra-time for exams.

Students should check what adjustments and access arrangements will be made for them with the disability services team at the college or university as soon as possible. The student should ask the staff to provide a written list of the adjustments and access arrangements they are going to provide so the student can check these. Adjustments can be amended or changed as the course progresses.

Fresher’s week can be overwhelming for autistic students so the student could contact the Students’ Union and/or disability services about alternative activities. The Students’ Union will often have an elected student representative as a welfare or disability officer who can be a point of contact and support regarding fresher’ and also settling into the non-academic side of university.

Disabled Students’ Allowance (DSA)

Away from the adjustments that universities can make, another key source of support for students on the autistic spectrum is [Disabled Students Allowance \(DSA\)](#).

DSA is a grant which is paid for by the government to cover some of the additional costs that disabled students may have when completing higher education.

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The types of support DSA can finance include:

- provision of assistive computer programmes such as Text to Speech / Speech to Text Software and Mind Mapping Software.
- recording devices in order to take audio recordings of lectures and seminars.
- funding towards taxi journeys or support with travel
- note-taker
- non-medical support workers such as mentors or study skills tutors, to help develop a range of academic and non-academic skills
- [Brain in Hand](#)

It is a good idea to apply for DSA prior to the course beginning (around the same time that student loans/grants are applied for) as it can take a few weeks to get in place. However, students can also apply at any time during their course. It is available to both undergraduate and postgraduate students.

Applying for DSA

1. The student must complete [an application form](#) and submit it to [Student Finance England](#), [Student Finance Wales](#), [Student Finance NI](#), [Student Award Agency for Scotland](#) or [NHS Bursaries](#) (dependent on where you live); along with medical evidence of the disability for example a letter from the GP confirming an autism diagnosis. It is a good idea to get this done as soon as possible so that support can be in place without too much of a delay – ideally prior to the student starting the first year of their course.
2. Student Finance (SF) will write to the student confirming that they are eligible for DSA and invite them for a needs assessment. This can be booked online and can usually be done at or close to home, or at the university.
3. Attend the needs assessment. This is usually an informal meeting of around two hours in length - previous difficulties that the student has had and what types of support are available to them are discussed.
4. The Needs Assessor then sends off a report to SF who then decides whether to approve the support. If approved the student will get a letter in the post confirming all of the support that they are entitled to.
5. If the support includes aids such as laptop, printer and recorder, the student will have to order these. Instructions how to do this will be in the report, but it is not always obvious.

Inclusive practice

At present, there is a big push by the government for higher education settings such as universities to move towards inclusive practice. This means there shouldn't be a need for colleges and universities to make reasonable adjustments, as they are already in place as part of daily practice. These include:

- making key reading resources and lecture slides available online and in advance of classes
- assistive computer programmes installed on library computers
- the use of a variety of assessment methods (1-1 presentations, take-home exam papers, essays, multiple-choice exams)
- allowing the use of recording devices and laptops in lectures, seminars and exams as standard.

Universities and colleges are slowly moving towards this which should aid the support that autistic students have available to them.

Beyond university

The future and preparing for leaving university can be a source of anxiety and stress for autistic students. Here is some advice for both autistic students and their parents/carers, and higher education staff on the transition out of university.

Students/parents

- think about doing part-time paid employment or voluntary work when at university to gain experience of the workplace
- produce a general CV which can then be adapted for specific jobs
- explore potential areas of employment
- review and work on any independence skills that may be a barrier moving forward, for example travelling.
- look at forms of workplace support such as [Access to Work](#) funding, graduate schemes or supported placements (see Further Information below)
- think about contacting careers services such as the university careers team and external organisations such as the Job Centre.

Higher education staff

- rather than just focussing on the academic side of university, encourage autistic students to develop other skills which can lead to employment, and explore what support would enable this
- prompt students to engage with the university careers service
- meet with students early on in their final year in order to discuss the options available to them after university. It is a good idea to do this as soon as possible in the student's final year

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- support students to identify and add the transferable skills that the student has gained at university in job applications and CVs
- if students want to disclose their autism diagnosis to potential employers then support them to emphasise the benefits that being autistic brings to their employability.

Many autistic students also choose to go on to complete postgraduate (Masters/PhD) study and for some this is often the best choice. It is worth bearing in mind that further study is more intense and often with less support. Occasionally autistic students choose to go into postgraduate study due to the familiarity and security that the university setting provides. Whilst this may well be the correct choice for some, it is worth exploring the reasons for choosing post graduate study carefully to ensure it is right for the individual student.

It is important to carefully consider all options at the end of undergraduate study with regards to what the student wants to do next. The support as mentioned above can successfully aid students into their desired career.

Further information

[The National Autistic Society offers a support service for autistic students including mentoring and study skills, which can be funded by student finance](#)

[Evenbreak matches disabled job seekers with suitable employers](#)

[Disability Jobsite helps disabled people to find work by offering 'barrier-free' e-recruitment.](#)

[Disabled Workers is a registered charity that supports disabled people looking for work.](#) It lists the latest job opportunities and provides a space where you can showcase your skills online.