## Misperceptions and realities: listening to autistic students on their online Higher Education experience.

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## Abstract

This pilot study explores the autistic student experience of online post-secondary education. It investigates the needs and preferences for autistic students and whether stereotypical views about autism may negatively impact their higher education experience. Reviews of published research papers on the learning and social challenges faced by autistic students have identified an insufficient rigour that is often due to non-autistic researchers ignoring the value of authentic autistic voices. Data is collected from online surveys with data analysed quantitatively and qualitatively. The study participants are current autistic students at a distance higher education provider based in the UK. Data collection and analysis is conducted by an autistic researcher. The findings suggest that stereotypical views and misunderstandings about the realities for autistic students do impact negatively on their well-being. Although the analysed data is from the survey responses of a small participant group of 20 students with varying support needs, there is a strong indication of a shared challenges and comparable learning preferences. A preference for no group work and having printed course material available from the start of a module is consistent across the group. The findings identified that a new approach to future learning design and practice in post-compulsory education is required. Rather than preserving the personalised support model based on individual challenges, this study’s findings suggest that more general support focussed on identified common needs, is worth investigating. This may appear contrary to equal and fair inclusion practice, but support provision fails when based on a generic support model for disabled students. The identification of common needs justifies further investigation into the feasibility of developing support models that target general autistic student preferences alongside specific challenges.

Key words:  
autism, autistic experience, higher education, online learning, student voice, personalised support

## Lay summary

### Why is this an important issue?

The quality of the autistic student experience in post-secondary education is an important issue because it can affect the self-worth, well-being, and the prospect of future employment for autistic persons now and in the future. It is also important to explore the experience and impacts of neuro-typical attitudes to autism, and the effect that negative stereotypes have on the well-being and sense of inclusion in this context.

### What was the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this study is to explore the autistic student experience of online post-secondary education by involving current autistic students. The investigation also looks at the impact that studying in a system designed by and for neuro-typical persons can have on the potential learning and achievement of autistic students.

### What did the researchers do?

The researcher collected data through online surveys on how the students feel about being labelled by their neuro-typical peers. The survey also asked about the challenges and the advantages of studying online, and how this affected their ability to take part in activities. The students were also asked how they felt about taking part in the research and whether it was a positive or negative experience.

### What were the results of the study?

The autistic students felt that they performed better in an online environment than they might when studying in face-to-face environments, and that issues around choice and having control over their learning were important to them. They felt that the support offered did not always suit their particular needs and that the challenges of their autism were not always understood.

### What do these findings add to what was already known?

Existing research has shown that autistic students do not perform as well as their neuro-typical peers. The reason for this is that the majority, neuro-typical community hold the power to control the teaching and support systems. This study found that the difficulty for autistic students in created by current post-secondary education systems that do not match their specific needs and preferences. They felt that knowledge of autistic challenges and strengths are often based on stereotypes and this creates problems.

### What are potential weaknesses in the study?

The small number of participants (n= 20) and setting the study in one online UK university does not reflect a wide enough student sample.

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

This study provides evidence of what matters to autistic students and gives a strong indication of autistic challenges and strengths that are not understood in post-secondary education. The findings suggest that because of the lack of knowledge of autistic needs and preferences, the support systems are not relevant to autistic student needs. The findings have the potential to inform future research into the wider experience of autistic students, and to repeat it in other locations and other postsecondary education settings.