

University educators' understanding of autism and of reasonable adjustments for autistic university students

Charlotte Skinner

Bachelor of Occupational Therapy (Honours)

Supervisors - Prof Sandra Jones, Dr Chloe Gordon and A/Prof Annette Joosten

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BACKGROUND

The aim of this study was to explore university educators' understanding of autism, their experiences of applying reasonable adjustments for autistic students, and their attitudes towards implementing these adjustments.

Transition from secondary to post-secondary education is an important developmental period that is well known to cause substantial levels of stress and disruption for students.¹ When commencing university, students must quickly adapt to a more complex academic curriculum, take on increased responsibility and independence, and navigate the formation of new relationships while building their own identities.¹

For autistic students, transitioning into tertiary education can be a period of heightened risk, as they face a variety of additional challenges that are not experienced by the other students in their cohort.²

In Australia, reasonable adjustments are commonly addressed in an "Education Inclusion Plan" (EIP), which is individually designed for each student.³ Academic staff are required to implement the adjustments declared in a student's EIP and therefore play an important role in supporting autistic students in their learning. However, there is currently little research from the perspectives of university educators on their understanding of autism and how to apply reasonable adjustments.



Participants in this study were 12 university educators from the Australian Catholic University.

1. Anderson & Butt, 2017

2. White et al., 2016

3. Victorian Department of Education and Training, 2020

FINDINGS

The findings suggested that university educators have the desire to support autistic students but are limited by knowledge and systemic barriers.

Four overarching themes were developed from the data:

- 1. Understanding autism and reasonable adjustments**
Educators need training to support their implementation of reasonable adjustments.
- 2. Knowing the student**
Educators do not always have access to relevant student information; autistic students are all different and therefore need individualised supports.
- 3. System barriers: Structure and interaction**
The challenges of implementing adjustments within strict course designs, and the need for educators to collaborate with other stakeholders.
- 4. System barriers: Inclusion and exclusion**
Aspects of the university environment that limit or prevent inclusion for autistic students.

To improve university education for autistic students, universities need to increase autism awareness, provide educators with professional development opportunities and tailor education inclusions plans to the individual student.

"I think that a challenge with the EIP is that it just gives everyone this extra 10 minutes for an exam, or an extension, without really thinking through why they need this or if there are other ways of looking at it."

Participant