

Understanding the needs of autistic university students

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BACKGROUND

The aim of this project is to identify from the perspective of Australian autistic students what available adjustments are useful, and which are unhelpful, as well as supports which could be helpful but are not available.

Current available reasonable adjustments for academic activities in universities do not sufficiently support the challenges and individual needs of autistic students.¹

Autistic students can have difficulties with communication skills, styles of communication, self-regulation, self-advocacy and sensory overload at university.² There is a lack of literature which listens to the autistic student's voice about their experiences and challenges, yet this is a key element of ensuring reasonable adjustments are fair.³

Traditional reasonable adjustments such as time extensions and breaks during class are offered to both autistic and non-autistic students which assumes the supports will suit most people.⁴ However, they do not account for the spectrum of unique difficulties autistic students can experience.⁵

There is increased reporting by current and past autistic students about the need for individualised reasonable adjustments.⁶ As more autistic students enrol in universities there is a need to identify from the perspective of Australian autistic students what available adjustments are useful, and which are unhelpful, as well as supports which could be helpful but are not available.

FINDINGS

Both similarities and differences have been reported as to what is considered a helpful or unhelpful adjustment, highlighting the varying nature of support needs autistic people have.

- Some students reported alternative assessments such as essays instead of oral presentations, completing exams in a separate room and time extensions as helpful adjustments. In contrast, other students had assessment alternatives refused on occasion, despite being written into their IEP (Individual Education Plan).
- The process of implementing reasonable adjustments has been highlighted as a major barrier to accessing adjustments, rather than the adjustment itself being unhelpful.
- The opportunities to discuss rubrics and clarify key terms one-on-one and resubmit work when rubrics are misunderstood have been reported as helpful adjustments which aren't available or easily obtainable.
- Some students identified the transition into the university environment as supportive. They had their supports set up prior to commencing studies, undertook a campus tour and had the opportunity to meet teaching staff prior to classes starting which eased their anxiety.

Students report that lecturers interpret reasonable adjustments in IEP's with great variation. This results in an increased need for self-advocacy from students already experiencing mental overload and on occasion, withdrawal from units when reasonable adjustments are refused by teaching staff.

1. Gelbar et al., 2014; Knott & Taylor, 2014; Cai & Richdale, 2016

2. White et al., 2016; Van Hees et al., 2015

3. Disability Standards for Education, 2005

4. Accardo et al., 2019

5. Cai & Richdale, 2016

6. Toor et al., 2016; Van Hees et al., 2015; Accardo et al., 2019