

An unwritten tale is something missed

Autism and adventure in Higher Education

Over a three year period I was given the pleasure of supporting and learning from an inspirational, funny, clever and kind individual who this short article is based upon. As part of my Masters in Education I wanted to capture the experiences, aspirations and daily challenges faced in Higher Education (HE) by a student diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). A case study research design was chosen to capture the uniquely individual characteristics of the student with ASD. The findings are intended to offer support and guidance to those who support students with ASD in an Adventure HE'

ASD refers to a spectrum of challenges, with no one behaviour that is 'autistic'. This spectrum can see some individuals function with relative ease in education whilst



others face a magnitude of difficulties every moment of the day. Due to the vast spectrum of needs, supporting an ASD student through any part of their educational journey can be a challenge. Having had only a personal interest previously with SEND students, I quickly found myself becoming a driving force behind the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) policy on reasonable measures. Arguably, I had embarked upon the toughest educational challenge I had faced to date.

Challenge 1

Some students with ASD may have low levels of independence in addition to high levels of social isolation. In line with QAA policy my role was to support educational provision whilst promoting levels of independence (through self-directed study) and reduce levels of social isolation.

Challenge 2

Transitional periods. Unlike many other students this isn't limited to a single occurrence in the initial couple of months of University. Instead, transitional periods may be an ongoing battle that occurs at the beginning and end of each semester, plus any other changes to routine due exams and longer holiday periods.

Challenge 3

Despite the ever-increasing number of adults diagnosed with ASD the process of facilitating and support their learning remains a complex and poorly understood area of education.

Always unpredictable, time, is something memorable

With educational institutions being stressful and anxiety-provoking places, I learnt that time, patience, consistency and understanding were key in bridging the gap to independent learning in HE. Although sometimes quiet, unnerved and uncommunicative, a lot of effort and resilience was given to every aspect of the University journey for individuals with ASD. As a department we worked hard to ensure academic content was not reduced but taught in manageable chunks taking into account any difficult times due to transitional periods: sometimes allowing for more time meant individuals could independently resolve any challenges faced.

Linking with student support services and listening to individual aspirations is imperative to making sure provision offered is appropriate to meet the need of, firstly the student and secondly, the degree. Limitations in being able to access

the degree may not be down to the individual's academic ability, but instead due to challenges such as access, 24/7 care arrangement, travel and communication. Had the institute not followed the QAA guidelines of reasonable measures with commitment and determination, this student would have not been able to access residential experiences and academic achievements would have been limited. Whilst it is important to tailor opportunities it is necessary to find a balance between providing support when needed and restricting individual independence.

Practical considerations such as practice visits to unfamiliar places, internet research and comprehensive discussions on what to expect along with strict timetabling, familiar patterns and routines built into residential experiences enabled for a smoother transition from university campus to residential experience. Further minor, but equally important, practical considerations involved not wearing the colour red due to synaesthesia discomfort, avoiding busy noisy places (though sometimes wearing ear defenders helped to minimise anxiety).



Sometimes wearing ear defenders helped to minimise anxiety in noisy places.



Learn more about ASD and sensory overload by reading these stories on the National Autistic Society site:
www.autism.org.uk/get-involved/tmi/stories/sensory.aspx#

An understanding towards individuals, something manageable

This section aims to give an ASD student their voice whilst offering recommendations for good practice in the future.

"I aspire to be myself!"

““AUTISTIC in capital letters, which is some sort of code for impending doom. We'll speak very loud and slow our voices down, so I can't understand a word we are saying”

“I know when people are nervous around me and it always freaks me out”

Assumptions can be damaging, and inclusion can go too far. Be considerate to the fact that you are there to help bridge the gap between accessing the activities through making appropriate adaptations, but we must be careful to not dumb down and decrease independence.

““I would like to raise awareness of autism and help people to understand that anything is possible, and autism is not a barrier it's just people attitudes and their willingness to accept. Autism doesn't mean I can't achieve the things I want to and it doesn't make my achievement (which may be small compared to others) any less, I may just take a different path and that's ok.”

Through appropriate target setting and high standards which we as facilitators in the outdoors would all strive for our students to achieve, the barriers students with ASD face can be reduced.

Although independently instructing a climbing session may not currently be achievable, this does not mean that smaller but as significant targets cannot be achieved in a similar session, i.e. climbing in an unfamiliar venue with a new partner.

““I like being by myself, but I think this is quite a big misunderstanding when it comes to Autism, I think I do get lonely.”

A misconception due to communication difficulties is that students with ASD want to be left alone. In this case the student took comfort from being around familiar people.

““I need time for my brain and thoughts to catch up and I don't work in real time. Hence why sometimes I take a while to answer or misunderstand because everything moves way too fast”

These periods of silence and what some people might interpret as disconnection from reality is a way of information processing at a more manageable pace. These periods of time should be embraced, and time given to enable that individual to process thoughts.

““Order and routine helps me navigate the world and give me something to follow which makes up for the fact that I find the world overwhelming confusing and very scary”

During times of change giving our students a routine and timetable can give clear start and finish points. Imagine never knowing when a task has begun or stops, or when you will get a break or time to think, nor knowing when the next will start again. It can be overwhelming and relentless!

Overall, this has been an incredible learning experience with my perceptions of autism evolving day by day. In the beginning I was naive to the complexity and emotional attachment that comes with supporting an individual in an adventure educational setting.

Moving forward my approach would differ regarding the 'process' to which support is offered, rather than changing the activities / residential offered: in recognition that there is a fine line to be walked between providing support and limiting independence.

In summary, the vast amount of both hard and soft skills gained through residential experiences cannot be overlooked when supporting ASD in the outdoors, nor should it be watered down.

The benefits of outdoor learning exposure outweighs most of the challenges faced by ASD participants, as well as the challenges faced by practitioners offering such activities to those with ASD. ■



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Kirsty Lawie is Senior Lecture at the University of Chichester. Passionate about inclusive outdoor education programmes and the benefits of learning through the outdoors. I have a deep rooted personal desire to be outdoors - Life is outside.



Go to 'Scanning the horizon' on page 4 to find a resource recommendation related to ASD by the author Kirsty Lawie.

“Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid”

Albert Einstein