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Towards 'A Level Playing Field': A Participatory Study of Autistic University Students' Experiences with Academic Support in England

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ABSTRACT

It is a university's responsibility to ensure their autistic students are supported academically. While current research gives us an indication of how universities provide this support, it reveals very little about the experiences that autistic students themselves have with such support. In this research, we took a participatory approach, via a collaboration between autistic and non-autistic staff and students, to examine the experiences that autistic students have with their academic support. Twenty-eight autistic students from across England completed an online survey, and content analysis of this data found that mentoring and changes to exam arrangements were the two most commonly reported supports. Nine autistic students from one English university then took part in the semi-structured interviews and, through reflexive thematic analysis of the data, three themes were generated. First, that students appreciate their academic supports; second that support is very dependent on staff involvement; and third that responsibility for academic support falls on the student. These findings demonstrate the academic supports that autistic students consider effective, as well as where they feel barriers still exist that prevents them from fully accessing their support.

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Academic; autism; higher education; participatory research; support

Introduction

Autism is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition diagnosed on the basis of challenges with social communication and interaction, alongside the presence of restricted and repetitive behaviours, interests and activities (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Internationally, the number of autistic[1] students attending university has grown dramatically in the last five years (Bakker, Krabbendam, Bhulai, & Begeer, 2019; Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2020; Van Hees, Moyson, & Roeyers, 2015). However, research into the experiences that autistic students have at university indicates that in both social and academic domains, their experiences are overwhelmingly negative (Bell et al., 2019; Cage & Howes, 2020). In addition,

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academic outcomes for autistic students are significantly worse than for other graduates (VanBergeijk, Klin, & Volkmar, 2008). As such, there is a strong case to be made that universities are not currently providing enough academic support for their autistic students (Fabri, Fenton, Andrews, & Beaton, 2020).

The purpose of academic support is to ‘counteract the inequality that disabled people may experience’ while studying at university (Riddell & Weedon, 2006, p. 58). Typically, academic support includes alternative arrangements for teaching and assessment, such as extra-time in exams or alternative submission dates for assignments; as well as specialist equipment and accessibility to premises (Kendall, 2018). Given the range of strengths and challenges associated with autism, there is no one distinct reason why autistic students might need academic support. However, literature surrounding this topic points us towards some of the areas where they are likely to face challenges. For instance, in a European-wide study that surveyed 280 autistic students about their academic experience at university, students reported facing challenges with group work, exams, difficulty adjusting to sudden changes to timetable arrangements and noisy lectures or seminars (Fabri & Andrews, 2016).

A recent systematic review conducted by Davis, Watts, and López (2021) provided insights into the academic supports that autistic students find useful, including professional services (e.g. mentors), alternative exam arrangements and coursework modification. Yet what is much less clear is the experiences they are having with them, and which are most effective. Arguably, this is the result of two factors. Firstly, studies have predominately combined research about autistic students’ experiences of support with other research about their university experiences. And secondly, most of the studies in the review were conducted through quantitative or qualitative surveys, rather than interviews. As such, existing research has been unable to provide sufficient detail and nuance about the experiences of student support. It is also important to note that very little research in this area has taken a participatory approach (see Hotez et al., 2018; Cage & Howes, 2020 for rare examples of participatory research on this topic). As such, the power over the research process has tended to be held by researchers (Nelson & Wright, 1995), which in turn has further prevented us from understanding the experiences that autistic students have with academic support, most notably, how much say they have in the process of accessing and using support.

With all this in mind, the aim of the current study was to examine the experiences that autistic students have with academic support from a participatory standpoint. In doing so, the goal was to offer possible ways in which universities can further support their autistic students. The following research questions were addressed: (1) What are the experiences that autistic students at English universities have with their academic supports? (2) What academic supports do autistic students at English universities find effective? (3) How much say do autistic students at English universities have about their academic support?

Methods

Design

A collaborative community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach (Nicolaidis et al., 2019) was adopted, meaning that autistic people were involved throughout the project, making decisions about aspects such as the interview schedule design, recruitment process and presentation of findings. Throughout the research process, the Academic Autism Spectrum Partnership and Research Group's (AASPIRE) best practice guidelines for the successful inclusion of autistic adults as co-researchers (Nicolaidis et al., 2019) were followed.

A mixed-method approach was selected, consisting of two elements. First, an online survey was used to collect quantitative and qualitative data to provide a broad overview of the experiences that autistic students at English universities have with their academic support. Second, semi-structured interviews were used to collect the in-depth experiences that students from one English university, University College London (UCL), had with academic support. At UCL, academic support is provided through a Summary of Reasonable Adjustment (SoRA). A student works with the Student Support and Wellbeing Team and their Department's Disability Officer to draw up their SoRA, which should take account of the student's needs and the curriculum on their specific programme of study. Although academic support may have different names at different institutions, this process is largely the same across all western universities. The decision to recruit from one university was made for pragmatic reasons.

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants for the online survey and interviews (Table 1). Recruitment stopped when it was deemed that there was enough data to tell a rich story, but not so much that it prevented thorough and complex engagement in the time available (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005). While both sample sizes are relatively small (online survey = 28 participants, interviews = 9 participants) both are also considered appropriate by Braun and Clarke (2013) based on chosen methods of data analysis.

Table 1. Demographic information of participants.

Characteristics	Online survey sample (%)	Interview sample (%)
Age (Years)		
Mean	33 (SD = 12.3)	26 (SD = 9.9)
Range	18-65	19-33
Gender Identity		
Man	8 (29%)	4 (44%)
Woman	17 (61%)	4 (44%)
Non-binary	2 (7%)	0
Transgender	1 (4%)	1 (11%)
Ethnic Identity		
White	27 (96%)	7 (78%)
Asian or Asian British	1 (4%)	1 (11%)
Black or Black British	0	1 (11%)
Programme of Study		
Undergraduate	10 (36%)	6 (67%)
Postgraduate (Taught)	10 (36%)	3 (33%)
Postgraduate (Research)	8 (29%)	0
Mode of Study		
Full Time	16 (57%)	5 (56%)
Part Time	12 (44%)	3 (33%)
Flexible	0	1 (11%)
Total number of participants	n=28	n=9

Materials

The online survey and the interview schedule were both created by the first author and then extensively reviewed and adapted by the other team members, with particular care taken to ensure that the topics addressed were relevant and approached in an autism-friendly manner.

Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained via the Department of Psychology and Human Development at UCL Institute of Education. An online format was selected for the survey used in this research. The survey was self-administered and completed anonymously. Participants had the opportunity to skip questions they were not comfortable answering.

All interviews were conducted online in the preferred format of the participant, and interview questions were provided in advance. After each interview, the recording was transcribed verbatim with the participant's name being removed. Immediately after each transcription, the original recording was deleted.

Data Analysis

Qualitative content analysis was used to analyse the data collected from the online survey (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). The data was coded by the first author. A sample of the data (20%) and the codes associated with this was then shared with the second author. There was 80% agreement on 100% of the codes, with the second author adding an additional code. This level of agreement is considered acceptable by Miles and Huberman (1994) who suggest a standard of 80% agreement on 95% of codes. The codes were then grouped in categories and sub-categories.

Reflexive thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013, 2019), was used to analyse the qualitative data collected during the interviews. This specific type of thematic analysis was selected as it allowed for an in-depth exploration of the experiences that autistic students have with academic support. In addition, its reflective nature complemented the participatory approach addressed above. In their 2019 paper, Braun and Clarke distinguish their form of thematic analysis as markedly different from others by stressing the researchers' role at the heart of knowledge production. Specifically, they advocate that quality reflexive thematic analysis is about the 'researcher's reflective and thoughtful engagement with their data and their reflexive and thoughtful engagement with the analytic process' (p. 594).

As such, it is crucial to document such reflective engagement by briefly explaining the qualitative philosophy underpinning the approach. Firstly, a critical realist framework was adopted for the analysis (Sims-Schouten, Riley, & Willig, 2007). From this perspective, it is impossible to find a de-contextualised truth, and therefore, participants' accounts have been viewed as real to them, but are also brought about by the wider social context in which they exist (Terry, Hayfield, Clarke, & Braun, 2017). In addition, throughout Braun and Clarke's six step process an inductive approach was taken. This involved the researcher identifying themes present in the data, rather than trying to accommodate data into prior understanding about the topic. This involved looking for semantic meaning in the data. It should be acknowledged that the authors subscribe to a ‘social model’ approach to disability (Oliver, 1986). This model argues that autistic people are disabled by society and the barriers that society creates for them.

Braun and Clarke (2021) also encourage researchers following their method to clearly outline and describe what they did in their analysis, rather than allude to generic procedures. As such, see Appendix 1 for a table containing the phases of reflective thematic analysis undertaken during this research.

Results

Online Survey

In total, 28 participants completed the survey, providing details of their reported academic support (see Table 2).

Participants were also given the option to describe experiences with academic support through open-ended questions. Using qualitative content analysis, three categories and seven subcategories were identified: (1) success stories; (2) support is not always delivered as planned; (3) applying for support.

Category 1: Success Stories

Participants noted that academic supports improved their experience at university. In particular, they described the positive impacts that mentors had on their mental health ($n = 7$). They also noted how academic supports such as extra time alleviated anxiety and increased confidence when working towards deadlines ($n = 6$). Some participants also described having autistic mentors who made them feel ‘understood’ ($n = 2$).

Category 2: Support is Not Always Delivered as Planned

Participants reported that supports were not always put into practice as planned. For some participants, the supports they had agreed with their student support

Table 2. Participants’ reported academic support (n=28).

Reported academic support	Number of participants (%)
Mentor	17 (61%)
Changes to exam arrangements	10 (36%)
Lecture notes provided in advance	8 (29%)
Help to plan study schedule	8 (29%)
Changes to coursework arrangements	4 (14%)
Permission to type assignments/exams instead of using pen and paper	4 (14%)
Alternatives to group work	3 (11%)
Sensory friendly environments	2 (7%)
Note-taker	1 (3%)
Specialist equipment	1 (3%)
Autism support group	1 (3%)
Study skills	1 (3%)
Captioning	1 (3%)

departments were ignored, partially implemented, or done sporadically ($n = 9$). Participants also described how staff members' attitudes towards support could be inconsistent ($n = 7$).

Category 3: Applying for Support

Participants reported a wide range of experiences relating to the process of applying for their academic support. Some participants regarded the process as long, but well supported ($n = 6$). Others commented on how simple it was to provide evidence and how quickly support was put in place ($n = 5$). Participants also wrote about how they were initially not sure who to contact about support ($n = 4$).

Interviews

Using reflexive thematic analysis, three themes were identified: (1) students appreciate their SoRA; (2) staff involvement in the process makes a big difference; (3) responsibility for academic support always falls on the student. [Pseudonyms were created for each student (e.g. S-1 for student 1).

Theme 1: 'I Am Very Glad That I'm Able to Have one' - Students Appreciate Their SoRA

Sub-theme 1: 'The extra time has been invaluable'. Students emphasised the effectiveness of these supports and explained the impact these had on their academic performance:

> The extra time has been invaluable, it's probably the single most useful thing I've had along with extensions in work. Those are the things that I benefit the most from because for me, a lot of it's about the anxiety of starting work or the speed of processing. (S-4)

Extensions to deadlines were also viewed in a positive light, with students expressing the importance the increased flexibility of an extension gave them: 'The week extension is really useful … it makes it easier if things go wrong … there is also no massive admin burden' (S-2).

In some situations students were not given extra-time, for example, during 24-hour exams. When explaining how this made them feel, one student said: [Extra-time] has been the most useful thing, so this year, not having that, I've noticed how that's made me feel during exams, the mental health side of things have been much better when I have that extra time put in place (S-4).

Sub-theme 2: A SoRA is helpful, but students are aware of its constraints. Students discussed how they felt their SoRA had generally supported them well: 'It's given me a lot more support than I otherwise would have had' (S- 3) and 'I think [the SoRA] is honestly the best they could have done, even as much flack as I give to it for not being perfect, I can't imagine it being any better at any other university' (S-1). However, running parallel to this, students also had measured expectations about the support their SoRA can provide: 'It's not tailored to an individual person, because that would take too much time to be implemented [and] to have a really unique SoRA for everyone, so I understand why they don't have that' (S-4).

Theme 2: 'A Disconnect Between the Staff and the Sora' - Staff Involvement Makes a Huge Difference

Sub-theme 1: Support can be different on paper to in practice. Lecturers and tutors are responsible for implementing adjustments on a student's supports. However, students reported that staff did not know how to implement these adjustments. When discussing the provision of 'lecture captioning', one student commented:

> I had to explain to the head of the module why I needed [captions]. I was like look, my processing is different, my brain works differently, I can't process audio at the same time, because there is so much to try and take in. (S-3)

These experiences were not limited to captioning. Other students described how staff did not understand the purpose of extra-time to complete an assignment:

> I feel like some of the lecturers or professors think of it like that we're giving you an extra week to do this, you should be thankful, and it's like well, no, I shouldn't [. . .] it's not extra time, that's the time I require to be on a level playing field with people who don't. (S-4)

Alongside sharing these accounts, students also regularly described where they felt improvements could be made: 'I wonder if there's some way of it being made clear [to staff] that there are good reasons for [academic support] and that it's not just another pointless bureaucratic hurdle that they have for no reason' (S-2).

Sub-theme 2: Staff attitudes towards support can be unaccommodating. Students clearly expressed how some interactions with staff about their academic support had put them in uncomfortable situations. One student shared their experience of being in an exam hall where staff had not been aware that the student was entitled to extra-time. The student felt forced to explain to the module convenor about their SoRA, in front of at least thirty other students. Reflecting on the situation, the student said:

> I'm not ashamed of having a SoRA, that was just a really big [thing] to do in front of strangers. I had to explain and then they said they couldn't access the system, so I wasn't allowed my extra time or anything. Then I kind of kicked up a fuss and they said ok, this time you're allowed . . . I felt like it was my fault. (S-4)

For some students, this unaccommodating atmosphere dissuaded them from asking for support entitled them to:

> I always feel guilty [asking for lecture notes in advance], this year there are some lecturers that I didn't even ask for the lecture notes, because I just felt I didn't want them to think that I was lazy or something

(S-5). However, this type of attitude by staff was generally not thought of by students as intentional: 'I think they always mean well but they just don't have the training or education to actually know how to deal with [the SoRA]' (S-3).

Sub-theme 3: When its good, it's really good. Positive experiences with academic support evoked strong responses from students:

> There are some lecturers who've done an incredible job, that has really made a difference and sometimes made my day, or just made me feel happy every time I joined for the module because I knew there weren't going to be obstacles that were going to stop me from enjoying the course. (S-5)

Similarly: 'Staff have engaged really positively, especially when I'm working with people from my department, they have been very accommodating' (S-1). There was also recognition and appreciation from students when they felt that staff had followed their SoRA. For instance, one student shared an example of when a lecturer dimmed the lights in a seminar room and, without addressing the student directly, asked if the group were happy with how bright the lights were. The student said: 'This made me feel like the staff (at least this member of staff) genuinely cared about students' needs and wellbeing' (S-8).

Theme 3: 'Sometimes You Really Have to Fight' - Responsibility Always Falls on the Student

Sub-theme 1: Students have to request support that is already in their SoRA. Despite having provision in their SoRA for supports, students had to ask, or in some cases tell departments or lecturers, what they should be getting: 'I was eventually given my own room in exams, but this was like the biggest argument anyone has ever had … My department didn't like it basically because they had to invigilate me' (S-2). In other cases, students had their requests for support denied or ignored:

> I asked the lecturers for the [lecture] notes … two out of nine lecturers agreed to send me the notes and only one of them did it … this was in my SoRA, they were aware of it, I had asked, and they didn't do it. I felt like I had to give information and reasons why this was in my SoRA. (S-5)

Sub-theme 2: Students are expected to know what supports they need and how to get them. Although students reported that they were provided with a large amount of information about the supports they could ask for, they also described how this was not always helpful: 'Even though I'd had a list [of supports] given to me, I don't know how it could be implemented, so I felt a bit overwhelmed by it all' (S-4). Students also reported facing challenges when it came to navigating the support system itself: 'I didn't know where to apply … if I hadn't reached out, I wouldn't have known how to apply for it' (S-6). Linked to this, students also reported feeling like they 'did not know their own needs' (S-2). 'I would have liked more support, but I didn't know what there was available, and I also didn't really know what to ask for because I've never had support before, because I was diagnosed at 21' (S-3).

Sub-theme 3: There is not enough opportunity for personalised communication. Autistic people have very different needs and, while the support in a SoRA broadly reflects this, students felt that some of the administrative structures around a SoRA do not. The most widely discussed was an online system used by students to request support. Students discussed how this system lacked a personalised response to something that was very personal:

> [My application] was all done online and they kept closing my case, so that drove me nuts. Through the system an advisor can close a case when they think it's finished, but then if I have a follow-up question, I have to start all over again and it's a pain. (S-3)

An increase in the personalisation of the structures around the SoRA were also regularly mentioned by students when discussing how the SoRA could be improved:

> I've got a bio on my work intranet which is like [name] graduated in such and such a year and knows these coding languages. If it said something like that at the top [of the SoRA] I would be a person. (S-2)

This notion of a student describing themselves in their own words was also expressed by other students: 'It's easier than having someone not know how it affects me. [They might just think I] will be rocking in a corner or something because that's still what people see you as in many ways' (S-4).

Sub-theme 4: Support for group work is not provided in a SoRA. Students reported a lack of provision for group work in their academic support: 'It doesn't handle things like group work well because I think there's a grey area on where a student will have difficulties and should be supported' (S-2). In addition:

> 'For our group project, we got an email from the lecturer saying how to, if you have someone different (student gestured air-quotes around the word *different*) in your group, how to talk to them or how to be inclusive and I just think that that's not good enough to support someone, so I had to disclose pretty much everything and explain to people'. (S-4)

From this example, it is clear that a lack of provision for group work also resulted in students having to take responsibility for how they were going to approach these situations.

Discussion

We explored the experiences that autistic university students studying at English universities have with academic support. We found that extra-time in exams, extensions to deadlines, and mentors were all highly valued academic supports that were perceived to be effective. Results also demonstrated that students had to fight for their academic support, staff attitudes could be inconsistent, and there is a lack of provision for group work. In some cases there was also a lack of personalisation related to support. Next, we discuss our results in relation to each of our research questions.

What are the Experiences That Autistic Students at English Universities Have with Their Academic Support?

Our findings indicated that autistic students positively viewed academic supports related to extra-time, deadline extensions and mentors. However, students reported regularly missing out on support that was previously promised to them. This was commonly found in instances where a student's academic support was facilitated by a staff member, such as with captioning a lecture or providing lecture notes in advance. A possible explanation for this is that university staff do not have sufficient time in their workload allocation to balance research commitments with teaching commitments (Barrett & Barrett, 2007). Hemer (2013) interviewed 14 academic staff members and found that staff who defined their role as a teacher, rather than a researcher, were more likely to prioritise 'high quality teaching', while those who saw themselves as researchers before teachers, were less likely to do so. This may further explain why we found inconsistencies in this type of academic support. Therefore, there is a case to be made for sufficient time and funding for university staff to implement these kinds of academic supports.

Students also reported having to fight for their academic support, with most of these 'fights' involving students explaining to staff members why they needed the academic supports they were entitled to. This implies a lack of staff knowledge about why support is important. This echoes the findings of Bunbury (2018), who found that staff were not always aware of why students with un-seen disabilities required support. While there is no quick fix for this problem, one potential solution is to have more opportunities for staff to learn about autistic students perspectives and experiences with academic support. This could be done through mandatory training for staff that has been co-designed by autistic students. By making this type of training mandatory and co-designed by autistic students, their perspectives are being heard without having to be individually responsible for initiating required change (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2021). In this way, those without lived experience of being autistic will be able to get closer to understanding what academic life is like for autistic students, and in turn, be better placed to support them through their studies. Through its participatory design, with autistic students and staff working together, this study has taken some preliminary steps in this direction, but more is undoubtably needed.

Alongside fighting for support when it was not provided, students regularly justified the shortcomings of their academic support. For example, students discussed understanding how it would not be possible to tailor academic support to each individual student, because of how much time it would take. This is a clear example of students being empathetic towards those who provide their support (e.g. academic staff or disability services). As such, these findings challenge the traditionally held view that autism is associated with a lack of empathy (Fletcher-Watson & Bird, 2020).

It is also important to acknowledge that this study found many examples of students having positive experiences relating to staff interaction with their support. In these instances, students described the positive difference that it made to their studies. In a study eliciting the views of autistic young people, Crane et al. (2021) found similar results, in that students often had 'key champions', such as teachers who were especially supportive and improved their educational experience. Crane et al. (2021) recommended that the best practice of 'key champions' is learned from, in order to become more widespread. Based on the current results, this positive action is undoubtably also needed in higher education to ensure that good practices of academic staff are shared and built upon.

What Academic Supports Do Autistic Students at English Universities Find Effective?

Extensions to assignment deadlines, extra-time in exams, and working with a mentor were all academic supports that students reported as useful. The effectiveness of extensions to assignment deadlines and extra-time in exams have previously been reported by Gurbuz, Hanley, and Riby (2019). However, this study extends this by reporting on *why* students found these supports effective. For example, participants in the interview stage of this study highlighted how extensions to deadlines provided increased flexibility and time to demonstrate their knowledge. This support is easy to implement on the part of a university but, as demonstrated, makes a big difference. A similar picture was painted by students who discussed the value of extra-time in exams. Students drew attention to how it helped them to process information, but as with extensions to deadlines, the mental health elements were also important. Extra-time in exams is widely debated in education: some regard it a valuable tool for ensuring equal opportunity, while others consider it an unfair advantage (Duncan & Purcell, 2020). However, autistic students in this research clearly consider them to be vital in ensuring they are afforded the same opportunities as non-autistic students. Far from being an unfair advantage, they considered these supports as crucial for levelling the playing field.

Working with a mentor was also an academic support that students in this study reported as effective. In addition, a small number of participants reported working with a mentor who was autistic. In these incidences, the support students received was regarded as especially effective. While this specific support was only reported by a very small number of students, its significance should not be overlooked. For example, through interviews with autistic people Crompton, Hallett, Ropar, Flynn, and Fletcher-Watson (2020) found that autistic people feel better understood by other autistic people, relative to non-autistic people.

How Much Say Do Autistic Students at English Universities Have About Their Academic Support?

Students reported this in two distinct ways. First, students described not knowing what academic supports to ask for when applying for their support, even when students were provided with a list of supports, and had advice from student support advisors. Second, students reported a lack of ownership over the process related to the systems around academic support. Specifically, they spoke about how it lacked personalisation. This was most evident from how students discussed that academic support could be improved by making their support document more reflective of them as individuals, rather than just a list of the supports they require. This element of academic support has not been addressed by the previous research in this area, but there are examples of initiatives which are already doing this successfully. For example, the autism-specific 'Research Passport' developed in the UK (Ashworth, Crane, Steward, Bovis, & Pellicano, 2021), and the autism-specific healthcare toolkit developed by AASPIRE in the United States (Nicolaidis et al., 2015). In both of these initiatives, the focus is maximising the autonomy of autistic people, promoting flexibility, and creating positive relationships between autistic people and professionals.

Group work is another area where this research found that autistic students did not have enough say. Autism is associated with differences in social communication (Milton, 2012) and, therefore, it is likely that autistic students may find elements of group work challenging. While it is important to remember that autism is a heterogeneous diagnostic label and, therefore, not all autistic people will experience the same types of communication differences (Sutton, Webster, & Westerveld, 2019), many students in this study reported that group work was an area of difficulty. They also reported their disappointment that there was no academic support provided to aid them in these circumstances. This finding, as well as those discussed above (relating to staff not understanding why an academic support would be needed for an autistic student), is a clear illustration of Milton's 'Double Empathy Problem' Milton (2012). Milton suggests that while it is widely acknowledged that autistic individuals may not understand non-autistic individuals' perspectives (Baron-Cohen, 2000), less attention is paid to the fact that non-autistic individuals also do not understand the perspectives of autistic people. Milton suggests that it is this bi-directional breakdown which leads to shared misunderstanding. Examples of this can be seen throughout the research's findings, and further serves as a reminder that autistic people need to be involved in the process of designing academic support, as well as in the process of using it.

Strengths and Limitations

A key strength of this study was its participatory design. As discussed above, this approach aligns with how autistic people want research to be conducted. In this study, it allowed those with lived experience of being autistic and receiving academic support to shape this study's direction. Another notable strength of this study was that, due to data being collected through in-depth interviews, the results provided a rich and detailed picture of the experiences that autistic students have with academic support. This level of detail has not been reported in previous research on this topic, as in previous studies data was gathered through surveys and, where interviews were used, academic support was not the sole focus.

Alongside these strengths, there were a number of limitations to this study. First, the relatively small sample size for the online survey means that the findings cannot be generalised across the population (autistic students studying at English universities). In addition, the survey could only provide a snapshot of students' experience with academic support. As a result, potentially valuable detail about students' experiences with academic support were missed. Although nuance and detail was provided from the in-depth interviews, these were only conducted with students from one university in England.

Another significant limitation was that only the views of autistic students who had received academic support was sought. As such, it means that it excluded students who might want academic support from their university but are unable to get any. Had students without academic support also been included in the study, it would have been possible to see if they had made this choice themselves or if they were not receiving support because their university was not providing any. A further consequence of this is that this research was not able to report on the strengths associated with autism. Ward and Webster (2018) have highlighted how autistic students feel their autism aids their study skills and more research into this area is needed.

Implications and Further Research

The findings of this study have implications for how universities implement academic support for their autistic students. First, it suggests that more flexibility is needed in the design of the SoRA and other similar documents. Specifically, that there should be opportunity for students to describe how autism impacts them in their own words if they wish to (Ashworth, Crane, Steward, Bovis, & Pellicano, 2021). This would help to alleviate some of the reported misunderstanding which takes place between staff and students. From the perspective of one student in this study, it could even go so far as to make the student a 'person' in the academic support process.

The second recommendation is that some form of student-staff partnership is developed to help staff better understand how academic support improves the academic experience of autistic students. A partnership scheme (Bovill & Felten, 2016; Hewett, Douglas, McLinden, & Keil, 2020) has the potential to solve many of the problems students reported in this study. Most notably, it could allow for a dialogue between autistic students and staff about how students could be supported through group work assignments. However, as very little research has explored this area, this should also be considered an avenue for future research. Finally, we recommend that the role played by autistic academic mentors as a means of academic support is explored further by research. Although only a small number of students mentioned working with autistic mentors, the potential they have to solve many of the challenges autistic students face should not be underestimated.

Conclusion

Via a participatory approach, online surveys and interviews were carried out with autistic students at English universities. Results demonstrated that extra-time in exams, extensions to deadlines, and mentors were all highly valued academic supports. However, we also found that barriers still exist, which result in students having to fight for their academic support. These barriers include staff attitudes towards academic support, a lack of provision for group work and, in some cases, a lack of personalisation related to support. This research represents the first time a participatory approach has been used to explore the experiences that autistic students have with their academic support and, as a result, the findings make a unique contribution to this area of study. A key recommendation of the research is that autistic students are more than just users of academic support. This can be achieved by ensuring that alongside staff, they are meaningfully involved in the process of developing academic support in the future.

Note

1. We have used the identity-first language of ‘autistic person’ throughout this paper to reflect the preferences of participants. See also Bottema-Beutel, Kapp, Nina Lester, Sasson, and Hand (2021).

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