

From hiding in the toilets to Enid Blyton adventures - supporting the transition of first year students with autism; an evaluation. - Paper

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ABSTRACT

There has been an increase in the number of students with Autism entering Higher Education in the UK (HEFCE, 2015). There is also significant evidence that these students are more vulnerable to withdrawal, dissatisfaction and academic underperformance than their matched peers (Dente & Coles, 2012; Madriaga, 2010).

Whilst some research has taken place into the experiences of these students and some researchers have made suggestions as to what might help, there have been no current studies evaluating the effectiveness of support or identifying what support might be most effective (Van Hees, Moyson & Roeyers, 2015).

In 2012 the University of Derby implemented a new programme of transition support for students with Autism. The programme aimed to improve student social and academic integration and reduce withdrawal. The programme provided early contact with prospective students and their families, support to attend open days, a specially designed pre-entry summer school, support to attend the university Get Ahead programme for disabled students, an assigned support worker and support to build social networks. A number of changes were also made to practice, including an increased intention to work with families and an adoption of more directive interactions, particularly in the early stages of students' university experience.

In 2014\15 a research project was undertaken to evaluate the impact of this support and to better understand the experiences of students with autism. The study adopted a pragmatic approach using a mixed methods design. Qualitative evidence was gathered from 15 students with autism and from 7 specialist staff responsible for organising and providing support to students with autism. Quantitative information was drawn from the university records system. This evidence was then synthesised to provide an overarching narrative account.

This paper will focus mainly on the qualitative accounts to provide an evaluation of the programme.

Qualitative accounts indicate that a holistic approach to preparation and transition is necessary. The research also identified the following

- One of the main reasons students participants wanted to come to university was to improve their social lives – despite finding social situations difficult. This appeared as an ongoing tension and made socialising a key element in successful transition
- Most students relied on families for pre-arrival support
- Working directly with families during application appears to improve transition – but there must be a phased move from families to university support by enrolment to ensure students can develop independence

- Summer schools and pre-entry events appear to significantly improve preparation and subsequent experiences of university
- Students can be supported to improve social interactions through education, role play and analysing social situations in detail
- One to one support has a significant positive impact and students believe it improves retention and completion
- Three-way working relationships between students, support staff and academic staff improve consistency and expectations, reduce anxiety and help resolve problems quickly

Quantitative evidence demonstrated that the first year withdrawal rate among students with autism had fallen from 20% to under 6% since this support had been implemented.

REFERENCES

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