Chapter 8
Students with Autism in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Recently there has been an increasing awareness of disability issues in the UK. In line with this, there is an increasing concern to enhance the learning of students with disability in higher education (HE) and an acknowledgement that more research is needed to investigate the practical issues faced by students with disabilities. This recent increase in research has, however, tended to ignore issues faced by students with autism in HE. It was this that motivated the research discussed in this chapter. The chapter starts by arguing for the importance of catering for students with autism in HE. Next the authors consider the practical issues that students with autism might face in HE. The authors do this through three means: a narrative account of two students, a case study of another student written by his close social worker and a case study concerning a specific UK University.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the impact that autism might have on students, both academically and socially, while they are at University. This is done via three accounts; a narrative account of student experience and two case studies. The narrative involves a set of scenarios that have been put together from a set of real experiences to illustrate the kinds of issues that students with autism experience. Because individuals on the autistic spectrum vary widely in how they perceive the world, these experiences have been crystallized into two characters, Bob and Sam, who think quite differently from each other but who experience similar difficulties. These scenarios set the scene
for the first case study concerning a student with Asperger Syndrome. This case is written by the support worker who supported the student for 40 hours a week for the duration of the student’s course. Finally, we provide another case study of a major UK University, including an interview with the University’s Disability Services Manager (DSM) and a collection of documents and information in relation to students with disability in this University. Finally, based on the above three accounts we conclude with a set of recommendations that we hope will enhance the support of students with autism in HE. All names used in the chapter, including the University name, are anonymous, for ethical reasons.

BACKGROUND

The Importance of Catering for People with Autism in HE

Recruiting more students into HE has become one of the most important items on the political agenda in the UK (Riddell et. al., 2005). In particular, there is an increasing interest in research concerning the participation of students with disabilities in HE (cf. Riddell et. al., 2005), and there is an increasing interest in recruiting more students with disabilities into HE (Brown, 2005).

As well as an obvious ethical obligation to cater appropriately for students with disabilities, these students are protected by law against any discrimination in UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Disability Rights Commission, 2007). Consequently, a Widening Participation agenda becomes essential in HE to guarantee fair opportunity for all students with disabilities and to ensure that they achieve their full potential (HEFCE, 2008). For example, after publishing the tenth set of UK HE performance indicators in 2008, Professor David Eastwood, HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England) Chief Executive said: ‘Widening participation in higher education is vital to ensuring a fair and equitable society. HEFCE and the Higher Education sector are determined to increase the number of students entering higher education from under-represented groups’ (HEFCE, 2008). In the light of this, there is an increasing awareness by UK universities of their responsibility to offer appropriate provision for students with disabilities, and students with disabilities are encouraged to seek and choose universities that can offer suitable support (Directgov, 2010).

Despite such measures, however, people with autism still face a considerable amount of discrimination. For example, a survey by the UK National Autistic Society (NAS) 2001 Ignored or Ineligible? The Reality for Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorders suggests that adults with autism are “vulnerable” and “excluded”, many are dependent on their parents or carers and often “fall through the gap between mental health and learning disability” (NAS, 2001, p. 6). An NAS report (NAS, 2008), I Exist: The Message from Adults with Autism in England, showed that adults with autism were “scared” about their future and feel they do not get the appropriate support as a result of people “misunderstanding” autism. Similarly, Beardon & Edmonds (2007) argue that there is little information concerning the needs of adults with autism.

The passing of the Autism Act in November 2009 by the UK government was an acknowledgement that adults with autism have received inadequate care in the past and a commitment to improve on this in the future. Similarly, after the publication of the first Bill of Scotland for Autism (We Exist) in 2010, Carol Evans, the NAS National Director for Scotland, said that people with autism’s “needs are great and have been very much ignored” (NAS Scotland, 2010).

The research outlined in this chapter aims to contribute to attempts to address this imbalance concerning the needs of adults with autism. Specifically, we will address a particular population of adults with autism i.e. students with autism in