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Supporting young autistic students during key transitions in higher education

Dr Marc Fabri
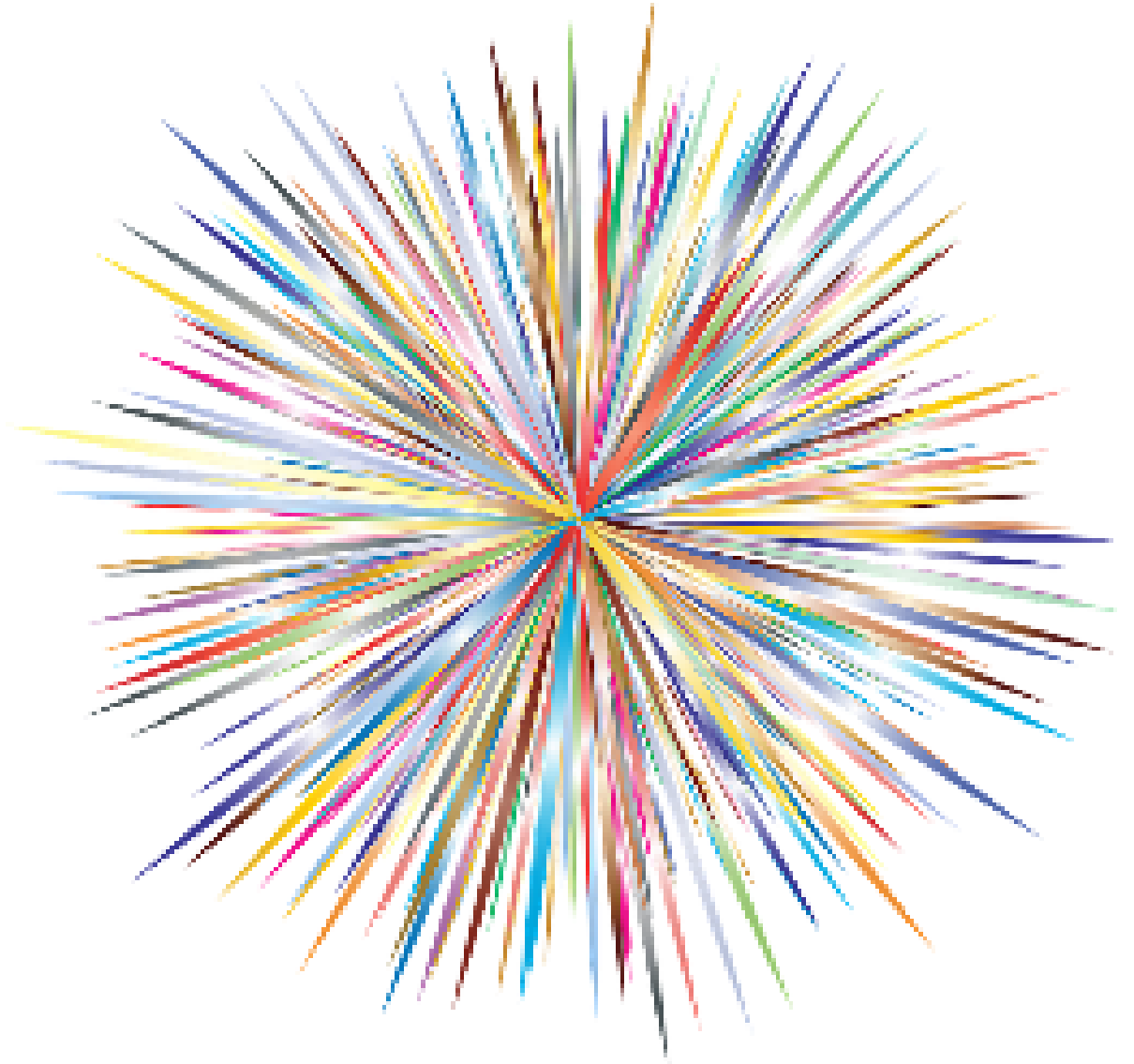Reader in Participatory Design

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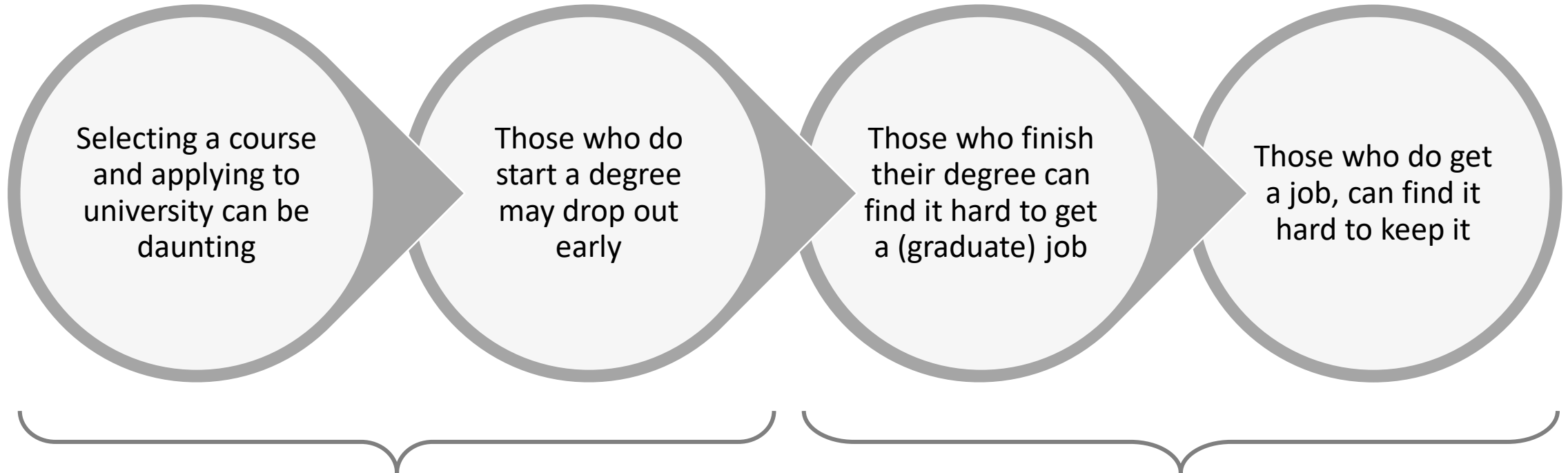autism&uni

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Our view of autism: A "spikey" profile

- Strengths in some areas

- Difficulties in others

- Remarkably good at some things

- Unexpectedly challenged by other things

What are the key transitions?

Selecting a course and applying to university can be daunting

Those who do start a degree may drop out early

Those who finish their degree can find it hard to get a (graduate) job

Those who do get a job, can find it hard to keep it

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Widening Access to Higher Education for Students on the Autism Spectrum
(resources published 2016)

www.autism-uni.org

Challenges when starting university

From the Autism&Uni Best Practice Guides
www.autism-uni.org/bestpractice

Based on 280 survey responses
and 14 interviews

The social and physical environment

- difficulty picking up unwritten social rules when interacting with tutors and fellow students
- difficulty tolerating background noise, lighting, crowding or other sensory aspects of the university environment
- handling the social isolation that often comes with living in a new environment

Lack of appropriate support

- lack of access to appropriate support right from the start
- a focus on the 'deficits' of autism, rather than the strengths students can bring
- lack of consistency in reasonable adjustments, autism-specific services and personal support

Unrealistic expectations by the student

- what university study is really like
- content of study subject or course
- performing at the same high standard as in secondary education
- fellow students' interests and dedication

Challenges concerning assessment (even when mastering the subject matter)

- difficulty interpreting ambiguous and open assignment briefs correctly
- lack of understanding why something needs to be done
- difficulty planning studies and revision
- uncertainty how much time to spend on a given task

Transitioning to adult life requiring more effort than it would for the average student

- moving away from home for the first time
- time management and establishing routines
- an unfamiliarity with advocating effectively for oneself

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Positive aspects of starting university

Quotes from Autism&Uni research

Based on 280 survey responses
and 14 interviews

"I love my course and my tutors are extremely helpful when I have questions. " (student, UK)

"I have always wanted to do research, especially with languages, and studying makes it possible." (student, Finland)

"In high school I was ridiculed by my peers. This does not happen at university, where my fellow students treat me with respect." (student, Spain)

"On the whole, studying was very beneficial in building my confidence to socialise with others. I was also studying something I loved." (former student, UK)

"We were all assigned a personal tutor. Mine was very proactive in getting to know me as a person and organising regular meetings with me whether there was a problem or not." (former student, UK)

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Increasing Employability for Autistic Graduates in Europe (resources published 2022)

www.imageautism.com

Challenges when leaving university

Based on 53 interviews, 224 online survey responses, and participatory design workshops with 79 people

For autistic students and graduates

- High expectation of self-directness when looking for a job
- Matching degree skills with jobs out there
- Having the confidence to attend careers fairs or to self-promote
- Interacting with employers
- Accessing the "hidden" job market – through networks and friends

For careers advisors

- Lack of autism-specific training and understanding
- Careers advice and study support are provided by different teams
- Unable to provide much, if any, individualised support
- Not enough communication about what support is available

During job search and recruitment

- Asking for reasonable adjustments during job interview
- Interviews often not set up to assess job skills, but to check "chemistry"
- Employers are unsure how to support autistic graduates
- Employers worry about doing or saying the wrong thing, and therefore avoid the issue altogether

In the workplace

- Sensory environment, e.g. noise level, open office layout, hot-desking
- Transition into job: new people, new rules, unwritten rules
- Asking for reasonable adjustments, in line with preferences
- Lack of understanding by colleagues (adjustment = privilege?)
- Developing social relationships with colleagues

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What constitutes good support practice?
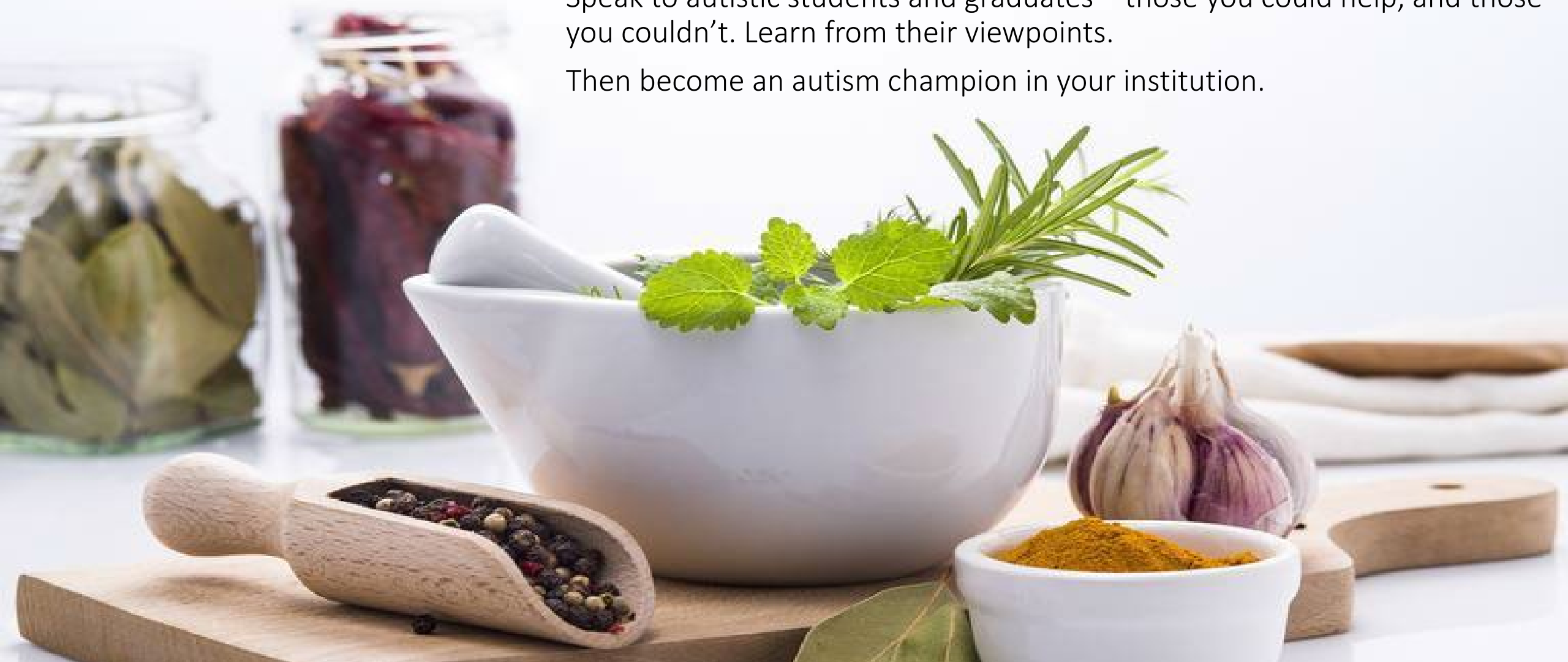
I have a cook book…

Recipe 1

Develop a deep understanding of autism, then openly share it with colleagues

Get the training you need to move beyond autism "awareness".

Speak to autistic students and graduates – those you could help, and those you couldn't. Learn from their viewpoints.

Then become an autism champion in your institution.

Recipe 2

Recognise autistic characteristics as strengths, not deficits

Too often the focus is on deficits and difficulties, e.g. when initial needs and adjustments are identified.

Look beyond this and characteristics and interests that can turn into real strengths – at uni and in the workplace.

Foster these.

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Recipe 3

Help students succeed not only academically, but also socially

Most support services deal well with academic needs, and reasonable adjustments focus on that.

Also ensure that the autistic person is supported in their social needs and activities.

Ask about interests outside university.

Make clubs and societies inclusive and accessible.

Recipe 4

Design support around needs and preferences, not based on a diagnosis

The keyword here is inclusiveness, or Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Design support and adjustments in a way that they can be accessed by all students, whether with a diagnosis or not.

Recipe 5

Communicate clearly, avoid ambiguity, check for misunderstandings

It is easy, and quite natural for most people, to speak in an ambiguous way and let others fill the gaps.

Avoid ambiguity when giving instructions.

Be clear about when independence is required, and when guidance is needed. Communicate this.

Recipe 6

Offer consistency: people, locations, communications, catch-ups

If possible at all, ensure that the same people deal with the same students. Ideally they get to know each other well and develop mutual empathy.

Meet in the same place, at the same time.

Give advance notice of any changes – make things predictable.

Recipe 7

Create a welcoming environment

This may include quiet spaces, sensory-friendly events, clear directions to campus locations.

Be kind.

Have an open mind.

Make time.

Be honest about your knowledge and your own limitations.

Recipe 8

Set small, achievable goals for adapting your own practice

For example, aim to change one thing every month.

Identify what you can change without asking anyone else (for help or for permission).

For those changes that need permission, have a holistic approach that includes other teams.

Recipe 9   **Partner up with autism organisations**

Use their resources.

Attend any training available.

Talk to them if you have questions.

AS I AM.IE

National Autistic Society

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Tips for lecturers/academics

- Offer students multiple ways to evidence their skills and knowledge
  - Constructively align learning outcomes to teaching and assessment
  - Make assessments accessible and equitable for *all* students
- Critically review the habits and conventions of your discipline
  - "we have always used exams"
  - "students have to attend all seminars"
  - "this is how I learned it"
- Build employability into the curriculum, right from the start
- Promote work experience, internships and placements
- Work closely with the careers and disability services
- Connect with potential employers

Tips for disability support staff

- Encourage students to engage as early as possible, ideally before arrival

- Always focus on needs AND strengths – the latter is easily missed

- Involve the student in all discussions and decisions about them (co-design)

- Review someone's needs, adjustments and support regularly

- Involve academics and other staff (e.g. admin, security, catering)

Tips for careers advisors

- Regularly speak to academics to understand the specifics of a course and potential jobs in that area

- Encourage students to engage as early as possible

- Understand the range of reasonable adjustments available in workplaces

- Get (and stay) in touch with employers and offer your autism expertise – with the student's permission

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Our resources

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The Autism&Uni Toolkit

https://autism-uni.org/toolkits

- Learn about university, challenges and opportunities

- Designed to be adapted to a specific university's needs

- Interviews with students and with support staff

- Practical tips and prompts for reflection

- Encourages positive action and self-advocacy

- Used by 20 universities in the UK, Ireland & Europe

- Several others are currently setting up their toolkit
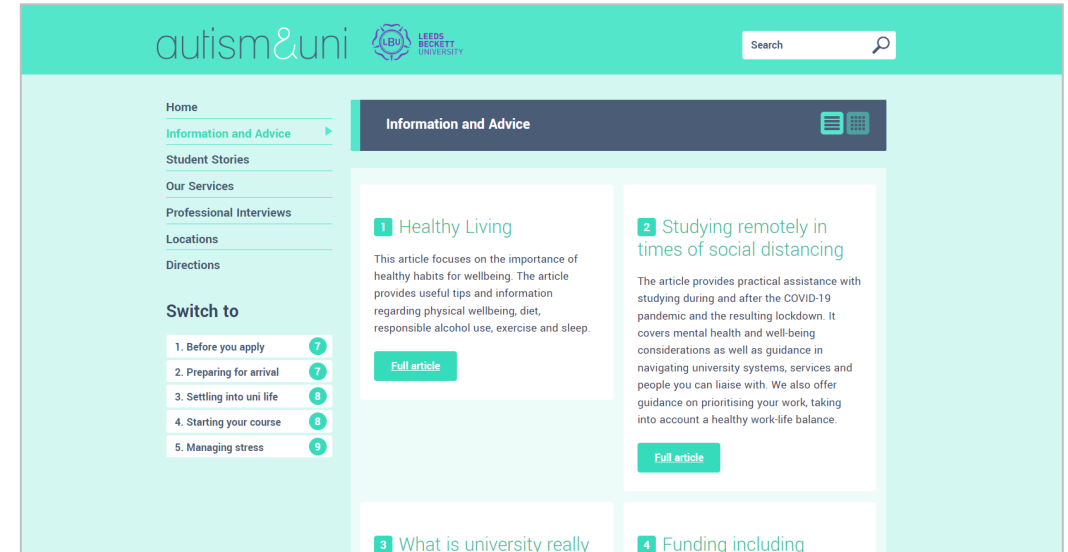
The Autism&Uni Best Practice Guides

GUIDE 1: For Higher Education managers and senior academics

GUIDE 2: For lecturers and tutors

GUIDE 3: For professionals supporting autistic students
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- 15,000 copies distributed across Europe

- Available in Dutch, Finnish, Polish, Spanish, German, Portuguese, French

www.autism-uni.org/bestpractice

Takeaways
(good practice to adopt and share)

These focus on university-wide and strategic changes that require management support.

▸ Encourage autistic students to apply for support and arrange an assessment as early as possible; be pro-active in communicating with students about the support available

▸ Ensure that an assessment covers both the challenges and the positive aspects of autism. If the assessment is done externally or by medical professionals only, consider complementing it with an additional educational assessment:

  ▸ assess impairments, challenges, and the need for any services or technological solutions that these require

  ▸ encourage students to understand the positive aspects of their autism (that are specific to them) for their academic life and beyond, and their personal strengths

  ▸ assess personal coping strategies, strengths and interests.

▸ Ensure that support arrangements involving mentors, buddies, coaches, note-takers and the like are consistent, i.e. the same person at the same time in the same place; this will reduce anxiety for the student

▸ When assessing the requirements of students or making decisions about support services, consider possible overlap between HEI and external provision, as well as the possibility of areas not covered by any organisation

▸ When writing official statements to recommend adjustments and services, provide an opportunity to re-assess the situation in case the suggested interventions are unavailable or turn out not to function as expected

▸ Develop general practices for regularly reviewing support requirements, using low barrier means such as quick surveys; include input from students, academics, support staff and also parents as stress at university may not be expressed at university but picked up at home

▸ Ensure students are aware that they do not simply have to work with the support staff they have been allocated – interpersonal relationships do not always work, even on a professional level

▸ Encourage students to work with you to put together information that can be conveyed to their tutors and lecturers, making this information specific to them and relevant to their study situation

▸ If you see that provision for a student is divided between several service systems and therefore difficult to manage, ensure that there is a single, clearly identified individual or organisation in charge of overall coordination and keeping all service providers up to date

Calls to action
(what you can do right now)

Involve the student in all discussions and decisions about their study requirements; communicating with the student is not only good practice, it is mandatory

Actively engage with academic staff about how learning to work better with autistic students would also provide opportunities to improve the experiences of students generally

Critically examine the support and information offered to autistic students, and compare it to descriptions of good practice from other HEIs and countries; review it regularly with input from students and recent graduates, including those who no longer receive services

1.
Employability toolkit for students and graduates

- self-assessment and career planning
- develop self-advocacy
- case studies and good practice examples

toolkit.imageautism.com

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2.
Training Materials
for careers advisors

- Group activities
- Training videos
- Case studies
- Guide to "Train the Trainer"

imageautism.com/training

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ACTIVITÉ DE CONSTRUCTION : LE MONDE DE L'ACCÈS À L'EMPLOI

Juan a été embauché par ALC Inc. ALC n'avait jamais embauché de personne autiste auparavant : cela signifie qu'au départ, ils avaient une compréhension limitée de l'autisme. Ils ont demandé à Juan de faire une présentation à ses collègues sur son état et sur la façon dont cela l'affecte sur le lieu de travail. Que conseilleriez-vous à Juan de faire ? Quel type d'adaptation conseilleriez-vous à l'entreprise ?

Première réunion/espace de travail
- Usages
- Formel/informel
- Individuel/en groupe
- Se présenter
- Qu'en est-il d'un nouvel employé qui n'a pas informé l'employeur de son autisme - y a-t-il encore un moyen de faire connaître ses besoins ?

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Supporting the transition to employment for autistic students
PRACTICAL TRAINING

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EFFEKTIVE UND KLARE KOMMUNIKATION?

TRAINING OVERVIEW

Thanks for joining us today! This training session will cover:
- Why this training has been developed
- Introductions
- Basic facts about autism
- Autism and finding work: success stories, but also barriers
- Practical activities where we will discuss ways of handling some typical situations
- Key principles for working with autistic students/graduates
- University/local and national resources that can help you

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3.

Good Practice Guides for careers advisors, academics, policymakers and employers

- Advice and examples
- Quick 'takeaways'
- Checklists and case studies

guides.imageautism.com

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Thank you

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www.imageautism.com
www.autism-uni.org