



Where Autism  
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## **Autism&Uni – widening access to Higher Education for autistic students**

Autism&Uni is a multi-national, European-funded initiative that helps young autistic people navigate the transition from school to university ([www.autism-uni.org](http://www.autism-uni.org)). Young people on the autism spectrum, like any other young people, want to grow up and lead full and independent lives. But although autism is not an indicator of academic ability, many find it difficult to enter university and those who do start a degree course are prone to dropping out early. The Autism&Uni project aimed to gain a deep understanding of the barriers and enablers to academic success for this student group, and then created resources and initiatives to help with overcoming these barriers.

### **How we went about it**

To find out about the needs and aspirations of autistic university students we:

- conducted a questionnaire survey
- talked to students about their experiences
- reviewed research
- mapped educational provision across Europe.

About 300 individuals and organisations took part in the survey, over half which were autistic young people. Our research has shown that there are many challenges:

### **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

Arguably these are challenges for any new student. But while most can adapt reasonably quickly and draw from the support of their friends, for autistic students these challenges can rapidly lead to anxiety, further isolation and depression and they may eventually drop out from their course of study.

This is clearly an immense loss to European society and economy as many autistic people have particular strengths to offer, e.g. strong dedication to their chosen study subject, attention to detail, a high work ethic and a propensity to thinking rationally and logically. It became clear during the project that such a strength-based view of autism is not commonly found, but absolutely necessary.

## What are the outcomes?

### Best practice guides

We published a set of free downloadable [Best Practice Guides](#) for those directly supporting students at university and those making key decisions about their support. These guides are available for HE managers, lecturers and tutors as well as disability support staff (to receive a printed copy contact Marc Fabri at [m.fabri@leedsbeckett.ac.uk](mailto:m.fabri@leedsbeckett.ac.uk)). Each guide focuses on:

- Takeaways: insights, ideas and prompts for making a positive change and good practice to share with others; these usually require some support from management or colleagues.
- Calls to action: direct positive action one can make immediately and without the help of others – call them "Quick wins" if you like.

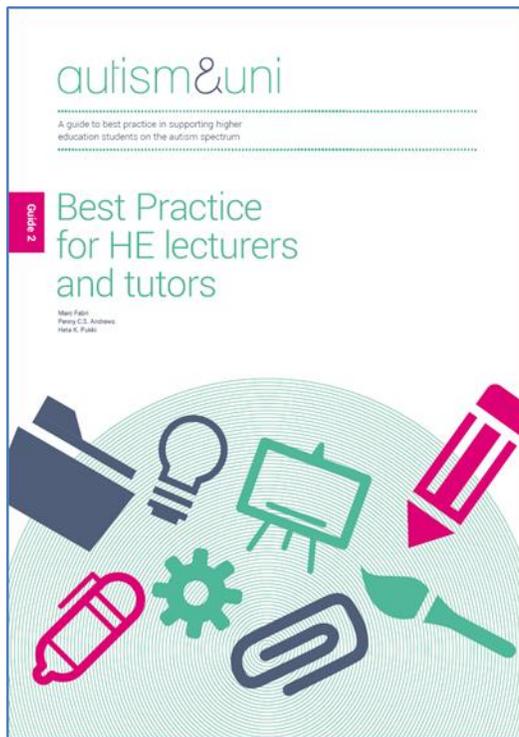


Figure 1: Best Practice Guide for Lecturers and Tutors

### Online Toolkit

We have also created an Online Toolkit that gives students strategies for overcoming typical challenges and advocating for themselves. The toolkit covers the following topics and more:

- Telling the university about your autism: Many autistic students do not declare their autism before starting university, which may prevent access to support at the start of the study when it matters most. The toolkit also covers disability assessment and Disabled Students' Allowances.
- Managing expectations: Often students' (and parents') expectations do not match the real situation at university. Our surveys provided many accounts and quotes to support this. The toolkit covers some of the unwritten rules of university life and what may be different compared to secondary education.
- Help with getting to campus locations: Students reported getting repeatedly lost on campus and not remembering items on their timetable. And when they are late there is a reluctance to enter a class. The toolkit has a section where universities can show key campus locations and directions between them.
- Typical study situations: It can be difficult for autistic students to get used to the conventions that exist in lectures, seminars, during group work and when studying independently. The toolkit gives advice on what to do in certain unfamiliar situations, e.g. when working with other students in a group.
- Managing difficult situations: It is important for students to advocate for themselves. Parents and teachers were very vocal about this, and a number of typical situations were identified (e.g. talking about one's autism, complaining about something, when and how to arrange a meeting with a tutor). The toolkit covers this in brief, to the point activities.

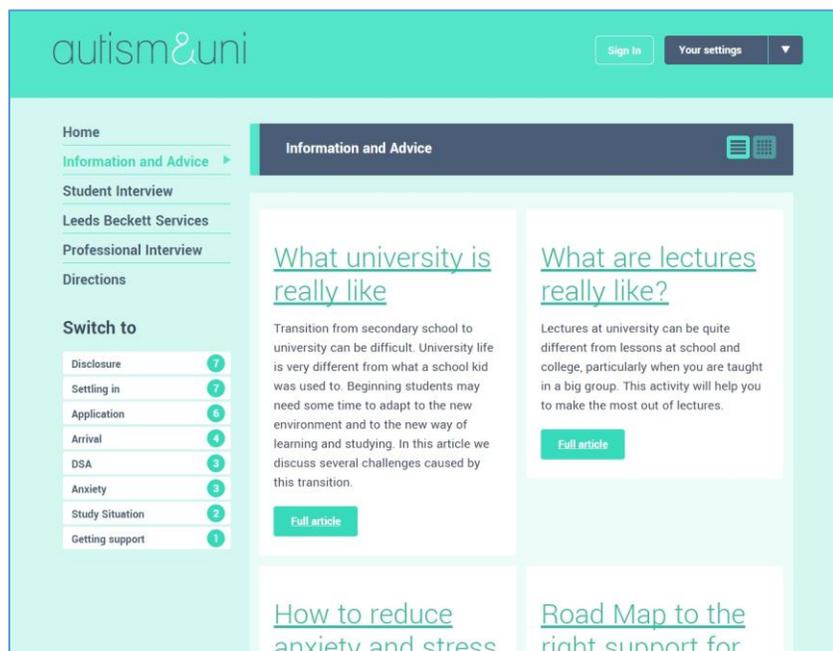


Figure 2: Online Toolkit Screenshot

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For the toolkit's creation we followed a participatory design approach, engaging with autistic students and researchers throughout the entire process. We ran three co-design and evaluation workshops and the results challenged some generally held perceptions about the participation of autistic people in technology design<sup>i</sup> and what their interface and interaction preferences are<sup>ii</sup>.

The toolkit is freely available to UK universities and comes pre-installed with suggested content. Further adaptation and extension is recommended as much of the information autistic students want is specific to each institution, e.g. the support services available at that institution and details of the buildings, people and infrastructure. We can help with the initial set up. Please contact Marc Fabri ([m.fabri@leedsbeckett.ac.uk](mailto:m.fabri@leedsbeckett.ac.uk)) for more information.

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<sup>i</sup> Fabri, M., Andrews, P.C.S., Pukki, H.K. (2016) *Using Design Thinking to engage autistic students in the creation of an online toolkit to help with transition into higher education*. In *Journal of Assistive Technologies*, 10(2), Emerald Publishing, DOI 10.1108/JAT-02-2016-0008 – copy available on request

<sup>ii</sup> Fabri, M., Andrews, P.C.S. (accepted for publication) *Human-Centered Design with Autistic University Students: Interface, Interaction and Information Preferences*. In *Lecture Notes of Computer Science*, Springer – copy available on request