What should be done to ensure autistic graduates succeed in the workplace?

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Abstract

Of all disabled graduates leaving university, autistic individuals are the most likely to experience challenges when seeking to enter employment. Few studies have sought to explore the experiences and understanding of autistic graduates as a method of establishing what university-based practitioners can do to better support autistic students to develop their employability and readiness for the workplace. This article describes the perspectives of eleven recent autistic graduates and their experiences of obtaining work, becoming self-employed or struggling to find work. A thematic analysis of data collected from semi-structured interviews and questions by email was conducted. Results indicate themes relating to challenges encountered, effective strategies for success and suggestions for employers. Recommendations are made for both universities and the workplace. Key messages are the need for greater collaboration between university departments such as disability and careers services, and the requirement for autism awareness training for employers.

Introduction and literature review

A recent study of the first destinations of disabled graduates in the UK found that at all qualification levels (first degree, post graduate taught and post graduate research), those most likely to be unemployed were autistic graduates (Allen & Coney, 2021). This concurs with other research, which overwhelmingly demonstrates that autistic individuals have disappointing employment outcomes (Vincent 2020; Remington & Pellicano 2019; Nicholas et al. 2017; Bublitz et al. 2017; NAS, 2016). Unemployment has been shown to result in adverse effects on the mental health and life prospects of autistic people (Remington & Pellicano 2019; Howlin and Moss 2012). Conversely, employment has been found to have a positive effect on quality of life and as Walsh et al. (2014) note, provides autistic individuals with a means of social inclusion and the opportunity to contribute to society. Chen et al. (2014) assert that employment is fundamental to the wellbeing of all individuals, including those who are autistic. Hedley (2017) notes that the basic economic needs of an individual are met through employment, in addition to self-actualisation and the opportunity to build social networks. Nicholas et al. (2019, p4) affirm that there are many indications that autistic youth and adults 'face substantial socioeconomic adversity' and that some studies in the UK indicate that homelessness levels may be higher for autistic individuals than non-autistic people.

The number of autistic students in UK universities is increasing year-on-year (Vincent & Fabri 2020; Gurbuz et al. 2018). Given these rising numbers and the challenges many autistic graduates are known to face when seeking employment, it

is important that research is conducted regarding the specific challenges in order to develop appropriate support to help prepare these students for success in the workplace (Bublitz et al. 2017). Employment-related challenges that have been identified include social communication difficulties and mental health conditions, particularly stress and anxiety (Hurlbutt & Chalmers 2004). Nicholas et al. (2017) suggest that the social context of the workplace can cause barriers to optimal performance, especially where the context does not accommodate needs (such as heightened sensory awareness). Remington and Pellicano (2018) assert that the 'double empathy' issue (Milton 2012) causes challenges for autistic individuals, where misapprehension and misinterpretation is bi-directional and non-autistic managers and colleagues may lack understanding of the needs of autistic individuals. In additional to lack of understanding, Vincent & Fabri (2020) identify one of the obstacles for autistic graduates as being industry professionals' negative attitudes; they add that given the low levels of understanding, recruitment processes (which are largely designed with non-autistic candidates in mind) can cause real barriers for autistic graduates. Wong et al. (2018) argue that autistic behavioural characteristics should be regarded as differences rather than deficits and that there should be a strength-based employment approach; they describe typical autistic strengths under four categories: intense focus, cognitive/visual thinking, personality-behavioural pattern and hyper/hypo-reactivity to sensory input. Nicholas et al. (2019) concur with this concept of focusing on assets and strengths and suggest that employment studies and programmes should look at traits associated with positive psychology.

In the past few years, some universities have developed employability-related activities to support autistic students in preparing for the workplace; provision that has emerged includes supported work placement programmes (e.g. Remington and Pellicano 2018) and mentoring programmes (Lucas & James 2018). However, Vincent et al. (2021) and Bublitz et al. (2017) report that there is much less evidence of support for transitioning out of university than there is for the move into higher education. Vincent et al. (2021) recommend that the sector must address the uneven distribution of provision that currently exists to ensure that all autistic students experience the same outcomes as the rest of the student body. Nicholas et al. (2019) state that there is a lack of the perspectives of autistic people in research related to autism and employment and urge that this is needed in order to learn first-hand from experiences and successes and to drive improved outcomes. This last point regarding gaining insights and understanding from experts by experience is of particular relevance to this article, which seeks to describe the perspectives of recent autistic graduates, their experiences of employment and their recommendations for those in universities seeking to support autistic students to prepare for the workplace.

There are a number of models which endeavour to provide a basis for defining disability and a framework for creating strategies on how best to meet the needs of individuals. The World Health Organization International Classification of

Functioning Disability and Health (ICF) utilises a biopsychosocial framework to describe health-related functioning (Black et al. 2019; World Health Organisation 2002). The biopsychosocial model in autism studies captures the biological factors of autism that will in turn have an impact on how an individual processes the world (psychological factors), whilst their experiences will also be influenced by their environment and context (social factors). Guldberg (2020, p16) adds to this, stating that the biopsychosocial-insider model in autism studies:

> 'emphasises the need to understand the interrelationship between the biological, psychological and social whilst ensuring that individuals and subjective experiences are also taken into account when developing understandings of autism and autistic people'.

This article seeks to acknowledge the biopsychosocial-insider model and explores the experiences and views of autistic graduates as a way of understanding what can be done to support autistic individuals to successfully progress to employment when they graduate.

Methodology

This paper describes the findings of one element of the first cycle in a PhD action research study that is seeking to explore what could be done by careers practitioners like myself to support autistic students to successfully progress to employment when they graduate. As a practitioner, action research appeals as a methodology: Elliott (1991) notes, 'the fundamental aim of action research is to improve practice' (p.49). Kemmis (2009 p. 463) develops this by stating that action research seeks to transform 'practitioners' practices, their understandings of their practices and the conditions in which they practice'. At the start of this research study, I was aware that my practice could be improved and this concept of transforming not just practice, but also my understanding of my practice and the context in which I operates was of real interest.

This research study is underpinned by the philosophical stance I take towards social research: an emancipatory, critical educational paradigm. With this paradigm, there is a particular focus: 'to emancipate the disempowered, to redress inequality and to promote individual freedoms within a democratic society' (Cohen et al., 2018, p.51). This concern with promoting social justice and stimulating positive change through research resonated deeply with my reasons for choosing the research topic.

Action research commonly takes the form of self-reflective cycles, where researchers plan a change, act on this change, reflect on the processes and consequences of the change and then re-plan (Kemmis et al. 2014). As a practitioner seeking to improve the way I supported autistic students in an HE setting, I thought that an important element of my first cycle should be to seek to explore the views and lived experiences of recent autistic graduates, who had completed a university course

within the past five years. To recruit autistic graduate participants, invitations were sent out through my professional networks, a network based in the university department, and to existing individual contacts I had. Eleven autistic graduates responded to this call for participants; details of these can be seen in the table below.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Employment status	Studied at postgraduate level (Y/N)	University type (undergraduate course)	University type (postgraduate course)
Mark	M	35	Unemployed	Y	New	New
Julia	F	40	Employed PT & also a postgraduate student	Y	New	New
Kevin	M	25	Employed FT	N	1960s	N/A
Emma	F	22	Self-employed	N	New	N/A
George	M	46	Employed FT	Y	1960s	1960s
Gill	F	35	Employed PT	Y	Unique	New
Amir	M	25	Employed FT	Y	1960s	Ancient
Gabriella	F	25	Employed FT	Y	Ancient/Russell Group	Russell
Stacey	F	49	Employed PT & also a postgraduate student	Y	New	1960s
Philip	M	25	Unemployed	Y	Constituent college of a large city university	Constituent college of a large city university
Andrew	M	22	Employed in two PT roles	N	New	N/A

Participants were invited to provide their views on their experiences of employment (including self-employment and unemployment) and on the support they received (if any) whilst at university to prepare them for the workplace. Participants were also asked to share ideas on what would have been helpful for preparing them for work and succeeding in the recruitment and selection process. Individuals were asked how they would like to contribute (to allow for different preferences in types of communication); of the eleven, one participated in a face-to-face interview, one in a virtual interview, three via telephone interview and six contributed via email. The six participating via email were sent a digital copy of the interview questions and were asked to email their responses. Ethical consent was sought from the university where my PhD study is based. All participants were assured that their responses

would be stored confidentially and that they would be given anonymity, in accordance with good practice (Robson & McCartan 2016, p25) and BERA's ethical guidelines (BERA 2018, p21).

Once all interviews had been conducted, the recordings of these were transcribed; transcriptions, along with email responses were then analysed using NVivo. A thematic analysis was performed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach to coding and theme development (Clarke, Braun & Hayfield 2015, p230), which involved familiarization with the data, coding, identifying themes, reviewing these themes, defining the themes before writing up the findings. This led to the identification of three overriding themes. The first concerns the key areas of challenge experienced when seeking to enter and succeed in the workplace. The second theme relates to effective strategies employed by some of the participants and the third is suggestions the autistic graduates had for resolving some of the challenges they had experienced.

Results and discussion

In this section, the three key themes are described and discussed in turn.

1. Key areas of challenge

Job Interviews

Interviews for employment were highlighted as an area graduates felt they struggled in;

> 'I primarily struggled with interviews…due to a multitude of factors that relate directly to my symptoms. These included: not being able to read body cues, struggling with my tone of voice…and quite intense anxiety which made me stumble in the flow of my answers.' (Andrew)

This same graduate described how he had developed approaches to enable him to succeed:

> 'Since I tended to overthink and get extremely anxious for interviews, I employed strategies before each interview to help me relax before walking in front of a panel. Even something as simple as controlled breathing and positive thinking can really help.' (Andrew)

Chen (2015) notes that a number of papers highlight the challenges for autistic individuals in an interview situation and points to the concept that practitioners could provide training for autistic individuals to assist them with the social challenges presented in these situations. McKnight-Lizotte (2018) concurs with this, suggesting that support with job interview communication skills should be a priority area for those seeking to support autistic individuals to enter the labour market. However, Sarrett (2017, online) suggests that rather than seeking to train autistic individuals to

navigate the interview process, if employers modified social aspects of job interviews to make them more accessible, there could be 'vast diversity benefits for any workplace'. Indeed, in a recent study, Maras et al. (2021) found that simple adaptations to job interview questioning made by employers had a positive impact on the interview performance of autistic individuals.

Employer responses to disclosure*

* Although disclosure is commonly used to describe the process of an applicant or employee informing an employer about their disability, it is noted that this term can have negative connotations and so the neutral term 'informing employers that they are autistic', will be used for the rest of this article (except where 'disclosing' forms part of a research participant's quote).

Several participants described instances where informing employers that they were autistic had not led to any change in behaviour to them, or to suitable adjustments. One, when asked about workplace adjustments he had been offered stated:

'Literally none, and this is the kind of the problem because everyone kind of nods their heads in an interview and says 'Yeah, that's fine'. But then in reality with my current job when I started...I said to someone in the interview, 'you know, I'd really appreciate it if you could please let my line manager know', just so they are aware...and that didn't happen although they said it would.' (Kevin)

Another participant had a similar experience:

'The most frustrating thing was despite disclosing my autism at this point in the application & receiving the support (from a member of the careers team, to prepare for the interview), I felt the employers were not making slight adjustments to make my experience of interviewing slightly easier'. (Andrew)

Lindsay et al. (2021) describe concerns some autistic individuals have about informing employers that they are autistic, which includes worries about being judged and experiencing discrimination; they assert that this discrimination is often the outcome of a lack of knowledge and experience in working with disabled people. Bublitz et al. (2017) notes that misconceptions about autism amongst employers are common and that many individuals still experience discrimination in hiring processes.

Relational issues and isolation

Participants described employment-related social challenges they had experienced. One stated,

'I struggle with getting to know people deeper and forming those sort of relationships, friendships, it's like…tough…but I think that's why I seek fixed-term contracts, because the idea of being in a nine till five forever, if you like, for the foreseeable future without an end to it, …it's very daunting.' (Kevin)

Another participant stated that avoiding the social element of work had been a key criterion when choosing a particular career; he described why he has chosen archiving:

'this is fitting due to my liking of history and the fact it is work which does not involve an overt amount of socialisation.' (Philip)

McKnight-Lizotte (2018) notes that social challenges can negatively affect the workforce participation of autistic individuals and suggests that addressing these issues could have a positive impact on employment success.

Perhaps related to the last theme, some participants described feelings of loneliness or isolation in the workplace. One participant described how she has been given her own office as her team works in an open plan area that was not suitable for her, but this office is on a different floor,

'which means I am isolated from the day-to-day conversations and am often the last to know about new developments.' (Gill)

Bublitz et al. (2017, p8) suggests that co-workers may use 'stigmatizing beliefs to judge individuals with disabilities' and suggests this could lead to isolation, but it is difficult to assess if this was occurring in the workplaces these participants were situated in.

'Otherness'
Some participants described seeing themselves as different to the majority of people in the workplace and viewed the way that organisations operate as a mystery:

'I would still regard the working world, its day structure, worker interrelationships and working mindsets to all be a very foreign world to me.' (Mark)

Part of the mystery articulated above was not understanding the 'unwritten rules of the workplace'. One sought to illustrate this point:

'… you go into a job, 'What do you want me to do?'… 'the goals of the business are to be a 'happy workplace', where everyone's valued and make as much money as you can and constantly strive to improve'…and you go, 'That's what I'm gonna do'. But that's not the goal – that's the overt goal of the organisation. The covert goal of the organisation is peer structure and it's each individual trying to achieve their own agenda…' (Julia)

A lack of being understood by those in senior positions was also a common theme; one graduate said,

'Challenges have been around lack of understanding from management regarding late diagnosis and subsequent PTSD. Despite having support from Access to Work, this resulted in a disciplinary and an appeal with union support. It was very stressful and I fortunately had psychological therapy from a senior clinical psychologist…' (Stacey)

Chen et al. (2015) assert that findings in the literature indicate that 'social difficulties' are a major obstacle and can cause difficulties with supervisors and colleagues; they add that there can be negative effects for autistic individuals as a result of employers' attitudes. Chen et al. (2015) also note that an appropriate autism awareness training could help in these situations; this echoes the recommendations of Hendricks (2010, p129), who states that a 'primary component of existing supported employment programs is receptivity and knowledge of the employers and co-workers'. This suggests that there are challenges of misunderstanding for both parties involved: autistic employees and non-autistic managers and colleagues. As noted earlier, Milton (2012) describes this 'double empathy problem', suggesting that such situations should be viewed as a mutual issue, rather than viewing autistic individuals as having deficits, just because they are the minority group and therefore are typically seen as 'unusual' in their perspectives and subsequent behaviours.

Experiencing self-doubt
The challenge of the mystery of many aspects of the workplace and of being misunderstood have in some cases led to feelings of self-doubt. One participant described how some autistic people when criticised may react in different ways, but for her, it has led to doubting herself:

> '...the big successful ones like your Teslas…have a belief that they are fundamentally right and so when they've been alienated, they've gone 'no – you're wrong'…but me – I've gone 'I'm wrong' and I can't defend myself…so it's that 'who am I?' (Julia)

Sometimes these experiences and resulting doubts could lead to great distress:

> '…basically getting overwhelmed, crying in the toilets…this is the wrong job, this is the wrong environment…so I'm wrong…and I'll go into depression and I'm broken…' (Julia)

Milton (2012) notes that where an individual has experienced being 'othered' (Said 1978) and then internalised this, the results can be a self-fulfilling prophesy, leading to 'a self-imposed psycho-emotional disablement' (Milton 2012, p885).

Mental health

Many participants described mental health conditions, as has already been alluded to in the above two sections. One graduate stated,

> 'I've had lifelong depression and anxiety which is very common indeed for people on the spectrum. These compound the autism and make negative routines harder to break out of…it can be really hard at times to discern and

separate out whether something is in relation to autism or anxiety or depression. They all blur into each other.' (Mark)

Another said,

'it's really only been maybe the last 7 years … where I've really felt that I've kind of come a long way in terms of my personal...development of mental health...because I was... I was in a very sort of bad place emotionally…' (Amir)

Remmington & Pellicano (2019) note that 70-80% of autistic individuals experience mental health issues, particularly anxiety and depression; they add that there can be elevated levels of anxiety due to environmental factors such as sensory differences or social communication factors such as seeking to 'fit in'.

2. Effective strategies employed by individuals

Self-awareness is key

Some participants were able to fluently articulate their skills and strengths and also to reflect on how they had grown over a period of time. They were also able to describe what they did and did not want from a job role, or employment in general. One stated:

'I've always been a good all-rounder, but art, it's like I didn't need to try.' (Emma)

This individual later described how certain experiences (including living away from home in as busy city) had helped her to see what she did not want from work and how she decided upon her career choice:

'until you see it and then realize, 'actually, that's what I want, that's what would suit me.' (Emma)

One participant who was teaching English in another country, said:

'I need stimulation and the opportunity to do something that I feel at least vaguely matters and is interesting…one of the things I discovered when I went to university was that I really enjoyed the sharing of information…I loved giving presentations.' (Amir)

Confidence in what they could offer employment was another element of this theme; a third participant stated:

'I was asked by the lady who did my diagnosis to do a speech…and I described myself as 'Human 2.0' – you know, like Microsoft version 7 or whatever…I would describe myself as a better version of a human being.' (George)

It is well known that self-awareness is a key aspect of effective career-decision making and is a common theme of many career development models, such as the SOAR (Self-awareness, Opportunity-awareness, Aspirations and Results) model (Kumar, 2007) and the CareerEDGE model (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007). In her article 'Revisiting the CareerEDGE model of graduate employability', Dacre Pool describes self-awareness as 'essential for a successful life beyond university' (Dacre Pool, 2020). Being able to articulate the skills and abilities you have to offer is also key to success in obtaining employment.

Navigating unpredictability

Another set of qualities that some participants appeared to possess were curiosity, persistence, flexibility, optimism and risk-taking. One described optimism and persistence in her thinking when she found herself at a location she did not want to be in:

> 'Luckily I had the attitude where I sort of thought, 'Well, what can I do whilst I'm there… so building up the business and getting like a website set up…were just the loveliest distraction from everything else.' (Emma)

Another graduate, successfully working full-time, demonstrates his persistence and risk-taking in his account:

> 'I was actually declared unfit for work…but I was like – I was very bored at home and so I needed something to do…so I decided I would do the training… I was a bit worried, because I'd left behind the opportunity to sit at home and rest… It was decided that I didn't need to work, but I did it anyway…' (Amir)

These qualities are identified as characteristics that are core to the 'Planned Happenstance' model (Mitchell et al., 1999), which acknowledges that chance plays a key role in a person's career and has a focus on the qualities required to succeed in an unpredictable world. Considering the current circumstances of the labour market in a post-pandemic world, these attributes could be of even greater importance over the next few years.

The importance of networking

Batistic & Tymon (2017) define networking as 'the age-old practice of building and nurturing personal and professional links with a variety of people to create a bank of resources, including personal contacts, information and support'. Some participants illustrated the important role that networking had played in their success in employment. One graduate outlined how her connections had led to an internship with an MP and how another contact she had met through doing volunteering had suggested that she should apply for a role at a partner organisation, which she was then successful in obtaining. Another participant described how in advance of his interview for the Civil Service, he had sought out a senior manager in recruitment and asked questions about what to expect:

'Just…asking the right questions to the right people and you get the right answers, don't you?' (George)

He subsequently was offered, and accepted this job. There are many articles affirming the importance of networking for enhancing employment prospects (e.g. Jacobs et al. 2019, Sarkar et al. 2016) as a method of both exploring career ideas, finding out about opportunities and obtaining advice for success in the recruitment process.

Work experience is pivotal

Many participants had obtained experience of the workplace prior to leaving university, which is important for career exploration and 'development of professional behaviours and skills, and the development of self' (Bennett 2016, p21). Indeed, work experience is widely recognised as vital for the employability of graduates (Tran 2015; CIHE 2008; Rae 2007). One participant said:

'By the time I started my masters degree, I knew I wasn't going down the corporate law route…as it happened, it was also around this time that I started getting more involved with X (a charity), and ultimately that was what finally set my mind on the charity sector' (Gabriella).

Two graduates particularly described how previous roles had helped them learn about themselves: what they found difficult, in terms of social aspects and how to manage these aspects in their current roles. For one, starting to gain experience of craft fair events whilst at university was key for developing coping strategies regarding the social elements (which initially caused her to be anxious):

'What I've realised…is that I don't mind going to the events because I know that really the first thing people are going to want to talk to me about is my art…and this is my passion…so you think 'oh I know all about this'…and the more you do it, it's the same questions people ask. (Emma)

Identifying and overcoming challenges

Some participants gave an account of challenges they had or were having in the workplace, but described ways that had managed to overcome these. Chen et al (2015, p116) acknowledge the need for autistic individuals to develop coping strategies in the workplace and state, 'employment involves a complex social dynamic, which constantly changes'. One graduate mentioned that being aware of what helps and what hinders his mental health has been helpful:

'…my day is very structured which means it's very stress free. I don't have to think about my work when I get home…not having to think about my work keeps my anxiety down.' (Amir)

Another graduate described how, when he had worked in a lively team who liked to socialise, he had identified his limits in terms of what he could cope with socially: he would go out for dinner with his colleagues, but then leave when he had had enough:

'I've worked out in my life what stress I have to live with and what stress I don't have to live with.' (George)

3. Suggestions made to resolve challenges

'Try before you buy'

Participants had several suggestions regarding what would help autistic individuals to obtain and sustain employment. First, one suggested that work trials would be an effective way of assessing a candidate's ability to meet the requirements of a role and should replace interviews, which:

'…are intentionally obscure/misleading and are designed to make applicants open up and potentially catch them out. The truth is, is that job interviews are more of a social test for neurotypicals rather than a test of whether someone can practically do a job or not.' (Mark)

Work trials might allow all candidates to effectively demonstrate the skills they have through completing relevant tasks. Another suggested a similar notion:

'It's got to be a 'try and you buy' sort of approach, finding that person-centred fit…' (Julia)

Julia proposed that a work trial could also enable the autistic individual to have a chance to see if they will like the role and consider it to be suited to their strengths and interests.

A 'soft landing'

A second suggestion made by a participant was called a 'soft landing' for autistic individuals entering the workplace. She described this concept:

'Soft landing is a building term…it's a stage the Government wants in big buildings - they (the builders) hand over the building and go 'Bye, thanks for your money, I'm off'. And that's not going to get the most out the building - we need to understand how it works…there needs to be more interest from all the stakeholders into how that building is performing.' (Julia)

This graduate then explained what this might mean for an autistic person:

'So creating a soft landing, it's about helping …doing what you can to help that transition, recognising the difficulties, the challenges that person may have and providing the talk, the support around it and then hopefully preparing them…' (Julia)

Waisman et al. (2021) describe the concept of ongoing support in the workplace, such as a mentor, as something that could assist with social challenges in the workplace, provide guidance and promote colleagues' interpersonal initiatives.

Hedley et al. (2017) report that providing this support not only assists the mentee, but also leads to satisfaction in those providing the mentoring support.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The limitations of this study are acknowledged and in order to find out more about the lived experiences of autistic graduates and to further obtain perspectives on what should be done to support current autistic students to prepare for the graduate labour market, further research would need to occur. It should be noted that I am in the early stages of my PhD and it is likely that more themes and action points will be identified as I progress with this research. However, the results of this study have highlighted a number of challenges experienced by autistic graduates when entering the recruitment process and in employment. These may be interpreted as a combination of the biopsychological factors of the autistic individuals and the environmental factors of the workplace; as described by Black et al. (2019, p1658): 'employment outcomes for autistic individuals are influenced by a complex interaction of factors related to autistic individuals, their work involvement and activities and the environment within which they are situated'. Black et al. (2019) go on to suggest that the environmental factors may have the greatest influence on the success of an autistic individual in the workplace. Doyle (2020, p114) concurs with this, suggesting that approaches should focus more on 'adjusting the fit between the person and their environment than about treating a disorder'. Doyle (2020) also notes that legally, there is no obligation for the individual to change according to their workplace; the requirement sits with the employing organisation. Employers seeking to provide an accessible workplace for autistic individuals should further explore the suggestions made by several participants regarding how employers could resolve some of the identified challenges.

The effective strategies described by some participants are actually approaches that would be helpful for all graduates seeking success in employment. However, it is considered that additional attention should be given to ensuring that these particular individuals have an understanding of these strategies, as there are many indications that a great deal of determination is required to succeed in the labour market due to the challenges it currently poses for autistic individuals who may experience the world differently. Conducting this study has led me to consider the implications of these findings for practitioners seeking to support autistic students in higher education, resulting in a number of university-based and workplace-based recommendations, as outlined below.

University-based recommendations

1. Enhanced one-to-one support at university

Much good practice already exists regarding university-based one-to-one support for autistic students, but this is often focused on enabling the individual to navigate their

way through their studies (which is recognised as important for success in completing their qualifications). It is suggested that in addition to this support, there should also be an emphasis on coaching the student to develop self-awareness and to enhance awareness of the importance of the Planned Happenstance characteristics. This one-to-one support should be person-centred and strengths-focused (Pesonen et al. 2021). As a theme was identifying and then overcoming challenges, it would also be helpful if autistic students could be encouraged to reflect on challenges and to develop strategies for surmounting these. In addition, it is important that autistic students gain an understanding of employment-related support and funding available to them after they graduate. Advisers should ensure that they have a full understanding of the current government schemes and can communicate this clearly, to ensure all autistic individuals are equipped for a successful transition into work.

2. Increased opportunities for gaining work experience and networking

Some participants gave accounts of what they gained through work experience whilst at university, which included increased self-awareness and clarity about career plans. Much good practice already exists in many universities, including supported internships and volunteering award schemes. For example, at the time of writing, a new supported paid internship scheme delivered by Ambitious About Autism entitled 'Employ Autism' has recently been launched in 18 UK universities; this scheme involves specific training for careers and disability service practitioners as well as employers. It is important that autistic students are supported to take advantage of these schemes where they exist, and that university resources are allocated to initiate programmes where they currently do not occur.

Some participants highlighted the value of networking for exploring career options, obtaining advice about the recruitment process and finding out about opportunities. Again, there are many good examples of effective practice in universities, which include networking events, alumni talks, careers fairs and employer mentoring schemes. It is important that institutions recognise the importance of these, provide adequate resourcing and that autistic students are supported to engage in these activities (and perhaps most importantly, are helped to recognise the value in engagement for preparing for the future).

3. Collaboration between university departments

In any given institution, the two previous recommendations are likely to be the responsibility of at least three different departments – disability teams, careers teams, alumni teams and possibly other student support teams. For real change to be made for autistic students, it is key that the members of these teams work collaboratively, with effective referral systems and communication so that students can be actively encouraged to engage in the support and activities designed to help them. There is increased awareness of the need for this collaboration (Vincent 2020, Stevenson & Mellway 2016), but much more needs to be done to ensure that

universities are providing the most cohesive support possible for autistic students and their readiness for the workplace.

Workplace-based recommendations

1. Autism awareness training for employers

Given what has already been highlighted about the responsibilities of the employer and that some of the issues outlined by participants could perhaps be alleviated if these employers were to receive awareness training about autism, this concept is pertinent. A greater understanding of autism could lead to more inclusion and less judgement and less discrimination. Reverse mentoring, described by Chaudhuri and Ghosh (2012) as a social exchange tool, the purpose of which is to increase appreciation of different needs and perceptions, could be a useful means to achieving understanding.

2. Exploration of work-trials to replace interviews

A theme highlighted in this study is the challenges and anxiety related to interviews. There are many calls for employers to make their recruitment processes more autism-inclusive (e.g. Maras et al. 2021; Vincent 2020; Nicholas et al., 2019) and it is recommended that research explores the viability and outcomes of work trials as an alternative to interviews.

3. Mentoring in the workplace

As this study has highlighted, challenges for autistic graduates exist in the workplace as well as the recruitment process. In order to support autistic individuals not only to obtain, but also to sustain and thrive in employment, the concept of a 'soft landing' should be investigated. This could involve workplace mentoring, which has the potential to benefit all those involved.

In summary, there is much that can and should be done, both in universities and in the workplace. In all cases, it is recommended that those responsible for making change seek the expertise of autism charities, who can provide advice and training for those endeavouring to make positive adjustments. In addition, given the economic case for increasing employment rates of autistic individuals, it is recommended that calls are made to Government, to provide funding for appropriate training and resources are allocated to institutions and employers and in return, to hold these organisations accountable for providing inclusive and supportive environments for autistic individuals.

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