

Listening to Autistic Voices in Higher Education

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Introduction

Autism is a lifelong developmental condition which impacts how individuals communicate and interact with the world around them^[1] and is protected legally as a disability under the U.K. Equality Act^[2].

Disabled students are known to be disadvantaged across Higher Education (HE), in terms of attainment, retention and continuation^[3,4] but are progressing into HE in increasing numbers^[5,6].

Currently available Office for Students (OfS) awarding gap data indicate a continued disadvantage for social and communication-based disabilities (e.g. autism) relative to other disability groups (Figure 1).

This study aims to gather and amplify the voices of autistic people in HE, adding their perspectives to broader discussions on inclusivity. We adhere to the ‘nothing about us without us’ principle by placing autistic voices at the very centre of the discussion^[7,8].

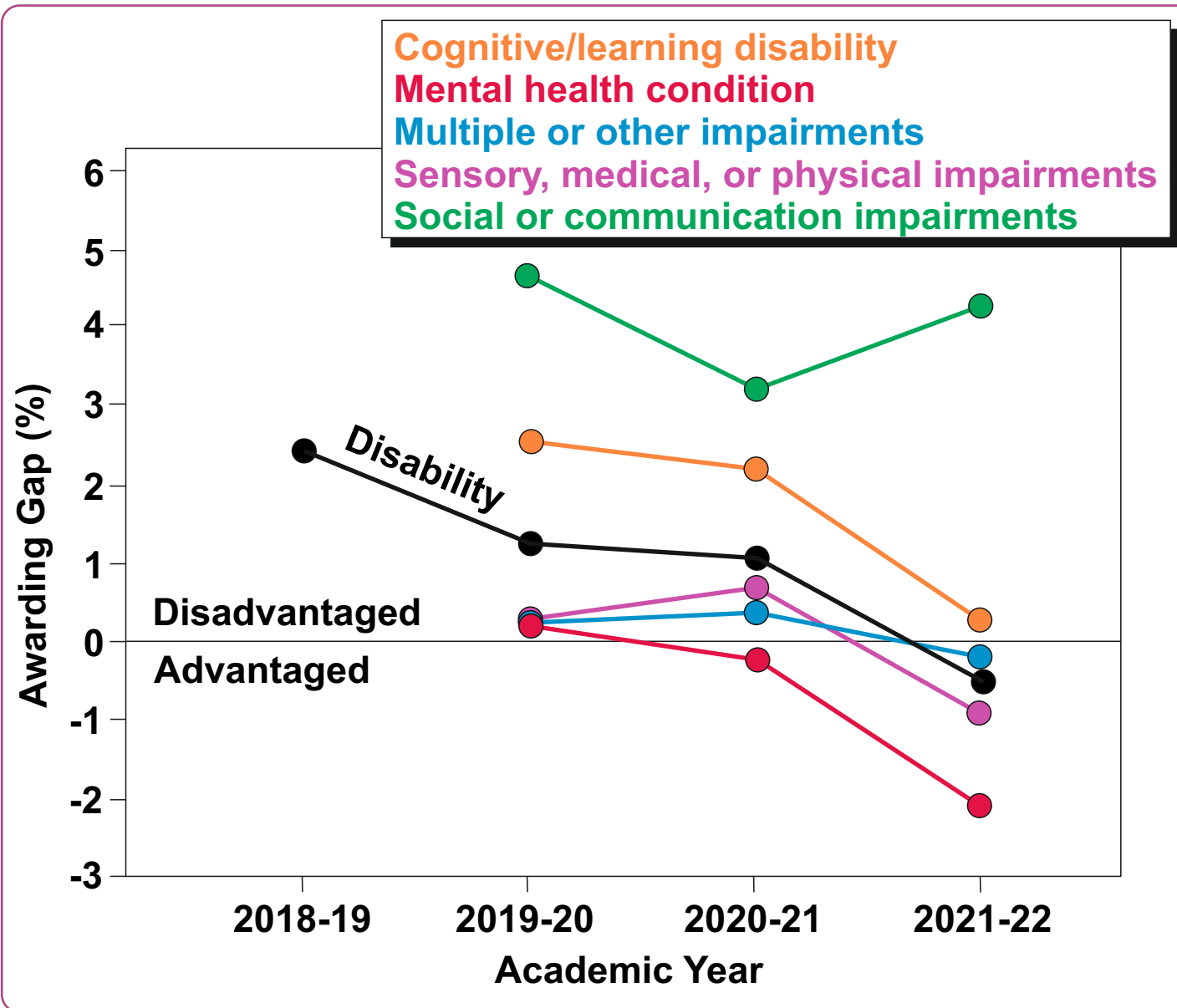


Figure 1: The disability awarding gap for full-time undergraduate students indicating the individual trends of different disability classifications^[9-12].

Methodology

We adapted the World Café method to create an online, asynchronous environment hosted in Discord.

Geoscience students were targeted for the study due to the diversity of learning styles and approaches routinely encountered in these disciplines.

40 participants from at least 16 U.K. HEIs took part in the study, responding asynchronously to 27 questions released sequentially over 4 weeks.

Over 85,000 words of in-depth discussion were captured and analysed via reflexive thematic analysis, creating three key themes and 8 subthemes.

Theme 1: Being Me

Participants demonstrated profound personal understanding, affirmative identity, capacity for deep self-reflection, recognising their own personal strengths and weaknesses, and the need to hide (mask) their true selves.

“It allows me to see things from a different perspective and think outside the box. I often have ideas and insights that haven't even crossed other people's minds.”

“I find it hard to understand social cues and nonverbal communication which often leads to misunderstandings and makes it a lot harder to communicate which affects my relationships with people, even friends.”

“I've had people tell me I can't be autistic because I look normal too and it's so annoying because it's called a hidden disability for a reason!”

“I've been masking most of my life in order to survive in social situations and [this] has caused a lot of difficulty with my sense of self.”

“I've had people tell me I can't be autistic because I look too normal and it's so annoying because it's called a hidden disability for a reason!”

“...it's easier to appear normal...”

Theme 2: Interacting with the World

Participants highlighted ways in which their interactions with the HE system and those within it was either supported or challenged, including experiences of different learning environments and teaching approaches.

“I feel a bit more relaxed in smaller tutorial rooms during seminars due to the fact I can move, fidget and talk a bit more which calms me down.”

“I tend to struggle with the lighting in labs, I am not sure if the lighting itself is different or if it's just because most of the surfaces are usually white.”

“Most fieldwork I have been on included long days out in the field, then activities in the [evening] and then shared accommodation... ...there's no free time or safe space to decompress and recharge which is extremely draining.”

“At my university there isn't a standardised marking system so I find it confusing to keep up with advice - a good thing in a piece of work for one teacher may be a bad thing for another.”

“...on trips I tend to have a large space in my suitcase for my safe foods...”

“Some teachers adapted and some didn't, I think it's to do with how much education/experience they have with autism and disabilities in general.”

Theme 3: Facilitating Change

Training in autism for all staff in HE, and the appreciation that every autistic person is different, was presented as being key to positive change.

“Of course, there is the saying 'when you've met one autistic person, you've met one autistic person', we're all different!”

“Training and understanding is most important as well as not applying a blanket approach to autistic individuals, some might need more understanding about rooms being too bright for them to concentrate and others might find the social atmosphere of seminars to be too difficult but by actually asking us what can be done to help and have an honest conversation that can produce change that would fit each individual's need.”

“I think better education awareness of our experiences, and listening to actual neurodivergent people, not just for teaching staff, but support staff and the wider student body too. How our neurodivergence intersects with mental health and disability too, as we often have co-morbidities in my experience. It's complex, but information helps to rehumanise and preserve our dignity if it becomes more normalised/less stigmatised + stereotyped.”

“Higher education needs to start considering diversity not only in race and ethnicity but also neurodiversity, this makes room for efficient planning of higher education to be more inclusive.”

Participants asked to be **fundamentally understood**, demonstrating a desire amongst autistic learners to be heard and to see change.

“We're not all the same, whilst we do have many similarities, so please, DO listen to us and do NOT infantilise - we're still highly capable people, we just navigate the world differently...”

“I am part of this community and want to feel accepted and involved in everything that goes on in this community. I want you guys to understand that most times my loneliness is not because I don't want to but I am unable and trying to.”

“Please be patient with me and take a bit of time to understand me. I may seem a little withdrawn and awkward at first but that's because I experience and process the world differently to most people. I may not have a loud personality and it may not be obvious at first, but I am passionate about my interests and always strive to work to the best of my ability with things that are important to me.

Please understand that my needs may not be obvious at first, and I may not seem to need support all the time, but it is very necessary to have support and I wouldn't lie about something I need. Finally, please be kind and know that we are also people wanting to learn and enjoy university and that I am really passionate about exploring and expanding my knowledge in my special interest alongside others who also love the subject.”

Positionality Statement

into the nuances of their data. We were able to reflect on similarities and differences to our own experiences of teaching, and previously as students ourselves. Where we have “outsider” experiences, coming from other disciplines or as neurotypical individuals, we were able to question and support the development of ideas, in a way that ensured that we were understanding participants' views and surfacing concepts that may be taken as read by “insiders”. Thus, collaboratively, we were able to interpret data and construct themes that are both sensitive to our participants and credible to our readers^[13].