

Experiences, Opportunities and Challenges of Autistic Students in Higher Education in Singapore: A Qualitative Analysis

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1. Introduction

- More autistic people are entering higher education (HE) than ever before worldwide
- Research on autistic students’ experiences, barriers, facilitators in HE increased over the last few years, but mostly from the UK, USA, and Australia; only one study from Japan and one from Israel to date.
- Some common challenges identified by autistic students include:
 - Transition programmes insufficient or non-existent
 - Academic accommodations often limited or unhelpful
 - Independent living, organizational/time management skills can be challenging
 - Navigating social interactions & relationships in college/university can be difficult
 - Managing physical & mental well being
- Autism education research in Singapore mainly so far focused on primary/ secondary school education
- Disability support offices & funding to support students with disabilities in HE relatively new (2014) in the country.

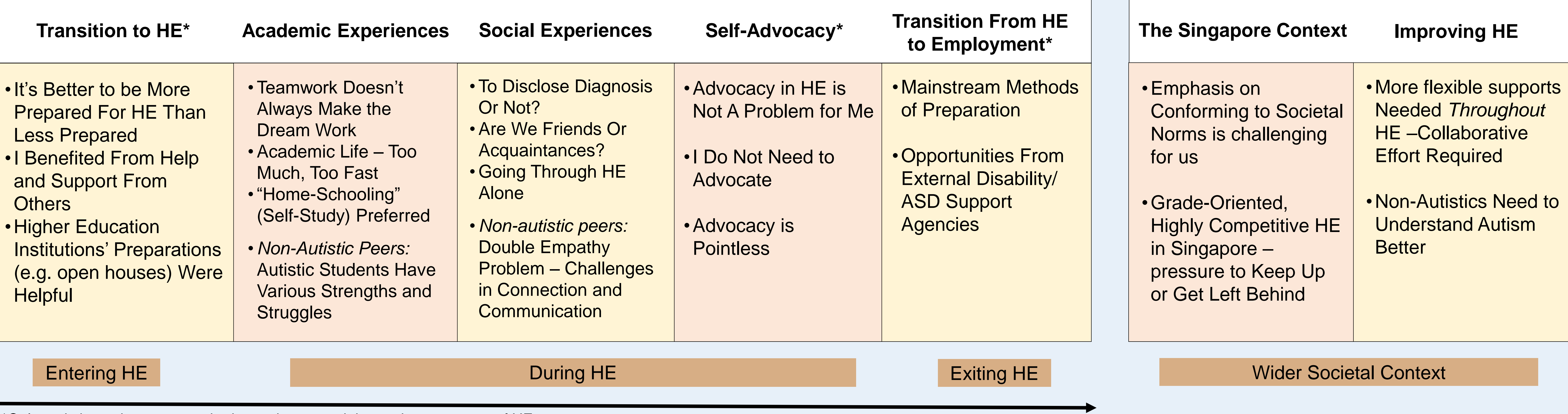
2. Aims

- To understand Singaporean autistic students’ academic and social experiences, strengths & needs in HE
- To explore Singaporean non autistic students’ experiences of, thoughts about & attitudes towards autistic peers
- To investigate whether participants’ experiences may be influenced by the Singaporean educational and sociocultural context

3. Methods

-  Questions & online survey developed in consultation with autistic HE graduate
-  20 autistic students (21-29 years old; 15 males)
26 non-autistic students (20-30 years old; 8 males)
-  Demographic information
Online open-ended questions about HE experiences
-  Common ideas (“themes”) were identified from participants’ responses through Thematic Analysis

4. Findings: Our Study’s Thematic Map



5. Findings explained

The thematic map above shows the derived themes relating to the “journey” of HE from entering to exiting, as well as the Singapore context and recommendations for improving HE.

1. Transition to HE

- Important to prepare for entry into HE (e.g. advice from seniors, attending open houses).
- Autism-specific, person-specific transition plans would be helpful but are largely not available.

2. Academic Experiences

- Group work at HE was enjoyable for some autistic students, but “*least favourite*” for others.
- Some struggled to “*keep up with ... tutorials, projects and assignments*” due to the “*fast pace of learning*”.
- “*Home-schooling*” preferred by many autistic students as “*University is more for the network, [students] can self-learn the content.*”
- Non-autistic students described their autistic peoples as bringing “*a variety of positives*” but also facing various struggles e.g. “*slower*” to process information.

3. Social Experiences

- Some autistic students disclosed their diagnosis and were met with support; others chose not to disclose to avoid “*another label to [be judged] with*”.
- Some maintained friendships throughout HE; others experienced “*friendships*” ending when group projects ended.
- Many autistic students go through HE alone – some prefer the independence; others were excluded because they were “*not like the rest*”.
- Double Empathy Problem – difficult for autistic and non-autistic students to understand each other’s perspectives due to a perceived “*barrier*” and “*disconnect*” between them.

4. Self-Advocacy

- Some autistic students were able to advocate for themselves in HE, while others did not feel a need to advocate as they were “*capable of going through the norms*”.
- A few felt that advocacy was pointless due to deep-rooted stigma about autism.

5. Transition From HE to Employment

- Many prepared “*as a normal person would prepare*” using mainstream methods (e.g. career workshops); others found opportunities through external disability agencies.

6. The Singapore Context

- Autistic students who cannot “*blend in*” with non-autistics may face rejection – “*the nail that sticks out here will get knocked down*”.
- Strong emphasis on grades, high competition between peers – those who cannot keep up will lose out, especially academically.

7. Improving HE

- Existing supports insufficient; HE as a whole “*doesn’t seem to be flexible enough*”
- Stigma and lack of understanding about neurodevelopmental/mental health conditions prevalent – may contribute to why our autistic participants rarely spontaneously referred to mental health difficulties, unlike Western counterparts.

6. Future Directions, Recommendations & Conclusions

- We need to expand existing knowledge base by surveying additional stakeholders, e.g. HE faculty, professionals, family members of autistic HE students, especially in Asian countries to explore students’ experiences in different educational/sociocultural contexts.
- Improvements within HE include developing transition programmes and providing Individualised Education Plans tailored to each student’s needs and specific to each IHE.
- **Crucially, HE institutions need to be flexible in providing accommodations since support needs differ between individuals and may change over time.**
- At the societal level, neurodiversity appreciation and acceptance could be incorporated into school curricula and social initiatives to encourage understanding of autistic people from a young age, and to better equip non-autistic peers to accept, include and support autistic peers mitigating the double empathy problem.