"Students shouldn't have to provide proof that they need help": Autistic Students' and Disability Support Staff's Perspectives of Support at University

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1. Background

- There are increasing efforts to make higher education more inclusive and accessible to autistic people.
- Past research indicates that not all higher education providers are adequately supporting their autistic students (e.g., [1,2]).
- Existing research also lacks representation from key support providers (e.g., disability officers) to understand how supports are coordinated and delivered.

2. Aims/Research Questions

1. Understand autistic university students' experiences of receiving supports
2. Understand university disability staff's experiences of providing and/or coordinating supports
3. Investigate why and in what aspects of UK universities legislation is not being equally met – how can services be improved?

3. Methods

Participants
- 10 autistic students (19-63 years old; 5 male, 4 female, 1 non-binary)
- 8 disability support staff (28-56 years old; 7 female, 1 male)

Measures
- Individual semi-structured interview over Zoom or email exchange
- Questions about experiences getting / providing / improving support

Analysis
- Common ideas ("themes") were identified from participants' responses through Reflexive Thematic Analysis [3-5]

4. Results

Theme 1: Preparing for University

A staff member describing a transition event for students:
"They basically get the opportunity to hear little talks about different things that are happening, meet disability officers, meet study skills tutors, meet the mentors, so that they have before they arrive … some degree of familiarity with where they … need to go and who they need to connect with." [STA4]

Theme 2: Getting Support Is Not Always Easy

2.1: Individual Barriers to Receiving Support

A student discussing the "hidden curriculum" of higher education:
"You can't ASK because this is HIGHER ED and people will despise you for being such a fool, and not knowing what to them is blindingly obvious." [STU10]

2.2: External Barriers to Receiving Support

A student discussing under-resourced disability services:
"This results in extremely long delays in getting support plans, failure to provide reasonable adjustments early enough, and students performing well below their potential as a result." [STU7]

Theme 3: The University Experience Has Room for Improvement

3.1: Make University More Accessible

A student suggesting more flexible access to support:
"Stop requiring medical evidence first … Students shouldn't have to provide proof that they need help." [STU6]

3.2: Improve Delivery of Supports

Staff members discussing training:
"They need to understand autism better." [STA2]
"Compulsory training for all staff within the university that are student-facing, around disability and particularly neurodiversity … it's the foundation of the rest of it being better." [STA8]

5. Discussion, Implications & Conclusion

- A lot of work and effort is needed from both students and staff in order for students to receive support.
- Students and staff discussed various barriers to receiving support and suggested numerous steps to help reduce these barriers and improve university experiences for autistic students.
- Multiple groups of stakeholders (e.g., school and university staff, autistic students' family members) were noted to be involved in students' university preparations, as well as in the coordination and provision of supports for students.
- Accordingly, improving higher education requires joint effort from numerous stakeholders, and includes the need to improve public services (e.g., diagnosis through the NHS).

References:
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