



“I hope that at college I will have support from someone who really understands what I find difficult”:

REMOVING BARRIERS TO LEARNING FOR STUDENTS WITH AUTISM IN FURTHER EDUCATION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 1990s saw a surge of children being diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders who are now approaching the age of transition to college. The autism ‘triad of impairments’¹ will disadvantage those with autism in any social setting including a teaching and learning environment. Anecdotal evidence suggests that persons with autism are the subject of often substantial barriers to learning and to accessing learning (which amounts to discrimination) by educational establishments due to a general lack of awareness and understanding of autism and its implications for teaching and learning. This study sought to enhance current appreciation of autism awareness and understanding in further education, and to investigate barriers to learning and accessing learning by means of a series of individual interviews, group interviews, and the completion of questionnaires.

During the course of our research we ‘discovered’ earlier research undertaken in the West Midlands by East Birmingham College (now City College Birmingham) and by Autism West Midlands which we refer to. The general level of autism awareness and understanding amongst staff at Dudley College was insufficient to enable us to provide an autism-friendly, person-centred teaching and learning environment for students with autism (and as many members of staff who completed our awareness questionnaire were those with an existing

interest in autism the general level of awareness cross-college was likely to be lower than we recorded). Key recommendations were that colleges needed to identify their students with autism, ensure that each such student was ‘profiled’ (everyone with autism being different), and provide autism awareness training cross-college (to ancillary staff who come into contact with students, not just teaching and learning support staff), quiet rooms where students with autism can go when stressed, autism self-awareness and social skills training for students with autism, direct access to autism expertise for staff, social networking facilities for students with autism, and make their built environment as autism-friendly as possible. One prospective student of Dudley College, when asked “As a person with autism do you have any points to make to a college of further education about accommodating your autism?” said “I hope that at college I will have support from someone who really understands what I find difficult”. We hope so too.

¹ The autism ‘triad’ covers socialisation, communication and imagination impairments.

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Secondary schools

All schools contacted via the Dudley Autism Outreach Service

Further education colleges

Dudley College, Loughborough College, North Warwickshire and Hinckley College, and Wolverhampton College

Specialist colleges

Glasshouse College (Stourbridge) and Whitegates College (Worksop)

Other bodies

Autism West Midlands, Dudley Autism Outreach Service, and TOADS

We also wish to express our thanks to Dr Luke Beardon of the Sheffield Hallam University Autism Centre for his advice on designing our question set; Christine Breakey – author of *The Autism Spectrum and Further Education: A Guide to Good Practice* – who travelled all the way down from Sheffield to Dudley to advise and guide us; Diane Hanke, Head of Dudley Autism Outreach Service, for taking time to meet us to discuss autism, and for leading a workshop at our dissemination event; and Neale Pilkington, Chair of Dudley Autistic Support Group, for his involvement with us throughout the project, and for leading a workshop at our dissemination event.

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CHAPTER 1: SETTING THE SCENE

AN INTRODUCTION TO AUTISM

Standard psychiatric diagnostic manuals classify autism as a pervasive developmental disorder involving delays in the development of various basic human functions typically first evident in childhood (World Health Organisation, 1992; American Psychiatric Association, 1994). There is agreement that autism involves delays in three particular areas of function (often referred to as the triad of impairment) i.e. social interaction, social communication, and social imagination (the latter often giving rise to restricted and repetitive behaviours) with onset in the first three years of childhood and impacts, mainly adverse, throughout life. Asperger's syndrome (AS) is also characterised by the triad of impairment but there is no significant delay in language or cognitive development (whereas autism involves delays in both areas) and there need be no developmental difficulties before three years of age. A person with AS is therefore sometimes referred to as high-functioning². Those with AS are often also described as having 'mild autism'. This is not always correct as social difficulties may be severe. Although not mentioned in the standard diagnostic manuals, physical clumsiness and unusual use of language are frequently reported with AS, and persons with autism/AS may also have one or more sensory sensitivities (e.g. to light, sound, touch).

It has been said that about four or five children per 10,000 have autism, but if Asperger Syndrome (AS) is included the prevalence rate may increase to as many as one per 500 children (Ghaziuddin, 2005). More recent studies have indicated higher rates for autism spectrum prevalence, for instance the National Autistic Society (NAS) in the UK consider around 1 in 100 to be a best estimate autism spectrum prevalence rate in children (National Autistic Society, 2007). No prevalence studies have ever been carried out on adults. There is no denying that prevalence rates have risen in recent years. It is a matter of debate as to whether there is a real increase in autism. It could simply be that increasing awareness of autism amongst professionals in the field is resulting in persons being diagnosed who would

not previously have received a diagnosis, coupled with the widening of the field from classical autism to the concept of a wider spectrum of conditions involving triad features. The European Commission's Health and Consumer Protection Directorate has said that:

“The rates in recent surveys are substantially higher than 30 years ago and certainly reflect the adoption of a much broader concept of autism, recognition of autism among normally intelligent subjects (Asperger's syndrome), changes in diagnostic criteria, and an improved identification of persons with autism attributable to better services ...”. (European Commission, 2005).

Whatever the position is regarding the stability or otherwise of the autism population, a prevalence rate in the region of 1% of the population represents a significant number of people with autism, and society should ensure that each and every person with autism lives as full a life as possible. The ability to live a full life is enhanced by ensuring that each person receives the best education possible hence, the inclusion in the general framework for the rights for people with autism adopted as a Written Declaration by the European Parliament, of the following right: “THE RIGHT of people with autism to accessible and appropriate education” (Autism Europe, 2006). UK anti-discrimination legislation in the disability field now outlaws discrimination against students and prospective students with autism (SENDA, 2001).

It would appear that no research has been undertaken into the prevalence of autism in further education establishments. Given the compulsory nature of pre-16 education in this country, and the difficulties that persons with autism often face when attending school, including being at greater risk of exclusion, it is likely that the percentage of students with autism in post-16 education is significantly lower than the percentage of such students in compulsory education who have the capacity to benefit from continuing their education in an FE college. VanBergeijk, Klin and Volkmar say that

² The term “high-functioning autism” reflects intellectual ability, not overall functioning.

“In the 1990’s (sic) a surge of children were diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) and are now approaching college age” (VanBergeijk, Klin and Volkmar, 2008). There is anecdotal evidence of increasing numbers of students with autism in FE colleges.

As far as we are aware, there are also no statistics concerning the ‘drop-outs’ from further education to suggest whether or not students with autism may be more likely to leave an FE establishment without completing their course because of the difficulties they face (whether or not related to barriers to progress put in their way by their college).

Given that we have no figures to indicate how the percentage of those persons with autism who could benefit from further education, as compared to those who actually go on to an FE establishment, compares with the numbers relating to all young persons, and are also unable to make a comparison between course completion rates for those with autism and the total FE student population, we are unable to comment on how successful persons with autism are in achieving their desired FE qualifications in relation to overall success rates in colleges of further education. We will say something about the need for further research into the prevalence of autism within the FE establishment population, and the success or otherwise of students with autism in gaining the qualifications they have set their sights on, elsewhere in this report. At this stage we simply wish to express our view that:

- 1) The difficulties persons with autism face in primary and secondary education (and about which we will also have something to say later) are likely to discourage many young persons with autism with the potential to benefit from further education from going to college;
- 2) The additional difficulties faced by young people with autism who have made the challenging move to an FE establishment – with an ethos based around independence, self-reliance and self-study – add to the problems they already face and, in consequence, may make successful completion of their chosen course more difficult than ‘graduation’ from school was for them.

We will now go on to look at the general difficulties persons with autism and AS face in an education setting as well as the extra problems they are required to deal with when working in an environment where all students need to be independent, self-reliant and able to study on their own with far less supervision than they are used to. We will do so in relation to the triad of impairment referred to earlier that, with subtle differences, is common to both diagnoses:

- Social interaction
- Restricted and repetitive rituals, behaviours, activities and interests
- Verbal / nonverbal communication.



SOCIAL INTERACTION

Impairments in social interaction are a core feature of both autism and AS. In both cases, and acknowledging that no two persons are exactly alike, young people with autism present with impairments in social understanding which, in turn, give rise to impairment in social interaction. Much research has been undertaken on the differences between autism and AS. In the area of social interaction. Macintosh and Dissanayake have said that “although children with (AS) displayed more social awareness and interest than those with autism, this did not result in greater involvement in social play or more friendships in the former group” (Macintosh and Dissanayake, 2004). Social understanding and interaction deficits lie at the heart of autism and explain why it is referred to as a social learning difficulty. Some have described autism as ‘social dyslexia’ as autism can restrict access to learning in the same way that dyslexia restricts access to reading. Whilst autism is often accompanied by an intellectual learning disability it is not itself an intellectual learning disability. Nevertheless, the profound social difficulties associated with autism can make academic learning much more difficult for a young person with autism than it is for their neurotypical peers as so much learning takes place in social groups (the traditional classroom). A further challenge faced by young persons with autism is that their mindblindness³ may last until they are between 9 and 14 years of age whereas a neurotypical child will generally be ‘sighted’ in this way at age 3 or 4. A young person with autism may be faced with the challenges associated with puberty and developing theory of mind simultaneously.

The social difficulties we see with autism are likely to lead to problems with self-esteem and cause a child to be withdrawn and not wish to participate in class. However, a child or young person with autism may often have as much difficulty with unstructured time between lessons (‘free’ periods etc.) unless they have a plan for how to make use of free time. To a neurotypical person this may not appear particularly important but it is for the child with autism who finds day-to-day life difficult enough when the timetable is clearly laid out for them, and they know what is expected of them, let alone when structure is absent.

RESTRICTED AND REPETITIVE RITUALS, BEHAVIOURS, ACTIVITIES AND INTERESTS

Diagnostic criteria for autism cover stereotyped body movements, persistent preoccupation with parts of objects, marked distress over changes in trivial aspects of environment, and an unreasonable insistence on following routines in precise detail. With AS diagnostic criteria include an encompassing preoccupation with one or more stereotyped and restricted patterns of interest that is abnormal either in intensity or focus and/or an apparently inflexible adherence to specific, non-functional routines or rituals and/or stereotyped and repetitive motor mannerisms and/or persistent preoccupation with parts of objects.

In an education context a difficulty may be experienced with a child or young person with AS who cannot see the point of a subject they are not interested in. If their special interest can be used as the focus of a lesson they are likely to learn better. Of course, it will not always be possible to do this and the challenge may be to motivate the child or young person to learn in areas of the curriculum that they find ‘boring’.

Change is a problem for persons with autism. To appreciate why this should be the case it is necessary to realise that a person with autism finds it extremely difficult to exercise any control over their lives. They are constantly bombarded with sensory input without the neurotypical person’s ability to ‘shut out’ extraneous input and focus on what really matters. Hence, the person with autism will seek to introduce an element of control through engaging in repetitive behaviours or rituals. For a person with autism to cope with significant change (significant to them, not to the neurotypical tutor) they need to have the change explained to them carefully in advance as preparation.

³ Mindblindness refers to the Theory of Mind which is an individual’s ability to attribute mental states to themselves and to others. This is often referred to as “mind-reading” although it does not actually involve the reading of minds but the use of sensory stimuli to guess the mental state of others. A child with autism usually develops this function much later in life than a neurotypical child.

A further pattern associated with autism is a tendency to focus on the individual trees and miss the fact that they make up a wood (the detail rather than the 'big picture'). Drawings and paintings by artists with autism are often highly, and very accurately, detailed. One well-known drawing is of a room with a person in it. All the things in the room are drawn in minute detail but the person is not shown in any detail and the person's face is totally blank (this shows both the tendency to concentrate on detail, and the mindblindness that can result in another person not being fully 'seen'). The central coherence⁴ theory seeks to explain the detail focused perspective of the person with autism. The enhanced ability of the person with autism to focus on fine details, and to maintain concentration for long periods, coupled with their tendency to have special interests, is a positive aspect to AS.

VERBAL / NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

In children on the autism spectrum there is a matching spectrum of communication symptoms that vary from a mute child, to one who parrots speech (echolalia) and reverses pronouns, right up to a child with AS whose speech is apparently quite normal but who makes errors in their use of language (pragmatics). Children with AS may speak in a very pedantic manner. There may be a tendency to interpret language literally. This tendency to literal interpretation is due to the difficulty the child with autism has in understanding non-verbal aspects of communication. It is sometimes said that up to 70% of human communication is non-verbal. One can immediately see that a child with autism may be relying on only, say, 40 to 50% of the communication inputs (speech, body language, tone of voice etc) that the neurotypical child can call upon. Clearly, the communication difficulties associated with autism may put the child at a severe disadvantage in comparison to their neurotypical peers (and cause or contribute to the social difficulties).

Yet a further potential difficulty for the child with autism is that they may be visual or kinaesthetic learners who will struggle in an auditory environment. They may also need more time in which to assimilate instructions or taught subject matter as they have less short-term, working memory than their neurotypical peers. (This is one aspect of the Executive Functioning⁵ difficulties associated with autism.)



⁴ Central coherence (CC) theory attempts to explain why persons with autism exhibit particular strengths as well as weaknesses. CC can be described as a preference for the general against the specific or a tendency to focus on detail.

⁵ Executive functioning has been described as problem-solving behaviour or as the mental control processes that enable self-control necessary to achieve a particular end. The main components of EF have yet to be established but are considered to encompass matters such as formation of abstract concepts, planning, focusing and sustaining attention, shifting focus, and working memory.



ANTI-DISCRIMINATION LAW RELATING TO AUTISM IN FURTHER EDUCATION

The first anti-discrimination law relating to disabilities in the UK was the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA 1995). Unfortunately, educational establishments were exempted from the provisions of this Act and it was only in 2002 that the exemption of education from UK disability anti-discrimination law was removed when certain provisions of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA) came into force (other provisions were effective from 2003 and 2005). With the introduction of SENDA, discrimination against students – including students in further education – became unlawful. SENDA only prohibits discrimination against persons defined as disabled under the DDA 1995. As autism is treated as a disability under the DDA 1995 this means that students with autism are provided with the full protection of current anti-disability law. SENDA makes it unlawful for further education establishments to discriminate against disabled students and prospective students (including those with autism) as follows:

- (a) in the arrangements it makes for determining admissions to the institution;
 - (b) in the terms on which it offers to admit him to the institution; or
 - (c) by refusing or deliberately omitting to accept an application for his admission to the institution.
- 2) It is unlawful for the body responsible for an educational institution to discriminate against a disabled student in the student services it provides, or offers to provide.
- 3) It is unlawful for the body responsible for an educational institution to discriminate against a disabled student by excluding him from the institution, whether permanently or temporarily. (SENDA, 2001)

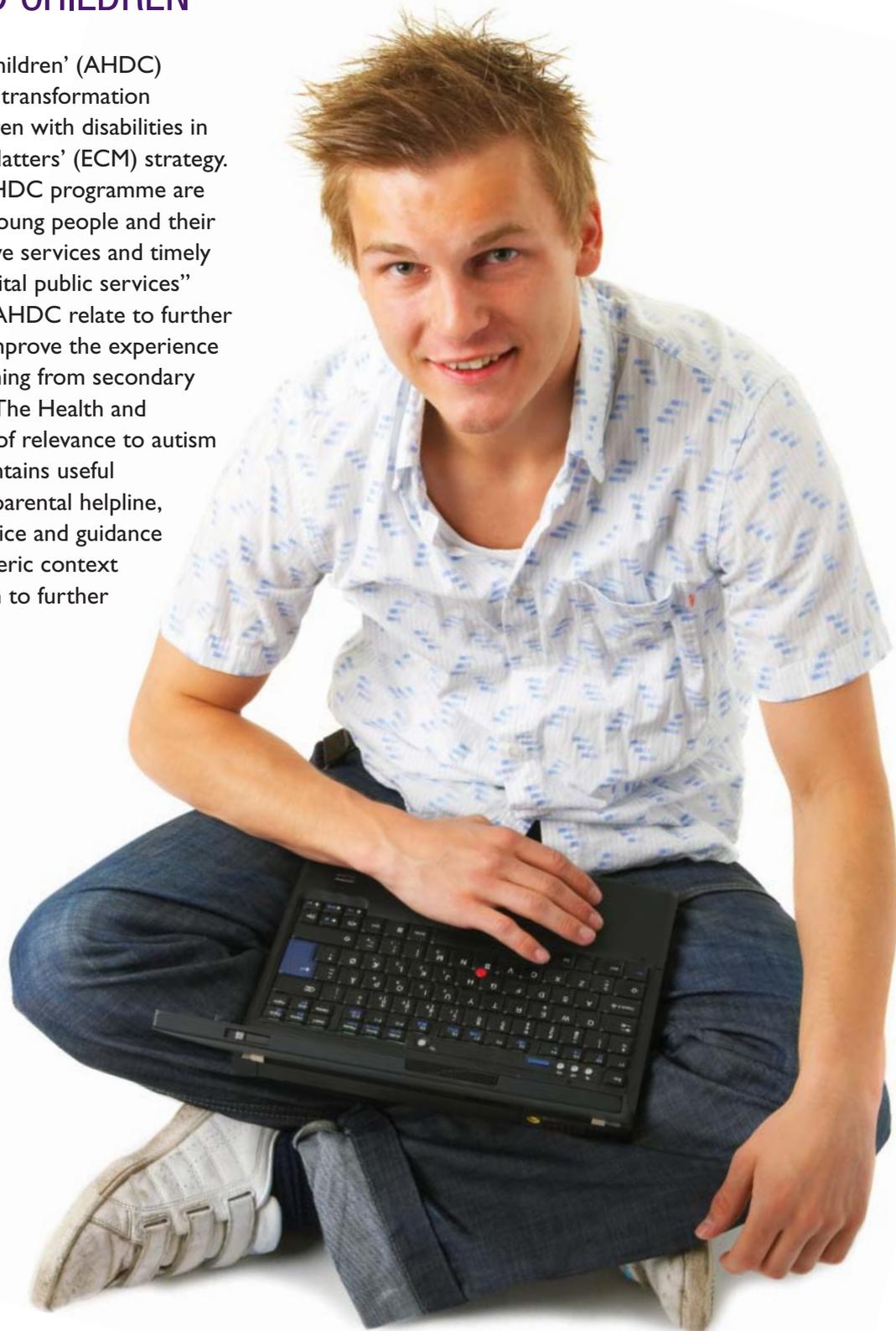
The Disability Discrimination Act 2005 placed a duty on public bodies to actively promote disability equality. This is a positive duty aimed at ensuring that public bodies proactively embed disability equality across all their activities instead of simply responding to complaints of discrimination from individuals with disabilities. This Act applies to educational establishments including FE colleges.

Because the public sector duty to promote equality of opportunity for persons with disabilities is an anticipatory (proactive) duty, public sector bodies must ensure that no policy, practice, procedure or service discriminates against persons with disabilities. And when planning future service provision or developing new policy, practice or procedures they must ensure that no discrimination can arise.

In 2009 a landmark piece of anti-discrimination legislation – the Autism Act – was passed. This Act imposes various duties on Local Authorities in relation to their delivery of social services, and on Primary Care Trusts in relation to health services. Whilst it does not cover education services, some commentators consider that the effect the Act should have on local authorities will eventually impact positively on all their areas of responsibility.

EVERY CHILD MATTERS: 'AIMING HIGH FOR DISABLED CHILDREN'

The 'Aiming High for Disabled Children' (AHDC) programme is the Government's transformation programme for services to children with disabilities in England under the 'Every Child Matters' (ECM) strategy. The three main themes of the AHDC programme are to "empower disabled children, young people and their families: promote more responsive services and timely support and boost provision of vital public services" (DfES, 2007). Various aspects of AHDC relate to further education, including the aim to improve the experience for young people when transitioning from secondary education to further education. The Health and Wellbeing strand of ECM is also of relevance to autism e.g. the Young Minds⁶ website contains useful information on autism and AS, a parental helpline, and links to other sources of advice and guidance on autism and AS, albeit in a generic context rather than specifically in relation to further education (DfES, 2007).



⁶ 'Young Minds: the voice for young people's mental health and wellbeing is said to be the UK's only national charity committed to improving the mental health and emotional well-being of all children and young people. Its mission includes the improvement of life chances for children and young people at risk of and experiencing difficulties with mental and emotional health.'



CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH DESIGN, METHODOLOGY AND ETHICS

AN ETHICAL APPROACH TO THE RESEARCH

Whilst all research must be undertaken in an ethical manner and with integrity, the particular vulnerability of persons (particularly young persons) with autism imposes a special 'duty' on researchers to ensure that persons participating in the research are protected at all times.

Our prospective interviewees were given plenty of time to consider whether they wished to be interviewed. This was achieved by providing each prospective interviewee with written details of the project (including how information gained at interview was to be analysed, reported and disseminated) together with a copy of the research protocol a few days before their interview. Where we had had dealings with the student's parent, we either submitted the project details and protocol to the student and parent at the same time or forwarded them to the student via the parent. Where practical we also offered to meet with the student prior to the interview as a means of introducing the interviewer to the student (with the parent present where requested). We tried to ensure that no student was shown the protocol for the first time on the day of the interview but, despite our precautions, this did not always happen. However, we think that our approach enabled us to achieve the informed consent of the student (and parent where involved). The consent agreement was worded as follows:

“You are under no obligation to participate in this survey but, if you do participate, you may answer only those questions that you wish to answer. Completion of this form will be taken as consent for your responses to be incorporated in the analysis and reporting of the results of this survey. All results will be unattributed and no individuals participating in this survey will be identifiable.”⁷

All interviewees were accompanied by a parent, mentor, or learning support worker.

No sensitive data has been handled. All data was carefully handled to ensure that it was kept secure and confidential. This report has been drafted so that it is not possible to identify the specific sources of the data or individual respondents and thereby ensures anonymity.

No payments were made to secure participation although after each interview was concluded we offered a £10 gift voucher to the student (i.e. the gift was not an inducement to participate).

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The main purpose of the project was to conduct research into the specific needs of FE learners or potential learners on the autism spectrum. Dudley College decided to employ two researchers to investigate the needs of students with autism and the barriers they face in further education and any barriers facing them in accessing further education. This will allow us (and other FE establishments) to work towards removing barriers.

Whilst we have a good track record of working with learners with behavioural issues and/or disabilities (our Learning Difficulties and Disabilities team enrol a substantial number of learners annually – 402 such students in the academic year 2007-08), (** student numbers for 08-09 would be more relevant) and these learners are supported through a range of methods including one-to-one support, we seek to continually improve our services, curriculum and learning environment. The establishment of this autism research project is a reflection of our commitment to continuous improvement and an initial, and timely, response to the Autism Act 2009.

⁷ Extracted from the project details and research protocol form designed by the project team.

The specific project objectives were to:

- Undertake 12 workshops to raise awareness among cstaff and staff of stakeholder organisations of issues relating to further education learners with autism, developing the necessary training material;
- Publish a report outlining the findings of the research activity;
- Develop and publish an autism awareness-raising pamphlet;
- Hold a 'launch event' to publicise the research findings amongst stakeholders and others interested in the subject matter;
- Upload learner video clips to Youtube and to our website;

In the longer term:

- Increase the number of learners with autism enrolled at Dudley College;
- Mainstream the findings of the research into college teaching practice and support service provision.

SELECTION OF RESEARCH TOOLS: LISTENING TO THE 'EXPERTS'

In their research into the views and experiences of pupils on the autistic spectrum in mainstream secondary schools Humphrey and Lewis say that: "several authors have suggested that the perspectives of pupils with special educational needs in inclusive contexts have been under-explored" (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). They point out that governmental guidance "reflects this trend" and highlight a quotation from the Department for Education and Skills: "Children and young people with special educational needs have a unique knowledge of their own needs and circumstances and their own views about what sort of help they would like to help them make the most of their education" (DfES, 2001).

The approach we decided to take to the project was to (a) identify current good practice by undertaking a review of the relevant literature on the subject, and (b) consult directly with learners and prospective learners with autism through an interview programme. This dual approach was designed to obtain input to our own learning about the specific needs of students with autism from experts in the field defined as both education professionals and, importantly, the students with autism themselves.

We wanted to be guided by the experience of professionals engaged in teaching students with autism but knew that, by itself, this would be insufficient since most professionals will be neurotypical and see things from a neurotypical perspective. It was considered essential to obtain the views of those on the spectrum as well since only they really know what their individual needs are. Some parents of students (and prospective students) with autism kindly volunteered their experiences of supporting their sons and daughters. Thus this report's recommendations reflect 'advice' from students, professionals, and parents.

Had time permitted we would have sought to interview parents, carers, or mentors of the students we interviewed to gain an additional perspective.

We refer later on to issues relating to the validity of data obtained from the students.



LEARNING NEEDS ANALYSIS

It was felt that it would improve the effectiveness of the research output if the research was informed by a learning needs analysis. Such an analysis would cover:

- Learning styles - the ways people learn;
- Learning motivation – the willingness and enthusiasm to learn;
- Learner's environment - the quantity and quality of learning opportunities;
- Learning skills - behaviour and practices as a learner.

The approach taken was to undertake an initial learning needs analysis to inform the design of the question set and reflect on the learning needs analysis after the interviews.

INTERVIEWING STUDENTS WITH AUTISM

We thought carefully about how we would interview young people with autism. In addition to the standard interview protocol already referred to, we identified a number of specific issues related to autism that would need to be reflected in the approach taken to the interviews. The main issues were as follows:

- 1) **Sharing questions with interviewees prior to interview** – As a person with autism may need extra time in which to assimilate and process questions and develop their responses than a neurotypical student, we felt that persons with autism would benefit from being given the opportunity to review the questions, and consider their responses, before being interviewed. In most cases this was achieved, however, despite all our efforts it was not always possible.
- 2) **Interview environment** – Given that social interaction difficulties can make a person with autism particularly prone to anxiety, we ensured that all interviews were carried out in as calm, quiet and informal a setting as was possible in a busy FE college (one interview was undertaken in the student's home). We sought to put the interviewees at their ease at all times. Whilst this was primarily for their benefit we knew that it would also help to ensure good quality interview output.
- 3) **Interview length** - Appreciating that persons with autism may wish to talk at some length about issues that interest them, and wanting to let them have their say before moving on to the next topic, we allowed plenty of time for each interview.
- 4) **Accompanied interviews vs. unaccompanied interviews** – Realising that we must protect the students, and having identified that an earlier researcher had arranged for all her young interviewees to be accompanied at interview, we sought advice on the matter of whether or not students with autism should be accompanied. We then realised that this was an ethical issue with no definitive answer as it required balancing the protection of the students from risk against their individual right of choice. Whilst we also appreciated that the presence of another person would introduce a risk of skewing the output from an interview, we ensured that all the students were accompanied. Had a student expressed the wish to be interviewed alone we would have considered their request. No such request was made.
- 5) **Recording interviews** - We wished to tape-record the interviews as it would assist subsequent content analysis, enable us to maintain appropriate eye contact with the interviewees, show interest in proceedings, and because one of the researchers has AS and would have some difficulty in focusing on what was being said if required to take notes. We always asked for permission to tape-record and would have agreed to take notes instead if an interviewee preferred not to be recorded.

- 6) **Interview technique** – Although both researchers had experience of interviewing (one as a former insurance loss adjuster, the other as a special constable) one had no experience of interviewing persons with autism and the other had only limited experience. We sought advice on interview technique which we did our best to put into practice. We briefed the interviewees at the start of their interview, making it clear that they could have a break from questions whenever they wanted one, that they could refuse to answer particular questions, and could call a halt to the interview at any time. We explained that the interview was being undertaken in confidence, that the student's privacy would be respected at all times, and that we would ensure the anonymity of all matters said at interview.



INTERVIEW QUESTION SET DESIGN

We sought general advice and guidance on the basic design of an interview question set from Dr Luke Beardon of the Sheffield Hallam University Autism Centre, Hilary Jakovlevs of Dudley College and Marie Fitzpatrick of Whitegates College.

We appreciated that the development of a question set is not a clear-cut issue as various, potentially conflicting, aims have to be weighed in the balance. We were clear as a team that our questions must be autism-specific (we wanted to learn about the student interviewees' experiences as young people with autism, not hear about the generic kind of problems that concern all students). Research shows that persons with autism will find it easier to respond to specific questions put to them in a closed manner, but with this approach there can be a tendency towards 'leading' the interviewees and, of course, of asking questions about matters that are not of much concern to them. An alternative approach was to ask a series of open-ended questions, however, not only might this approach be more difficult for the interviewees, but it could also make it more difficult for the researchers to analyse the interview output and identify patterns and commonalities. It was suggested that we might include prescriptive and open-ended questions which is what we eventually decided to do, combining specific questions relating to matters identified from the learning needs analysis with opportunities for the students to talk about matters of interest to them.

The pilot interviews indicated that the question set was appropriate (although subsequent experience indicated that some of the questions were still too difficult for some students with autism despite our efforts to simplify the question set as much as possible). We developed questionnaires from the interview question set (separate versions for current students, former students, and prospective students) so that individuals could either talk to us about their experiences or write the experiences down, whichever they preferred. We refer later on in this report to various ways in which, with hindsight, we could have improved the questions.

CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

In their research into the views and experience of pupils on the autism spectrum in mainstream secondary schools, Humphrey and Lewis say that:

“Despite the large numbers of pupils with AS attending mainstream schools, the process of facilitating their learning and participation remains a complex and poorly understood area of education. The limited research base in this area indicates that school is a stressful and anxiety-provoking place for many such pupils, with social isolation, loneliness and bullying commonplace. Furthermore, although many teachers in mainstream schools are firmly committed to the principles of inclusive education, they do not feel that they have the necessary training and support to provide adequately for pupils with AS.” (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008).

In view of their experiences in compulsory education, it is perhaps no wonder that many intellectually capable pupils with autism and AS do not go on to further education. But little research has been carried out on students with autism/AS in further education. In 1996 a researcher said that “There is currently a paucity of literature available concerning the integration of adults with autism into the further education system within the UK” (Morgan, 1996). He referred to a development project undertaken by East Birmingham College (now City College Birmingham), which had attempted to identify how FE colleges could best address the needs of adults with autism, as “one of the few examples (of research into such integration)” he had been able to identify. Even though this was said 13 years ago, there still appears to be very little published guidance in relation to the teaching of young persons with autism who have successfully reached post-16 education. VanBergeijk, Klin and Volkmar said as recently as 2008 that there is relatively little information available about the unique needs of college-bound youth (VanBergeijk, Klin and Volkmar, 2008). But there is one particularly important exception: ‘The Autism Spectrum and Further Education: A Guide to Good Practice’ by Christine Breakey. Although with a different focus (limited to AS but covering university as well as college), ‘Managing Asperger Syndrome at College and University’ by Juliet Jamieson and Claire Jamieson is also highlighted (Jamieson and Jamieson, 2004) as is the advice on

“Education: meeting the needs of students in FE and HE” and “Supporting students with autism in further education” available from the National Autistic Society website (NAS, 2009).

THE EAST BIRMINGHAM COLLEGE STUDY

The East Birmingham College project had apparently sought to report on:

- The current usage and need for further education for adults with autism
- Good practice elsewhere
- Barriers to access
- Positive steps that should be taken (Morgan, 1996)

Morgan reported that the East Birmingham College study had concluded that there was little support for young persons with autism in further education at that time, and that persons with autism were often placed in classes with students with intellectual learning difficulties “which were not appropriate and did not meet their specific needs” (Morgan, 1996). At this time awareness and understanding of AS was in its infancy as the research undertaken by Hans Asperger had only begun to be discussed in the UK in the early 1980s, Asperger’s original paper was translated into English for the first time in 1991, and AS was first included in a diagnostic manual in 1992.

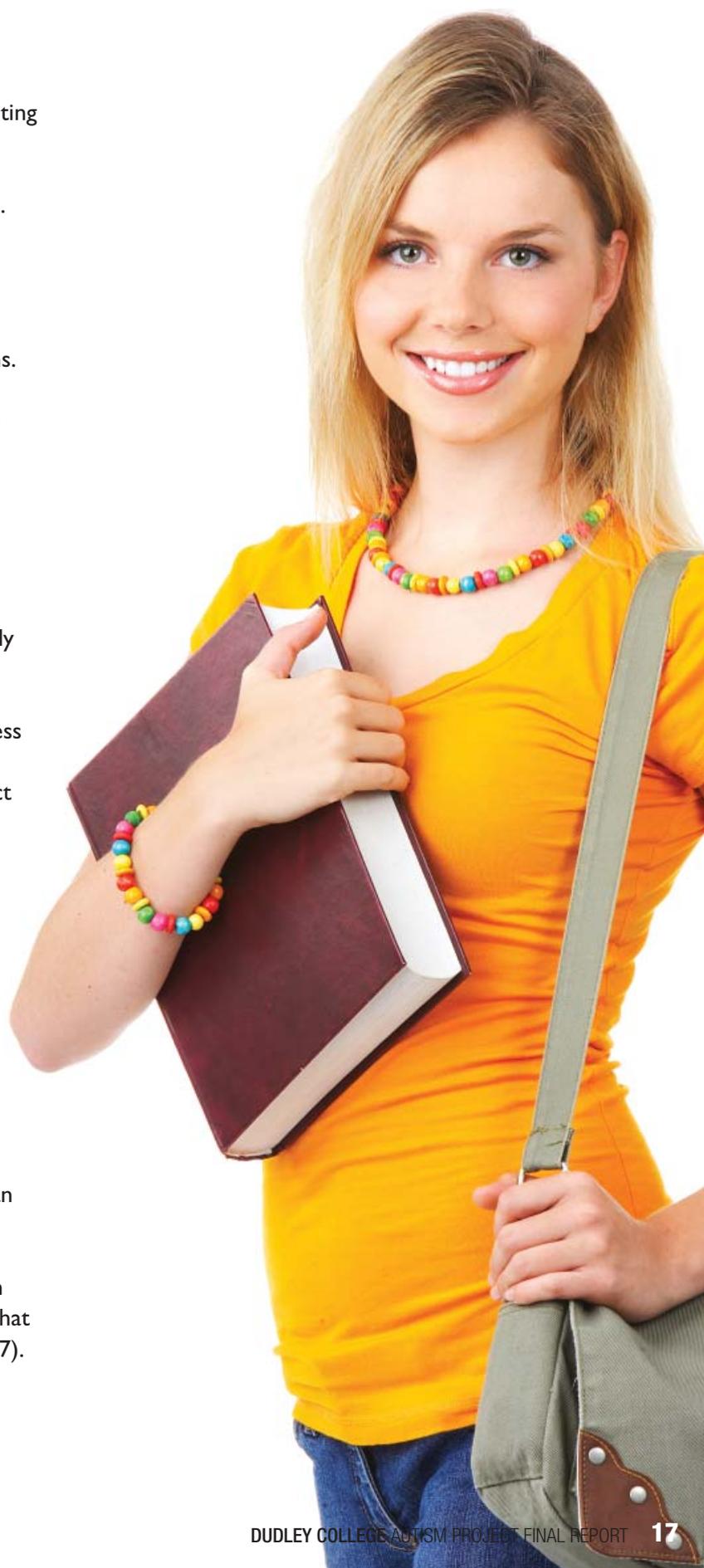
A subsequent study known as the ‘Oakfield House / Mathew Boulton College Project’ aimed to develop the East Birmingham College research data by “linking a local college and an autistic community through placing two young people with (classic) autism ... on courses carrying a qualification ... with on-going support” (Morgan, 1996). The study concluded that “... the education of adults with autism needs to be based on an understanding of the condition, with attention directed at the teaching process rather than solely at the award of a qualification at the end of a course (our italics).

Specific recommendations from this follow-up study were:

- 1) Formation of links between colleges and organisations working on behalf of, and representing the views of, people with autism.
- 2) Training in autism for all college staff involved, i.e. lecturers, classroom assistants and ancillary staff.
- 3) Period of familiarisation or pre-access work.
- 4) Sharing of information between link organisations.
- 5) Staggering start time of courses to allow gradual entry.
- 6) Consistency of approach and staffing within the teaching situation.
- 7) Support worker should initially come from the specialist service then gradually and systematically hand over to college support.
- 8) Attention needs to be paid to the learning process rather than product (our italics), and the social benefits that may accrue through planned contact with others.
(Morgan, 1996)

The current Dudley College study goes back over some of the ground covered by East Birmingham College in 1996 (identification of good practice, barriers and positive steps that can be taken). City College Birmingham's provision for students with autism was investigated by Autism West Midlands during their good practice research in 2007.

In evaluating how certain groups of disabled learners are less likely to be included in post-16 education than others, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) report 'Through Inclusion to Excellence: Moving from Policy to Practice' classified autism as a group where gaps in provision are most commonly identified, concluding that persons with autism are difficult to include (LSC, 2007). Difficult to include certainly, but not impossible if an autism-specific, person-centred approach is followed.



THE AUTISM SPECTRUM AND FURTHER EDUCATION

Whilst further education colleges are attended by persons across the autism spectrum, “people with Asperger syndrome usually have average, or higher intelligence and can greatly benefit from college or university education” (Powell, 2002). Powell goes on to say that “Unfortunately, many (students with AS) experience difficulties accessing tertiary education”, due to social isolation and a failure of educators to allow for the different AS learning style (Powell, 2002).

In her book ‘The Autism Spectrum and Further Education: A Guide to Good Practice’ Breakey mentions that “... the National Autistic Society estimated in 2001 that only 6 per cent of autistic people are in full-time employment, that the school exclusion rate for autistic children is more than 20 times the national average” (Barnard et al, 2001 in Breakey 2006), and that “people who have a diagnosis of Asperger syndrome are inadequately supported, or even not supported, at Further Education colleges and universities” (Breakey, 2006). She points out that persons with autism are often “labelled ‘habitual complainants’ or ‘too challenging’, or even ‘too different’” and “blamed for such things as ‘failure to comply’, ‘unwillingness to engage’, ‘being too difficult’ or ‘lack of conformity’” (Breakey, 2006). It has been suggested that the high rate of exclusion of students with autism may be due to “the colleges not providing a person-centred approach that enables a student to have input to their own educational programme” (Williams, 2007). This could be because a failure to consider the student’s needs and desires can lead to frustration which in turn causes so-called ‘challenging behaviour’ resulting in exclusion. Without going deeply into the reasons why people with autism are often given labels such as these, it is necessary to appreciate that in many cases the labels are simply an expression of a lack of awareness and understanding of autism on the part of neurotypical teachers and others. Persons with autism think differently to their neurotypical peers. What may appear as an unwillingness to engage may be a reflection of the difficulties they have in engaging in the learning process when delivered in the

kind of social setting that persons with autism struggle with. Social rules are possibly the most complex of all rules - and generally neither codified nor taught – so to expect a person with autism to conform to societal standards is to expect the impossible. And attempting to deal with what appears to be disruptive behaviour by applying generic disruptive behaviour policy principles will often be both counter-productive in that it may not bring order to the class, and may cause damage to the individual.

Under the social model of disability the systemic barriers, negative attitudes and exclusion by society (whether intentional or not) define who is disabled in a society and who is not. As a noted academic says, in an imaginary society where the vast majority of people are confined to wheelchairs, and only a handful of people can walk, able-bodied people would be regarded as disabled as architecture (e.g. door heights) would be based on the needs of wheelchair users, not the able-bodied.

The key to breaking down the barriers to learning in further education for persons with autism is to adopt a social model perspective on the teaching, curriculum, and support services. If persons with autism are not making the academic progress they are capable of we should not assume that there is something ‘wrong’ with them (even though they may behave differently from society’s expectations, that is a facet of their autism) but find out what is wrong with the processes by which college services are delivered.

Breakey suggests a process for removing barriers to learning:

- 1) **Identify the (societal) barriers**
 - Prejudice, stereotypes and discrimination
 - Inflexible organisational procedures and practices
 - Inaccessible information
 - Inaccessible buildings and transport
- 2) **Removing societal barriers.**
(Breakey, 2006)

HOW DO PERSONS WITH AUTISM LEARN?

Whilst all persons with autism manifest symptoms of autism differently, some aspects of autism are seen on a regular basis including these symptoms identified by Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect) in their guidance on thinking and learning in autism:

- Good rote memory skills
 - Attention problems
 - “Switching on” attention
 - Orienting attention
 - Selecting what to attend to
 - Shifting attention
 - Sustaining attention
 - Sharing a focus of attention with others (joint attention)
 - Difficulty learning concepts, categories and classifications
 - Compartmentalised chunk learning
 - Rule-governed versus flexible abstract thought
 - Difficulty developing meaning and generalising skills
 - Concrete and literal thinking
 - Visual thinking style.
- (Aspect, Australia, 2002)

The Aspect information sheet referred to is considered such an excellent and concise (two page) summary of the thinking and learning differences in autism that we have included it as an appendix to this report and commend it to readers.

It is important to appreciate that autism is not only about weaknesses but also gives rise to strengths. In making this point the Aspect Australia information sheet lists the following learning strengths in autism listed earlier by Janzen:

- Take in chunks of information quickly
- Remember information for a long time
- Learn to use visual information meaningfully
- Learn and repeat long routines
- Understand and use concrete, context-free information and rules
- Concentrate on narrow topics of interest.

(Janzen, 1996 in Aspect Australia information sheet, 2002) between concepts, independent of acquired knowledge. Aspect Australia say that “One of the most important strengths in autism is the visual learning style” and (quoting from Linda Hogdgon) that many people with autism can be considered “as being 90% visual and 10% auditory learners” (Aspect Australia, 2002). Those with autism often need longer in which to assimilate new information than their neurotypical peers which may explain their strong tendency to prefer a visual approach to learning. The research referred to by Aspect Australia indicating that “the visual learning skills of people with autism are superior to their skills in other areas” may be due to the benefits of a visual approach for them because “the message is present long enough for them to take in and process the information” (Aspect Australia, 2002).

Recent research indicates that children with AS may have superior fluid intelligence than neurotypical children (Hayashi, M. et al, 2007), fluid intelligence being the ability to find meaning in confusion and solve new problems by being able to draw inferences and understand relationships between concepts, independent of acquired knowledge.

BREAKING DOWN THE BARRIERS PERSONS WITH AUTISM FACE IN FURTHER EDUCATION

Breakey considers that the “ideal approach for working with autistic students (is) to be grounded in knowledge of autism and personal accounts, and to be person-centred” which in her view requires “effective forms of autism-specific assessments, curricula and teaching methods” (Breakey, 2006). To be grounded in knowledge of autism requires an effective, and continuing, autism awareness and understanding training programme for college teaching and support staff. Arguably, there is no better way of learning about the implications of autism than from those who have autism (e.g. Donna Williams and Temple Grandin). [This is why we have interviewed students.] Other research has shown that people often ask that persons with autism be involved in autism training programmes. Involving a person or persons with autism in the delivery of autism training will enable the trainees’ understanding of autism to be grounded in ‘personal accounts’ as Breakey recommends. Her approach to person-centred teaching involves gaining an understanding of each person with autism so that teaching can be tailored to the needs of the individual as a ‘one size fits all’ approach will not work given the differences between persons on the spectrum. Breakey makes the point that “the whole autism spectrum is represented at college, and that autistic students, wherever their diagnosis places them on the autism spectrum, all need highly-skilled, individually planned support” (Breakey, 2006).

To achieve quality individually planned support for young persons with autism at an FE college Breakey advocates that each person with autism should be individually profiled through a process of information gathering, assessing the information, the making of recommendations, and evaluating and reassessing the effectiveness of recommendations on a structured basis. A framework of information designed to assist an FE college to break down the barriers to learning for a person with autism would involve a set of questions along the following lines.

Individual profiling framework

- 1) What does the person want to achieve in life?
- 2) What support / coping strategies has the person found effective in the past?
- 3) Does the person use verbal communication to communicate with others? If so, how effectively? It is helpful at this point to identify and discuss areas of misuse, misinterpretation or misunderstanding.
- 4) Is the person aware of non-verbal cues in communication? If so, are they able to use and interpret them effectively? Again, possible areas of misuse, misinterpretation or misunderstanding should be identified and discussed.
- 5) Does the person experience any hyper- or hypo-sensitivity in any of the five sensory areas? If so, identify what and where and when?
- 6) What environmental triggers provoke anxiety? These should be identified and listed.
- 7) What strategies work in reducing anxiety? Again, these should be identified and documented.
- 8) Is behaviour an indicator of emotional and/or sensory sensitivity? If so, identify.
- 9) What is repeated behaviour communicating? Identify and document.
- 10) Does the person have any specific talents, skills or fascinations? If so, what?
- 11) What is the person’s thinking style? For example: logical; visual; literal; inventive; creative etc.
- 12) At what academic stage is the person at?

(Breakey, 2006)

Autism is an integral part of a person with autism. The two cannot be separated. And although a person with autism may develop coping strategies, their autism remains with them for their whole life. Recommendations to overcome barriers to learning must not require a person with autism to change. Breakey quotes a recommendation to 'work on their ability to learn how to use euphemisms and metaphors' as an example of an inappropriate recommendation. This language is not something they have not been taught properly but a fundamental part of their autism that cannot simply be corrected through the learning process. Breakey's recommendations framework is as follows:

Recommendations framework

- 1) Identify strategies that are known to work for the person.
- 2) Suggest the type of support which needs to be put in place.
- 3) Make suggestions for more effective ways of communicating with the person.
- 4) Identify ways of motivating the person.
- 5) Identify triggers for anxiety and suggest ways of minimising them.
- 6) Suggest ways of adapting teaching to suit thinking and learning style.
- 7) Suggest ways of altering or adapting the environment to take account of sensory issues.
- 8) Suggest ways of avoiding emotional hypersensitivity.
- 9) Suggest ways of interpreting and understanding behaviour.
- 10) Provide aims which are targeted at maximising and achieving potential.

(Breakey, 2006)

A key message from the Learning and Skills Council report 'Through Inclusion to Excellence: Moving from Policy to Practice', was that "It is important to put the disabled learner at the centre of the planning process and to listen to the voices of learners or potential learners with disabilities and/or learning difficulties." (LSC, 2007).

Specialist autism resource

It is quite clear that the expertise necessary to provide an effective person-centred autism-specific support service for persons with autism within an FE college will require a dedicated team of specialists in autism. Given the costs involved in establishing and maintaining such a specialist team, a practical 'model' is where a number of colleges in a particular area join together to provide the service. Another option, if it is impractical for a college to introduce an in-house specialist, would be to ensure that the college has direct and continuous access to external autism expertise. But, however a college goes about providing access to specialist autism expertise, it must understand that probably the most important barrier to learning for students with autism is the absence of adequate support defined in terms of quality and continuity. It is essential that a sufficient number of learning support workers (dependent on the number of learners with autism in the college) receive thorough training in autism, and maintain their standards through a programme of continuing professional development.

AUTISM AWARENESS AND UNDERSTANDING TRAINING

The need for effective autism awareness and understanding training for teaching and support staff⁸ in any college is, of course, paramount, especially so where a college has yet to develop its own specialist autism resource. Breakey has suggested that training should be tailored to the needs of the specific group of staff, and be immediately relevant and responsive to the needs of the group at that time. She also suggests the following prerequisites for trainers to deliver quality autism training.

Autism training prerequisites

- 1) Be knowledgeable regarding ASC⁹ and the current theories.
- 2) Have detailed practical experience of working with autistic individuals in an educational setting, preferably FE.
- 3) Be able to challenge pre-conceived ideas and stereotypes of ASC.
- 4) Be able to see the difficulties faced by a variety of different staff.
- 5) Be able to provide practical suggestions and strategies.
- 6) Be aware of funding issues.
- 7) Be willing to adapt materials so that they relate to the precise needs of the audience.

(Breakey, 2006)

BRINGING FE LEARNERS WITH AUTISM TOGETHER

The Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) have undertaken a range of projects associated with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). One project focusing on 'learners with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD)' revealed the value of enabling learners to meet other learners who shared the same disability, even when following different learning programmes (LSDA, 2004). Workshops enabling a group of learners with autism to share experiences amongst themselves and with their tutors could form part of a college autism awareness training programme.

The key learning points from the various FE sites involved in the LSDA DDA ASD project included the following:

- That there are a number of ways to raise staff awareness, that training around ASD needs to be practical and hands on and differentiated to the staff group.
- Staff also need appropriate information about ASD as well as specific information about the learners.
- Learners need specific individual support and to be communicated with clearly.
- Learners also benefit from a quiet space in college and from information and support during their transition to college.
- It was also highlighted that learners may have a different perspective on their need for support than those expressed by parents and tutors, they may not feel that they need support and may need support in discussing or disclosing support needs.

⁸ In this context the term "support staff" covers all staff who may come into contact with students, not just learning support staff.

⁹ ASC is an acronym for autism spectrum conditions such as classic autism and Asperger's syndrome.

- Other themes recognised that the use of IT does not necessarily result in increased staff and learner involvement and that there is a lack of standardised systems regarding ASD. Working together with other agencies helps to provide consistent support from learners. It was also highlighted that strategies for learners with ASD can be used to support the inclusion of other vulnerable groups. (LSDA, 2004)

The overall project has resulted in a number of key messages including:

- Learners are individual and have their own perspective on their support needs which may conflict with other perspectives. Learners need to be supported individually and flexibly and learner's histories can provide a detailed insight into previous barriers and appropriate support. During transition learners should be provided with individualised information about college, their tutors and courses.
- Parents should be fully involved in the process of supporting their young adult and supported to provide feedback.
- The increasing number of learners with ASD is likely to challenge colleges in terms of funding their support. (LSDA, 2004)

THE 'HIDDEN CURRICULUM'¹⁰ – ADDRESSING THE SOCIAL SKILLS IMPAIRMENTS

Difficulties with social interaction lie at the heart of autism. Whilst acknowledging the need for sensitivity given the dilemma involved in apparently 'imposing' particular standards of behaviour on adults, Breakey advocates that an FE college should include the teaching of social skills within a programme of autism training, describing the teaching of these skills as the 'hidden curriculum'. Teaching social skills would cover understanding communication and social behaviour, linking autism theory in this regard to actual practice, assessing a profile of need for individual learners with autism, teaching autism self-awareness, and developing programmes of learning (Breakey, 2006).

SUGGESTED OUTLINES FOR TRAINING SESSIONS

Breakey suggests the following package of training courses.

- Autism awareness: A one-day introduction course
- 'Understanding 'autistic' thinking, learning and behaviour
- ASC-specific differentiation and assessment
- Teaching social skills.

¹⁰ The Autism Spectrum and Further Education: A Guide to Good Practice, Breakey (2006).

SUPPORT PATHWAY INTO COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY

Powell sets out his views as to an effective support pathway for students with AS into college or university as follows (summarised).

- 1) Awareness sessions on AS for all staff.
- 2) Learning support, counsellors and disability officers will benefit from 'job-specific' training on AS to enable them to provide effective pastoral support.
- 3) First impressions are important to people with AS. A coherent protocol for students' entry into college/university should be established.
- 4) Colleges locally should discuss good practice and share ideas, about how best to support students.
- 5) Colleges should consider AS specific courses, 'open-learning' or outreach courses to assist those who find traditional provision prevents them from learning.
- 6) Colleges should consider courses which help prepare people for work, developing closer links with employers.

- 7) Some colleges in the UK offer AS specific post-school options.
- 8) Link courses can be considered for students to test out local colleges/universities facilities and whether the course content suits from 14 onwards.
- 9) People with AS and their families should have access to a checklist of questions to ask any proposed college or university.
- 10) A good practice guide is needed for colleges and universities when including students with AS. This guide could be part of a training package and might include elements such as:
 - An explanation of AS
 - How the condition affects an individual's ability to learn
 - A preparation checklist before the student starts the course
 - A social needs checklist
 - An academic/learning needs checklist
 - An exit strategy checklist
 - Useful contacts within college and links to specialist agencies.

(Powell, 2002).



AUTISM WEST MIDLANDS RESEARCH INTO FE SERVICES FOR PERSONS WITH AUTISM

We began this chapter with reference to the research undertaken by East Birmingham College (now City College Birmingham) a decade or so ago into good practice and barriers to access in respect of further education for adults with autism, and we will now conclude the chapter by drawing attention to some more recent research into autism in an FE context – this time research into current provision to address the needs of learners with autism in the Birmingham and Solihull area of the West Midlands undertaken by Autism West Midlands¹¹ on behalf of the Learning and Skills Council¹².

Autism West Midlands investigated current practice in nine FE colleges in the area concerned. The main findings of their research project (in summary) are as follows:

- 1) All the colleges have ‘discreet’ provision which includes ASD learners, and it would appear that all the colleges have learners with High-Functioning Autism, alternatively known as Asperger syndrome, in mainstream provision.
- 2) Collection of data/information is problematic and colleges found it difficult to provide detailed information on ASD learners’ needs.
- 3) There are examples of good practice which could be shared across the colleges to create a more cohesive approach. School-college Links and Tasters offer a more productive way of exchanging information about prospective learners, but also help to reduce the anxiety levels of an ASD learner who becomes very anxious about change.
- 4) ASD learners with LD (intellectual learning disabilities) are often placed in ‘discreet’ provision at a college, but ASD learners with additional sensory sensitivities and challenging behaviours are more likely to face rejection from colleges because their needs cannot be met even in ‘discreet’ provision. They often require separate facilities, both for teaching and social contexts, as learners with ASD find ‘free’ time and break times difficult to deal with.
- 5) Support from the Connexions Service¹³ during the transition process is variable and information for stated learners is much more readily available than for those non-stated or those with AS. Support and information from schools is also variable and reports or Records of Achievements that accompany learners vary in their usefulness, are patchy and sometimes hide behavioural issues.
- 6) College Additional Learning Needs Coordinators or equivalent postholders should establish a database of additional learner support needs to include all ASD learners. An agreed framework and information gathering process would be beneficial across all colleges.
- 7) The type of ASD specific training received by teaching and support staff varies considerably between the colleges. Provision of a tailor-made Certificate level course¹⁴ in ASD for all colleges would create a more consistent approach and experience for staff shared across colleges.

¹¹ Autism West Midlands is an independent provider of services for people of all ages with an autistic spectrum disorder, their families and carers and professionals across the West Midlands region.

¹² The Learning and Skills Council was responsible until 31 March 2010 for planning and funding further education (post-16 education and training other than higher education) in England. Its responsibilities have been transferred to the local authorities across the country.

¹³ Connexions describe themselves as “(being) for you if you are 13-19, living in England and wanting advice on getting to where you want to be in life. It also provides support up to the age of 25 for young people who have learning difficulties or disabilities (or both)”.

¹⁴ We identified this ‘gap’ in autism training prior to gaining access to the Autism West Midlands research and suggested to the Director of Learning at Dudley College that the College might consider developing such a course. The college aims to have an accredited course in place from September 2010.

- 8) Provision of work experience placements is variable depending on the course but does not generally form part of the courses that AS learners choose to study and therefore they are missing a vital part in preparation for the world of work. Information on the progression of ASD learners after leaving college is very variable; some colleges provide information when requested.
- 9) Improved inter-agency co-operation is required. Other agencies or next level providers, such as Training Providers or those providing work-related or 'employment support' provision, or Adult Education providers, would benefit from communicating with colleges and acquiring information from colleges in a structured manner.
- 10) Communications between organisations varies with regard to identifying and logging information in the transition process. There are also anomalies and discrepancies in the sharing of information between children's and adult's services, and between education and social care, which, if addressed, could perhaps lead to more effective communication of valuable information on a more productive level.
- 11) The Adults and Communities Modernising Day Service Agenda – review of Day Services – may lead to a reduction of provision for service users with ASD who currently attend a 'Day Centre'. This change may lead to increased demand for placements in colleges or Adult Education in future.
- 12) The LSC may wish to consider assisting the development of more strategic relationships and partnerships in learning with schools, the independent sector providers of support, including housing providers and training and employment providers. This could create opportunities for colleges to provide for ASD learners on an 'outreach' basis which could also focus on acquiring skills, vocational and independent living skills, and could allow a range of providers from different disciplines and organisations to help develop longer term planning on a more strategic level¹⁵.
(Autism West Midlands, 2007)

Autism West Midlands state in their report:

“In conclusion, significant time, effort and resources i.e. money go into offering provision to learners both in out-of-area provision and locally through the colleges. For learners with ASD, being able to access structure, routine and longer term sustainability in their localised environment through co-ordinated planning and provision, would benefit all concerned and lead to more efficient use of resources.”

(Autism West Midlands, 2007)

As Lord Bichard said in an 'In my opinion' article in a recent edition of the journal of the Chartered Management Institute:

“At the moment, we are wasting huge sums of money because of our failure to work together effectively. Clients often receive unco-ordinated services from a wide range of local, regional and national providers ... The providers know little about each other or how their well-intentioned support fits with other provision. In addition, our failure to co-operate means that savings that could be made ... are lost to the public purse.”

(Chartered Management Institute, 2010)

In view of the parlous financial state the country is currently in, which will require all areas of the public sector to 'do more with less', it is now essential that all the good words over recent years about working together are acted upon. Despite the moral and legal imperative for bodies to provide appropriate services for persons with autism (and other disabilities), and the step change in the legal framework with the passing of the Autism Act, there is a real risk that such services will be seen as low priority in the cut-throat competition for scarce financial resources over the coming years. There is a business case for supporting students with autism better, and the provision of better services does not have to involve additional expense if we work together better.

¹⁵ The LSC was dismantled at the end of March 2010 with its responsibilities transferred to, among others, Local Authorities and Primary Care Trusts which have duties under the Autism Act 2009. Although the Act is restricted to health and social services, it would make much sense for those concerned to take the holistic view of autism provision that Autism West Midlands advocate here.

EVALUATING THE QUALITY OF FE SERVICES PROVIDED FOR PERSONS WITH AUTISM

A framework of quality indicators was put forward recently by Nicola Martin.

- 1) Is the culture inclusive and is diversity valued, not problematized?
- 2) Are staff AS-aware, empathic and reliable?
- 3) Is pre-entry support planned?
- 4) Are communications clear?
- 5) Is the sensory environment calm in places?
- 6) Is not tolerating bullying the norm?
- 7) Are services available for all students who struggle with loneliness and anxiety?
- 8) Are social opportunities diverse and easy to access?
- 9) Is there help available for students to develop independent living skills?
- 10) Are all aspects of the student journey considered, from pre-entry to post-exit? Does this include help with finding a job?

(Martin in ed. Pollak, 2009)

Whilst we must ensure that all persons with autism are enabled to achieve of their best, we quote Nicola Martin who, referencing Temple Grandin's view that "without AS the world would be short of a wide range of necessary inventions" (Grandin, 1996), and Hans Asperger's statement that he knew of "numerous individuals (with what is now known as AS) among distinguished scientists" (Asperger, 1944), ends her piece in 'Neurodiversity in Higher Education' with the thought that "we ignore the opportunity to nurture the talent of people who have AS at our peril!" (Martin in ed. Pollak, 2009).

Young adults with classic autism are able to benefit from attendance at a college of further education, but require a high level of support (Morgan, 1996). There may be a tendency for colleges to focus on young people at the higher end of the spectrum as their abilities will be of benefit to the colleges in terms of meeting their performance targets. Morgan advises that attention should be directed at the teaching and learning process rather than solely at the award of qualifications (Morgan, 1996). As this approach will challenge public sector organisations judged on the basis of their ability to meet targets, there is a need for a certain flexibility in target setting to enable colleges to provide the teaching and learning environment that persons across the autism spectrum require if they are to realise their potential as unique individuals.



CHAPTER 4:

THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE: OUR INTERVIEW FINDINGS

It is worth reminding ourselves at this point that the purpose of this research – as set out in the request for funding paper submitted by us to the Learning and Skills Council – was to “conduct research into the specific needs of FE learners or potential learners on the autistic spectrum” which was to include “(investigating) the needs of autistic students and the barriers they face in education and any barriers facing them in accessing education (to) allow us to work towards removing those barriers” (Dudley College, 2009). The paper went on to say that “... we will approach current and past students of Dudley College and through other organisations such as NO LIMITS, Connexions, Dudley Council and Dudley Autistic Support Group, asking them about their experiences of education, the related barriers, and resources they accessed to make their educational journey more positive” (Dudley College, 2009).

As with all research, limitations on the validity of findings must be taken into account when drawing conclusions. The main limitations we identified were as follows:

- 1) Although we exceeded the minimum requirement of 30 “beneficiaries” (participants) agreed between Dudley College and the LSC, in the time available to us we were only able to obtain data from 45 students (including former students and prospective students) in total which is quite a small sample from which to draw valid conclusions.
 - 2) As Dudley College was unable to identify all its current or former students with autism it proved necessary to involve other colleges of further education in order to achieve the minimum number of participants. The greatest number of participants from any one FE college was 13 which further reduces the ability to draw valid conclusions from the research.
 - 3) We sought to obtain data from students across the autism spectrum rather than just those at the higher functioning end of the spectrum. We acknowledged that there could be a tendency to focus on the higher functioning students with the potential to impact positively on our performance regime
- but that the research proposal was to investigate the barriers for all students on the autism spectrum, not a sub-set of those students. We knew there would be a wide variety of experiences from across the spectrum and wanted to hear the voice of all students with autism so that we could consider the barriers at all points on the spectrum. Despite all our efforts to simplify the process of obtaining research data it proved considerably more difficult to obtain reliable data from students not at the higher end of the spectrum. If time had permitted we would have sought to interview parents, carers or mentors of students with autism.
- 4) It is a factor to be borne in mind when interviewing some students with autism (or otherwise obtaining research data from them) that responses may sometimes be difficult to interpret, confusing, contradictory and not always in direct response to the actual question. For instance, if a question relating to matters that happened in the past elicits a response relating to current circumstances, how is the interviewer to know that? We undertook all interviews in the company of a learning support worker, parent, or mentor, which we hoped would enable such responses to be identified, but there can be no certainty that all the responses from all the students constitute valid data.
 - 5) Given the time-consuming nature of interviews (and the writing up of interview notes / transcription of recordings), and our appreciation that not all students would want to talk about their experiences, we developed a set of questionnaires. Since there can be no guarantee that a parent, carer or mentor exercised oversight over completion of the questionnaires, correcting responses as necessary, there is some doubt as to validity of all the data from students away from the higher functioning end of the spectrum. We were also advised that, in some cases, due to the incidence of autism within a family parents would have the same difficulty in completing our form as their children. One college reported that staff would have to assist some students with their form.

Nevertheless, we feel that much of the data enables us to draw valid conclusions when interpreted from the perspective of an understanding of autism. The research was undertaken with the kind participation of the educational establishments set out on page 3 of this report.

We asked various 'background' questions to assist us in interpreting responses to the main research questions (e.g. we asked for the interviewee/respondent's age as responses from mature students may differ significantly from those obtained from students joining straight from school). Where background question data is relevant in terms of the interpretation of a response to one of the main questions we draw attention to this in the text.

We would highlight the following matters from the data we obtained.

DID YOU HAVE ANY PARTICULAR ANXIETIES (WHAT PARTICULAR ANXIETIES DO YOU HAVE) ABOUT ATTENDING A FURTHER EDUCATION COLLEGE?

Being aware that anxiety in some social situations is common to all persons with autism we want to know about any anxieties prospective students had about the prospect of attending an FE college.

- 1) 33% of the students who responded to this question said they had no anxieties. Two out of every three students who said they had no anxieties were from specialist colleges where there is generally a greater understanding of autism, teaching and mentoring is on a one-to-one basis, and the focus is very much on the individual. It would be expected that students at specialist colleges would suffer less anxiety than those attending mainstream FE colleges. But this question asked about anxieties about the prospect of attending an FE college and there is some doubt as to whether all those responding actually answered the question asked. Some students at specialist colleges may have had the situation at their current college in mind when they responded. Some students at FE colleges may also have had their current experience in mind. Other students may not have wanted to 'admit' to having anxieties. However these responses are interpreted, 66% of students said they were anxious about attending an FE college.
- 2) About 16% of the responses referred to having to get used to new premises, navigating premises (and getting lost) and/or the greater number of people at the FE college being the cause for their anxiety.
- 3) Approximately 10% of the responses concerned loneliness, not making friends or being seen as 'uncool'. This is associated with the students' desire to 'fit in', and is likely to be an area where they already have difficulty. The importance of making friends was stressed by all interviewees, although it would seem that many of these students confuse the term 'friend' with 'acquaintance'. Sometimes a student with autism called other people friends simply because they spoke to them, rather than being a friend in the true neurotypical sense. Two further responses referred to anxiety over their perceived vulnerability to harassment or bullying by peers, and this was linked to the wish to fit in and have friends (which could serve to reduce their vulnerability).
- 4) Around 7% of the responses were concerned about finding it difficult to achieve the necessary grades to pass their course. Surprisingly, half of these responses were from students at a specialist college. The apparent difficulty that some students have at a specialist college clearly indicates the greater challenge that they may face if attending an FE college where they may receive less support and be less well understood. One other similar response was that from a student who was concerned that they might not be able to cope with full-time education.
- 5) Other causes of anxiety highlighted by the respondents included timetabling issues such as not knowing what to do in free periods and classroom changes (linked with the difficulty in navigating college premises already referred to) and travelling to and from college.



WHAT ARE YOU DOING (DID YOU DO) TO COPE WITH YOUR ANXIETIES WHEN AT COLLEGE?

We asked this question about coping strategies for anxiety as a follow-up to the question about whether students had any particular anxieties about attending an FE college.

- 1) Approximately 28% of the respondents say they cope with their anxiety by talking to a college tutor, mentor, counsellor, or student manager. Another 10% talk to family or friends. Well over a third, therefore, rely on someone to help them.
- 2) About 16% of respondents did not answer this question. This may be because they were in the category of students who said in response to the previous question that they had no anxiety, however, around 26% of students said they had no anxieties and, as approximately the same number of students responded to both questions, it would appear that some who said they had no anxieties listed coping strategies.
- 3) Of the remaining responses, which vary greatly, the main coping strategies seem to be to work hard and try to relax to block out distractions.

IN WHAT WAY IS COLLEGE HELPING (DID COLLEGE HELP) YOU TO COPE WITH ANXIETIES OR MAKING MATTERS WORSE?

As a further follow-up to the question about coping strategies for anxiety we asked what the college had done to help or hinder the situation for each student.

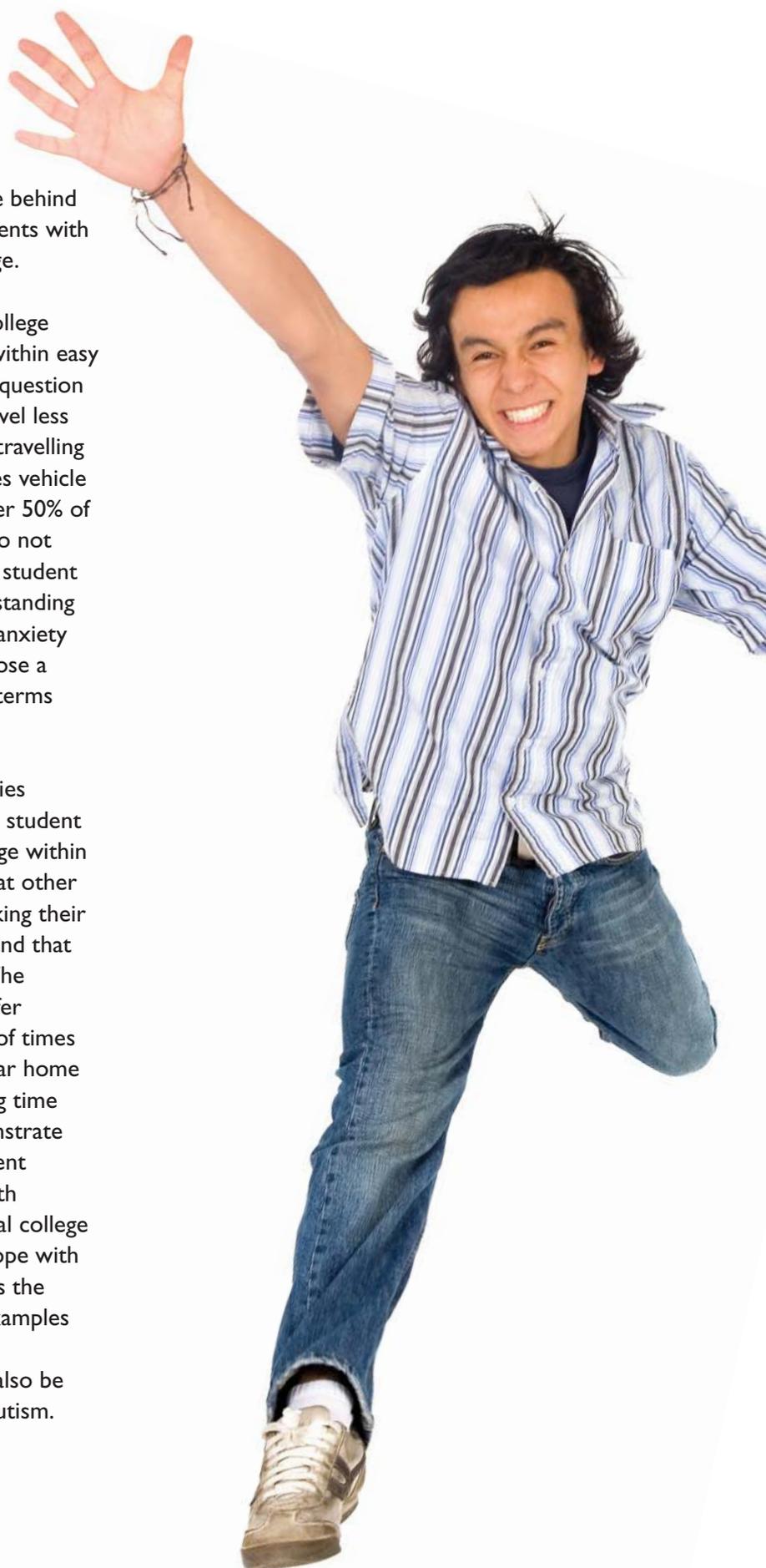
(Despite our efforts to simplify the questioning process - which specifically included avoiding 'multiple' questions - we failed to spot that this question is actually two questions in one, which may have made it more difficult for some students to respond to.)

- 1) A significant number of responses stated that their college helps them to cope with their anxiety either by providing a support worker or someone else they can go to for advice on matters relating to their autism.
- 2) Although the majority of comments were positive, showing colleges did help in many situations, in the case of about 20% of the respondents that help could be improved. In particular respondents wanted somewhere within their college outside their classroom where they could go to calm down. Other items included tutors disliking a student because of their differences, timetable changes, and having to cope with classes in various different rooms across a campus which led to a student getting lost and having to come to terms with complex buildings.

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE THIS COLLEGE?

We wanted to try and understand the rationale behind the choice of an FE college by prospective students with autism so we asked why they chose their college.

- 1) The main response was that the chosen college was the closest college to their home or within easy access. From the responses to a separate question it can be seen that 25% of respondents travel less than 2 miles to college, with another 25% travelling between 3 to 5 miles. Assuming 20 minutes vehicle travel equates to 8 miles distance, then over 50% of respondents travel 8 miles or fewer. We do not know how this compares with the general student body but it does reinforce previous understanding that, because travelling can be a source of anxiety and stress, many students with autism choose a college more for its convenience in travel terms than for the courses on offer.
- 2) Other responses included that extra facilities were available for people with autism (one student saying that their college was the only college within their borough that offered support, and that other colleges they had approached prior to making their choice were negative about their autism) and that their college offered a course they liked. The relative lack of reference to courses on offer at a college in comparison to the number of times respondents said that their college was near home also confirmed the importance of travelling time when choosing a college. This does demonstrate the need for a greater consistency of student 'offer' across colleges as many students with autism are effectively confined to their local college whereas neurotypical students, who can cope with longer commutes, are better able to access the courses they really want. We have seen examples of students on courses which are entirely inappropriate for them, although this may also be due to failure to understand the student/autism.





WHAT BENEFITS ARE YOU GETTING (DID YOU GET) FROM ATTENDING COLLEGE (FRIENDS, NEW SKILLS ETC)?

From the number of responses it is apparent that a number of respondents listed more than one benefit. We felt that we needed to provide examples of benefits whilst realising that this could influence the responses. Whilst responses to the questionnaire were consistent with those from the interviews, where the risk of 'prompting' a response was less of an issue, nevertheless, we generally had to give examples of benefits when interviewing. Had we undertaken further interviews we would have given different examples to check whether respondents were just feeding these back to us.

- 1) The main benefit cited by respondents was the formation of friendships and relationships which accounted for approximately 33% of the responses. Many of the interviewees in particular focused on the issue of making friends. We think this is very significant although – in view of the social difficulties at the heart of autism – certainly not unexpected. Various means by which students with autism could be helped to make friends were suggested including the formation of a social group by their college (in the case of a former student of Dudley College who has gone on to great success at university, it was stressed that a group should be set up in response to the specific needs of the students). No respondent asked for social skills training in the sense of a taught approach to learning social skills, the students' approach to this being for colleges to provide the means for them to develop their social skills alongside their peers.
- 2) The second highest response (20%) was the benefit of new skills although in many cases these are not defined which suggests that respondents may have been guided by the wording of the question. However, other respondents were specific about the skills they have learned at college e.g. independent living skills, social skills, gaining in confidence, and learning about games.

- 3) 10% of responses refer to gaining qualifications and subject knowledge. As all students would be expected to attend college for these reasons, respondents who did not refer to either qualifications or knowledge may have decided to identify benefits over and above the 'obvious' benefits.

WOULD YOU RECOMMEND YOUR COLLEGE TO OTHER PEOPLE WITH AUTISM?

We thought we would see if asking this question would provide a respondent 'overview' of the success or otherwise of a college's ability to provide a suitable learning and teaching environment for students with autism.

There appears to be very strong backing for the college studied at with over 75% of respondents saying they would recommend their college to other people with autism. This is very interesting given that about 33% of respondents have had difficulties in timetabling (Question 15), approximately 33% say that their college has not made any changes to help them as a person with autism (Question 16), around 25% of the responses to Question 19 mentioned that they had been subject to verbal abuse or bullying, and many responses to Question 21 were to the effect that support for social activities was either not in place or considered inappropriate. How can we reconcile the difficulties many students have faced at college with this apparent strong endorsement of their college? Is it possible that many respondents – even though promised anonymity – did not wish to be seen to be criticising their college? Or might it simply refer to the fact that travelling distance is the main deciding factor in choosing a college so that, logically, the nearest college has to be the right choice?!

WHAT DO YOU WANT TO DO (DID YOU DO) AFTER YOU LEAVE COLLEGE?

The responses indicated that a range of jobs were being aimed for, as well as about 40% of respondents saying that they wished to continue their education. Of the latter, about 20% of the total responses have definite plans to go on to university (for example, degrees in veterinary nursing, film studies), and approximately a further 20% wish to continue their studies at FE level (including technical theatre, art). Four respondents want to pursue ICT/computer programming but do not say whether they aim to go on to higher education or enter the job market. Two respondents want to get work and a flat to live in so that they can be independent and live as 'normally' as possible.

ARE (WERE) ORAL INSTRUCTIONS FROM COLLEGE STAFF CLEAR AND EASY TO UNDERSTAND?

Although about half of respondents said that they had no difficulty understanding instructions from teaching staff about 75% of these respondents were from specialist colleges where there is generally much greater understanding of autism than at FE colleges and hence tutors know how to give instructions to students with autism. About a further 25% of respondents said that they mostly understand instructions but that their teachers were not always specific enough for them to understand what they were being asked to do. There is a clear 'divide' between the clarity of instructions at specialist colleges and mainstream FE colleges. Greater awareness and understanding of autism by teaching staff at the latter will help to close the gap with the specialists.

HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED (DID YOU EXPERIENCE) ANY DIFFICULTIES IN RELATION TO TIMETABLING AT COLLEGE?

Approximately one third of respondents admitted to having difficulties in relation to timetabling due to not being told of classroom changes etc. Whilst it is understood that some late timetabling changes are inevitable in an educational environment, colleges should seek to avoid major changes wherever possible and, when it is not possible, should take steps to reduce the anxiety experienced by students with autism.

HAS COLLEGE MADE ANY CHANGES TO ACCOMMODATE YOU AS A PERSON WITH AUTISM?

The responses are allocated approximately equally (33% each) to those saying that their college had made changes to accommodate their autism, that no such changes had been made, and that some changes had been made but their college 'could have done more'. Hence, from this sample, in about 66% of cases either no changes had been made to accommodate the student's autism or, in the view of the student, the changes made were insufficient (i.e. not all 'reasonable adjustments' had been made).

Whilst we only have the students' perspective on this matter we need to accept that this is the most important perspective as they will know better than anyone else whether more needs to be done to accommodate their autism. As it stands, the finding is that the responses from two thirds of the student respondents indicate that their college had failed to ensure that the learning and teaching environment was suitable for the student which implies that the college was in breach of disability discrimination legislation, not to mention the moral duty towards their student.



HOW WELL ARE YOU COPING (DID YOU COPE) WITH FREE PERIODS AT COLLEGE?

Approximately one third of respondents commented that they had no problems with free periods at their college, however, over three quarters of these respondents were from specialist colleges who should, generally speaking, provide a more autism-friendly learning and teaching environment. Nearly 40% of respondents said that they were coping well with free periods as they had suitable strategies in place. Five respondents admitted to having difficulty with free periods or mentioned a solitary activity.

Clearly it is impossible for an FE college to provide the highly structured environment found within a specialist college but providing a quiet, stress free venue for students with autism to go to when between classes would go a long way towards resolving the issue of free periods for those students. One should not underestimate the anxiety that can be caused to a student with autism through having to cope with unstructured time. A place they can go to relax during free periods should not only solve that specific problem but help to reduce overall anxiety levels and thereby enhance learning.

IF YOU HAVE EVER BEEN (WERE) DISCIPLINED BY COLLEGE PLEASE TELL US ABOUT IT?

Half of the respondents had been disciplined. Whilst it is not known how this compares to the general student body it appears, intuitively, to be a very high proportion. Whilst the other half had not been disciplined, the nature of autism is such that it is possible that some respondents had been disciplined without realising it hence the percentage of students who had actually been disciplined may be higher than reported.

There is a general lack of detail as to the reasons for being disciplined. Two students refer to lateness as being a factor (either their own lateness or, interestingly, due to autism within the rest of their family that causes them to be delayed).

Further research needs to be undertaken into the issue of disciplining of students with autism so that we can better understand why they are being disciplined, to what extent this is due to their autism, and what can be done to ameliorate the situation.

In the meantime, it is considered possible to conclude that much disciplinary action is likely to be due to a failure of colleges to understand autism and their students with autism. Clearly, raising the general level of awareness and understanding of autism across colleges should better enable college staff to manage the discipline issue, by which we mean take preventative action to maintain disciplinary levels as near to that of the general student body as is possible (noting that all students may misbehave!).

PLEASE TELL US ABOUT ANY UNPLEASANT EXPERIENCES AT COLLEGE RELATED TO YOUR AUTISM (E.G. BULLYING, DISCRIMINATION, VERBAL ABUSE)

Just under half of the respondents say that they have not had unpleasant experiences at college. However, as was pointed out to us by the parent of one of the respondents, the perception of a student with autism of what bullying is, and the boundary between acceptable teasing and unacceptable harassment, will not always be understood or may have even been forgotten by the student if it had happened some time ago. It is also possible that some students may not have wished to admit to unpleasant experiences, perhaps because it may 'bring the anxiety back' or because they are uncomfortable thinking of themselves as someone who is bullied. A quarter of the respondents stated that they had experienced verbal abuse or bullying. Six students referred to lack of awareness of autism by other students, teaching staff or security personnel. This reference to college staff – and specific mention of bullying by staff in a small number of cases – reminds us that the problem of bullying is not restricted to peers.

The fact that as many as 25% of respondents admitted to facing unpleasant experiences like bullying and verbal abuse (and that the actual percentage is likely to be higher) is a cause of much concern. Bullying and verbal abuse must never be tolerated. Students with autism can be off-putting to their peers because of their difference but if peers have an understanding of autism this problem can be substantially reduced. Colleges should consider providing autism awareness training for the immediate peers (classmates) of a student with autism.

DO (DID) YOU FOLLOW A STANDARD EDUCATION PROGRAMME AT COLLEGE?

The data obtained in response to this question is distorted for various reasons. Firstly, it is known that there is a group of students within Dudley College outside the higher functioning end of the spectrum who could not be interviewed due to communication difficulties (verbal and written). Secondly, many of the respondents were at a specialist college where courses can be tailored towards the needs of the student with autism more easily than is the case of a mainstream FE college. Thirdly, some FE college students with autism are studying at a level below their intellectual abilities which may avoid the need for adjustment to their education programme. Wherever possible a student with autism should study a course adjusted appropriately to suit both their academic abilities and their autism. This requires a commitment to profiling each student with autism and designing non-standard education programmes.



HOW WELL DOES (DID) COLLEGE SUPPORT YOU IN RELATION TO SOCIAL ACTIVITY AT THE COLLEGE?

About half the respondents say either that their college supports them well in relation to social activity or that they did not need such support. The other half say either that no support is offered or that what is offered is considered inappropriate (such as offering the use of the gym at times that clash with lessons), or something that the student is simply not interested in i.e. not tailored to their specific needs.

Given that social difficulties lie right at the heart of autism, and the desperate need for friends has been stressed by so many of the respondents to our survey, all FE colleges should seek to provide some suitable form of social activity for their students with autism. This may be something as simple and inexpensive as setting up, and supporting, a social group for these students where they can meet each other and develop their social skills in a non-stressful environment. Not only will such an approach help the students in the area that they probably find the most difficult but, by reducing anxiety, should also enhance their learning and help them to achieve academically.

HAVE YOU RECEIVED (DID YOU RECEIVE) ANY SOCIAL SKILLS TRAINING FROM COLLEGE?

Approximately one third of student respondents say they have received some form of social skills training from their college although the majority of these were students at a specialist college where social skills training is part of the curriculum. Hence, about two thirds of student respondents say they had received no social skills training.

The issue of social skills training for students with autism (or anyone else for that matter) is not straightforward. There is a dilemma over the extent to which it is acceptable to impose types of social behaviour on adults, or even whether it should be done at all. Nevertheless, as social difficulties lie at the heart of autism, and certain social skills are essential if a student is to be properly prepared for their life in the wider world, educational establishments do deliver social skills training.

Social skills training is not usually seen on an FE college curriculum. As a student with autism is at a substantial disadvantage in relation to their neurotypical peers because they do not generally learn social behaviour in the same way but often have to be taught such behaviour, the delivery (sensitively) of social skills training by colleges is considered to be a reasonable adjustment. Unless social skills training is on the curriculum there is a gap that will perpetuate discrimination against a college's students with autism.

DO YOU THINK THAT YOUR COLLEGE TUTORS & OTHER STAFF UNDERSTAND (UNDERSTOOD) THE LEVELS OF ANXIETY THAT A PERSON WITH AUTISM EXPERIENCES?

Half of the respondents said that tutors and staff do understand the levels of anxiety that a person with autism experiences. However, the majority of these came from specialist colleges where there is a higher staff to student ratio and should be a greater understanding of autism and of individual students. Most of the other respondents said that their levels of anxiety were understood. A small number of responses were to the effect that there is some understanding by tutors and staff for some of the time.

It was considered that the actual level of understanding of autism (and therefore of the anxiety that is a main feature of autism) would vary within a college as some staff would know more about autism than others. The stark contrast between the students who said that staff did not understand them and those that said that they were understood was clearly due to this being a 'yes/no' question. If further research of this nature is undertaken we suggest that there should be a facility to provide a text response.

Nevertheless, when asked to decide whether, on balance, the staff at their college understood their level of anxiety or not, 50% of respondents said that they were not understood. This is a clear indication that some of the colleges involved in the survey need to do much more to raise levels of awareness and understanding of autism amongst their staff. We came across examples of (often unwitting) discrimination against students with autism from security staff and catering staff in addition to teaching staff. There is a need for autism awareness training to be delivered cross-college.

DO (DID) YOU HAVE ANY DIFFICULTY FINDING YOUR WAY AROUND THE COLLEGE CAMPUS?

93% of respondents claimed they did not have difficulty in finding their way around their college. Nevertheless, although this appears not to be a significant problem for the students in our sample, it was an issue for a substantial number of students studying at mainstream colleges (many of those who had no difficulty being based at much smaller specialist colleges). Getting lost easily is a known issue with autism generally.

DO YOU THINK THAT YOUR COLLEGE TUTORS HAVE (HAD) ANY UNREASONABLE EXPECTATIONS OF YOU?

75% of respondents thought that tutors did not have any unreasonable expectations of them. Whilst this was a 'yes/no' question we asked if tutors had "any" unreasonable expectations so that a positive response would be appropriate however significant or otherwise the issue of unreasonable expectations was for a particular student. Despite asking the question in this way (and, with hindsight, the subtlety of this wording may well have been lost on some students) the large majority of the students in the sample did not see this as an issue. This finding is difficult to reconcile with the earlier finding that only half of the respondents said that tutors and staff do understand the levels of anxiety that a person with autism experiences (also a 'yes/no' question). There were some signs during interview that the concept of 'unreasonable expectations' may have been difficult for some of the students to understand, whereas 'anxiety' is not. Tutors who do not understand the levels of anxiety faced by students with autism clearly do not have a good understanding of autism. Without a good understanding they are not going to be aware that some students with autism will appear more capable (socially) than they are and hence be aware that there may be an issue regarding expectations.

This subject area is now considered too complex for responses to a simple 'yes/no' question to elicit valid data. Greater in-depth research is required.



WHO DO (DID) YOU GO TO AT COLLEGE FOR HELP WITH PROBLEMS RELATING TO YOUR AUTISM?

Well over half of respondents had a member of staff to go to if they needed help, in the majority of cases more than one person to go to. It is good to know that these students had someone to call on at their college if they had problems relating to their autism, but a substantial number of the students in the sample said that they did not. Given the range of difficulties that students with autism may face, and the complex nature of autism, they will need someone to approach for advice and guidance and the person they approach must have a good understanding of autism to be able to help.

WHEN YOU ASKED FOR HELP DID YOU GET THE HELP YOU NEEDED?

Well over half of the student respondents said they received the help they needed when they had asked for it. A substantial number of students said that they were helped most of the time or occasionally. Three students said that help was not needed. Only two students said that they had not received help when they asked for it, and one student admitted to finding it difficult to ask for help. It is difficult to draw definitive conclusions from this response, however, there are clear indications that college staff are doing their best to assist students with autism and that in many cases the help may be sufficient to satisfy the student. Nevertheless, many of the students were apparently not helped every time they asked and we have no way of knowing how effective the 'help' was and whether it could have been better (e.g. more autism-specific and person-centred). The provision of autism awareness training cross-college will improve the help on offer.

PLEASE TELL US ABOUT ANY SENSORY DIFFICULTIES YOU HAVE EXPERIENCED AT COLLEGE (E.G. PROBLEMS WITH LIGHT, SOUND).

Half of the respondents said they had experienced sensory difficulties at college including visual problems and problems with sound / noise, whether from the canteen, other students, alarm bells, chairs scraping on the floor, and loud bangs. Other issues referred to included problems with crowds and being clumsy. It is known that many persons with autism also face sensory difficulties. The response to this survey confirmed that understanding and suggested that it may be an issue for a substantial number of students with autism (50% in this case), and adding to the anxiety and stress resulting from their social difficulties. College environments should, wherever possible, be designed to reduce the impact of sensory sensitivities in autism.



PLEASE TELL US ABOUT ANYTHING ELSE YOU WOULD LIKE US TO KNOW ABOUT YOUR TIME ATTENDING COLLEGE.

Comments made by students included:

- 1) I need true and nice friends
- 2) Staff need to appreciate autism and difference
- 3) I have severe learning difficulties and no spoken language. I love people but find it difficult to associate with them
- 4) Many saw me as a waste of time. With suitable mentoring I went from class pain to high flyer
- 5) Needed more support by staff who understood autism/AS
- 6) College a waste of time, people rude
- 7) I enjoyed college, learnt new things and am independent
- 8) Sometimes needed research help and working to a homework timetable
- 9) I find it difficult to ask questions, often miss the point and worry about getting it wrong
- 10) Go here if you have autism
- 11) The college helps find external placements and helps people to understand your problems
- 12) I had a lovely time here
- 13) I don't like authority misused or being rudely spoken to. Would like a LSA
- 14) Managed to overcome bullying issues
- 15) Enjoy college but teachers don't understand my problems
- 16) Enjoy college
- 17) Got better support here
- 18) AS is not affecting my studies
- 19) Support workers are very nice and important to my daily life

LEVELS OF AUTISM AWARENESS AMONGST DUDLEY COLLEGE STAFF.

When delivering autism awareness workshops to college staff we asked delegates to complete a multiple-choice 'true or false' autism awareness questionnaire to enable us to gauge current levels of autism awareness cross-college. Our questionnaire was based on the example in The Autism Inclusion Toolkit by Maggie Bowen and Lynn Plimley. The form was given to delegates to complete at the start of each workshop. We did not ask delegates to complete the form again at the end of each session, preferring to evaluate trends in autism awareness by comparing test results over time rather than aiming for a superficial increase from workshops. As multiple-choice questions can be guessed the approach may tend to exaggerate actual levels of awareness slightly.

There were 20 questions. Scores varied from a low of 4 correct answers to a high of 18. By far the majority of delegates scored between 13 and 16. The approximate average score from the 83 workshop delegates was slightly less than 14.

This autism awareness evaluation exercise, although limited in scope and without any source for comparison, indicated that there is a significant degree of awareness already cross-college to build on but clearly some significant gaps in awareness that only a systematic approach to training college staff can seek to reduce.

CHAPTER 5: A MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK FOR EVALUATING THE QUALITY OF FE SERVICES PROVIDED FOR PERSONS WITH AUTISM

THE GENESIS OF THE FRAMEWORK

We have already mentioned Nicola Martin's recommendation that a framework for evaluating the quality of FE services provided for persons with autism is deployed (Martin in ed. Pollak, 2009). The findings of the Autism West Midlands research into good practice in the delivery of FE services to students with autism suggested a set of good practice 'headings' under which items of good practice in an FE context might be categorised. Approaches to designing evaluation frameworks in other contexts suggested that an approach was needed which emphasised that it is unrealistic to expect a good practice teaching and learning environment to be developed 'overnight'. A practical approach would involve (1) deciding on a desired end state good practice environment, and (2) systematically planning to achieve the desired end state over a suitable time period reflecting present provision, resources available, and any other relevant planning factors. This approach requires (a) a method for a college to evaluate the present position of its autism provision, and (b) a framework for planning future provision. One such method is a 'maturity model', details of which are set out below.

WHAT IS A MATURITY MODEL?

A maturity model is a means by which an organisation can plan – over a period of time to suit its circumstances and budgets – to deploy good practice in a particular area by reference to the various stages on the journey from initial recognition that action needs to be taken to the point where it can be said that good practice has been embedded within 'business as usual'.

WHAT MIGHT A MATURITY MODEL LOOK LIKE FOR FE COLLEGES?

In this case the model has been designed to enable colleges of further education (FE colleges) to deploy good practice service delivery for students with autism (including Asperger's syndrome). A five stage model has been prepared taking a college from the initial awakening of interest in the subject through three interim stages of the improving maturity of service provision culminating in a college capable of sustaining 'autism friendly' practice that takes students with autism from the school environment and educates them for work or higher education.

Maturity levels

- Level 1 – Awakening interest
- Level 2 – Corporate commitment
- Level 3 – Embedding good practice
- Level 4 – Autism-friendly
- Level 5 – Sustainable good practice.

The good practice service provision envisaged by the model covers competencies under the following seven headings:

Competencies

- Element 1 – Senior management commitment
- Element 2 – Student data management
- Element 3 – Student induction (including assessment/profiling)
- Element 4 – Student support (including student life skills)
- Element 5 – Staff training
- Element 6 – Student progression
- Element 7 – Partnership working.

The maturity model acts as both a business planning and performance management tool as it sets out planning targets to guide the planning process and that can be embedded in a performance management system.

WHAT ARE THE KEY BENEFITS OF A MATURITY MODEL APPROACH?

The key to maturity models is the fundamental business value derived by an organisation as it works at embedding good practice. Integrating good autism practice into existing FE college processes adds value through improving customer satisfaction, service delivery, academic success rates, recruitment rates, and retention rates. It will also improve staff morale as working with students with autism can be very stressful for staff unless good practice processes are in place and they have received adequate training.

HOW MATURE IS OUR SERVICE DELIVERY FOR STUDENTS WITH AUTISM?

An autism awareness maturity model can answer these key questions:

- How mature is our existing approach to students with autism?
- To what do we aspire? What does a mature college look like?
- What evolutionary path do we want to follow to get there?

It is then for the college to determine how long it wishes to take to get to where it wants to be in terms of embedding good practice autism service delivery.

A key aspect of the maturity model approach is that a college can plan to achieve good practice at a pace that suits its circumstances including the availability of finance. A 'three year plan' or similar could be developed with targets set for each year that build up to achieving the desired end state of a sustainable good practice autism learning and teaching environment at the end of year three.

It is essential for the good practice service delivery to be sustainable if students with autism are to have an excellent learning environment and learning experience into the future. So the work does not stop once a college has succeeded in becoming 'autism friendly'. The college must continue to monitor service delivery to ensure that good practice standards are maintained.

TRACKING THE MATURITY OF AUTISM SERVICE DELIVERY CROSS-COLLEGE

With the basic ingredients for establishing a sustainable process identified, the evolutionary path for the emergence of cross-college good practice autism service delivery can now be considered. The following milestones along this evolutionary path are proposed. Each item is a general statement that cannot apply to all colleges. It is necessary to identify the item under each column heading that best reflects the current status of the college under review. It may also be appropriate for a college to move specific targets from one level of the maturity process to another to reflect their particular circumstances.

AUTISM SERVICE DELIVERY COMPETENCIES

MATURITY MODEL	Senior management commitment	Student data management	Student induction ¹⁶
Level 1 - Awakening interest	Certain individuals taking an interest in the subject	Applications do not identify students with autism adequately	Induction process takes little or no account of autism
Level 2 - Corporate commitment	Directorate 'in principle' commitment secured	Agreement to identify students with autism during induction secured	Agreement to adopt good practice induction / assessment secured
Level 3 – Embedding good practice	Plan to embed good practice agreed	Application form & student database both cover autism appropriately	Induction process identifies students' specific needs
Level 4 - Autism-friendly	Commitment to sustain good practice secured	Student data disseminated cross-college effectively	Students needs being identified and handled well
Level 5 – Sustainable good practice	College continually seeking ways of improving	College continually seeking ways of improving	College continually seeking ways of improving

¹⁶ Includes assessment / profiling process covering items such as need for support, learning style, social skills, sensory sensitivities.

Student support and training ¹⁷	Staff training	Student progression	Partnership working ¹⁸
Support patchy & provided by untrained LSAs / No student training	Staff under-stand autism only if they have an interest in the subject	No formal process for student progression beyond college	Little or no effective working with key partners
Agreement to develop an autism support function & offer training for students	Agreement to deploy appropriate training for staff (not just teaching staff)	Acceptance of need to focus on transition to employment or continuing education	Acceptance of need to work closely with key partners
Autism specialist in place / LSAs trained, and training for students with autism on offer	Basic awareness training delivered cross-college	Processes in place to ensure progression to employment or continuing education	Processes in place to ensure close partnership working
Peer awareness training now on offer as well	Advanced training delivered as necessary	College good at preparing students for life after college	College works well with all key partners
College continually seeking ways of improving	College continually seeking ways of improving	College continually seeking ways of improving	College continually seeking ways of improving

¹⁷ Includes Autism West Midlands 'student life skills' category of good practice and self-awareness training for students with autism together with awareness training for the peers of students with autism i.e. the reference to students is not restricted to those with autism in this case.

¹⁸ The autism 'triad' covers socialisation, communication and imagination impairments.

CHAPTER 6: RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of our research findings we make the following recommendations for FE colleges to reflect on when developing their provision for students with autism.

RECOMMENDATION 1: DEVELOP A PLAN TO ‘EMBED’ GOOD PRACTICE AUTISM PROVISION (AND AUDIT PERFORMANCE) ON THE BASIS OF A ‘MATURITY MODEL’.

The maturity model approach to planning and performance management has been used by major organisations (e.g. HM Treasury, Metropolitan Police) to support embedding of new practice and culture change. Whilst further work is required to confirm the ‘high level’ detail shown on the draft maturity model at Chapter 5, and to flesh out the detailed content of each item in the model, the basic approach is a good practice approach. Key performance indicators based on the model could be added to an existing college performance management ‘dashboard’.

RECOMMENDATION 2: DEVELOP COLLEGE POLICY AND PROCEDURAL GUIDANCE FOR EMBEDDING GOOD PRACTICE AUTISM PROVISION CROSS-COLLEGE.

Until such time as autism awareness and understanding is fully embedded cross-college, it is felt that the development of a separate autism policy and associated procedures – to supplement existing college equality and diversity policy – would provide valuable extra focus in this important, and potentially vulnerable, area.

RECOMMENDATION 3: IDENTIFY STUDENTS DIAGNOSED WITH AUTISM/AS AND ENSURE THAT THEIR DETAILS ARE SUITABLY RECORDED ON THE STUDENT DATABASE.

It is essential that steps be taken by all colleges to identify all students diagnosed with autism and to record their details on the college’s learning disabilities database. This will ensure that the college can target its autism support efficiently and effectively.

RECOMMENDATION 4: ENSURE THAT COLLEGE ENROLMENT PROCEDURES REFLECT THE SPECIFIC NEEDS OF STUDENTS WITH AUTISM/AS.

The student’s school will have much useful information relating to the student’s autism and should be consulted during the transition process from school to college, as should the parents/carers of the student, to ensure that the best possible information is available to enable the college to provide appropriately for the student.

RECOMMENDATION 5: ENSURE THAT ALL NEW STUDENTS WITH AUTISM ARE INDIVIDUALLY PROFILED TO EVALUATE THEIR LEARNING AND TEACHING NEEDS.

A person-centred approach to autism is good practice. All individuals with autism are affected differently by their autism and it is therefore essential to identify each student's own unique autism profile. Profiling of individuals with autism should include ability and potential, thinking style, use and understanding of language, use and understanding of non-verbal communication, sensory processing, social skills, specific talents, anxiety levels and potential triggers, and behaviour as a form of communication. Autism is highly complex and, in many cases, counter-intuitive for neurotypical college staff, and thus requires specialist expertise to profile. This is one reason amongst many reasons why it is also good practice for a college to have an autism specialist in-house.





RECOMMENDATION 6: ENSURE THAT A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COLLEGE AND PARENT IS DEVELOPED AND MAINTAINED THROUGHOUT A STUDENT'S TIME IN COLLEGE.

Whilst for a neurotypical young person going to college after school is an opportunity to achieve greater independence, many students with autism will not have the necessary life skills to be as independent as their neurotypical peers. Autism may also have the effect of limiting the ability of a student with autism to fully appreciate their own needs (e.g. for learning support) whereas a parent/carer may have a more realistic view of such needs. It is essential that the college develops and maintains a relationship with the parents/carers of a student with autism throughout the student's time in college.

RECOMMENDATION 7: PROVIDE AUTISM AWARENESS TRAINING ON A CONTINUOUS ROLLING-PROGRAMME BASIS FOR ALL TEACHING AND SUPPORT STAFF, AND ALSO FOR THE PEERS OF STUDENTS WITH AUTISM IN CERTAIN SPECIFIC CIRCUMSTANCES.

Autism is so different from other disabilities that awareness training for tutors and learning support staff is essential if students with autism are to be supported effectively through their studies. Training must enable tutors and learning support workers to adapt the learning and teaching environment in accordance with the needs of students with autism, including adaptation to their particular learning styles (and to know when to call on the services of a specialist). Other staff who will come into contact with students – including security and catering staff – should also be trained suitably.

The report prepared for the Department of Health on the UK Adult Autism Strategy consultation exercise concludes that “Raising awareness and understanding of ASC amongst practitioners working with adults with an ASC emerged as the catalyst for change and a key to providing the personalised approach which adults with an ASC need.” (DoH, 2009) The report also states that “Training levels should be improved amongst frontline ... education ... professionals. Training levels could be tiered so that all practitioners have a basic understanding but they have local experts who provide advice and information as well as being a point for referral.” (DoH, 2009).

A Learning and Skills Development Agency project, which focused on including autistic students in FE, identified that “training for FE staff would enable them to empathise and understand autistic students, and also enable them to understand and manage autistic students’ behaviour better” (LSDA, 2004). A continuous rolling programme of staff awareness training can be devised to fulfil this requirement in a practical and cost-effective way.

Experience shows that students with autism will benefit if their peers receive autism awareness training (but only if the student with autism agrees). A practical approach to deploying such training would be to (a) offer all new students with autism the option to have their peers trained, and (b) deliver peer training in response to a behavioural or other problem involving a student with autism.

One possible training option would be to roll out basic autism awareness training online and follow that up with more advanced training for teaching staff, learning support workers, peers of new students with autism (as above), and in response to problems with existing students. The Department for Children, Schools and Families autism training¹⁹ is a possible way forward for delivery of online basic autism training.

¹⁹ DCSF online training details are at <http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/165037>.

RECOMMENDATION 8: SET UP A CENTRAL AUTISM SUPPORT FUNCTION BY RECRUITING A SPECIALIST IN AUTISM AND PROVIDING IN-DEPTH TRAINING FOR SOME LEARNING SUPPORT ASSISTANTS.

There is a misconception that inclusive is synonymous with integration and that specialist is synonymous with segregation. Neither is true. For those with autism “Inclusion within an educational setting, means finding the best match, or fit between the individual student’s learning requirement and the educational provision. Unlike integration, which means fitting the student into the provision, inclusion means devising or redesigning the learning environment to match the individual student’s learning requirement” (Hesmondhalgh and Breakey, 2001).

It is essential for colleges to have recourse to an expert on autism to assist tutors to devise or redesign the learning environment to match the individual student learning requirement as captured by the student profiles referred to earlier.

This would constitute the “local expert” provision envisaged by the report into the findings of the UK Adult Autism Strategy consultation exercise (DoH, 2009). If the cost of such a resource is beyond the means of a college, a possible way forward may be partnering with another local college or colleges to share the expense.

Probably the most important thing that any FE college can do to accommodate a student with autism is to provide high quality learning support. There are examples of where high quality support has made the difference between exclusion and high academic achievement. As change can cause much anxiety to persons with autism it is important to ensure continuity of learning support (continually changing support personnel may even make matters worse for the student than not having any support at all). The importance of learning support cannot be exaggerated. It is the one thing that, by itself, can make a major difference to the student’s ability to learn. If a college has to prioritise its autism provision quality learning support should be afforded a high priority.

It should also be appreciated that providing learning support for students with autism is a qualitatively different role to providing more general learning support. A strong case can be made for treating such learning support workers, trained to support students with autism, as a separate staffing category between general LSAs and tutors.





RECOMMENDATION 9: PROVIDE QUIET ROOMS WHERE STUDENTS WITH AUTISM CAN GO TO CALM DOWN WHEN OVERWHELMED BY ANXIETY.

Anxiety and stress lie at the heart of autism. Persons with autism will suffer anxiety and stress in situations that would not worry their neurotypical peers (as well as those situations that would affect them both). When

a person with autism is completely overwhelmed they may suffer a 'meltdown' (severe tantrum) or 'shutdown' (where the brain goes into 'safe mode' to protect the person). Whilst such extreme manifestations of anxiety and stress may not happen on a regular basis, all persons with autism will suffer heightened levels of anxiety from time to time. When this happens they need somewhere safe and quiet to retreat to calm down. Colleges should provide quiet rooms where students with autism can go to, and accept that there will be occasions during classroom activity when these students will need to go to the quiet room.



RECOMMENDATION 10: PROVIDE AUTISM SELF-AWARENESS AND SOCIAL SKILLS TRAINING FOR STUDENTS WITH AUTISM.

Persons with autism lack the level of self-awareness of a neurotypical person. The advice received is that autism self-awareness training should also be offered to students. Because all people with autism are different, this training has to be delivered on a one-to-one basis, and because of the complex nature of autism it has to be delivered by a specialist. Generalist counselling can be damaging as some techniques that work with neurotypical students will not work with those with autism. This is another important reason for recommending that a college has its own in-house autism specialist.

The provision of social skills training for persons with autism (or anyone else for that matter) involves a dilemma in an FE context. To what extent is it appropriate for an organisation to impose particular standards of behaviour on adults? One possible conclusion is that students with autism will be at a grave disadvantage as against those without autism (which can and will give rise to discrimination) in their life after college if not suitably prepared for this. Behaviour in many social settings may have to be taught to persons with autism if they are to not be disadvantaged. Thus, a case can be made for colleges to offer social skills training as long as it is delivered sensitively.

RECOMMENDATION 11: PROVIDE A SOCIAL NETWORKING GROUP FOR STUDENTS WITH AUTISM TO BE FACILITATED BY THE AUTISM SPECIALIST.

To complement social skills training (or instead of social skills training if a college feels that such training should not be delivered to adults) a college should establish a social networking group that students with autism can attend (either restricted to students with autism or alongside their neurotypical peers as appropriate). The request for a social group has been made by many of the students we have interviewed. It will give them an opportunity to develop their social skills in a non-threatening environment.

RECOMMENDATION 12: AGREE GUIDANCE ON MAKING THE COLLEGE'S BUILT ENVIRONMENT NEURO-DIVERSITY²⁰ FRIENDLY.

Buildings should be designed to be friendly to 'hidden' disabilities – including autism – as well as to physical disabilities. Examples of autism friendly adjustments to typical building design include provision to turn lights off and low arousal colour schemes (visual sensitivities), and the provision of quiet rooms (aural sensitivities).

²⁰ Neurodiversity is a generic term covering conditions such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia etc. Designing out matters in the built environment that may be affected by sensory sensitivities will often help students with these other conditions as well as those with autism.

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APPENDIX 1: AUTISM SPECTRUM AUSTRALIA (ASPECT)

THINKING AND LEARNING IN AUTISM

Common learning style characteristics:

- Good rote memory skills
- Attention problems
- Difficulty learning concepts, categories and classifications
- Compartmentalised chunk learning
- Difficulty developing meaning and generalising skills
- Concrete and literal thinking
- Visual thinking style

Good rote memory skills:

Children and adults with autism have excellent rote memory skills (the ability to remember things without giving any thought to the meaning). Examples of behaviour which show good rote memory skills include; recalling the dialogue of videos, books and films; echoing complete conversations perfectly; playing a tape recorder backwards and learning to sing all the songs both forward and backwards; reciting the number plates of all visitors cars; reciting the definition of every word beginning with 'A' from the Oxford Dictionary even though the person was unable to use any these words in sentences when communicating with others.

Attention problems

“Switching on” attention: People with autism have difficulty “switching on” their attention. This is more obvious when they are required to attend to things other than their natural interests. They may require more time to focus their attention.

Orienting attention: When people with autism take in information through one or more of their senses they may have difficulty working out where the information originated (e.g. where the sound they hear is coming from).

Selecting what to attend to: Children and adults with autism have difficulty selectively attending to relevant details in their environment. Instead of scanning the whole environment to identify and focus on important details, the person with autism may focus on small details and be unaware of other things happening in the environment. Studies have shown that people with autism tend to be overselective and attend to small, minute details (referred to as “spotlight attending”, OR take in all the information present in one chunk without editing for relevance, (referred to as “chunk” style learning) OR take in nothing at all.

Shifting attention: People with autism take longer to shift attention i.e. to disengage attention from what they are currently attending to, shift, then re-engage attention. They have more difficulty shifting attention from an auditory to a visual stimulus.

Sustaining attention: People with autism have trouble keeping their attention on something long enough to take in the necessary information, unless they are attending to their “narrow interest area”.

Sharing a focus of attention with others (Joint attention): People with autism have difficulty sharing a focus of attention with other people.

Difficulty learning concepts, categories and classifications

The “spotlight” style of attending makes it difficult for people with autism to learn categories and classifications. To learn how and why things are grouped in categories, it is important to be able to work out how two or more things are similar or different. To do this a person must attend to the critical features of objects, events, or whatever is being compared. If a person with autism is attending to minute, insignificant details, it is difficult to notice overall similarities and differences.

Compartmentalised chunk learning

People with autism tend to learn information in chunks. They take information that occurs close in time in one go (simultaneously, as a whole) without editing the information for relevance and meaning.

Often irrelevant information is ‘pulled’ into the learned chunk. This is because they are unable to sort out what are important versus irrelevant details. People with autism may expect the whole chunk that has occurred in the past to occur the same way again and again. This is related to the need for sameness that was first talked about by Kanner in 1943. If things do not happen the way they are supposed to (i.e. according to the chunked sequence), people with autism may become confused and anxious. Many children with autism do not learn language through the usual gradually expanding system of categories and rules. It appears that language may be learnt using the chunk learning style (echolalia).

Echolalia, (the repetition or echoing of words said by others), is common in autism. Research and practical experience suggests that echolalia is used by children with autism to communicate, make sense of what others say, and learn functional language.

It is important to remember that people with autism may not necessarily understand the individual components of learnt chunks.

Rule-governed versus flexible abstract thought

Generally, people with autism (those who have normal or above average intelligence) are able to solve problems that require rule-governed abstract thought with no difficulty (rule-governed abstractions are the sorts of problems that are found in maths, engineering and computer sciences). On the other hand, abstractions that require verbal reasoning, cognitive flexibility and complex memory are difficult for people with autism.

Developing meaning and generalising

Most people have a natural drive to see “big picture” meaning. They take input from various experiences and integrate this information with stored bits of information from past experiences. This allows them to develop a mental frame work or “scheme of things”. The framework allows people to interpret new experiences, anticipate and solve problems.

Happe (1999), suggests that autism is characterised by a cognitive style that is biased towards local rather than global information, thus people with autism tend to think in details and are not good at working out the relative importance of the details or how to integrate the little bits of information to form concepts and meanings.

Happe says people with autism are often concerned with isolated detail but do not grasp the whole picture (the overall message or purpose of an activity, scene or event). They see the whole picture as “lots of little parts”.

Concrete and literal thinking

Even the most capable children and adults with autism are very literal in the way they use and understand language. Sayings such as “Line up please”, “He’s over the hill” and “It’s raining cats and dogs” present difficulties for people with autism. Confusion caused by literal interpretations is one of the major causes of learning/behaviour problems for people with autism. A child with autism may insist on calling objects by particular names (like “graphite” pencil, not “lead” pencil).

There are other problems associated with the literal and concrete style such as difficulty understanding that things may have multiple labels (e.g. “swimmers/costumes/togs/cossies”) or words have multiple meanings (e.g. bat can have several meanings) and words change meaning depending on who is speaking and who is listening (the words “you” and “me” refer to different people, depending on who is speaking).

Visual thinking

One of the most important strengths in autism is the visual learning style. The majority of people with autism are visual learners. In the words of Linda Hogdgon, (1996), it is best to think of people with autism “as being 90% visual and 10% auditory learners”.

Visual teaching strategies are recommended for people with autism for the following reasons:

- 1) Research indicates that the visual skills of people with autism are superior to their skills in other areas. People with autism are better able to comprehend permanent (non-transient) visual information because the message is present long enough for them to take in and process the information.
- 2) People with autism claim to use visual information to interpret their world.
- 3) Programs that use visual strategies are highly effective with people who have autism.

Learning strengths

Janzen (1996) summarises the learning strengths in autism as the ability to:

- Take in chunks of information quickly
- Remember information for a long time
- Learn to use visual information meaningfully
- Learn and repeat long routines
- Understand and use concrete, context-free information and rules
- Concentrate on narrow topics of interest

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APPENDIX 2:

AUTISM RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE CURRENT STUDENTS

All references to “autism” in this document refer also to Asperger’s syndrome.

Background information on the College’s Autism Project

This project is conducting research into the specific needs of learners, former learners, and prospective learners with autism in Further Education. It also aims to raise awareness of issues regarding the autism spectrum and make available additional support mechanisms. The project is investigating the needs of students with autism and the difficulties they face at college, as well as their positive experiences. The research involves the completion of a questionnaire by students with autism and interviews (if a student is willing to be interviewed – see below).

The research findings will be published in a report by the Autism Project team in April 2010. The team’s report will be made available to all College staff and students. The findings of the report will assist the College’s Senior Management Team to provide a better learning experience and additional support mechanisms for students with autism.

Seeking the experiences of students with autism

No-one knows more about autism than a person with autism. It is therefore essential that the College consults with you. The College wants to learn lessons from your experience as a learner with us. Time spent completing this questionnaire will provide us with valuable information to help us improve the learning experience of students with autism at the College in future.

You are under no obligation to participate in this research. If you decide to participate, you do not have to answer any question that you do not want to answer. Completion of this questionnaire will be taken as consent for your responses to be incorporated in the analysis and reporting of the results of this research. All results will be unattributed and no students participating in this survey will be identifiable.

You do not have to put your name on the questionnaire unless you want to. You may also send a completed questionnaire to us anonymously if you wish.

Completed questionnaires should be emailed to autismproject@dudleycol.ac.uk, handed in to Reception, or posted to the address below please.

AUTISM PROJECT
INTERNATIONAL OFFICE
DUDLEY COLLEGE
THE BROADWAY
DUDLEY
WEST MIDLANDS
DY1 4AS

Would you be willing to be interviewed?

If you complete a questionnaire, and we have follow-up questions to ask you, would you be willing to be interviewed? We do not want to interview all students who complete a questionnaire, only where we want to follow up something, and only where a student is willing to be interviewed.

Please tick this box if you are willing to be interviewed

PART 1 QUESTIONS

These are the background questions that will give us some important information about you to inform the analysis of the Part 2 questions, without identifying you.

1. What is your age?

2. Which schools did you attend before college?

3. What qualifications have you got, if any?

4. Did you have any particular anxieties about attending a further education college?

5. What are you doing to cope with your anxieties when at Dudley College?

6. In what way is Dudley College helping you to cope with anxieties or making matters worse?

7. Why did you choose Dudley College?

8. When did you commence your studies at Dudley College?



9. Which subject / subjects are you studying at Dudley College?

10. How far do you have to travel to Dudley College?

11. What benefits are you getting from attending Dudley College (friends, new skills etc)?

12. Would you recommend Dudley College to another person with autism?

YES	NO
-----	----

13. What do you want to do after you leave Dudley College?

PART 2 QUESTIONS

14. Are oral instructions from Dudley College staff clear and easy to understand?

15. Have you experienced any difficulties in relation to timetabling at Dudley College?

16. Has Dudley College made any changes to accommodate you as a person with autism?

17. How well are you coping with free periods at Dudley College?

18. If you have ever been disciplined by Dudley College please tell us about it.

19. Please tell us about any unpleasant experiences at Dudley College related to your autism (e.g. bullying, discrimination, verbal abuse)?

20. Do you follow a standard education programme at Dudley College?

YES	NO
-----	----

21. How well does Dudley College support you in relation to social activity at the college?

22. Have you received any social skills training from Dudley College?

YES	NO
-----	----

23. Do you think that your Dudley College tutors & other staff understand the levels of anxiety that a person with autism experiences?

YES	NO
-----	----

24. Do you have any difficulty finding your way around the Dudley College campus?

YES	NO
-----	----

25. Do you think that your Dudley College tutors have any unreasonable expectations of you?

YES	NO
-----	----

26. Who do you go to at Dudley College for help with problems relating to your autism?



27. When you asked for help did you get the help you needed?

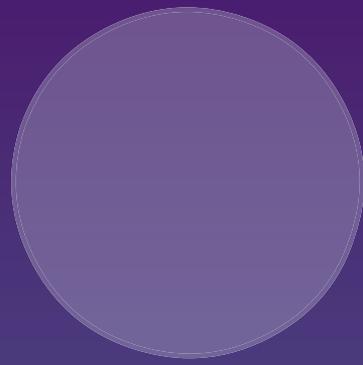
28. Please tell us about any sensory difficulties you have experienced at Dudley College (e.g. problems with light, sound).

29. Please tell us about anything else you would like us to know about your time attending Dudley College (please continue on a separate sheet if you need to)?

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR COMPLETING THIS QUESTIONNAIRE.

YOUR FEEDBACK WILL BE USED TO IMPROVE THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE FOR STUDENTS WITH AUTISM AT DUDLEY COLLEGE.





Our mission: outstanding learning which develops skills,
raises aspirations and changes lives.

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