
Teaching Autistic University Students: A Guide for UNSW Educators

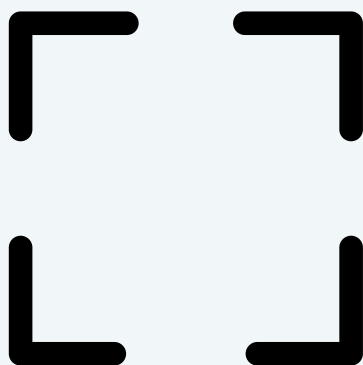
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Submitted to:
Iva Strnadová



Navigating This Booklet

Yellow boxes like these will have extra tips and suggestions that can be helpful.



Black boxes like these will be next to scannable codes that link to additional resources for more information or insights.

All images and icons used in this booklet are sourced from Canva unless otherwise stated by the author.

All resources and references made will be listed at the end of this booklet.

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1

Letter from the author

Hello, dear colleague!

I'm Vivienne, an academic and current student at the University of New South Wales (UNSW). I'm sure we can agree that ***providing quality education for all our students is an important goal*** that UNSW is actively pursuing, and that a big part of that is making education inclusive and equitable [1].

In this guide, I'll be going over some information and strategies on how to teach your Autistic university students.

As an Autistic student myself, I can't tell you how many ***little things make a big difference*** in my academic journey. It might be hard work to get started, but it's good work that will be worth every effort. ***I have trust in your ability as an academic to do good by your students, and I sincerely hope that this booklet will be useful to you in doing just that!***



[1] UNSW Sustainable Development Goals 2023 Report, p. (2024, p. 9)

We'll start with some important information about **autism, language, and relevant legislation** so you have a good foundation for the rest of this booklet!

Remember to scan the QR codes for more insight.



2

Autism



What is it?

The definition of autism has changed over the years due to continuous research and discoveries[2]. While subject to different perspectives, ***Autism can be broadly defined as a set of neurological conditions characterized by*** [3]:

differences and
difficulties in
communication and
socialization



repetitive or restricted
behaviors, interests, or
activities



[2] (Matson & Sturmey, 2022)

[3] (Cherewick & Matergia, 2024)

2

Autism



Different views

It's important to note that autism can be viewed as a disease, which makes people think it's something to 'cure' or 'fix' [4].

Viewing it as a neurological condition means ***viewing autism as an aspect of human diversity*** [5].



Watch this video from UNSW Diversified's Toolkit for Educators entitled **"Introduction to Neurodivergence"** featuring perspectives from neurodivergent UNSW alum and staff.

As an academic, perhaps affirming neurodiversity is better.
We're not here to 'cure' our students, we're here to accept and educate them as best we can!

[4] (Fein & Rios, 2018, p. 253)

[5] (Fein & Rios, 2018, p. 192)

3 Notes on Language

Most English-speaking individuals prefer **Identity-first Language!** This means saying “**Autistic person**” **instead of “person with autism**” [6]. Many Autistic people find that autism is integral to their sense of self and that it could not be removed or separated from their identity [7].



This video by Autistic content creator Chloe Hayden further elaborates on **Identity vs Person-First Language** and the importance of using preferred terminology.

As an academic, this means saying “Autistic student” instead of “student with autism”! *Person-first Language* such as “Person on the autism spectrum” is considered by Autistic people to be not offensive, so it’s fine to say “student on the autism spectrum” as well [8].

Still not sure what terms to say and use? Ask!
Everyone is different, and so are their preferences.



[6] (Keating et al., 2023, p. 413)

[7] (Bury et al., 2023, p. 683)

[8] (Bury et al., 2023, p. 681)

3 Notes on Language

✗ *Avoid using:*

1. **Impairments**
2. **Deficits**
3. **Disorder**

These terms are viewed as offensive, harmful, and imply that Autistic individuals are 'less' [9].

✓ *Instead, try:*

1. **Difficulties**
2. **Challenges**
3. **Differences**

These terms better reflect the experience of Autistic individuals, especially in the context of their environment [10].

It's important to use preferred terms because effectively ***using inclusive language can positively affect your Autistic students and the teaching environment*** by encouraging active and collaborative learning [11]!

Still not sure what terms to say and use? Ask!
Everyone is different, and so are their preferences.



[9] (Keating et al., 2023) (Bury et al., 2023)

[10] (Keating et al., 2023, p. 417)

[11] (Ackah-Jnr et al., 2020, p. 184)

4

Legislations & Requirements for University Academics

As educators in Australia, we have a few **legal requirements** to fulfil when it comes to teaching students with disabilities, including our Autistic students!

Here are some you should be familiar with:

Disability Discrimination Act 1992



Under this act, **discrimination against persons with disabilities is illegal** in various areas, including Education [12]. Notably, educators cannot deny or limit a student with disability's access to benefits provided by the university [13].

Disability Standards for Education 2005



This is an instrument that shows how certain particulars such as **reasonable adjustments and support services** can be made accessible for students with disabilities [14].

[12] (Disability Discrimination Act 1992, n.d., Section 22)
[13] (Disability Discrimination Act 1992, n.d., Section 22:2a)
[14] (Disability Standards for Education 2005, n.d.)



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Legislations & Requirements for University Academics

To help you comply with the listed legal requirements, ***here are a few resources provided by the university!***

These can be distributed to your students so that they are aware of the benefits they can rightfully access.

UNSW's Equitable Learning Services (ELS)



This website is for **UNSW's Equitable Learning Services (ELS)**, a free and confidential service provided for students who are neurodivergent or living with a condition that impacts their studies, or carers for someone with these conditions.

Video - Introduction to ELS at UNSW



Watch this video introducing **UNSW's Equitable Learning Services** with instructions on how to register and access its provided services!



The following section will talk about **Autism in the university context** including common challenges and what can be done to help.

This will give us some more insight on the experience of Autistic university students.



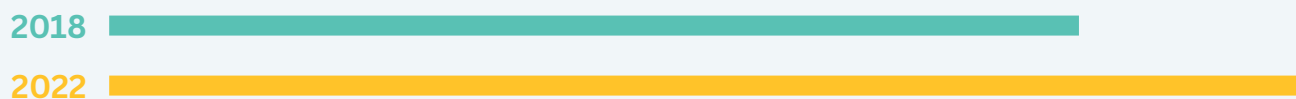
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Autism at University

Context & Background

There is an increasing number of persons with disabilities entering university and graduating!

In 2022, 19.7% of persons with disability held a bachelor's degree or higher [15].



This is 3.6% higher than in 2018 [16].

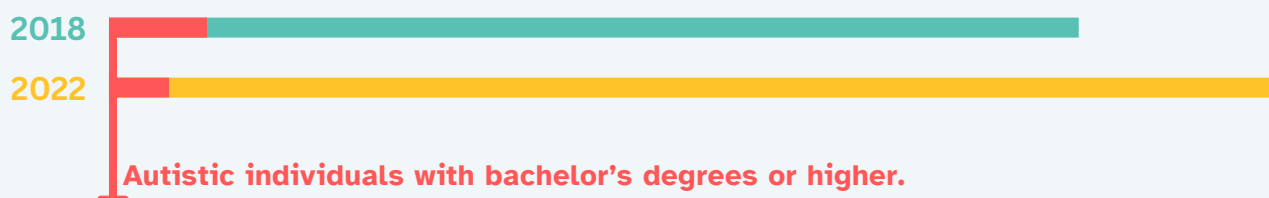
(Note: In this census, people with disability counted Autistic participants as well [17][18]).



There are less Autistic graduates, though.

In 2022, 5.2% of Autistic individuals held a bachelor's degree or higher [19]. In 2018, it was 8.1% [20]. This is a 2.9% decrease.

(Note: This percentage counts Autistic participants only [21][22])



Autistic individuals with bachelor's degrees or higher.

[15] (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024) [16] (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019)
[17] (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024) [18] (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019)
[19] (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024) [20] (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019)
[21] (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024) [22] (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019)

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Autism at University

Common Challenges for Autistic Students

Autistic individuals are less likely than other students to hold degrees because of various reasons including ***discrimination, lack of support, and lack of accessibility at universities*** [23]. These experiences lead to a higher likelihood of dropping out or being unable to complete their degrees [24].

Let's look at two common challenges:

Social

Autistic students find social interaction and communication difficult, and it leads to anxiety and stress [25].

These challenges can impact aspects such as motivation and ability to participate in group work and class discussions [26][27].

Academic

Course delivery and assessments, particularly presentations, have been identified as challenging by Autistic students [28].

When courses are not systematically designed, they are disorganised and difficult to understand [29]. Presentation-style assessments include public speaking, interpreting audience reactions, and being mindful of one's own body language, which many Autistic students find difficult [30].

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Autism at University

What can we do?



As UNSW Academics, we have a few things we can offer when our Autistic students are having a difficult time!

Here are some helpful resources as a start:



Introduction to **Equitable Learning Services!** This is a free and confidential service for students that provides practical support so their conditions don't affect their studies.



Neurokin Networks offers Body Doubling Sessions and a Connections Club to help boost academic productivity and socialisation in a safe environment.

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Autism at University

What can we do?



There are more targeted solutions we can implement!

In the following pages, we will explore the following **Challenge Areas** based on the Common Challenges listed earlier and some **Solutions and Strategies** that can be implemented within courses:

Challenge Area

Solutions & Strategies

Group Work & Class Discussions [31] [32]

Modeling, and Prompting

Course Delivery [33]

Technology Aided Instruction and Intervention, and Visual Supports

Presentation-style Assessments [34]

Video Modeling

[31] (White et al., 2016) [32] (Gurbuz et al., 2019) [33] (Gurbuz et al., 2019) [34] (Kumazaki et al., 2019)

The solutions and strategies in this section are accompanied by **practical suggestions** that you can apply in classrooms, course design, and assessments. The suggestions are drawn from Evidence-based Practices (EBPs).



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Solutions & Strategies

Group Work & Class Discussions

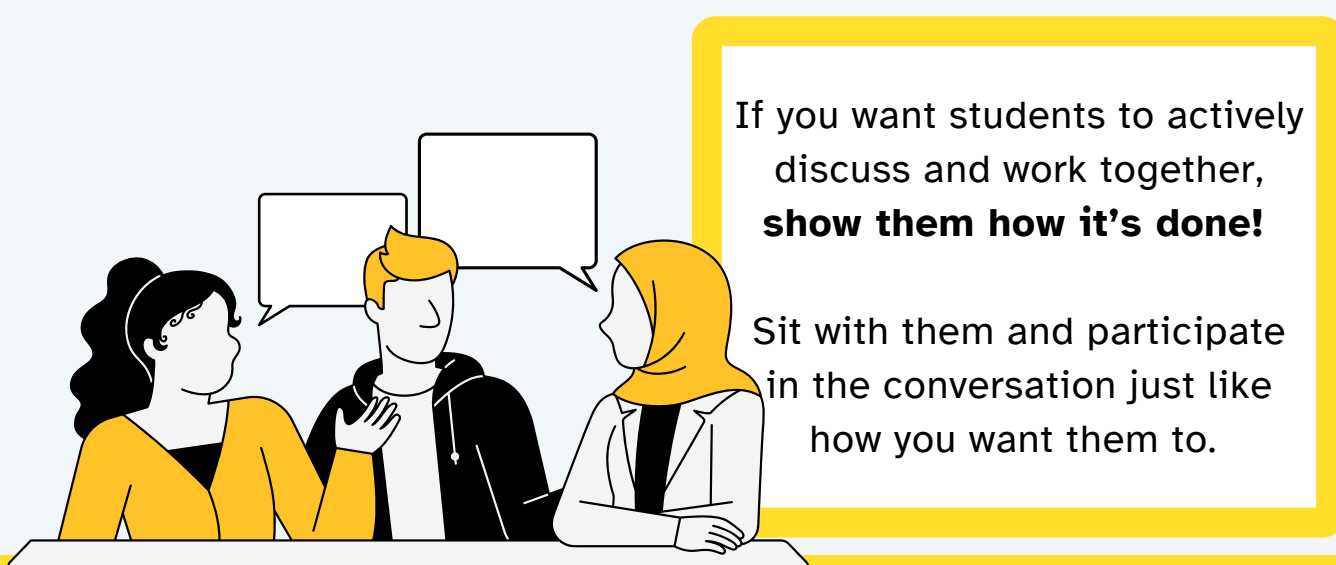
Autistic students find group work and class discussions challenging due to the involvement of social communication, which **causes stress and anxiety** [35][36].

Here's how we can help!

Method 1: Modeling (MD)

You can **encourage desired behaviour by demonstrating it**, allowing the student to observe and eventually mimic, then acquire it [37].

The demonstration of skills leads to Autistic students performing them in time, although not always with accuracy, and **improves their confidence in communication** [38].



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Solutions & Strategies

Group Work & Class Discussions

Method 2: Prompting (PP)

You can **use verbal, gestural, or physical cues and supports** to help students engage in specific skills [39].

Autistic students who are given cues or prompts to speak **increase their social communication**, and some learn to do so without prompts afterwards [40].

You can offer **“talk cards”** with some prompts like:

“What did you think of the lecture?” or “Did you find anything particularly interesting?”

You can approach the groups with Autistic students who aren’t talking so much and say **“I’d like to hear everyone’s thoughts!”** to give everyone a chance to share something.

This is a prompt that doesn’t single out the Autistic student and asks them to participate in the activity like their peers.



[39] (Steinbrenner et al., 2020, p. 106)

[40] (Ackerman et al., 2021, p. 43)

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Solutions & Strategies

Group Work & Class Discussions

Extra resources:



Read more about **modeling strategies** in the classroom and how to use them, particularly how to make it more interactive!



Watch the use of a visual cue called “**Talk Moves**” that has a list of sentences to prompt academic conversation among students.



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Solutions & Strategies

Course Delivery

Autistic students find courses difficult to understand when they are **disorganized or not designed systematically** [41][42].

Here's how we can help!

Method 1: Visual Supports (VS)

You can provide **concrete cues showing information about your course, activities, and expectations** [43].

Providing information through concrete cues such as course schedules, summary of assessments, and the like helps **reduce anxiety and stress in Autistic students** [44][45]. This also helps them **distinguish important information** from additional details [46].

At the beginning of the course, you can **provide a summarised schedule** of topics per week alongside course or assessment expectations so your students know what to prepare for!



[41] (Jansen et al., 2018) [42] (Gurbuz et al., 2019)
[43] (Steinbrenner et al., 2020) [44] (Steinbrenner et al., 2020) [45] (Jansen et al., 2018) [46] (Jansen et al., 2018)

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Solutions & Strategies

Course Delivery

Method 2: Technology Aided Instruction and Intervention (TAIIP)

Use technology to your advantage! Recommend or provide certain programs or websites that can aid student learning [47].

Some Autistic students find ***in-person lectures overstimulating*** due to noise and other environmental factors [48]. The use of technology such as pre-recordings or transcriptions can ***help Autistic students absorb information in a way that is comfortable*** because of predictability and structure, and because they can be adapted to their needs [49].

Record your lectures and provide transcriptions!

Your students can either listen at a slower or faster rate, or read the information instead. This way, they can avoid overstimulation.



[47] (Steinbrenner et al., 2020, p. 129)

[48] (Jansen et al., 2018)

[49] (Valencia et al., 2019)

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Solutions & Strategies

Course Delivery

Extra resources:



Watch this video from UNSW Diversified's Toolkit for Educators entitled "**Digital Platforms & Assistive Technologies**" for more insight.



Read on how to build an **effective Course Calendar** that's easy and straightforward for your students to navigate.



Check this guide from UNSW on its **lecture recording service and its benefits**, as well as links to support if needed.



6

Solutions & Strategies

Presentation-style Assessments

The **public speaking** aspects of presentations, which include reading audience expression and being aware of one's body language, makes these types of assessments **challenging for Autistic students** [50].

Here's how we can help!

Method 1: Video Modeling (VM)

Provide videos that show the type of skills or behaviours you'd like your students to embody or acquire [51].

The use of videos showcasing desired behaviour has resulted in **increased use of appropriate eye contact and hand gestures** amongst Autistic individuals [52][53]. The demonstration gives the student an opportunity to **practice the behaviour** [54].

Give your students video examples of what 'good' and 'bad' public speaking looks like based on your assessment criteria!

This way, they know what you're expecting to see and they can practice.



6

Solutions & Strategies

Presentation-style Assessments

Extra resources:



Watch this video entitled “**Delivering a bad presentation**” with a list of specific mistakes. This can be used as VM tool for your students.



Watch this video entitled “**Delivering a good presentation**” with a list of specific techniques. This can be used as a VM tool for your students.



Watch this video explaining **hand gestures** in presentations.

This can be used as a VM tool for your students.



This final section covers **university-wide efforts currently at UNSW**. It is important to be aware of these for both you and your students' benefit.

Let's make the most of what we have!



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University-wide Efforts

Context & Background

School-wide Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports (SWBIS) include creating **safe, equitable, and inclusive environments** [55]. Whole-school approaches that focus on the inclusion of Autistic students **benefit the entire student body** because they address common needs [56].



There are efforts done by UNSW to make the university more safe, equitable, and inclusive for Autistic students and others who can benefit from them! The following pages will cover a few examples.

[55] (Webster & Roberts, 2022, p. 14) [56] (Roberts & Webster, 2022, p. 711)

University-wide Efforts

Sensory-friendly Spaces

Sensory-friendly Zones are necessary for Autistic students because of noise and light sensitivity [57]. Some Autistic individuals report that bright lights cause them pain, and sounds like typing and talking are distracting [58][59].

The UNSW Library has three Sensory-friendly zones that Autistic students or students with similar needs may access:

Silent Areas in Levels 6 and 7 where talking and other auditory stimuli are lower.

Retreat Space on Level 3 for periodic breaks.

Neutral Sensory Study Spaces on Levels 3 and 6 with low light and individual carrel desks [60].



Read more about the **Neutral Sensory Study Spaces** at UNSW Library here.



[57] (Clément et al., 2022)

[58] (Clément et al., 2022, p. 11)

[59] (Clément et al., 2022, p. 5)

[60] (UNSW Library, n.d.)

University-wide Efforts

Neurodiversity Events & Programs

Increased information on and interactions with neurodiversity, including autism, lead to benefits such as more confidence in communication and collaboration, positive relationships, and innovation [61].



Watch this video about **Diversity Festival 2024**, its significance, and some of the events and activities that took place!

UNSW holds the **Diversity Festival** on an annual basis, offering in-person, online, and hybrid events to promote diversity within the university community [62]. There are stallholders and events featuring Neurodiversity and disability [63].



[61] (Axbey et al., 2023, p. 2197)

[62] (UNSW Sydney, n.d.)

[63] (UNSW Sydney, n.d.)

University-wide Efforts

Neurodiversity Events & Programs

Faculty training is also necessary as **staff competence and readiness to teach Autistic students affects academic experience** [64]. Training also **benefits the staff through increased awareness and understanding of neurodivergence**, particularly autism, and can improve rapport between students and educators [65].



Access the **Toolkit for Educators** here and learn how you can help better support your Autistic and neurodiverse students!

UNSW Diversified is a team of neurodivergent students and staff that have engaged in and designed projects with the goal of **improving inclusivity at UNSW** [66]. One of the projects they have created is the **“Inclusive Teaching Toolkit for Educators”**, which is a resource to help educators create an inclusive and supportive learning environment [67].



[64] (Bolourian et al., 2024)

[65] (Bolourian et al., 2024, p.

547) [66] (UNSW Sydney, n.d.-a)

[67] (UNSW Sydney, n.d.-c)

That's it from me! I know that was a lot of information, but I hope that was helpful to you so ***you can now help your Autistic students thrive at university*** (not just survive it).

Thank you for your time, and ***good luck!***



8

Resources & References

All Resources and QR Codes



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Resources & References

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Resources & References

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