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Gaining insight into transition and progression of students on the autism spectrum - DISCOVER a transition programme with a difference

Introduction

Autism is a neurodevelopment condition that is ‘characterised by qualitative impairments in social communication and social interaction across contexts and a repetitive or restricted pattern of interest, behaviour and activity’ (Lambe, 2019:1531). According to the autistic rights movement, ‘autistic people are not disconnected from the world around them, they are differently connected to it’ (Leveto, 2018 :3). Over the last number of years, there has been a move away from defining autism as a ‘disorder’ and towards redefining it as a ‘difference’ (Ring et al, 2018). In this paper, the terms ‘autism’ or ‘on the spectrum’ will be used.

The Moving to Further and Higher Education Report (Guckin et al, 2013) recommended the development of targeted access initiatives to support the academic and social needs of students with a disability in transition and progressing through further education. Targeted orientation programmes are used to allow students from under-represented groups to meet other students, visit the campus, tour the library and get essential information that will support the student’s transition to higher education.

Disability Support Services (DSS) are keenly aware of the importance of the transition from second-level education into third level education. Year on year there is an increase in the number of students with disabilities who are accessing third-level education. Students with disabilities now make up approximately 6.2% of the total student population (AHEAD, 2019). Since 2016, there has been a 25% increase in the number of students accessing higher education who are on the spectrum.

Background

In 2018, the Department of Education and Skills established strand 3 of the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH 3) Fund to support the implementation of the National Plan for the Equality of Access to Higher Education 2015 -2019. The South Cluster, SOAR project emerged in response to the Higher Educational Authorities (HEA) call for the development of regional clusters to develop strategies to implement access initiatives for under-represented groups in higher education. The SOAR project is an inter-institutional collaboration between five higher education institutes in the south region (University College Cork, Cork Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology Carlow, Waterford Institute of Technology, and Institute of Technology Tralee) and community partners on access initiatives for under-represented groups.

Under the workstream of Enabling Transitions, the Disability Support Service (DSS) in Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) set out to develop transition programmes for students on the autism spectrum. This project sets out to create a roadmap of support for students who are on the autism spectrum and who are potentially entering Higher Education. Structured into three elements - pre-entry, entry and post-entry, this pilot project seeks to draw on research conducted with students, parents and professionals, to gain insight into transition and progression

experience of students on the spectrum in CIT. This paper highlights the findings of the transitional needs of students from the perspective of current students on the autism spectrum in CIT.

Literature Review

Over the last two decades, developing access initiatives for people with disabilities in Ireland has been a part of the political agenda (Shevlin et al, 2017). Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) now make up 7.5% of all new entrants into higher education (AHEAD, 2019). While most students experience increased social, emotional and organisational demands as they transition from secondary to tertiary education (Arnett, 2000), these demands may be amplified for students with autism (White et al, 2016). Research has shown that students who participate in pre-transition programmes are nearly three times more likely to attend third-level education than those who do not participate in a pre-transition programme (Chiang et al, 2012). Nationally, Doyle et al (2017) support the implementation of pre-transition programmes across all higher education institutes (HEIs) in Ireland, to ensure equity of access for students on the autism spectrum.

The increasing trend on delivering pre-transition programmes at third level 'reflects a growing recognition of the increased numbers of students on the autism spectrum in higher education and the need to provide additional or supplementary supports' (Sarrett, 2018: 681). However, supports and accommodations tend to focus on addressing academic needs rather than social or emotional difficulties (Gelbar et al 2014). Van Hees et al (2015) argues that the three domains of a student's life – socialisation, educational, and independent living – are inseparable and therefore, third level institutions should provide support across all three domains to ensure a truly inclusive and accessible educational environment.

Understanding the transition to tertiary education from the perspective of students on the spectrum is vital to designing, developing and delivering a pre-transition programme to potential students. Their experience of navigating the system can offer insights and recommendations on how best to deliver effective and inclusive supports and educational environment. As Sarrett (2018: 680) rightly points out, addressing the needs of students should only be done

> 'by gathering the perspectives of autistic individuals on accommodations received and desired in institutes of higher education as well as thoughts on making higher education more accessible and autism-friendly'.

While more research is needed to identify the concerns of students preparing to transition (the recipients of the pre-transition programme), this paper will focus on the data gathered from the perspective of existing students.

Methodology

The data presented here is part of a larger study aimed at collecting the barriers and facilitators to positive engagement in higher education for students on the spectrum. The larger study aims to gather data from primary stakeholders – students, parents and professionals – to inform our understanding of the transition needs of students with autism with the aim of improving the educational environment. This paper draws on quantitative data gathered from students on the autism spectrum that are currently in tertiary education. An online survey was

administered using a secure and encrypted website link that was sent out to all students on the autism spectrum in Cork Institute of Technology who were registered with Disability Support Service. A total of 11 students took part in an online survey, whose content was informed by existing research on the transition needs of students with autism (Febri and Andrews, 2015). The questions in the survey related to pre-transition preparedness, structural barriers and/or facilitators, and the skillset needed for optimal wellbeing.

Findings

A total of 11 participants took part in this survey, 6 were male and 5 were female. All the participants had informed the DSS of their autism before or within the first week of starting college. Due to the nature of distributing this survey, only students on the spectrum who were registered with the DSS were invited to participate. The participants were spread across a range of departments with CIT (see table 1a,b,c), reflecting the diversity of interests among the group.

Table 1a Gender	Participants n=11
Male	6 (55.6%)
Female	5 (45.4%)
Other	0

Table 1a of participants demographic and characterisation - Gender.

Table 1b Degree (area of study)	Participants n=11
Science/Medicine	2 (18.2%)
Tech/Computing	1 (9.1%)
Engineering	1 (9.1%)
Maths	2 (18.2%)
Social Science	2 (18.2%)
Arts/Humanities	3 (27.3%)

Table 1b of participants demographic and characterisation - degree.

Table 1c Stage of Disclosure	Participants n=11
Before starting college	9 (81.8%)
In the first week	2 (18.2%)
In the first semester	0
In the first year	0
After the first year	0

Table 1c of participants demographic and characterisation - disclosure.

The research showed that the majority of the participants found the college application process quite manageable (91%), with only one student stating that they found it difficult. Pre-entry supports are vital for supporting a positive transition to higher education (Chiang et al, 2012). While subject knowledge influenced the majority of the participant's college choice (54.6%), additional support networks were also identified, such as family (36.4%), friends (27.3%), current students in college (18.2%), and career advisers (27.3%). To a lesser extent, teachers, hobbies and popular culture also contributed shaped some of the participant's decision.

Table 2 What or who influenced your course choice when you applied?	Participants n=11
Family	4 (36.4%)
Partner/Spouse	1 (9.1%)
Teachers	1 (9.1%)
Friends	3 (27.3%)
Previous grades in the subject	6 (54.6%)

Table 2 What or who influenced your course choice when you applied?	Participants n=11
People already in college or university	2 (18.2%)
Careers adviser	3 (27.3%)
TV	1 (9.1%)
Movies	1 (9.1%)
Books	1 (9.1%)
Hobbies	2 (18.2%)
Internet	0
Celebrities	0

Table 2: What or who influenced your course choice when you applied?

The three main concerns the participants had before starting college related to making friends (72.7%), managing academic demands (63.6%) and navigating the college compass (63.6%). As previously identified in this paper, the three domains of a student's life are inseparable and challenges can lead to mental health issues (Van Hees et al, 2015).

Table 3 What were your concerns about starting college?	Participants n=11
Financial cost	3 (27.3%)
Academic workload	7 (63.6%)
Living away from home	1 (9.1%)
Finding my way around campus	7 (63.6%)
Making new friends	8 (72.7%)
Attending lectures	3 (27.3%)
Socialising	5 (45.5%)
Getting to and from college	1 (9.1%)
Completing assignments	4 (36.4%)
Doing work placements	2 (18.2%)
Managing anxiety	1 (9.1%)

Table 3: What were your concerns about starting college?

For the most part, the participants gave a positive overview of their transition into CIT. Nearly all of them liked the modules they were taking (90.9%) and the lecturers delivering the course (90.9%). Although few (18.2%) were satisfied with their grades, the vast majority were enjoyed the learning experience (73.7%). Overall, the participants felt accepted and supported within the college. However, 63.6% of the participants experienced difficulty with instrumental demands, such as timetable changes.

Table 4 Participants perceptions of and likes and dislikes of college	Positive experience n (%)	Negative experience n (%)
Lecturers	10 (90.9%)	0
Grades	2 (18.2%)	0
Learning experience	8 (72.2%)	0
Friendships	7 (63.6%)	1 (9.1%)
Spaces to eat	5 (45.5%)	2 (18.2%)
Living arrangement	4 (36.4%)	0
Being supported to do well	5 (45.5)	1 (9.1%)
Modules	10 (90.9%)	1 (9.1%)
Being independent	6 (54.6%)	0
Sense of belonging	7 (63.6%)	2 (18.2%)
Timetable changes	0	7 (63.6)

Table 4: Participants perceptions of likes and dislikes of college.

Reflecting on their transition into college, the participants highlighted supports and accommodations that were useful or would have been useful, if they had been offered. As table 5 indicates, students with autism are not a homogenous group and require a diverse range of supports and accommodations. As Van Hees et al (2015: 1682) notes, ‘Measures that work well for one student may not be appropriate for another student’. While a pre-transition programme will go some way to making the unfamiliar familiar, individualised supports and coaching must extend beyond transition.

Table 5 Supports and information	Useful n (%)	Not Useful n (%)
Information about the college	8 (72.7%)	3 (27.3%)
Information about the course	8 (72.7%)	3 (27.3%)
Opportunity to tour the campus	9 (81.8%)	2 (18.2%)
Opportunity to talk to current students on the course	9 (81.8%)	2 (18.2%)
Tour of lecture halls	6 (54.6%)	5 (45.5%)
Opportunity to take a virtual tour	3 (27.3%)	8 (72.7%)
Information about clubs and societies	6 (54.6%)	5 (45.5%)
Meeting disability support team	11 (100%)	0
Course reading list	6 (54.6%)	5 (45.5%)
Chance to try a 'normal' college day	7 (63.6%	4 (36.4%)
Information about moving away from home	2 (18.2%)	9 (81.8%)
Information on living as a student	5 (45.5%)	6 (54.6%)
Access to peer support mentors	7 (63.6%)	4 (36.4%)
Training/information on stress management	7 (63.6%)	4 (36.4%)
Training/information on mental health /wellbeing	6 (54.6%)	5 (45.5%)
Training/information on time management	10 (90.9%)	1 (9.1%)
Training/information on study skills	9 (81.8%)	2 (19.2%)
Training/information on communication skills	7 (63.6%)	4 (36.4%)

Table 5: Supports and information.

Conclusion and next steps

It has been widely acknowledged that young people with disabilities need preparation within school to become more autonomous and develop self-determination skills (Harrison, 2006; OECD, 2011). As highlighted in this research, a supportive post-primary school experience is a key factor in a student’s progression. School grades, family members, guidance counsellors and friends were identified as influencing progression choices. With this in mind, a ‘Discover’ camp has been developed that will target students with autism early in the senior cycle of post-primary school. The theme of the camp will concentrate on choice and student’s planning for the future. This pre-transition programme is not aimed at recruiting students to CIT or other higher education institute but more to present possible choices going forward with the acknowledgement that higher education may not be their next step. The choice process would be supported through experiencing the environment, college activities and supported reflection. This camp was due to commence in April, 2020 but due to Covid-19, has been postponed indefinitely.

In addition to the ‘Discover’ Camp, a summer transition programme will be developed to support incoming

students on the spectrum. Targeted orientation programmes are not a new concept but have been used to allow students from under-represented groups to meet other students, visit the campus, tour the library and get essential information that will support the student's transition to higher education. The data from this research will be used to guide the development of the programme. Thus, participants in the programme will be introduced to self-management, communication, organisation and group work skills as well as planning, time management and self-advocacy. By taking a holistic approach to the student's transitional needs (social, personal and academic), this programme seeks to make visible the hidden curriculum of the college and support student's self-efficacy.

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Laura Coleman has been working in CIT Disability Support Service (DSS) for over 10 years in her role as Disability Support Officer. Laura is a member of the Board of Directors of AHEAD, Treasurer of DAWN and sits on numerous advisory and practitioner groups for DARE. Laura has gained a lot of experience professionally including BA in Social Care, accredited Assistive Technology course, Certificate of Competency in Educational Testing and is currently studying the MA in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. Laura is supportive of the further development of an inclusive curriculum and working with students and staff in CIT towards this.



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Annie Cummins is a postdoctoral researcher on the SOAR Project in the School of Applied Social Studies at University College Cork (soarforaccess.ie). She is working on evaluating the widening participation initiatives under the five workstreams: Travellers in Education; 1916 Bursary Fund; Enabling Transitions; Connecting Communities and Connecting Curriculum; and Partnership for Access.



Julie O'Donovan

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Julie has been working with the CIT Disability Support Service (DSS) for the last year. Prior to this, she practised as an occupational therapist in community mental health services in the UK and Australia. Julie has a BSc in Occupational Therapy and a Diploma in Design for Printing. The Transition Programme Coordinator role emerged from a three-year funded PATH project. The objective is to consider and develop student and system supports at a pre-entry, entry and post entry level. The primary focus of this project is to support students that identify on the autism spectrum. Several initiatives are being developed, trialled and implemented in the CIT learning environment to support this cohort of students.

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