

An investigation of the lived experiences of university students who identify with or have been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

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Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) can be defined as a neurodevelopmental disorder that affects individuals' social communication (Maye et al, 2022). Characteristics of this disorder include restrictive and repetitive behaviors and interests (Maye et al, 2022). These impacts can be shown through individuals having difficulty expressing emotions, recognising others' facial expressions and having a strong preference for routine (Berendse et al., 2018). Navigating the complexities of university with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) brings forth unique, challenging experiences that go against the traditional beliefs of learning and socialisation, as these environments are not designed for neurodiverse minds (Evans et al., 2023).

In 2020 it was found that 2.4% of university students are diagnosed with ASD and they are 10 times more likely to drop out than their non-ASD peers (Higher Education Statistics Agency., 2020; Anderson et al., 2017). This stark disparity underscores the challenges faced by students with ASD in navigating the academic, social, and structural demands of university life. Despite these challenges, research exploring the lived experiences of ASD students remains limited, particularly in the UK context.

Specifically, within a university setting, individuals with ASD face challenges of fluctuating schedules with lecture timetables and social events. In addition to this, they are surrounded by new people within a brand-new environment, which may be difficult for any individual; however, for a person with ASD, it can be more daunting (Ward & Webster, 2018). Academically, they have to face a higher level of education and with this comes situations, such as group work, which may be scary for an individual with ASD as it combines a social and academic issue that they may struggle with more than their peers (Nuske et al., 2019). Moreover, another common belief of individuals with ASD is their lack of empathy. As peer-reviewed articles have reported, individuals with ASD struggle to show compassion towards others (Harmsen, 2019). These challenges can lead to increased stress and feelings of isolation, making it essential for universities to provide proper support systems.

Yazici and Bas. (2024). surveyed the suggestions, concerns, and expectations of higher education students diagnosed with ASD. The outcome of the surveys was that students with ASD needed more educational support and struggled more socially than those without a diagnosis of ASD. These results were useful as they provided insight into how ASD can change a person's road to university and how to handle university life. However, the surveys were answered by fellow students and teachers of the individual with ASD instead of those with the diagnosis themselves. As Gurbuz et al. (2019). study found that ASD students were happy and willing to share their experience, this project aims to do the same. Therefore, due to this limitation, this project intends to gain the perspective of individuals who are living with ASD, because it is vital to understand how they feel that ASD affects them.

Accardo et al. (2018). conducted a two-year-long study investigating students diagnosed with ASD and how they found the accommodations and support services provided for them. This study resulted in the students reporting that the most common accommodation made for them was being given an individual tutor whom they could go for aid with their ASD characteristics. The students believed this to be beneficial for them and their experience in university, academically and socially. However, Accardo et al. (2018). also found that there was a lack of proactive social-emotional support available to assist with their ASD and the mental health conditions they suffered due to their ASD, such as anxiety and depression. Smith et al. (2026). supports this as this research found there is still an urgent need for more ASD specific strategies within higher education. This lack of support suggests that there is still much-needed vital research that needs to be done within this sector of psychology to allow individuals with ASD to prosper within a university setting.

In addition to this, Anderson et al. (2017). carried out anonymous online surveys with participants registered with disability services from 12 different universities in America. This study aimed to identify common strengths, needs, and recommendations from people diagnosed with ASD. This study found that the most common struggles reported were the comorbidity of ASD with anxiety and depression, and their extremely low satisfaction levels with the support that is offered for these individuals. These findings are important as they highlight the necessity for improved mental health support tailored to individuals with ASD in higher education settings. This can only be achieved if more research is done in this sector of Psychology. These findings were further supported by Lai et al. (2019). who found, during a meta-analysis, that co-occurring mental health conditions were more prevalent in individuals with ASD than those without. These findings suggest that individuals with ASD are more prone to suffering from mental illnesses.

Despite the insight Anderson et al.'s (2017) study offers, it only uses participants with a formal diagnosis of ASD. This fails to acknowledge the long waiting list for individuals waiting to be diagnosed in the United Kingdom. This is supported by Binte Mohd Ikhsan et al. (2025). as this research reported that access to service for those with ASD is inconsistent and needs addressing. This project included individuals who have a diagnosis of ASD but also those who self-identify with ASD characteristics, to allow for those who are waiting for a diagnosis to also discuss their experiences. By incorporating both diagnosed individuals and those who self-identify with ASD characteristics, this project ensured a broader range of experiences was captured, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and support needs of this population. This method also aligns with the growing recognition that self-identification can be a valuable perspective in research, particularly when formal diagnoses are difficult to obtain.

This study aimed to investigate the individual experiences of university students with ASD to provide valuable insights into the barriers they face, the support systems they find effective, and the broader implications for inclusive higher education practices. Understanding these experiences is crucial for informing university policies and ensuring that higher education institutions foster an environment where neurodivergent students can thrive. This research will hopefully contribute to the body of literature that will lead to improvements made within the pre-existing support offered for ASD, and new insights may also allow for new interventions to be provided for university students with ASD. This current project aims to give a platform for those with ASD, formally diagnosed or self-diagnosed, to explore how ASD has impacted them in their day-to-day university life, whether it be socially, emotionally or academically.

The overall research question of this project was: How does living with ASD impact an individual's university life, socially and academically?

The Aims of this research project were to:

- Investigate how, if at all, a student having ASD changes their day to day life at university.
- Furthermore, to research if there are any positive impacts of having ASD and how this research could be used to offer more information for universities for them to understand how to support students.

Methods

Theoretical Perspectives

This study adopted an interpretive epistemology, recognising that reality is socially constructed and that personal, social, and institutional factors shape individuals' experiences of autism in higher education. Rather than seeking objective, generalisable truths, this research aimed to explore meaning, context, and personal narratives, making qualitative methods the most appropriate approach. This research followed an inductive approach as themes naturally emerged during the process of reading and re-reading the transcripts. This allowed for a data-driven understanding that remained grounded in the participants' lived experiences, aligning with the phenomenological aim of giving voice to their perspectives.

Participants and Recruitment

The participants were recruited using purposive sampling, as part of the criteria to take part was to either have an ASD diagnosis or self-identify with ASD characteristics. The inclusion of those who self-identify with ASD characteristics was important due to the long wait lists for a diagnosis in the United Kingdom (Casagrande, 2022). In total 4 out of the 5 participants were self-diagnosed. Snowball sampling was also used at the end of the interview; the participants were asked if they could recommend anyone to participate in this study, which led to another two participants. Volunteer sampling was also used as posters advertising that this study was placed around campus and on the dissertation blackboard site. On the posters there was a link and a QR code that would lead them to the participant information sheet, through this they could decide whether they wanted to take part and then sign up for this study, after they had taken sufficient time to consider their participation in this study.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data was collected through 15 to 25-minute interviews, either online, via Microsoft Teams, or in person, on the University of Salford campus, which depended on the participant's preference. An example of one of the questions that were asked within these interviews was: 'How has the diagnosis (or self-diagnosis) changed your understanding of yourself and your life experiences?' The recorded interviews using Microsoft Teams and transcripts have been stored on the researcher's secure university's OneDrive. The full interview schedule can be found in Appendix A. Once the data were collected from the participants, a thematic analysis was carried out on all of the data. Within the study, all findings have been described anonymously, using unique identities such as P1 and P2, etc. After the interviews were completed, the participants were provided a debrief information sheet that included the resources that had been listed on the participant information sheet including the University of Salford Wellbeing Service and Disability Service and the National Autistic Society.

Semi-structured interviews were used, which is a practical method of data collection as it allows for rich data to be collected. The interviewees had the option to clarify and expand on any details they wished to. The interviewer could ask any follow-up questions, which created a natural conversation. Interviews provide rich, detailed insights that standardised surveys or quantitative methods might overlook, allowing autistic students to express their thoughts in their own words.

The process of the inductive thematic analysis approach followed the stages of Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation with the data to get a broad understanding, generation of initial codes, identification of patterns where the codes led to the generation of themes. Then refinement and naming of themes checking them against the datasets, eventually leading to a Thematic Map (see Figure 1). The writing up of the results then included the selection of compelling quotes to support the themes.

To analyse this data effectively, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) is useful, as it helps identify patterns and recurring themes across participants' narratives. This method balances flexibility with structure and allows themes to emerge naturally while also being informed by existing theoretical frameworks. Moreover, thematic analysis ensures that autistic voices remain central to the research, rather than reducing their experiences to mere statistics. Thematic Analysis is well-suited for this research as it allowed for the identification of patterns and recurring themes within participants' responses, providing insight into shared challenges faced by university students with ASD (Finlay, 2021). By highlighting these shared experiences, this method helped inform the development of improved support systems tailored to the needs of neurodivergent students.

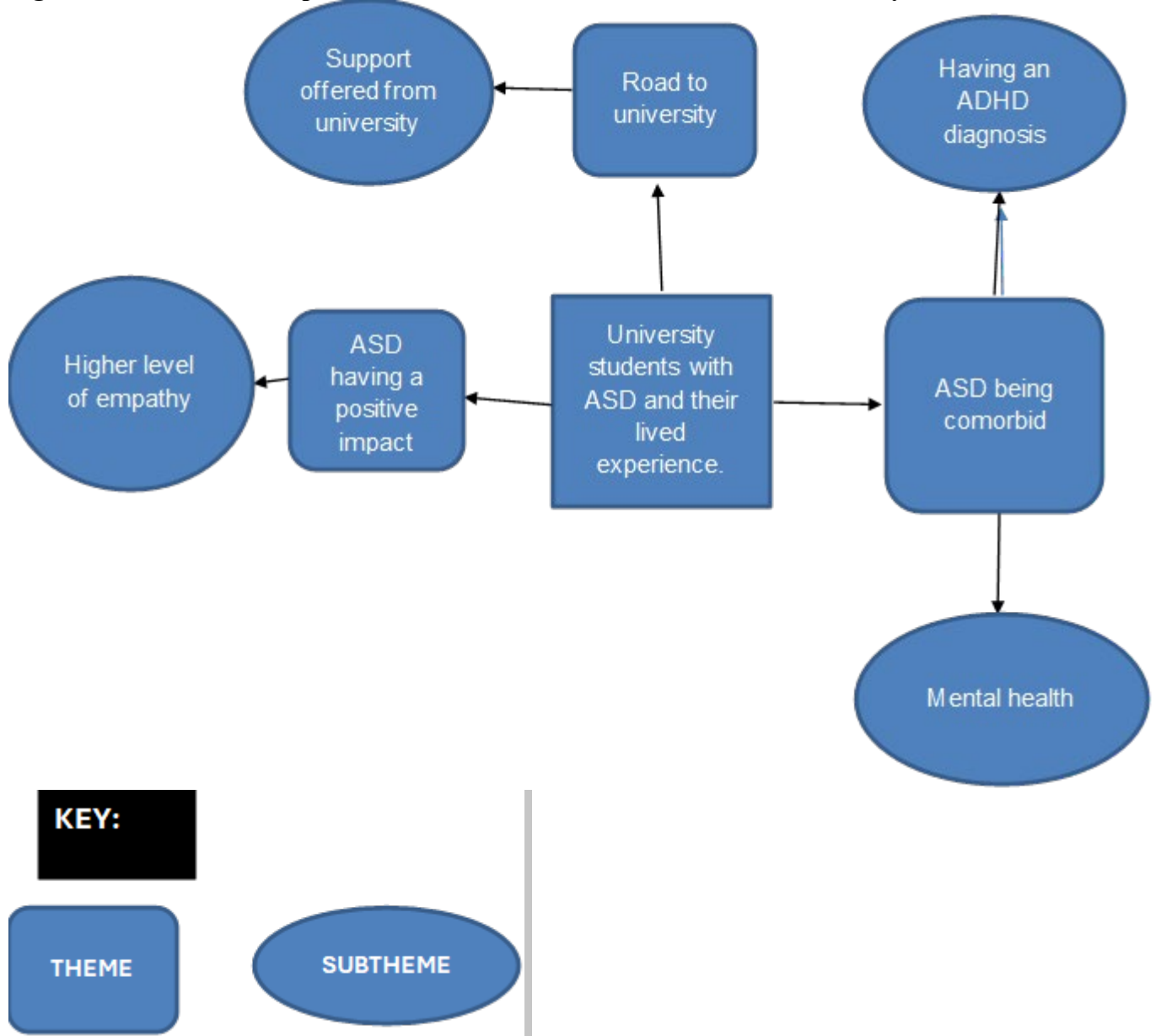
Ethics

This study was given ethical approval by the University of Salford Ethics Board, this was obtained before any data was collected, reference: 2551, dated: 10/01/2025. Ethical considerations were guided by the British Psychological Society (BPS) Ethical Framework. Participants were given clear, accessible information about the study and sufficient time to provide fully informed consent. Questions were asked sensitively and respectfully, and participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any point without penalty. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout, with any identifying information removed from the transcripts. The participants were given participant IDs for anonymity. Additionally, participants were provided with resources and support contacts in case any emotional distress arose during or after the interview process.

Results

Five participants took part in this study: all female university students aged between 18 and 23. Three key themes and four sub themes emerged that reflect the lived experiences of university students diagnosed or self-identifying with ASD. These are as follows, themes: ASD being comorbid, Road to university and ASD having a positive impact. Subthemes: Having an ADHD diagnosis, mental health, support offered from university and a higher level of empathy. The themes highlighted both the challenges they faced and the forms of support they received, offering insight into how ASD characteristics interact with and influence experiences within higher education settings.

Figure 1: A Thematic Map to present the themes and sub-themes of this study.



Comorbidity with ASD

Participants talked about comorbid mental health conditions, which aligned with past research that suggested that individuals with ASD are more likely to suffer from poor mental health and have a diagnosis of multiple mental health conditions than those without ASD (Zablotsky et al., 2013). After participants had been diagnosed with ADHD, other aspects of mental health problems were not attended, similar to earlier research (Antshel and Russo, 2019).

Mental Health

Within this research, all participants discussed having mental health conditions that they also had experience with. The idea that individuals with ASD are more prone to poor mental health has been addressed by many studies. Lai et al. (2019). found, during a meta-analysis, that co-occurring mental health conditions were more prevalent in individuals with ASD than

those without. The findings of this study support Lai et al.'s. (2019). results. This can be shown through P1, stating that they struggled with “social anxiety” (Transcript 1) and they were constantly “worrying over things” (Transcript 1). This indicates that they experienced significant internal distress, which likely affected their ability to interact with others and navigate daily life. This highlights the struggles they faced due to their mental health and the impact of their ASD.

Additionally, P4 spoke about how they had suffered from “really bad depression” (Transcript 4) and “anxiety” (Transcript 4). This suggests that they faced significant mental health struggles that deeply impacted their well-being. The phrase “really bad depression” (Transcript 4) indicates a severe and overwhelming sense of sadness or hopelessness, while “anxiety” (Transcript 4) suggests persistent worry and fear. Next, P5 talked about having several mental health conditions from an incredibly early age, as they stated they had “mixed anxiety and depression disorder, OCD” (Transcript 5) and “PTSD” (Transcript 5) from “the age of 10” (Transcript 5). This shows that they also suffered due to their poor mental health. These findings suggest that it is not uncommon for those with ASD to struggle with adverse mental health.

With all participants discussing having suffered from some sort of mental health problem, it indicates that it may be quite common for individuals with ASD to struggle with their mental health and this may be an issue of concern for them. Considering why this may occur is important, as it could have something to do with the characteristics or struggles that come with living with ASD. If this is the case, it should be observed that more funding should be placed into this sector of research so that the causes can be investigated. This would allow for more support and services to be available for individuals with ASD and other mental health concerns, so they can live a more fulfilled life.

Having an attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) Diagnosis

In this research, P2 and P3 both indicated that they had been diagnosed with “ADHD” (Transcript 2) (Transcript 3), and both spoke about how this combination of the impulsivity of ADHD and the routine that ASD craves makes day-to-day life difficult. As P3 stated, “ADHD makes it difficult to concentrate” and it makes “social situations more stressful”. Hours et al. (2022). found that 50 to 70% of those with ASD also present with comorbid ADHD. This study goes on to suggest that there is an overlap in the characteristics of ADHD and ASD. This overlap is important to consider as it could make it challenging for clinicians to distinguish between the symptoms of each condition, particularly because traits such as executive dysfunction, sensory sensitivities, and difficulties with social interactions can be present in both disorders. The overlap between ADHD and ASD is crucial to consider, as misdiagnosis or underdiagnosis can impact the type of support and interventions an individual receives (French et al., 2023). For example, traditional ADHD treatments that focus on increasing attention and reducing impulsivity may not fully address the needs of someone who also has ASD, where social skills training and sensory accommodations may be just as important. Similarly, ASD-focused therapies may not adequately address the difficulties with focus, hyperactivity, and impulsivity that come with ADHD.

Given these complexities, there is a compelling case for further research into the relationship between ASD and ADHD. A better understanding of the neurological and behavioural intersections between these conditions could lead to improved diagnostic tools and more individualised treatment approaches. Future studies could explore how shared genetic, cognitive, and environmental factors contribute to the co-occurrence of ASD and ADHD, ultimately leading to more effective interventions that address the full spectrum of needs in individuals with both conditions.

University Life

As previously discussed, university life can be difficult for most people; however, it has been found that those with ASD tend to struggle more than their non-ASD peers. This research highlighted these struggles through themes of having a difficult journey to university and the troubles ASD brings to life on a university campus, but also how these troubles can be eased through coping mechanisms and support provided.

Road to University

Within this research, it was found that the participants found the process of moving into and adapting to new surroundings at university difficult to get used to. Firstly, this was suggested through P1 stating that they made “no friends” (Transcript 1) when they first moved to university. They found it “hard to settle in” (Transcript 1). This experience links to Lauritsen's (2013) findings of ASD making individuals struggle socially, and this may be why P1 had a challenging time making friends. Then P1 went on to report that they felt their experience was “not normal and not the same as everyone else's” (Transcript 1) due to the part their ASD played. These feelings may have caused more stress due to P1 feeling abnormal compared to their peers. These findings are vital to research as they show the impact that ASD can have on a person's university experience and start to give an insight into how a university can provide support for those students with ASD.

“Made no friends and I just didn't go to like any of my classes, so I was just like really hard.” (P1, Transcript 1).

In addition to this P3 discussed how they found “moving from Manchester to Liverpool quite difficult” (Transcript 3) because they found the number of changes that came with the move “quite overwhelming and it led to a lot of panic attacks” (Transcript 3). They may have found this challenge due to ASD's preference for a rigid, consistent routine (Laurstien, 2013). Rydzewska. (2016). found that when adults with ASD had a change to their daily routine, it led to them feeling distressed; however, Rydzewska also found that grounding techniques put into place when this change occurred lessened the feelings of distress. This could be helpful for universities as they could implement mindfulness and grounding societies for individuals with ASD moving away from home and starting university. This would allow them to gain coping mechanisms to help them adjust to the substantial changes that come with moving away from university.

Coping Mechanisms/ Support Offered at University

Within this research, many of the participants reported experiencing many sensory issues within a campus setting. Despite them all having struggled with this, many of them also went on to state strategies they have found that help them cope with these and the support they had received to ease these issues a little bit. Firstly, all 5 participants spoke about being given extra time to complete their assignments when they felt it was needed, with P5 saying, “extensions, which have been a lifesaver” (Transcript 5). This gives an insight into how ASD can impact a person's ability to complete work as a university student due to how easily ASD can make an individual feel overwhelmed, especially when they have tasks to complete. P3 reported feeling that the “amount of workload was overwhelming.” (Transcript 3). Ward and Webster further support this. (2018). who found that ASD students got easily stressed when tasks felt like they were building up. This is important as it suggests ways that universities can support students with ASD so they can reach their full potential in their academics. One way shown here is providing extensions to the deadlines for their assignments if the individual feels it is needed to lessen the overwhelming feeling of the tasks.

Furthermore, sensory overloads are a characteristic of ASD that has been reported to make individuals feel tired and drained (Millington & Simmons, 2024). The participants of this study all reported having experienced some sort of sensory overload/sensitivity within the campus setting. As P4 reported, “the noise and you can't really escape that kind of thing... it can get

overwhelming sometimes” (Transcript 4). P4's statement about noise being inescapable and overwhelming illustrates the distress sensory overload can cause. This insight is important as it highlights the need for sensory-friendly spaces on campus. These spaces offer respite students with ASD, and it allows them to regulate their sensory inputs, reduce their stress and flourish within a campus setting. Next, P5 spoke about one way they cope with the sensory overloads that come from background noise in classrooms is with their headphones, they said, “my headphones are my lifeline”. (Transcript 5). This suggests that while sensory overload is challenging, self-management strategies can help mitigate its effects. This is supported by Pfeiffer et al. (2019), who found that the use of noise-cancelling headphones reduces the impact of noise sensitivities in children on the ASD spectrum.

Positive impact of ASD

Despite all participants discussing the challenges they faced at university, they also acknowledged the positive aspects of having ASD. One key benefit they reported was developing greater self-compassion and empathy toward others and themselves. This suggests that while ASD presents difficulties, it can also foster personal growth, resilience, and a unique perspective on the world.

“I think it's also positive because I think. When you're on the spectrum or when you like, can identify in that side, you allow yourself to be put in a community. You can find people like yourself.” (P3, Transcript 3)

Post diagnosis or self-identification relating to ASD characteristics, all participants disclosed a feeling of closure, and with this realisation, they all were able to be kinder to themselves. As P3 stated, it helped them “understand themselves better and it helps you have less self blame” (Transcript 3). This suggests that the self-diagnosis/formal diagnosis provided them with an explanation as to why they felt the way they did, and why they experienced things differently from their non-ASD peers and relatives. As P2 reported, their self-diagnosis allowed them to have more “sympathy and patience for themselves” (Transcript 2) as it made them feel validated in their experiences. This suggests that a diagnosis of ASD played a positive role in the participants' lives, not only by offering a clearer understanding of their experiences but also by fostering self-acceptance and emotional well-being. With this newfound awareness, they were able to reframe past challenges with greater compassion, recognising that their differences were not personal shortcomings but rather intrinsic aspects of their neurodivergence. As a result, the diagnosis served as a transformative moment, enabling them to navigate life with increased self-assurance, resilience, and a more positive sense of identity.

Moreover, these findings showed that many of the participants reported feeling as though they were a more empathetic person compared to the people they knew without ASD. This was shown through P2, stating that they felt that they were “quite an empathetic person” (Transcript 2), and P4 reported the same thing (Transcript 4). P5 also described themselves as “having a very strong moral compass” (Transcript 5), and they “enjoyed that aspect” (Transcript 5) of their ASD. This suggests that, rather than viewing their neurodivergence solely through the lens of challenges, participants also recognised and valued the positive traits associated with their condition, such as heightened empathy and a powerful sense of justice. These findings contradict existing research, as many studies have reported that individuals with ASD struggle to show empathy towards others (Harmsen, 2019). This suggests that it is vital for more research to be done between people with ASD and their levels of empathy to provide a better understanding of individuals with ASD, but also for people without it, so they can understand the condition better.

Discussion

This project aimed to investigate the lived experiences of university students who are diagnosed or self-identified with the characteristics of ASD. The key findings of this study were that individuals with ASD commonly struggle with poor mental health and that those with ASD are also often simultaneously diagnosed with ADHD. This research also found that those with ASD tend to struggle with adapting to university life, but despite this, they find the support offered by universities to be helpful. Perhaps the most compelling and surprising finding from this study was that individuals with ASD all report remarkably similar experiences of the positives of the condition. An example of one of the positives reported by many of the participants was the empathy they were able to give themselves and others.

Comorbidity and ASD with Mental Health

This study underscores the importance of addressing mental health as a key component of ASD support contradicting Hillier et al. (2026). findings as this research reported little to no report of individuals with ASD having mental health issues. Lai et al. (2018) highlights the high rates of co-occurring mental health conditions, such as anxiety and depression, reinforcing the need for early identification and intervention strategies tailored to individuals with ASD. These findings suggest that mental health challenges should not be treated separately from ASD but rather as an integral part of support systems.

Recognising these comorbidities allows for a more comprehensive and holistic approach to supporting individuals with ASD, ensuring that their mental health needs do not go unnoticed or untreated. Without appropriate interventions, mental health difficulties can significantly impact daily functioning, academic performance, employment prospects, and overall quality of life. Therefore, universities, workplaces, and healthcare providers should integrate mental health services within ASD support frameworks to create environments where individuals feel understood and supported. Additionally, increasing awareness among mental health professionals about the unique ways ASD can present in individuals is crucial. Misdiagnosis or a lack of understanding about how ASD interacts with mental health conditions can lead to ineffective treatment plans or unmet needs. By improving ASD-specific mental health training and expanding access to specialised interventions, professionals can offer more targeted support.

Future research should continue to explore the underlying causes of mental health challenges in ASD, examining both biological and environmental factors. Investigating effective intervention strategies, including cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) adaptations, sensory-friendly therapeutic environments, and peer support programs, could lead to improved mental health outcomes. By prioritising this area of study, policymakers and healthcare professionals can develop more effective, evidence-based support structures, ultimately enhancing the overall well-being and life satisfaction of individuals with ASD.

Support from Universities

In addition to this, the project found that students with ASD found the support offered by their universities to be helpful. This links to Accardo et al. (2018). who also found that students with ASD found their accommodations to be useful. This is important because it highlights the positive impact of university support systems in fostering an inclusive learning environment for students with ASD. By recognising and addressing their unique needs, universities can help these students navigate academic and social challenges more effectively. Additionally, these findings reinforce the necessity of maintaining and improving such accommodations to ensure that students with ASD have equal opportunities for success in higher education.

The theme of ASD and its positive characteristics highlights a more nuanced understanding of autism, moving beyond the dominant narrative of challenges to acknowledge the personal

growth, self-acceptance, and positive traits that autistic individuals develop. While participants openly discussed the difficulties they faced in university, they also emphasised the benefits of being autistic, particularly in terms of self-compassion, empathy, and moral awareness. Interestingly, the study also found that participants viewed themselves as highly empathetic, contradicting traditional perspectives that suggest autistic individuals' struggle with empathy (Harmsen, 2019). Several participants described themselves as deeply compassionate and possessing a "strong moral compass," indicating that empathy in autism may manifest differently rather than being absent. These findings challenge existing stereotypes and highlight the importance of further research into autism and empathy, particularly from the perspectives of autistic individuals themselves. Future studies should explore how autistic individuals experience and express empathy differently from neurotypical expectations.

This research highlights the need for personalised learning accommodations, such as extended deadlines, to address the overwhelming feeling that ASD feels when workload builds up due to their ASD. Sensory-friendly environments, including quiet study spaces and modified housing options, help mitigate sensory overload and enhance comfort. Social and peer support programs, such as mentorship initiatives and autism-friendly social events, foster a sense of belonging and inclusion. Universities must also prioritise ASD-specific mental health services, offering counselling with reduced social demands and crisis intervention plans. Institutional policies should ensure streamlined access to disability services, faculty training on neurodiversity, and the integration of student-led advocacy initiatives. By adopting these measures, universities can create an inclusive and supportive environment that empowers ASD students to thrive academically, socially, and professionally.

Strengths

A key strength of this study is its focus on the firsthand experiences of individuals with ASD at university, offering an authentic and nuanced understanding of how ASD impacts both their academic and social lives. Unlike many studies that rely on external perspectives, such as those of educators, parents, or support staff, this research prioritises the voices of autistic students themselves. By doing so, it sheds light on the unique challenges they face, such as sensory sensitivities, social communication barriers, and difficulties in accessing appropriate support systems. This strength is supported by Tan et al. (2025) results as this study reported the need for universities to actively engage with ASD individuals themselves as this current project suggests. Additionally, it highlights the coping strategies and resilience demonstrated by these individuals, providing valuable insights that may not be fully captured in institutional policies or previous literature. This participant-centred approach ensures that any recommendations made for improving university experiences are grounded in lived realities, making them more relevant and actionable for educators, policymakers, and support services. Furthermore, this study contributes to a growing body of research that advocates for more inclusive and neurodiversity-affirming approaches within higher education.

Limitations

A flaw of this study is that there were no male participants. This may be surprising due to Gesi et al. (2021) reporting that females with ASD are more likely to be misdiagnosed and later to access support than males with ASD. However, this lack of male participants may be due to men being less open about how they feel, as found. This limitation is important to consider because in future replications of this study, this shortcoming could be improved by ensuring an even number of female and male participants to allow the findings to be relatable for the entire population of those with ASD. The low percentage of male participants may also reflect the gender imbalance in psychology students at the university.

Another shortcoming of this research project was that the interviews were much shorter in length of time than originally planned. The interviews were planned to be around 30 to 40 minutes long; however, on average, the interviews were 13 minutes long. This may be due to individuals with ASD struggling socially and therefore interviews with someone they do not know may challenge them to the point where they feel they cannot feel truly comfortable. This may have led to them rushing through their answers, and as a result, the interviews were not as long as expected. This is a limitation as it means the answers given are more limited, which means that the findings are not as elaborate as expected. In future research, accommodation should be considered. An example of this could be building a rapport with the individuals before the interview to ensure they feel comfortable, as this may allow them to open up more, leading to longer and more detailed-enriched answers.

Future Recommendations

For future research, it can be recommended based on the findings of this project that more research be conducted into how ASD can impact a student's university experience and what other support can be offered to those with ASD in a university setting. Additionally, more investigation could be done into how comorbid ASD is with ADHD and many mental health conditions to ensure the right support is offered to those individuals. This allows them to get the best chances at not letting the ASD characteristics ruin their day-to-day life and experiences, such as university.

Reflection

This study, using thematic analysis, has allowed me to uncover and interpret patterns within the data, providing a rich understanding of the lived experiences of university students diagnosed or self-identifying with ASD. Throughout the process, I gained a deeper appreciation for the complexity of ASD and how it intersects with various aspects of university life, such as social interaction, academic performance, and the experience of institutional support.

One of the most significant aspects of conducting this research was recognising the importance of reflexivity. As a researcher, I was aware of my own potential biases and preconceptions, especially regarding the challenges faced by students with ASD due to self-identifying with ASD characteristics myself. To mitigate these biases, I made conscious efforts to maintain an open, inductive approach, allowing the themes to emerge naturally from the data rather than imposing preconceived ideas. This process allowed me to better understand the nuanced ways in which the participants experienced their education.

While much of the research on ASD tends to focus on the challenges faced by individuals, this study also highlighted several positive aspects of the university experience for students diagnosed or self-identifying with ASD. Through thematic analysis, it became evident that many participants found strength in their unique perspectives, demonstrating resilience, creativity, and an intense sense of focus in their academic pursuits.

From an ethical perspective, I was careful to maintain the privacy and confidentiality of the participants, ensuring that their voices were represented accurately without compromising their anonymity. I also reflected on the importance of conducting interviews sensitively and respectfully, particularly given the vulnerability of discussing firsthand experiences related to ASD. The ethical guidelines provided by the BPS Ethical Framework were invaluable in guiding these practices, and I am confident that the ethical considerations were adhered to throughout the study.

Overall, this research has not only deepened my understanding of the educational experiences of students with ASD but also reinforced the importance of conducting research with empathy and awareness. The thematic analysis process, while challenging, provided a

meaningful way to capture the richness of the participants' experiences, offering insights that can contribute to improving support systems within higher education for students with ASD.

Conclusion

This qualitative study highlights the challenges and strengths of university students with ASD. Key findings include struggles with mental health, the effectiveness of university support services, and the recognition of unique strengths, such as heightened empathy. The results emphasise the need for integrated mental health support and personalised accommodations to enhance student well-being. While the study contributes valuable insights, limitations such as gender bias and short interview durations should be addressed in future research. Further studies should explore ASD's impact on university experiences and improve support strategies to foster academic and personal success for autistic students.

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