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Evaluating the experiences of students at Trinity College Dublin with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in accordance with best practice

Alison Dillon

Trinity College Dublin, Ireland

The number of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) attending university is increasing yet low graduation rates indicate their particular needs are not being met. Research in the area has primarily been exclusively qualitative. This study investigated the experiences of students with ASD undertaking a third-level academic course at Trinity College Dublin (TCD) in order to suggest changes to align current with best practice. It adopted a mixed-method design. First, a qualitative analysis was conducted of best-practice guidelines derived from the most relevant literature to determine the most up-to-date supports available for students with ASD at university. Then, a quantitative analysis was conducted of data derived from 45 TCD students with an ASD who completed a survey designed to ascertain the challenges they experienced in relation to academic work, relationships, mental health, society membership, and sensory issues. The results found that, despite desiring comradeship, the majority of students experienced social difficulties at university, including a lack of friends and bullying. Students also reported a high rate of mental-health difficulties, especially depression and anxiety and these seemed to have bi-directional effects relating to the social difficulties experienced. These findings point to the need for future research to investigate the precise factors that limit the formation of relationships at university among students with ASD and to improve their university experience and support completion of studies. In particular, it should investigate the links between bullying, friendships and internalising problems among these students.

Biography

Alison Dillon has completed her Undergraduate degree in Law, a Post-graduate degree in Psychology and a Master's degree in Applied Behaviour Analysis. She hopes to pursue a career as a Clinical Psychologist and currently works as an Assistant Psychologist for the Irish Health Service. She has published research on the use of smartphone applications for the reduction of anxiety in *Frontiers in Psychology* and has presented at the Psychological Society of Ireland's Annual Conference. She recently conducted a systematic review on Doctors' knowledge of Autism worldwide and presented this research at the Annual Autism Conference in Miami, Florida.

dillonai@tcd.ie

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