

# **Exploring the experiences and needs of college students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)**

## **Executive Summary**

### **Background**

This study is funded by the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) to explore the experiences and needs of college students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

The study employed a qualitative interview approach to collect data from multiple stakeholders. Target stakeholders included college students with ASD, parents of college students with ASD, university teaching staff, professional support staff, and neurotypical students who had experience interacting with college students with ASD. There were a total of 30 college students with ASD, 8 parents, 10 teaching staff, 8 support staff, and 9 neurotypical students participated in this study.

### **Objectives**

The research objectives of this study include:

1. To investigate the needs and challenges of students with ASD faced in university
2. To explore how university teachers, staff, and students perceive and treat students with ASD

### **Key findings**

College students with ASD were found to experience the following challenges in their study and life around post-secondary education. Given the considerable diversity of student backgrounds, as well as varying degrees of ASD characteristics, the findings reported here were not intended to be all-encompassing or representative of the experience of the entire autism spectrum or ASD community. It should be acknowledged that the following themes described the major challenges and needs commonly identified by the college-bound individuals with ASD who were willing and able to speak about their experiences.

#### **1. Learning and academic challenges**

College students with ASD had difficulties with executive functioning that make them struggle with time management and higher order cognitive skills to meet the academic demands of post-secondary curriculum. Due to their ASD characteristics, they would benefit from structured and concrete learning strategies, but these were not commonly or consistently available in college learning. The COVID-19 pandemic also caused disruptions and sudden changes to the normal routines and university life, which caused stress and adjustment difficulties to many of the students.

#### **2. Social communication challenges**

College students with ASD encountered numerous challenges in the area of social communication, ranging from adopting effective communication skills in different social situations and developing relationships with others during their college life. Implicit social rules or expectations were complex for them to discern and understand, where miscommunication and misunderstanding would arise easily, which may result in embarrassing situations and socially inappropriate behaviors to others at times. Group work in academic courses were stressful to these students, as they found them challenging to form

a group and coordinate work among groupmates, which led to further psychological distress and academic setbacks.

### 3. Emotional and sensory challenges

High academic demand might easily trigger emotional responses from students with ASD. School-related stressors included general worries about academic achievement, test anxiety, and peer pressure. Students also recalled stress related to the changes in university life and the broader society during the period of social unrest and recent years of COVID-19 pandemic. Specific sensory input and situations with high social demand also negatively impacted their emotions.

### 4. Transition and career challenges

It was common for students with ASD to have concerns and experience confusion, uncertainty, and struggle for their transition to post-secondary education and future career development. They would explore and select a post-secondary program based on their interests while also considering their personal strengths and weaknesses. Their preferences were at times related to their ASD or emerged from their past experience during early school years or childhood. Significant others (e.g., parents, teachers, mentors, and friends) and career counsellors also played a crucial role in providing career guidance or academic advice. In school-related internships or other types of work opportunities, these students encountered challenges in areas of executive functioning, social communication, and interviewing and presentation skills, which made them less competitive in gaining the necessary skills and experience to prepare for future career.

### 5. Others' misunderstanding

Inaccurate knowledge about ASD and special educational needs (SEN) in general led to people's misunderstanding or negative perceptions towards college students with ASD. Stereotyped and stigmatized images of ASD often involved either overly negative portrayals of autistic symptoms or savants with special talents, which misalign with the spectrum nature of ASD and its diverse presentations in reality. Others' misperceptions contributed to negative judgments, unfair expectations, and missed opportunities of college students with ASD.

### 6. Disclosure of ASD or SEN conditions

Other people's limited understanding of ASD and low sensitivity of their needs, coupled with institutional policies and the social climate that might be unfriendly or stigmatizing at times, hindered college students with ASD to disclose their conditions or seek help. They would rather pretend normal or hide their own difficulties for fear of others' hurtful treatment, which might further exacerbate their learning challenges and mental health needs.

### 7. Gaps in accommodations and services

Services and supports for college students with ASD received are varied. Common academic accommodations provided for students who disclosed their ASD condition included extra time and breaks for examinations, a special examination room, and assignment extension. Community-based services such as counseling, therapies, and case management would also be available to those undeclared students and whose needs would be better supported by outside professionals, such as social engagement and career development. Although positive examples were recalled by many students with ASD and stakeholders where students reported enhanced learning outcomes and satisfaction with school life, services generally

lacked coordinated planning and systematic implementation, thus adversely affected intervention efficacy and student outcomes.

### **Recommendations**

1. Efforts are needed to promote awareness and understanding of ASD and SEN in colleges and in society. Although the attention towards these students is on the increase, there is still limited knowledge related to their diverse presentations and various challenges in post-secondary settings and during the adulthood. An autism-friendly college environment is paramount to improving their quality of life and mental health.
2. Adopting a strength-based approach focuses on capitalizing on the unique strengths and abilities of college students with ASD, while also supporting their understanding of their own limitations and weaknesses that benefit their long-term whole-person development. It is important to recognize the rights to self-determination of transition-age young adults while balancing the need to provide support for their challenges associated with ASD.
3. More training and professional development for teaching and supporting staff in post-secondary education would better meet students' learning needs. Teaching strategies and learning tactics that are applicable to all students, with or without SEN, are recommended to maximize positive outcomes for diverse student bodies and to create an inclusive learning environment.
4. Interventions targeting social and communication skills should be conducted in real-life settings as much as possible. Involving diverse peers and incorporating authentic activities would help engage students with ASD in applying knowledge and practicing skills to increase their social competence and confidence.
5. A consistent and systematic support framework should be established for all groups of stakeholders to follow and navigate. Practice guidelines outlining the roles and functions of different stakeholders within the college community would allow a more transparent and well-coordinated provision of student services.
6. Interagency collaboration should be promoted to facilitate better transition and continuation of services. Coordinated communication and systematic procedures among institutions and community-based organizations would facilitate transition support before and after college.