

Seeking Social Justice:

involving autistic students as partners in the design
of tailored careers and employability provision

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Outline

- Context
- Methodology
- Cycle 1: the reconnaissance phase
- Cycle 2: the collaborative phase
- Cycle 3: the co-creation phase
- Summary and Next Steps

Context



- Universities have a key role in enabling individuals to successfully progress to employment after graduation (Department for Business, Industry and Skills, 2016).
- The number of autistic university students is increasing year-on-year (Vincent & Fabri 2020;)
- Graduates with autism frequently have poor employment outcomes (Allen & Coney, 2021; Nicholas *et al.* 2017; Bublitz *et al.* 2017)
- Adverse effects of unemployment for autistic individuals: on mental health, socioeconomic factors , life prospects (Remington & Pellicano 2019; Nicholas *et al.* 2017; Howlin & Moss 2012)

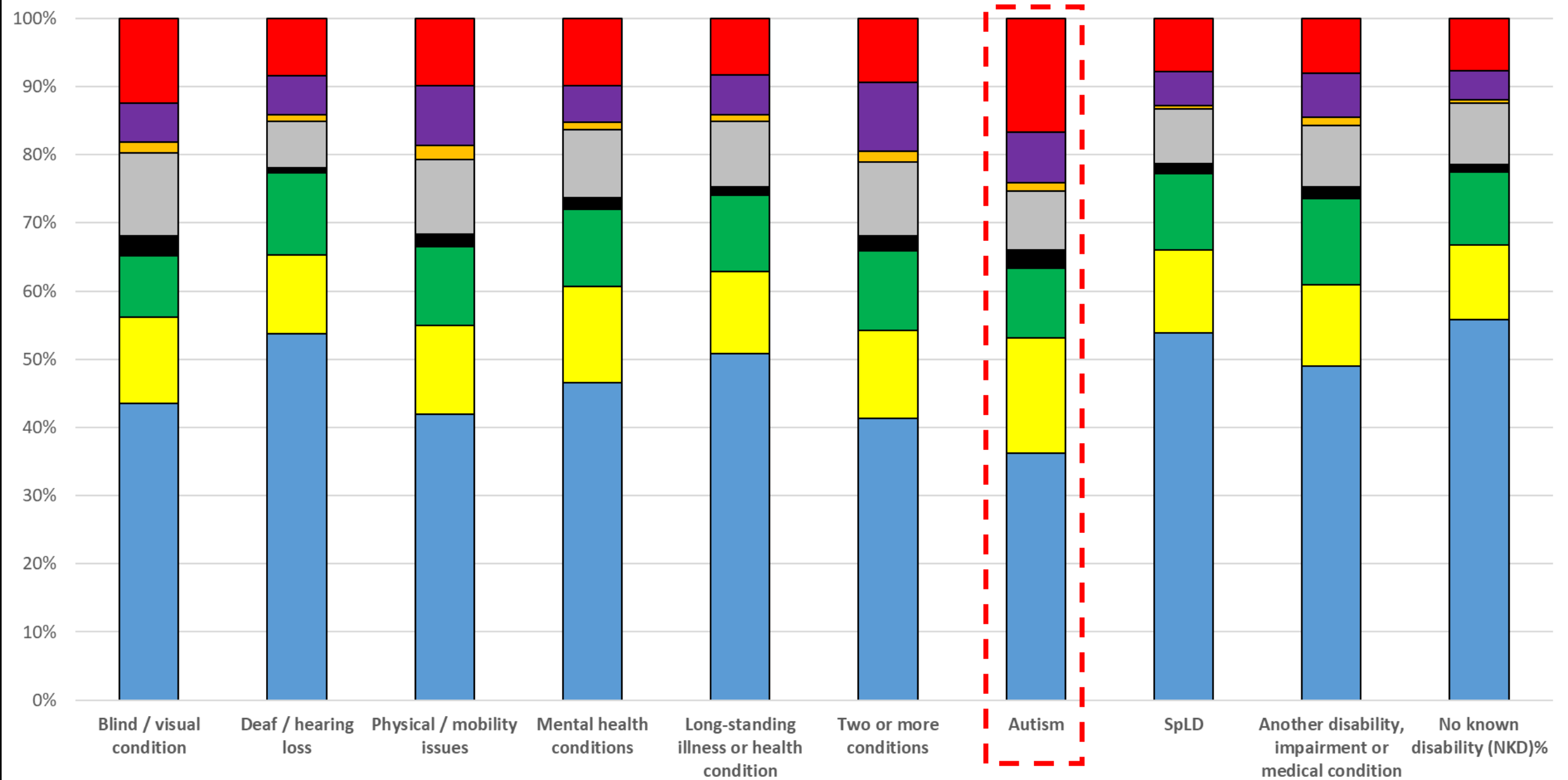
What Happens Next? 2022



Graduate destinations for those with and without a known disability

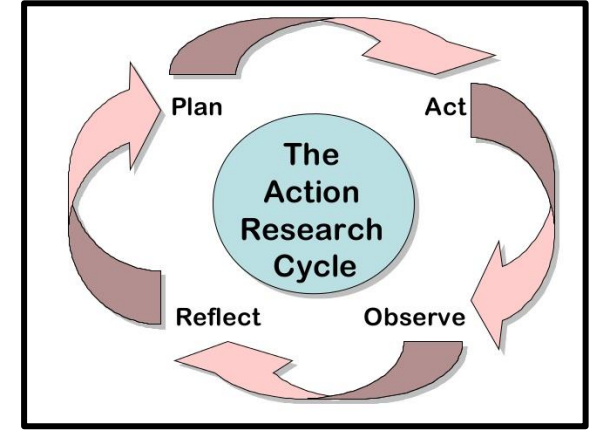


Destinations by disability type (first degree)



Methodology

- Action Research as a methodological approach
- An emancipatory paradigm
- Emancipatory perspective resonates with a social justice approach to career guidance (Hooley *et al.* 2021)
- Participatory Action Research



Cycle 1: Reconnaissance

Reconnaissance: *"Exploring with others the kinds of felt concerns experienced by different people and groups involved in and affected by a practice"*
(Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon, 2014)



Element 1. Exploration of the views of autistic graduates



Element 2. Exploration of current practice in UK universities

Emerging themes...

Element 1: **Graduate Consultants**

- **The 'mystery' of the workplace**
 - "I don't understand jobs"
 - Lots of jargon, which is intimidating
 - Disconnect between what people say and what they mean
- **The challenge of being different in the workplace**
 - "where do I fit?"
 - Black and white approach not always being well received
 - Often unseen – people think they're coping
- **The prevalence of mental health issues**
 - Depression, anxiety
 - Work/prospect of work can exacerbate issues
- **Careers support: what helps?**
 - Someone to talk to
 - Regular contact to provide support and reassurance
 - Continuity matters



Emerging themes...

Element 2: **Careers Practitioners**



- **A person-centred approach**
 - Adaptive, flexible, reflective, invest more than usual
 - Learn to see success differently
- **The impact on careers practitioners**
 - The 'mystery' of the students
 - Usual techniques not working
 - Self-doubt, worry
 - Requiring resilience
- **Partnership with Disability Support services is key**
 - Promoting programmes
 - Co-delivery is most effective
- **Limiting factors**
 - Lack of resources
 - The challenges of engagement
 - Systemic issues

Cycle 2: Co-designing support with autistic students at LJMU

- Participatory action research project
- Initial survey of all autistic students
- Recruitment of Autistic Student Consultants
- Series of workshops:
 1. Disclosure and adjustments
 2. Learning from the experiences of autistic graduates
 3. Preparation for interviews
- Inclusive elements suggested by the Consultants



Positive feedback

– before and after surveys

"That was a great webinar. The speakers were so interesting and had so much advice"



"It was really helpful hearing people talk about how they found work and disclosed their autism...a lot about what they said about their autism and how it affects them felt very similar to my own situation"

"I will make sure I try to include the tips they gave us in this session into looking for a job"

"I am going to make as many connections as possible"

Cycle 2: Co-designing support with autistic students at LJMU

Ongoing impact: the 'ripple' effect

- For some Autistic Student Consultants
- For my critical friend
- For me
- For the institution

Aims of participatory action research:

- To produce understanding
- To promote change
- to empower people through the process of constructing and using their knowledge

(Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2018; O'Brien 2001; Reason 1994)



Cycle 3: Further collaboration and co-creation of resources with autistic students at LJMU

- Consultation with Consultants
- Multi-pronged approach:
 1. Webinars
 2. One-to-one appointments
 3. Webpages & online employability course
- Co-creation internships:
 1. Paid positions
 2. *They* chose what to focus on
 3. Development of resources for autistic students



Seeking Social Justice

Five signposts of socially just careers guidance:

1. Build critical consciousness
2. Name oppression
3. Question what is normal
4. Encourage people to work together
5. Work at a range of levels

Hooley et al. (2021)



What have I learned about working with students as partners?



- It is definitely worthwhile!
- It takes more time and effort
- Relationships with students are key
- Re-contract at every stage
- Considers ways to recognise and reward students' time
- Seek ways to diminish the power imbalance
- Be open to the 'ripple effect'

What have I learned about working with autistic students?



- A heterogeneous group, just like non-autistic people!
- Many strengths – but may need support to recognise and articulate these
- Ask how they would like to participate...and communicate
- Be willing to adapt
- Consider ways to demystify concepts and terms
- Allow for opting-out at any time

Summary and Next Steps



- Analysing and writing up the PhD!
- Issues with bringing about change in HE
- Critical success factors:
 - Seek the student voice when planning support
 - Find like-minded colleagues to work with
 - Adopt a resilient and curious approach

If you
would like
to know
more...



- '1823 podcast LJMU' – season 3, episode 9 (Nov 2021)
- Findings from autistic graduates (Cycle 1) described in: Journal of Inclusive Practice in Further & Higher Education, issue 13:
<https://nadp-uk.org/issue-13-1-summer-2021/>
- Context of graduate outcomes for disabled graduates – AGCAS What Happens Next? 2022:
https://www.agcas.org.uk/write/MediaUploads/Resources/Research%20and%20knowledge/WHN_2022.pdf
- Coming soon: article on the participatory project (Cycle 2) in the Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability
- SAGE Handbook of Graduate Employability chapter:
'Supporting the Employability of Neurodivergent Graduates'

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