

TRANSITION TO UNIVERSITY

This is an updated version of the materials developed by the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre (OTARC) at La Trobe University. This material appears on the Neurodiversity Hub under a licensing agreement with OTARC.

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PARENTS/ CARERS

Find out more about how you can support your student as they transition to tertiary education and once they are studying at university.

The information provided is general and not targeted for specific tertiary institutions. For specific information regarding policies and student support services at individual tertiary institutions, please visit their website or contact them directly. Links to other useful resources with further information are also provided within the student and staff sections.

Please note, while this information is designed to support autistic students, a lot of the information and resources also apply to students with other neurodiverse variations.

TRANSITION TO TERTIARY EDUCATION

Key Points

1 Family involvement and support can help students with the transition to tertiary education. Students will experience more freedom and face new challenges at university. It is important to prepare your student for this exciting new chapter.

2 There are things you can do to help your student with the transition, before they begin at university. It may be helpful to tour the campus with your student before orientation week. This will help your student feel more comfortable in the new environment.

3 Consider creating an 'action plan' with your student, so they have some strategies to deal with challenges that might occur.

4 Talk with someone in the disability/ accessibility services center to learn about what services are offered, before school begins.

Autistic students will typically have had a lot of support from family and teachers during secondary school. When they move on to universities, the transition period can be extremely challenging because there may not be as much support available. Studying at universities can be particularly difficult because they are very different from secondary schools.

Formal transition planning

Families can help their autistic student prepare for university informally, for example by taking the student to the campus to familiarise them with the location, or by talking about life at university.

To allow smoother transition to tertiary education, families may consider developing an 'action plan' for their autistic student. This action plan could, for example, give precise details about any special needs of the student, and make some suggestions about how these needs might be met. It is not just a description of someone's difficulties but a list of actions to be carried out in order to help deal with those difficulties.

MY STUDENT'S RIGHTS

KEY POINTS

1

There is legislation that gives your student the right to reasonable adjustments and accommodations to help your student reach their full academic potential.

2

Autism can affect sensory, motor, cognitive, behavioral, social, interpersonal, and emotional skills. There are certain accommodations your student can ask for to help with things they struggle with. An example, is using a lap top in examinations, instead of writing by hand.

In Australia, the Disability Standards for Education (2005) were formulated under the Disability Discrimination Act (1992). The Standard states the obligations of education and training providers to ensure students with disabilities are able to access and participate in education and training on the same basis as those without a disability.

The Standards provide for reasonable adjustments and alternative assessment arrangements to allow students with disabilities (including autism) equal access to academic courses and activities.

Reasonable Adjustments

A 'reasonable adjustment' is an action which enables a student with a disability to participate in education and training on the same basis as other students.

Examples of reasonable adjustments for examinations or essays could include:

- an alternative assessment such as an oral exam rather than a written one
- an alteration to the standard approach to the completion of an assessment, such as typing instead of handwriting in an examination

- allowing more time for the completion of an assignment or examination.

Other examples of reasonable adjustments and alternative assessments provided to students by higher education institutions in Victoria, Australia are listed in the table on the following page. With the exception of counselling services, these adjustments can be made only when the student has told the university about their autism diagnosis.

Functional impacts on academic performance	Reasonable adjustments	Alternative assessment arrangements
<p>Sensory and motor</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Light sensitivity • Noise sensitivity • Irritation to certain environments • Difficulty with fine motor skills such as handwriting <p>Cognitive</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easily distracted • Miscomprehension due to literal interpretation • Difficulty comprehending certain communication styles (verbal and gesture) • Difficulties with new tasks or unplanned changes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short breaks during classes to help manage sensory sensitivities • Provide a learning environment which minimises the impacts of environmental effects e.g. lighting • Note taker for taking class notes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All communication (oral and written) to be clear and concise using non-figurative and unambiguous language e.g. no metaphor • Paraphrase communications • One-on-one catch-up with lecturers • Copies of overheads and formal lecture notes provided few days prior to class • Audio recording of lectures or classes • Short breaks during class to help manage the condition • Digital audio recorder for non-audio-recorded teaching space 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexible arrangements for field placements with extra consultation with field supervisor • For exams, provide extra writing time or use of computer to type answers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Special exam conditions for exams and in-class tests (written, practical and laboratory). For example, separate room for exam • Extra reading time with access to clarification of exam content • Extra writing time • One exam per day
<p>Behavioural</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor organisational skills • Obsessive or repetitive routines <p>Social/interpersonal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abrupt or intrusive communication style • Difficulties with group work • Difficulties initiating or responding appropriately in communication with others (academics and fellow students) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Referral to specialist department within the tertiary institution to assist with organisational skills and study planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extensions as negotiated with academic staff and relevant support staff when condition is impacting
<p>Emotional</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxiety and depression 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Referral to Counselling Service 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assigning roles and responsibilities to students within the group • Individual assignment as alternative to group assignments where the academic integrity of the course is not impacted
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Referral to Counselling Service 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Referral to Counselling Service

DISCLOSURE

Key Points

1 Disclosure is a personal decision. It is important to discuss what is best for your student with them. Keep in mind, the sooner your student discloses, the sooner they will receive the beneficial adjustments and accommodations.

2 The university is there to help your student and wants to see them succeed. It is important to encourage your student to communicate their needs with the disability/ accessibility unit to ensure tailored support.

Disclosure means informing the university about the student's autism diagnosis. It is a dilemma that a lot of students with a disability or neuro-variation, including autism, face.

On the one hand, students may prefer to keep such information private and confidential. On the other hand, universities are committed to creating an environment where diversity and difference are valued and respected, and can do this only if they are aware of the student's differences.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality is taken very seriously in the tertiary environment. Staff at university understand that they must seek the student's permission before they can tell anyone else about the student's differences/ diagnosis. For example, the disability/ accessibility support staff may want to inform the teaching staff to make sure that appropriate reasonable adjustments are put in place: but they should do so only if the student agrees. The student has the option not to disclose the actual autism diagnosis. The teaching staff would still be made informed about the reasonable adjustments the student may require, but not the diagnosis.

Why disclose?

Disclosure is a personal choice, so your student is not obliged to disclose their disability. However, if your student chooses not to do so, staff at their university may not be able to meet their specific needs, as they will not know what these needs are. In addition, disclosing to the university may allow your student to participate in work-ready programs that are becoming more prevalent at universities. This may include an internship/ work experience program, industry mentoring, resume/ CV/ interview preparation, or field visits to different job sites.

Your student's educators do not need to know about the students' disability or medical condition if it does not impact their learning.

If your student needs help while studying in university, it is important that they disclose as soon as possible.

Here are some ways to disclose:

- **If your student has not yet started their tertiary studies or has not enrolled:** most universities ask about the student's disability on the enrolment form. Your student can

specify on the form that they have a disability and specify the condition, for example autism, Asperger's, etc. Also, before classes begin, encourage your student to contact the disability/accessibility support unit because this will increase the chances that adjustments will be in place when classes start.

- **If your student has already enrolled in a university course and wants to get additional support:** the student can speak to a teacher or lecturer, or contact the disability/ accessibility unit about their autism diagnosis. In many cases, teaching staff cannot make reasonable adjustments until the student has disclosed the condition to the disability/ accessibility unit.
- If appropriate, you might also consider offering to accompany your student when he or she visits the disability/ accessibility unit to disclose the condition

Disability/accessibility support services

Every university should have some type of student support office/ team.

Each university and institute in Victoria employs at least one person in the role of disability/ accessibility support. The support staff works closely with students, and the students' teachers, to determine the appropriate reasonable adjustments to allow the students to fully participate in their studies.

Please note that for your student to receive reasonable adjustments and accommodations, disclosure at university requires documentation of your student's diagnosis. Your student should bring whatever documentation they had in high school or any medical documentation they might have.

For more information about this, you should contact the disability/ accessibility support unit at the university to find out more about the process and what exactly is required.

SUPPORTING MY STUDENT'S TERTIARY EDUCATION

Key Points

1

At age 18 or over, the university is not allowed to give information out to parents. A university may be able to provide you with information if your student gives the university consent.

2

It may be a good idea to have a conversation with your student about disclosure to make sure they understand the potential adjustments and accommodations that can be made should they decide to disclose.

In addition to the professionals who are working to assist autistic students, families also face a number of challenges as they strive to meet the service needs of their student as they transition to or attend university.

My student is over 18 years of age

Your student is legally an adult when they reach 18 years of age, regardless of their disability and level of functioning.

At age 18, parent(s) are no longer the legal guardian(s) of their child, unless appointed as such by the Office of the Public Advocate (Victoria, Australia). This 'independence' can create difficulties for parents when they want to support their children in tertiary education. Under the law, university staff cannot give parents any specific information about their adult child due to privacy issues. Staff can, however, inform parents about the general types of support their institute has available for any student with a disability.

Many institutions will allow staff to talk to parents about their student's education if consent has been obtained from the student. Generally written consent is required, however some staff may

prefer not to communicate directly with parents.

Please check with your student's institution to find out about their policy and consent requirements.

Collaboration with staff

Knowledge about autism may differ between individual staff members. This could be due to differences in their experience of working with people diagnosed with autism. If you feel that staff are not well informed, you can refer them to the staff information pages contained in the university resources section of the Neurodiversity Hub. Staff time and resources can often be limited due to their work commitments. However, when staff are able and willing to take time to work closely with parents of autistic students, they comment about the usefulness of doing so.

If you believe your student will only succeed in tertiary education with your support and that both of you should work closely with your student's educators, it may be helpful to:

- Have a discussion with your

student about disclosing their autism diagnosis to the disability/ accessibility support unit at the university.

- Once disclosure has occurred, ask your student for their consent for you to speak directly with the disability/ accessibility support staff and/ or teachers.
- Once your student has given their consent, contact the disability/ accessibility support staff and/ or teachers to find out the process for getting you involved in your student's education.

It is important to be aware that:

- Every tertiary institution has its own policies.
- Staff work differently, so what one staff member or institution is willing to do may differ from what another staff member or institution will do.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Websites

Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training. (2012). Improving access for people with disability into post-secondary education and training. [Retrieved 26 July 2012]

National Disability Coordination Officer Program. (unknown). Effective Transition Planning for Secondary School students with Disability. [Retrieved 26 July 2012]

National Disability Coordination Officer Program. (2012). Preparing for higher education: A Victorian guide for students with a disability. [Retrieved 20 September 2012; PDF 3.16 MB]

NOTE: A few of these resources were written in other countries and some of the content in these resources may not be applicable for university students in Australia e.g. legislation and tertiary education system.

REFERENCES

- National Disability Coordination Officer Program. (2010). Preparing for : A guide for students with a disability in Victoria. [Retrieved 26 July 2012]
- Richdale, A., Dissanayake, C. & Cai, R., (2011). DHS interim report: Supporting transition to and participation in tertiary education for students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. Department of Human Resources (DHS, Victoria).