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Launching lives: transition
from university to
employment for students
on the autism spectrum

Fellowship Report, 2017

Dr Jonathan Vincent

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About the author

Since 2013 I have taught in the School of Education at York St John University, UK, where I am currently course lead for the MA Education and also lead the Education Studies with Special Educational Needs and Inclusion strand.

Much of my research, and indeed teaching, has focused on special educational needs and specifically the transitional experiences of learners on the autism spectrum. My PhD sought to uncover, through a qualitative study design, the experiences of transition from university for students on the autism spectrum based in UK institutions.

This Fellowship offered a unique opportunity to explore some of the key areas from an international perspective with a view to informing research and practice in the UK.



Executive Summary

Evidence shows that university students on the autism spectrum are typically one of the highest achieving groups at university but also the least likely to gain graduate level employment following their studies. The aim of this Fellowship was to identify and make use of the good practice across Canada and the USA regarding successful transition support for autistic students and graduates leaving higher education.

In total I engaged with twenty-three practitioner-researchers in thirteen different centres of excellence across North America, including seven universities / research units, five not-for-profit organisations, and one government office.

The main findings from my Fellowship centre on four distinct but overlapping themes:

Theme 1: University level provision

It was identified that where universities and colleges had access to relevant funding and expertise provision for autistic students and graduates might be greatly enhanced. In particular, holistic transition support, mentoring programmes and intern opportunities were all identified as beneficial; however, a significant challenge includes the joining up of university and adult community provisions.

Theme 2: Recruitment and accommodations

Reconsidering recruitment processes was identified as being important for bringing about practical change in terms of employment patterns for autistic jobseekers. My findings show that where employers engage in training their staff, making small but important adjustments to their environments and consider more flexible approaches to working, this can have significant positive impacts. Furthermore, job-matching and networking events, where suitable autistic candidates are facilitated in the process of finding suitable competitive employment were both identified as having the potential to open up new opportunities for autistic young people.

Theme 3: Employer engagement in the workplace

Evidence from my Fellowship suggests that changing the attitudes of company directors, managers and employees is one of the most effective means of affecting sustainable change. The shift involves building the business case for inclusive hiring; that is not arguing on the basis of it being the '*right*' thing to do' but because it is '*smart*' thing to do' given the range of skills, capacities, and dispositions that many autistic people have. Interviews suggest that the most effective mediators of this attitudinal shift are in fact individuals in the companies themselves who,

through employer-to-employer networks, can advocate for the positive difference that autistic employees make.

Theme 4: Emerging knowledge-base

The final theme suggests that there is a significant lack of knowledge and robust research to underpin the current (inchoate) practices around transition to employment for autistic university graduates. However, colleagues across Canada and the United States were optimistic about the potential for development and pointed to where there is good practice taking place, particularly expanding the knowledge-base through participatory research.

Recommendations

The report makes five recommendations based on the Fellowship findings:

Recommendation 1: Develop participatory processes

Recommendation 2: Engage in collaborative practices

Recommendation 3: Identify practical and holistic solutions

Recommendation 4: Develop the evidence-base

Recommendation 5: Change attitudes among employers

Dissemination

I have disseminated the findings from the Fellowship at a range of community and employer events, through research seminars, as part of large research funding bids and I am booked to present at my regional Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Association in East Pennines.

Introduction

Very little is known about the experiences of transition from higher education for university students on the autism spectrum.

The National Autistic Society (2017a) define autism as a lifelong developmental disability which affects how an individual communicates and relates to others, processes information, and makes 'sense of the world'. Within higher education, students may define themselves or be defined by practitioners and policy-makers as having an autism spectrum disorder (ASD), an autism spectrum condition (ASC), Asperger's syndrome (AS), or High Functioning Autism (HFA). The variety of terms used is indicative of the complexity of the autism diagnosis and the different ways that individuals choose to describe their condition. Throughout this report the term 'students / graduates on the autism spectrum' or 'autistic students / graduates' will be used in keeping with identity-first language (e.g., 'autistic person') as preferred by self-advocates (Kenny et al, 2016).

Transition from university for autistic learners

Whilst young people on the autism spectrum are less likely than their peers to go to university (NAS, 2017b), there is evidence to suggest that the population of autistic students in higher education is actually increasing. Obviously students on the spectrum have always attended university, indeed Hans Asperger (1944) used the term 'little professors' to describe the children that he observed and some suggest that such eminent academics as Sir Isaac Newton and Ludwig Wittgenstein were in fact autistic (Fitzgerald, 2000). However, it is only relatively recently that data has begun to be collected regarding the participation of specific groups of disabled students in higher education.

According to the Higher Education Statistical Agency (2015) the most recent data reports 2400 students on the autism spectrum that disclosed a diagnosis to their institution; such figures reflect a 300% rise just since 2012. Whether these figures signal an increase in real terms in the numbers of autistic students attending higher education or just an increase in those disclosing their diagnoses is debateable. Whichever it is, the actual figures are likely to be much higher still as some students choose not to disclose their autism diagnosis at all for fear of discrimination. Moreover, according to estimates from White, Ollendick, and Bray (2011), up to 1.9% of university population could be on the autism spectrum but have never been diagnosed at all.

Dillenburger et al. (2016) report an increase in the relative proportion of students with autism who successfully completed university (0.23% vs 0.31%, respectively).

However, despite this positive trend in academic outcomes, other evidence suggests that disabled graduates have consistently lower rates of employment than their non-disabled peers and graduates on the autism spectrum specifically have the highest unemployment rates of all disability types (Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services, 2015). Recent UK government figures indicate that only 3.9% of neurotypical graduates were unemployed six months after completing their course by comparison to 21.5% of autistic graduates (BIS, 2016).

Unfortunately this evidence also falls within the wider social context of autistic unemployment, where the most recent figures suggest that up to 84% of adults on the autism spectrum are not in full-time employment, a statistic that has not changed in over a decade (NAS, 2017b). Evidence suggests that the vast majority (79%) of autistic adults do want to work; however, accessing and retaining suitable employment is a significant barrier. According to Remington and Pelicano (2017; Baldwin et al, 2014), of those autistic adults that are in employment, many are in posts that are not consistent with their skill set and abilities (mal-employment) or overqualified for their role (under-employment). This evidence suggests that there is a clear disparity between autistic university students' academic capability and their postgraduate progression outcomes and signals a gap in postgraduate transition provision.

That said, even in the UK, significant steps have been taken to redress some of these issues. In Wales the first ever national strategy for autism was published in 2008, and other political initiatives followed, for example The Autism Act (2009) which aimed to improve diagnosis and support for autistic adults in England, the Scottish Strategy for Autism (2011) and the wide-ranging Autism Act in Northern Ireland (2011). Each of these emphasise improving the employability prospects for autistic adults, calling for the provision of guidance and training for employers and employment support services, to ensure autistic adults benefit from employment initiatives. Some of these include local government initiatives such as Access to Work but also specialist autism employment providers such as Care Trade, Auticon and Specialisterne. Developments at legislative and practical levels have both created a positive momentum in the UK; however there is still much to do and learn.

[Learning from Canada and the United States](#)

Whilst nowhere in the world has all the answers, some of the employment policies, practices and working cultures for autistic adults in North America has been recognised as being particularly positive. Canada has recently undergone something of a renaissance in progressive politics with the premiership of Justin Trudeau. The Minister of Sport and Persons with Disabilities, Carla Qualtrough, stated in a 2017 speech 'I believe that our country's diversity is our strength—and

when we include people with disabilities, we create a stronger Canada for everyone'. As a disabled politician representing disabled people, she introduced the annual National AccessAbility Week, which celebrates, highlights and promotes inclusion and accessibility in communities and workplaces across the country. However, this inclusive social policy has a rich history in Canada; supported employment programmes have been central in enabling vocational rehabilitation for people with intellectual disabilities, including autism, for the past 30 years (Lysaght et al, 2012). These tended to centre on gaining competitive employment in the community, consumer choice of job and workplace, and ongoing support. In 2006, the Canadian government introduced the Opportunities Fund for Persons with Disabilities in order to equip all Canadians in their capacity to work. This legislation reflects a shift toward demand-driven training solutions for people with disabilities and is underwritten by the Government's Economic Action Plan which has committed itself to increasing funding to the Opportunities Fund by \$40 million annually. Moreover, at provincial and local levels across Canada, there are a range of progressive policies and innovative projects committed to the inclusion of disabled and autistic people in the workplace that I was keen to learn from.

Similarly, the United States of America has a long history of inclusive legislation and practice, with the National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM) dating back seventy years to 1945. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1990) and more recently the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (2014) both serve to enable people with disabilities to participate fully in employment, transportation, public accommodations, communications and access to state and local government' programs and services. The Job Accommodation Network (JAN) was set up in 1983 as a national service provided by the United States Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP). It specifically provides free, expert and confidential guidance on workplace accommodations to employers as well as to employees, job seekers, family members and service providers. Finally, with reference to young people, The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth), established in 2001, serves to increase the capacity of young people with disabilities to engage in programs and systems that can increase employment and post-secondary education outcomes.

Whilst it would be misleading to suggest that Canada and the USA have no issues regarding mal-employment or under-employment of disabled and specifically autistic young people, across both countries there has been an attitudinal sea-change where businesses of all sizes are beginning to recognise and talk openly about the benefits of fostering inclusive, accessible workplaces. Rather than being positioned as a financial 'burden' to society, those on the autism spectrum are increasingly being viewed as a valuable yet untapped employee talent pool. I was particularly keen to find out more about this new emphasis as part of my Fellowship.

Research questions and approach

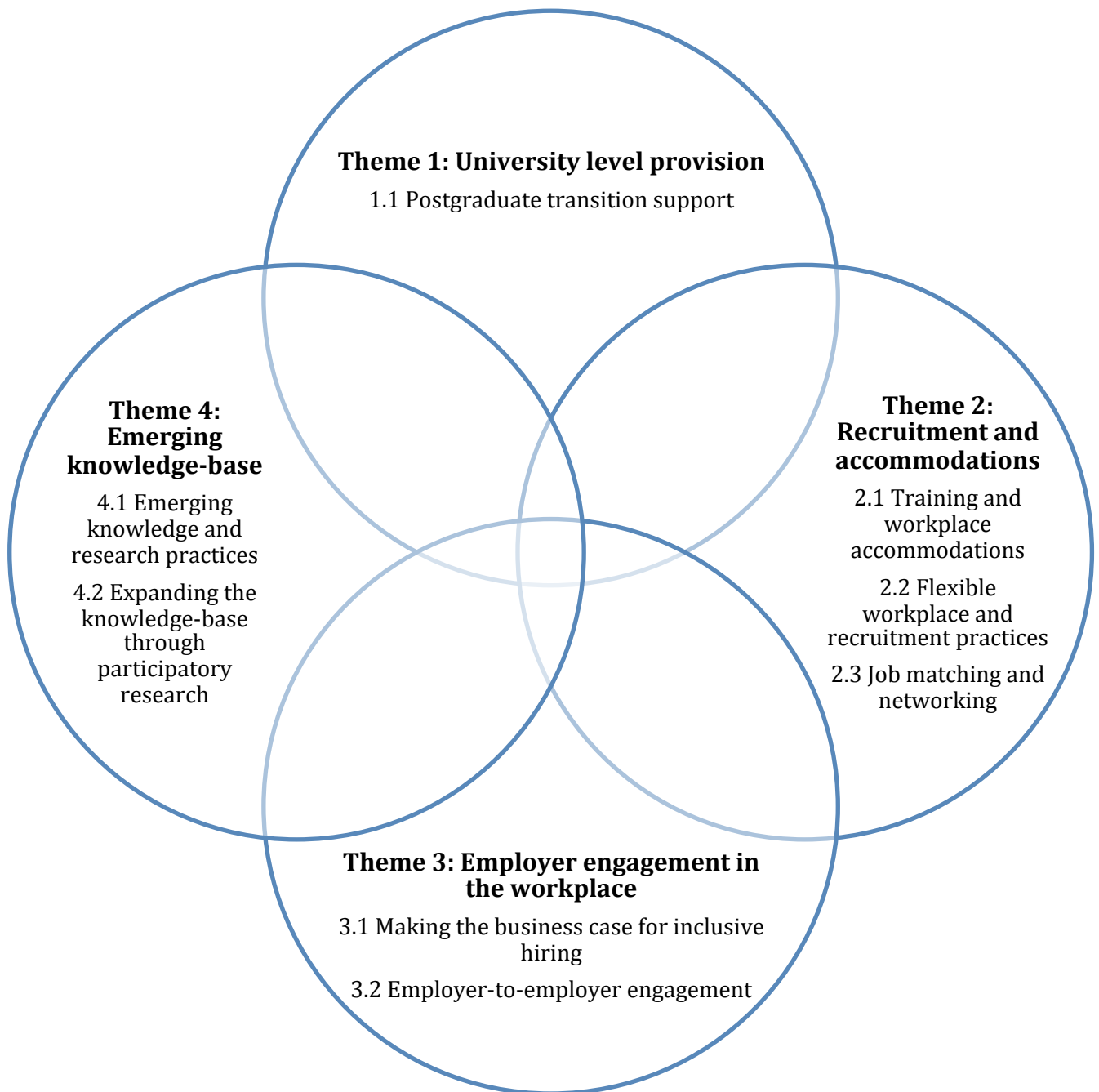
My Fellowship was guided by the following questions:

1. How is effective employment provision made for autistic university students in Canada and the United States of America?
2. What factors affect the success of transition from university to employment?
3. What can be learned and applied to the UK context?

During my Fellowship, I conducted semi-structured interviews with over twenty-three practitioner-researchers in thirteen different centres of excellence across North America, including seven universities / research units, five not-for-profit organisations, and one government office. Whilst these reflect many examples of excellent practice, they are not exhaustive and there were many organisations, university programmes, and experts that I was not able to engage with during my brief 4-week Fellowship.

Findings

I was privileged to be able to engage with staff, view resources, and spend time learning with and from many different people as part of my Fellowship. Below I indicate the main findings from my project; these centre on four distinct but overlapping themes:



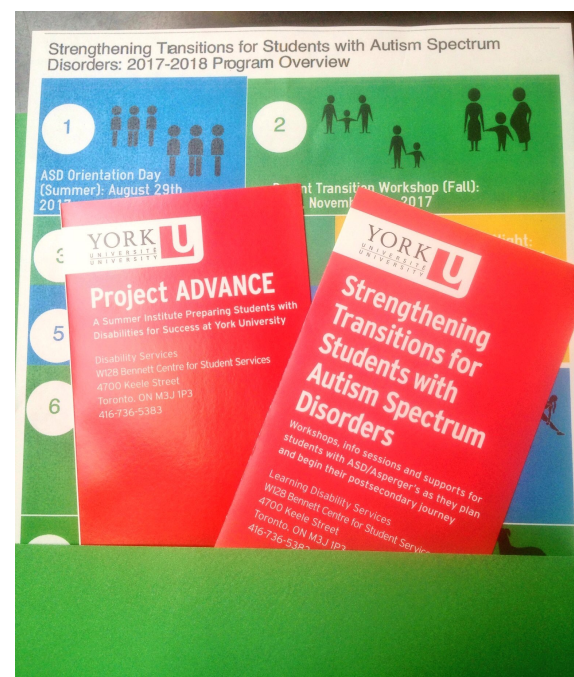
Based on these I identify a range of recommendations that might improve practice in the UK to better enable successful transition for autistic students leaving university.

Theme 1. University level provision

1.1 Postgraduate transition support

The Learning Disabilities Services at York University, Toronto has recently established itself as a centre of excellence for transitional support for students on the autism spectrum. Having drawn down \$212,000 in 2014 from the Ministry of Training, Colleges it developed the Strengthening Transitions for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders project. The collaborative three-year pilot involves York University, Seneca College, the Toronto District School Board, the York Catholic District School Board, and the Ministry of Training, Colleges & Universities. I met with Maureen Barnes, manager of the Learning Disabilities Services team, and colleagues Raymond Peart and Jayne Black-Greene who discussed with me the importance of detailed guidance and robust support for students on the spectrum, from their initial induction, throughout their time at university, and into their final transition to postgraduate employment.

Provision includes coordinated support by an ASD Coordinator who initially meets with prospective York students and their families to discuss how they might be supported once they start their studies at the University. Throughout their time, autistic students receive on-going support, which includes workshops, support groups, 1:1 coaching, parent information hubs, and sensory spaces. I found out more about York's well-established Asperger Mentorship Program, run by Professor James Bebko from the Psychology Department and supported by the Counselling Foundation of Canada. In this program, up to 20 students on the spectrum are supported by Psychology / Counselling graduate mentors. By engaging mature mentors who understand autism in a detailed way they have the potential to construct tailored and person-centred peer support. Finally, York's transition support extends to students' postgraduate experiences as well where they are offered paid internships within the assistive technology lab space where students work as lab monitors. In this capacity, they curate the physical space, assist students in a variety of ways and contribute to maintaining the overall positive space of the TEL lab. One of the most interesting and important aspects of support that relates to transition to employment, however, was their student-employer mentorship program.



"We run a mentorship program, where we pair students with a mentor from the community that represents their core interests; so we've had students interested in specialised fields including Geographical Information Systems, we've had a student paired with someone in the film and TV industry. So we have had a number of students on the spectrum participate...students put in a custom application based on what they are hoping to be and want to get out of the program and they can be at any stage from early to ready to go into employment and our job is to think about who in the community might be able to support them...they are all volunteers and the commitment of the mentors is a year. Some students do one-to-one, some do work-shadowing, some just want a chat, some want contacts to help them get work; so there are different kinds of activities and they work that out in the contract at the beginning...The mentors also kind of help each other as I've had some mentors who have been taking on students for over twenty-five years".

(Jayne Greene-Black, York University)

However, whilst York University is recognised as being a leader in the field of university transition for autistic students, it was acknowledged that there were limits to what could be offered by universities with respect to postgraduate transition. At times it is practically difficult to join up planning / collaboration between disability services and careers within HE; a point that was also reflected by others including Karen Kelsey at Lime Connect, members of staff at Douglas College, and staff from the Canadian Council for Rehabilitation and Work (CCRW).

As a priority we are always trying to connect with local colleges and universities, in order to make awareness of our services, so that information is being provided to young grads or people about to graduate that this is the support that is out there. We do get referrals from colleges and universities but personally I wish there were more.

(Elizabeth Smith, Canadian Council for Rehabilitation and Work)

In many universities across Canada there are accessibility or disability departments and they would provide all the accommodations for people with all sorts of disabilities but then when it comes to careers centres in each university, the counsellors seem to have really no experience of disability – no idea what barriers students may face transitioning to employment.

(Nayla Farah, Canadian Council for Rehabilitation and Work)

Theme 2. Recruitment and accommodations

2.1 Training and workplace accommodations

A number of organisations across Canada discussed the importance of specific training courses for improved future employment success. Research indicates that students who have participated in career exploration and other transition services in a quality learning environments have higher career search self-efficacy (Solberg et al, 2012). In Toronto, Ontario, I visited the Canadian Council for Rehabilitation and Work and met with Jaclyn Krane from the Workplace Essential Skills Partnership (WESP). I also spent time in Vancouver, British Columbia, where I spoke with Jenna Christianson-Barker, the director of Adult Programing at Pacific Autism Family Network. Whilst on opposite sides of the country, both indicated the impact that employability enhancement courses can have for improved outcomes for autistic young people.

Jaclyn described WESP as a pre-employment program for university and college graduates with disabilities in Ontario. As part of the service young people have access to 5-day intensive workshops and on-going coaching focusing on job development. Frequently employers are invited to present about their industries and WESP has organised two Diversity Employment Fairs for WESP clients and other community agencies. Jaclyn explained to me how WESP also makes use of two in-house assessment tools called the Occupational Skills Assessment and Occupational Accommodation Assessment, both of which are designed to assist disabled young people in identifying their accommodation needs in the workplace. WESP was an interesting example of specific state-level post-graduate provision for those disabled students leaving higher education. Such a service does not exist in the UK, where in fact disabled university leavers are often unable to access local government support despite specific needs.

Another state-funded national program focused on training was EmploymentWorks Canada (EWC), which operates as a peer- and co-worker-supported program to enhance social, communication and job skills; however, unlike WESP, which has a more general disability remit, EWC is specific to young people aged 15-29 and with a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder. I had the privilege of discussing this with Jenna Christianson-Barker, at Pacific Autism Family Network, Vancouver, which hosts the program. EWC's 12-week pre-vocational program focuses on three main themes:

- Knowing Myself as a Working Person (What are my strengths and interests? What is my plan of action?)
- Engaging in the Culture of Employment (What does the boss want? How to overcome challenges?)
- Building My Skills for Employment (How to network; developing social thinking skills)

However, Jenna explained how PAFN also goes beyond just job training and through GO Café and other social enterprise and entrepreneurial schemes also offers young autistic people paid work experience and business experience.



Work experience has been consistently identified as the most important predictor of post-education employment success for students with disabilities, regardless of disability or intensity of special education services (Carter et al., 2013), so opportunities such as this are vital for future success.

A novel and important training provision that has been developed in collaboration between Douglas College and RWA is the training of supported employment providers who often act as the practical 'go-between' for disabled candidates. It was recognised that there existed a knowledge and skills gap among advisors about specific conditions like autism, specific information about fields of work, and nuances of industries etc. The result was the establishment of the online-only program of its kind in Canada to up-skill those advising and assisting youth and adults into employment. I spoke with Sandra Polushin, Lori Wood, and Meaghan Feduck at Douglas College where the program is based.

Experienced practitioners – five, ten years in the field – after taking it said 'wow, I thought I knew a lot but this was much deeper and broader and was much more challenging for them.

(Lori, Douglas College, British Columbia)

As course instructor, Meaghan explained to me the different theoretical frameworks, employment supports models and evidence-based methods and practices that are taught as part of the course. Whilst this course is still in its infancy, it has proved anecdotally to yield very positive results with an increase in advisor confidence and employability rates.

I think that a lot of practitioners in the field feel like they are swimming upstream in isolation in doing the supported employment work and I think that one of the things that the course offers is a validity of the work – the legitimising of it and the reasons that we do it.

(Meaghan, Douglas College, British Columbia)

2.2 Flexible workplace and recruitment accommodations

The Job Accommodation Service was established in 2000 with the goal of reducing barriers – both individual and systemic – in the workplace. This is typically achieved by working with employers to identify, advise, and develop practical adjustment / accommodation solutions with the aim of producing barrier-free and inclusive places of work. Nayla Farah, the Director of Job Accommodation Service at Canadian Council for Rehabilitation and Work indicated that many employers are anxious about employing disabled people due to the fear of legal action for unfair dismissal should the employee's contract be terminated. Whilst she rejected the assumption that disabled employees would underperform, she was clear that the right accommodations go some way to create reassurance for all involved: for the disabled person, they are enabled to do the job that they have been employed to do; and for employers, they can feel assured that they have made the necessary provisions without fear of recourse. For those at the CCRW 'accommodations are not about lowering the bar – the job requirements are the job requirements – all they do is level the playing field, so that everybody is set up to succeed'.

Subsidised training / wage subsidies

A further positive provision in Ontario was the use of subsidised training. CCRW gain access to a wage subsidy program to reduce training costs during the probationary period for new hires.

The wage subsidy scheme is framed as a way for employers to support, accommodate and train someone with a disability – of the 120 or so people that used it around 87% of those were retained after six months...once an employer has had someone in their workplace for that long and has been engaged in training and supporting them, why on earth would they want to give them up? More than that It can contribute to dispelling the myth that employers have about employing someone with a disability as they don't have to worry about wages – I think it is a very pragmatic way of facilitating that transition to employment.

(Elizabeth, Canadian Council for Rehabilitation and Work)

Job carving

This is where the employer “carves out” existing responsibilities from other positions to create a new one to suit the needs of an individual employee. This might involve altering the hours that one works, the tasks they complete, or even the location in which it takes place.

Inclusive interview processes

Frequently the interview process can be one of the most challenging aspects of the recruitment processes, especially for autistic individuals given that it relies heavily on subtle social and communication skills. The result can be that the best candidates are not appointed, so by creating an alternative interview process this opens up the possibility for a more diverse workforce. SAP has effectively used this approach, moving away from the traditional questions-based interview to a more useful task-based one with a focus on job skills.

Personal / practical support

The final aspect of promising positive practices is the practical support that can be useful for any young autistic adult making the transition to both employment but potentially also independent living. Due to its collaborative nature, where Pacific Autism Family Network is able to provide a fully operational apartment complete with kitchen, bathroom, bedroom etc. where young people can develop the skills required to live by themselves. Jenna Christianson-Barker, the director of Adult Programing at PAFN explained how it was only through the collaborative funding and planning between of a range of autism-related charities, providers, and healthcare organisations that such facilities could be developed.



2.3. Job matching and networking

One of the most interesting and useful forms of support for autistic graduates that I discovered as part of my fellowship was that of job-matching and networking. Typically, autistic people may find the process of meeting new people in unfamiliar environments challenging, especially if the social interaction is unscripted and outcomes unclear. For this reason large job fairs, that might be effective for many graduates leaving university could in fact be extremely daunting and become a barrier to gaining employment for this group.

Case study 1: National Educational Association of Disabled Students

I met with a number of organisations that serve to facilitate the process of looking for employment and meeting employers for the first time. I spent a morning with Frank Smith, national coordinator of the National Educational Association of Disabled Students (NEADS) based at Carlton University, Ottawa. Established in 1986, it was one of the oldest organisations that I visited and has the mandate to support full access to education and employment for post-secondary students and graduates with disabilities across Canada. Working in partnership with the BMO

Capital Markets' Equity Through Education Program, NEADS has held 20 Job Search Strategies Forums for post-secondary students and graduates with disabilities across different locations in Canada. At the time of our interview Frank showcased their newly developed web portal - Breaking it Down: Your Portal to Inclusive and Accessible Employment Opportunities.

The website is informed by seven different participatory events that were organised across Canada and acts as a platform for developing disabled students and recent graduates' career transition to employment. It offers specialist information, videos and case studies specific to the needs of employers, students and university careers advisors including 'marketing yourself in the changing economy', promoting your skills set, guidance on disclosure and arranging workplace accommodations. Moreover, the organisation also offers the NEADS Online Work System (NOWS) which is a dynamic job site designed to steer disabled students to companies that have potentially identified themselves as inclusive and disability-friendly.



Some of the content is original...this section on legal duty to accommodate was actually written by an intern who was with us for the summer and who was a law student at the time at the University of Ottawa...and we also have our project partners – our project partners are private sector like federally regulated companies, we also have university and college careers associations and industry associations...the partners have contributed some of the content that is on the portal so it addresses everything...

(Frank Smith, NEADS)

Currently the job site has over 1500 post-secondary students and graduates with disabilities and 85 employers registered.

Case study 2: Lime Connect

Another not-for-profit organisation that also effectively brings together disabled students / graduates and employers was Lime Connect, Canada. Originally based in the USA, Lime has recently positioned itself in Canada and seeks to rebrand disability through achievement. It seeks to facilitate the employment process so that students with disabilities can reach their full potential professionally and personally but does so on the basis that for businesses this is about being 'smart' - not about being 'nice'.

I met with Karen Kelsey, the Relationship Manager for Canada in Toronto, whose role involves liaising between large multinational corporations including Facebook, IBM, Google, PWC to name a few. The Lime network caters for any university students and professionals who happen to have any type of disability, including

those on the autism spectrum. For Karen, the advantages of being part of the Lime Network include access to a career/professional development platform and app that pushes notifications of new internships and full time career postings based on the individual student's industry and role preferences. Moreover, the Network offers social events, often hosted by corporate employers, campus visits and professional development seminars and webinars focused on interview skills, industry overviews, and disclosure.

As Karen explained, Lime Connect seeks to develop a sustainable network of support. One novel aspect of this is the Fellowship Program For Students with Disabilities, which includes intensive leadership and development training in New York, internships, and more over the final summer of university / college. On graduating from the program, Fellows become part of the larger Lime Connect Fellows Community and have access to ongoing professional development, community and networking opportunities throughout their careers.



However, according to Karen, one of the most important aspects of Lime Connect's offer is their Recruitment Receptions, where members of the Lime Network are invited to attend should their talents match what the top hiring businesses and recruiters are looking for. These receptions are not just job fairs but rather could be seen as facilitated opportunities for employers to network one-on-one with potential candidates who they might not meet otherwise. Given the collegial emphasis of Lime Connect, Karen explained how successful members of the network or Lime Fellows are often invited to support other disabled students, should they find the process overwhelming.

Case study 3: The Compass

A final example of good practice with respect to job matching was The Compass in Vancouver. Whilst both NEADS and Lime Connect facilitate job matching and networking services for any disabled students, the Compass offers aspects of this but specifically for young people on the autism spectrum. The service is run collaboratively between Pacific Family Autism Network and Ready, Willing & Able and gives users access to a database to autism-friendly and inclusive employers in the province. It is being piloted across British Columbia, Ontario and Nova Scotia so far with the ambition to roll it out nationally.

Ready, Willing & Able (RWA) is a national partnership between the Canadian Association for Community Living (CACL) and the Canadian Autism Spectrum Disorders Alliance (CASDA) to develop a more inclusive workforce across Canada. Their remit is to increase the employment rates of those on the autism spectrum by the engaging with employers and raising awareness about the value and benefits of hiring people with diverse abilities. In British Columbia, RWA is delivered in partnership with Inclusion BC and based in PAFN.



Similar to Lime Connect's and NEADS' platforms, autistic individuals create a profile based on their skills, interests, and capacities on The Compass website before meeting one-to-one with an Autism Outreach Coordinator to search the database and discuss matched employment opportunities in the local area.

Theme 3. Employer engagement in the workplace

3.1 Making the business case for inclusive hiring

Although Lime Connect, NEADS, and RWA all offer practical support in terms of access to employment opportunities for disabled students or specifically those on the autism spectrum, from my experience, the aspect that has the most impact for change is the positive attitudinal shift that is taking place among corporate business partners and employers. Through leveraging executive support and a desire within companies to become more inclusive and autism-friendly, entire

industries are reconsidering their position on disability and employment. Notable examples of where such change is observable is within large IT-based companies such as Microsoft, Google, and SAP all of which have actively committed themselves to employing more autistic people based on their capacities for systematic processing skills, attention to detail, commitment to task completion. The IT-solutions firm SAP has set itself the global goal to hire 650 people on the autism spectrum by 2020. They hope to achieve this through SAP's Autism at Work program launched in May 2013.

I met with Stacey Freeman, Regional Autism Manager in Vancouver to find out more about how RWA engages with employers with a view to bringing about systemic change. She explained that a large piece of the work that she does involves making the business case to companies that employing autistic people goes beyond a social mandate but is in fact good business sense. This strongly resonates with what both Karen Kelsey at Lime Connect explained about their employment pitch to businesses being 'smart' not 'nice' and was also eloquently articulated by Marco Pasqua, Accessibility and Inclusion Consultant from the Presidents Group in British Columbia.

Employers can be so frightened of risk, so you have to actually change the way they frame it from risk to almost as if you are segmenting someone's abilities...if someone has a strength we should be focusing on that strength...so the way that you can sell it to them is that when we look at our candidates we want to look at what is their unique ability, right so, in tech the reason that people are so inclusive is because that they've realised that when you are talking about autism spectrum disorders, that detail orientation is a competitive advantage, so someone who is doing quality assurance testing and they are looking at the same thing over and over and over again and still pull out the details when most of us would glaze over – that's an asset... there are also positive externalities when you hire inclusively that we have seen and its across the board. One is that when you hire inclusively it changes the way that managers work with their teams because they might have to be more direct and so organisations that hire inclusively tend to have better results overall. Any company that tends to be diverse tends to be more innovative so those are selling points – you foster innovation when you have diversity, you might find that you are more productive because your team uses direct language, they might be more willing to go to work because they can see that its an inclusive environment; a lot of people respond well to inclusion and respond well to an inclusive company and so those are actually some of the best selling points as opposed to you should do this for social reasons.

(Stacey Freeman, Ready, Willing and Able)

The Presidents Group works with government and the disability community to implement Accessibility 2024, BC's 10-year action plan to become the most progressive province in Canada for people with disabilities. As a group of 22

business leaders it seeks to leverage others to increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities and create a more accessible consumer marketplace.

All three organisations, Lime Connect, RWA, and the Presidents Group, highlight the positive contribution that disabled employees can make – not on the basis of charity but profitability. RWA offer evidence to employers to show that disabled employees are less likely to be absent from work or leave companies once they have been fully trained and are supported with the right accommodations, can often have higher levels of productivity and therefore yield greater profits, and can offer new approaches to work system flows and processes.

Our role is to be the main point of contact for the twenty-two different companies in the Presidents' Group; to meet with their HR department, understand their employment practices – everything from pre-recruitment process through the post-recruitment process; anything that they had put in place from diversity and inclusion teams within their organisations, to, if they were a small business, then giving them advice or tips on how to get started. What we have really done is be the eyes and ears of these companies...

(Marco Pasqua, The Presidents Group)

Tamara Vrooman, President and CEO of Vancity in BC, states (2017) that “people with disabilities bring different perspectives, are innovative, and are often energetic about trying something new, so they improve the culture, morale and energy of our organizations in ways that are beyond the bottom line.” Moreover, according to a study in the BC area, 90% of consumers actually prefer companies that employ people with disabilities, thus making it an effective and sustainable model of employment.

3.2 Employer-employer engagement

As both Stacey and Marco explained to me, this sort of industry change does not come about quickly. One of the most significant challenges for fully embedding inclusive employment is that many employers do not fully understand autism or disability, they often lack confidence in developing inclusive employment processes, and frequently do not know how to find, hire and manage employees on the autism spectrum. To address these needs, both RWA and the Presidents Group offer employers knowledge, resources and tools to enable them to realise their aspirations to become more inclusive.

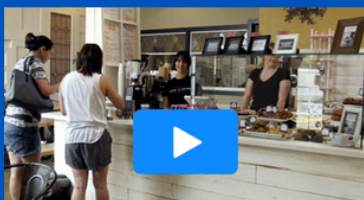
Through training in inclusive HR strategies and guides on workplace accommodations it has been possible to increase employer capacity. The Presidents Group has recently developed a website Accessible Employers which

includes a range of tools, as well as case studies to support other employers in the area.

Learn How Employing People with Disabilities Can Help Your Business Succeed



Inclusive Employment – It's Just Good Business



Building an Inclusive Corporate Culture - A Small Business Approach



Why Businesses of All Sizes Benefit from Diversity and Inclusion Strategies

Marco explained to me the range of possible solutions that have been successful for making employment more inclusive in the BC area; some of the most useful accommodations include:

Developing a diverse team

Often the attitudinal shift within a company comes from individuals, perhaps the CEO, with a vested interest in seeing change. In order for this to trickle down into the whole, a simple and effective method can be to establish a diversity team, if for no other reason than to put the issue on the agenda at the company.

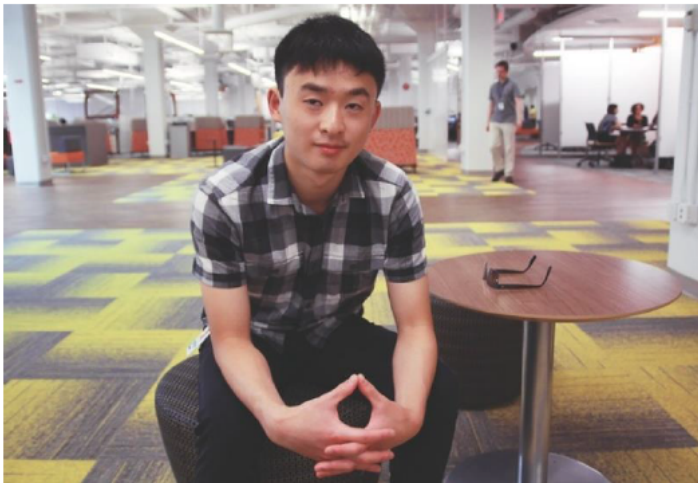
On the employers side it's about breaking down the attitudinal barriers that just because someone has a disability it doesn't necessarily mean that they just need to have an entry level position...it starts with [the CEO] at the top by setting an example for the rest of your organisation... and on the side of the job seeker, the thing I keep hearing again and again is the fear of disclosure – how do we get past that and how do we share with employers that if somebody self-discloses it's not necessarily a bad thing because the accommodations that you are going to make for people are not going to cost you an arm and a leg and may in fact encourage customers to go to your company over somebody else because you are showing that you are inclusive.

(Marco Pasqua, The Presidents Group)

Employer-to-Employer Networks

A final aspect of good practice that I discussed with Stacey and Marco at RWA and Presidents Group respectively was the usefulness of Employer-to-Employer Networks. Here business leaders support and encourage each other in becoming more inclusive. This model brings increased credibility, as rather than an outside

(charitable) agency attempting to justify the change, business peers make the case.



“Having a full-time job for me has been a great enabler - because of it, I’ve become more willing to leave my shell and experiment...” – Matthew Hung

Photo: SAP legal compliance analyst Matthew Huang in the company’s Vancouver office.
Credit: Rob Kruyt.

One particular success story has been the global IT-solutions company SAP, which has worked with RWA in putting into practice a range of these approaches. As a result, in Vancouver, SAP has met their goal of recruiting 13 Autism at Work program participants to work in the Vancouver office and have just completed their fourth wave of hiring in May 2017.

Theme 4. Emerging knowledge base

3.1 Emerging knowledge and research practices

As outlined at the beginning of this report, knowledge about autistic students’ postgraduate transitions is an area which currently lacks a solid evidence-base. This was something that Dr Mahadeo Sukai, Director of Research at NEADS in Canada, was acutely aware of and commented on the paucity of empirical data to support meaningful evaluation of what kinds of postgraduate transitional approaches work and for whom. This missing piece of the puzzle was also reflected by other organisations such as RWA, Douglas College, and AASPIRE.

However, this is beginning to change. Increasingly these organisations are beginning to invest time and resources into the empirical investigation of transition practices. At York University, Jayne Black-Greene was in the process of conducting a piece of qualitative research to better understand the transitional trajectories of autistic students leaving university. Her preliminary results showed that many young autistic people were struggling to make the transition to skilled employment; such findings were also echoed in my own PhD study (2017) where some participants reported applying to up to 1000 jobs before being successful.

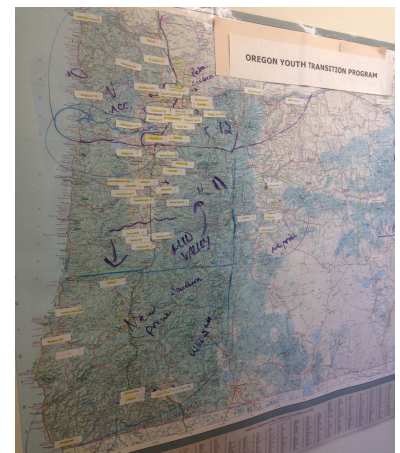
Other organisations were also in the process of gathering larger quantitative datasets which provide a broader picture of the issue across Canada and the United States. For Dr Mahadeo Sukai, a recent partnership with a national university student survey was able to provide important demographic data about disabled students across the entire country which he will be able to correlate with their experiences of and transitions from university. Moreover, it was recognised that through this sort of data there might be an increase in the capacity for organisations to establish the knowledge gap and draw down further national funding.

With regard to researching the trajectories of autistic populations, the United States were some way ahead. I interviewed Dr Jennifer Yu from SRI, which had administered the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2), one of the world's largest and most robust datasets into disabled adolescents' transitions into adulthood. The NLTS2 data provides a national picture of the experiences and achievements of students who have been educated within special education settings, mapping the transition from high school into adult life. The ten-year study began in December 2000 and draws on a nationally representative sample of students who were 13 to 16 years old at the time. The NLTS2 study followed this group until 2010 in an effort to understand their educational, vocational, social, and personal experiences as they transition from adolescence to early adulthood. The data were collected via telephone and face-to-face interviews with parents and young people; the collection of school outcomes data; as well as surveys of teachers, special education teachers, and principals. A further wave currently underway, NLTS 2012, is collecting data from an additional 15,000 students, aged between 13 to 21 from more than 400 school districts and which is likely to add to this already rich picture.

Findings from large longitudinal data like NLTS2 and NLTS 2012 are extremely useful for offering broad overview of the successes and challenges of disabled students nationally but also offer the possibility of disaggregating this data with respect to particular groups. Dr Jen Yu and colleagues (Wei et al, 2014) conducted a life course sequence analysis on this dataset to understand the particular experiences of autistic young people's transitions to adulthood. The findings showed that the rates at which young autistic people were able to find employment, particularly full-time jobs, fell short of achieving their high school employment goals, offering specific evidence for under- and mal-employment.

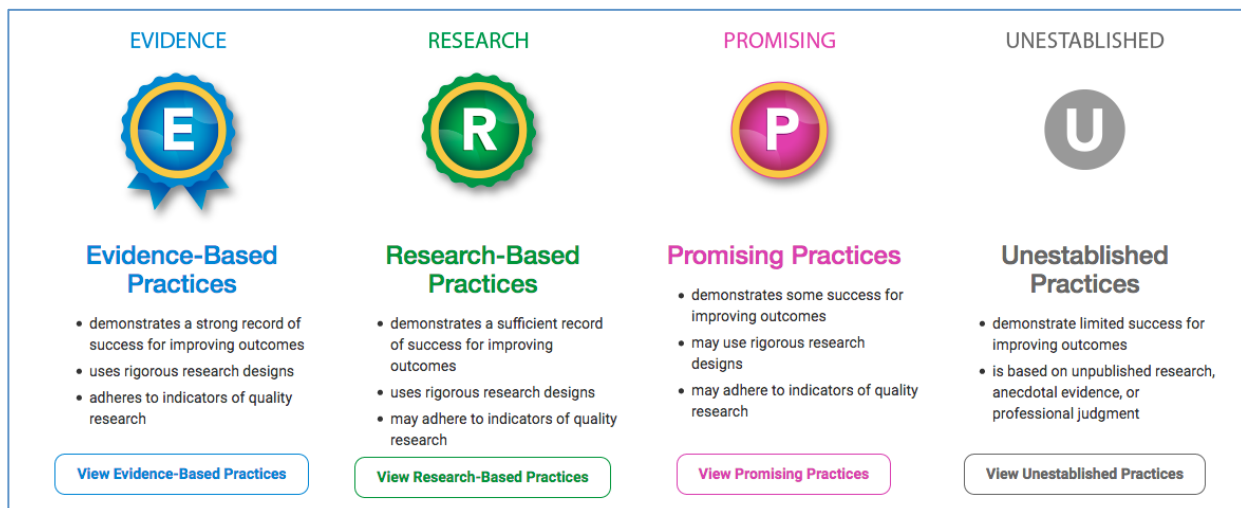
Compared to the other disability categories on NLTS2, those with autism tended to have the most positive job-seeking behaviours, in that they sought help from others in order to get those jobs; that might be local rehab, oftentimes a teacher, or somebody that had supported them. So that was actually quite encouraging to think that this might be an in-road in how we provide better supports for these individuals to be able to access the workforce in a more positive way. But that is just part of the initial findings from a recent analysis.

I also interviewed Dr Joe Madaus, Director of the Center on Postsecondary Education and Disability at the University of Connecticut and Past President of the Division on Career Development and Transition, Council for Exceptional Children, USA, who had also made use of the NLTS2 dataset. Both he and Jennifer suggested that more research in the area of life course outcomes for young people with autism was required, particularly around the transition to employment. However, the available data currently indicates some interesting and quite positive aspects of the employment process for this group.



As well as developing high-impact research, NTA CT also provides technical assistance for educational settings in decision-making, resource development and interventions. The Youth Transition Program operates as a partnership between Oregon Vocational Rehabilitation Services, the Oregon Department of Education, and the University Of Oregon College Of Education and serves students with disabilities state-wide.

Moreover, as a national centre for technical assistance on transition the organisation reviews, evaluates, and disseminates their evidence-based practices right across the USA. NTACTION researchers have developed a set of user-friendly toolkits which outline those transition practices that have the greatest levels of success. The Competitive Integrated Employment Toolkit by Allison et al (2017) is a good example and demonstrates how data is effectively used to guide practices regarding post-school employment outcomes for students with disabilities. As well as responding directly to the pre-employment policy requirements included in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (2014) and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1990), the toolkit provides guidance for practitioners based on a comprehensive analysis of the different employment-related interventions for disabled young people. Deanne Unruh explained how these are rated evidence-based, research-based, promising, or unestablished and links provided for each that allow for further exploration.



One of the most pleasing aspects of the fellowship was how it broadened my own view of transitional support and the need for this to be evidence-based, which very much lies at the heart of NTACTION.

4.2 Expanding the knowledge-base through participatory research

I believe firmly that the most effective change will come about where there is collaboration between autistic people and practitioners, thus, one of the things on my Churchill Fellowship that I was most eager to learn more about was Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) utilised so effectively by Dr Christina Nicolaidis and Dr Dora Raymaker, co-directors of the Academic Autistic Spectrum Partnership in Research & Education (AASPIRE) based in



Portland State University, Oregon. In many respects AASPIRE was one of the projects that inspired my application to WCMT and so my time with Christina and Dora was informative and very special (including a very tasty Thai meal!).

What was patently clear from my conversations with Dora and Christina was that CBPR has the potential to be of the highest quality but also respond to the practical needs of a particular community. However, what was of great additional interest and use was Christina's analysis of the ethical approach that must underpin CBPR as an approach.

The main goal of a community-based participatory research project is to have a partnership between the academics and the community...So one question is am I aiming at equal partnership, or am I aiming at authentic engagement throughout where people have a real role, or am I aiming at just advice here or there when I need it...I think it is important to talk about this right at the outset – and it doesn't mean it can't change – but if people think that they are aiming at an equal partnership but it turns out you are only using their advice here and there it ends up causing a lot of distrust and hurting the process, so I think it is somewhat helpful in early conversations to establish this.

(Christina Nicholaidis, AASPIRE)

A superlative example of this was their AASPIRE Healthcare Toolkit project, funded by a \$690,000 National Institute of Mental Health grant. It used CBPR to develop and evaluate an interactive toolkit and printable report for adults on the autism spectrum, people who support adults on the autism spectrum, and primary care providers. The interactive toolkit provides information and guidance for both autistic individuals accessing healthcare and healthcare providers as the image below indicates. This model was the inspiration for my envisaged future output as part of the Churchill Fellowship.

AASPIRE Healthcare Toolkit

Primary Care Resources for Adults on the Autism Spectrum and their Primary Care Providers

This web site has information and worksheets for adults on the autism spectrum, supporters, and healthcare providers. It focuses on primary healthcare, or healthcare with a regular doctor.

The resources on this site are meant to improve the healthcare of autistic adults. They were made by the [Academic-Autistic Spectrum Partnership in Research and Education \(AASPIRE\)](#) through a series of research studies funded by the [National Institute of Mental Health](#). AASPIRE hopes that you will find these resources helpful.

PATIENTS & SUPPORTERS

[click here](#)


Make a [Personalized Accommodations Report](#) for your healthcare provider.

This section also has information on:

- [Healthcare](#)
- [Staying Healthy](#)
- [Your Rights in Healthcare](#)
- [Autism Information](#)
- [Medical Information](#)
- [Checklists and Worksheets](#)



HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS

[click here](#)

This section has information on:

- [Autism Information, Diagnosis, and Referrals](#)
- [Caring for Patients on the Autism Spectrum](#)
- [Legal and Ethical Considerations](#)
- [Associated Conditions](#)
- [Resources and Links](#)

Healthcare providers also might want share our [Autism Healthcare Accommodations Tool](#), and other [checklists and worksheets](#) with their patients on the autism spectrum.

The now completed healthcare toolkit project involved three distinct phases; in the first instance it sought the healthcare experiences and recommendations of the different stakeholders. This was underpinned by a cross-sectional study among 437 participants (Nicolaidis et al. 2013) and a further study based on semi-structured interviews with 39 autistic adults and 16 people who had experience supporting autistic adults in healthcare settings (Nicolaidis et al. 2015). The second phase involved the creation of a customised report / letter for autistic adults to provide to their healthcare providers (Autism Healthcare Accommodations Tool). This is based on an interactive assessment tool (below) which generates customised advice and guidance. Development of the Autism Healthcare Accommodations Tool included cognitive interviewing and test-retest reliability studies (Nicolaidis et al. 2016).

The final phase involved 'roll-out' and rigorous evaluation of the toolkit including mixed-methods, single-arm pre/post-intervention comparison evaluations among 259 autistic adults and 51 primary care providers. This project demonstrated that this collaboration between the autistic community and researcher-practitioners can generate a reliable and highly accessible healthcare toolkit and could be the model for an employment toolkit in the UK.

Finally, another AASPIRE project that had particular import for my own context was Dora's study into autism in the workplace. Whilst still in nascent form it will aim to interview up to 95 people on the autism spectrum and those who work with them. She was, at the point of my fellowship, gathering her qualitative dataset from which she was hoping to establish the barriers and enabling mechanisms for successful transition. Whilst the project does not relate directly to autistic university graduates, it has a specific emphasis on specialised training, including trades and

professions, rather than entry-level work. I look forward to hearing more about how the project develops and the findings that it generates.

Recommendations for the UK context

The following recommendations are based on the research and findings taken place during the fellowship.

Recommendation 1: Participatory processes

Any employment solutions for autistic graduates ought to be community-based or participatory. Both AASPIRE in the USA and NEADS in Canada reflect sustainable and ethical practice that is embedded in and informed by what is most valued by the community that they are designed to serve.

In the UK this could be achieved by engaging autistic students, allies, employers, and researcher-practitioners in the development of practical solutions that would enable them to better access and succeed in employment.

Recommendation 2: Collaborative practices

Collaboration is key to transition success for autistic graduates when leaving university. Where this was in place (for example, Pacific Autism Family Network, Presidents Group, NEADS, Ready Willing and Able, Lime Connect, York University, Toronto and Douglas College, Vancouver) transition experiences were typically enhanced.

In the UK this could be achieved by greater alignment between universities and employers, perhaps by establishing mentoring programmes like that in York University. Putting pressure on universities to be accountable for disabled students' postgraduate trajectories and to demonstrate the support offered.

There is scope for stronger collaboration between third sector organisations in the UK such as Care Trade, Employ-Ability, Specialisterne etc. and universities in order to ensure that autistic graduates are enabled to take the next step into employment. Harness and celebrate the successes – make these known to others.

Better collaboration between government bodies and employers would greatly enhance the prospects of young autistic people with nationwide initiatives designed to respond to the specific gap in provision. Finally, collaboration between networks of inclusive employers would be highly effective for the sharing of good working practices but also changing attitudes.

Recommendation 3: Practical and holistic solutions

Solutions to the employment gap for autistic university graduates must be practical and holistic. Many of the challenges with securing a job and succeeding in a workplace are practical and so, in the UK, we must develop clearer guidance on solutions such as job-carving, working interviews or adjustments to the environment.

Moreover, the most sustainable solutions will also be holistic and take into account the whole person: their personal values, physical needs, practical capacities. This way the individual has the potential to not only get a job but thrive in their working environment.

Recommendation 4: Develop the evidence-base

Findings suggest that the research base with respect to autistic university graduates must be developed. More and better data is required to fully understand the issues and potential solutions and thus begin to resolve the employment gap for this group.

In the UK, we must work towards establishing rigorous research that provides clarity about which methods have the best potential to bring about success for autistic graduates making the transition to work. As AASPIRE has demonstrated, there is great strength in conducting robust research collaboratively, engaging academics, autistic students and graduates, careers services, disability practitioners and others, in developing interventions and evaluating these to gauge what is most effective. Moreover, there is great scope in extending 'evidence-based practices' in conjunction with our international partners who are also engaged in this endeavour and so building a global picture.

Recommendation 5: Changed attitudes

Changing attitudes will, without a doubt, be the most difficult recommendation to achieve but is probably the most important of all. Typically stakeholders within education, community services, and supported employment provision have positive attitudes about what is possible for autistic students and graduates; however, employers are still some way behind.

Initiatives in Canada including Ready, Willing and Able and the Presidents Group both provide excellent examples of how it is possible to leverage employers and begin to affect changes at a cultural level within companies. In the UK, we must look to examples such as these in order to first understand the barriers that employers perceive and then, where possible, begin to demystify these such to

enhance employers' attitudes about the potential that autistic people have both for their sectors and for society more generally.

Dissemination

So far I have had opportunities to share my Fellowship findings through a range of different events and media.

As part of the autistic / non-autistic research collaborative that I lead in the UK, PRO Autism, I was able to partner with supported employment providers, United Response and Genius Within and York St John University, to organise a conference focusing on employment for autistic students and graduates.

Over seventy delegates from a range of community sectors across the north of England attended. Through this opportunity I was able to share about my Churchill Fellowship and the potential there is for change based on increasing our knowledge base.



Following this our group, PRO Autism, organised an employer-focused event where partnering this time with the North Yorkshire branch of the Chartered Institute of Professional Development (CIPD). Here I had the opportunity to share my Fellowship findings with over fifty company directors, HR advisors and recruitment managers. This included outlining the benefits of employing people on the autism spectrum and facilitating training around the types of reasonable adjustments that might enable autistic employees to be successful in the workplace.



Within the higher education sector, I have disseminated my findings at the Pro Vice-Chancellor's research seminar at York St John University and have also submitted an abstract to present a paper at an international conference in July 2018. I intend, over the next year, to write up my findings for dissemination in UK-based practitioner journals, such as *Good Autism Practice*.

One of the primary aims following the Fellowship was to use the information garnered to produce an online toolkit accessible for autistic young people and employers. In order for this to be professional enough to engage employers and robust enough to classify as 'evidence-based practice' it was clear to me that this would require more substantial support and wider collaboration. Since my fellowship, working with colleagues from charities including Ambitious About Autism, Participatory Action Research Collaborative as well as higher education institutions including Portsmouth University and Leeds Beckett University, I submitted, as co-investigator, a £99,000 research funding bid to develop and evaluate an online toolkit. Unfortunately, this was unsuccessful; however, a number of the partners are again in the process of developing bids, this time potentially including media and technology companies as part of the bid.

Following the completion of the report I intend to disseminate this document and offer to speak at a number of relevant UK associations, including the National Association of Disability Practitioners, the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services, as well as the Institute of Student Employers. Finally, as an active member of the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust I will be speaking at my regional Association in East Pennines in Oct 2018.

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Appendices

Below are the addresses and web-details of the different organisations that I made contact with during my Fellowship.

Autism Spectrum Partnership in Research and Education
Portland State University
School of Social Work
PO Box 751
Portland, Oregon
<https://aaspire.org/>

Canadian Council for Rehabilitation and Work
477 Mount Pleasant Road, Suite 105
Toronto, ON
M4S 2L9
www.ccrw.org

Center on Postsecondary Education and Disability at the University of Connecticut
University of Connecticut
Storrs, Connecticut
06269
<https://cped.uconn.edu/>

Douglas College, British Columbia
New Westminster
700 Royal Avenue
New Westminster, BC
V3M 5Z5
<https://www.douglascollege.ca/>

Learning Disability Services, York University
4700 Keele Street
Toronto, Ontario
M3J 1P3
<http://lds.info.yorku.ca/>

Lime Connect Canada
Toronto Branch
<https://www.limeconnect.com/>

National Educational Association of Disabled Students
Rm. 514, Unicentre
1125 Colonel By Drive
Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario, K1S 5B6
Canada
<https://www.neads.ca/>

National Technical Assistance Center on Transition and Secondary Special
Education & Transition,
University of Oregon,
Clinical Services Building
901 E. 18th Avenue
Eugene, Oregon 97403
<https://education.uoregon.edu/rou/secondary-special-education-and-transition-program>

Pacific Autism Family Network
3688 Cessna Drive
Richmond, B.C.
V7B 1C7
<http://pacificautismfamily.com/>

Presidents Group
Vancouver
<http://www.accessibleemployers.ca/>

Ready Willing and Able
3688 Cessna Drive
Richmond, B.C.
V7B 1C7
<http://www.inclusionbc.org/ready-willing-and-able>

SRI International,
333 Ravenswood Avenue
San Francisco,
Menlo Park, CA 94025-3493
United States
<https://www.sri.com/>

Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports
University of Oregon,
Eugene, OR 97403
<https://www.pbis.org/>