The Lived Experiences of Final Year Neurodivergent Students Navigating the Transition from Higher Education to Employment: A Qualitative Exploration

Janet Susan Hanson

Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of Professional Doctorate in Education

York St John University

School of Education, Language and Psychology

December 2025

The candidate confirms that the work submitted is their own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This doctoral journey would not have been possible without the extraordinary support of many individuals and systems that have sustained me through this research.

I extend my deepest gratitude to my supervisors, Dr Margaret Meredith and Professor Tom Dobson, whose patient guidance, intellectual challenges, and unwavering belief in this research's importance sustained me through the complexities of doctoral study. Your expertise in navigating both the academic rigours and the personal dimensions of this work has been invaluable.

To the eight neurodivergent students who generously shared their transition experiences with such honesty and courage—Philip, Rosa, Demi, Maisie, Emily, Michelle, Willow, and AstroBlack—this research exists because of your voices. Your willingness to articulate both struggles and strategies, frustrations and hopes, has illuminated a transition period that has remained invisible for too long. I hope this research honours your contributions and supports future neurodivergent students navigating similar journeys.

To my husband Mark, who has been by my side throughout these doctoral studies and indeed throughout our 44 years together—without you, I would not have reached this point. Your unwavering support, patience, and belief have sustained me through every challenge, not just during this doctorate but throughout all my studies across the decades we have shared. As we approach our 40th wedding anniversary, I am profoundly grateful for your constant encouragement and the sacrifices you have made to enable my academic pursuits. To my sons, Timothy and Thomas, who have always championed me in whatever endeavour I have undertaken—your encouragement and pride in my work have meant more than you know. To my Mom, whose support and belief in my abilities has been a constant throughout my life—thank you for always encouraging me to pursue my goals. Thank you all for supporting this journey and for being my foundation.

Amanda, my personal assistant, deserves special recognition for her meticulous transcription work and for serving as an invaluable "alien observer" who helped identify potential biases in my analytical process. Your external perspective significantly strengthened the rigour of this research.

Trixie, my body doubling partner, provided essential support in maintaining focus during the intensive writing phases of this thesis. Your presence transformed solitary writing sessions into shared, productive endeavours that made completion possible.

McGee, my assistance dog, provided quiet companionship through countless hours of writing, offering both practical support and emotional grounding during challenging moments.

I acknowledge York St John University for providing the institutional framework and resources necessary for this research, including the formal recognition of AI assistive technology (Claude) within my learning adjustment plan as legitimate accessibility support for neurodivergent doctoral researchers. Following university guidelines on responsible AI use, I employed Claude within a dedicated project workspace containing only my own research materials, thesis drafts, and academic sources, ensuring all AI interactions worked exclusively with my existing scholarship rather than external internet content. Claude supported my writing process by structuring my spoken thoughts into academic prose, providing feedback on writing style and clarity of expression, and assisting with document organisation and formatting. As emphasised in York St John's principles, I used AI to help me think—not to think for me—ensuring that all ideas, analysis, interpretations, and conclusions remain entirely my own intellectual work, with Claude serving as an accessibility tool to bridge the gap between my thinking and written expression.

Finally, I acknowledge the broader neurodivergent community whose advocacy, scholarship, and lived experiences inform every aspect of this work. This research stands on the foundation of "nothing about us without us"—may it contribute

meaningfully to creating educational and employment systems that genuinely support neurodivergent flourishing.

ABSTRACT

This research examines how neurodivergent students experience and navigate the transition from higher education to employment. It addresses a critical gap where existing literature examines university experiences and employment outcomes as disconnected domains, whilst rendering the transition period itself invisible. Despite substantial growth in neurodivergent student populations—from 11% to 20% of UK domestic students—and comprehensive academic support systems, only 36% of autistic graduates secure full-time employment within 15 months compared to 80% of neurotypical peers, revealing profound coordination failures between educational and employment contexts.

Employing a case study methodology grounded in interpretivist philosophy, this research centres on the voices of eight neurodivergent students through semi-structured interviews and a longitudinal narrative account. As a neurodivergent researcher, I bring an insider-outsider positioning that deepens understanding whilst requiring rigorous reflexivity. Reflexive thematic analysis, guided by abductive reasoning, examines participants' lived experiences of navigating multiple environmental systems during their final year and transition to employment. This research addresses three interconnected questions: How do neurodivergent students experience and navigate complex environmental systems during workplace transitions? What information, support, and resources do students identify as necessary? How do different environmental systems coordinate or fail to coordinate during this critical period?

Analysis reveals three major themes: struggling through invisible systems demonstrates how students navigate opaque support structures whilst experiencing abrupt discontinuity at graduation—what participants termed the "transition cliff." Perpetual disruption exposes systematic failures when multiple support systems fail to coordinate, creating cascading barriers. The identity-navigation paradox illuminates tensions between neurodivergent authenticity and neurotypical workplace expectations, with masking leading to burnout whilst disclosure risks discrimination.

This research's major theoretical contribution, the Multi-Directional Ecological Framework (MDEF), emerged organically from iterative engagement between participant data and existing ecological theory during the analytical process. The MDEF extends Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory and Navarro and Tudge's neo-ecological theory by demonstrating how neurodivergent students navigate simultaneous, multi-directional pressures across environmental systems rather than linear sequential transitions.

Table of Contents

Table of Figures

Table of Tables

List of Abbreviations

ADD - Attention Deficit Disorder

ADHD - Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

AGCAS - Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services

ASD - Autism Spectrum Disorder

AT - Assistive Technology

AtW - Access to Work

BA - Bachelor of Arts

BERA - British Education Research Association

BSc - Bachelor of Science

COVID-19 - Coronavirus Disease 2019

DEI - Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

DPIA - Data Protection Impact Assessment

DSA - Disabled Students' Allowances

DSC - Disabled Students' Commission

DVR - Digital Voice Recorder

EdD - Doctor of Education

EHRC - Equality and Human Rights Commission

GDPR - General Data Protection Regulation

HAP - Health Adjustment Passport

HE - Higher Education

HEFCE - Higher Education Funding Council for England

HEP - Higher Education Provider

HREC - Human Research Ethics Committee

IAR - Information Asset Register

IT - Information Technology

MA - Master of Arts

MDEF - Multi-Directional Ecological Framework

MSc - Master of Science

NMH - Non-Medical Helper

OFFA - Office for Fair Access

OfS - Office for Students

PhD - Doctor of Philosophy

PIP - Personal Independence Payment

PPCT - Process, Person, Context, Time

PSRB - Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies

QAA - Quality Assurance Agency

RAP - Reasonable Adjustment Plan

RTA - Reflexive Thematic Analysis

SNA - Study Needs Assessment

SpLD - Specific Learning Difficulties

SRPP - Student Research Project Panel

UCAS - Universities and Colleges Admissions Service

UK - United Kingdom

VLE - Virtual Learning Environment

Chapter 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Opening Context

The transition from higher education to employment represents a critical juncture in the lives of neurodivergent students, yet this pivotal period remains remarkably under-researched and inadequately supported. Despite neurodivergent students now constituting 20% of home student enrolments in UK higher education—a proportion that has doubled since 2010 and is projected to reach one in four students by 2027 (Disabled Students UK, 2024)—systematic support for their transition into employment remains virtually absent. Within this population, 55-56% have Specific Learning Differences, including ADHD, Dyslexia, and Dyspraxia, whilst 38-39% identify as autistic (Disabled Students UK, 2024). These statistics represent a fundamental shift in the composition of higher education, yet institutional responses have failed to evolve accordingly. This thesis addresses this critical gap by examining the lived experiences of neurodivergent students navigating the complex, multi-directional pressures of transition whilst attempting to access support systems that consistently fail to meet their needs.

The stark reality of employment outcomes for neurodivergent graduates underscores the urgency of this research. The Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS, 2025) found that autistic graduates at all qualification levels, from all ethnic backgrounds and of all genders, experience the lowest levels of full-time employment, with only 40% securing permanent or open-ended contracts compared to 56% of graduates with no known disability 15 months after graduation. Vincent and Fabri (2022) provide further sobering context, reporting that only 14% of autistic adults are in full-time employment in the UK, with many overqualified for their positions. The economic implications of these statistics are profound—with neurodivergent employees demonstrating productivity improvements of 45-145% in suitable roles, particularly in technology and data analysis, where their pattern recognition and attention to detail excel (Austin and Pisano, 2017). Failing to support successful transitions represents not only individual tragedy but societal waste. The annual cost of unemployment and

underemployment among neurodivergent individuals reaches £14.5 billion in the UK alone (Vincent and Fabri, 2022; Disabled Students UK, 2024), revealing the economic irrationality of maintaining systems that exclude rather than include neurodivergent talent.

These statistics, however, tell only part of the story. The lived experiences behind each percentage point – what neurodivergent students and graduates themselves describe when asked about their navigation of higher education and the transition into employment – is the focus of this research. This thesis aims to explore those perspectives, and what they can tell us about the environmental systems within which neurodivergent students move through and beyond higher education.

The COVID-19 pandemic added another layer of complexity to these transitions, fundamentally altering the landscape of both education and employment. For many students who began their university studies during the pandemic, their entire higher education experience has been shaped by rapid shifts between online and in-person learning, the dissolution of traditional support structures, and the emergence of new digital barriers alongside physical ones. Newman (2022) documented how disabled students' needs were often forgotten during pandemic responses, but this research reveals that the impacts persist well beyond the acute phase, with temporary "adjustments" having solidified into permanent barriers.

1.2 Personal and Professional Context

My journey to this research began long before I understood myself as neurodivergent, rooted in years of witnessing systemic failures whilst working in education support. As a professional facilitating support for students and employees, I observed patterns of struggle that seemed unnecessarily complicated, transitions that appeared deliberately obstructed, and potential that remained unrealised because of institutional inflexibility. These observations planted the seeds of questions that would eventually grow into this doctoral research: Why do intelligent, capable students suddenly falter at transition points? Why does support that exists in theory fail so consistently in practice? What makes the journey from education to employment so treacherous for neurodivergent individuals?

It was only when I entered my own doctoral journey, having received my dyslexia and dyspraxia diagnoses at age thirty, that I began to understand the deeper patterns at play. Though I had struggled through school without knowing why, these formal diagnoses gave language to experiences I had long navigated without understanding their neurological basis. I believed I now comprehended the landscape of neurodivergent navigation through higher education, having developed strategies to manage the impacts of dyslexia and dyspraxia. However, receiving an autism diagnosis in my second year of doctoral studies fundamentally disrupted this understanding. Suddenly, struggles I had attributed to personal inadequacy revealed themselves as autistic responses to neurotypically designed environments. The exhaustion I felt after supervisory meetings was not weakness but the toll of masking. My difficulty with implicit academic expectations was not obtuseness but a need for explicit communication, which autism explains.

The ADHD diagnosis in my fourth year added another dimension to this evolving understanding. Patterns of hyperfocus alternating with paralysing inability to initiate tasks, which I had judged as character flaws, revealed themselves as ADHD traits requiring support rather than self-recrimination. This diagnostic journey, occurring simultaneously with my research, created a unique reflexive dynamic. I was researching transition challenges whilst experiencing my own fundamental transition in self-understanding. I was discovering new environmental pressures creating demands I had not previously recognised, whilst simultaneously analysing how participants navigated similar revelations.

This evolving diagnostic journey positioned me uniquely as what Yip (2024) terms an “insider-outsider”—simultaneously experiencing the phenomena I was studying whilst maintaining the analytical distance necessary for rigorous research. The insider knowledge provided crucial insights: understanding the specific exhaustion of translating between neurodivergent and neurotypical ways of being, recognising the subtle invalidations that accumulate into profound alienation, and identifying the particular relief when environments finally accommodate rather than merely tolerate difference. Yet the outsider perspective remained essential, ensuring that my

experiences informed rather than overrode participant voices, that patterns identified reflected systematic rather than personal phenomena, and that findings served broader communities rather than individual vindication.

My professional role added multiple layers to this positioning. As a neurodivergent freelance worker, I facilitated support for both neurodivergent students receiving Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) and neurodivergent employees accessing Access to Work (AtW). This meant I occupied multiple positions within the very systems I was researching—as a student receiving support, as a professional providing support, and as a researcher analysing support. This created what might be termed "recursive positioning," where each role informed the others in complex ways (Yip, 2024). My student experience revealed the gaps between policy and practice. My practitioner knowledge identified systemic patterns across individual cases. From my researcher perspective, I synthesised these insights whilst maintaining analytical rigour.

This multiple positioning brought both opportunities and responsibilities. The opportunities included access to perspectives that single-role researchers might miss, an understanding of how systems appeared different from various vantage points, and credibility with both research participants and professional stakeholders. The responsibilities included maintaining clear boundaries between roles, ensuring confidentiality across different professional contexts, and managing potential conflicts between advocacy and analysis. Throughout this research, I navigated these responsibilities through rigorous reflexive practice, documented in research journals that traced how my evolving understanding influenced and was influenced by this research process.

1.3 Research Problem

The problem this research addresses is not singular but multiple, interconnected, and operating across various ecological levels. At its core lies a fundamental paradox: as the number of neurodivergent students in higher education increases dramatically, support for their transition to employment has not merely failed to keep pace but has arguably deteriorated. This paradox becomes more perplexing when considered alongside growing recognition of neurodiversity's value in workplaces and strengthening

legislative frameworks for disability support. How can awareness be increasing whilst outcomes worsen? How can support systems exist in policy whilst failing in practice? These questions drive this research.

At the individual level, my professional experience suggested that neurodivergent students face something akin to multi-directional navigation without a compass – a complex set of pressures operating simultaneously rather than sequentially. Whether this metaphor holds true for participants in this study, and what shape it takes in their experiences, is one of the questions this research explores. Where their neurotypical peers, who may focus primarily on academic completion and job searching, neurodivergent students appear to navigate manage multiple intersecting challenges. They navigate academic demands that may not accommodate their learning styles, personal mental health challenges that statistics show affect almost half of neurodivergent students (Tan et al., 2025), sensory environments that can be actively hostile, social expectations based on neurotypical communication norms, and family dynamics that may not understand their needs. Added to these are the specific transition challenges: understanding workplace cultures designed around neurotypical assumptions, preparing for recruitment processes that disadvantage neurodivergent candidates, making complex decisions about disclosure and accommodation needs, and attempting to access support systems they may not know exist.

At the institutional level, the problem manifests as a fundamental disconnection between stated commitments to inclusion and actual practice. Universities proudly proclaim their support for disabled students. Yet institutions may simultaneously communicate that statutory obligations under the Equality Act 2010 are merely advisory — a position that fundamentally misunderstands legal requirements under disability law. Career services provide generic guidance that assumes neurotypical approaches to networking and job searching, failing to recognise that these approaches may be inaccessible or inappropriate for neurodivergent students. Support that does exist often operates in silos—disability services do not communicate with careers services, academic departments remain unaware of student support needs, and no one takes responsibility for transition preparation.

The abrupt cessation of support at graduation creates what is sometimes referred to as a “transition cliff” – a metaphor that captures the sudden withdrawal of institutional support at precisely the moment when students face the complex challenge of entering employment. There is no graduated reduction, no handover to employment support services, no bridge between educational and workplace systems. Students who may have spent years building relationships with support providers, developing effective strategies, and learning to navigate university systems can suddenly find themselves unsupported and alone. How this transition is experienced by neurodivergent students themselves, and what it costs them, is one of the questions this research seeks to explore.

At the systemic level, the problem manifests as a comprehensive failure of coordination among different support systems. The transition from Disabled Students’ Allowance to Access to Work—two government-funded support schemes that, theoretically, should connect—instead creates a chasm that students must navigate alone. Research in this field consistently reveals that the overwhelming majority of neurodivergent students have no knowledge of Access to Work at the point of transition (McDowall and Kiseleva, 2024) — exposing not individual oversight but a systematic failure to provide essential information at a critical juncture. The administrative burden of navigating multiple, non-communicating bodies—identified by Quinn and Anwar-Westander (2023) as affecting disabled PhD students—extends throughout all levels of higher education and into employment transitions.

Through my professional experience prior to this research, I had observed what I came to think of as an “invisible transition period” – a critical phase where students appear to be neither fully supported by educational systems nor yet integrated into employment support structures. Whether and how that pattern is borne out in the experiences of the participants in this study is one of the lines of inquiry the research follows.

Information systems designed for neurotypical processing become labyrinths for neurodivergent students. Support provision that depends on individual champions rather than systematic processes creates lottery-like inequities. The requirement for students

to use precisely the skills their neurodivergence affects—executive function, communication, organisation—to access support creates cruel paradoxes.

The temporal dimension of the problem adds another layer of complexity. These are not new challenges—research from the 1980s and 1990s (Baker and Blanding, 1986; Silver, Strehorn and Bourke, 1997) identified similar issues, yet they persist virtually unchanged today. This temporal persistence suggests not implementation challenges but profound structural resistance to change that transcends individual institutions or policy contexts. Each generation of neurodivergent students faces the same battles, depleting energy that could be directed towards education and development. The cumulative cost of this repetition represents an unconscionable waste of human potential.

The digital dimension, highlighted by Navarro and Tudge's (2023) neo-ecological framework, introduces contemporary complexities. Students must navigate not only physical environments but increasingly complex digital spaces—online application systems, virtual learning environments, remote interview platforms—that may create additional barriers. Whether digital institutional systems – online application portals, virtual learning environments, remote interview platforms – function as accessible spaces or as additional barriers for neurodivergent students navigating complex transitions is one of the questions this research explores.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

This research employs an integrated theoretical framework drawing on established ecological theories to examine the complex, multi-directional nature of neurodivergent students' transition experiences. At its foundation lies Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model, which provides a comprehensive framework for understanding human development as occurring through dynamic interactions between individuals and their environmental contexts. This model, refined over several decades (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007), recognises human development as occurring through "processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate external environment" (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007, p. 797).

The bioecological model's nested systems provide an essential structure for understanding transition experiences. The microsystem encompasses the immediate environments in which students directly participate—university classrooms, support services, family homes, and, eventually, workplaces. For neurodivergent students, these microsystems often present unique challenges: lecture theatres with overwhelming sensory stimuli, career services assuming neurotypical communication styles, and workplaces organised around neurotypical productivity patterns. The mesosystem represents interactions between microsystems—how university support coordinates with workplace preparation, how family understanding influences academic engagement, and how peer relationships affect professional networking. How well, or poorly, mesosystem connections function for neurodivergent students – how university support coordinates with workplace preparation, how academic departments communicate with one another, how educational and employment systems interact – is one of the lines of inquiry this research pursues.

The exosystem includes contexts that indirectly influence students—university policies, employer recruitment practices, and professional qualification requirements—creating invisible barriers students cannot directly influence but must navigate. The macrosystem encompasses broader cultural beliefs about neurodiversity, productivity, and professional competence. Despite growing neurodiversity awareness, macrosystem beliefs rooted in medical model assumptions persist, viewing neurodivergent individuals as deficient rather than different. The chronosystem captures temporal dimensions—both individual developmental timing and historical changes in how neurodiversity is understood.

However, Bronfenbrenner's framework, developed before digital technologies fundamentally altered human interaction, requires updating for contemporary contexts. Navarro and Tudge's (2023) neo-ecological theory provides this essential extension, recognising that "the bidirectionality between the macrosystem and developing individuals is more fluid now than at any time in history" (p. 19344). Their framework acknowledges digital environments not as tools within existing systems but as new ecological contexts with distinct characteristics and influences. For participants who

began university during COVID-19, this digital dimension proved particularly significant as they navigated rapid shifts between virtual and physical environments whilst established support patterns dissolved.

The neo-ecological framework's recognition of increased bidirectionality proves particularly relevant for understanding neurodivergent transitions. Through social media and online communities, neurodivergent individuals can now influence macrosystem beliefs about neurodiversity whilst simultaneously being shaped by them. Digital platforms enable peer support networks transcending geographical boundaries, creating new mesosystem connections. However, these same technologies create new barriers—overwhelming information architectures, anxiety-inducing always-on communication expectations, and algorithmic systems embedding neurotypical assumptions.

The theoretical framework also incorporates insights from Multiple and Multi-dimensional Transitions (MMT) theory, recognising that transitions involve "multiple changes or 'transitions' across the environmental, mental, social, and academic domains" (Davies and Bagnall, 2025, p.157). This multi-dimensionality means students are not simply moving from university to work but simultaneously navigating identity transitions, social transitions, cultural transitions, and support transitions.

1.5 Research Questions and Approach

This research addresses three interconnected questions that emerged from recognising fundamental gaps in existing knowledge about neurodivergent students' transition experiences:

1.5.1 Research Question 1: How do neurodivergent students experience the transition from higher education to employment?

This question seeks to understand the lived experiences of neurodivergent students as they navigate the complex journey from university to the workplace. It recognises that whilst statistics reveal poor employment outcomes, they do not explain how students actually experience transition challenges, what sense they make of support failures, or how they navigate multi-directional pressures. The question deliberately focuses on

student perspectives rather than institutional or employer viewpoints, addressing what McDowall and Kiseleva (2024) identified as the absence of student voice in existing research. It encompasses not just practical challenges but emotional, social, and identity dimensions of transition, recognising that neurodivergent students may experience transitions in qualitatively different ways from their neurotypical peers.

1.5.2 Research Question 2: What environmental systems influence these transition experiences, and how do these systems interact?

This question examines the complex ecological contexts within which transitions occur, recognising that individual experiences cannot be understood in isolation from environmental influences. It investigates how different system levels—from immediate support relationships to broader cultural attitudes—shape transition experiences. Crucially, it examines interactions between systems, recognising that support failures often occur not within single systems but at their intersections. The question encompasses both physical and digital environments, reflecting Navarro and Tudge's (2023) neo-ecological framework. It investigates how systems that ostensibly exist to support can become barriers, how coordination failures compound individual challenges, and how temporal factors influence system effectiveness.

1.5.3 Research Question 3: What support do neurodivergent students identify as necessary for successful transitions?

This question centres on students' expertise about their own support needs, challenging deficit models that position professionals as experts about neurodivergent experiences. It seeks to understand not what institutions think students need but what students themselves identify as helpful or necessary. The question encompasses both support that students have experienced as effective and support they imagine could help, recognising that innovation may be needed beyond current provision. It investigates support across multiple ecological levels—from individual accommodations to systemic changes—and across temporal dimensions; from early preparation to post-graduation follow-up.

These questions emerged through iterative engagement with literature and my own evolving understanding as a neurodivergent researcher. My diagnostic journey during the research revealed additional dimensions of transition challenges that warranted investigation, deepening my awareness of the complexities neurodivergent students navigate. This insider perspective, combined with gaps identified in existing literature, shaped the research questions to ensure they addressed actual rather than assumed challenges.

To address these questions, I employed a qualitative case study methodology that prioritised depth over breadth. Chapter 3 provides full details of the research design, participant selection, and analytical approach.

1.6 Contributions to Knowledge

This research makes several significant contributions that extend beyond traditional academic boundaries, offering theoretical, empirical, practical, and transformative insights into understanding and supporting neurodivergent transitions.

1.6.1 Theoretical Contributions

This research makes three distinctive theoretical contributions to understanding neurodivergent students' transitions from higher education to employment.

First, the development of the Multi-Directional Ecological Framework (MDEF) advances both Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory and Navarro and Tudge’s neo-ecological framework. The MDEF reconceptualises traditional nested ecological systems to capture the dynamic, multi-directional pressures neurodivergent students navigate simultaneously across all system levels during transitions. This framework reveals how participants manage competing demands from multiple systems concurrently—university requirements, workplace expectations, family dynamics, and support services—rather than progressing linearly through hierarchical environments (see Section 4.4 for detailed discussion of the MDEF’s theoretical development and application).

Second, this research extends neo-ecological theory by demonstrating how digital environments create unique navigational challenges for neurodivergent students.

Building on Navarro and Tudge's (2023) recognition of digital spaces as distinct ecological contexts, the MDEF exposes how technological systems designed with neurotypical assumptions become additional barriers rather than supportive tools for neurodivergent populations.

Third, the framework provides a new theoretical lens for conceptualising the transition period as a distinct ecological phenomenon. While existing ecological theories address stable environments, the framework theorises the unique characteristics of transitional spaces where multiple ecological systems overlap and interact in complex ways.

1.6.2 Empirical Contributions

This research provides crucial empirical evidence about phenomena largely invisible in the academic literature. The finding that not one participant received systematic transition support—regardless of university, discipline, or neurodivergent profile—reveals systemic rather than isolated failures, indicating fundamental gaps in how transitions are conceptualised and supported.

The identification of three major themes—struggling through invisible systems, perpetual disruption, and the identity-navigation paradox—provides an empirical framework for understanding transition challenges. Emerging through rigorous analysis of lived experiences, these themes reveal interconnected patterns that questionnaire-based research or outcome statistics cannot capture, showing how challenges compound to create cascading failures that make successful transitions increasingly unlikely.

The research documents specific mechanisms of support failure, moving beyond general statements about inadequate provision to identify precise breakdown points. For instance, placement educators routinely ignore learning support plans and then blame students for "downplaying" their needs, revealing how institutional failures are reframed as individual deficits. Similarly, students only learn about Access to Work through chance conversations, exposing systematic information gatekeeping rather than innocent oversight.

1.6.3 Practical Contributions

This research offers concrete, actionable recommendations emerging directly from participant experiences rather than theoretical speculation. These span multiple ecological levels, recognising that effective change requires coordinated intervention across systems. At the microsystem level, recommendations include establishing dedicated neurodivergent transition coordinators and maintaining continuous support from the final year through six months post-graduation. At the mesosystem level, recommendations focus on integrated support platforms that enable coordination among currently disconnected services. At the exosystem level, recommendations address policy changes ensuring support continuity through transitions rather than abrupt cessation.

Equally important, the research documents what participants identify as genuinely effective support—practical guidance that is often missing from the literature. Participants consistently valued support relationships characterised by genuine understanding over professional expertise, explicit information over implicit expectations, and environmental adaptation over individual accommodation. These insights directly inform training for support professionals and service restructuring.

1.7 Ethical and Methodological Considerations

As a neurodivergent researcher investigating neurodivergent experiences, this research embodies ethical and methodological principles that extend beyond traditional academic requirements to embrace emancipatory, neurodivergent-affirming approaches aligned with neurodiversity movements. This positioning brings unique insights that enhance research validity. My lived experience of navigating neurodivergent educational systems — detailed in Section 1.2 — provides insight into subtle dynamics that outsider research might miss, enabling recognition of patterns in participant accounts that might otherwise be overlooked or misinterpreted.

However, this insider position also requires careful reflexivity to ensure that my experiences inform rather than override participant voices. Throughout my research, I maintained reflexive journals documenting how my evolving diagnostic understanding influenced data collection and analysis. For instance, receiving my ADHD diagnosis

during the analysis phase led me to revisit earlier interviews with new awareness of executive function challenges, revealing patterns I had initially missed. This reflexive process, whilst challenging, enhanced rather than compromised research rigour by making analytical decisions transparent and traceable.

Ethical considerations extended beyond formal requirements to embrace neurodivergent-affirming practices throughout this research. Interviews were scheduled at times and in formats that suited individual participants, recognising that flexibility supports authentic engagement. Some participants preferred video calls, others audio only, and one requested written responses to supplement verbal discussion. These accommodations, whilst creating additional analytical complexity, ensured that communication differences did not become barriers to participation.

The power dynamics inherent in research relationships required careful navigation, particularly given my multiple roles as student, practitioner, and researcher. Participants needed assurance that their accounts would not affect any support they might receive, that criticism of institutions would remain confidential, and that they could withdraw without consequence. Building trust required transparency about my own neurodivergent identity and experiences, creating more reciprocal research relationships than traditional interviewer-interviewee dynamics allow.

The representation of findings required decisions about how to balance individual voices with analytical synthesis. Extensive participant quotations preserve authentic voices, whilst thematic analysis reveals systematic patterns. The decision to include line numbers for all quotations maintains transparency about context whilst enabling readers to trace interpretations. The narrative account of Michelle, constructed from multiple interactions, required particular care to ensure accurate representation whilst protecting confidentiality about specific institutional contexts.

1.8 Thesis Structure

This thesis is structured to guide readers through a comprehensive examination of neurodivergent students' transition experiences, from theoretical foundations through empirical investigation to practical recommendations for transformation. Each chapter

builds upon previous insights whilst contributing distinct knowledge to the overall argument that current transition support fails systematically and requires fundamental reconstruction rather than incremental adjustment.

1.8.1 Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This chapter establishes both the scholarly context and theoretical foundation for this research. The literature review reveals a striking gap in research on neurodivergent students' employment transitions—whilst substantial literature examines university entrance and academic experiences, the critical transition to employment remains remarkably under-researched. The review synthesises insights from adjacent fields—disability studies, transition theory, and employment research—constructing a foundation for understanding transition challenges. Significantly, it reveals that problems identified in research from the 1980s persist virtually unchanged today, suggesting profound structural resistance to change.

The chapter then introduces and critically examines Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory alongside Navarro and Tudge's neo-ecological framework, demonstrating how these theoretical foundations illuminate the complex environmental systems neurodivergent students must navigate. It establishes how proximal processes—the engines of development in bioecological theory—consistently fail for neurodivergent students, and identifies the limitations of existing frameworks that the main study would subsequently need to address. This theoretical groundwork reveals transitions not as linear progressions but as complex navigation across multiple, often contradictory, environmental demands, where development is constrained not through individual limitations but environmental inadequacies.

1.8.2 Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter details the interpretivist paradigm and case study methodology employed to centre participant voices whilst maintaining analytical rigour. It documents the abductive analytical process through which iterative engagement between theoretical frameworks and empirical data progressively revealed the limitations of existing ecological models for capturing participants' transition experiences — laying the groundwork for the theoretical development presented in Chapter 4.

Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive thematic analysis, facilitated through Quirkos software, enabled systematic pattern identification through colour-coded thematic maps that provided visual evidence of analytical development.

The chapter also includes a dedicated section on the pilot study, conducted in July 2023, which was instrumental in transforming anecdotal professional knowledge into research evidence. The pilot study involved six participants — three former final-year DSA students and three former Access to Work clients — and employed a sequential mixed methods design. Its findings provided the first empirical signal of what this research would later term the transition cliff, and participant feedback directly shaped the main study interview schedule. Critically, the pilot also revealed the limitations of applying Bronfenbrenner's bioecological framework as a fixed analytical lens, prompting the shift to a fully abductive approach that characterises the main study methodology.

Methodological decisions—from providing interview questions in advance to employing visual analysis methods—reflect a commitment to neurodivergent-affirming research practices. The chapter addresses ethical considerations, including navigating insider-outsider positioning and power dynamics, and demonstrates how neurodivergent-affirming values and "nothing about us without us" principles operated throughout the research process.

1.8.3 Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

This chapter presents the empirical findings through three major themes that emerged from reflexive thematic analysis: 'struggling through invisible systems,' 'perpetual disruption,' and 'the identity-navigation paradox.' It also presents the Multi-Directional Ecological Framework (MDEF), which emerged from iterative engagement between the data and existing theoretical frameworks during analysis. The MDEF is introduced in Section 4.4, demonstrating the explicit chain from thematic analysis through Quirkos to the development of the framework. These themes, illustrated through extensive participant quotations, reveal systematic patterns of transition experiences across the ecological levels the MDEF identifies.

1.8.4 Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

This chapter presents comprehensive institutional transformation proposals derived from the findings, followed by conclusions that challenge fundamental assumptions about neurodivergent transitions. Recommendations operate across ecological levels: microsystem interventions establish dedicated transition coordinators and sensory-conscious environments; mesosystem developments create integrated support platforms and formal handover protocols; exosystem reforms address policy and accountability mechanisms; macrosystem changes shift from an accommodation to an inclusion paradigm.

The conclusions reveal that apparent individual struggles represent a systematic institutional failure rather than personal deficits. This research exposes how institutions abandon neurodivergent students at a critical transition point, creating an 'ecological invalidation' in which environmental systems actively undermine rather than support development. The study argues for recognising transition support not as optional accommodation but as a fundamental institutional responsibility, requiring complete reconstruction of support architectures rather than superficial adjustments.

Chapter 2 LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction

This chapter critically examines how existing literature addresses neurodivergent students' transition from higher education to employment. Through systematic analysis of contemporary research, I demonstrate that whilst substantial evidence exists on university experiences and employment outcomes as separate phenomena, the literature treats these as disconnected domains rather than examining the critical transition period that connects them. This analytical separation in the literature itself reveals how transition experiences have been rendered invisible within academic discourse, creating the theoretical and empirical gap my study addresses.

2.1.1 Structure and Scope of This Literature Review

This literature review examines five interconnected areas that reveal the complexity of neurodivergent students' workplace transitions, whilst identifying critical gaps:

First, I examine Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory and Navarro and Tudge's neo-ecological theory**,** establishing the theoretical foundations for understanding multi-system navigation during transitions.

Second, I trace the historical evolution of neurodiversity conceptualisation**,** revealing how macrosystem changes in understanding disability cascade through chronosystem developments, reshaping environmental influences.

Third, I investigate neurodivergent students' higher education experiences, examining how microsystem interactions, identity development, and accommodation effectiveness influence workplace readiness.

Fourth, I analyse employment outcomes and workplace research, exposing persistent barriers whilst examining mesosystem coordination between educational and employment contexts.

Fifth, I critically evaluate theoretical applications and research gaps, revealing how bioecological frameworks remain underutilised in transition research, the invisibility of

the transition period itself, and the absence of neurodivergent student voice—limitations necessitating new analytical approaches.

2.2 Theoretical Foundations: From Bioecological to Neo-Ecological Frameworks

2.2.1 Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory

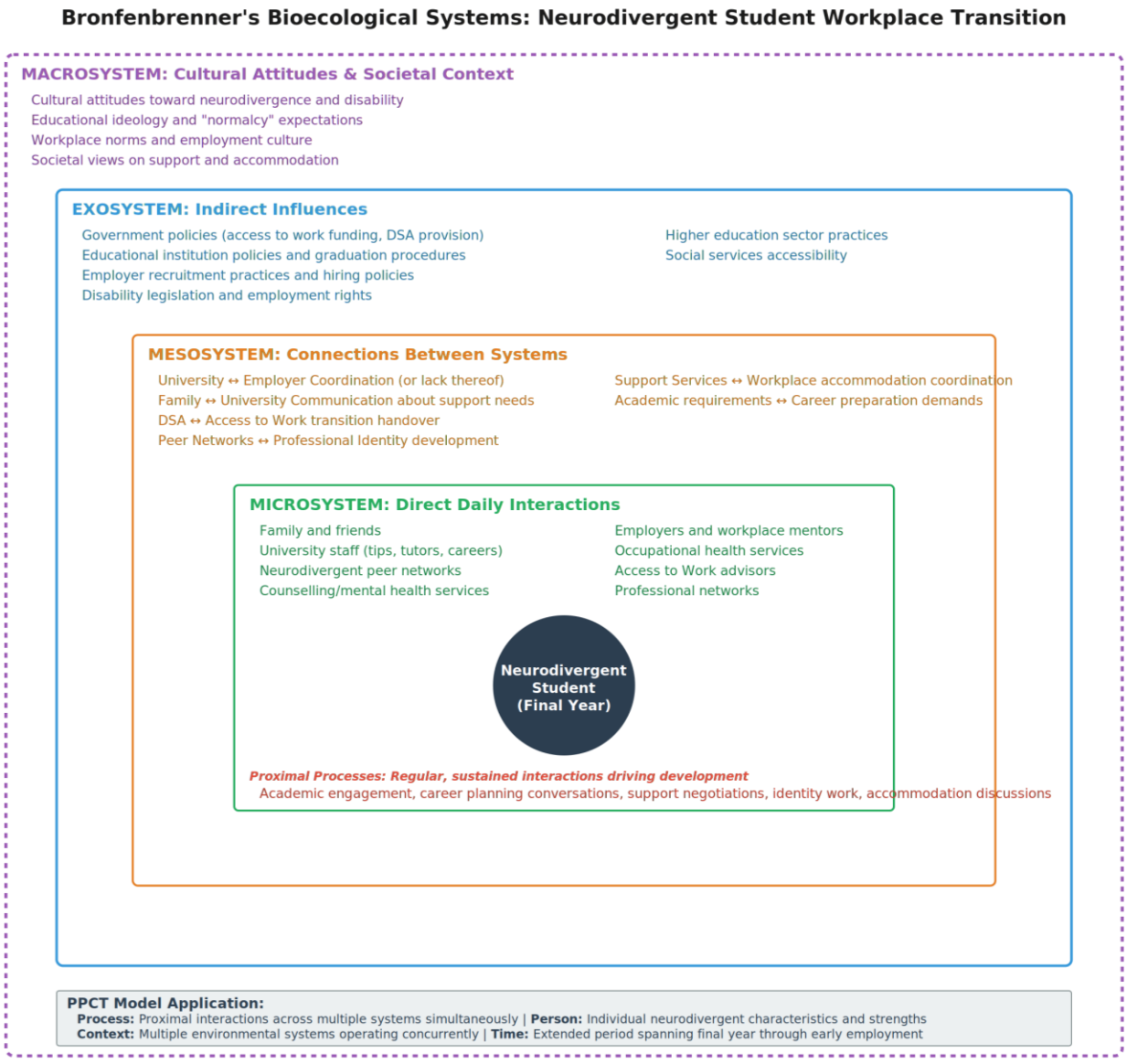


Figure 2.2.1.1 Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems: Neurodivergent Student Workplace Transition

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model conceptualises human development as occurring through dynamic interactions between individuals and nested environmental systems (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007). The microsystem encompasses immediate environments where individuals directly participate, such as family, educational settings, and peer groups. The mesosystem represents connections between these microsystems, examining how experiences in one context influence another. The exosystem includes settings that individuals do not directly participate in but which affect their development, such as institutional policies or parental workplace demands. The macrosystem comprises broader cultural values, beliefs, and ideologies that shape all other systems. The chronosystem captures temporal dimensions, including both developmental transitions and historical changes that influence environmental contexts—for example, the COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally altered educational delivery and workplace structures, affecting students' developmental experiences across all ecological levels. Central to the mature bioecological model is the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) framework, which emphasises proximal processes—regular, sustained interactions between individuals and their environments—as the primary engines of development (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007, p. 797).

Applying this framework to neurodivergent student transitions, Bronfenbrenner's model is particularly suited to understanding how neurodivergent students navigate the complex transition from higher education to employment. However, the nature of this complexity differs fundamentally from traditional developmental models.

Neurodivergent students in their final year do not experience workplace transition as a linear progression. Rather, they engage in proximal processes that operate simultaneously across multiple environmental systems. They must maintain academic performance, engage in career-preparation activities, manage family relationships and expectations, navigate employer recruitment processes, negotiate accommodation requirements, develop professional identities, maintain peer relationships, and adapt to changing support systems—all concurrently across different environmental levels.

As Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) emphasise, these proximal processes require "progressively more complex reciprocal interaction" (p. 797). Yet for neurodivergent

students, the complexity operates differently than this progressive model suggests. Rather than experiencing developmental challenges that build sequentially over time, neurodivergent students face fundamentally multi-directional complexity. Demands from all ecological levels converge simultaneously: they navigate university academic requirements (microsystem), manage disconnects between support services (mesosystem), respond to institutional policies and employer expectations (exosystem), and contend with societal attitudes about neurodiversity and employability (macrosystem)—all at the same time, rather than addressing each level sequentially.

2.2.2 Neo-Ecological Framework: Integrating Digital and Virtual Environments

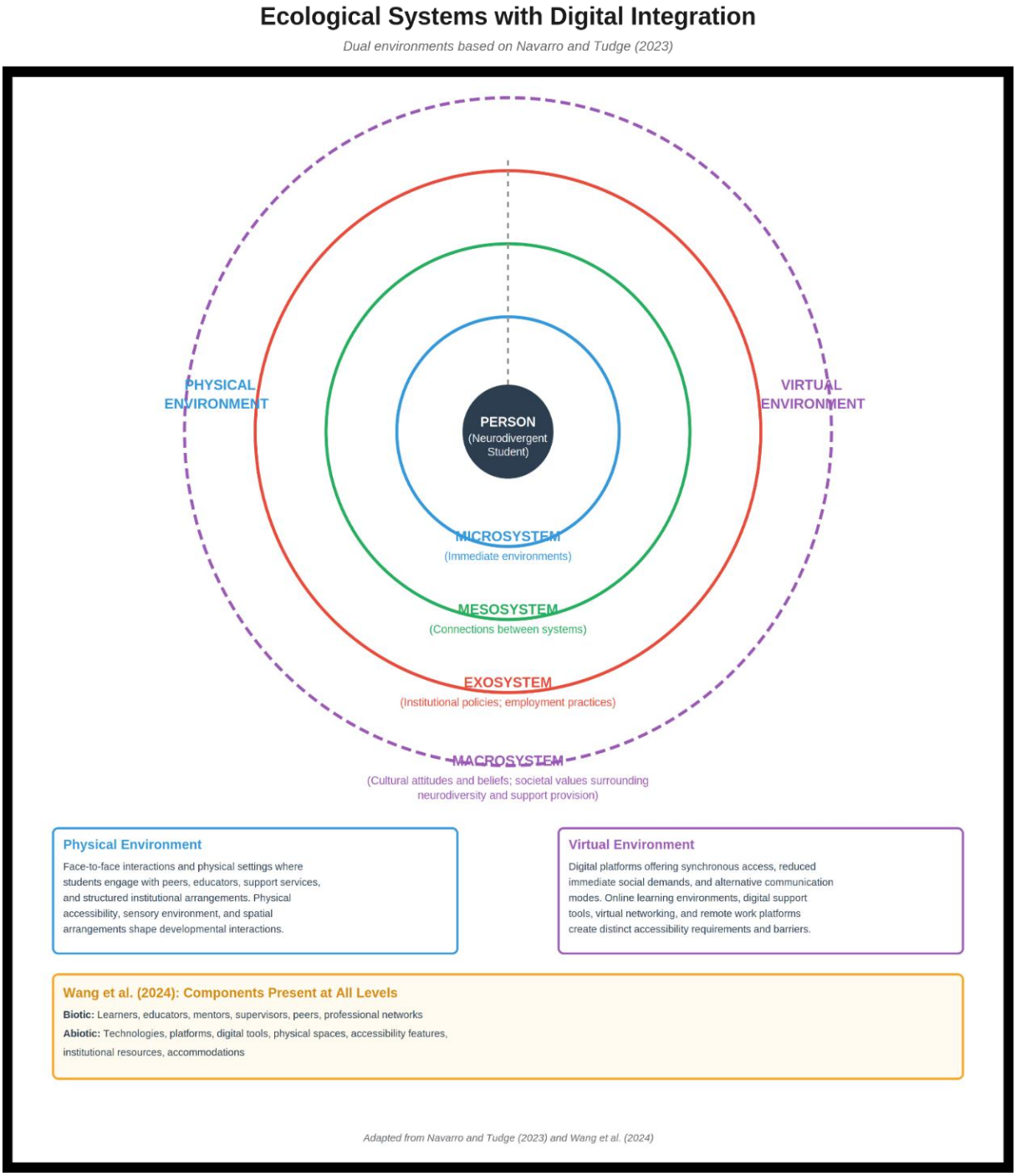


Figure 2.2.2.1 Ecological Systems with Digital Integration

Navarro and Tudge's (2023) neo-ecological framework extends Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model by recognising that contemporary development occurs within dual,

simultaneous microsystems: physical and virtual environments. Whilst Bronfenbrenner's foundational Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model accounted for nested ecological systems, it was developed in an era when development occurred primarily within face-to-face environments. The neo-ecological extension demonstrates that individuals now navigate multiple environmental types at each ecological level, each with distinct characteristics regarding availability, synchronicity, accessibility, and social demands.

For neurodivergent students, workplace transition requires navigating both physical professional environments—managing face-to-face communication, workplace culture, and embodied social expectations—and virtual professional spaces, including remote work platforms, digital communication tools, and online networking. These are concurrent demands requiring distinct skill sets and coping strategies.

Virtual environments offer specific advantages for neurodivergent students: asynchronous access to information, reduced immediate social interaction demands, and potential accommodation of sensory sensitivities. However, they simultaneously introduce new demands—navigating digital interfaces, managing virtual communication norms, and adapting to different social cues. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated mandatory digital engagement across educational and employment sectors, exposing both opportunities and novel barriers for neurodivergent students. Virtual environments are not inherently more accessible; they present different accessibility requirements.

Wang et al. (2024) further illuminate this understanding by re-conceptualising digital learning ecosystems through ecological frameworks. They identify biotic components (learners, educators, mentors, supervisors, peers, professional networks) and abiotic components (technologies, platforms, tools, resources, accessibility features) operating at every ecological level. Importantly, these components apply equally to physical microsystems, where people interact through physical spaces and structured arrangements.

Recognising that neurodivergent students navigate dual microsystems at every ecological level—with biotic and abiotic components present in both physical and virtual dimensions—reveals the complexity embedded in workplace transition. Neither

environment is inherently superior; each presents distinct navigational demands and opportunities. Effective transition support requires explicit attention to how students might navigate these simultaneous environments and where bridging strategies or accommodations might support competence across both domains.

2.2.3 Contemporary Theoretical Developments

Recent theoretical developments have enhanced the framework's applicability to contemporary higher education challenges. Renn and Smith (2023) documented innovative adaptations incorporating critical theory, queer theory, and Indigenous Knowledge Systems into Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, specifically addressing how power dynamics and systemic oppression operate across the microsystem, mesosystem, and macrosystem levels. Similarly, Vital and Yao (2023) presented an equity-driven ecological model for doctoral student research training that extends Bronfenbrenner's PPCT framework by explicitly incorporating racial, colonial, political, and economic hierarchies as additional contextual factors that influence proximal processes. These developments address traditional criticisms that Bronfenbrenner's original framework inadequately addressed systems of privilege and oppression within the macrosystem and their cascading effects through mesosystem and microsystem interactions.

The Four-Dimensional Ecology Education (4DEE) Framework, endorsed by the Ecological Society of America (Klemow et al., 2019), integrates four dimensions: core ecological concepts, ecology practices, human-environment interactions, and cross-cutting themes. This framework aligns with Navarro and Tudge's (2023) neo-ecological expansion by explicitly incorporating digital environments and globalisation impacts—elements that operate as both microsystem and exosystem influences in contemporary student experiences. Unlike Bronfenbrenner's traditional model, 4DEE recognises that digital spaces function as primary developmental contexts (microsystems) rather than merely exosystem influences, moving beyond textbook-based approaches toward interdisciplinary and place-based learning that reflects the multi-directional influences emphasised in the mature PPCT model.

Transformative approaches have emerged that extend beyond anthropocentric models. Ellyatt's (2025) Eco-Systemic Flourishing (ESF) framework positions human development within four interdependent domains: Natural Environment, Circular and Regenerative Economics, Cultural Values and Identity, and Human Capacities and Potential. This framework expands Bronfenbrenner's chronosystem concept by incorporating environmental sustainability and intergenerational impacts as temporal factors affecting development. ESF emphasises relational "interbeing" and regenerative learning principles, which align with Bronfenbrenner's later emphasis on bidirectional person-environment interactions whilst extending beyond individual development to consider collective and planetary wellbeing as interconnected processes. Incorporating Indigenous Knowledge Systems and spiritual dimensions represents a fundamental expansion of the macrosystem beyond Western cultural assumptions that dominated Bronfenbrenner's original conceptualisation.

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model demonstrates generative potential, offering researchers opportunities to adapt and extend the framework according to their specific research contexts and interests. Such contextual extensions remain grounded in bioecological principles whilst enabling exploration of phenomena and populations that warrant specific theoretical refinement. This flexibility has enabled scholars to address contemporary concerns—from digital environments through to planetary wellbeing—by building upon rather than abandoning Bronfenbrenner's foundational architecture.

Comprehensive research tools have emerged to support practical implementation, with Kitchen et al. (2019) introducing the ecological systems interview tool that operationalises Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory by facilitating systematic examination of students' relationships across microsystem environments (home, community, educational settings) and mesosystem connections between these contexts. This methodological advancement enables researchers to gather holistic information about factors influencing college experiences and outcomes across environmental systems, directly addressing Tudge et al.'s (2016) critique that various studies claiming to use Bronfenbrenner's theory fail to adequately examine proximal processes and PPCT components.

These contemporary developments collectively demonstrate how Bronfenbrenner's foundational framework and Navarro and Tudge's neo-ecological enhancements continue to evolve, incorporating critical perspectives on power, digital environments, sustainability, and methodological rigour that address the complex realities of neurodivergent students navigating contemporary higher education systems.

2.3 Historical Evolution of Neurodiversity Conceptualisation and Disability Legislation

Understanding neurodivergent students' workplace transitions requires examining how conceptual frameworks and legislative responses have shaped current educational and employment provisions. This section traces development from early medical conceptualisations through to contemporary neurodiversity-affirming approaches, demonstrating how shifting paradigms have influenced policy and institutional responses. From a bioecological perspective, each historical paradigm shift fundamentally reconfigured environmental systems surrounding neurodivergent individuals, altering available supports, creating new barriers, and redistributing pressures across ecological levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007).

2.3.1 From Medical Model to Social Model

Early understanding of neurodivergent conditions was grounded in medical frameworks positioning these differences as pathological deviations requiring treatment. Leo Kanner's 1943 paper "*Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact*" established foundations for autism research, whilst his subsequent 1949 assertion that autistic children were "reared in emotional refrigerators" (Cohmer, 2014) demonstrates how early models not only pathologised neurodivergent individuals but blamed families. The biomedical model reduced people to their conditions through language such as "the blind" or "the mentally ill" (McLoughlin et al., 1994; Morgan and Klein, 2004).

From a bioecological perspective, the medical model represents a fundamental macrosystem orientation—cultural beliefs about normal human development—that cascaded through all environmental levels. This created exosystem policies focused on individual treatment rather than environmental accommodation, establishing institutions

emphasising deficit remediation. At the microsystem level, the medical model established relationships characterised by professional authority over neurodivergent individuals' lives, with limited reciprocal influence—contradicting Bronfenbrenner's emphasis on bidirectional developmental processes (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007). Whilst medical model assumptions persist in some institutional policies (Adam and Koutsoklenis, 2023), growing recognition of neurodiversity-affirming approaches demonstrates evolving macrosystem understanding.

Michael Oliver's coining of the "social model of disability" in 1983 (Oliver, 1996) marked a crucial paradigm shift, reframing disability as socially constructed with oppression resulting from social biases, environmental factors, and cultural attitudes rather than individual pathology. This macrosystem shift created cascading effects: exosystem policies began emphasising barrier removal and reasonable adjustments; mesosystem interactions shifted from deficit-focused coordination to collaborative environmental modification; and microsystem relationships evolved from treatment-oriented to rights-based approaches (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007; Barnes, 2019). The social model's influence on policy development was profound, creating frameworks such as the Equality Act 2010 and the Disabled Students' Allowance system, which established crucial foundations for contemporary neurodiversity-affirming approaches (Oliver, 1996).

However, the social model's limitations became apparent in its application to neurodivergent experiences. Whilst successful for physical and sensory impairments, it struggled to address complexities of neurodivergent conditions involving differences in communication, social interaction, and sensory processing (den Houting, 2019; Fletcher-Watson, 2022). The model inadequately addressed the Person characteristics component of Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model, maintaining conceptual separation between the developing person and environmental systems rather than recognising dynamic, bidirectional nature of proximal processes involving genuine neurological differences in processing (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007).

2.3.2 The Emergence of Neurodiversity

The neurodiversity movement represented significant evolution beyond both medical and social models. Coined in 1998 by Australian sociologist Judy Singer,

"neurodiversity" initially referred to "the many different ways in which minds are wired and think" (Singer, 2017), with "neurodivergent" subsequently coined in 2000 by Kassiane Asasumasu as "an umbrella term to describe individuals whose mind or functioning falls outside dominant societal norms" (den Houting, 2019). Chapman (2021, cited in Dwyer, 2022) traced development from initial association with "societal valuing of minority minds" to the contemporary neurodiversity paradigm that "seeks to depathologise and politicise neurodivergence."

This paradigm shift reframed the relationship between person and context within Bronfenbrenner's model. Rather than viewing neurodivergent individuals as passive recipients of environmental accommodation, the neurodiversity movement emphasised bidirectional nature of proximal processes—recognising that neurodivergent individuals actively contribute unique strengths, perspectives, and capabilities that can enhance educational and workplace environments. This represents a fundamental shift from unidirectional adaptation to genuinely reciprocal developmental processes where both the developing person and environmental contexts are mutually transformed through interaction (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007).

The neurodiversity movement's influence on educational and employment policies has been transformative, promoting understanding that neurodivergent individuals bring valuable perspectives and capabilities to academic and professional environments (Hughes, 2021; Sonuga-Barke, 2023). This shift from deficit-focused to strengths-based approaches has increasingly influenced institutional policies, moving from accommodation models towards universal design approaches that create inherently accessible environments.

2.3.3 Legislative Framework Development

The evolution of disability conceptualisation was paralleled by significant legislative developments. From a bioecological perspective, legislative developments represent exosystem changes that indirectly but significantly influence neurodivergent students' experiences (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007; Tudge and Rosa, 2020). The UK's legislative journey demonstrates how changing conceptual frameworks influenced policy development.

The 1981 Education Act marked the beginning of inclusive education policy, establishing that most children with special educational needs would benefit from mainstream education, supported by the 1994 Code of Practice and UNESCO Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994, cited in Shaw, 2021). The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 created the first legal framework prohibiting discrimination, though its limitations became apparent in reliance on justification clauses maintaining medical model assumptions (Disability Rights UK, 2022).

The Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 significantly strengthened protections by requiring educational establishments to make reasonable adjustments to prevent disabled students from being placed at a substantial disadvantage. This marked a crucial shift from tolerance of differential treatment to an active requirement for environmental modification (EHRC, 2014). The Disability Discrimination Act 2005 introduced the disability equality duty, requiring educational institutions to publish schemes committing to promoting equality, eliminating discrimination, encouraging participation, and taking steps to meet disabled people's needs. This legislative shift represented a fundamental reconceptualisation of ecological contexts—requiring institutions to create developmentally generative environments that proactively enhance resource characteristics (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007).

2.3.4 The Equality Act 2010 and Contemporary Challenges

The Equality Act 2010 represented the culmination of decades of legislative development, consolidating previous legislation and establishing comprehensive protection against discrimination. The Act's significance for neurodivergent students lies in its expanded definition of discrimination and strengthened reasonable adjustment duties (EHRC, 2014). The Act identified four forms of discrimination: direct discrimination, indirect discrimination, discrimination arising from disability, and failure to make reasonable adjustments (Cabinet Office, 2023).

The reasonable adjustment duty became particularly significant, requiring institutions to change provisions, criteria, or practices; provide auxiliary aids or services; and address physical features creating barriers. The recent Abrahart v University of Bristol case confirmed that teaching methods constitute "provisions, criteria, or practices" subject to

reasonable adjustment duties, establishing that adjustments must address core educational processes rather than being peripheral additions (EHRC, 2024a; Ralton, 2024).

Recent policy developments reflect both progress and ongoing challenges. The 2023 amendments to the Equality Act addressed discrimination in recruitment processes, updating Section 60 to clarify permissible pre-employment enquiries about disability (Cabinet Office, 2023). However, significant challenges remain in practical implementation. The Disabled Students' Allowance system has undergone significant changes, with recent proposals for fundamental restructuring raising concerns (Dickinson, 2024). Quinn and Anwar-Westander (2023) highlighted particular difficulties for disabled PhD students navigating multiple support systems, noting "an administrative burden due to multiple bodies involved in support (DSA, Disability Services, Occupational Health, academic departments, Access to Work) that often do not communicate."

Navarro and Tudge's (2023) neo-ecological framework becomes essential for understanding these contemporary challenges, recognising that neurodivergent students now navigate both physical and virtual microsystems simultaneously. Students must coordinate interactions across multiple physical microsystems whilst simultaneously managing virtual microsystems (DSA online portals, Access to Work digital assessments, institutional learning management systems, employer recruitment platforms). Each virtual microsystem has distinct features that "invite, permit, or inhibit engagement in proximal processes" (Navarro and Tudge, 2023, p. 1710), creating coordination demands that traditional bioecological theory did not anticipate.

2.3.5 Contemporary Approaches and Models

Recognition of limitations in both medical and social models has led to more nuanced approaches. The diversity or socio-political model builds upon the social model whilst emphasising environmental factors including prejudice and discrimination, promoting self-acceptance and rejection of internalised ableism (Shpigelman et al., 2021). This model encourages disability pride and adopts identity-first language, recognising disability as central to identity rather than as something to minimise.

The diversity model's influence on contemporary policy reflects broader civil rights movements, arguing that "a perfect world is not a world without disabilities but a world in which accommodations and services are provided to people with disabilities, and more important, disability is not viewed as inferiority" (cited in Shakespeare, 2014, p. 35). The model's emphasis on "nothing about us without us" has become particularly prominent in neurodivergent communities, shaping expectations for participatory research approaches and genuine partnership in policy development.

2.3.6 Implications for Workplace Transition

The historical evolution from medical through social to neurodiversity-affirming models demonstrates significant macrosystem progress, creating cascading effects across all system levels that neurodivergent students navigate during workplace transitions (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007; Navarro and Tudge, 2023). Legislative advances including the Equality Act 2010 represent fundamental chronosystem shifts from pathologisation towards recognition of neurodivergent contributions and rights-based support (Pellicano and den Houting, 2022).

However, my analysis reveals a critical implementation gap: whilst macrosystem understanding and exosystem policies have evolved substantially, translation into coordinated mesosystem support and responsive microsystem practices remains inconsistent. The persistence of medical model assumptions in some institutional policies creates ongoing barriers during transitions between educational and employment contexts (Adam and Koutsoklenis, 2023; Shaw, 2021). This historical trajectory reveals that whilst significant progress in developing inclusive legislation and policy frameworks has occurred, the critical challenge lies in translating these principles into effective workplace transition support through coordinated mesosystem bridges between educational and employment contexts.

2.4 Neurodivergent Students in Higher Education: Microsystem Experiences and Person-Environment Interactions

Building upon this historical macrosystem context, I examine how contemporary neurodivergent students experience higher education through complex person-

environment interactions across multiple microsystems. The landscape has undergone a fundamental demographic transformation. UK domestic students reporting disabilities increased from 11% in 2014-15 to 20% in 2022-23, representing 441,600 students (House of Commons Library, 2024). Current estimates suggest 15-20% of students are neurodivergent (Doyle, 2020; Butcher and Lane, 2024). A 2023 survey of UK university applicants found 14.2% identified as autistic and/or ADHD, with 8.4% reporting ADHD and 6.6% autism (Shaw and Selman, 2023). Research indicates that 2-8% of UK HE students have ADHD, up to 2% meet autism spectrum disorder diagnostic criteria, and approximately 5% have dyslexia (McDowall and Kiseleva, 2024). This dramatic growth reflects improved awareness and diagnostic practices rather than increased prevalence, revealing the gap between expanding student populations and the pace of institutional adaptation.

From a bioecological perspective, this demographic transformation requires a fundamental reconfiguration of how microsystems, mesosystems, and exosystems operate. Whilst universities have developed substantial support infrastructure, many environmental systems continue operating according to medical model assumptions, creating contexts that limit rather than enable developmental processes (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007). Despite legislative advances and innovative support programmes, only 30% of autistic adults achieve employment compared to 80% of non-disabled individuals (Vincent and Fabri, 2022). This employment gap exposes a critical challenge: universities have absorbed growing numbers of neurodivergent students and developed comprehensive academic support, yet the coordination between university support systems and employment preparation remains underdeveloped.

2.4.1 Research Evolution and Demographic Growth

The historical evolution of neurodivergent student research spans approximately 50 years, beginning with clinical autism studies in the 1970s and culminating in today's comprehensive neurodiversity approaches. The BRAINHE Project in 2009 marked a pivotal turning point as the first significant study examining neurodiversity specifically in higher education contexts (Griffin and Pollak, 2009), revealing that students adopting a "difference" view established greater career ambition and academic self-esteem

compared to those who maintained a "medical/deficit" perspective. Whilst this evidence identified benefits of strengths-based approaches fifteen years ago, implementation across institutions has progressed unevenly.

Bioecological systems theory and person-environment interaction models emerged as dominant theoretical frameworks from the 2010s onwards, shifting analytical focus from individual deficits to environmental barriers and bidirectional interactions between student characteristics and institutional contexts (Butcher and Lane, 2024). The UK's legislative framework, particularly the Equality Act 2010 and Disabled Students' Allowance system, created a relatively advanced support infrastructure compared to international contexts, DSA providing up to £27,783 annually in England (excluding travel costs), with higher amounts in Wales (up to £34,000) and varying structures in Scotland and Northern Ireland (Student Finance England, 2025)—representing one of the most comprehensive government-funded disability support programmes globally.

Demographic data reveal unprecedented growth patterns. UK universities experienced a consistent one percentage-point annual increase for nine consecutive years, with 106,000 additional students (47% increase) reporting disabilities from 2014-15 to 2019-20 (House of Commons Library, 2024). Within the UK disabled student population, Specific Learning Differences represent the largest cohort at 55-56%, whilst mental health conditions more than doubled between 2014/15 and 2018/19, alongside a 90% increase in students reporting autism spectrum disorder (Disabled Students' Sector Leadership Group, 2020; Disabled Students UK, 2024). Multiple impairments are significant, with 47% of disabled students identifying with two or more conditions (Disabled Students UK, 2024), highlighting the complexity that requires individualised, coordinated mesosystem responses.

Intersectionality data reveals a complexity that institutions address with varying effectiveness. UK disabled students show significantly higher rates of LGBTQIA+ identification, with approximately 50% identifying as LGBTQIA+ compared to the general student population, whilst non-binary students report disability at substantially higher rates than binary gender students (Disabled Students UK, 2024). These intersectional patterns demand support approaches recognising how multiple identity

factors interact within person-environment dynamics. Within the UK context, whilst the National Health Service (NHS) provision theoretically ensures equitable diagnostic access, significant regional variation in assessment waiting times and service quality creates socioeconomic barriers through differential access to private assessment pathways (Disabled Students UK, 2024).

2.5 University Support and the Transition Gap

Neurodivergent students face well-documented academic challenges, including executive functioning difficulties, sensory processing issues, and social communication barriers that universities increasingly address through reasonable adjustments, assistive technology, and disability support services (Tan et al., 2025; Pagespetit et al., 2025). UK universities have developed support structures for neurodivergent students, who now constitute 20% of home student enrolments (Disabled Students UK, 2024).

However, these support systems exhibit critical limitations relevant to workplace transition. They focus predominantly on academic accommodation rather than employment preparation (McDowall and Kiseleva, 2024; AGCAS, 2025), revealing what Bronfenbrenner would term a mesosystem coordination gap between educational and employment contexts (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007). Whilst emerging initiatives such as the Disabled Students Commitment and Communities of Practice are beginning to address careers support coordination (AGCAS, 2025), research examining neurodivergent students' lived experiences of navigating careers services and transition advice remains limited (McDowall and Kiseleva, 2024), representing a critical gap this study addresses.

2.5.1 The Invisible Transition Period

The transition from higher education to employment reveals substantial challenges, with autistic graduates only 36% likely to find full-time employment after 15 months compared to 80% of neurotypical peers (AGCAS, 2025). This employment gap exposes critical mesosystem coordination challenges. Universities create microsystem support structures that enable academic success, yet these systems typically end at graduation, whilst employment microsystems often lack comparable developmental supports.

McDowall and Kiseleva's (2024) rapid review found limited evidence-based research on transition support, with most studies being US-centric and having small sample sizes.

Current university support varies dramatically across institutions. Oxford University provides dedicated disability careers advisers and specialised employer events, whilst the University of Nottingham organises support by functional challenges rather than diagnostic categories (Oxford University Careers Service, 2024). Innovative approaches are emerging, including the UMO Services University to Workplace Transition programme, providing preparatory mentoring sessions during students' final month, followed by post-graduation transition support (UMO Services, 2025). Corporate neurodiversity programmes, such as Microsoft's Neurodiversity Hiring Programme, demonstrate alternative assessment processes, yet these initiatives reach only a fraction of neurodivergent graduates who require employment support (Austin and Pisano, 2017).

However, whilst these initiatives display promising practice, they remain institution-specific or corporate-led rather than representing systematic coordination across the education-employment boundary. They represent localised microsystem innovations rather than the mesosystem transformation (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007) required to create consistently effective transition pathways. The longitudinal nature of these challenges becomes evident when contextualised against Lord Holmes' (2022) report, which acknowledged that initial government pilot studies using transition passports were only beginning in two UK universities. Despite decades of research consistently highlighting that autistic students require individualised, flexible transition support yet receive support "not at the same level or quality as that given to non-disabled students" (Vincent, 2019; Pesonen et al., 2021b), systematic coordination has been slow to develop.

2.5.2 Pedagogical Innovation Without Transition Application

Recent research has proven the effectiveness of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approaches, with Alodat et al.'s (2023) meta-analysis reporting substantial effect sizes for UDL implementation. Technology-enhanced learning shows promise through AI-

enabled adaptive systems that produce performance improvements of up to 30% (Wang et al., 2024), whilst COVID-19's shift to online learning revealed distinct cognitive load patterns among neurodivergent students (Le Cunff et al., 2024).

However, these pedagogical innovations focus predominantly on improving academic performance within educational microsystems rather than on developing transferable competencies for employment contexts or on creating mesosystem bridges between university and workplace environments. Supported employment programmes establish strong retention outcomes and cost-effectiveness, with international programmes achieving high placement and retention rates (Dwyer et al., 2023), yet universities rarely integrate employment preparation systematically into their neurodivergent support structures (McDowall and Kiseleva, 2024; AGCAS, 2025). Educational innovation without systematic employment application represents another dimension of the transition gap my study addresses.

2.5.3 Centring Student Voices

Qualitative research reveals critical gaps between formal support systems and lived experiences, yet these insights translate inconsistently into transition support. Syharat et al.'s (2023) study of 18 neurodivergent graduate STEM students identified internalisation of neurotypical norms leading to negative self-judgement, self-silencing behaviours, and neurodivergent burnout from overwork and masking. These patterns—developed within educational microsystems (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007)—often carry over into workplace contexts, where neurodivergent graduates continue to mask, experience burnout, and self-silence (Quigley and Gallagher, 2025).

The BRAINHE Project's finding that students adopting a "difference" rather than a "medical/deficit" identity perspective exhibit greater career ambition and academic self-esteem (Griffin and Pollak, 2009) reveals that identity development during university directly influences employment confidence and success. Yet, universities vary considerably in how they integrate strengths-based identity development into career preparation. Students consistently identify peer connection, flexible individualised approaches, environmental modifications, strengths-based recognition, and

knowledgeable staff as most critical supports, challenging accommodation models focused on individual deficits rather than systemic environmental barriers.

Participatory research methodologies increasingly centre neurodivergent students as co-researchers, with Le Cunff et al.'s (2024) community advisory board model demonstrating improved accessibility and psychological safety. However, whilst these methodologies produce valuable insights into what neurodivergent students need, their application to transition support remains inconsistent across institutions, with research consistently documenting that students receive support "not at the same level or quality as that given to non-disabled students" (Nolan and Gleeson, 2017; Vincent, 2019; Pesonen et al., 2021b; Longville-Carr, 2024) and systematic coordination developing slowly despite decades of evidence (Lord Holmes, 2022; McDowall and Kiseleva, 2024). The gap between understanding what students need and implementing comprehensive transition support represents another dimension of the coordination challenge my study examines.

2.5.4 International Perspectives

International contexts reveal varied approaches to neurodivergent support—Nordic collective responsibility models emphasising mainstream inclusion (Pesonen et al., 2021b), UK individual rights frameworks through the Equality Act 2010 and DSA system, US recommendations for system-wide diversity and inclusion reform (Dwyer et al., 2023), and Australian strengths-based innovations (Gibbs et al., 2025; Hamilton, Anderton and Kat, 2025)—yet none systematically address workplace transition with the same comprehensiveness as academic support.

International contexts show comparable demographic growth patterns. Irish higher education experienced a 268% increase in disabled students over twelve years (AHEAD, 2021), whilst Australian undergraduate domestic students with disabilities increased 123% between 2008-2017 (MDPI, 2022), reflecting worldwide trends in expanding neurodivergent student populations.

This international pattern reveals that, regardless of philosophical approach—collective responsibility versus individual rights, deficit versus difference models—all contexts exhibit similar challenges: universities develop substantial support for academic success, whilst coordination systems supporting workplace transition remain comparatively underdeveloped. The consistency of this pattern across diverse policy contexts suggests this represents a structural challenge requiring systematic mesosystem coordination (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007) rather than solely a resource or cultural issue.

2.6 Reasonable Adjustments: Academic Focus Without Employment Translation

Accommodation frameworks have evolved from compliance-based approaches towards Universal Design for Learning principles and "inclusion by design" (Alodat et al., 2023; CAST, 2024), with traditional reasonable adjustments (extra time, alternative formats, environmental modifications) increasingly supplemented by technology integration. However, these frameworks exhibit critical limitations for workplace transition. First, reasonable adjustments remain predominantly focused on academic microsystems—universities develop sophisticated accommodation systems for assessments without consistently teaching neurodivergent students how to navigate entirely different accommodation frameworks in employment contexts (McDowall and Kiseleva, 2024). Second, accommodation knowledge often fails to transfer: from a bioecological perspective, it may have taken neurodivergent students years of proximal processes—repeated interactions within university microsystems—to develop the confidence and self-advocacy skills to request reasonable adjustments, often progressing from accepting generic accommodations like "25% extra time and coloured paper" to articulating the individualised support they actually need. These competencies develop through a sustained engagement with specific environmental contexts (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007). However, competencies developed within one microsystem do not automatically transfer to different microsystems with distinct resource characteristics, demand structures, and social norms (Tudge et al., 2009).

Moreover, as Navarro and Tudge (2023) emphasise, contemporary students navigate dual physical and virtual environments simultaneously—developing accommodation request skills through both face-to-face disability services meetings and digital DSA portals, then facing entirely different physical workplace contexts and virtual Access to Work systems in employment. Transferring accommodation requests to employment contexts requires students to initiate entirely new proximal processes across both environmental dimensions (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007) — building relationships with unfamiliar gatekeepers, navigating different systems like Access to Work rather than DSA, and demonstrating legitimacy in contexts where job security feels precarious, all without the established trust and relationships that facilitated their university accommodations. Third, mesosystem coordination between educational and employment accommodation systems remains underdeveloped.

These transfer challenges are compounded by implementation failures within university systems themselves. Variable staff training, inconsistent policy interpretation, and administrative burden mean that even students who successfully navigate university accommodation systems may have experienced frustrating or inadequate support, further complicating their confidence in requesting workplace adjustments. International comparative analysis reveals that whilst the UK maintains relatively comprehensive legal frameworks for both educational and workplace reasonable adjustments, the coordination between these separate systems represents a substantial challenge.

2.6.1 Implications for Transition Support

The transformation of neurodivergent student support over five decades—from 11% to 20% of UK domestic students—demonstrates substantial progress in creating academically accessible microsystems through comprehensive approaches combining UDL, technology-enhanced learning, peer support, and strengths-based identity development (Alodat et al., 2023; House of Commons Library, 2024). However, this literature review reveals a consistent pattern: universities have invested substantial resources in developing proximal processes, accommodation frameworks, and support structures that enable neurodivergent students' academic success, yet the coordination of this support across workplace transitions remains underdeveloped.

Students transition from educational to employment contexts with entirely different microsystem structures, exosystem policies, and macrosystem workplace cultures (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007), facing what participants described as an abrupt discontinuity in support systems. The employment statistics expose this challenge's magnitude: only 36% of autistic graduates find full-time employment after 15 months compared to 80% of neurotypical peers (AGCAS, 2025), with overall unemployment costs reaching £14.5 billion annually (Vincent and Fabri, 2022; Disabled Students UK, 2024), whilst neurodivergent employees demonstrate 45-145% productivity improvements in suitable roles (Austin and Pisano, 2017).

Critical priorities include addressing mesosystem coordination challenges between educational and employment support systems, creating transition-specific interventions rather than assuming that academic accommodations transfer seamlessly to workplace contexts, and developing institutional approaches that recognise transition as a distinct developmental period requiring coordinated support across ecological levels. International evidence demonstrates that this challenge transcends cultural and policy contexts—whether Nordic collective responsibility models or Anglo-American individual rights frameworks, all exhibit similar patterns in which academic support development has progressed more rapidly than transition coordination (Pesonen et al., 2021b; American Enterprise Institute, 2024).

2.7 Employment Outcomes and Workplace Navigation: Mesosystem Challenges and Opportunities

Despite increasing recognition of neurodivergent strengths—with research demonstrating that neurodivergent employees can achieve 45-145% productivity improvements in suitable roles and bring valuable cognitive diversity, innovation, and specialised skills to workplaces (Austin and Pisano, 2017)—my analysis reveals a critical gap between this potential and actual employment outcomes for neurodivergent graduates. From a bioecological perspective, this gap reflects failures of mesosystem coordination between educational and employment contexts rather than individual deficits (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007). Universities successfully develop proximal processes and support structures that enable neurodivergent students' academic

success. Yet, these systems rarely connect with employment microsystems where neurodivergent strengths could flourish with appropriate environmental supports.

2.7.1 Understanding Barriers and Identifying Pathways

Neurodivergent graduates face profound employment barriers despite educational achievement. The UK government's Buckland Review reports that only approximately 30% of working-age autistic adults are in employment (Buckland, 2024; Department for Work and Pensions, 2024), with international data showing comparable patterns. The employment pipeline reveals significant attrition at each stage: whilst 17% of autistic students attend four-year college, only 34% graduate within six years, and employment outcomes remain significantly below those of neurotypical peers (McKenna, 2024).

Vincent and Fabri's (2022) bioecological analysis demonstrates these outcomes reflect systematic mesosystem coordination failures between educational preparation and workplace integration rather than individual deficits. However, research also reveals effective pathways. Kraemer et al.'s (2024) longitudinal study, which followed 129 autistic young adults, revealed that high school work-based learning predicted adult employment success, demonstrating that early mesosystem connections between education and employment create lasting positive impacts. This illuminates Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) chronosystem component—early environmental experiences establish trajectories influencing later transition outcomes—suggesting that coordinated educational-employment bridges during university could similarly improve graduate employment success. The majority of neurodivergent students who access university have the academic capabilities to complete a degree and pursue employment, with barriers arising from inadequate support systems rather than individual limitations. Critically, low disclosure rates suggest many neurodivergent students navigate transitions without accessing available supports, emphasising the need for proactive, coordinated mesosystem interventions (Cage and Howes, 2020; Brewer, 2022).

2.7.2 Recruitment Barriers and Inclusive Innovations

Research consistently identifies recruitment processes as significant environmental barriers reflecting macrosystem assumptions about neurotypical ways of being. Vargas-Salas et al. (2025, p. 87) reveal that recruitment processes, including job adverts, interviews, and assessment centres, are often designed with only neurotypical candidates in mind and can present barriers for graduates with autism. Transition difficulties encompass academic-to-workplace gaps, where graduates struggle with unstructured work environments despite academic success, inadequate career services, and 72% reporting that recruitment processes are challenging. Support service gaps also exist, with limited coordination between university disability services and career guidance (Hotte-Meunier et al., 2024).

However, innovative approaches demonstrate how environmental modifications can create more inclusive systems. Austin and Pisano's (2017) documentation of successful neurodiversity programmes at major corporations identifies seven elements creating more responsive recruitment environments: partnering with specialised organisations, using non-interview assessments, training staff, establishing support systems, tailoring career management, scaling programmes, and mainstreaming initiatives. These modifications illustrate developmentally generative exosystem policies—environmental structures that facilitate rather than constrain effective proximal processes during employment entry (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007), as demonstrated in Vincent and Fabri's (2022) analysis of neurodivergent employment support.

2.7.3 Workplace Accommodation and Universal Design

Research reveals a growing sophistication in understanding workplace accommodations as environmental modifications rather than special provisions. Tomczak's (2022) identification of four accommodation types—job-performance communication, attitudes and interpersonal communication, daily workplace routines, and physical and sensory environments—illustrates how effective support requires coordination across multiple environmental dimensions. Accommodation needs include flexible working arrangements (identified as most effective by Branicki et al., 2024), sensory accommodations, communication supports, and technology assistance.

However, 58% of neurodivergent graduates feel compelled to conceal their condition due to stigma concerns (Disabled Students UK, 2024), creating disclosure dilemmas complicating workplace integration.

Significantly, Santuzzi et al. (2024) advocate for universal support systems, representing a shift from individual disclosure-triggered accommodations to inherently accessible work environments, with flexible hours, quiet spaces, job-sharing, noise-cancelling headphones, and note-taking software as standard workplace provisions. Bjelland et al. (2023) explored technology-based workplace accommodations for autistic employees, revealing that digital tools and remote working options significantly enhanced productivity and well-being. Szulc, McGregor, and Cakir's (2023) examination of neurodiversity and remote work during COVID-19 found that the shift to remote working unexpectedly benefited many neurodivergent employees by removing social and sensory barriers whilst enabling greater autonomy over work environments. These findings demonstrate that what begins as accommodation for neurodivergent employees often creates improved working conditions benefiting all staff.

2.7.4 Neurodivergent Contributions: Recognising Workplace Strengths

Despite persistent barriers, research increasingly documents valuable contributions neurodivergent individuals make to workplace environments, challenging deficit-based assumptions. Khan et al. (2023) present a multistage theoretical framework that determines how organisations can create neurodiverse workplaces and capitalise on the benefits of equitable supervision and inclusive development practices. Hartman and Hartman's (2024) research documents lower levels of "moral disengagement" amongst autistic employees, providing empirical evidence for neurodivergent contributions to ethical organisational culture. Early productivity studies revealed substantial contributions, with Australian software testers showing 30% higher productivity than neurotypical peers (Austin and Pisano, 2017) and JP Morgan Chase reporting their first neurodivergent cohort was 46% more productive after six months (Coplan et al., 2021).

Rollnik-Sadowska and Grabińska's (2024) review identifies sustainable human resource management practices creating mutual benefits for organisations and neurodivergent employees, demonstrating that effective neurodiversity management contributes to organisational sustainability whilst enhancing employee wellbeing. Kersten et al. (2025) present a strengths-based human resource management approach to neurodiversity, demonstrating how organisations can move beyond deficit-focused accommodation models to recognise and leverage neurodivergent strengths for competitive advantage. These studies reveal that workplaces successfully accommodating neurodivergent ways of being often discover previously unrecognised benefits, including enhanced innovation, creativity, and ethical decision-making. From Bronfenbrenner's perspective, when microsystem environments develop genuine responsiveness to neurodivergent characteristics, bidirectional developmental processes emerge where both the developing person and their environment are mutually enhanced (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007).

2.8 Ecological Applications and Research Frameworks

My examination of existing theoretical applications reveals significant underutilisation of bioecological and neo-ecological frameworks in understanding neurodivergent workplace transitions. This gap represents a substantial limitation in current research, affecting both the understanding and development of interventions.

2.8.1 Bioecological Applications to Neurodivergent Experiences

Vincent and Fabri (2022) provide one of the most comprehensive applications of bioecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007) to neurodivergent employment experiences. Their demonstration that employment outcomes result from interactions across all ecological systems—individual characteristics, family and university support networks (microsystem), coordination between support systems (mesosystem), educational and employment policies (exosystem), and societal beliefs (macrosystem)—illustrates the framework's analytical power. Critically, their employment ecosystem framework validates that interactions between family, university, and workplace across multiple ecological levels are essential to the successful transition into employment for autistic graduates, emphasising that

collaborative relationships at every level and across actors are crucial to transition success.

Hamilton and Petty's (2023) compassionate pedagogy framework represents a significant ecological application (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007) to neurodiversity support in higher education. Their conceptual analysis shows how effective neurodiversity support must operate across multiple system levels simultaneously: at the microsystem level, transforming individual educator-student interactions; at the mesosystem level, requiring coordination among teaching staff, support services, and assessment systems; at the exosystem level, challenging institutional policies creating barriers; and at the macrosystem level, confronting deficit-based cultural narratives. Rather than adding special supports as external attachments, compassionate pedagogy restructures the entire educational environment to become inherently more flexible and responsive.

Kitchen et al. (2021) present an ecological validation model of student success, highlighting how educators can validate students' assets across multiple coordinated support contexts over time, creating synergistic effects that promote belonging amongst at-promise student populations. This longitudinal approach confirmed that proximal processes serve as the primary mechanisms of development (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007), with validation occurring simultaneously across the microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem levels. The framework's utility for understanding complex environmental systems is evident in McCrone and Kingsbury's (2024) investigation of student transitions between formal and informal learning spaces. Their research introduced the concept of "ecotones" as zones of transition that create unique learning opportunities, demonstrating how spatial, pedagogical, and agentic transitions interact within bioecological systems (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007). These ecotones represent dynamic spaces where different environments meet and create unique developmental opportunities—critical mesosystem interactions.

However, Tong and An's (2024) comprehensive review reveals that most studies inadequately represent the mature bioecological model, particularly the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) framework (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007). This

theoretical misapplication limits research quality and intervention effectiveness, suggesting that more sophisticated applications could significantly enhance understanding of neurodivergent workplace transitions.

2.8.2 Digital Environments and Contemporary Theoretical Developments

Contemporary workplace transitions increasingly occur within digital environments that traditional ecological models struggle to address. Navarro and Tudge's (2023) neo-ecological framework extends Bronfenbrenner's theory into digital dimensions, in which virtual microsystems connect with physical environmental systems to create complex, multi-directional navigation requirements. Navarro and Tudge argue that digital environments do not simply replicate physical microsystems but create entirely new developmental contexts with unique opportunities and barriers for neurodivergent individuals. Research examining digital transition spaces remains limited, yet emerging evidence suggests virtual environments can both facilitate and complicate neurodivergent students' workplace transitions.

Contemporary educational research has witnessed significant theoretical evolution. The Four-Dimensional Ecology Education (4DEE) Framework, endorsed by the Ecological Society of America (Klemow et al., 2019), explicitly incorporates digital environments, the impacts of globalisation, and contemporary social factors. Vélez-Agosto et al. (2017) proposed moving culture from the macro into the micro level of ecological systems, arguing that culture operates as a proximal process rather than a distant influence. This reconceptualisation has particular relevance for neurodivergent students from diverse cultural backgrounds navigating workplace transitions, where cultural expectations about professional behaviour intersect with neurodivergent ways of being at the most immediate level.

2.8.3 Multiple and Multidimensional Transitions Theory

Davies and Bagnall's (2025) application of Multiple and Multidimensional Transitions (MMT) theory to university transitions provides valuable insight into how neurodivergent

students experience "multiple changes or 'transitions' across the environmental, mental, social, and academic domains." This framework recognises transitions as "dynamic and longitudinal processes, as opposed to single moments in time," highlighting " the nested nature of transitions" in which support systems influence and are influenced by transition processes.

The MMT framework's emphasis on how individual transitions trigger transitions for significant others aligns with bioecological theory's recognition of bidirectional person-environment influences (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007)**.** Neurodivergent students' workplace transitions affect family members, friends, support providers, and educational systems whilst being influenced by these same relationships (Tate and Glazzard, 2024)—illustrating the interconnected nature of ecological systems. Jindal-Snape's (2023) conceptualisation of multiple and multi-dimensional educational and life transitions provides XII pillars that structure understanding of transition complexity, recognising that transitions are not isolated events but interconnected processes affecting multiple life domains simultaneously.

2.8.4 Critical Gaps in Current Research

My analysis reveals three fundamental gaps in existing research that significantly limit understanding of neurodivergent students' workplace transitions.

2.8.4.1 The Invisibility of Transition in Current Literature

Through my examination of recent literature, I have identified a striking pattern: research often examines either university experiences or employment outcomes as separate, static structures rather than understanding transition as a dynamic process of navigating multiple environmental systems simultaneously. McDowall and Kiseleva's (2024) rapid review explicitly identified this gap, noting that whilst most studies focused on distinct conditions, very few addressed "life outcomes such as successful transition into work" (p. 15). Multiple systematic reviews identify the lack of research on the specific transition period from higher education to employment for neurodivergent students as a critical gap. Goodall et al. (2022) noted: "While there is a wealth of evidence on the barriers that people with disabilities face in both higher education and

the workplace, there is currently a lack of literature that summarises knowledge on the transition between these two settings."

From my bioecological perspective, this represents a fundamental misunderstanding of how development occurs through ongoing interactions between the person and the environment, rather than through discrete stages or outcomes. Bronfenbrenner's framework emphasises that transitions involve continuous adaptation and navigation rather than a movement from one fixed state to another (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007).

2.8.4.2 Absence of Student Voice and Lived Experience

The most significant gap is the absence of neurodivergent students' own voices and experiences during workplace transition. McDowall and Kiseleva (2024) noted that "none of the reviews or primary studies made explicit reference to co-creation and user involvement," despite the concept of "nothing about us without us" becoming prominent in neurodivergent communities. This absence means that the current understanding of transition needs is largely inferential, based on employment outcomes or support provider perspectives, rather than a direct investigation of students' lived experiences, information needs, and support preferences. From a bioecological perspective, research cannot adequately understand transition experiences without centring student voice and agency.

2.8.4.3 Limited Theoretical Applications and Methodological Constraints

Despite the clear relevance of bioecological and transition theories to workplace transition, the systematic application of these frameworks remains limited. Tudge et al. (2016) found that most studies claiming to use Bronfenbrenner's theory failed to describe or test its core concepts appropriately. Theoretical framework gaps are particularly evident, with Bölte et al. (2025) identifying "a terminal perspective of labour force participation (employed vs. unemployed) as opposed to considering the experiences of neurodivergent individuals as a sequence of work-related events that cumulatively reflect one's career across the lifespan."

The lack of theoretical grounding means existing research often treats workplace transition as a linear process rather than recognising a complex, multi-directional system navigation that bioecological theory illuminates (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). Methodological approaches predominantly employ outcome measures rather than process-focused investigations capturing the dynamic, ongoing nature of person-environment interactions during transitions. Geographic and cultural research limitations further constrain understanding, with a notable lack of empirical research on neurodiversity in many global regions (Aguilera-Rodríguez et al., 2024).

Workplace intervention research remains particularly underdeveloped, with Doyle and McDowall (2022) describing "the dearth of research about the occupational implications of neurodiversity as less of a gap, and more of a 'blind spot'." The emergence of comprehensive transition programmes highlights the urgent need for rigorous evaluation research. Whilst programmes like UMO Services report positive student feedback (UMO Services, 2025), the absence of systematic evaluation using bioecological frameworks represents a significant missed opportunity. These programmes inherently operate across multiple system levels, yet no published research examines these multi-level interactions or their effectiveness in supporting actual workplace transitions.

2.9 Implications, Conclusions and Research Questions

My literature review reveals that whilst substantial research examines university experiences and employment outcomes separately, the critical transition period connecting these phases remains largely invisible in current literature. This gap creates an urgent need to understand how neurodivergent students experience and navigate complex environmental systems during their transition from higher education to employment. The theoretical integration of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007) and Navarro and Tudge's neo-ecological frameworks (Navarro and Tudge, 2023) offers sophisticated analytical tools for examining these contemporary workplace transitions whilst maintaining focus on student agency and experience.

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological framework reveals that effective transition support requires coordination across microsystems (career services, family networks), mesosystems (university-employer connections), exosystems (employer policies), and macrosystems (cultural attitudes towards neurodiversity**)** (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007). The multi-directional nature of these systems influences means that interventions at any single system level may be insufficient. This complexity raises critical questions about what information, support, and resources students identify as necessary for successful transitions, particularly when navigating intricate environmental pressures characterising the education-to-employment journey.

From Bronfenbrenner's perspective, successful workplace transitions require environmental systems that work together to provide consistent, understanding, and responsive support through coordinated proximal processes across all ecological levels (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007)**.** However, when these systems fail to coordinate effectively, students may experience developmentally disruptive rather than developmentally generative transitions—where competing pressures and misaligned supports create barriers rather than pathways. Understanding how different environmental systems coordinate (or fail to coordinate) during transition periods becomes essential for identifying where mesosystem connections weaken and where interventions might restore coordination and support.

The significant growth in neurodivergent student populations, combined with persistent employment disadvantages, creates an urgent imperative for research informing more effective transition support. Recent estimates suggest neurodivergent students make up approximately 15-20% of the higher education population **(**Butcher and Lane, 2024)**,** including between 2-8% with ADHD, up to 2% with autism spectrum disorder, and approximately 5% with dyslexia (McDowall and Kiseleva, 2024)**,** yet employment outcomes remain poor, with 85-90% experiencing unemployment or underemployment despite university completion (Kalmanovich-Cohen and Stanton, 2025; Branicki et al., 2024). The question emerges: what systemic changes could better support neurodivergent students' workplace transitions whilst preserving successful elements of

existing support systems and building new pathways responding to contemporary workplace realities?

2.9.1 Research Questions

This literature review establishes a foundation for addressing the central research question:

"How do neurodivergent students experience and navigate the complex environmental systems during their transition from higher education to employment?"

Sub-questions examine:

- What information, support, and resources do students identify as necessary for successful transitions?
- How do different environmental systems coordinate (or fail to coordinate) during transition periods?
- What systemic changes could better support neurodivergent students' workplace transitions?

2.9.2 Conclusion

This comprehensive literature review has demonstrated that the transition from higher education to employment for neurodivergent students represents a critical yet understudied period that warrants urgent research attention (McDowall and Kiseleva, 2023; Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education, 2023). Through the application of bioecological and neo-ecological theoretical frameworks (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007; Navarro and Tudge, 2023), I have illuminated complex, multi-directional navigation challenges that neurodivergent students face during this crucial transition period.

The historical evolution from medical through social to neurodiversity-affirming models reveals fundamental shifts in how society conceptualises and responds to neurodivergent experiences (Milton, 2012). Yet despite legislative advances and growing recognition of neurodiversity as a valuable human variation, translation of these principles into effective transition support remains profoundly inadequate (Clouder et al.,

2020; Nash-Luckenbach and Friedman, 2024). Contemporary higher education has witnessed an explosive growth in neurodivergent student populations, yet institutional support systems have not evolved at a comparable rate (Disabled Students UK, 2024; Tan et al., 2025).

The employment outcomes data present a stark paradox: whilst educational achievement has improved, workplace integration remains catastrophically poor (Vincent and Fabri, 2019; AGCAS, 2025). This disconnect reflects complex mesosystem failures in coordination between educational and employment contexts (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007). Strong individual environmental systems (successful university experiences) fail to translate into positive outcomes when mesosystem connections (transition support mechanisms) remain weak or absent.

Critical gaps in current research—particularly the invisibility of the transition period itself, the absence of student voice, and the limited theoretical applications—constrain both understanding and the development of interventions (Anderson et al., 2017; McDowall and Kiseleva, 2023). The overwhelming focus on static outcomes rather than dynamic transition processes fundamentally misrepresents the lived experiences of neurodivergent students navigating between and through multiple environmental systems simultaneously (Jindal-Snape, 2023; Davies and Bagnall, 2025).

The urgency of addressing these gaps extends beyond individual student success. With neurodivergent employees demonstrating productivity improvements of 45-145% in suitable roles (Austin and Pisano, 2017), and substantial annual unemployment costs, effective transition support represents both a moral imperative and an economic opportunity. Moving forward, research must centre neurodivergent students' voices and agency whilst applying sophisticated ecological frameworks to understand complex system interactions (Milton et al., 2019; Botha and Cage, 2022). Successful transitions require not just flexible individual environmental systems but coordinated, responsive mesosystem connections between all ecological levels (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007).

The implications of this review extend beyond individual transitions to fundamental questions about how educational and employment systems can evolve to recognise and harness neurodivergent contributions (Hamilton and Petty, 2023; Dwyer et al., 2023). From Bronfenbrenner's bioecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006), effective systems depend not on uniformity but on the dynamic interplay of diverse characteristics and flexible environmental responses, recognising that inclusive societies benefit from neurodivergent perspectives and capabilities when environmental systems develop genuine responsiveness and coordination.

This literature review establishes that effective workplace transition support cannot be achieved through isolated interventions or minor adjustments to existing systems. Instead, it requires a fundamental reconfiguration of how environmental systems interact and coordinate, ensuring that multi-directional navigation challenges neurodivergent students face are met with equally sophisticated, multi-level support responses (Tong and An, 2024; Kitchen et al., 2021). Future research must adopt methodological approaches capturing the dynamic, multi-directional nature of transition experiences whilst centring student voice and agency (Chown et al., 2017; Nicolaidis et al., 2019). Only through such a comprehensive investigation can we develop the understanding necessary to transform workplace transitions from periods of vulnerability and exclusion into opportunities for neurodivergent students to contribute their unique perspectives and capabilities to professional environments that genuinely value diversity of thought and experience.

2.9.3 Bridging to Methodology

The critical gaps identified in this literature review directly inform my methodological approach. McDowall and Kiseleva's (2023, p. 15) finding that "none of the reviews or primary studies made explicit reference to co-creation and user involvement" reveals a fundamental epistemological failure that my research addresses by positioning neurodivergent students as experts in their own experiences. Furthermore, Tudge et al.'s (2016) critique of most studies claiming to use Bronfenbrenner's framework, which fail to operationalise its core concepts appropriately, necessitates methodological sophistication. My case study methodology, employing reflexive thematic analysis

through abductive reasoning, enables iterative movement between empirical data and theoretical frameworks, ensuring that complex ecological dynamics identified in this literature review are authentically captured. The following methodology chapter presents an approach specifically designed to address these critical gaps, centring neurodivergent student voices whilst applying bioecological and neo-ecological frameworks (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007; Navarro and Tudge, 2023) with the theoretical rigour they demand.

Chapter 3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the methodological framework underpinning my research, which investigates the experiences of final-year undergraduate and postgraduate students as they navigate their transitional educational phase. The methodology is informed by Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model and its contemporary adaptation, neo-ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007; Navarro and Tudge, 2023), which provides a comprehensive framework for examining students' experiences across physical and virtual contexts. The chapter is structured to address the research paradigm, methodology, methods, and analytical approach that guide this investigation. It also presents the pilot study conducted in July 2023, which was instrumental in transforming anecdotal professional knowledge into research evidence and directly informed the design of the main study.

3.1.1 Chapter Structure

The chapter begins by establishing my research paradigm, examining the interpretivist orientation and its associated ontological and epistemological positions that frame this study. It then outlines the case study methodology employed, including ethical considerations that informed research design decisions. The methods section details the data collection processes, focusing on semi-structured interviews and narrative accounts as primary data sources. A dedicated section presents the pilot study conducted in July 2023, documenting how it informed the design of the main study and shaped the analytical approach. Finally, the chapter presents the analytical approach, explaining the abductive reasoning process and application of reflexive thematic analysis used to interpret the data.

3.1.2 Research Paradigm

My research is situated within an interpretivist paradigm, recognising that my educational experiences are socially constructed and individually interpreted. My ontological position acknowledges multiple realities shaped by the participants' diverse perspectives, while the epistemological stance embraces the subjective and contextual

nature of knowledge construction. This interpretivist orientation allows for a deep exploration of how final-year students make meaning of their educational transitions within complex ecological systems.

3.1.3 Methodology

A case study approach was selected as the most appropriate methodology for my research, enabling an in-depth examination of the participants' experiences within bounded contexts. As Johansson (2007) articulates, case studies are particularly valuable when investigating complex phenomena within their real-life contexts. The case boundaries encompass final-year students navigating transitional educational phases, examined through Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007).

This case study is informed by Chong and Graham's (2013) "Russian doll approach," which facilitates examination across micro, meso, and macro contextual levels (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2018). Ethical considerations are integral to the methodological design, guiding decisions about participant engagement, data handling, and representation of findings.

3.1.4 Methods

The primary data collection methods employed in my research were semi-structured interviews and narrative accounts. These qualitative methods aligned with the interpretivist paradigm and case study methodology, allowing my participants to articulate their experiences in their own terms while providing sufficient structure to address my research questions. The semi-structured interviews explored the participants' perceptions of their educational transitions, while narrative accounts offered insights into how students construct coherent understandings of their experiences over time.

3.1.5 Data Analysis

The analytical approach employs abductive reasoning, iteratively moving between data and theory to develop explanations that best account for the observed phenomena (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). Abductive reasoning differs from purely inductive or

deductive approaches by allowing theory and empirical observations to interact dynamically, creating space for new theoretical insights to emerge whilst remaining grounded in established frameworks. This approach complemented the case study methodology by enabling both inductive engagement with the richness of individual narratives and deductive application of theoretical frameworks, particularly Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007) and Navarro and Tudge's (2023) neo-ecological adaptation. Through this iterative analytical process, I engaged deeply with these established theories whilst remaining attentive to how participants' lived experiences might extend, challenge, or reconfigure existing conceptual frameworks. This openness to theoretical development proved essential, as participants' descriptions of their transition experiences revealed patterns and dynamics that existing frameworks had not fully captured.

Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), as developed by Braun and Clarke (2021), provided a systematic framework for data interpretation that explicitly acknowledged the researcher's active role in meaning-making. This six-phase process—familiarisation, coding, generating initial themes, developing and reviewing themes, refining and naming themes, and writing the analysis—offered a structured yet flexible approach that acknowledged the "messiness" inherent in qualitative research whilst maintaining analytical rigour (Braun and Clarke, 2019). RTA's emphasis on reflexivity aligns with my commitment to transparency about how my own positioning as a neurodivergent researcher shapes the analytical process.

Through this methodological framework, my research aims to generate contextually rich and theoretically informed insights into neurodivergent students' transition experiences from higher education to employment, contributing to a deeper understanding of how these students navigate complex ecological systems during this critical transition period. The subsequent sections of this chapter elaborate on each component of this framework, providing detailed explanations of the philosophical foundations, methodological decisions, and analytical strategies that guide this investigation.

3.2 Philosophical Positioning: Interpretivist Paradigm

My research is situated within an interpretivist paradigm, recognising that reality is socially constructed and that meaningful knowledge emerges through understanding subjective human experiences (Crotty, 2020). This paradigmatic choice aligns with my positionality as a neurodivergent researcher working with neurodivergent participants, acknowledging the value of lived experience as authoritative knowledge (Denzin et al., 2024).

3.2.1 Ontological and Epistemological Foundations

Ontologically, my research adopts a subjective realist position that recognises participants' experiences as real whilst acknowledging that individual perspectives and social contexts shape our understanding of those realities (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). Rather than seeking objective truths, I acknowledge that participants' accounts reflect their lived realities as they experience them, shaped by their unique circumstances, institutional contexts, and power dynamics within educational systems (Brookfield, 2017). This stance recognises that whilst neurodivergent students' experiences are real and material, they are accessed and understood through subjective interpretation and social interaction rather than as external, measurable facts.

Epistemologically, within the interpretivist paradigm, I position knowledge as co-constructed through dialogue between researcher and participants rather than discovered through objective observation (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This approach privileges the contextual, situated nature of knowledge that emerges from lived experience over clinical or theoretical abstractions. As Haraway (1988) argues, all knowledge is 'situated', emerging from particular social positions and perspectives. My epistemological stance, therefore, values the unique insights neurodivergent participants bring through their direct experiences of navigating educational transitions, recognising these as valid knowledge that challenges dominant epistemological hierarchies that privilege professional or academic expertise. Crucially, I acknowledge my positionality and biases as a neurodivergent researcher, recognising that the knowledge generated through this research emerges from the interaction between my

interpretive lens and participants' accounts—a co-construction process requiring ongoing reflexivity about how my perspectives shape understanding.

3.2.2 Value for Neurodivergent Research

The interpretivist paradigm is particularly appropriate for neurodivergent research as it acknowledges diverse ways of being and knowing, respecting the epistemological diversity inherent in neurodivergent cognition (Milton, 2014). Neurodivergent individuals process information, perceive the world, and construct meaning through cognitive patterns that differ from neurotypical norms, yet these differences represent valuable alternative epistemologies rather than deficits requiring correction (Chapman, 2020). An interpretivist approach honours these diverse ways of knowing by rejecting the notion of a single, objective reality accessible through standardised methods.

There is limited literature addressing appropriate research frameworks for neurodivergent researchers investigating neurodivergent experiences (Botha and Cage, 2022), making the interpretivist approach's fundamental purpose—providing space for expression of lived experiences—especially valuable (Denzin et al., 2024). This gap in the methodological literature reflects broader patterns of neurodivergent exclusion from research processes, in which neurodivergent people have historically been researched rather than positioned as researchers (Pellicano and den Houting, 2022). My positioning as a neurodivergent researcher examining neurodivergent experiences addresses this gap, embodying the principle of "nothing about us without us" (Charlton, 1998) at the methodological level. This insider positioning provides epistemological advantages: I share experiential knowledge of navigating educational systems as a neurodivergent person, understand the nuances of disclosure decisions and masking strategies, and recognise the exhaustion of constant environmental negotiation that participants described.

This paradigmatic choice enabled me to construct appropriate interview questions capturing participants' lived experiences whilst incorporating my own subjective lived experience as valid knowledge rather than bias requiring elimination. The interpretivist lens allowed for a deeper understanding of participants' lives and experiences whilst considering the rich complexities of their individual situations and the social constructs

within which they are positioned (Bryman, 2016). Rather than attempting to achieve detached objectivity—itself a problematic goal when researching marginalised experiences (Harding, 1993)—I embraced my positioned knowledge as methodologically valuable. This approach proved particularly pertinent as participants either began their university careers during the COVID-19 pandemic or directly afterwards (Newman, 2022), requiring close examination of contextual factors rather than generalising their impact.

Through this interpretive lens, I examined the socially constructed nature of educational institutions and the constraints participants navigated, including bureaucratic processes such as Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) and Access to Work (AtW) applications. The interpretivist framework facilitated investigation of how students make sense of their educational journeys within specific social, cultural, and institutional contexts—an approach particularly valuable when researching marginalised groups whose experiences may not be adequately captured through positivist methodologies (Oliver and Carr, 2009). By acknowledging multiple realities and the social construction of educational experiences, this paradigm created space for participants to articulate experiences that might otherwise remain invisible within deficit-oriented research frameworks.

3.2.3 Researcher Subjectivity and Positionality

Within the interpretivist paradigm, researcher subjectivity is acknowledged as integral to the research process rather than an impediment to validity (Finlay, 2002a, 2002b). As I continue to work with students and clients, I maintain awareness of how my observations might influence the interpretation of participants' accounts. This paradigm requires owning one's subjectivity and biases whilst using them constructively to advocate for marginalised voices (Biber, 2011).

By adopting an interpretivist stance, I recognise that knowledge is co-constructed between researcher and participants, with my own neurodivergent perspective contributing valuable insights to this process. This approach aligns with Gadamer's concept of the "fusion of horizons" (cited in Barak, 2022), where understanding emerges through dialogue between different perspectives, including that of the researcher. The

interpretivist paradigm thus provides an appropriate framework for research that seeks not only to document experiences but also to advocate for social change based on those experiences (Steinberg and Down, 2020).

My evolving diagnostic journey during the research—receiving autism and ADHD diagnoses during my doctoral studies—provided insider understanding whilst requiring reflexive practices to maintain analytical rigour. This dual positioning as both a neurodivergent researcher and a neurodivergent student recipient of support created what Yip (2024) describes as an insider-outsider positioning, offering unique insights into participants' experiences whilst requiring ongoing critical reflection on how my perspective shaped my interpretation. However, insider status also carries risks: my own experiences could potentially constrain interpretation by projecting personal perspectives onto participants' narratives rather than attending to their unique lived realities (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009; Berger, 2015). To mitigate this, I employed several reflexive strategies, including maintaining a detailed research journal documenting my own transition experiences separately from participant data (Braun and Clarke, 2019). Additionally, I engaged my personal assistant as a critical friend and regularly consulted with my supervisors to challenge interpretive assumptions, sharing emerging codes and asking them to question my analytical decisions, particularly where my proximity to the research context might create blind spots (Finlay, 2002a). I then returned to the raw data repeatedly to ensure that analytical claims remained grounded in participants' words rather than in my own experiences. Member checking further enabled participants to confirm or challenge my interpretations, ensuring that their voices, rather than my projections, shaped the findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

3.3 The Pilot Study: From Professional Knowledge to Research Evidence

Prior to commencing the main study, I conducted a pilot study in July 2023. The primary purpose was to design a study that would transform what had, until that point, remained anecdotal professional knowledge into systematic research evidence. Through my work as a DSA tutor/mentor and Access to Work coach, I had accumulated years of professional experience observing the transition challenges faced by neurodivergent

students and clients. Whilst this experience gave me insight into the patterns I was observing, it did not constitute evidence. The pilot study was designed to change that — to give participants their voice and to establish an empirical foundation from which the main study could be developed.

3.3.1 Participants

Six participants took part in the pilot study: three former final-year DSA students and three former Access to Work clients, all of whom had been in receipt of DSA within the preceding ten years. The ten-year criterion was chosen deliberately to ensure all participants had received their allowances under the post-reform DSA framework (Willetts, 2014), thereby establishing a commonality of experience across the group. As all participants had previously been either students or clients of mine, careful attention was paid to the ethical implications of this existing relationship. To ensure there was no power imbalance between us, no data was collected from any participant whilst I was still actively supporting them. I explicitly acknowledged this pre-existing relationship within my ethical considerations, recognising that, as Karnieli-Miller, Strier and Pessach (2009) observe, such relationships carry both unique methodological value and ethical responsibility. Participants were asked to choose their own pseudonyms, which were to be carried forward into any future research arising from this work.

3.3.2 Design

I decided to use a sequential mixed methods approach for the pilot study, following Creswell and Plano Clark's (2018) connected design. Participants first completed a structured questionnaire, the findings of which were analysed before informing the construction of the semi-structured interview questions. This sequencing allowed the quantitative questionnaire data to identify patterns and surface initial themes, which the subsequent interviews could then explore in depth. The questionnaire included a combination of open text, split choice, and directional questions, enabling both breadth of response and the identification of distinctions between the experiences of final-year students and those of Access to Work clients already in employment.

3.3.3 What the Pilot Study Informed

Participant feedback on both the questionnaire and the semi-structured interview questions was central to refining the main study design. Participants identified areas where questions were insufficiently specific to neurodivergent experience, where language needed to be more accessible, and where the sequencing of questions could be improved to allow for a more natural conversational flow. For example, pilot questionnaire questions asked participants to identify people who had supported them but did not ask in what capacity or in what specific way. This meant that responses could refer to anyone in the participant's environment without capturing the nature or quality of that support. In refining the questions for the main study interview schedule, I made them more specific — asking not only who had supported the participant but in what role and in what way, with particular attention to career-focused support that extended beyond graduation.

This feedback also informed a key methodological decision: I chose not to carry the questionnaire format forward into the main study. The pilot demonstrated that the semi-structured interview yielded considerably richer data, allowing participants to speak at length and in their own way without the constraints that a questionnaire format imposed. This decision directly informed the construction of the main study interview schedule (see Appendix A) and the wording of the participant information sheet subsequently circulated to all main study participants.

The pilot data also provided the first empirical signal of what I would later term the transition cliff — the abrupt cessation of support at the point of graduation, precisely when students were navigating their most complex transition demands. Participants described a consistent and sudden withdrawal of institutional support at graduation, leaving them without guidance at a critical juncture. This pattern, observed clearly across the pilot data, became a central focus of the main study design and is evidenced fully in the findings presented in Chapter 4.

3.3.4 Analytical Evolution

The pilot study also fundamentally shaped my analytical approach. Initially, I engaged with the pilot data using Bronfenbrenner’s (2006) bioecological framework and PPCT

model (Process, Person, Context, Time) as sensitising theoretical frameworks. Whilst these provided a valuable conceptual starting point, my engagement with the pilot data revealed that both were insufficiently responsive to the complexity of what participants were describing. The ecological systems participants navigated did not interact bidirectionally or sequentially — they exerted simultaneous, multi-directional pressures that neither framework could adequately represent. I decided to adopt a fully abductive approach for the main study, moving iteratively between empirical data and theoretical frameworks rather than applying a fixed theoretical lens in advance.

The pilot analysis itself was conducted manually. Printed transcripts were spread out on the floor and sorted physically, with emerging patterns then mapped onto flipchart paper. This spatial, hands-on process allowed me to see relationships across the data visually before formalising them into the four initial themes documented in Appendix D. For the main study, I moved to Quirkos qualitative analysis software to manage the increased scale and complexity of the dataset, a methodological decision that itself reflected learning from the pilot about the demands of the analytical process.

Following the main study, I returned to the pilot data and reanalysed it using the analytical framework developed during that process — an approach described in full in Section 4.4. This retrospective analysis confirmed that the multi-directional pressures the framework was developed to capture were already present in the pilot participants' accounts, including the transition cliff, the absence of Access to Work awareness, and the simultaneous ecological pressures operating across institutional, policy, and personal systems. This retrospective analytical coherence provided further validation that the framework was capable of illuminating experiences that earlier theoretical models had left partially visible.

3.4 Case Study Methodology

3.4.1 Methodological Approach and Rationale

Case study methodology was selected as the most appropriate for examining neurodivergent students' transition experiences within their real-world educational contexts. As Yin (2018, p. 15) defines it, case study research constitutes "an empirical

method that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the 'case') in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident." This methodology enables intensive examination of how students navigate complex ecological systems during critical transitional phases.

My methodological positioning draws primarily on Stake's (2010) interpretivist conceptualisation of case study research, which emphasises understanding the particularity and complexity of individual cases within their contexts, whilst incorporating Yin's (2018) emphasis on systematic rigour and clearly defined case boundaries. This combined approach privileges participants' subjective meaning-making whilst maintaining methodological transparency necessary for doctoral research. The alignment between Stake's approach and interpretivist methodologies (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018) makes this particularly appropriate for examining neurodivergent students' constructed experiences of educational transitions.

Case study methodology has evolved significantly from early descriptive approaches to contemporary, sophisticated applications that incorporate systematic data collection and analysis procedures (Swanborn, 2010). The flexibility of case study research allows integration of various data collection techniques whilst maintaining focus on understanding phenomena within their natural contexts—making it particularly valuable for educational research examining complex social phenomena inseparable from their contexts (Johansson, 2007).

3.4.2 The Case: Boundaries and Context

The bounded case for this study comprises eight neurodivergent students in their final year of study across six UK universities—five undergraduates and three postgraduates—navigating the critical transition from higher education to employment or further study. This transitional phase is particularly significant because it marks the point at which university support systems typically cease, yet workplace support structures have not yet been established. Research was conducted between March and September 2024. Although the Disabled Student Commitment had been launched in 2023 with explicit principles addressing transitions to employment (Disabled Students' Commission, 2023), systematic support frameworks remained underdeveloped across

the sector. This bounded context allows examination of complex ecological interactions between students and multiple environmental systems (support services, careers advice, employers, family networks) within their natural contexts. As Merriam (1988, p. 16) emphasises, case study methodology enables "an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit." This specific focus aligns with my insider positionality whilst maintaining clear case boundaries, ensuring research integrity.

3.4.3 Nested Ecological Analysis

The research applies Chong and Graham's (2013) "Russian doll approach" vertically throughout the study via participants' lived experiences, enabling systematic examination across micro, meso, and macro contextual levels (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). Whereas Chong and Graham use this approach horizontally across independent case studies, my research uses it vertically to accommodate the theoretical framework across multiple levels, demonstrating micro-level experiences of participants to macro-level social and institutional contexts in which these experiences are embedded (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007; Navarro and Tudge, 2023).

This nested approach acknowledges that I am not a detached observer but an active participant in the construction of meaning within the research process. As a neurodivergent person who has traversed higher education as both a student and an academic, I bring a deeply personal understanding to this research. My experience with accessing support services, negotiating accommodations, and confronting systemic barriers mirrored that of many participants. This shared neurodivergent experience creates a foundation for genuine empathy rather than solely theoretical understanding, whilst requiring mindfulness that my personal journey must not lead to assumptions overriding the uniqueness of each participant's lived experience (Ellingson, 2017).

3.4.4 Explanatory Orientation and Methodological Rigour

The primary orientation of my research aligns with the explanatory case study methodology, examining how Bronfenbrenner's bioecological framework (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007) and Navarro and Tudge's neo-ecological framework (Navarro and Tudge, 2023) illuminate the transition experiences of neurodivergent

students. This approach allows the development of a theoretical understanding grounded in empirical evidence, extending existing ecological theories by analysing participants' lived experiences within specific educational contexts.

While the organic and interpretive qualities of the case study methodology are strengths, this does not constitute a "soft form of research" (Yin, 2018, p. 33). Methodological rigour was established through several systematic procedures: clearly defined case boundaries (final-year neurodivergent students at six UK universities during a specific transitional period); structured ethical approval process ensuring participant safeguarding; semi-structured interview schedules developed systematically whilst maintaining flexibility; and pre-planned analytical approach using Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive thematic analysis framework. This careful planning established methodological rigour whilst preserving the organic responsiveness characterising interpretivist case study research.

Regarding transferability, this research aims for analytical generalisation rather than statistical generalisation (Yin, 2018). By connecting findings to existing theory and providing detailed contextual information, readers can assess their transferability to other contexts (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The nested ecological analysis reveals how individual experiences reflect broader systemic patterns, enabling theoretical insights applicable beyond the specific case whilst respecting the particularity of participants' experiences.

3.5 Who, What, When of My Case Study Research

I applied Yin's (2018) seminal work on the "Who, What, and When" of case study research to my study, as it considers the key elements of whether case study methodology is appropriate. This approach is based on the research of Hedrick, Bickman and Rog (1993) and the formation of research questions that remove the "How and Why" questions from the familiar sequence (Swanborn, 2010). Yin (2018) emphasises that the case study research methodology is most appropriate when focusing on contemporary events, such as my participants' transition from university.

Once the above is answered, leaving the Who, What and When gives clarity for contextualisation. This framework provides a structured approach to defining the parameters of my case study while maintaining methodological rigour.

3.5.1 Who: Participants and Stakeholders

For this study, the 'Who' can be identified as the relevant people from whom the data was collected. These can be divided into two categories: primary participants and secondary stakeholders.

3.5.2 Participant Recruitment

3.5.2.1 Full Multi-Stakeholder Recruitment

The original research design employed a comprehensive multi-stakeholder approach to examine the transition ecosystem from multiple perspectives. Ethical approval was obtained for six stakeholder groups: neurodivergent students, career advisors, non-medical help providers, employers, coaches, and clients who have successfully navigated transitions. Recruitment was successful across all groups, with 32 participants recruited and interviewed.

However, thesis constraints required strategic decisions about data presentation. Analysing and presenting findings from all 32 interviews would generate a thesis substantially exceeding these parameters. The decision was made to focus this thesis exclusively on participants' experiences, reflecting the fundamental principle that neurodivergent students' own voices must provide the foundational understanding of transition experiences before examining how surrounding systems function. This methodological positioning centres lived experience as the primary source of knowledge about the transition period. The remaining stakeholder interview data remains available for future publications that will examine the full 360-degree view of the transition ecosystem.

3.5.2.2 Student Recruitment Method

Student recruitment employed a snowballing sampling technique to identify final-year neurodivergent students. Initial contact was made through associates working in different roles across higher education and through professional bodies who contacted their students to participate in the study. This approach was deliberately chosen to

ensure participants were not previously known to me as the researcher, helping to mitigate potential bias and power imbalances whilst expanding recruitment beyond my immediate professional network (Naderifar, Goli and Ghaljaie, 2017). Participants attended six different UK universities, providing diverse institutional perspectives. The inclusion criteria specified that participants must be: (1) self-identified as neurodivergent or holding formal diagnoses, (2) enrolled in their final year of undergraduate or postgraduate study, and (3) willing to discuss their transition experiences through semi-structured interviews.

When recruiting participants for this study, ethical considerations necessitated the use of pseudonyms to protect their identities. This approach aligns with standard practice in educational research, where confidentiality is paramount, particularly when working with potentially vulnerable populations such as neurodivergent students (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). The use of pseudonyms not only safeguards participants' privacy but also allows them to share their experiences more openly without fear of identification.

3.5.3 Primary and Secondary Stakeholders

The primary participants in this study were eight neurodivergent students in their final year of university—five undergraduates and three postgraduates—who were either transitioning into the workplace or continuing into postgraduate education. Participants attended six different UK universities, providing diverse institutional perspectives on transition support and experiences.

Secondary stakeholders included those who interacted with either the participants or me during this research process. These individuals represent essential elements within the ecological systems that influence students' experiences during transition, aligning with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007; Navarro and Tudge, 2023).

Table 3.5.1 Research Participants and Secondary Stakeholders

Primary Stakeholders	**University**	**Secondary Stakeholders**
Philip - Postgraduate Student	University A	Academic Staff - Module Tutors and Lecturers
Rosa - Postgraduate Student	University B	Academic Supervisors - Dissertation and Project Supervisors
Demi - Postgraduate Student	University C	University Disability Support Services Staff
Maisie - Undergraduate Student	University D	University Career Advisors
Emily - Undergraduate Student	University F	Placement Supervisors and Workplace Mentors
Michelle - Undergraduate Student	University E	University Administration Personnel
Willow - Undergraduate Student	University D	External Education and Employment Transition Specialists
AstroBlack - Undergraduate Student	University D	

The eight primary participants represented a diverse range of academic disciplines and neurodivergent profiles, providing rich perspectives on the transition experience. Their distribution across six UK universities offered insights that reflected varied institutional contexts, geographic considerations, and different approaches to supporting neurodivergent students during workplace transitions.

Secondary stakeholders provided complementary perspectives that were crucial for understanding the micro-systemic and meso-systemic influences on participants' transition experiences. Their inclusion aligns with the neo-ecological theoretical framework (Navarro and Tudge, 2023), which emphasises the importance of examining

the interrelationships between developing individuals and the various contexts in which they function.

Finally, my own positionality and voice need to be recognised for their contributions, with a continual awareness of insider-outsider positioning (Yip, 2024). As a researcher with professional experience in education, I maintained awareness of how my perspective shapes this research process through reflexive journaling, supervisory discussions, and employing my personal assistant as an 'alien observer' to review transcripts and challenge interpretations (detailed reflexivity strategies in sections 3.2.1, 3.2.3 above, and methodological safeguards in section 3.6.1.1 below) whilst striving to understand the lived experiences of participants who may have different experiences of neurodivergence and educational transitions.

3.5.4 What: Phenomenon and Boundaries

Focusing on what includes the phenomenon and boundaries (Yin, 2018). The 'case' for my study is the support that final-year neurodivergent students receive when transitioning to the workplace or continuing in higher education. This clearly defined case allows for focused investigation while acknowledging the complexity of student transitions.

The theoretical frameworks applied were Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007) and Navarro and Tudge's Neo-ecological model (2023) to understand these transitions. Using Chong and Graham's (2013) 'Russian Doll' approach to this case study methodology enabled the contextualisation of my theoretical framework. This approach allowed for an examination of how different ecological systems interact and influence students' transitional experiences.

To enable this, the data collection methods were semi-structured interviews and a narrative account (Priya, 2021). These methods were well-suited to capturing the nuanced experiences of neurodivergent students and aligned with the interpretivist orientation of my research methodology.

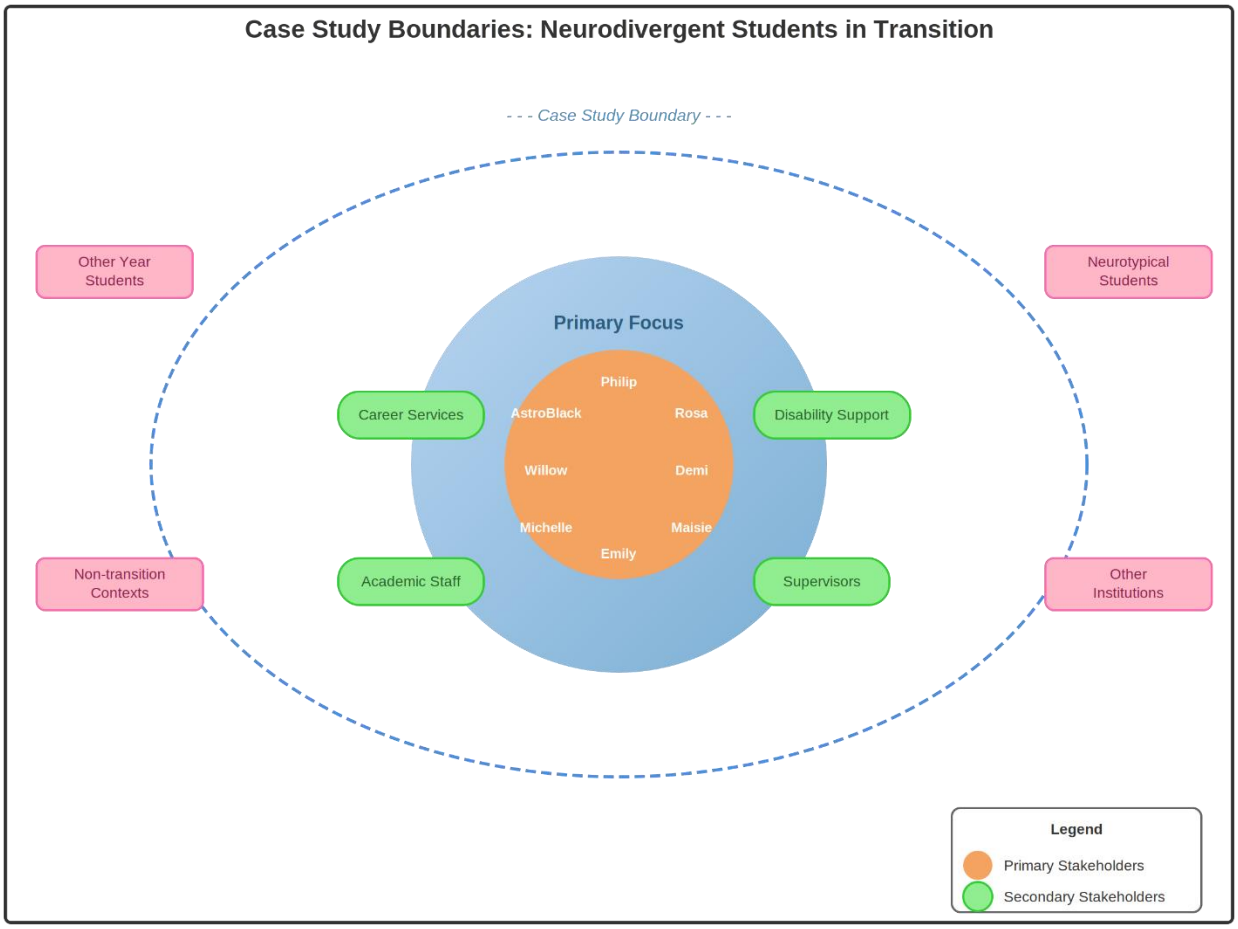


Figure 3.5.4.1 Neurodivergent Students in Transition

3.5.5 When: Temporal Dimensions

The timescale for this research was determined by the availability of final-year students and a significant policy window. Data collection needed to be completed before the General Election in July 2024 and the planned implementation of new transition support documentation in September 2024. In November 2023, the Department for Work and Pensions announced that the Adjustment Planner, following successful pilots at three universities, would be 'rolled out to all students in higher education in time for the next academic year' (Department for Work and Pensions, 2023). This represented a potential step towards addressing the systematic transition support gaps identified in the Disabled Student Commitment (Disabled Students' Commission, 2023). However, following the July 2024 General Election and change in government, this national rollout

did not occur, maintaining the policy uncertainty that characterised participants' transition experiences.

This temporal boundary is significant because it situates this research within a specific policy context in which transition support frameworks remained underdeveloped despite sector-led initiatives. The timing captures students' experiences during a crucial transitional phase in their educational journey, aligning with Bronfenbrenner's chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007), which acknowledges the importance of timing and transitions in human development.

Table 3.4.4 Research Timeline

Phase	**Timeline**	**Significance**
Pilot Study	July 2023	Sequential mixed methods pilot study transforming professional knowledge into research evidence; informed main study interview design and analytical approach
Ethical Approval	February 2024	Formal approval to commence data collection
Participant Recruitment	March 2024	Snowballing technique across six UK universities
Student Interviews	April - July 2024	Data collection with eight neurodivergent students in their final year
General Election	July 2024	Change in government: the DWP Adjustment Planner national rollout did not proceed
MDEF Development	July 2024	The Multi-Directional Ecological Framework (MDEF) emerged during a writing retreat through iterative engagement with participant data and theoretical literature; presented in full in Section 4.4

Phase	Timeline	Significance
Employer/Stakeholder Interviews	Early September 2024	Secondary stakeholder perspectives on workplace transition
Adjustment Planner non-implementation	September 2024	Planned national rollout to all HE students did not occur (DWP, 2023)
Transcription	August - September 2024	Verbatim transcription of interview data
Data Analysis	October 2024 onwards	Reflexive thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2021) framework

This timeline demonstrates how this research was strategically positioned to capture participants' experiences within a specific policy window—after they had navigated university support systems but during a period when promised systematic transition support frameworks failed to materialise. A new analytical framework emerged organically in July 2024 during an analytical engagement with participant data and theoretical literature, representing a key conceptual development that shaped subsequent analyses (discussed in full in Section 4.4). The chronosystem perspective (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007) highlights how this particular historical moment shaped participants' experiences, with both the gap between policy announcements and implementation, and the change in government adding complexity to their transition planning.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Research ethics form an essential component of any academic study, particularly when investigating educational transitions with human participants. As Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018, p. 111) assert, ethical considerations must "permeate all aspects of the research process," from initial conceptualisation through to dissemination of findings.

3.6.1 Ethical Approval and Informed Consent

Prior to commencing research, formal ethical approval was obtained through the university's Ethics Committee. The approval process involved submitting a detailed research proposal outlining the study's aims, case study methodology, participant recruitment strategy, data collection methods, and data management procedures. All research materials, including participant information sheets, consent forms, and interview schedules, were scrutinised as part of this process. The study proceeded only after receiving formal approval confirming adherence to institutional ethical standards and relevant regulatory frameworks for educational research.

An important ethical consideration was ensuring neurodivergent participants were appropriately accommodated throughout the research process. Following best practice recommendations of Milton (2014) and Nicolaidis et al. (2019), I provided all interview questions to neurodivergent participants in advance of scheduled sessions. This practice was crucial for several reasons: it allowed participants to process questions at their own pace, reducing potential anxiety; it gave them time to reflect on their experiences, potentially leading to more thoughtful responses; and, as Crane et al. (2021) suggest, this approach helps address the inherent power imbalance in research interviews by giving participants greater control.

All participants were explicitly informed that they could terminate the interview at any time without explanation, request breaks as needed, or withdraw entirely from the study at any point up to thesis completion. This protocol aligns with Stone and Priestley's (1996) emancipatory research paradigm, emphasising participant autonomy. These measures were implemented not only as ethical safeguards but also as methodological enhancements, improving the quality and authenticity of data collected.

3.6.2 Confidentiality, Anonymity, and Researcher Positioning

Protecting participants' confidentiality and anonymity was prioritised throughout the research process. All personal identifiers were removed from the data during transcription and analysis. Participants chose their own pseudonyms, and any potentially identifying information (such as specific references to unique programmes or particular institutions) was either removed or modified. Data was stored securely in

accordance with the university's data protection guidelines and in compliance with GDPR. Electronic data was password-protected and stored on encrypted devices, whilst physical documentation was kept in locked storage accessible only to me as a researcher.

My position as both an educational practitioner and a researcher created potential ethical complexities. This dual role was carefully managed to avoid any perception of coercion or power imbalance. Participants were assured that their decision whether to participate would have no bearing on their academic assessment or relationship with the institutions. During interviews, I maintained awareness of potential power dynamics and worked to create a supportive, non-judgmental environment where participants felt comfortable sharing experiences honestly. Member checking was employed, whereby participants were given the opportunity to review interview transcripts and provide feedback on the accuracy of representation. This practice aligns with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) recommendations for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research.

3.6.3 Ethical Research Practice and Representation

The principle of non-maleficence guided this research, with careful attention paid to minimising potential negative impacts on participants. Semi-structured interview questions were designed to be sensitive to participants' experiences, and I remained attentive to signs of discomfort during data collection. A protocol was established to signpost participants to appropriate university support services if discussions about transitional challenges raised distressing issues.

Ensuring ethical representation of data was a significant consideration during analysis and reporting. This involved faithful interpretation of participants' accounts without misrepresentation or decontextualisation. The analysis process employed rigorous methods to maintain trustworthiness, including cross-checking data sources and critical reflection on potential sources of bias in interpretation. In presenting findings, I endeavoured to represent the diversity of participant experiences, avoiding selective reporting that might distort the overall picture. Negative or contradictory findings were included alongside those that aligned with initial expectations, maintaining intellectual honesty in this research process.

Throughout this research, I engaged in ongoing reflexivity regarding the ethical dimensions of the study. This included regular reflection on my positionality as a researcher, the potential influence of my own educational background and perspectives on this research process, and continual questioning of whether ethical standards were being maintained at each stage. According to Guillemin and Gillam (2004, p. 274), reflexivity is "a continuous process of critical scrutiny and interpretation." A reflective journal was maintained throughout, documenting ethical challenges encountered and the reasoning behind decisions made. This practice supported ethical mindfulness and helped ensure that ethical considerations remained at the forefront of this research process.

The dissemination of research findings was conducted with continued attention to ethical principles. Participants have been informed of my research outcomes through summary reports, recognising their right to be aware of how their contributions have shaped knowledge. In academic publications and presentations arising from this research, anonymity will be preserved, and findings will be represented accurately and with integrity. These principles guide my approach to the dissemination phase. The ethical framework described has not been merely a procedural requirement but a fundamental aspect of ensuring research quality and integrity in this investigation of students' transitional experiences.

3.7 Methods

In this section, I shall outline the data collection methods employed in my research, commencing with an examination of semi-structured interviews and their theoretical underpinnings, as established in the literature. Subsequently, I shall critically evaluate the relative merits and limitations of semi-structured interviews as a methodological approach. The discussion will then progress to an analysis of narrative accounts, including their theoretical conceptualisation within the relevant academic literature. This will be followed by a comprehensive assessment of the strengths and constraints inherent in utilising narrative accounts as a data collection method.

3.7.1 Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary data collection method, providing a balanced approach between structure and flexibility that allowed for comparability across participants whilst accommodating individual differences in expression and experience (King, Horrocks and Brooks, 2019). This format enabled participants to express themselves freely after being posed initial questions, with flexibility to reframe questions as necessary for individual participants, thereby making them more accessible and appropriate (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). For instance, complex questions could be broken down into smaller, more manageable sections, allowing participants to address one element at a time.

The semi-structured format facilitated deeper exploration of research areas (Galletta, 2020). When participants provided particularly interesting or relevant responses, I could prompt them with, "Please, could you expand on that?" This technique facilitated richer data collection as participants elaborated on their experiences and perspectives, a strategy endorsed by Seidman (2019) as essential for developing depth in qualitative interviewing. This adaptability proved valuable when several participants raised issues related to institutional support mechanisms I had not initially considered central to the study, allowing me to follow emergent themes and explore unexpected avenues of inquiry (Bryman, 2016).

3.7.1.1 Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

To acknowledge my researcher positionality and maintain reflexivity throughout this research process, I implemented several methodological practices. First, I maintained a comprehensive reflective journal documenting my positionality, emotional responses, and interpretive decisions during the interview process, aligning with Berger's (2015) recommendations for enhancing researcher reflexivity. Additionally, I engaged my personal assistant as an independent transcriber, which provided an external perspective on the data and helped identify how my positionality might influence questioning techniques or interpretations. In this capacity, she functioned as what might be termed an 'alien observer' (McManus, Robinson and Van Wilgenburg, 2024), approaching the transcription process from a position of relative neutrality. This

arrangement proved valuable not only for maintaining reflexive awareness of how my perspective shaped my research but also for identifying gaps in the data that necessitated follow-up questions.

3.7.1.2 Neurodivergent-Specific Accommodations

Neurodivergent participants received interview questions in advance and were offered flexible participation options to ensure their meaningful engagement with this research process, as detailed in Section 3.5.1. These accommodations reflected best practice in neurodivergent research (Milton, 2014; Nicolaidis et al., 2019) and enhanced both ethical practice and data quality.

3.7.1.3 Interview Schedule Design

The semi-structured interview schedule (see Appendix A) comprised eight main questions designed to accommodate multiple stakeholder perspectives across this research. Following an opening consent question, participants were asked to identify their role within the study (student, client, support worker, coach, careers adviser, or employer) before describing the biggest challenges within their category. The schedule then systematically explored participants' knowledge of key support mechanisms (DSA, Access to Work), information sources, awareness of accessibility passports, and reflections on disability identity under the Equality Act 2010.

It is important to note that whilst the interview schedule captured multiple stakeholder perspectives, the bounded nature of neurodivergent student support systems meant numerous participants occupied multiple roles simultaneously. For instance, Rosa participated both as a student and a study skills tutor whilst also being a client receiving Access to Work support. This overlapping of roles, whilst adding complexity to the analysis, provided particularly rich insights into how neurodivergent individuals navigate multiple positions within support ecosystems.

The decision to use semi-structured interviews proved especially valuable given the exploratory nature of the case study and the notable shortage of existing research in this area (Stake, 2010; Yin, 2018). This approach enabled capture of lived experiences, providing rich data for analysing challenges participants encountered during their final

year at university, consistent with Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) guidance on qualitative research in education.

3.7.2 Narrative Account

In addition to semi-structured interviews with all eight participants, I constructed one detailed narrative account documenting Michelle's educational and workplace transition journey. This methodological decision emerged from my unique longitudinal relationship with Michelle, with whom I had worked for over four years prior to and during the research process. Michelle provided informed consent specifically for the construction of this narrative account, with the same ethical protections afforded to all participants, including confidentiality, anonymity through a pseudonym, right to withdraw, and opportunity to review and amend the narrative prior to inclusion in the research. Throughout this extended period, I maintained field notes documenting significant events, challenges, and developments in her transition experience. These contemporaneous observations provided rich contextual data that complemented the formal interview process.

Michelle's journey was characterised by multiple intersecting challenges that exemplified the complex, multi-directional pressures neurodivergent students navigate during workplace transition. Constructing a narrative account from the accumulated field notes provides valuable depth and a longitudinal perspective that a single interview could not capture. As Tamboukou et al. (2013) emphasise, narrative accounts provide a means of accessing experiences that might otherwise remain hidden or fragmented across time.

The narrative account was constructed through a systematic review of field notes recorded throughout our professional relationship, contextualised within the bioecological framework guiding this research. This approach allowed me to present Michelle's experiences chronologically, highlighting significant turning points and the cascading effects of the systemic barriers she encountered. Clandinin (2006) identifies field notes, journal records, and chronological narrative construction as the core tools of narrative inquiry, emphasising that the longitudinal nature of the data gathering process is itself a methodological strength rather than a convenience. Each of these tools was

employed in constructing Michelle's account. Field notes were maintained contemporaneously across four academic years, capturing significant events, challenges, and developments as they unfolded rather than retrospectively. The records vary in format:

- 2021 – 2022: Brief diary notes (relationship began at the end of the academic year)
- 2022 – 2023: Handwritten notebook entries (no direct quotes)
- 2023 – 2024 and 2024 – 2025: Note-taking software (Read.ai) used for meeting transcripts

These notes were then reviewed systematically and organised chronologically, following Clandinin's (2006) narrative inquiry methodology, to reveal the cumulative and cascading pattern of system failures that a single retrospective interview could not have captured. Direct quotations from the Read.ai transcripts are presented verbatim, preserving Michelle's habitual verbal idioms (for example, '*confused.com', stressed.com'*), which form part of how she articulates her emotional experience. Reflexive journaling was maintained throughout to document how my longstanding professional relationship with Michelle shaped the construction of the account, ensuring that her perspective rather than my interpretation of events remained central.

To ensure trustworthiness and authenticity, the narrative account underwent rigorous validation. Michelle reviewed the account for accuracy (member checking), and my personal assistant conducted an independent review to verify methodological integrity and identify how my positionality might influence interpretation. The analytical approach to constructing and validating this narrative account, including strategies for maintaining trustworthiness and managing the interpretive nature of narrative inquiry, is detailed in Section 3.8.1. The narrative account itself is presented in full in Section 4.3.3, where Michelle's longitudinal journey is documented chronologically across four academic years, followed by analytical commentary applying the framework introduced in Section 4.4 to illuminate the cumulative, cascading pattern of multi-directional system failures her experience reveals.

3.8 Data Analysis

In this section of my methodology chapter, I explain the reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) methodology that formed the analytical foundation of my research. Drawing upon relevant academic literature, I clarify RTA's theoretical underpinnings and practical application, demonstrating its appropriateness in addressing my research questions and generating meaningful insights from the data. This section also relates to my ontology, epistemology, and positionality, which are viewed through the lens of my theoretical and conceptual framework, demonstrating how the dataset was analysed.

3.8.1 Analytical Reasoning: From Theoretically-Informed to Abductive Approaches

My analytical approach evolved significantly throughout the research process, shifting from an initially theoretically informed stance to a fully abductive approach. In the early stages of analysis, I approached the data with Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007) as a sensitising framework, using the PPCT model (Process, Person, Context, Time) to guide attention to particular features of participants' experiences. However, this was not a deductive approach in the strict sense of hypothesis-testing; rather, the theoretical framework served as a conceptual lens through which to view data whilst remaining open to unexpected findings. This theoretically informed approach provided a foundation for developing increasingly abductive analytical processes as the research progressed.

My analytical stance evolved significantly as I engaged more deeply with both data and contemporary theoretical literature. During a writing retreat, as I was attempting to understand various iterations of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory, contemporary advances in ecological theory transformed my analytical approach. The extensive work by Tudge and colleagues in adapting Bronfenbrenner's original model to address 21st-century contexts proved particularly illuminating (Tudge et al., 2016, 2022; Merçon-Vargas et al., 2020).

Navarro and Tudge's (2023) paper "Technologizing Bronfenbrenner: Neo-ecological Theory" emerged as particularly significant for my analysis. Their innovative application of proximal processes to both physical and virtual environments resonated profoundly

with participants' experiences. This theoretical advancement became especially pertinent as research participants had either commenced university education during the COVID-19 pandemic—studying from home online before transitioning to in-person learning—or had completed school/college education remotely with support from immediate microsystems (family and established relationships with tutors) and then transitioned to unfamiliar university environments (new exosystems) without these established support networks.

By adopting an abductive approach, I was able to move iteratively between empirical data and theoretical frameworks, recognising the complex, multi-directional influences at play (Byrne, 2022). As Timmermans and Tavory (2012) observe, abductive reasoning allows researchers to develop theoretical insights through a recursive process of engaging with unexpected findings and existing theoretical frameworks. This approach aligns with my interpretivist research paradigm, as it acknowledges the co-construction of meaning between researcher and data whilst maintaining theoretical rigour.

The neo-ecological perspective proved particularly valuable in understanding how neurodivergent students navigated complex ecological transitions, especially shifts between virtual and physical learning environments. This approach involves "moving back and forth between induction and deduction" (Meyer, Hinton and Derzis, 2015, p. 334), allowing for a nuanced understanding of how proximal processes manifest across different contexts. For neurodivergent participants, these transitions often involved complex negotiations across multiple microsystems simultaneously, requiring significant adaptational resources.

The abductive approach thus allowed me to identify patterns in data that neither purely deductive nor inductive reasoning would have illuminated, particularly regarding multi-directional influences between different ecological systems (Braun et al., 2022). This analytical evolution ultimately provided a more comprehensive framework for understanding the complex navigational challenges faced by neurodivergent students during educational transitions.

3.9 Reflexive Thematic Analysis

3.9.1 Thematic Analysis Methodology: Approach and Implementation

Following Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase approach to RTA, I systematically coded the student transcripts to identify meaningful patterns. This methodology offered a structured yet flexible framework that aligned well with my constructivist ontological stance, which recognises the socially constructed nature of reality, and my interpretivist epistemological position, which acknowledges my active role in knowledge construction (Terry et al., 2017). My positionality as both a researcher and practitioner in higher education inevitably influenced how I engaged with and interpreted the data, requiring ongoing reflexivity throughout the analytical process (Finlay, 2002a). In practice, this reflexivity took several forms throughout the analytical process. I maintained a detailed research journal documenting my initial reactions to participants' accounts, noting instances where my own experiences as a neurodivergent professional resonated with or diverged from participants' descriptions. For example, when coding discussions about workplace disclosure, I explicitly acknowledged my own positioning as someone who had navigated these decisions, recording how this might sensitise me to certain aspects whilst potentially overlooking others. During the coding process, I regularly questioned my interpretive decisions, asking, "Am I seeing this pattern because it exists in the data, or because it aligns with my expectations?" When participants' experiences contradicted my assumptions—such as when several described positive institutional responses I had not anticipated—I used these moments to interrogate my preconceptions. Reflexivity was particularly crucial in constructing Michelle's narrative account, given my longstanding professional relationship with her. I was conscious of ensuring that my knowledge of specific challenging situations she had experienced did not lead me to adopt an overly negative framing that might not reflect her own interpretation of events. I repeatedly returned to her words and checked the narrative account with her to ensure it represented her perspective rather than my assumptions about the severity or impact of those situations. Additionally, I engaged my personal assistant as a critical friend, sharing emerging codes and asking her to challenge my interpretations, particularly where my proximity to my research context might create blind spots. This ongoing

reflexive practice ensured that whilst I acknowledged my insider perspective as a methodological strength, I remained critically aware of how it shaped my analytical lens.

The systematic coding process revealed themes that reflect the multi-directional nature of influences on student experiences. Braun and Clarke (2019) note that thematic analysis is theoretically flexible, allowing integration with frameworks such as Bronfenbrenner's ecological model to deepen analytical insights. This theoretical flexibility proved particularly valuable in examining how various contextual factors interacted to shape participants' lived experiences, with the emerging analytical framework providing conceptual structure for understanding these simultaneous, multi-directional pressures across different environmental systems (Tudge et al., 2009). The combination of reflexive thematic analysis and this emerging analytical approach enabled systematic identification of patterns whilst maintaining analytical sensitivity to the complex navigational challenges participants described.

3.9.2 Phase One: Familiarisation with the data

During this phase, I immersed myself in the data by repeatedly reading all the participants' transcripts. This process involved active engagement with the content to understand the participants' perspectives, experiences, and concerns (Braun and Clarke, 2021b). Key observations during this phase included:

- The richness and complexity of individual experiences across different neurodivergent conditions
- The emotional tone of frustration and isolation in numerous accounts
- The varying levels of support received and challenges faced
- The transition concerns expressed by participants at different stages of their educational journeys
- The different perspectives offered by students versus support providers

Particularly striking was the way participants described their interactions with institutional systems, often using language that suggested they felt forgotten, overlooked, or misunderstood. Through an ecological lens, these accounts revealed how microsystem experiences were frequently negatively influenced by exosystem and

macrosystem factors, such as institutional policies and societal expectations about neurodiversity (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007; Navarro and Tudge, 2023).

3.9.3 Phase Two: Generating Initial Codes with Quirkos

Following the familiarisation process, I developed an initial set of codes to capture significant aspects of the data. Quirkos, a qualitative data analysis software, was selected for this purpose because of its intuitive visual interface, which corresponded with my neurodivergent methodological preference for visual rather than textual data representation (Silver and Lewins, 2014; Olanrewaju and Ifeduba, 2024; Ting et al., 2024). As Quirkos is not a standard data analysis tool within the institution, approval for its use was sought from the Head of Ethics before commencing analysis (see Appendix B). This approval process ensured methodological rigour whilst accommodating the accessibility requirements outlined in my learning adjustment plan. The Quirkos project file was password-protected and stored on secure university servers to maintain data integrity and participant confidentiality throughout the analytical process.

The software allowed me to create visual representations of emerging codes and themes through the use of 'Quirks', coloured bubbles, whose size would increase proportionally with the frequency of coded text segments (see Figure 3.8.3). The development of these initial codes, or 'Quirks' as they are termed in the software, was both data-driven (derived directly from participants' statements) and guided by my research's focus on transitions and support experiences (Silver and Lewins, 2014; Olanrewaju and Ifeduba, 2024; Ting et al., 2024). This dual approach allowed for capturing authentic participant voices whilst aligning with my research questions. The coding process was iterative, with codes being refined, merged, and occasionally divided as my understanding of the data deepened (Saldaña, 2021).

Figure 3.9.3.1 Quirkos - Diagram - Initial Codes

3.9.3.1 Initial Codes

The emergence of initial codes followed a systematic yet organic process. I began by reading Michelle's narrative account and the first two interview transcripts without coding, simply noting initial impressions in my research journal. During the second reading, I highlighted segments that captured significant experiences, challenges, or insights, assigning descriptive labels that stayed close to participants' own language. For example, when multiple participants described feeling "dropped" or experiencing a "cliff edge" after university support ended, I created a code labelled "transition cliff" that captured this shared metaphor. As I progressed through subsequent transcripts, I tested

whether existing codes adequately captured new data or whether refinement was needed. The visual nature of Quirkos proved particularly valuable during this process—watching certain Quirks grow substantially larger than others provided immediate visual feedback on recurring patterns, prompting me to examine whether large Quirks needed to be subdivided into more nuanced codes. For instance, an initial broad code about "support services" eventually split into "accessing support," "quality of support," and "coordination between services" as I recognised these represented distinct experiences. Conversely, several smaller codes about different types of information gaps merged into a single "information deficit" code when analysis revealed they reflected a common underlying issue. This iterative process continued until I had coded all eight interview transcripts and the narrative account, resulting in approximately 30 initial codes that formed the foundation for theme development.

These initial codes (see Figure 3.8.8.1) provided a foundational framework for identifying patterns across participants' experiences (Richards and Hemphill, 2018). As the analysis progressed, these codes were refined, consolidated, and organised into more interpretative themes, but they served as crucial first-level interpretations of the raw data.

The coding process was not without challenges. At times, the participants' experiences were so intricate and multifaceted that they could be coded under multiple categories. In these instances, I made decisions about primary coding while maintaining memo notes about secondary connections, ensuring that the complexity of experiences was preserved even as the data was being organised (Marvasti, 2019).

This initial coding phase was undertaken with careful attention to preserving the integrity of participants' accounts while beginning to draw connections across different experiences. It represents the first analytical step towards identifying broader patterns in how neurodivergent students navigate transitions within higher education environments (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

Throughout the coding procedure, I maintained a consistently reflexive orientation, ensuring thematic development was abductively grounded in the data rather than

imposed through predetermined conceptual ideas (Marvasti, 2019, p. 6). This reflexive stance was particularly significant given my dual positionality as both researcher and practitioner within higher education, necessitating ongoing critical examination of how my experiential knowledge and professional assumptions might influence my interpretative engagement with participants' narratives (Dean et al., 2018).

3.9.4 Phase Three – Generating Initial Themes (clustering codes)

In this phase, I examined the relationships between codes to identify potential themes that captured broader patterns of meaning. This involved clustering related codes and considering how they interconnected to form coherent themes. The process required moving back and forth between codes, coded extracts, and the full dataset to ensure the emerging themes faithfully represented the data (Braun and Clarke, 2021b).

I began by considering how the initial codes might cluster together to form more meaningful patterns. This involved visually mapping the relationships between codes, identifying overlaps, contradictions, and hierarchical relationships (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Through this process, I was able to discern several potential thematic groupings that seemed to capture important aspects of my participants' experiences.

For example, codes such as 'Knowledge gaps about available support', 'Self-advocacy challenges', and 'Support discontinuity' seemed to coalesce around a broader theme related to navigational challenges within support systems. Similarly, 'Masking and burnout', 'Environmental barriers', and 'Sensory challenges' pointed toward the embodied experience of neurodivergence within higher education environments (Milton, 2012).

The visualisation capabilities of Quirkos proved particularly helpful during this phase, as I was able to physically arrange and rearrange code bubbles to explore different thematic configurations (Silver and Lewins, 2014; Olanrewaju and Ifeduba, 2024; Ting et al., 2024). The size of each bubble, representing the frequency of coding, also provided visual cues about the prominence of specific issues within the dataset. Examples of these Quirkos visualisations illustrating the thematic development process are presented in Section 3.8.8 (see Figures 3.8.8.1, 3.8.8.2, and 3.8.8.3).

As potential themes began to emerge, I constantly questioned whether they were capturing something meaningful about the data, whether they were coherent with a central organising concept, and whether they had clear boundaries distinguishing them from other themes (Braun et al., 2019). This process involved numerous iterations, with some initial themes being discarded, others being merged, and new themes emerging as my understanding of the data deepened.

Throughout this process, I maintained a reflexive stance, regularly questioning how my neurodivergent researcher positionality might influence my interpretation of the data (Pitard, 2017). I also sought to ensure that the themes were not merely descriptive summaries of content, but rather interpretative accounts that offered insights into the meaning of participants' experiences in relation to these research questions (King, 2017). For instance, when developing themes around institutional support and student agency, I encountered a reflexive challenge in interpreting Emily's account of preparing for a mock interview. Emily explained that she did not want to receive the interview questions in advance—an accommodation I had offered to all neurodivergent participants—because she felt she "didn't deserve" that support given that her institution had not provided such information during her actual job application processes. My initial interpretation coded this as evidence of institutional failure leading to internalised deficit thinking. However, in my research journal, I paused to question: "Am I seeing systemic oppression here because that's what I, as a neurodivergent advocate, expect to find? Emily didn't frame this as oppression—she presented it as a choice about fairness. Am I imposing my interpretation of what accommodations she 'should' want onto her account?" This prompted me to return to Emily's actual words and examine how she herself understood the situation. Whilst the institutional gap in providing pre-interview support remained evident in the data, my reflexive pause prevented me from constructing Emily as a passive victim of institutional failure, and instead recognised her as actively navigating what she perceived as ethical considerations regarding preparation equity. This led me to refine my analytical approach to better capture both the genuine institutional barriers participants faced and their own complex reasoning about how to respond to those barriers—acknowledging their agency even within constrained circumstances.

3.9.5 Phase Four: Reviewing Potential Themes

During Phase Four, I systematically reviewed the potential themes generated in Phase Three against the coded data and entire dataset, following Braun and Clarke's (2021) guidance for checking whether themes 'worked' in relation to both coded extracts and the complete data corpus. This rigorous review process involved reading all data extracts for each potential theme to verify internal coherence whilst examining relationships between themes to ensure they were distinct yet interconnected.

Through this systematic review, supported by the visual mapping capabilities of Quirkos, six candidate themes emerged that better captured the complexity of participants' experiences:

1. Navigating opaque support systems
2. Discontinuity and disruption in support provision
3. The education-to-employment transition cliff
4. Neurodivergent experiences in neurotypical environments
5. Institutional and structural barriers
6. Individual agency and advocacy requirements

These six candidate themes (see Figure 3.8.8.2 and Table 3.8.1) represented substantial refinement from earlier thematic groupings, with more precise boundaries and stronger internal coherence. However, as Phase Five would establish, further refinement was needed to fully capture the multi-directional ecological pressures revealed in the participants' accounts.

3.9.6 Phase Five: Defining and Refining Themes

Through continued engagement with the data, reflexive journaling, and iterative analysis guided by emerging analytical insights about multi-directional ecological pressures, Phase Five involved defining and refining the six candidate themes identified in Phase Four. Critical reflexive questioning challenged whether six discrete themes adequately captured participants’ simultaneous navigation of interconnected pressures or whether this structure risked fragmenting their integrated experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2021). This reflexive process resulted in six final themes:

1. **Navigating opaque support systems** – addressing challenges in discovering and accessing institutional support
2. **Discontinuity and disruption in support provision** – capturing the temporal fragmentation of support across transitions
3. **The education-to-employment transition cliff** – highlighting the abrupt end to support at graduation
4. **Neurodivergent experiences in neurotypical environments** – exploring the mismatch between neurodivergent needs and neurotypically designed spaces
5. **Institutional and structural barriers** – examining systemic policies and practices that disadvantage neurodivergent students
6. **Individual agency and advocacy requirements** – addressing the extraordinary self-advocacy demanded from students

These six candidate themes provided a robust framework for understanding participants' experiences. However, deeper engagement with the MDEF during Phase 6 revealed opportunities for further refinement that would better capture the simultaneous, multi-directional nature of participants' navigational challenges. The analytical development process through which these six candidate themes evolved into the final thematic structure.

3.9.7 Analytical Development: From Initial Codes to Final Themes

The journey from initial coding to final thematic structure was iterative and reflexive, characterised by continuous engagement with the data and theoretical framework. This section presents the analytical trajectory, demonstrating how six initial candidate themes evolved into three major themes with two cross-cutting dimensions that better captured the complexity of neurodivergent students' transition experiences.

3.9.7.1 Initial Coding and Early Theme Development

During Phases 2-3 of reflexive thematic analysis, initial coding generated numerous codes capturing discrete aspects of participants' experiences (see Figure 3.8.8.1).

These codes ranged from specific practical challenges, such as "knowledge gaps about available support" and "Access to Work awareness," to more experiential dimensions, including "sensory challenges," "masking and burnout," and "transition anxiety."

As analysis progressed through Phase 5, these initial codes clustered into six candidate themes (see Figure 3.8.8.2 and Table 3.8.8):

1. Navigating opaque support systems
2. Discontinuity and disruption in support provision
3. The education-to-employment transition cliff
4. Neurodivergent experiences in neurotypical environments
5. Institutional and structural barriers
6. Individual agency and advocacy requirements

Each candidate theme captured important dimensions of participants' experiences and was grounded in substantial coded data. However, reflexive review revealed conceptual overlap and suggested these six themes might not optimally represent the complexity of neurodivergent students' simultaneous navigation of multiple environmental pressures.

3.9.7.2 Theoretical Integration and Theme Consolidation

The analytical framework introduced in Section 4.4, became crucial during the refinement process of Phase 6. The framework’s emphasis on multi-directional, simultaneous pressures across ecological systems challenged the implicit linearity in presenting six discrete themes. Participants’ accounts consistently demonstrated that challenges were neither sequential nor isolated but somewhat interconnected and mutually reinforcing across environmental contexts.

Critical reflexive questioning guided consolidation: did six separate themes accurately reflect participants’ lived reality of navigating simultaneous pressures? Or did this structure risk fragmenting what participants experienced as integrated, compounding challenges? Deeper engagement with the data suggested the latter, prompting analytical restructuring.

The consolidation process recognised that Themes 1-3 (Navigating opaque support systems, discontinuity and disruption, and the education-to-employment transition cliff)

all captured different manifestations of systemic failures that participants experienced simultaneously. Rather than presenting these as separate phenomena, consolidating them into two major themes better illustrated how support system opacity (Theme 1: struggling through invisible systems) and support discontinuity (Theme 2: perpetual disruption) operated concurrently throughout participants' transitions.

Similarly, Themes 5 and 6 (institutional and structural barriers and individual agency and advocacy requirements) represented environmental dimensions that spanned all participants' experiences rather than discrete themes. Re-conceptualising these as cross-cutting dimensions acknowledged their pervasive influence: institutional barriers systematically shaped every aspect of transition. At the same time, paradoxical demands for individual advocacy pervaded participants' navigation of all systems.

Theme 4 (neurodivergent experiences in neurotypical environments) became Theme 3 (the identity-navigation paradox) with deeper integration of analytical insights regarding how macrosystem values about neurotypical norms shaped microsystem interactions and individual identity development throughout transition processes.

3.9.8 Final Thematic Structure

This reflexive consolidation produced three major themes, each illuminated by two cross-cutting dimensions (see Figure 3.8.8.3):

Major Themes:

1. Struggling through invisible systems: The multi-directional navigation challenge
2. Perpetual disruption: When support systems fail to hold
3. The identity-navigation paradox: Being neurodivergent in neurotypical spaces

Cross-Cutting Dimensions:

1. Institutional and structural barriers: Policies creating systemic disadvantage
2. Individual agency and advocacy requirements: Extraordinary self-advocacy expectations

This structure more authentically represents the analytical insight that neurodivergent students navigate simultaneous, multi-directional pressures rather than sequential,

discrete challenges. The cross-cutting dimensions acknowledge environmental factors that permeate all aspects of the transition experience, while the three major themes capture distinct but interconnected facets of this navigation process.

Table 3.8.1 presents the complete evolution from initial codes through candidate themes to the final thematic structure, including representative quotes that demonstrate grounding in participant data. Figures 3.8.8.1-3.8.8.3 provide visual documentation of this analytical journey, illustrating the reflexive, iterative nature of theme development.

These final themes reflect the multi-directional pressures that emerged from the analytical process, capturing how participants navigate simultaneous influences across multiple environmental systems. The detailed exploration of each theme, supported by participant accounts and analysis of their interconnections, is presented in Chapter 4.

Table 3.9.1 Evolution from Initial Codes to Final Themes

Initial Codes (Quirks)	**Phase 5 Initial Themes**	**Representative Quote**	**Final Themes**	**Cross-Cutting Dimensions**
• Knowledge gaps about available support •Administrative burdens • Access to Work awareness • DSA experiences • Support coordination value	**1. Navigating opaque support systems** *Confusion navigating labyrinthine systems*	**Willow:** "*There's so much information on [the] pages. It's like, I find it very overwhelming*,"	**Theme 1: struggling through invisible systems: The multi-directional navigation challenge**	**Institutional and structural barriers** *Policies creating systemic disadvantage*
• Support staff relationships	**2. Discontinuity and disruption in support provision**	**Demi:** "*Pretty much all contact with [the] university has ceased*,"	**Theme 2: Perpetual disruption: When support**	

Initial Codes (Quirks)	Phase 5 Initial Themes	Representative Quote	Final Themes	Cross-Cutting Dimensions
• Institutional communication failures • Support discontinuity	*Support breaking down during transitions*		**systems fail to hold**	
• Employment concerns • Transition anxiety • Access to Work awareness	**3. The education-to-employment transition cliff** *Abrupt cessation of support at graduation*	**Maisie:** "*No, nothing. Nothing at all*" [about transition support]	*Incorporated into Themes 1 and 2*	**Individual agency and advocacy requirements** *Extraordinary self-advocacy required*
• Sensory challenges • Masking and burnout • Social communication difficulties	**4. Neurodivergent experiences in neurotypical environments** *Challenges in neurotypically-designed spaces*	**Willow:** "*It's exhausting sometimes just to, like, be around people*,"	**Theme 3: The identity-navigation paradox: Being neurodivergent in neurotypical spaces**	
• Non-implementation of learning plans • Proving disability status • Formal complaints necessity	**5. Institutional and structural barriers** *Systematic disadvantage through policy*	**Philip:** "*DSA student allowance recommendations are just that, recommendations*."	*Became Cross-Cutting Dimension 1*	
• Self-advocacy challenges	**6. Individual agency and advocacy requirements**	**Philip:** "*Ironically, it's laughable that someone who has a condition supposedly with executive function*	*Became Cross-Cutting Dimension 2*	

Initial Codes (Quirks)	Phase 5 Initial Themes	Representative Quote	Final Themes	Cross-Cutting Dimensions
• Individual support champions	*Paradoxical advocacy expectations*	*disorders, it's organising [the] university's front of house.*"		

Figure 3.9.8.1Quirkos Diagram - Initial Coding Structure (Phase 2)

This diagram shows the initial codes (Quirks) generated during Phase 2 of reflexive thematic analysis, with bubble sizes indicating frequency of coded segments.

Figure 3.9.8.2 Quirkos Diagram - Candidate Theme Development (Phase 5)

This diagram *illustrates the clustering of initial codes into six candidate themes during Phase 5 of the analytical process.*

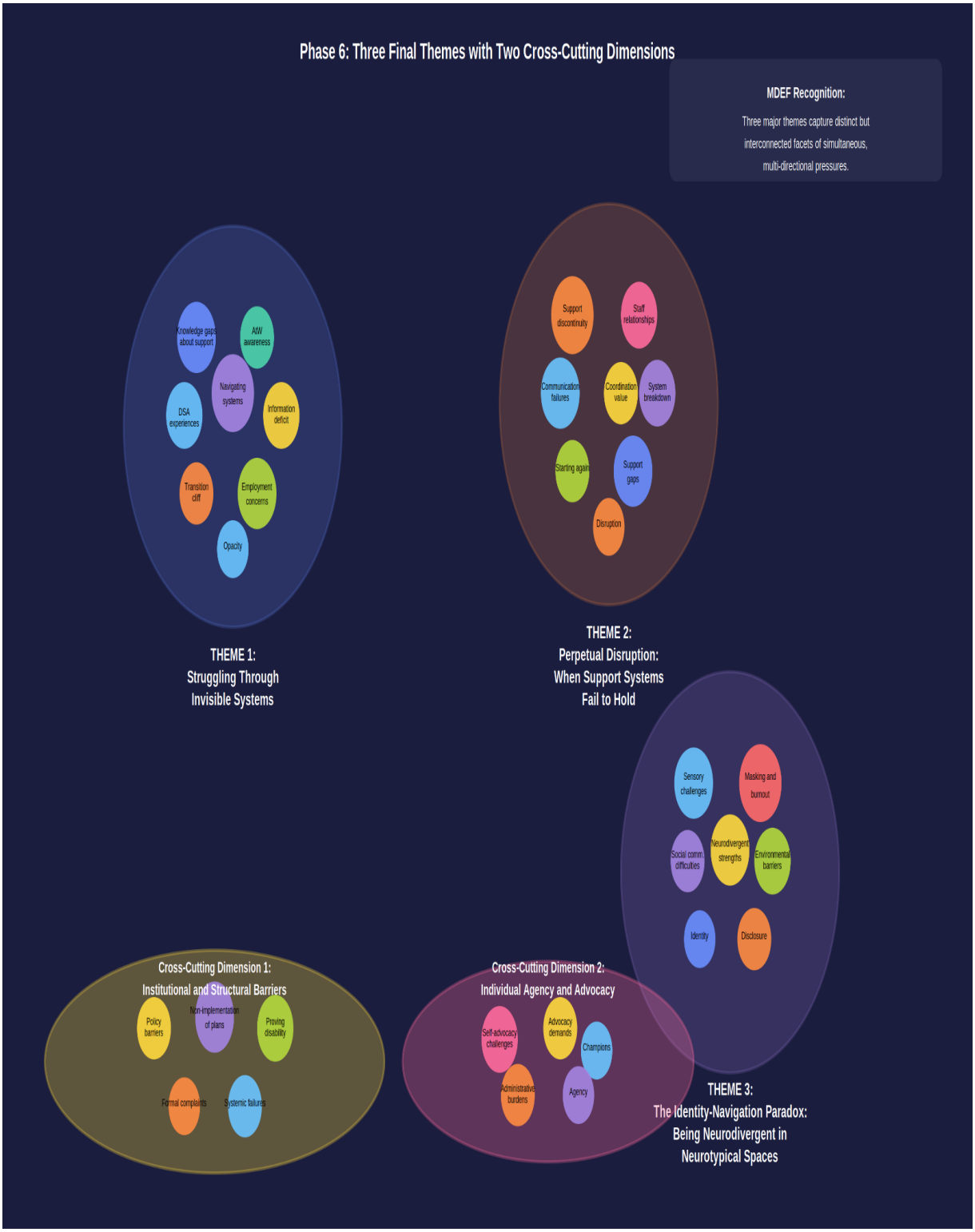


Figure 3.9.8.3 Quirkos Diagram - Final Theme Structure (Phase 6)

This screenshot demonstrates the consolidation into three final themes, each with two cross-cutting dimensions, reflecting the analytical recognition of simultaneous, multi-directional pressures.

3.10 Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined the methodological framework underpinning this research into neurodivergent students' transitions from higher education to employment. The study adopted an interpretivist research paradigm, employing a case study methodology with eight neurodivergent participants alongside one detailed narrative account. Semi-structured interviews provided rich qualitative data, complemented by longitudinal field notes documenting one participant's journey over four years.

The chapter detailed my abductive analytical approach, moving iteratively between data and theory throughout the research process. This analytical evolution resulted in an original theoretical contribution, presented in full in Chapter 4, that extends Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007) and Navarro and Tudge’s neo-ecological theory (Navarro and Tudge, 2023) by emphasising the simultaneous, multi-directional pressures neurodivergent students navigate across environmental systems.

Reflexive thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase approach, was employed to systematically code and analyse the data. Throughout this process, I maintained a reflexive awareness of how my positionality as a neurodivergent researcher shaped interpretation whilst ensuring participant voices remained central to the analysis. The use of Quirkos software, selected for its visual interface that accommodated my neurodivergent processing preferences, facilitated systematic coding whilst maintaining analytical rigour. The iterative nature of this analytical process is demonstrated through the evolution from six candidate themes to three major themes illuminated by two cross-cutting dimensions (see Table 3.8.1), reflecting the reflexive engagement required for robust thematic analysis.

The methodological decisions detailed in this chapter—from participant selection through analytical approaches—were guided by a commitment to centring neurodivergent student voice, acknowledging researcher positionality as both a strength

and a potential limitation, and developing analytical frameworks that capture the complexity of contemporary educational transitions. The resulting themes provide a robust foundation for understanding neurodivergent students' transitional experiences within their ecological contexts.

3.10.1 Bridging to Findings

Having established the methodological framework and analytical approaches that guided this research, the following chapter presents detailed findings from the thematic analysis. Chapter 4 first introduces the Multi-Directional Ecological Framework (MDEF) as an analytical framework that emerged from iterative engagement with the data, before exploring each of the three major themes in depth. Drawing on participants' accounts, the chapter illuminates the complex challenges neurodivergent students face in navigating educational and workplace transitions, demonstrating how these themes interconnect and how they reflect the multi-directional ecological pressures the MDEF identifies, providing rich empirical evidence that addresses the study's research questions whilst foregrounding neurodivergent students' lived experiences.

Chapter 4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings and discussion from my case study research examining how neurodivergent students experience and navigate the complex environmental systems during their transition from higher education to employment. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with eight participants and one narrative account, the findings reveal profound systemic failures that create multi-directional navigation challenges for students at this critical juncture.

Three major themes emerged from the data: (1) Struggling through invisible systems: The multi-directional navigation challenge; (2) Perpetual disruption: When support systems fail to hold; and (3) The identity-navigation paradox: Being neurodivergent in neurotypical spaces. These themes capture the intricate nature of participants' transition journeys, with two cross-cutting dimensions—Institutional and structural barriers, and individual agency and advocacy requirements—woven throughout, revealing how these elements permeate all aspects of participants' experiences.

The eight participants—Philip, Rosa, Demi, Maisie, Emily, Michelle, Willow, and AstroBlack—brought diverse perspectives from different universities, disciplines, and stages of transition. Their pseudonyms, chosen by themselves, reflect their agency in this research process and align with the principle of "nothing about us without us" that McDowall and Kiseleva (2024) identify as crucial yet often absent in neurodivergent research. Through their voices, this chapter reveals not individual struggles but systemic failures operating across multiple ecological levels.

4.2 Chapter Structure

This chapter is structured to provide a comprehensive exploration of participants' lived experiences whilst maintaining analytical depth. Section 4.3 provides detailed participant context and positioning, introducing the eight individuals whose experiences illuminate systemic failures, including Michelle's longitudinal narrative account (Section 4.3.3). Understanding each participant's unique context—their discipline, stage of study, neurodivergent identity, and position within transition—is essential before engaging with

the thematic analysis. Section 4.4 introduces the Multi-Directional Ecological Framework (MDEF), presenting how this analytical framework emerged from iterative engagement between participant data and existing theoretical frameworks. The themes presented in sections 4.5, 4.6, and 4.7 draw upon multiple participants' experiences; without first establishing who these individuals are and what circumstances shaped their journeys, the patterns revealed would lack the grounding necessary for meaningful interpretation. This contextual foundation enables readers to appreciate how systemic failures manifest across diverse situations whilst recognising the lived reality behind each analytical insight. These three sections explore each major theme through rich participant narratives and theoretical analysis. Sections 4.8, 4.9, and 4.10 integrate findings across all themes, examining their interconnections and cumulative impact, whilst providing a bridge to the recommendations chapter that follows.

Throughout this chapter, participant quotations are presented with line numbers from the original transcripts to maintain transparency and traceability. Literature from the review is integrated to contextualise findings within the broader research landscape. The analysis is grounded in Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007) and Navarro and Tudge's (2023) neo-ecological framework, which together provide theoretical depth for understanding how environmental systems shape individual development and how failures cascade across system levels, creating compound disadvantage. An analytical framework emerged from iterative engagement between these theoretical foundations and the participant data; it is introduced in Section 4.4 and provides the interpretive lens through which participants' experiences are examined throughout this chapter.

The analysis maintains focus on patterns rather than individual deficits, recognising that participants' struggles reflect environmental failures rather than personal inadequacies. The findings presented here reveal a disturbing consistency in how systems fail whilst demonstrating the complexity of challenges faced during the transition from higher education to employment. Participants reported not merely generic support and information voids, but active misinformation and systematic abandonment at crucial

transition points. This progression suggests deep-rooted dysfunction within support systems that transcends individual institutional failings.

Through participants' voices, this chapter reveals the true cost of what I term the "invisible transition period"—a critical phase where support ceases precisely when students need it most. Their experiences illuminate not just what is failing but why these failures persist despite decades of disability legislation and policy development. Most importantly, participants' insights point toward concrete pathways for change, offering hope that multi-directional navigation need not remain an impossible challenge for future neurodivergent students.

4.3 Participant Context and Positioning

This section introduces the eight participants whose experiences form the foundation of this research. Table 4.3.1 provides a demographic overview, whilst the following portraits contextualise their transition challenges.

Table 4.3.1Participant Overview

Pseudonym	**Neurodivergent Identity**	**Study Level**	**Discipline**	**COVID-19 Enrolment**	**Transition Status at Interview**
AstroBlack	Autism	Undergraduate	Medicine	During	Starting hospital work
Demi	Dyslexia, Dyspraxia	Postgraduate	Physiotherapy	During	Probationary employment
Emily	Dyslexia	Undergraduate	Occupational Therapy	During	Writing dissertation
Maisie	ADHD	Undergraduate	Nursing	During	Employed in healthcare
Michelle	Autism, Learning Disabilities	Undergraduate	Education	During	Continuing to MA

Pseudonym	Neurodivergent Identity	Study Level	Discipline	COVID-19 Enrolment	Transition Status at Interview
Philip	Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, ADD, Ehlers-Danlos Type 3	Postgraduate	Business	During	Completing dissertation
Rosa	Cerebral Palsy	PhD	Not specified	Post	Continuing PhD
Willow	Autism	Undergraduate	Geography	Post	Finishing coursework

4.3.1 Participant Demographics and Contextual Patterns

The demographic composition of this cohort reflects broader patterns whilst revealing specific contextual factors that shaped transition experiences. Notably, 75% began university during COVID-19, aligning with Newman's (2022) findings that pandemic-era students faced unprecedented disruption to support structures.

The diagnostic timing patterns—with three out of eight participants receiving diagnoses after starting university—reflect what Clouder et al. (2020) describe as the "invisible majority" of neurodivergent students who navigate without formal recognition or support. This late diagnosis particularly affects women, and those with internalised presentations, as Emily and Willow’s experiences demonstrate. Bioecological analysis reveals how these students navigated environmental systems without understanding why specific pressures caused such strain, and how they lacked both self-knowledge and institutional support.

Half the participants were mature students, introducing additional complexity that McDowall and Kiseleva (2024) identify as under-explored. Mature students juggle multiple microsystems—family, work, finances—creating multi-directional pressures in

which failure in one system cascades across others, as Philip's experience managing parental illness whilst fighting for academic accommodations powerfully demonstrates.

However, the split between undergraduate (50%), postgraduate (25%), and doctoral (25%) participants reveals how transition challenges persist across educational levels. Rosa's experience—despite being a PhD student and professional support provider—of requiring four appeals for Access to Work funding exemplifies what Quinn and Anwar-Westander (2023) term the "administrative burden" affecting all disabled students regardless of academic progression.

Significantly, whilst 87.5% were theoretically eligible for DSA, none received adequate transition support, confirming AGCAS (2025) findings that support structures fail at the education-to-employment boundary. This systematic failure transcends individual characteristics, affecting students across all disciplines, study levels, and neurodivergent profiles equally.

When examined through Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2007) PPCT model, this demographic profile enables understanding of how individual characteristics (Person) interact with transition timing (Time) within specific institutional contexts (Context) through complex support processes (Process) that consistently fail to facilitate successful transitions. The neo-ecological framework's recognition of digital environments (Navarro and Tudge, 2023) adds further complexity—all participants, regardless of age or technological confidence, struggled with online information systems that often exacerbate rather than alleviate access barriers.

4.3.2 Individual Participant Portraits

4.3.2.1 AstroBlack

An undergraduate medical student with autism preparing to graduate as a doctor, AstroBlack’s experience illuminates the paradoxical nature of high achievement without adequate transition support. Ecological analysis reveals exceptional ability to navigate academic microsystems whilst remaining completely uninformed about employment support exosystems. His detailed DSA knowledge—“*pretty good working knowledge because I've had to essentially, and it's been a necessity*"—contrasts starkly with his complete ignorance of Access to Work, discovered only months before graduation

through his study skills tutor. This disconnect illustrates systematic failures in mesosystem coordination between educational and employment support (Vincent and Fabri, 2022). His need for information "presented in an explicit way" reflects autistic processing styles that Tan et al. (2025) found are inadequately accommodated in neurotypically designed systems. Through Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2007) PPCT model, his experience reveals how proximal processes fail when information is ambiguous or implicit, creating stress that compounds across transitions among chronosystems.

4.3.2.2 Demi

A postgraduate physiotherapy student with dyslexia and dyspraxia, Demi was navigating her probationary employment period at the interview. Her placement experiences reveal systematic failures across multiple ecological levels: microsystem interactions in which educators ignored her learning support plan, mesosystem breakdowns between the university and placement settings, and exosystem policies that failed to ensure the implementation of agreed-upon accommodations. Her experience demonstrates how support structures that appeared robust in theory proved unreliable under pressure—four of seven placement educators failed to read her learning support documentation, then claimed she had "downplayed" her needs. This pattern reflects what Quinn and Anwar-Westander (2023) describe as an administrative burden, where multiple bodies fail to communicate effectively. Post-graduation, the complete cessation of university contact beyond providing a reference illustrates what I term the "transition cliff", where all support simultaneously ceases. Analysis through Navarro and Tudge's (2023) neo-ecological framework shows how Demi must now navigate both physical workplace environments and digital systems without the scaffolding previously provided by educational structures.

4.3.2.3 Emily

An undergraduate occupational therapy student with dyslexia, Emily was immersed in dissertation completion at the interview. Her transition struggles began earlier, moving from her college's highly structured microsystem—"*I was used to being in college and having people there all the time telling me what to do*"—to the university's expectation of independent navigation. Through Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory, Emily's

experience reveals how changes in proximal processes (from directive to self-directed learning) created cascading difficulties across all environmental systems. Support structures that previously provided direction suddenly became unresponsive, requiring her to create her own scaffolding. Her self-minimisation—"*I feel like it's not a huge massive disability*"—reflects what Adam and Koutsoklenis (2023) identify as internalised medical model assumptions about the legitimacy of support needs. Emily's terror at NHS application forms and avoidance of recruitment processes demonstrates how macrosystem employment practices create barriers that Santuzzi et al. (2024) found cause 58% of neurodivergent graduates to conceal their conditions.

4.3.2.4 Maisie

An undergraduate nursing student diagnosed with ADHD during her studies; Maisie's journey exemplifies the additional complexity of late diagnosis during pandemic conditions. Beginning university during the COVID-19 lockdown, her initial microsystems consisted of familiar family support, masking the extent of her executive function challenges (Quigley and Gallagher, 2025). The pandemic initially compressed environmental demands, but as restrictions lifted, multiple systems began pulling simultaneously in different directions. Already employed in healthcare at the interview but utterly unaware of Access to Work, Maisie's experience of receiving "nothing at all" in transition support aligns with the findings of AGCAS (2025) on systematic transition failures. Her description—*"Part of my ADHD; if something is harder than it needs to be, I just walk away*"—reveals rational self-preservation strategies that Mantzalas et al. (2022) identify as responses to overwhelming environmental demands. Through Navarro and Tudge's (2023) framework, Maisie navigates both physical workplace demands and virtual systems without support, demonstrating remarkable individual resilience that should not be necessary.

4.3.2.5 Michelle

An undergraduate student with autism and learning disabilities, Michelle's complex journey reveals multi-directional system failures across all ecological levels. Analysis through the MDEF illuminates simultaneous pressures: witnessing trauma in accommodation (microsystem crisis), losing trusted support staff (mesosystem disruption), receiving actively harmful in-class support (proximal process failure), and

managing housing insecurity (exosystem instability)—all whilst maintaining academic progress. Despite these overwhelming pressures pulling in contradictory directions, Michelle achieved a 2:1 and was named student of the year, demonstrating what Kitchen et al. (2021) term "ecological validation", where individual strengths emerge despite systemic failures. Her transition "support" consisted solely of erroneous advice to complete an unnecessary Level 3 course, exemplifying what Syharat et al. (2023) identify as micro/mesosystems exerting inappropriate influence over impressionable students. Through chronosystem analysis, Michelle's journey shows how disruptions compound over time, with each crisis depleting resources needed for the next challenge. Her longitudinal narrative provides detailed evidence of sustained multi-directional navigation without institutional support.

4.3.2.6 Philip

A postgraduate Master's student in Business with multiple diagnoses (dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADD, and Ehlers-Danlos Type 3), Philip's three-year ordeal epitomises multi-directional navigation failure. Philip was not merely navigating environmental systems but was forced to adjust each one while they actively resisted manual adaptation. His bitter observation—"*ironically, it's laughable that someone who has a condition supposedly with, like, you know, executive function disorders, it's organising universities front of house*"—captures what McDowall and Kiseleva (2024) identify as the cruel paradox of neurodivergent self-advocacy. Bioecological analysis reveals failures at every level: microsystem (supervisors vanishing), mesosystem (departments not communicating), exosystem (university claiming DSA requirements are optional), macrosystem (ableist assumptions), and chronosystem (three years of compounding failures). Philip's forced expertise in university bylaws demonstrates how proximal processes become corrupted when students must draw on their areas of most significant challenge to secure basic support. His parents' cancer diagnosis added another dimension of pressure, illustrating the bidirectionality between the macrosystem and developing individuals operating across multiple life domains simultaneously (Navarro and Tudge, 2023).

4.3.2.7 Rosa

A PhD student with cerebral palsy, Rosa occupies a unique position as both system navigator and professional guide, working as a study skills specialist tutor whilst pursuing doctoral studies. Despite her professional understanding of support systems, she required four appeals to secure appropriate Access to Work provision. The advisor's question—"*Well, if you're that physically disabled, why are you working?*"—reveals persistent macrosystem ableism that Shakespeare (2014) identifies as more disabling than impairments themselves. Rosa's observation that "*99% of the students I've spoken to don't know about Access to Work funding*" provides crucial evidence of systematic information failure at the mesosystem level, where university and employment support systems fail to connect. Through Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2007) lens, Rosa's dual role reveals how proximal processes fail even for those with exceptional system knowledge, suggesting structural rather than individual causation. Her experience navigating both physical and virtual environments whilst managing PhD demands exemplifies Navarro and Tudge's (2023) neo-ecological complexity.

4.3.2.8 Willow

An undergraduate geography student diagnosed with autism during her studies; Willow's articulate descriptions provide visceral insight into the exhaustion of neurodivergent existence in neurotypical spaces. Ecological analysis reveals how Willow must constantly reconfigure herself to match rigid environmental systems rather than those systems developing flexibility. Her description of following "*the script in my head of like, normal human interactions*" whilst managing sensory overwhelm from *"really annoying whirring sounds*" in lecture theatres captures what Butcher and Lane (2024) identify as identity varying across different microsystems. The complete absence of transition support—"*I actually have no clue what I want to do after I finish my degree*"—isn't individual indecision but predictable outcomes when proximal processes fail to include career development. Willow's experience demonstrates how masking, which Mantzalas et al. (2022) link to negative mental health outcomes, becomes necessary for basic participation. Through chronosystem analysis, her late diagnosis meant years of struggling without accommodation, depleting resources needed for transition planning. The neo-ecological framework reveals additional complexity as

Willow navigates online information systems that overwhelm rather than inform— *"there's so much information on pages... I find it very overwhelming*."

4.3.3 Michelle: A longitudinal Narrative Account

Whilst the participant portraits in section 4.3.2 provide contextual snapshots, Michelle's experience requires a different form of presentation. Unlike the other seven participants, whose data was gathered through a single semi-structured interview, Michelle's account was constructed through four years of contemporaneous field notes maintained throughout our professional relationship as researcher and DSA tutor/mentor. This longitudinal narrative account — reviewed and approved by Michelle prior to submission — offers a form of data that a single interview cannot replicate: a chronological, accumulative record of multi-directional system failures as they unfolded in real time, and of the sustained navigation required to survive them.

The narrative was constructed through systematic review of field notes recorded across four academic years. The analytical framework used to contextualise these field notes — the Multi-Directional Ecological Framework (MDEF) — is introduced in Section 4.4, where its emergence from the data is described in full. As Tamboukou et al. (2013) emphasise, narrative accounts provide a means of accessing experiences that might otherwise remain hidden or fragmented across time. Michelle's account is presented below in full, in first-person researcher voice, as a distinct piece of data. Her experiences are then woven through the thematic analysis in sections 4.5 to 4.7 alongside the other participants' voices.

4.3.3.1 The Narrative Account

I met Michelle two years into her degree, at the end of her first year. I began by providing her with Autism Spectrum mentoring support — listening to areas of her life that she was finding complex and challenging, and building a rapport that would carry her into her second year.

The support Michelle had in place for her second year was an external study skills tutor, myself as an external mentor, and in-class support provided by the University Centre of the college where she was studying, all funded through the Disabled Students' Allowance. Everything was progressing well; Michelle was being supported effectively because Diane, the study skills tutor, and I were liaising to ensure we complemented the support we provided, allowing Michelle to progress with her studies. Michelle also had a positive experience with her in-class support, who explained her work using accessible steps that were then relayed to us.

The situation became significantly more difficult when Michelle witnessed a traumatic experience within her sheltered accommodation. At the same time, her study skills tutor left. To reduce further upheaval and spare Michelle the adjustment of getting used to a new person, I took on her study skills as well as her mentoring — at that point, it was difficult to separate the impact of what was happening at home from her academic work. This entailed ensuring Michelle remained as positive as possible whilst acknowledging the stress and anxiety her home situation was having on her. The situation culminated in her needing to be relocated, which happened at the end of June 2023 when she was completing her final assignments. Michelle passed her foundation degree and enrolled to complete a top-up course to convert it into an honours degree — the plan being that once completed, she would apply for a Master's in Autism.

Over the summer of 2023, Michelle gained a position as a Trio member for the Oliver McGowan Training and was approached to take the lead on a panel reviewing care plans for Autistic people or people with Learning Disabilities. This was to cover maternity leave, it would possibly be a short-term contract. The opportunity was a direct extension of her academic field and her professional identity as an Autistic woman entering autism advocacy and care plan review – yet no academic structure recognised it as such, or offered her support in weighing it against her studies. Michelle was pleased to have been asked, but was concerned about how she would manage her level 6 studies alongside a dissertation. We had long discussions about this – the

number of days she would be working, the days in college, the modules and assignments to be completed. By breaking everything down, Michelle was able to make an informed choice about what she wanted to do. The decision-making support came entirely from the DSA-funded relationship outside the academic structure; without it, Michelle would have been navigating this transition alone.

Michelle began the academic year 2023/24 in considerable distress: a different person from the previous year was providing her with in-class support, and nobody had told her this change had been made. It had been changed because her previous in-class support had trained as a tutor and been employed as one; Michelle found out eight months later, when her previous in-class support returned to help at the end of the course, as things were going wrong.

Three systemic failures converged in this period. First, a lack of consistency of staffing: the in-class support worker had been changed without notification or handover, exposing the absence of any institutional process for transitioning support arrangements that student had spent time building. Second, an absence of awareness of what Michelle needed: the new in-class support, Isabel, had not read Michelle's learning support plan and did not understand how to support her. She continually gave Michelle tasks that were too easy or inappropriate for the modules she was working on – for example, extra research on subjects that would not help with her final assignments. This continued for several months, with Michelle growing increasingly disillusioned. As Michelle put it in one of our sessions in November 2023: "*I've received an email from Isabel, she's doing my head in … I don't know what she wants*, *I never know what she wants …"* Third, a misplacement of responsibility for resolution: the response from the disability team compounded the problem, telling Michelle, "You must try to work with your support; she's there to help you" – placing the burden of accommodation on the student rather than addressing the misalignment within the institution. Michelle responded that she was getting increasingly confused by the information she was being

asked to complete and stressed because she felt she was falling behind with her studies and assignments.

In one of our sessions in January 2024, Michelle said: "*I don't know what's happening … I'm so frustrated … Mandy is supposed to be helping me whilst Annabel isn't free but she's just stressing me out and making things worse. I think I'm going to quit."* This is where our twice-weekly sessions became critical — keeping her on track, constructing letters and emails in response to those she had received, and corresponding with Michelle's course tutor and dissertation supervisor, Annabel. Annabel's input was enormously significant: she facilitated a change from essays to PowerPoint presentations for Michelle's assignments, focusing on her strengths rather than expecting her to work the same way as everyone else.

This was working well until Annabel went on long-term sick leave in February and did not return. Ordinarily, Michelle would have been reassigned to another dissertation supervisor and personal tutor. She was not. The college had forgotten about Michelle entirely. Despite emails and contact from me, they kept telling her everything was fine, that the work she was producing was excellent, and to carry on. So we did.

We could only carry on because we had a structure: Michelle was due to present at a conference in April and needed to submit an abstract in October. She had already submitted her dissertation proposal and received ethical approval, so we continued working from that framework. However, when she went to the college to carry out data collection for the conference presentation, she found out that Annabel was still absent and the study would not be taking place. This meant changing everything — the conference presentation, the dissertation, and the final module.

Once the presentation and conference were completed, we finally met with a tutor via Teams to ensure Michelle's work was recognised. The college put in place a presentation meeting so Michelle could demonstrate evidence for her final module by

cross-referencing elements of her dissertation. This was when she encountered her old in-class support again. A complaint letter was written, documenting how Michelle had been treated during the academic year. It resulted in a meeting with the academic head, who apologised.

There was no support from the college to help Michelle with her transition once she had completed her course. Their only advice was to complete a Level 3 course in Autism before starting her Master's in Autism in October. In one of our sessions in May 2024, Michelle said: *I'm confused.com? In my feedback on my dissertation, Mandy said I should do a bridging course between this one and going to do my Masters. I've enrolled but I can't get on or get the materials its stressing me out."*

In July 2024, Michelle received a 2:1 for her Honours Degree and was named Student of the Year.

The Level 3 course has since caused Michelle significant stress and anxiety. Her transition to the Master's was also problematic — the university lost her registration. In one of our sessions in July 2024, Michelle said: "*okay, I'm stuck too many forms what do I need to fill in? How do things get paid? Where does the money come from? We went to the university and they told us lots of things and now I'm stressed.com that I'm on information overload."* Although we had put everything in place early to make the transition as smooth as possible, the system still failed her at the final stage.

4.3.3.2 Analytical Commentary

When analysed through the MDEF, Michelle's journey illustrates multi-directional system failure with a clarity that a single interview could not have captured. The four years of field notes reveal not isolated incidents but a cumulative, cascading pattern: each system failure depleted the resources available to manage the next. The trauma in accommodation disrupted the study support; the loss of the study skills tutor increased

pressure on the mentoring relationship; the inappropriate in-class support undermined academic confidence; the supervisor's absence exposed the absence of any institutional contingency for Michelle's needs; and the transition advice — to complete an unnecessary qualification — demonstrated the complete absence of transition-specific knowledge at the institutional level.

Across all ecological levels — microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and chronosystem — the field notes illuminate how each system contracted and expanded in ways that created impossible simultaneous pressures. Yet Michelle navigated all of this, achieved a 2:1, and was named Student of the Year. As the analytical framework introduced in Section 4.4 makes visible, her success was a product of extraordinary individual resilience and resourcefulness — not of effective institutional support.

This longitudinal account enhances the research as a whole by providing depth of evidence unavailable through a single interview. It demonstrates not just that systems fail but how they fail over time, cumulatively, with cascading consequences — and it provides a chronological record of what sustained support from an informed practitioner can achieve in the absence of institutional provision.

4.3.4 Common Threads Across Diversity

Despite varied backgrounds, these eight participants reveal systematic patterns that transcend individual circumstances. Their experiences show how failures cascade across system levels, creating what I term "ecological invalidation"—where environmental systems actively undermine rather than support development. Each participant faced multi-directional pressures requiring simultaneous navigation of academic, personal, social, and bureaucratic demands whilst managing their neurodivergent needs.

The COVID-19 context added unprecedented complexity. Participants navigated rapid shifts between virtual and physical environments whilst established support patterns

dissolved. This temporal disruption created lasting impacts on transition preparedness that persist beyond the pandemic's acute phase.

Most significantly, all eight participants encountered what Vincent (2019) terms "fear of the unknown" regarding transition—a rational response to the concrete absence of support. Not one participant received systematic transition preparation, confirming transition support remains largely invisible in institutional provision (McDowall and Kiseleva, 2024).

4.4 The Multi-Directional Ecological Framework (MDEF)

This analytical evolution—moving iteratively between my participants' accounts and contemporary ecological theory—ultimately revealed that existing frameworks, whilst valuable, could not fully capture the complexity of what participants were describing. The inadequacy became particularly apparent when attempting to map participants' transition experiences onto traditional bioecological representations: the familiar nested circles suggested hierarchical containment and sequential progression, yet participants described something fundamentally different.

Whilst Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007) and Navarro and Tudge's (2023) neo-ecological framework—with their recognition of virtual environments and contemporary contexts—provided valuable theoretical foundations for understanding student experiences across environmental systems, my abductive analysis of participants' accounts revealed patterns that these existing frameworks did not fully capture. Participants described experiencing simultaneous demands from university support services, family expectations, workplace recruitment processes, and societal attitudes towards neurodivergence—all whilst navigating both physical campus environments and virtual platforms. These pressures did not operate sequentially or hierarchically but converged simultaneously, creating what participants characterised as overwhelming navigational demands. My participants described experiencing pressures not simply as bidirectional interactions between themselves and their environments, but as multi-directional forces operating simultaneously across numerous systems, with each system exerting pressure independent of—and sometimes contradictory to—others. As my analysis progressed, it became evident that a new conceptual framework

was required to adequately represent these complex navigational experiences, particularly as they manifested during the transition period when environmental systems become especially unstable.

This realisation led to the development of what I term the Multi-Directional Ecological Framework (MDEF). The framework emerged organically during a July 2024 writing retreat, whilst I was attempting to understand the various iterations of Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory and how they might apply to my participants' transition experiences. During discussions about my participants' experiences with colleagues, I found myself using my hands to physically demonstrate the multi-directional pressures they described, envisaging each participant positioned at the centre, attempting to navigate different environmental systems simultaneously at multiple levels, pressing inward from all directions. This physical gesture—hands creating a sphere with fingers pressing inward from multiple angles—crystallised into the conceptual framework that became central to my analytical approach. Returning to my data with this emerging framework, I found it provided explanatory power that traditional nested representations lacked: participants were not moving outward through progressively larger environmental circles but rather managing inward pressures from all directions simultaneously.

The MDEF can be visualised through the metaphor of an ExpandAball—a spherical toy composed of interconnected, flexible bands that can expand and contract in multiple directions simultaneously whilst maintaining structural integrity (see Figure 4.4.1). Each coloured band represents different environmental systems: microsystems (immediate environments such as support services, academic departments, family), mesosystems (connections and coordination between microsystems), exosystems (indirect influences including institutional policies and recruitment practices), macrosystems (broader cultural attitudes and societal expectations), and chronosystems (temporal changes and life transitions). The neurodivergent student sits at the centre of this sphere, actively navigating these multi-directional forces. Critically, the ExpandAball metaphor captures not only multiplicity but also dynamism: bands can tighten or loosen independently, creating constantly shifting configurations that require continuous adaptation rather than a one-time adjustment.

The MDEF extends existing bioecological and neo-ecological theories in several critical ways. First, it emphasises multi-directionality rather than bidirectionality—students must navigate simultaneous pressures from numerous sources rather than simple two-way interactions. This distinction proves crucial for understanding transition experiences, where environmental systems that previously operated independently suddenly converge during the critical transition period. Second, it recognises students' active navigation and adaptation rather than positioning them as passive recipients of environmental influences, acknowledging the agency participants demonstrated even whilst describing feeling overwhelmed by systemic failures. Third, it acknowledges that when one environmental system tightens or loosens its pressure (when one "band" contracts or expands), this creates cascading effects across other systems, requiring constant adaptation. For instance, when university support systems abruptly ceased at graduation (microsystem change), this simultaneously affected participants' confidence in approaching employers (exosystem interaction), their family dynamics (different microsystem interaction), and their sense of identity as capable professionals (macrosystem influence). Finally, by incorporating Navarro and Tudge's (2023) insights about digital environments, the MDEF recognises that contemporary students navigate both physical and virtual spaces simultaneously, adding further complexity to the multi-directional pressures they experience.

This framework guided both my data collection and analytical approach. During interviews, I explored how participants experienced pressure from different environmental systems and how they attempted to navigate these multi-directional forces. Throughout the reflexive thematic analysis process described in the following section, I examined how participants' accounts revealed interactions between different "bands" of their ecological systems and the strategies they employed to maintain equilibrium whilst managing these complex, simultaneous pressures. The MDEF provided a conceptual lens for understanding not just what participants experienced, but why existing support structures—designed around assumptions of linear progression and hierarchical containment—proved so inadequate for neurodivergent students navigating workplace transitions.

Figure 4.4.1 The Multi-Directional Ecological Framework (MDEF)

4.5 Theme One: Struggling Through Invisible Systems: The Multi-Directional Navigation Challenge

This primary theme encapsulates the profound challenges neurodivergent students face when attempting to discover, understand, and access support during their transitions. The invisibility operates at multiple levels—information that is technically available but practically inaccessible, support systems that exist in theory but not in practice, and transition pathways that simply do not exist. When analysed through the MDEF, this

represents environmental bands that appear solid from the outside but prove gossamer-thin or entirely absent when students attempt to grasp them.

The systematic coding process revealed how this theme encompasses patterns of opacity, information voids, and the extraordinary demands for self-advocacy that emerge when systems fail to provide clear pathways.

4.5.1 Lost in the Labyrinth: The Opacity of Support

The most pervasive experience across all participants was the sense of being lost within systems that should support them. This was not merely confusion but a profound disorientation that affected their ability to prepare for transitions. Willow's account captures this with striking clarity:

"*I feel like it's, there's so many, there's so much information on pages. It's like, I find it very overwhelming, it's like, oh, well, what what, what do I actually need to find. So I think I probably should use the university more, but I don't really use it so I don't think I understand like or know how to actually get the best out of it.*" (Willow, Lines 88-93)

This directly reflects what Gibbs et al. (2025, p. 5) found: that neurodivergent students often find assessment deadlines difficult to manage, where "the ability to initiate a task, remain focused, and concentrate for long periods of time is tiring and mentally taxing and can cause cognitive overload." Yet Willow's account reveals something more profound—it is not just about managing deadlines but about navigating the very systems meant to help with that management. The MDEF reveals Willow attempting to determine which environmental bands she should engage with, but the bands are tangled and their destinations unclear. The microsystem of university support, the mesosystem of connections to career services, and the exosystem of institutional websites create a maze rather than a pathway. As Navarro and Tudge (2023) emphasise, digital environments add another layer of complexity—Virtual Learning Environments that should facilitate access often become additional barriers for neurodivergent students.

Philip's experience elevates this challenge to an almost Kafkaesque level, revealing how opacity compounds into active obstruction:

"*I found myself spending almost equal amount of times on my studies as I were combating the university to try and get things put into place for me. So I was having to quite literally organise departments to talk to each other inside the universities. I was having to organise DSA to talk to them.*" (Philip, Lines 177-179)

The bitter irony becomes clear in his sardonic observation:

"*Ironically, it's laughable that someone who has a condition supposedly with, like, you know, executive function disorders, it's organising [the] university's front of house.*" (Philip, Lines 183-185)

This paradox—requiring students to use precisely the skills their neurodivergence affects to access support—represents what McDowall and Kiseleva (2024) identified as a critical systemic failure. Through bioecological theory, we view this as a fundamental breakdown in proximal processes, in which the regular interactions that should support development instead create additional barriers (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007).

Rosa's experience adds another dimension, demonstrating that even professional knowledge does not guarantee successful navigation:

"*I would say it is very very difficult to get the level of support you want and need and there were a lot of hoops I had to jump through to get what I got in the end. I had to appeal it four times because a lot if why can't you do that and why can't you do that? And then in the end, I really, really had to fight my corner to get what I wanted but it shouldn't be that hard to get it.*" (Rosa, Lines 83-87)

As someone who works as a study skills specialist tutor whilst managing her own cerebral palsy, Rosa brings unique insight into systemic failures. Her encounter with Access to Work advisors reveals the macrosystem beliefs that permeate support systems:

"*One of the advisors actually said, well, if you're that physically disabled, why are you working?*" (Rosa, Lines 88-89)

This statement exposes the persistent assumptions of the medical model that Adam and Koutsoklenis (2023) describe, which constrain how environmental systems respond

to neurodivergent individuals. When examined through the MDEF, this represents environmental bands that not only fail to flex but actively constrict when pressure is applied, questioning the very presence of the individual at the centre rather than adapting to support them.

4.5.2 The Information Void: What Nobody Tells You

Beyond struggling with opaque systems, participants consistently encountered complete absences of crucial information, particularly regarding workplace transitions. When analysed through the MDEF, this void represents missing environmental bands—essential connections that should exist but are entirely absent, leaving students to navigate transitions without fundamental knowledge about available support.

AstroBlack's experience is particularly striking given his position as a high-achieving medical student about to graduate as a doctor:

"*In terms of Access to Work I don't know exactly yet, because obviously like, I've not even had my initial application processed yet... I only found out about that within the last couple of months because my study skills lady had mentioned it*." (AstroBlack, Lines 273-276)

This information void represents a profound institutional failure where universities systematically fail to provide transition-specific information. The fact that AstroBlack only discovered Access to Work through a chance conversation with his study skills tutor reveals how institutions abdicate their responsibility for comprehensive transition support.

When asked about the accessibility passport mentioned in government documentation, his response was definitive:

"*I've not heard of it before*" (AstroBlack, Line 291)

This is remarkable given AstroBlack's detailed knowledge of DSA, which he describes as:

"*Pretty good working knowledge because I've had to essentially and it's been a necessity*" (AstroBlack, Line 455)

The disconnect between his comprehensive understanding of educational support and his lack of access to information about employment support illustrates the systemic void that produces the outcomes Vincent and Fabri (2022) documented—only 14% of autistic adults achieve full-time employment in the UK, with many overqualified for their positions. This statistic is symptomatic of the information void; when students receive no systematic information about transition support, these outcomes become inevitable rather than surprising.

Maisie's experience crystallises this absence with painful clarity:

"*So I've never heard of the scheme [Access to Work], but essentially I finished uni and then started my job and there's not really... I've not really had any support adjusting to it and I do ridiculous shifts. So it's been a balance of that. I'm about on top of it now, but I didn't have anything to transition me*." (Maisie, Lines 143-146)

When pressed about university transition support, her response was emphatic:

"*No, nothing. Nothing at all*" (Maisie, Line 148)

This complete absence of transition support reflects what the AGCAS (2025, p. 5) report identified—autistic graduates at all qualification levels experience the lowest levels of full-time employment, with only 40% securing permanent contracts compared to 56% of non-disabled graduates. Through the MDEF, Maisie's experience shows entire environmental bands simply disappearing at the crucial transition moment, leaving her to create her own structures without guidance or support.

Emily's account reveals that even when career support exists, it fails to address neurodivergent-specific needs:

"*We've had that generic like, like we've had like information about days that we could go to about new jobs and stuff. But in terms of me specifically, nothing really, nothing I don't think... Nothing really specific to see someone who is neurodivergent, not had any like extra support for getting a new job*." (Emily, Lines 64-68)

Her elaboration of why generic support fails illuminates the specific challenges neurodivergent students face:

"*I think the whole application process seems so daunting to me... it takes me a while to do something like that, it would take me days. Or even like, say, applying on like the NHS, everyone's told me how horrible the, horrible the applying for form. They're like they applying for jobs and the forms are so, I just don't even want to look at it.*" (Emily, Lines 75-79)

This aligns with Pesonen et al. (2021a), who found that autistic students consistently highlighted the need for individualised, flexible support during transitions. Yet Emily's paralysis when facing employment applications reveals how the absence of transition-specific guidance creates practical barriers that generic career support cannot address. When universities fail to provide employment-specific information, students like Emily are left navigating complex application processes without the scaffolding they require.

The information void inhibits the proximal processes that should facilitate transitions between university and employment contexts. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2007) emphasised that development occurs through progressively complex reciprocal interactions between the individual and their immediate environment over extended periods. However, when universities fail to provide employment transition information, these proximal processes cannot form. The MDEF reveals this as a mesosystem failure—the connections between educational and employment microsystems simply do not exist for neurodivergent students.

Demi's experience with Access to Work shows this disconnection. When asked about the accessibility passport, she expressed confusion about its purpose:

"*I didn't really yeah, not really. Sure what the point of it means.*" (Demi, Lines 145-146)

Her confusion stemmed from a form that "*doesn't need to go anywhere and doesn't give you a conclusion as to whether you actually would need to apply for access to it*" (Demi, Lines 143-145). Even when information exists, without institutional guidance to contextualise it within the employment transition, it remains meaningless to students attempting to navigate these systems.

Maisie's experience crystallises how this systemic void manifests at the critical transition moment:

"*I mean I've already said it but someone telling me that access to work existed would have been really helpful because I didn't know it was a thing until I applied for this job*." (Maisie, Lines 118-119)

Her account reveals the temporal dimension of this failure. She only discovered Access to Work after she was already employed, long after university support had ended. This timing represents a critical chronosystem failure in Bronfenbrenner's model—the coordination between environmental systems across time completely breaks down at graduation. As Navarro and Tudge (2023) emphasise, effective development requires coordination between microsystems across temporal transitions. When this coordination fails, as it systematically does for neurodivergent students, the environmental systems that should support development instead create barriers to it.

4.5.3 Multi-directional Pressures: Juggling Impossible Demands (Subtheme: Individual Agency and Advocacy Requirements)

The navigation challenges become exponentially complex when students must manage multiple systems simultaneously, whilst also advocating for their own needs. This section integrates the subtheme of Individual Agency and Advocacy Requirements, revealing how students must become experts in systems navigation whilst managing academic, personal, and health challenges. Their experiences reveal what Navarro and Tudge (2023, p. 19344) term the "bidirectionality between the macrosystem and developing individuals," but with a crucial addition—this bidirectionality operates across multiple systems simultaneously, creating multi-directional pressures that require extraordinary personal resources to manage.

Philip's experience provides the most comprehensive illustration of these multi-directional pressures and the advocacy burden placed on students:

"*So I would be working on the modules that were basically term two whilst finishing off my term one and learning my term one and term two at the same time. Basically the*

constraint of let's say the speed of a masters like kind of framework and and not only basically the stuff not being in place." (Philip, Lines 171-173)

This academic juggling was only one dimension of Philip's multi-directional navigation. He was simultaneously managing a family health crisis:

"*Unfortunately, my parent of mine basically got cancer diagnosis and so I had to stop and go look after them. I applied for extensions based off this and basically what happened is I applied out of the deadline period supposedly... I literally travelled to a different country at that period of time and was quite literally organising oncologists and other appointments for my parents at the time.*" (Philip, Lines 313-321)

The university's response to his situation reveals the rigidity of systems that cannot accommodate multi-directional life pressures:

"*I thought that was pretty reasonable considering that I literally travelled to a different country at that period of time and was quite literally organising oncologists and other appointments for my parents at the time. The university then changed tactics and they said that it was a senior academic instead, that had made a decision, and it wasn't about the bylaws.*" (Philip, Lines 323-326)

Philip's forced expertise in self-advocacy reveals the paradoxical burden placed on neurodivergent students:

"*When I pulled the university up in this before all I've got is I've got bylaws and again I'm a stickler and I've had to get good at this now. I've read through the bylaws. I've then resent them back to them being like that's actually what it says you want to give another read and at that point the university does what I call like a double lock where they just pile me off to someone else*." (Philip, Lines 476-480)

This represents a fundamental inversion of what Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2007) describe as healthy proximal processes. Rather than experiencing regular, progressively complex reciprocal interactions that support development, Philip faces hostile interactions that require him to develop defensive expertise simply to access basic support. His skills in navigating bylaws and bureaucratic systems are not evidence

of positive development but rather trauma responses to systemic failure. The chronosystem dimension reveals the sustained nature of this burden—Philip must maintain this advocacy across months whilst simultaneously managing academic demands, his parents' cancer treatment, and his own neurodivergent needs. The university's "double lock" strategy demonstrates what occurs when microsystem and mesosystem structures actively obstruct rather than facilitate development.

When examined through the MDEF, Philip's experience shows him not just navigating environmental bands but also manually adjusting each one whilst they actively resist adaptation. He must become an expert in disability legislation, university bylaws, and bureaucratic navigation—all whilst managing his studies, his parents' cancer diagnosis, and his own neurodivergent needs. The person-context interaction that Bronfenbrenner emphasises becomes deeply pathological here: the very characteristics that should enable Philip's development (attention to detail, persistence, analytical thinking) are instead consumed by the labour of forcing dysfunctional systems to function.

Michelle's narrative, documented through my reflective account, provides another powerful example of multi-directional navigation combined with advocacy challenges:

"*Michelle gained a position as a Trio member for the Oliver McGowan Training... she had been approached to take the lead on the panel to review care plans for Autistic People or Learning Disabilities... Michelle was pleased to have been asked but was concerned about how she would manage her studies, mainly as they were at level 6, and she had a dissertation to write*."

The multi-directionality of Michelle's situation becomes clear when examining all the systems she was simultaneously navigating:

- Level 6 academic requirements, including a dissertation (educational microsystem)
- A new professional role with significant responsibilities (employment microsystem)

- Inadequate in-class support that was actively hindering rather than helping (support microsystem failure)
- Housing insecurity requiring relocation (personal microsystem crisis)
- The emotional impact of witnessing trauma in her accommodation (psychological stress across systems)

When analysed through the MDEF, Michelle's experience shows all environmental bands pulling in different directions simultaneously—academic, professional, personal, and support systems—creating impossible tensions that no amount of individual resilience could resolve. The fact that she succeeded despite these challenges speaks to extraordinary personal resources rather than effective systemic support.

The advocacy burden becomes particularly cruel when considering Emily's interview experiences:

"*I didn't when I did my prep interview, I didn't tell them that I was dyslexic or anything, so I didn't have the questions beforehand. So I think I was just really overwhelmed and it was like, it just probably looked like I didn't know the answer or I didn't know. I didn't like. I didn't understand it or anything, but it just definitely, definitely takes me a while.*" (Emily, Lines 145-149)

Her fear of disclosure reflects what Santuzzi et al. (2024) found—that 58% of neurodivergent graduates feel compelled to conceal their condition due to stigma concerns. The MDEF reveals environmental bands that not only fail to accommodate but actively punish disclosure, forcing students to choose between accessing support and avoiding discrimination.

4.6 Theme Two: Perpetual Disruption: When Support Systems Fail to Hold

The second major theme emerged through careful examination of how participants experienced support not as a safety net but as a web that repeatedly tore just when they needed it most. The analytical process revealed how discontinuity and disruption

patterns manifest across different contexts and timeframes, creating cumulative impacts that compound over time.

4.6.1 The Onerous Struggle: Forever Starting Again

Participants consistently described having to rebuild support arrangements from scratch, often multiple times throughout their education. This Sisyphean pattern—building support only to watch it collapse and having to begin again—created exhaustion and despair that compounded their existing challenges.

Philip's three-year ordeal exemplifies this pattern with devastating clarity:

"*So once I eventually finished my modules, which was a whole different thing which actually once I finally finished my modules... I go to then finish my dissertation, which is my last thing I wanted to do. I have this break which is basically when I, when I take my leave because of my families issues I then come back and then I go to do my chapter one, two and three... I found all this out because I was talking to the Business School and being like I need to get my ethical approval form, I cannot move forward with my dissertation till then... I have had no contact with an advisor. They've given me no one and they go, oh, OK.*" (Philip, Lines 286-305)

The cascading nature of these failures becomes apparent when he describes discovering his supervisor had left:

"*They sent me an email. They sent 'you do have an advisor, it's this person here'. The person I then relayed to them, to their own Business School has not been in employment with them for over 8 months or to a year. They seem to be unaware of this factor.*" (Philip, Lines 306-309)

This experience resonates with Quinn and Anwar-Westander's (2023) finding of "an administrative burden due to multiple bodies involved in support (DSA, Disability Services, Occupational Health, academic departments, Access to Work) that often do not communicate." However, Philip's lived experience reveals the human cost of this fragmentation—three years of his life consumed by institutional failures, each restart further depleting his resources.

Through bioecological theory, this represents a fundamental breakdown in chronosystem continuity—the temporal dimension that should provide stability and progression instead creates repeated disruptions that undermine development (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007). The MDEF reveals environmental bands that cannot maintain their configuration over time, repeatedly snapping back to rigid default positions regardless of previous adjustments.

Demi's experience in placement settings demonstrates how discontinuity extends beyond university into professional preparation:

"*When I was on placements, quite a handful of my educators didn't really put much effort into reading or understanding what we have... we have like a template in the book called like a learning plan. And that's your opportunity to like let your educator know about any like learning disabilities or any requirements that you have... Out of the seven, I wanna say four educators weren't really that keen to go through that section of the booklet.*" (Demi, Lines 118-126)

The impact of this institutional failure to implement agreed support becomes clear:

"*A lot of educators would not really pay much attention to that part... And then later on try and make out like I downplayed my needs. So that was quite challenging.*" (Demi, Lines 127-129)

This reflects what Vincent (2019) found regarding autistic students' "fear of the unknown" during transitions—but Demi's experience reveals the unknown includes whether support arrangements will be honoured or dismissed. When examined through the MDEF, this reveals environmental bands that appear to offer support but prove unreliable in practice, forcing students to test and retest whether support structures will hold constantly.

4.6.2 The Knowledge Drain: When Experience Walks Away

Beyond structural discontinuity, participants described the devastating impact of losing support relationships where trust and understanding had been carefully built. This subtheme reveals how the loss of individual support champions—often the only

functioning element within broken systems—created cascading failures across all support structures.

Michelle's experience, presented in full in Section 4.3.3.1, illustrates this devastation. The compound impact of losing her study skills tutor at the same time as a traumatice event in her accommodation, followed in the next academic year by the unannounced replacement of her in-class support worker with someone who had not read her learning support plan, produced exactly the cascading failure this subtheme describes. The new support worker's continued provision of tasks too easy or inappropriate for Michelle's modules, sustained over several months, was experienced by Michelle herself as an active source of distress; in one session in November 2023 she described the in-class support as "*doing my head in*" because she could not understand what was being asked of her. The accumulated knowledge from her previous support relationships – built carefully across an academic year – was unrecoverable.

When examined through the MDEF, this represents carefully calibrated environmental bands suddenly snapping back to rigid, inappropriate positions, destroying months of careful adjustment. The neo-ecological framework's emphasis on proximal processes reveals how these disruptions do not just remove support but actively undermine the developmental processes that had been established (Navarro and Tudge, 2023).

AstroBlack's experience with changing mentors reveals how support relationships can become actively harmful:

"*I had one, and then I didn't start using her until, like, I'd had DSA for a few months... there was kind of one time where- and the thing is as well with the tutor stuff or the specialist mentor, I just didn't really see as much benefit from it... she kind of almost like had to go at me for like, being late for a session once and she was saying, like, 'it's a summer holidays, I have a bunch of kids and I, you know, even though I've got to look after all these kids, I still make time for your sessions'*." (AstroBlack, Lines 266-274)

His response reveals the energy cost of poor support relationships:

"*At that point I was like, I contacted the company, I was like, can you give me a different mentor, please?... I feel like people if you're employed and you're getting paid to be my*

thing... she just seemed a bit judgemental sometimes, which, like, that's not really what I want from a specialist mentor. Like, I feel like it should be like a judgement free environment." (AstroBlack, Lines 275-280)

This aligns with Kitchen et al.'s (2021) ecological validation model, which emphasises how validation must occur across multiple coordinated support contexts over time. When support providers invalidate rather than validate, they create what could be termed "ecological invalidation"—actively undermining the student's sense of belonging and self-efficacy.

4.6.3 Transition into Void: When Support Simply Stops (Subtheme: Institutional and Structural Barriers)

The most profound disruption occurs at graduation, where support does not gradually reduce but simply ceases entirely. This section integrates the Institutional and Structural Barriers subtheme, revealing how policy-level decisions create the "transition cliff" that participants universally experienced.

Demi's experience is stark in its simplicity:

JAN HANSON: "So going back to your transition from university to work, would you say you had the support you needed from university to transition to work?"

DEMI: "*No. Pretty much all contact with university has ceased. I've got obviously every person has the opportunity to use their tutor as a reference but after we agreed to obviously act as a reference for the job I haven't really had any contact with him or anyone else from the university since*." (Demi, Lines 131-136)

When examined through the MDEF, this represents all environmental bands simultaneously releasing their hold, leaving the individual suddenly unsupported in space. The abruptness of this cessation violates fundamental principles of ecological transitions, which require graduated adaptation rather than sudden disconnection (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

Rosa, despite her professional knowledge as a study skills tutor, witnesses this cliff repeatedly with her students:

"*I mean a lot of them have raised it as a concern to me. There's this fear of being left alone. Not knowing that there's access to workplace coaches and things of that nature... I always signpost my students towards Access to Work and they're like oh have I got access to that like I've got medical students that are graduating and have graduated in the past and they're like do I have access to these things?*" (Rosa, Lines 192-197)

Her observation that "*99% of the students I've spoken to don't know about Access to Work funding*" (Rosa, Line 198) reveals this is not individual oversight but systematic institutional failure. This aligns with McDowall and Kiseleva's (2024, p. 15) finding of "limited evidence-based research on transition support, with most studies US-centric and having small sample sizes"—but Rosa's lived experience reveals the human impact of this research gap.

The institutional nature of these barriers becomes explicit in Philip's experience with university policy:

"*The university once told me, and still to this day, have this opinion, that the DSA, the DSA student allowance recommendations, are just that recommendations, and that university has no legal obligation to do them.*" (Philip, Lines 456-458)

This institutional position—directly contradicting the Equality Act 2010's reasonable adjustment requirements—reveals how macrosystem resistance to neurodiversity support cascades down through exosystem policies, creating microsystem failures (EHRC, 2010). The MDEF reveals environmental bands that are structurally designed to resist adaptation, maintaining rigidity despite legislative requirements for flexibility.

4.7 Theme Three: The Identity-Navigation Paradox: Being Neurodivergent in Neurotypical Spaces

The third major theme explores the profound paradox participants faced: needing to simultaneously assert their neurodivergent identity to access support whilst hiding it to avoid discrimination, all whilst navigating environments designed exclusively for neurotypical ways of being. This theme reveals how identity work becomes an additional labour that neurodivergent students must perform alongside their academic and transition tasks.

4.7.1 The Exhaustion of Translation: Living Between Worlds

Participants consistently described the exhausting work of translating between their neurodivergent ways of being and the neurotypical demands of the environment. This was not simply code-switching but a constant, draining performance that affected every aspect of their university experience and transition preparation.

Willow articulates this exhaustion with striking clarity:

"*There's definitely masking as well, but I that comes, yeah, like sometimes I just want to be left alone, and it's just sometimes exhausting. Just pretending to be someone to fit in. I think that comes down for me to like talking and interacting with other people, but yeah, it's like, trying. Yeah, definitely trying to mask, yeah, masking as well as one like just. It's kind of like exhausting sometimes just to, like, be around people and so I need my alone time.*" (Willow, Lines 83-86)

Her elaboration reveals the cognitive load of constant translation:

"*I really struggle with social interactions and making new friends and then the change of living somewhere different from home was also a big struggle for me, especially as like talking to people is like - because I'm quite quiet and shy and I think that's due to my autism I now know, I was like, how do I talk to people? Umm so I have like, do I follow the script in my head of like, normal human interactions like 'Hi, how are you?' and once that's finished, like I'm so bad with, like carrying on conversations especially in like a large group of people.*" (Willow, Lines 36-42)

Mantzalas et al.'s (2022) systematic review on autistic masking found that it has profound impacts on identity development and mental health outcomes. Moreover, Willow's words reveal the immediate, visceral experience—the exhausting mental gymnastics required for every social interaction (Quigley and Gallagher, 2025). When examined through the MDEF, this represents the individual at the centre having to constantly reconfigure themselves to match the expectations of rigid environmental bands, rather than those bands adapting to accommodate different ways of being.

AstroBlack's experience reveals how masking can suddenly fail, with devastating consequences:

"*I can be like doing fine in a social situation and then it can take like. One little thing and then it will just throw me off for the rest of the evening, which is like I wish like I wasn't like that, you know? But I know I can't really, like, help it."* (AstroBlack, Lines 103-105)

His description of a specific incident illuminates the fragility of masking (Mantzalas et al., 2022; Quigley and Gallagher, 2025):

"*I was kind of mangling the quiz sheet and then this other guy that I'd lived with was just, I'll *****, give it here, like, and just, like, snatched it from me... I immediately like, I feel like I'm not very good at, like, hiding my emotions sometimes. So, like, I feel like it's quite obvious in my face that I was, like, **** *** with what he just did. So like I just kind of like froze a bit and then immediately like went to the toilet*." (AstroBlack, Lines 97-102)

AstroBlack's response—freezing and retreating—represents the body's protective shutdown when overwhelmed, yet because neurodivergence is largely invisible, neurotypical observers cannot recognise this as a disability-related response. This creates what Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2007) would identify as a fundamental distortion of proximal processes: the regular reciprocal interactions between person and environment that should support development become sites of misunderstanding and harm when the person's characteristics (neurodivergence) remain invisible to others. The hidden nature of neurodivergence creates a particularly cruel dynamic: students appear to be coping until they suddenly are not, and when meltdown or shutdown occurs, it is interpreted through a neurotypical lens as overreaction, rudeness, or incompetence rather than as a legitimate disability-related response to overwhelming sensory or social input. This represents precisely the opposite of what Navarro and Tudge (2023) describe as ecological validation—instead of the environment validating and supporting the individual's needs, it actively invalidates their experience by rendering their disability incomprehensible to observers. This invisibility means that when masking fails—when the student can no longer maintain the neurotypical performance—there is no framework for understanding what is happening or why retreat becomes necessary for regulation. When examined through the MDEF, invisible disabilities create additional environmental bands of expectation and misunderstanding;

the person at the centre must not only navigate the actual demands of the environment but also manage others' inability to perceive or comprehend their disability, effectively doubling the adaptive work required whilst receiving none of the understanding or accommodation that visible disabilities might prompt.

This aligns with Butcher and Lane's (2024) finding that "HE students' identity as neurodivergent (Autistic and/or ADHDers) has a large impact on how they experience several micro-systems," with students' comfort with their neurodivergent identity varying significantly across different environmental contexts.

The environmental dimension of this identity work becomes explicit in AstroBlack's experience of sensory barriers in lecture theatres. The constant background noise from ventilation systems created an insurmountable barrier to concentration, forcing him to navigate the impossible choice between accessing his education and protecting his sensory wellbeing. This reveals how built environments actively hostile to neurodivergent ways of being compound the exhaustion of masking—students must not only perform neurotypicality socially but also endure physical environments that cause sensory distress. When examined through the MDEF, this represents environmental bands that demand constant adaptation from the individual whilst remaining utterly inflexible themselves, creating multi-directional pressures that make sustainable participation impossible.

4.7.2 The Irony of Advocacy: Using What You Lack to Get What You Need

Perhaps the cruellest paradox participants faced was needing to use precisely the skills their neurodivergence affected to advocate for support. This created a Catch-22 situation where accessing help required demonstrating capabilities that one's condition affects, whilst simultaneously proving the condition's impact warranted support.

Philip articulates this with bitter precision:

"*I found myself spending almost equal amount of times on my studies as I were combating the university to try and get things put into place for me... ironically, it's*

laughable that someone who has a condition supposedly with, like, you know, executive function disorders, it's organising university's front of house." (Philip, Lines 177-185)

The depth of expertise Philip was forced to develop reveals the scale of this paradox:

"*When I pulled the university up in this before all I've got is I've got bylaws and again I'm a stickler and I've had to get good at this now. I've read through the bylaws. I've then resent them back to them being like that's actually what it says you want to give another read.*" (Philip, Lines 476-480)

Through bioecological theory, this represents a fundamental violation of developmental support principles—rather than environmental systems adapting to support individual development, the individual must develop capabilities specifically to force environmental adaptation (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007).

Rosa's professional perspective as a study skills tutor reveals how this paradox affects students systematically. Despite working directly with neurodivergent students, she witnesses them struggling with the same advocacy burden, often lacking even basic information about their rights or available support. The expectation that students will independently navigate complex bureaucratic systems to access accommodations assumes precisely the executive function capabilities that many neurodivergent conditions affect.

Emily's experience with disclosure in interview contexts reveals another dimension of this paradox:

"*I didn't when I did my prep interview, I didn't tell them that I was dyslexic or anything, so I didn't have the questions beforehand. So I think I was just really overwhelmed and it was like, it just probably looked like I didn't know the answer or I didn't know. I didn't like. I didn't understand it or anything, but it just definitely, definitely takes me a while*." (Emily, Lines 145-149)

Her dilemma—needing accommodations to demonstrate her capabilities but fearing discrimination if she requests them—reflects what Santuzzi et al. (2024) found, with 58% of neurodivergent graduates feeling compelled to conceal their condition.

Maisie's experience reveals the impossibility of this position when entering employment without any transition guidance:

"*So I've never heard of the scheme [Access to Work], but essentially I finished uni and then started my job and there's not really... I've not really had any support adjusting to it and I do ridiculous shifts*." (Maisie, Lines 143-145)

Without knowing that workplace support exists, Maisie could not advocate for accommodations, yet the demanding nature of her role required exactly the support she did not know to request. This represents a complete breakdown in the mesosystem connections between education and employment—the absence of information itself becomes a barrier that no amount of self-advocacy can overcome.

Demi's placement experiences show that even when students do advocate successfully, their documented needs may be dismissed or ignored, requiring them to advocate repeatedly:

"*Out of the seven, I wanna say four educators weren't really that keen to go through that section of the booklet... And then later on try and make out like I downplayed my needs.*" (Demi, Lines 123-129)

The MDEF reveals environmental bands that create double binds—pulling in contradictory directions that make any movement painful. Students must simultaneously prove they are capable enough to succeed whilst also demonstrating they are disabled enough to warrant support, navigate complex systems whilst experiencing executive function challenges, and assert their needs whilst facing stigma for doing so.

4.7.3 Sensory Battlegrounds: When Environment Becomes Enemy

Beyond social and administrative challenges, participants described educational environments as sensory battlegrounds where their neurodivergent processing met hostile physical spaces. These experiences reveal how environmental design itself becomes a barrier to participation and success.

Willow's lecture theatre experience is visceral in its intensity:

"*I think there's I suppose like loud noises as well in the lecture theatre. I can remember one seminar is like that was just the really annoying, the fans make a really annoying whirring sound as like it was like it was really it was. I was trying to focus on anything but the whirring sound*." (Willow, Lines 88-91)

AstroBlack describes how sensory sensitivity has intensified over time:

"Like loud - I'm not, like noises and stuff like I am a bit and I feel like this is something that's come on more in the past few years. I don't know if I necessarily struggled as much with sensory stuff over the, like since, but like you know, sometimes like I'll find myself if a noise is loud or like a constant loud noise or something, suddenly I'll be going like that covers ears with hands" (AstroBlack, Lines 125-128)

His reflection on how stress amplifies these challenges reveals the interconnected nature of his struggles:

"*I found myself finding it really hard to focus on what people were saying to me in conversations and like most of the time, it's because there's other noises and stuff going on and my brain is like focusing on these other noises, even though I know I should like you know, focus on what's you know what the person's saying to me*." (AstroBlack, Lines 133-136)

Through the neo-ecological framework, these sensory challenges represent a fundamental mismatch between neurodivergent processing and environments designed exclusively for neurotypical sensory profiles (Navarro and Tudge, 2023). The MDEF reveals environmental bands that not only fail to accommodate but actively assault the individual at the centre, creating additional stress that compounds other challenges.

Maisie's description reveals how ADHD affects sustained academic work in these environments:

"*It was the assignments for my course was such a nightmare trying to keep myself focused for that long and I started medication to try and help, and then the medication made it worse towards the end of the day and it was just trying to juggle it all."* (Maisie, Lines 92-95)

4.7.4 The Identity Cost: "I Feel Like It's Not a Huge Massive Disability"

Perhaps most poignantly, participants revealed how systemic failures led them to minimise their own struggles and needs. Years of fighting for basic support created a learned helplessness and self-doubt about the legitimacy of their needs.

Emily's words are particularly heartbreaking:

"*I feel like with me because I'm dyslexic, I feel like it's not a huge massive disability. And I know I've struggled a lot, definitely in higher education, but I think the way I view it is like I didn't even think there was free help out there. I just think we kind of just have to get on with it.*" (Emily, Lines 61-64)

This minimisation reflects internalised ableism resulting from systemic gaslighting about the legitimacy of neurodivergent support needs. When examined through the MDEF, this represents the individual at the centre beginning to believe they should compress themselves rather than expecting environmental bands to adapt.

Maisie's experience reveals similar minimisation:

"*Part of my ADHD, if something is harder than it needs to be, I just walk away. I just don't do it and put my head down and sort it out myself. So having to go through someone and feeling like an inconvenience, I just that's why I was just like no, it's fine. I'll manage*." (Maisie, Lines 107-109)

This self-minimisation reflects what Butcher and Lane (2024) found: that students' comfort with their neurodivergent identity varies significantly across different environmental contexts. But these lived experiences reveal how institutional failures create this discomfort—when every request for support is a battle, students learn to stop asking.

Even AstroBlack, articulate and academically successful, reveals this internalised minimisation:

"*I mentioned once that I'm autistic, and you know, I'm not like, you know, it's, you know, obviously like it's a spectrum. Some people you could probably know without them*

telling you, whereas me, like, I feel like if I didn't tell you, you probably wouldn't know unless you're kind of, like, had been around me for a while." (AstroBlack, Lines 92-95)

AstroBlack's comment reveals a deeply problematic hierarchy of disability—the implicit belief that those who can "pass" as neurotypical are somehow less autistic or less deserving of support. This represents the internalisation of what Butcher and Lane (2024) identified: students feeling they are "not disabled enough" to access support for disabled students. The fact that AstroBlack, a medical student navigating extraordinary academic demands whilst managing sensory overload and social exhaustion, feels the need to qualify his autism diagnosis reveals how systemic failures have taught neurodivergent students to measure their struggles against an imagined hierarchy of "authentic" disability. His ability to mask effectively becomes evidence against his need for support, creating a cruel paradox where the very skills developed to survive hostile environments are used to dismiss the impact those environments have.

This phenomenon extends beyond individual participants. Research by Butcher and Lane (2024) found neurodivergent students describing themselves as falling into a "fail cycle" where their expectations of themselves continually decrease, or feeling too embarrassed to even send teachers their Reasonable Adjustment Plan. One student in their study articulated feeling, "I don't belong in groups with people who have ADHD and or Autism"—the ultimate rejection of one's own neurodivergent identity driven by institutional invalidation.

Willow's earlier reflection about "just pretending to be someone to fit in" takes on new meaning when understood through this lens of self-minimisation. When institutions communicate through their actions (or inaction) that neurodivergent needs are burdensome rather than legitimate, students internalise this message, deciding they should "just get on with it" rather than accessing support that could transform their educational experience.

4.8 Cross-Theme Analysis: The Multi-directional Reality of Neurodivergent Student Transitions

4.8.1 The Systemic Nature of Individual Struggles

Across all three themes, participants' experiences reveal that what might appear as individual struggles are actually systemic failures operating across multiple ecological levels. Through Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2007) bioecological framework, we can see how breakdowns in proximal processes at the microsystem level (student-support worker relationships) are caused by failures at the mesosystem level (poor coordination between services), which are influenced by exosystem policies (institutional interpretations of legal requirements) and macrosystem beliefs (persistent medical model assumptions about disability).

This multi-level analysis could be applied to each participant's experience, revealing how systemic failures cascade through ecological levels rather than representing individual deficits. Philip's three-year ordeal serves as an exemplar of this pattern:

Microsystem: Supervisors disappearing without replacement, support staff making judgmental comments

Mesosystem: Departments not communicating, DSA and university systems failing to coordinate

Exosystem: University claiming DSA requirements are optional, policies that do not accommodate life crises

Macrosystem: Ableist assumptions that disabled students should be grateful for any support

Chronosystem: These failures are compounded over three years, creating cumulative disadvantage

When analysed through the MDEF, Philip's experience shows how failures at each level create cascading effects throughout the entire structure. When macrosystem beliefs about disability remain rooted in medical model assumptions, they create exosystem

policies that resist accommodation, mesosystem failures in coordination, and ultimately microsystem interactions characterised by invalidation rather than support.

4.8.2 The Impossibility of Individual Solutions

The lived experiences powerfully demonstrate that no amount of individual resilience, self-advocacy, or determination can overcome systemic failures. Even Rosa, with professional knowledge as a study skills tutor and years of experience navigating disability support systems, faced what she describes as "very, very difficult" battles requiring four appeals.

This finding fundamentally challenges neoliberal narratives of "student success" as individual achievement. As Kitchen et al. (2021) demonstrated through their ecological validation model, student success requires validation across multiple coordinated support contexts over time. But these lived experiences reveal that for neurodivergent students, these contexts are not just uncoordinated but often actively hostile.

The MDEF illuminates this impossibility—no matter how strong or resilient the individual at the centre, they cannot maintain structural integrity when all environmental bands are pulling in contradictory directions or failing to provide support. Philip's experience exemplifies this: despite developing legal expertise in university bylaws and persistent self-advocacy across three years, he could not overcome microsystem failures (vanishing supervisors), mesosystem breakdowns (departments refusing to communicate), exosystem barriers (policies treating DSA as optional), and macrosystem ableism (assumptions that disabled students should be grateful for minimal support). Similarly, Emily's internalised belief that dyslexia is "not a huge, massive disability" and Maisie's pattern of walking away rather than feeling like an inconvenience both represent adaptive responses to environments that punish rather than support help-seeking. Michelle's simultaneous navigation of academic demands, professional responsibilities, inadequate support, housing insecurity, and witnessed trauma demonstrates that even extraordinary resilience cannot compensate for systemic abandonment. The expectation that neurodivergent students should overcome systemic failures through individual effort represents a fundamental misunderstanding of how development occurs through person-environment interactions.

4.8.3 The True Cost of Transition Without Support

The complete absence of transition support experienced by all participants reveals the true cost of what I have termed the "invisible transition period." The AGCAS (2025) statistics—only 40% of autistic graduates securing permanent contracts compared to 56% of non-disabled graduates—become tragically understandable when viewed through these experiences.

Willow's uncertainty about her future is not individual indecision but the predictable result of systemic failure:

"*I actually have no clue what I want to do after I finish my degree*" (Willow)

When students receive no transition support whilst managing overwhelming academic and sensory demands, career planning becomes impossible. Emily's terror at application forms, Maisie's entry into employment with "nothing at all" in terms of support, and AstroBlack only learning about Access to Work through chance—these are not isolated incidents but systematic patterns of institutional abandonment.

Through the neo-ecological framework, we see how the absence of transition support represents a failure to recognise that contemporary transitions occur across both physical and digital environments (Navarro and Tudge, 2023). Students must navigate online application systems, virtual interviews, and digital workplace platforms without preparation or support, adding layers of complexity to already challenging transitions.

4.8.4 Moments of Hope: When Systems Work

Despite the overwhelming evidence of systemic failure, participants occasionally described moments when support systems functioned effectively. These rare instances provide crucial insight into what effective support could look like if systematically implemented.

Michelle's experience with the Oliver McGowan Training represents one such moment:

"*Michelle gained a position as a Trio member for the Oliver McGowan Training... she had been approached to take the lead on the panel to review care plans for People with Autism or Learning Disabilities*."

This opportunity recognised Michelle's lived experience as expertise, validating her neurodivergent perspective rather than seeing it as a deficit. When examined through the MDEF, this represents environmental bands adapting to create space for neurodivergent contributions rather than requiring conformity.

Rosa's practice of informing her students about Access to Work, whilst highlighting systematic failure, also shows how individual practitioners can create bridges:

"I always signpost my students towards Access to Work and they're like oh have I got access to that like I've got medical students that are graduating and have graduated in the past and they're like do I have access to these things?" (Rosa, Lines 195-197)

These moments of effective support share common characteristics:

- Recognition of neurodivergent strengths and perspectives
- Proactive information sharing rather than reactive crisis management
- Validation of lived experience as expertise
- Environmental adaptation rather than individual conformity

Through bioecological theory, these represent successful proximal processes—regular, increasingly complex, reciprocal interactions that promote development (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007). Michelle's progression exemplifies this developmental trajectory: initial recognition of her expertise led to participation in training delivery, which developed into increasingly complex responsibilities as a panel leader reviewing care plans, with each interaction building upon previous success and validating her neurodivergent perspective as a valuable contribution rather than a deficit. Similarly, Rosa's repeated signposting interactions with successive cohorts of students demonstrate how regular, sustained engagement creates cumulative impact—each conversation building her understanding of student needs whilst simultaneously empowering students with critical transition information, creating reciprocal learning that strengthens both her practice and their confidence. These examples show what becomes possible when environmental systems develop genuine flexibility and responsiveness, with interactions becoming progressively more sophisticated as mutual

understanding deepens over time. The MDEF reveals the stark contrast between these moments of success, and the systemic failures documented throughout this chapter: when environmental bands adapt and coordinate to support the individual at the centre, development flourishes through strengthened proximal processes; when bands remain rigid or pull in contradictory directions, even the most resilient individuals cannot overcome the structural impossibility of navigating hostile multi-directional pressures. These rare instances of adequate support thus serve not merely as exceptions that prove the rule, but as a proof of concept—demonstrating that neurodivergent student success is possible when institutions develop the flexibility and coordination that should be standard practice rather than an exceptional occurrence.

4.9 Discussion: Implications for Understanding Neurodivergent Transitions

4.9.1 Re-conceptualising Transition Support

These findings fundamentally challenge current conceptualisations of transition support as a linear process from education to employment. Participants' experiences reveal transition as multi-directional navigation through complex, often contradictory environmental systems that require sophisticated support extending well beyond current provision.

The complete absence of transition-specific support across all participants aligns with McDowall and Kiseleva's (2024, p. 15) finding that "future research needs to concentrate more on neuroinclusion at the level of the entire education institution and on transition into work." But these lived experiences reveal that even this recommendation does not go far enough—transition support must address the complex interplay between multiple environmental systems rather than focusing on institutions in isolation.

When analysed through the MDEF, the participant experiences throughout this chapter reveal what effective transition support would require:

Maintained structural integrity: Demi's experience of all university contact ceasing at graduation, and Maisie entering employment with "nothing at all" in support,

demonstrates the devastating impact of the transition cliff. Support must continue through the transition rather than abruptly ceasing, maintaining connection across the critical period when students are most vulnerable.

Coordinating band flexibility: Philip's three-year ordeal of departments refusing to communicate and DSA systems failing to coordinate with university processes exemplifies mesosystem breakdown. Valuable support requires genuine mesosystem connections between education and employment contexts, with coordinated handovers rather than systemic abandonment.

Reducing contradictory tensions: Emily's fear of disclosing her dyslexia in interviews, despite needing accommodations to establish her capabilities, illustrates the impossible double binds students face. Support systems must eliminate situations where students must choose between accessing support and avoiding discrimination, creating environments where disclosure is safe rather than risky (Jones and Orchard, 2024).

Recognising multi-directionality: Philip simultaneously manages academic demands, his parents' cancer diagnosis, and battles for basic support, alongside Michelle, navigating dissertation writing, professional responsibilities, inadequate support, housing insecurity, and witnessed trauma, reveals that transitions occur across all life domains simultaneously. Support must address this complexity rather than focusing narrowly on academic or employment transitions in isolation.

4.9.2 The Limits of Reasonable Adjustments

Participants' experiences reveal fundamental limitations in the reasonable adjustments model currently operating in UK higher education. Even when adjustments were formally approved, implementation failures were endemic. Demi's experience of educators ignoring learning plans, Philip's discovery that universities consider DSA requirements optional, and Michelle's in-class support actively hindering her progress all prove that the existence of policy does not ensure implementation.

This aligns with the recent Abrahart v University of Bristol case implications, which confirmed that teaching methods constitute "provisions, criteria, or practices" subject to reasonable adjustment duties (EHRC, 2024a). Yet these findings show that legal

clarification alone cannot address systematic implementation failures rooted in ableist institutional cultures.

The MDEF reveals why reasonable adjustments often fail—they attempt to add flexibility to individual bands whilst maintaining overall structural rigidity. What is needed is a fundamental reconstruction that builds flexibility and responsiveness into the basic design of educational and employment systems.

4.9.3 The Digital Dimension of Contemporary Transitions

Participants' experiences, particularly during and after COVID-19, reveal how digital environments add complexity to transition navigation. Willow's experience of being overwhelmed by online information, Emily's fear of digital application systems, and Philip's struggles with remote learning during a family crisis all reveal how neo-ecological considerations are essential for understanding contemporary transitions.

Navarro and Tudge's (2023) neo-ecological framework provides crucial theoretical tools for understanding these experiences. Digital environments do not simply replicate physical microsystems but create new developmental contexts with unique challenges and opportunities. For neurodivergent students, these digital spaces can simultaneously reduce some barriers (social interaction demands) whilst creating others (executive function challenges in unstructured online environments).

The MDEF extends into digital dimensions, with virtual bands of interaction creating additional complexity. Transition support must therefore address both physical and digital navigation challenges, recognising that contemporary employment increasingly requires competence across both domains.

4.9.4 Identity, Agency, and Resistance

Despite overwhelming systemic failures, participants demonstrated remarkable agency and resistance. Philip's mastery of university bylaws, Michelle's persistence in completing her degree despite multiple crisis points, Rosa's determination through four appeals, and all participants' willingness to share their experiences for this research represent forms of resistance against systemic oppression.

This agency should not be romanticised—participants paid enormous personal costs for their resistance, and many explicitly stated they were exhausted. As Maisie noted: "Part of my ADHD, if something is harder than it needs to be, I just walk away." This is not defeatism but rational self-preservation in the face of impossible demands.

When examined through the MDEF, participants' agency represents the individual at the centre, actively pushing back against constraining environmental bands, sometimes successfully creating space for themselves, but always at a significant personal cost. The solution is not to celebrate individual resilience but to create environmental systems that do not require an extraordinary effort for basic participation.

4.10 Conclusion: Multi-directional Navigation Without a Compass

4.10.1 Synthesising the Multi-directional Challenge

This chapter has documented the lived experiences of eight neurodivergent students navigating the transition from higher education towards employment, revealing three interconnected themes that operate synergistically to create an environment of systematic abandonment. The themes of struggling through invisible systems, perpetual disruption, and the identity-navigation paradox are not discrete challenges but mutually reinforcing barriers that compound to make a successful transition extraordinarily difficult and, for many, ultimately impossible without informal support networks or chance discoveries.

The integration of Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2007) bioecological theory with Navarro and Tudge's (2023) neo-ecological framework reveals how failures cascade across system levels. Macrosystem beliefs rooted in medical model assumptions create exosystem policies that resist accommodation, leading to mesosystem coordination failures and ultimately microsystem interactions characterised by invalidation rather than support. The chronosystem dimension shows how these failures compound over time, creating cumulative disadvantage that makes a successful transition increasingly unlikely.

When examined through the MDEF, these lived experiences reveal neurodivergent students positioned at the centre of multiple environmental bands that simultaneously demand conformity, provide inadequate information, disappear at critical moments, and actively resist the flexibility required for genuine support. Philip managing academic demands whilst battling for basic accommodations and supporting a parent with cancer, Michelle navigating dissertation completion alongside professional responsibilities and housing insecurity, and Willow simultaneously managing sensory overwhelm, social exhaustion, and academic pressures whilst receiving no career guidance all exemplify the multi-directional nature of these challenges. No single environmental band functions adequately, and critically, no coordination exists between bands—students must independently manage academic systems, disability support services, mental health provision, career guidance, and transition planning, with each operating in isolation and frequently providing contradictory or absent information.

Most critically, these lived experiences reveal that the "transition cliff" is not a metaphor but a lived reality where all support simultaneously ceases at the precise moment students need it most. The complete absence of transition-specific information or support across all participants, regardless of their university or discipline, point to systematic rather than isolated failure. AstroBlack's chance discovery of Access to Work months before completing medical school, Maisie's entry into healthcare employment with "nothing at all" in support, and Rosa's observation that 99% of her students remain unaware of employment support options collectively reveal that current systems operate through abandonment rather than transition facilitation.

4.10.2 Implications for Higher Education

The implications extend beyond individual student experiences to fundamental questions about higher education's purpose and values. If universities truly aim to prepare all students for post-graduation success, the current systematic abandonment of neurodivergent students at the point of transition represents a profound ethical failure. The circumstance that participants like Philip must spend "*almost equal amount of times on my studies as I were combating the university*" reveals institutions that consume rather than nurture neurodivergent potential.

This research aligns with findings from the AGCAS (2025) "What Happens Next?" report, which found that "autistic graduates at all qualification levels, from all ethnic backgrounds and of all genders, experience the lowest levels of full-time employment" (p. 5). If universities cannot support the 20% of students who are disabled or neurodivergent through critical transitions (Disabled Students UK, 2024), they fail in their fundamental mission to prepare all students for post-graduation success.

Yet within these accounts of struggle, participants also exhibited remarkable insight, resilience, and clarity about what practical support could look like. Their recommendations—consistent information provision, proactive transition planning, recognition of neurodivergent expertise, environmental adaptation rather than individual conformity—provide a roadmap for systemic change.

4.10.3 Moving Forward

The MDEF ultimately reveals that supporting neurodivergent students' transitions requires more than adjusting individual environmental bands. It demands a fundamental reconstruction of how educational and employment systems conceptualise and respond to neurodiversity. These findings demonstrate that without such systemic change, neurodivergent students will continue navigating multi-directional pressures without a compass, exhausting their resources in battles that should not be necessary.

The evidence demands not merely the adoption of individual programmes or technologies, but a coordinated, systemic approach to transition support. The passport concept—whether governmental or private sector—represents only one element of necessary change. Without fundamental restructuring of how institutions conceptualise neurodivergent transitions, and without genuine commitment to implementing and evaluating support mechanisms, neurodivergent students will continue to face the same barriers identified nearly four decades ago in the earliest transition research (Baker and Blanding, 1986; Silver, Strehorn and Bourke, 1997).

These findings contribute crucial empirical evidence to address the gap identified by McDowall and Kiseleva (2024) regarding the absence of student voice in transition research. By centring participants' lived experiences and examining them through

sophisticated theoretical frameworks, this research reveals not just what is not working but why systemic failures persist despite decades of disability legislation and policy development.

4.10.4 Bridge to Conclusions and Recommendations

The lived experiences presented in this chapter provide the empirical foundation for transformative change. Participants' accounts reveal both the depth of systemic failure and the clarity of vision about what successful support should encompass. Their insights—born from navigating impossible systems whilst maintaining remarkable resilience—offer concrete pathways forward that move beyond incremental adjustments to fundamental reconstruction of transition support.

The following chapter will present conclusions drawn from these findings and translate them into actionable recommendations for policy and practice. Chapter 5 will first synthesise the key conclusions about neurodivergent students' transition experiences, examining what participants' accounts reveal about systemic barriers, multi-directional navigation challenges, and the fundamental misalignment between neurodivergent needs and existing support structures. Drawing on participants' experiences of navigating without support, their forced self-advocacy despite executive function challenges, and their clear articulation of support needs, the chapter will then present recommendations addressing multiple ecological levels—from microsystem interactions between students and support staff, through mesosystem coordination between education and employment services, to macrosystem shifts in how society conceptualises neurodiversity and transition.

The recommendations will be structured through the MDEF, demonstrating how environmental bands must be reconstructed to provide genuine flexibility and responsiveness rather than rigid constraints. Each recommendation emerges directly from the lived experiences documented here, ensuring that proposed changes address the actual challenges neurodivergent students face rather than institutional assumptions about their needs. The chapter will conclude by examining the broader implications of these findings for understanding neurodiversity in higher education and employment, proposing a new theoretical framework for conceptualising transitions that centres multi-

directionality, ecological complexity, and the fundamental principle that environmental systems must adapt to neurodivergent ways of being rather than requiring neurodivergent individuals to exhaust themselves attempting to fit neurotypical moulds.

Chapter 5 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

This final chapter presents the conclusions and recommendations emerging from this research into neurodivergent students' experiences navigating the complex environmental systems during their transition from higher education to employment. Drawing upon the lived experiences of eight participants analysed through the Multi-Directional Ecological Framework (MDEF)—which conceptualises how neurodivergent students navigate simultaneous, multi-directional pressures across multiple environmental systems—and bioecological framework (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007), this chapter articulates both the theoretical contributions made by this study and the structural changes required. The analysis reveals profound institutional failures that create multi-directional navigation challenges for students at this critical juncture, as documented through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

The urgency of addressing these findings becomes apparent when examining current employment outcomes. The AGCAS (2025) report found that "autistic graduates at all qualification levels, from all ethnic backgrounds and of all genders, experience the lowest levels of full-time employment" (p. 5), with only 40% securing permanent or open-ended contracts compared to 56% of graduates with no known disability. This 16-percentage-point gap represents a significant disadvantage at a critical career stage. Vincent and Fabri (2022) provide further context, reporting that only 14% of autistic adults are in full-time employment in the UK, with many overqualified for their positions. These statistics represent not merely numbers but human potential unrealised due to institutional failures in supporting transitions. As established in Chapter 1, whilst neurodivergent people represent approximately 15-20% of the population (Doyle, 2020), their disproportionately low employment outcomes reveal systematic barriers rather than individual deficits. The lived experiences documented in Chapter 4 illuminate precisely how institutional failures during the transition period contribute to these troubling employment statistics, with all eight participants experiencing a complete

absence of transition support despite varying institutions, disciplines, and individual circumstances.

This chapter first examines overarching conclusions about the nature of neurodivergent students' transition experiences and the institutional failures that characterise current provision. These conclusions demonstrate how the MDEF reveals patterns of systematic environmental failure across all participants' experiences, regardless of individual circumstances or institutional contexts. The chapter then presents recommendations structured through the MDEF, addressing interventions needed at microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Navarro and Tudge, 2023). These recommendations foreground the transformative potential of the findings, recognising that incremental adjustments to existing systems have proven inadequate over decades of research. McDowall and Kiseleva (2024) identified that "future research needs to concentrate more on neuroinclusion at the level of the entire education institution and on transition into work" (p. 15), yet this research reveals that even this recommendation does not go far enough. The conclusions that follow illuminate precisely why fundamental reconstruction is necessary, revealing patterns that challenge accepted narratives about individual responsibility, institutional obligations, and the very nature of inclusive education.

5.2 Conclusions: Understanding Multi-Directional Navigation Without a Compass

The conclusions drawn from my research extend beyond specific recommendations to illuminate fundamental patterns in how neurodivergent students experience transitions and how current systems fail to support them adequately. These conclusions challenge accepted narratives about individual responsibility, institutional obligations, and the nature of inclusive education.

5.2.1 Systemic Failures Across Time and Space

My research definitively establishes that what appears as individual struggle represents institutional failure operating across multiple ecological levels. As documented in Chapter 4, participants' experiences reveal failures in proximal processes—the "engines

of development" (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007, p. 795) through which human potential is actualised. When these processes consistently fail, development is constrained not by individual limitations but by environmental inadequacies.

Perhaps most disturbing is the temporal persistence of these failures. The problems identified in studies from the 1980s persist virtually unchanged today, suggesting profound structural resistance to change. Baker and Blanding's (1986) research identified that successful transitions required coordinated support, information sharing, and student involvement in transition planning. Yet participants in this study continue experiencing fragmented support, information voids, and exclusion from decisions affecting their transitions. Silver, Strehorn and Bourke's (1997) finding that support was "not at the same level or quality as that given to non-disabled students" could describe current provision forty years later.

This persistence is particularly troubling given the significant legislative and policy developments over these decades. The Equality Act (2010) strengthened legal protections, the DSA system provides substantial funding, and awareness of neurodiversity has increased dramatically. Yet lived experiences remain remarkably similar, suggesting that surface changes mask more profound structural continuities. When examined through the MDEF, this persistence appears as environmental bands that maintain rigidity despite policy rhetoric suggesting flexibility. Medical model assumptions about disability, deeply embedded in institutional cultures, continue influencing practice despite official adoption of social model language.

The persistence raises uncomfortable questions about the institutional commitment to inclusion. If the same problems persist after forty years of supposed progress, we must question whether there is genuine will for change. Each generation of neurodivergent students faces the same battles, depleting energy that could be directed towards education and development. The cumulative cost of this repetition—millions of students over decades fighting identical fights—represents an unconscionable waste of human potential.

5.2.2 The Paradox of Progress Without Practice

A striking paradox emerges from my research: whilst awareness of neurodiversity has increased dramatically and legislative frameworks have strengthened, the lived experiences of neurodivergent students remain remarkably similar to those documented decades ago. This suggests that progress in awareness and policy has not translated into a meaningful change in practice.

This paradox manifests in multiple ways. Universities prominently display inclusion policies whilst participants experience systematic exclusion. Disability services exist but remain inaccessible to those who need them. Staff receive awareness training but continue implementing practices that disadvantage neurodivergent students. Reasonable adjustments are approved but not implemented. Transition support is discussed in strategy documents but is absent in practice.

When examined through the MDEF, this paradox becomes comprehensible. Individual environmental bands may have developed some flexibility—increased awareness, creating more give in some areas, and better legislation providing stronger frameworks. However, the connections between bands remain rigid or dysfunctional, preventing the overall structure from adapting effectively. Surface changes in individual bands mask more profound structural continuities that maintain exclusion.

This paradox reflects what Ahmed (2012) terms "non-performativity"—where naming something (inclusion) works to prevent it from coming into effect. By declaring themselves inclusive, institutions avoid examining how their practices maintain exclusion. The existence of policies becomes evidence of inclusion regardless of implementation. The MDEF's contribution lies in making visible how multi-directional environmental pressures continue to operate despite policy changes, revealing why awareness without structural transformation produces paradoxical outcomes in which progress in understanding does not translate into progress in action.

5.2.3 From Accommodation to Environmental Transformation

Perhaps the most significant conclusion from my research is that effective support for neurodivergent students' transitions requires moving beyond individual accommodation

models towards comprehensive environmental transformation. The current approach, which positions neurodivergent students as requiring special provisions within otherwise unchanged systems, maintains the very structures that create barriers.

The individual accommodation model, rooted in medical model thinking, treats neurodivergent students as problems to be solved through individual adjustments. Extra time in exams, note-takers, and quiet rooms are added to existing structures without questioning why those structures create barriers. This approach maintains the fiction that neurotypical ways of learning, communicating, and being are natural and neutral, whilst neurodivergent ways are deviations requiring accommodation.

My research demonstrates that the numerous challenges faced by participants arose not from their neurodivergence per se but from mismatches between their needs and neurotypically designed environments. Design principles must shift from retrofitting accommodations to building in flexibility from the outset. Environmental adaptation must replace individual adaptation as the primary response to neurodiversity. Rather than expecting neurodivergent students to develop coping strategies for sensory-hostile environments, those environments should be redesigned. Rather than requiring neurodivergent students to master neurotypical communication styles, multiple communication modes should be valued.

This transformation aligns with the evolution from medical through social to neurodiversity paradigms. As Chapman (2021) argues, the neurodiversity paradigm "seeks to depathologise and politicise neurodivergence," recognising it as natural and valuable human variation. The transformation requires recognising that inclusive environments benefit everyone—explicit communication helps all students, flexible deadlines accommodate various life circumstances, and quiet spaces support anyone needing respite from stimulation. When environments are designed for neurodiversity, they become more humane for all.

5.2.4 Implications for Theory, Policy, and Practice

My research makes significant contributions to understanding the transitions of neurodivergent students. Theoretically, the Multi-Directional Ecological Framework

(MDEF) advances the bioecological and neo-ecological frameworks by revealing how environmental bands create multi-directional pressures that require constant navigation without adequate support. The framework explains why piecemeal interventions fail—adjusting one environmental band whilst others remain rigid creates additional tension rather than relief, explaining why individual reasonable adjustments often fail when systemic issues persist.

My research reveals a fundamental tension between the extraordinary agency required of neurodivergent students and the structural barriers they face. As documented in Chapter 4, participants displayed remarkable resilience, creativity, and determination in navigating hostile systems. Yet, this very resilience masks the injustice of requiring such extraordinary effort for basic participation. The celebration of neurodivergent students who "overcome" barriers obscures the structural failures that create those barriers, suggesting that with sufficient effort, anyone can succeed, whilst ignoring that the effort required is neither reasonable nor sustainable.

The solution is not to build student resilience but to create environments that do not require an extraordinary effort for basic inclusion. The energy students currently expend fighting for support could be directed towards learning, creativity, and contribution. This is not to diminish participants' achievements or agency—their voices, centred in my research, offer essential expertise about what needs to change. Their persistence illustrates not an individual deficit but a systemic failure.

In terms of policy and practice, my research established that effective support requires coordination across all ecological levels simultaneously. Interventions at single levels—however well-intentioned—cannot overcome multi-directional environmental pressures. The sixteen recommendations presented in this chapter provide a comprehensive framework for transformation, but their success depends on recognising that partial implementation will probably fail. The MDEF illustrates why comprehensive, coordinated change across all environmental bands is essential for creating genuinely inclusive transitions from higher education to employment.

5.3 Recommendations: Towards Institutional Transformation

The recommendations emerging from this research are organised according to the ecological levels at which intervention is required, reflecting the multi-directional nature of the challenges identified. This section presents sixteen recommendations spanning five ecological levels (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem) plus digital environment considerations. These recommendations move beyond what Clouder et al. (2020) describe as "reasonable adjustments" towards a fundamental restructuring of how educational institutions conceptualise and support neurodivergent students' transitions. The bioecological framework (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007) provides the theoretical structure for understanding how interventions at different ecological levels must work synergistically rather than in isolation.

The MDEF, which has guided this research, illustrates why piecemeal interventions fail. Just as adjusting one environmental band whilst others remain rigid creates additional tension rather than relief, implementing isolated support mechanisms without addressing broader structural issues often creates additional challenges for neurodivergent students. As Kitchen et al. (2021) comment through their ecological validation model, effective support requires coordination across multiple environmental contexts over a period of time.

5.3.1 Microsystem Interventions: Transforming Immediate Support Environments

At the microsystem level, where students directly interact with support services, academic staff, and careers provision, fundamental changes are required to address the opacity and discontinuity that characterised participants' experiences. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2007) define proximal processes as "progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate external environment" (p. 797). The current research reveals that these proximal processes consistently fail for neurodivergent students, requiring comprehensive intervention.

5.3.1.1 Recommendation 1: Establish Dedicated Neurodivergent Transition Coordinators

Each institution should appoint specialist transition coordinators who maintain continuous support from students' penultimate year through to six months post-graduation. These coordinators would serve as consistent points of contact, eliminating the exhausting requirement for students to explain their needs to new staff members repeatedly. As Philip's experience powerfully showed, spending "*almost equal amount of times on my studies as I were combating the university*" represents an unconscionable burden that dedicated coordination could alleviate.

This recommendation aligns with Vincent's (2019) finding that "fear of the unknown" characterises autistic students' transition experiences, suggesting that consistent support relationships could mitigate this anxiety. The coordinator role should incorporate elements of the UMO Services (2025) model, which provides "two preparatory mentoring sessions during students' final month of study, followed by up to five transition sessions post-graduation." However, the recommendation extends beyond this model to provide longer-term support, recognising that transitions are processes rather than events (Jindal-Snape, 2023).

These coordinators would maintain comprehensive knowledge of both educational and employment support systems, bridging the current chasm between DSA provision and Access to Work. The fact that 99% of Rosa's students were unaware of Access to Work funding, despite Rosa's professional role as a study skills tutor, demonstrates the critical need for specialist knowledge. As Pesonen et al. (2021a) found, autistic students consistently highlighted the need for individualised, flexible support during transitions, yet current provision remains generic and inadequate.

The coordinators would proactively schedule regular check-ins rather than awaiting students to reach crisis points, recognising that executive function challenges may prevent neurodivergent students from initiating support requests. This proactive approach reflects Gibbs et al.'s (2025) finding that "for many, the ability to initiate a task, remain focused, and concentrate for long periods is tiring and mentally taxing and can cause cognitive overload" (p. 5). The coordinator role would also involve maintaining

comprehensive records of effective support strategies, ensuring knowledge is not lost through staff turnover or transitions between academic stages.

5.3.1.2 Recommendation 2: Implement Mandatory Neurodiversity Training for All Student-Facing Staff

This research revealed consistent failures in staff understanding of neurodivergent needs, from careers advisors providing generic advice to academic staff treating learning support plans as optional. All staff engaging with students must receive comprehensive training that moves beyond awareness to practical competence in supporting neurodivergent individuals. This recommendation responds to participants' experiences with staff who, as Michelle's narrative revealed, "*needed to understand her or her needs*" but lacked the knowledge or skills to provide the correct support.

Hamilton and Petty's (2023) compassionate pedagogy framework, discussed in Chapter 2, provides a foundation for this training, emphasising neurodiversity-affirming practices that operate across multiple system levels. The training must address the specific challenges of different neurodivergent conditions whilst recognising the heterogeneity within each condition. As Butcher and Lane (2024) found, "HE students' identity as neurodivergent (Autistic and/or ADHDers) has a large impact on how they experience several micro-systems," with comfort varying significantly across different environmental contexts.

Training content should include an understanding of sensory needs, as highlighted by Willow's inability to concentrate due to "really annoying whirring sounds" in lecture theatres. It must address communication differences, exemplified by AstroBlack's need for information "*presented in an explicit way*" with "*100% what I'm going into*" clarity. Executive function challenges must be understood not as laziness or disorganisation but as neurological differences requiring environmental support (Pagespetit, Massé and Couture, 2025).

The exhausting nature of masking must be addressed, recognising Mantzalas et al.'s (2022) systematic review findings that autistic masking has profound impacts on identity development and mental health outcomes. Staff must understand that when Willow

describes "*pretending to be someone to fit in*" as "*exhausting*," this represents significant cognitive and emotional labour that affects academic performance.

Crucially, training must emphasise that reasonable adjustments are legal requirements under the Equality Act 2010, not optional accommodations (EHRC, 2014). The shocking revelation that Philip's university claimed "*DSA student allowance recommendations, are just that recommendations, and that university has no legal obligation to do them*" demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of legal obligations. The recent Abrahart v University of Bristol case confirmed that teaching methods constitute "provisions, criteria, or practices" subject to reasonable adjustment duties (EHRC, 2024), making staff compliance non-negotiable.

5.3.1.3 Recommendation 3: Create Sensory-Conscious Learning and Support Environments

The participants consistently described the exhausting nature of navigating sensory-hostile environments. Institutions must audit all learning and support spaces through a sensory lens and implement modifications to create more accessible environments for all students. This recommendation extends beyond minimal compliance to embrace what Ellyatt (2025) terms "Eco-Systemic Flourishing," recognising that environmental design profoundly affects wellbeing and academic success.

Physical modifications should include providing quiet spaces for decompression, recognising that neurodivergent students often need respite from sensory stimulation. Participants described the cumulative exhaustion of navigating sensory-hostile environments, with Willow explaining the mental gymnastics of "following the script in my head of like, normal human interactions" (Lines 36-42) and Maisie finding that sensory demands compounded throughout the day until "*the medication made it worse towards the end of the day*" (Lines 92-95). These quiet spaces should be readily accessible rather than requiring special permission, reducing barriers to self-care.

Lighting modifications are essential, offering alternatives to fluorescent lighting that many neurodivergent individuals find overwhelming. As a neurodivergent researcher, I recognise from lived experience how bright lighting and fluorescent strips can be as overwhelming as auditory stimuli, affecting concentration and triggering sensory

overload. Variable lighting options allow students to adjust their environment according to individual needs, recognising that sensory preferences vary between individuals and can change depending on stress levels or time of day (Hastwell et al., 2017).

Acoustic management in lecture theatres and study spaces requires systematic attention. AstroBlack's description of finding "*it really hard to focus on what people were saying to me in conversations... because there's other noises and stuff going on*" reflects a common experience that environmental design can address. This includes installing sound-absorbing materials, providing noise-cancelling headphones in libraries, and creating designated quiet study zones.

Digital environments require equal attention to ensure online systems are not visually overwhelming. Willow's experience of finding university websites with "*so much information on pages... very overwhelming*" demonstrates how poor digital design creates additional barriers. Following Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) and involving neurodivergent students in user testing can ensure digital spaces support rather than hinder engagement (Le Cunff et al., 2024).

These environmental modifications should be viewed not as special provisions but as universal design principles that benefit all students. The Four-Dimensional Ecology Education (4DEE) Framework endorsed by the Ecological Society of America emphasises that learning environments must consider human-environment interactions as fundamental rather than peripheral (Klemow et al., 2019). When environments are designed to accommodate neurodiversity from the outset, the need for individual adjustments is significantly reduced.

5.3.2 Mesosystem Interventions: Coordinating Support Systems

The mesosystem level, where different microsystems interact and coordinate, emerged as a critical failure point in participants' experiences. As Bronfenbrenner (1977) established, the mesosystem comprises "the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates" (p. 515). For neurodivergent students, mesosystem failures often mean that support gained in one context fails to

transfer to another, creating exhausting requirements for constant re-negotiation of needs.

5.3.2.1 Recommendation 4: Develop Integrated Support Platforms

Universities must move beyond the current fragmented approach, in which disability services, careers services, academic departments, and student services operate in isolation. Quinn and Anwar-Westander (2023) identified "an administrative burden due to multiple bodies involved in support (DSA, Disability Services, Occupational Health, academic departments, Access to Work) that often don't communicate." An integrated digital platform should provide a single point of access for all support needs, with backend coordination ensuring information flows appropriately between services.

This platform should incorporate features similar to the UMO Services' (2025) OneSpace Passport—"an AI-powered Mental Health, Neurodiversity, Disability and Wellbeing Passport"—allowing students to maintain ownership of their support information whilst facilitating secure sharing with relevant parties. The platform must address the challenge identified by Philip, who found himself "*quite literally organise departments to talk to each other inside the universities."*

Critical design principles must prioritise neurodivergent accessibility. The platform must avoid the overwhelming complexity that Willow described and instead offer straightforward navigation, a consistent interface design, and options for different information-processing preferences. As Wang et al. (2024) demonstrate in their analysis of digital learning ecosystems, effective platforms recognise both biotic components (learners, educators, supporters) and abiotic components (technologies, platforms, digital content) as interconnected elements requiring careful design.

The platform should maintain comprehensive records of all support arrangements and automatically flag when reviews are due or when transitions require a support transfer. This addresses Demi's experience, in which "four educators weren't really that keen to go through that section of the booklet" containing her learning plan, ensuring documentation is readily accessible, and implementation can be monitored.

Integration with external systems is essential. The platform should facilitate connections with Access to Work, NHS services, and potential employers' accessibility teams. This response to Rosa's observation that, despite her professional knowledge, she *"had to appeal it four times*" to secure appropriate Access to Work provision, suggested that better system integration could reduce such battles.

5.3.2.2 Recommendation 5: Establish Formal Handover Protocols for Transitions

This research revealed devastating impacts when support relationships ended abruptly due to staff changes or transitions between academic stages. Formal handover protocols must be established, requiring a documented transfer of knowledge about students' needs, practical strategies, and support history whenever transitions occur. This recommendation addresses what participants described as "starting from scratch" with each transition, exhausting their limited resources through repeated explanation of needs.

These protocols should be embedded in institutional policy rather than relying on individual good practice. The annual disruption of support relationships means students must repeatedly re-establish working arrangements, losing carefully calibrated support strategies developed over the previous year. Formal requirements should include written handover documentation, mandatory overlap periods where outgoing and incoming support providers work together, and student involvement in transition planning.

The handover process must capture a nuanced understanding developed through extended support relationships. Michelle’s experience of receiving support from someone who continually gave her tasks that were too easy or inappropriate, despite existing documentation, indicates that written records alone are insufficient. Face-to-face handover meetings allow for communication of subtle understanding that documentation cannot capture.

Student agency in transitions must be prioritised. Following the principle of "nothing about us without us" (Charlton, 1998), students should be active participants in handover processes rather than passive subjects. This includes the right to correct

inaccuracies, add their perspectives, and identify which strategies have been most effective.

Accountability mechanisms must ensure compliance. Regular audits should assess whether handover protocols are being followed, with consequences for non-compliance. The current situation, where support quality depends on individual staff commitment, creates unacceptable precariousness for neurodivergent students navigating critical transitions.

5.3.2.3 Recommendation 6: Create Education-Employment Bridge Programmes

The "transition cliff" metaphor that emerged from participants' experiences reflects the complete absence of structured support for the education-to-employment transition. Universities must develop bridge programmes that begin in students' penultimate year and continue through early employment, providing scaffolded support as students navigate this critical transition. As Davies and Bagnall (2025) emphasise, "a good transition is just key" for autistic students' success.

These programmes should incorporate a structured introduction to workplace accommodation processes, addressing Emily's terror at "*applying for jobs and the forms are so, I just don't even want to look at it.*" Systematic preparation for workplace environments, including an understanding of professional communication norms, organisational cultures, and disclosure decisions, must replace the current ad hoc provision.

Facilitated connections with neurodivergent professionals in students' fields provide crucial role modelling and insider knowledge. As Vincent (2020) found, peer support and mentoring from those with lived experience provides a unique value that neurotypical support cannot replicate. These connections help students envision successful futures and develop field-specific strategies for managing neurodivergent needs in professional contexts.

Support of disclosure decision-making requires particular attention. Santuzzi et al. (2024) found that 58% of neurodivergent graduates feel compelled to conceal their condition due to stigma concerns. Bridge programmes must help students navigate this

complex decision, providing frameworks for assessing workplace cultures, understanding legal protections, and developing disclosure strategies that maintain agency whilst accessing necessary support.

Practical assistance with Access to Work applications is essential. The fact that 99% of Rosa's students were unaware of Access to Work funding, combined with processing times that Brain in Hand (2024) reports as exceeding three months for 61% of applicants, means preparation must begin early. Bridge programmes should provide hands-on support with application processes, documentation requirements, and interim support strategies whilst awaiting decisions.

5.3.3 Exosystem Interventions: Policy and Structural Changes

At the exosystem level, institutional policies and structures require fundamental reform to remove the barriers that participants encountered. The exosystem comprises contexts that indirectly affect development through their influence on microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). For neurodivergent students, exosystem failures create cascading problems across all other system levels.

5.3.3.1 Recommendation 7: Reform Administrative Processes Through Neurodivergent Consultation

All administrative processes affecting students must be reviewed and redesigned in consultation with neurodivergent individuals. As Philip's experience revealed, current systems often require students to use precisely the skills their neurodivergence affects to access support—a cruel paradox that reform must address. This aligns with Chown et al.'s (2017) framework for inclusive autism research, which emphasises meaningful involvement of autistic individuals in research and policy development.

The reformation process must comprehensively map all administrative touchpoints—application processes, assessment arrangements, placement allocations, graduation requirements, and transition planning—examining each through a neurodivergent lens. Simplification should be the guiding principle. Multiple participants described overwhelming form-filling requirements that seemed designed to exclude rather than support. As Maisie explained: "*Part of my ADHD, if something is harder than it needs to be, I just walk away*." Processes must be streamlined to essential elements, removing

redundant requirements whilst offering multiple completion options—written, verbal, or with advocacy support.

The elimination of repeated proof requirements for permanent conditions represents a basic dignity. Participants described an exhausting cycle of repeatedly providing evidence for permanent diagnoses and submitting the same documentation multiple times across academic years, despite their conditions remaining unchanged. Digital systems must meet comprehensive accessibility standards, going beyond minimal WCAG compliance to embrace neurodivergent specific needs, including clear information architecture, predictable navigation, and regular testing with neurodivergent users.

5.3.3.2 Recommendation 8: Establish Accountability Mechanisms for Support Implementation

This research revealed widespread non-implementation of agreed support plans. Demi reported that four of seven placement educators failed to read her learning support documentation, then blamed her for “downplaying” her needs. This represents not just individual negligence but an institutional failure to ensure legal compliance with the Equality Act 2010. Precise accountability mechanisms must ensure agreed support is actually delivered.

Regular audits of support implementation should be conducted by independent bodies with neurodivergent representation, examining actual student experiences rather than paper compliance. Annual transparency reports should detail implementation rates, complaint patterns, and improvement actions, creating institutional pressure for improvement whilst helping prospective students make informed choices.

Consequences for non-compliance must be meaningful, including mandatory retraining, performance management interventions, and, where patterns persist, disciplinary action. Staff and departments that consistently implement support should be recognised, and their practices documented as models. However, accessible complaint procedures that do not require extensive self-advocacy from already exhausted students are essential. Philip's experience of needing to become an expert in university bylaws to secure basic support represents an unconscionable burden. Complaints

processes should offer multiple reporting routes, independent advocacy support, and timely resolution.

5.3.3.3 Recommendation 9: Mandate Transition Planning in Curriculum Design

Transition preparation must be embedded within curriculum design rather than treated as an optional add-on. All programmes should include structured opportunities for students to develop an understanding of workplace contexts, explore accommodation needs, and build confidence in self-advocacy within professional settings. This recommendation responds directly to Willow's experience: *"I actually have no clue what I want to do after I finish my degree.*"

Curriculum integration should begin in the first year rather than being compressed into final year activities. As Jindal-Snape (2023) emphasises, transitions are "multiple and multi-dimensional," requiring sustained preparation rather than brief intervention. Discipline-specific transition content is essential—generic careers advice consistently failed participants, with Emily noting that careers services provided "*nothing really specific to see someone who is neurodivergent*."

Work-integrated learning opportunities designed with neurodivergent students in mind should be mandatory. Traditional placements often create additional barriers, as Demi's experience revealed. Alternative models might include virtual placements, graduated exposure to workplace environments, or project-based collaborations that provide professional expertise without overwhelming sensory or social demands.

Professional identity development specific to neurodivergent students requires dedicated attention, including exploring how neurodivergent strengths apply in professional contexts, understanding workplace cultures, and developing strategies for maintaining wellbeing whilst meeting professional demands. Assessment methods should incorporate transition portfolio development, allowing students to document their learning needs and professional goals in formats that suit their communication preferences.

5.3.4 Macrosystem Interventions: Cultural and Societal Change

The macrosystem level, encompassing cultural beliefs and societal attitudes, requires long-term transformation to create genuinely inclusive environments for neurodivergent individuals. As Bronfenbrenner (1977) noted, the macrosystem consists of "the consistency observed within a given culture or subculture in the form and content of its constituent micro-, meso-, and exosystems" (p. 515). Current macrosystem beliefs about neurodiversity, rooted in medical model assumptions, create cascading problems throughout all other system levels.

5.3.4.1 Recommendation 10: Shift from Accommodation to Inclusion Paradigm

Institutions must move beyond the accommodation model, which positions neurodivergent students as requiring special provisions within otherwise unchanged systems, towards an inclusion paradigm that recognises neurodiversity as natural human variation. This shift requires a fundamental reconsideration of how educational environments are designed, moving from retrofitting accommodations to building in flexibility from the outset.

This paradigmatic shift aligns with the evolution from medical through social to neurodiversity models (den Houting, 2019; Fletcher-Watson, 2022). Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles provide a framework for this shift. Alodat et al.'s (2023) systematic review found total effect sizes of 3.56 for UDL implementation, demonstrating significant benefits for all students, not just those with identified support needs. The three core principles—multiple means of representation, engagement, and action/expression—create inherently flexible learning environments.

The shift requires recognising that numerous challenges faced by neurodivergent students arise not from their neurodivergence per se but from the mismatch between their needs and neurotypically designed environments. When AstroBlack describes needing information "*presented in an explicit way*," this highlights how current information systems privilege implicit understanding, creating unnecessary barriers. Institutional culture change must accompany structural changes, including challenging deficit language, celebrating neurodivergent achievements, and recognising neurodivergent staff and students as valuable contributors. Assessment and pedagogy

require fundamental reconsideration, with alternative formats, flexible deadlines, and varied pedagogical approaches becoming standard rather than special arrangements.

5.3.4.2 Recommendation 11: Develop Neurodivergent Leadership Pathways

The principle of "nothing about us without us" must be operationalised through the creation of formal leadership positions for neurodivergent individuals within institutional structures. McDowall and Kiseleva (2024) found that "none of the reviews or primary studies made explicit reference to co-creation and user involvement," despite this principle being fundamental to disability rights movements. Institutions must move beyond tokenistic consultation to genuine power-sharing, recognising that lived experience provides expertise that professional knowledge cannot replicate.

Formal positions should include paid neurodivergent student representatives on academic boards, disability services committees, and estates planning groups, with clear role descriptions, appropriate support, and genuine influence. Michelle's valuable contributions to the Oliver McGowan Training demonstrate the expertise that lived experience provides, yet such contributions are often voluntary and unrecognised.

Neurodivergent staff networks require institutional support, providing peer support, policy input, and visible role models. Leadership development programmes specifically for neurodivergent students and staff should address the unique challenges of navigating leadership roles whilst managing neurodivergent needs. Mentoring programmes connecting neurodivergent students with neurodivergent professionals provide crucial role modelling—Vincent et al. (2017) found that peer mentoring from autistic students offered strategies for navigating university life that neurotypical mentors could not provide. Recognition and reward systems must value neurodivergent contributions, understanding that individuals may excel in some areas whilst needing support in others.

5.3.4.3 Recommendation 12: Foster Cross-Sector Collaboration

The transition from education to employment cannot be successfully supported by universities acting in isolation. Formal partnerships must be established between universities, employers, and employment support services to create seamless transition

pathways. The current disconnects, where each sector operates in ignorance of others, creates the "transition cliff" participants described.

Employer education about neurodiversity must be systematic rather than ad hoc. Universities should partner with employers to develop sector-specific guidance, building on models like Austin and Pisano's (2017) documentation of successful corporate neurodiversity programmes. Sector-specific transition resources should be co-developed by universities, employers, and neurodivergent individuals. Generic resources consistently failed participants—healthcare students like Maisie needed to understand the implications of shift work for ADHD management, whilst business students like Philip needed to navigate corporate cultures with specific communication expectations.

Supported internship programmes providing a scaffolded introduction to workplace environments should be standard, offering graduated exposure to workplace demands with ongoing support from both the university and the employer. Knowledge exchange between sectors must be multi-directional, with regular forums bringing together educators, employers, and neurodivergent individuals. Longitudinal tracking of graduate outcomes through their first years of employment would identify where support succeeds or fails, informing continuous improvement.

5.3.5 Chronosystem Interventions: Temporal Considerations

The chronosystem dimension highlights the importance of timing and developmental trajectories in transition support. As Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2007) emphasise, development occurs over time through increasingly complex interactions between individuals and their environments. For neurodivergent students, temporal factors create additional complexity requiring specific intervention.

5.3.5.1 Recommendation 13: Implement Early and Continuous Transition Preparation

Transition preparation must begin in the first year of university rather than being compressed into the final year of career activities. This extended timeline allows for gradual skill development, exploration of accommodation needs, and building of confidence over time rather than creating additional pressure during the already stressful final year.

Early preparation is particularly crucial for students receiving late diagnoses during university. Willow's experience of autism diagnosis during her studies meant she was simultaneously processing a new understanding of herself whilst navigating university demands. As she explained: "*I now know*" why social interactions were challenging, but this knowledge came without sufficient time to develop strategies before facing graduation.

The first-year introduction should normalise the discussion of post-graduation pathways from the start. Second-year development should focus on understanding workplace environments through low-stakes exploration, including workplace visits and informational interviews with neurodivergent professionals. The penultimate year of preparation should intensify with specific skill development, application preparation, and disclosure decision-making. By this stage, students should have developed sufficient self-awareness to make informed decisions. Final-year support should focus on practical transition activities with scaffolded backing, including Access to Work applications and workplace accommodation negotiations.

The extended timeline particularly benefits students with executive function challenges. As Gibbs et al. (2025) found, neurodivergent students often struggle to manage assessment deadlines (p. 5), and career planning places additional demands on executive function. Spreading preparation across years reduces cognitive load and allows for processing time between activities.

5.3.5.2 Recommendation 14: Provide Extended Post-Graduation Support

The current model, where support ceases abruptly at graduation, fails to recognise that transitions are processes rather than events. Universities should provide graduate support that extends at least six months post-graduation, with a clear, warm handover to employment support services where appropriate. This addresses the "transition cliff" that participants universally described.

Immediate post-graduation support (0-3 months) should be intensive, recognising this as a vulnerable period when graduates are simultaneously managing job searching, potential relocation, financial pressures, and loss of student identity. Regular check-ins, practical support with applications, and emotional support should be available. Medium-

term support (3-6 months) should focus on workplace integration for those who secure employment or continued job searching, including troubleshooting accommodation implementation and managing workplace relationships.

Handover to long-term support—Access to Work coaching, NHS adult autism services, or third-sector organisations—should be carefully managed with warm handover ensuring continuity. Alumni mentoring networks specifically for neurodivergent graduates provide ongoing peer support beyond formal services, offering unique value through shared experience. Universities should facilitate these networks rather than expecting them to emerge organically.

The extended support period particularly benefits those entering graduate schemes or professional training programmes, where ongoing support can mean the difference between success and dropout. Investment in extended support is likely to produce returns through improved graduate outcomes and reduced crisis interventions.

5.3.6 Digital Environment Interventions: Addressing Neo-Ecological Challenges

Recognising Navarro and Tudge's (2023) neo-ecological framework, specific recommendations address the digital dimensions of contemporary transitions. The framework recognises that "the bidirectionality between the macrosystem and developing individuals is more fluid now than at any time in history" (p. 19344). When examined through the MDEF, digital contexts amplify the multi-directional pressures neurodivergent students face—environmental bands now include not only physical microsystems but also digital platforms, online support systems, and virtual workplace environments, each pulling in different directions with varying levels of accessibility and responsiveness. The digital dimension adds further complexity to the already challenging multi-directional navigation that participants described.

5.3.6.1 Recommendation 15: Design Accessible Digital Transition Resources

All digital transition resources must be designed with neurodivergent users as primary stakeholders rather than afterthoughts. This includes clear information architecture, minimal visual clutter, consistent navigation structures, and alternatives to video-heavy

content that may overwhelm some users. The current approach, where accessibility is retrofitted after design, consistently fails neurodivergent users.

Information architecture must prioritise clarity and predictability. Willow's experience of finding university websites overwhelming—"*there's so much information on pages*"—reflects common neurodivergent experiences of information overload. Clear hierarchies, consistent labelling, and logical navigation paths reduce cognitive load. Visual design should offer customisation options, recognising that some users need high contrast whilst others find it overwhelming. Rather than imposing single design choices, systems should offer user control over visual presentation.

Alternative formats must be available for all content—video content with transcripts and captions, audio content with visual alternatives, and text-heavy content with summary options. Interactive elements require careful consideration: time-limited sessions create pressure for those with processing speed differences, whilst auto-playing media can trigger sensory overwhelm. Default settings should be conservative, with users able to opt into rather than out of interactive features.

Mobile optimisation is essential, though mobile interfaces often prioritise aesthetics over accessibility. Dedicated accessibility testing on mobile devices with neurodivergent users is crucial. Regular testing with neurodivergent users should be embedded in development cycles from project inception through to launch. Co-design approaches, where neurodivergent individuals are partners rather than subjects, produce better outcomes, applying the principle of "nothing about us without us" to digital design as much as policy development.

5.3.6.2 Recommendation 16: Leverage Technology for Personalised Support

Technology offers opportunities for personalised support that adapts to individual needs and preferences. Institutions should invest in adaptive technologies that can provide customised information delivery, automated reminder systems supporting executive function challenges, and AI-assisted navigation of complex administrative processes.

Adaptive learning technologies can personalise information delivery based on individual processing styles. Wang et al.'s (2024) meta-analysis found performance improvements

of up to 30% for students using adaptive platforms. Automated reminder systems supporting executive function should be sophisticated, offering customisable reminder patterns, integration with task breakdown tools, and flexibility to adjust based on user feedback, rather than basic calendar reminders that fail to account for task initiation challenges or time blindness.

AI-assisted navigation can help students manage complex administrative processes, providing first-line assistance with common queries and guiding them through multi-step processes. However, AI limitations must be acknowledged, with clear pathways to human support when needed. Digital portfolios, allowing students to document their needs, strategies, and achievements in formats suiting their communication preferences, provide valuable transition tools that can include video explanations and visual representations better representing neurodivergent strengths.

Technology must supplement rather than replace human support. Many neurodivergent students value and require interpersonal connection in their support relationships. Technology should free human supporters to focus on relationship-building and complex problem-solving whilst ensuring non-digital alternatives remain available to prevent digital exclusion.

5.4 Limitations

Whilst my research provides valuable insights into neurodivergent students' transition experiences, several limitations must be acknowledged. These limitations, whilst not undermining the significance of the findings, provide an important context for interpreting the results and identify areas for future research.

5.4.1 Sample Scope and Composition

As detailed in Chapter 3, whilst my research design included 32 interviews across six stakeholder groups (students, careers advisors, non-medical help providers, employers, coaches, and clients), this thesis focuses exclusively on the eight student participants. This methodological decision aligns with both the principle of 'nothing about us without us' (Charlton, 1998) and the Multi-Directional Ecological Framework's (MDEF)

theoretical positioning that centres neurodivergent students within multi-directional environmental pressures.

However, this focus means that institutional perspectives on why support fails, employer views on graduate preparation, and practitioner insights into support delivery are not examined in this thesis. The additional stakeholder interview data will provide a crucial context for future publications on how different ecological levels function. These multiple perspectives will strengthen mesosystem analysis by examining connections between stakeholder groups and revealing how environmental bands interact to create or constrain opportunities for neurodivergent students' successful transitions.

The decision to foreground student voices in this thesis represents a theoretically grounded choice rather than a methodological limitation. Student experience must remain foundational, as the MDEF establishes that environmental systems exist in relation to the developing individual. The comprehensive dataset collected provides a foundation for extended research outputs examining the full 360-degree view of the transition ecosystem envisioned initially.

5.4.2 Temporal and Policy Context

Data collection occurred during a specific policy moment that may affect the transferability of findings to other temporal contexts. Interviews were conducted immediately before the July 2024 general election, during a period of policy uncertainty. The previous Conservative Government had proposed accessibility passports for disabled students, with pilots planned in two universities through the Department for Work and Pensions initiative (Holmes, 2022). These proposals were suspended following the change of government, creating a policy vacuum that continues at the time of writing.

This temporal specificity means that participants' experiences were shaped by particular policy expectations that may not reflect ongoing realities. The broader policy context also influences findings. My research occurred within the UK's specific legislative framework, including the Equality Act 2010 and the Disabled Students' Allowance

system. These create particular support structures and expectations that differ from international contexts.

However, the historical persistence of problems identified in my research suggests that findings transcend specific policy moments. The issues Baker and Blanding (1986) identified nearly forty years ago persist today despite multiple policy iterations. This suggests that whilst specific mechanisms may vary, fundamental challenges in supporting neurodivergent students' transitions remain constant across policy contexts.

5.4.3 COVID-19 Cohort Effects

With six of the eight participants beginning university during the COVID-19 pandemic, the sample represents a unique cohort whose experiences may not fully reflect typical transition challenges. These students experienced unprecedented disruption, including the replacement of face-to-face teaching with online learning, isolation from peer networks and support services, and disrupted placement opportunities.

However, this limitation also provides valuable insights. The pandemic revealed both vulnerabilities and possibilities in current support systems. Some participants found online learning more accessible, avoiding sensory challenges of campus environments, whilst others struggled with executive function demands of self-directed online study. The pandemic cohort effect may have intensified specific challenges whilst revealing systemic issues that pre-existed COVID-19. The abrupt loss of support during lockdowns made visible the fragility of support systems that appear robust during normal operations.

5.4.4 Geographic and Cultural Boundaries

The UK focus, whilst providing detailed understanding of a specific national context, limits international transferability. Different countries' legislative frameworks, support systems, and cultural attitudes towards neurodiversity create distinct transition experiences requiring separate investigation. Cultural attitudes towards neurodiversity vary significantly internationally—Nordic countries' collective responsibility models contrast with Anglo-American individual rights frameworks (McDowall and Kiseleva, 2023).

Within the UK, the sample was drawn from three geographic regions, potentially missing distinctive experiences in other areas. The sample also represents particular disciplinary concentrations, with 62.5% of the participants in Medical/Health and Social Care fields. Different disciplines create distinct transition challenges that deserve dedicated investigation.

5.4.5 Methodological Constraints

The qualitative case study methodology, whilst providing rich insights into lived experiences, has inherent limitations. The interpretivist paradigm acknowledges multiple realities and subjective interpretations, which means findings represent participants' constructed meanings rather than objective facts. This is a strength for understanding lived experience, but it limits claims about causation or prevalence.

The semi-structured interview format relies on retrospective accounts that subsequent experiences may influence. Participants describing their transitions were at different stages—some were still students, others had recently graduated, and one was continuing with their doctoral studies. These different temporal positions may affect how transitions are remembered and narrated.

My positionality as a neurodivergent researcher brings both insights and potential biases. My evolving diagnostic journey during my research—receiving autism and ADHD diagnoses during my doctoral studies—provided insider understanding but may also have influenced interpretation. Despite reflexive practices and external transcription support, complete neutrality is neither possible nor desirable in interpretivist research.

5.4.6 Absent Voices and Experiences

Despite efforts to recruit a diverse group, certain voices remain absent from my research. No participants identified as having intellectual disabilities, though Michelle identified as having "learning disabilities" alongside autism. Students who dropped out before their final year were excluded from this study due to this research design. Yet, their experiences of failed transitions might provide crucial insights into when and why support systems fail.

International students' experiences remain unexplored, though they are likely to face additional challenges navigating unfamiliar support systems whilst managing visa requirements and cultural transitions. Multiply marginalised students—those experiencing intersections of neurodivergence with race, class, sexuality, and other marginalised identities—are underrepresented in the sample. These intersections create additional complexity that my research only partially addresses.

Despite these limitations, my research provides crucial empirical evidence addressing significant gaps in understanding neurodivergent students' transition experiences. The limitations themselves identify significant areas for future research, whilst the findings offer both theoretical advancement through the MDEF and practical recommendations for institutional change. The consistency of experiences across participants, despite their diverse backgrounds and institutions, suggests that findings reflect systematic patterns rather than isolated incidents.

5.4.7 Towards Participatory Research: Proximity and Future Directions

This research was guided throughout by the principle of “nothing about us without us” (Charlton, 1998), which shaped every methodological decision, from the neurodivergent-affirming design of interview schedules to the participatory validation processes employed with participants. However, it is important to acknowledge that whilst this principle informed the ethos and direction of the research, the study does not constitute participatory research in its formal sense. Participants were not involved in the design of the research, the development of analytical frameworks, or the interpretation of findings. This distinction warrants transparency and reflection.

My proximity to participants — as a neurodivergent researcher, a DSA tutor and mentor, and an Access to Work coach — created research relationships that were necessarily different from those of an outsider researcher. The trust and reciprocity this positioning enabled were significant methodological assets, facilitating candid accounts that participants may not have shared with a researcher without lived experience. Yet this proximity also created boundaries that formal participatory research would have sought

to dissolve: the power dynamic inherent in the researcher's role remained, and the analytical work was ultimately mine.

Future research in this area would benefit significantly from a genuinely participatory design. Involving neurodivergent students as co-researchers — in shaping research questions, developing analytical categories, and interpreting findings — would extend the "nothing about us without us" principle from an ethical aspiration to a methodological reality. Such an approach would not only strengthen the validity of findings but would itself constitute an intervention, developing the advocacy skills and institutional awareness that participants in this study identified as essential yet largely unsupported. The MDEF, developed through this research, could provide a shared analytical framework through which co-researchers and lead researcher navigate transition experiences together, making the framework itself a participatory tool rather than solely a theoretical contribution.

5.5 Contributions to Knowledge

This research makes substantial and original contributions to knowledge across the theoretical, empirical, methodological, and practical domains. To fully appreciate these contributions, it is essential first to understand the state of knowledge before this research commenced—the gaps, absences, and limitations that characterised existing understanding of neurodivergent students' transitions from higher education to employment. Only in establishing what was known can we properly determine what this research adds.

5.5.1 The State of Knowledge Before This Research

Prior to this study, research examining neurodivergent students' experiences existed in an unusual state of fragmentation. As McDowall and Kiseleva (2024) identified in their rapid review, whilst substantial literature examined either university experiences or employment outcomes, research addressing "life outcomes such as successful transition into work" remained notably absent (p. 15). Multiple systematic reviews confirmed this pattern: Anderson et al. (2017) found limited evidence regarding employment transitions in their review of autism spectrum disorder support in post-secondary education, whilst Goodall et al. (2022) explicitly noted "a lack of literature that

summarises knowledge on the transition between these two settings" despite a wealth of evidence about barriers in both higher education and workplace contexts separately.

This fragmentation reflected a fundamental conceptual limitation in how transitions were understood. Research approached university experiences and employment outcomes as separate, static structures rather than recognising transition as a dynamic process of navigating multiple environmental systems simultaneously. From a bioecological perspective, this represented a profound misunderstanding: development occurs through ongoing person-environment interactions rather than discrete stages or fixed outcomes. The transition period itself—the actual process of moving between these contexts—remained virtually invisible in academic literature.

Perhaps most significantly, neurodivergent students' own voices were systematically absent from existing research. McDowall and Kiseleva (2024) noted that "none of the reviews or primary studies made explicit reference to co-creation and user involvement" (p. 15), despite "nothing about us without us" becoming prominent in neurodivergent communities. The Transforming Access and Student Outcomes report (TASO, 2023) explicitly identified this dearth of research capturing neurodivergent students' perspectives and experiences as a critical limitation. Research on neurodivergence has predominantly approached it from medical or deficit-based perspectives, focusing on what students could not do rather than examining how systems failed to accommodate different ways of being.

Where support systems were examined, research focused primarily on academic accommodation rather than employment preparation, revealing what might be termed a mesosystem coordination gap between educational and employment contexts. Universities had developed sophisticated microsystem supports enabling academic success, yet these systems typically ceased at graduation, whilst employment microsystems lacked comparable developmental supports. The mechanisms through which this support's cessation affected students and students' experiences of navigating this void remained unexplored.

Theoretical frameworks available for understanding neurodivergent transitions also exhibited significant limitations. Traditional representations of Bronfenbrenner's

bioecological model as nested circles could not adequately capture the dynamic, multi-directional nature of transition experiences. The model's static visual representation suggested hierarchical containment rather than the simultaneous, interactive pressures students actually navigated. Neo-ecological theory's recognition of digital environments (Navarro and Tudge, 2023) represented an essential contemporary development, yet its applications to neurodivergent workplace transitions remained absent from the literature.

This, then, was the knowledge landscape before this research: fragmented studies of separate contexts, the absence of student voice, deficit-based perspectives, a focus on academic rather than employment support, and theoretical frameworks inadequate to capture transition complexity. Against this backdrop, this research makes several distinctive contributions that fundamentally advance understanding.

5.5.2 Theoretical Contributions: Advancing Ecological Frameworks

The development of the Multi-Directional Ecological Framework (MDEF) represents this research's primary theoretical contribution, advancing both Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory and Navarro and Tudge's neo-ecological framework in ways that address their limitations for understanding neurodivergent transitions. The MDEF reconceptualises traditional nested ecological systems to capture the dynamic, multi-directional pressures that neurodivergent students simultaneously navigate across all system levels during transitions.

Unlike traditional representations that show concentric circles suggesting hierarchical progression, the MDEF visualises environmental systems as flexible bands that create simultaneous, multi-directional pressures, requiring constant navigation. This framework emerged directly from participants' descriptions of their experiences—managing competing demands from multiple systems concurrently rather than progressing linearly through hierarchical environments. Participants described navigating university requirements, workplace expectations, family dynamics, and support services simultaneously, with each system exerting distinct and sometimes contradictory pressures.

The MDEF's theoretical innovation lies in its capacity to represent agency, dynamism, and multi-directionality simultaneously. Where Bronfenbrenner's model emphasises how environments shape development, the MDEF shows how neurodivergent individuals actively navigate across and between systems, making strategic decisions about which environmental demands to prioritise at different moments. This shift from environmental determination to navigational agency represents a fundamental reconceptualisation with significant implications for how we understand both neurodivergent experiences and broader transition processes.

Second, this research extends neo-ecological theory by demonstrating how digital environments create unique navigational challenges for neurodivergent students during transitions. Building on Navarro and Tudge's (2023) recognition of digital spaces as distinct ecological contexts, the MDEF exposes how technological systems designed with neurotypical assumptions become additional barriers rather than supportive tools. Participants described how online application systems, virtual interviews, and digital workplace platforms each posed distinct challenges that required additional navigation. Yet, these digital challenges remained invisible primarily to support providers operating from neurotypical assumptions about technological accessibility.

Third, the framework provides a new theoretical lens for conceptualising the transition period itself as a distinct ecological phenomenon. Existing ecological theories address relatively stable environments where systems, whilst dynamic, maintain structural consistency. The MDEF theorises the unique characteristics of transitional spaces where multiple ecological systems overlap, interact, and create novel pressures that exist only during transition periods. This theoretical contribution has implications beyond neurodivergent transitions, offering a framework for understanding any major life transition where individuals navigate between established environmental systems.

5.5.3 Empirical Contributions: Making the Invisible Visible

This research provides crucial empirical evidence about phenomena largely invisible in academic literature, with findings that challenge comfortable assumptions about inclusive practice in higher education. The most striking empirical contribution is that no participant received systematic transition support—regardless of the university

attended, the discipline studied, or the neurodivergent profile. This consistency across all participants, despite varying institutional contexts and individual circumstances, reveals systematic rather than isolated failures, indicating fundamental gaps in how transitions are conceptualised and supported institutionally.

This finding directly contradicts familiar institutional narratives suggesting that transition support exists but requires students to access it proactively. Participants' experiences revealed that support did not simply go unused—it was systematically absent. Universities provided extensive academic support enabling degree completion, yet this support ceased precisely when students entered the critical transition period where navigation challenges intensified. This pattern held regardless of institutional resources, size, or reputation, suggesting deep-rooted structural dysfunction rather than resource limitations.

The identification of three major themes—struggling through invisible systems, perpetual disruption and compound disadvantage, and the identity-navigation paradox—provides an empirical framework for understanding transition challenges that questionnaire-based research or employment outcome statistics cannot capture. These themes, emerging from rigorous reflexive thematic analysis of lived experiences, reveal interconnected patterns that show how challenges compound to create cascading failures, making successful transitions increasingly unlikely. The themes demonstrate that what appears as individual struggle actually reflects environmental dysfunction operating simultaneously across multiple ecological levels.

The theme of struggling through invisible systems revealed how institutional opacity became an active barrier. Participants did not merely lack information—they encountered systematically inaccessible information architectures designed for neurotypical navigation styles. The theme of perpetual disruption documented how challenges did not occur sequentially but simultaneously, with each difficulty compounding others to create overwhelming navigational demands. The identity-navigation paradox exposed the impossible position students faced: required to advocate for needs whilst simultaneously conforming to neurotypical professional expectations that directly contradicted accommodation requirements.

Beyond thematic contributions, this research documents specific mechanisms of support failure, moving beyond general statements about inadequate provision to identify precise breakdown points. For instance, placement educators routinely ignored students' learning support plans and then blamed students for "downplaying" their needs, revealing how institutional failures are reframed as individual deficits. Similarly, students learned about Access to Work only through chance conversations rather than through systematic information provision, with 99% unaware of this critical funding despite its direct relevance to workplace transitions. These findings expose systematic information gatekeeping rather than innocent oversight.

5.5.4 Methodological Contributions: Neurodivergent Research Approaches

This research makes essential methodological contributions by demonstrating neurodivergent-led research approaches that centre participant voice whilst maintaining analytical rigour. As a neurodivergent researcher examining neurodivergent experiences, I implemented methodological innovations addressing the absence of insider perspectives that McDowall and Kiseleva (2024) identified as a critical gap.

The use of Quirkos qualitative analysis software, selected specifically for its visual rather than textual interface and for accommodating neurodivergent processing preferences, demonstrates how research tools themselves can embody accessibility principles. This choice required institutional approval, as Quirkos was not standard software, thereby establishing a precedent for accommodating neurodivergent researchers' analytical preferences whilst maintaining methodological rigour. The software's visual representations of emerging themes through proportionally sized coloured bubbles provided immediate feedback on pattern frequency, supporting analytical processes that might operate differently for neurodivergent researchers.

The formal inclusion of AI assistive technology (Claude) as part of my learning adjustment plan represents a pioneering use of AI as legitimate accessibility support for neurodivergent doctoral researchers. In accordance with York St John University's Guiding Principles on the Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (2025), AI has not been used as a replacement for my thinking and in-depth analysis but rather as a tool

that has supported my academic writing. Whilst I remained in charge of all analytical processes—conducting interviews, developing codes in Quirkos, identifying themes, and constructing the Multi-Directional Ecological Framework—AI supported these processes by assisting in transforming my spoken thoughts into more fluidly structured academic prose, and assisting me to organise my existing ideas into more clearly defined paragraphs. This methodological innovation challenges assumptions about what constitutes acceptable research support, demonstrating how AI can function as assistive technology comparable to text-to-speech software or specialist keyboards. However, significant limitations exist as with any assistive technology: AI requires active oversight and verification, cannot replace my analytical judgement or decision-making, and necessitates explicit instruction and iterative refinement to produce appropriate outputs. Whilst AI effectively assisted with organising complex ideas and articulating thoughts clearly—addressing executive function challenges common in neurodivergent cognition—I maintained full analytical agency throughout. Future researchers may build upon this precedent whilst remaining cognisant that AI functions most effectively as a collaborative tool requiring metacognitive awareness and critical engagement rather than as an independent solution.

5.5.5 Practical Contributions: Actionable Pathways for Change

This research offers concrete, actionable recommendations that emerge directly from participants' experiences rather than from theoretical speculation or institutional convenience. The sixteen recommendations span multiple ecological levels, recognising that effective change requires coordinated intervention across systems rather than isolated adjustments. These recommendations represent practical contributions grounded in empirical evidence about what students identify as necessary rather than what institutions assume would help.

Recommendations address microsystem interventions (individual support adjustments), mesosystem coordination (connecting education and employment systems), exosystem changes (institutional policies and structures), macrosystem transformation (societal attitudes and legislation), and chronosystem considerations (timing and developmental sequencing). This ecological comprehensiveness distinguishes these recommendations

from typical institutional guidance focusing primarily on individual-level adjustments, demonstrating that effective support requires simultaneous intervention across all system levels.

The practical contribution extends beyond specific recommendations to explain that current incremental approaches have proven inadequate. Decades of disability legislation and policy development have failed to create effective transition support, suggesting that fundamental reconstruction rather than gradual improvement is required. This research provides evidence-based justification for transformative rather than accommodative change, challenging institutions to reconceptualise their responsibilities towards neurodivergent students.

5.5.6 Significance and Integration

These theoretical, empirical, methodological, and practical contributions converge to advance knowledge about neurodivergent transitions whilst offering frameworks applicable to transition research more broadly. The MDEF provides analytical tools for examining any major life transition that involves navigating across multiple environmental systems. The empirical findings about systematic institutional failures challenge comfortable narratives about inclusive practice, requiring institutions to confront how their structures actively disadvantage neurodivergent students during critical developmental periods. The methodological innovations indicate how neurodivergent-led research can produce distinctive insights whilst maintaining scholarly rigour. The practical recommendations offer concrete pathways for institutional transformation grounded in students' voices rather than institutional assumptions.

Together, these contributions establish that what has been treated as an individual challenge—neurodivergent students' employment difficulties—actually reflects a systemic environmental failure that requires a fundamental reconstruction of how institutions conceptualise and support transitions. This shifts discourse from individual deficit to environmental responsibility, from accommodation to transformation, and from incremental adjustment to systematic change.

5.6 Concluding Reflections

This research began with a question about how neurodivergent students experience transitions and revealed complex institutional failures requiring fundamental reconstruction of educational support systems. The eight participants who shared their experiences provided insights that no amount of theoretical analysis could achieve. Their words — raw, honest, and often painful — illuminate the human cost of institutional failures whilst exhibiting remarkable resilience and sophisticated understanding of systemic barriers.

5.6.1 Future Directions

This research identifies numerous avenues for future investigation. The additional stakeholder interview data collected—careers advisors, employers, support providers, coaches, and clients—will provide a systemic understanding of how different ecological levels function. Longitudinal studies following neurodivergent students from university through early career, international comparative research examining different policy contexts, and intersectional research examining how neurodivergence intersects with other marginalised identities all require urgent attention.

5.6.2 A Call to Action

The evidence is clear: current approaches fail systematically and persistently. Transformation requires courage—acknowledging that prestigious institutions systematically fail their neurodivergent students, recognising that well-intentioned practices perpetuate exclusion, and accepting that cherished systems require fundamental reconstruction.

Yet transformation also requires hope. Despite experiencing systematic failures, the participants in this research maintained hope for better futures. They shared their experiences not out of bitterness but from a desire to improve conditions for future students. Their resilience, creativity, and generosity demonstrate the potential that inclusive systems could unlock.

The path forward is clear. The recommendations provide a roadmap; the MDEF offers analytical tools; and participant voices provide a moral imperative. What remains is the

will to act—to move beyond awareness to action, beyond accommodation to transformation, beyond exclusion to genuine inclusion.

Future neurodivergent students deserve not just individual accommodations but inclusive environments, not just awareness but acceptance, not just survival but flourishing. They deserve educational institutions that recognise their potential, support their development, and prepare them for meaningful careers. By centring participant voices, providing theoretical frameworks, and offering practical recommendations, this research contributes to a future in which neurodivergent students' transitions are supported rather than merely survived. The principle that has guided this research—nothing about us without us—must guide future transformation, with neurodivergent individuals central to designing inclusive systems. The rest lies in our collective will to act.

Chapter 6 REFERENCES

Adam, S. and Koutsoklenis, A. (2023) 'Who needs the social model of disability?', Frontiers in Sociology, 8, p. 1305301. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2023.1305301.

AGCAS (2025) What Happens Next? The Outcomes of Disabled Graduates. Summary Report. Manchester: Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services, pp. 1-10.

Aguilera-Rodríguez, G., López-Meneses, E. and Sirignano, F.M. (2024) 'University experiences of students and graduates with neurodiversity: Tools for creating a specialised mentoring program related to working life', Frontiers in Education, 9, p. 1432930.

AHEAD (2021) 20/21 Report on numbers of students with disabilities in higher education. Association for Higher Education Access and Disability.

Ahmed, S. (2012) On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life. Durham: Duke University Press.

Alodat, A.M., Altahat, F., Al-Saaideh, M., Al-Khasawneh, A.L. and Al-Makhadmeh, E. (2023) 'The effectiveness of universal design for learning: A systematic review of the literature and meta-analysis', Educational Research Review, 40, p. 100545.

American Enterprise Institute (2024) Employment statistics for neurodivergent individuals. AEI Policy Studies.

Anderson, A.H., Stephenson, J. and Carter, M. (2022) 'Academic accommodations for university students with disability and the potential of universal design to address their needs', Higher Education, 84(4), pp. 779-799.

Austin, R.D. and Pisano, G.P. (2017) 'Neurodiversity as a competitive advantage', Harvard Business Review, 95(3), pp. 96-103.

Baker, B.L. and Blanding, B. (1986) 'Factors affecting the successful transition of disabled students from high school to college', Journal of Rehabilitation, 52(1), pp. 32-36.

Barak, A. (2022) 'Fusing horizons in qualitative research: Gadamer and cultural resonances', Qualitative Research in Psychology, 19(3), pp. 768-783. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1854403.

Barnes, C. (2019) 'Understanding the social model of disability: Past, present and future', in Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies. 2nd edn. London: Routledge.

Berger, R. (2015) 'Now I see it, now I don't: researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research', *Qualitative Research*, 15(2), pp. 219–234. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112468475.

Bhandari, R. and Rainford, J. (2023) 'Exploring the transitions of neurodivergent access students to level one study: Narratives of study skills and support', International Journal of Educational and Life Transitions, 2(1), p. 5.

Biber, S.H. (ed.) (2011) Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Incorporated.

Bjelland, M.J., Bruyère, S.M., von Schrader, S., Houtenville, A.J., Ruiz-Quintanilla, A. and Webber, D.A. (2023) 'Autistic employees' technology-based workplace accommodation preferences survey—Preliminary findings', International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 20(10), p. 6078.

Bölte, S., Black, M.H., Lönngren, J., Berggren, S., Lundqvist, D., Helles, A. et al. (2025) 'Career guidance and employment issues for neurodivergent individuals: A scoping review and stakeholder consultation', Human Resource Management, 64(1), pp. 123-145.

Botha, M. and Cage, E. (2022) '"Autism research is in crisis": A mixed method study of researcher's constructions of autistic people and autism research', Frontiers in Psychology, 13, p. 1050897. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1050897.

Brain in Hand (2024) Your ultimate guide to Access to Work. Available at: https://braininhand.co.uk/partners/workplace/ultimate-guide-to-access-to-work/ (Accessed: 25 July 2025).

Branicki, L., Sullivan-Taylor, B. and Brammer, S. (2024) 'Factors shaping the employment outcomes of neurodivergent and neurotypical people: Exploring the role of flexible and homeworking practices', Human Resource Management, 63(4), pp. 512-530.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2019) 'Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis', Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health, 11(4), pp. 589-597. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2021) Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide. London: SAGE Publications.

Braun, V., Hayfield, N., Clarke, V. and Terry, G. (2019) 'Thematic analysis', in Liamputtong, P. (ed.) Handbook of Research Methods in Health Social Sciences. Singapore: Springer, pp. 843-860.

Braun, V., Hayfield, N., Clarke, V., Terry, G., Roberts, R. and Davidson, D. (2022) 'Doing Reflexive Thematic Analysis', in S. Bager-Charleson and A. McBeath (eds)

Supporting Research in Counselling and Psychotherapy. Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp. 19-38. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13942-0_2.

Bronfenbrenner, U. and Morris, P.A. (2007) ‘The bioecological model of human development’, in W. Damon (Series Ed.) and R. M. Lerner (Vol. Ed.), Handbook of Child Psychology: Theoretical Models of Human Development (pp. 793–828). New York, NY: Wiley.

Brookfield, S. (2017) Becoming a critically reflective teacher. Second Edition. Somerset: John Wiley and Sons, Incorporated.

Bryman, A. (2016) Social research methods. Fifth Edition. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

Butcher, L. and Lane, S. (2024) 'Neurodivergent autism and ADHD student experiences of access and inclusion in higher education: An ecological systems analysis', Higher Education, 88, pp. 1623-1647.

Byrne, D. (2022) 'A worked example of Braun and Clarke's approach to reflexive thematic analysis', Quality and Quantity, 56(3), pp. 1391-1412. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-021-01182-y.

Cabinet Office (2023) Equality Act 2010: Amendments and guidance. London: HMSO.

CAST (2024) The UDL guidelines 3.0. Available at: https://udlguidelines.cast.org/ (Accessed: 25 July 2025).

Chapman, R. (2021) 'Neurodiversity and the social ecology of mental functions', Perspectives on Psychological Science, 16(6), pp. 1360-1372.

Chong, P.W. and Graham, L.J. (2013) 'The "Russian doll" approach: developing nested case studies to support international comparative research in education', International Journal of Research and Method in Education, 36(1), pp. 23-32. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2012.675555.

Chown, N., Robinson, J., Beardon, L., Downing, J., Hughes, L., Leatherland, J., Fox, K., Hickman and MacGregor, D. (2017) 'Improving research about us, with us: A draft framework for inclusive autism research', Disability and Society, 32(5), pp. 720-734.

Clandinin, D.J. (2006) ‘Narrative inquiry: A methodology for studying lived experience’, Research Studies in Music Education, 27(1), pp. 44–54. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1321103X060270010301.

Clouder, L., Karakus, M., Cinotti, A., Ferreyra, M.V., Fierros, G.A. and Rojo, P. (2020) 'Neurodiversity in higher education: A narrative synthesis', Higher Education, 80(4), pp. 757-778.

Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K. (2018) Research methods in education. Eighth edition. London; New York: Routledge.

Cohmer, S. (2014) 'Early infantile autism and the refrigerator mother theory (1943-1970)', Embryo Project Encyclopedia. Available at: https://embryo.asu.edu/pages/early-infantile-autism-and-refrigerator-mother-theory-1943-1970 (Accessed: 23 December 2024)

Coplan, J., Crocker, L., Landin, J. and Stenn, T. (2021) 'Building Supportive, Inclusive Workplaces Where Neurodivergent Thinkers Thrive: Approaches in Managing Diversity, Inclusion, and Building Entrepreneurship in the Workplace', *SAM Advanced Management Journal*, pp. 21–30. Available at: https://doi.org/10.52770/XTBM1097.

Crane, L., Pellicano, E., Joffee, V. and Milton, D. (2021) 'Supporting Newly Identified or Diagnosed Autistic Adults: An Initial Evaluation of an Autistic-Led Programme', Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 51(3), pp. 892-905. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-020-04486-4.

Crotty, M. (2020) The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process. 1st edn. Routledge. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003115700.

Davies, J. and Bagnall, C. (2025) '"A good transition is just key": The views and experiences of disability support staff in supporting autistic students transition to university', Autism in Adulthood, 7(2), pp. 155-168.

Dean, J., Furness, P., Verrier, D., Lennon, H. and Bennett, C. (2018) 'Desert island data: an investigation into researcher positionality', Qualitative Research, 18(3), pp. 273-289. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794117714612.

den Houting, J. (2019) 'Neurodiversity: An insider's perspective', Autism, 23(2), pp. 271-273. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361318820762.

Denzin, N.K., Lincoln, Y.S., Giardina, M.D., Cannella, G.S. (eds) (2024) The SAGE handbook of qualitative research. Sixth edition. Los Angeles: SAGE.

Department for Work and Pensions (2023) 'New Government Planner to help thousands of disabled university students into work', 15 November. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-government-planner-to-help-thousands-of-disabled-university-students-into-work (Accessed: 15 November 2023)

Department for Work and Pensions (2024) The Buckland Review of Autism Employment: Report and recommendations, 28 February. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-buckland-review-of-autism-

employment-report-and-recommendations/the-buckland-review-of-autism-employment-report-and-recommendations (Accessed: 24 May 2024)

Dickinson, K. (2024) DSA reforms and future provision concerns. Higher Education Policy Institute.

Disability Rights UK (2022) Social model of disability: Language. Available at: https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/social-model-disability-language (Accessed: 23 May 2024).

Disabled Students' Commission (2023) Disabled Student Commitment. Available at: https://disabledstudents.co.uk/disabled-student-commitment/ (Accessed: 29 November 2023)

Disabled Students UK (2024) 2024 Access Insights Report. London: Disabled Students UK. Available at: https://disabledstudents.co.uk/2024-access-insights-report-3/ (Accessed: 24 July 2025).

Doyle, N. and McDowall, A. (2022) 'Neurodiversity at work: A biopsychosocial model and the impact on working adults', British Medical Bulletin, 135(1), pp. 108-125.

Dwyer, S.C. and Buckle, J.L. (2009) 'The Space Between: On Being an Insider-Outsider in Qualitative Research', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8(1), pp. 54–63. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690900800105.

Dwyer, P. (2022) 'The neurodiversity approach(es): What are they and what do they mean for researchers?', Human Development, 66(2), pp. 73-92. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1159/000523723.

Dwyer, P., Ryan, J.G., Williams, Z.J. and Gassner, D.L. (2023) 'Building Neurodiversity-Inclusive Postsecondary Campuses: Recommendations for Leaders in Higher Education', Autism in Adulthood, 5(1), pp. 1-14.

EHRC (2010) Equality Act 2010 Statutory Code of Practice: Post-16 Education. Manchester: Equality and Human Rights Commission.

EHRC (2014) Equality Act 2010 Technical Guidance on Further and Higher Education. Manchester: Equality and Human Rights Commission.

EHRC (2024) Reasonable Adjustments in Higher Education: Legal Guidance Following Abrahart v University of Bristol. Manchester: Equality and Human Rights Commission.

Ellingson, L.L. (2017) 'Crystallization', in The International Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods. John Wiley and Sons, Ltd, pp. 1-5. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118901731.iecrm0055.

Ellyatt, W. (2025) 'Eco-systemic flourishing: Expanding the meta-framework for 21st-century education', Challenges, 16(2), p. 21. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3390/challe16020021.

Equality Act (2010) Definition of disability under the Equality Act 2010. London: HMSO.

Fereday, J. and Muir-Cochrane, E. (2006) 'Demonstrating Rigor Using Thematic Analysis: A Hybrid Approach of Inductive and Deductive Coding and Theme Development', International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 5(1), pp. 80-92. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690600500107.

Finlay, L. (2002a) 'Negotiating the swamp: the opportunity and challenge of reflexivity in research practice', Qualitative Research, 2(2), pp. 209-230. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/146879410200200205.

Finlay, L. (2002b) '"Outing" the Researcher: The Provenance, Process, and Practice of Reflexivity', Qualitative Health Research, 12(4), pp. 531-545. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/104973202129120052.

Fletcher-Watson, S. (2022) 'Transdiagnostic research and the neurodiversity paradigm: Commentary on the transdiagnostic revolution in neurodevelopmental disorders by Astle et al.', Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 63(4), pp. 418-420. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13589.

Galletta, A. (2020) Mastering the Semi-Structured Interview and Beyond: From Research Design to Analysis and Publication. New York University Press. Available at: https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9780814732939.001.0001.

Gibbs, K., Pellicano, E., Andreou, M., Mountford-Zimdars, A. and Schnepf, S.V. (2025) 'Exploring the perspectives of Australian neurodivergent university students', The Australian Educational Researcher, 52(1), pp. 123-145.

Goodall, C., Seers, K., Regan de Bere, S., Murray, J. and Gibson, S. (2022) 'The transition from higher education to employment for students with disabilities: A systematic review', Disability and Rehabilitation, 44(15), pp. 3856-3871.

Griffin, E. and Pollak, D. (2009) 'Student experiences of neurodiversity in higher education: Insights from the BRAINHE project', Dyslexia, 15(1), pp. 23-41.

Hamilton, L., Anderton, J. and Kat, M. (2025) 'Designing for Neurodiversity in Higher Education', in Eddy, A., Frawley, T., Blanaid, G., Quigley, E. and Valeur, C. *Neurodiversity and Higher Education*. 1st edn. London: Routledge, pp. 13–28. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003495925-3.

Hamilton, L.G. and Petty, S. (2023) 'Compassionate pedagogy for neurodiversity in higher education: A conceptual analysis', Frontiers in Psychology, 14, p. 1093290.

Haraway, D. (1988) 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', Feminist Studies, 14(3), p. 575. Available at: https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066.

Hartman, L. and Hartman, B. (2024) 'An ethical advantage of autistic employees in the workplace', Frontiers in Psychology, 15, p. 1364691.

Hastwell, J., Martin, N., Baron-Cohen, S. and Harding, J. (2017) 'The Cambridge Project: reflections on a university-based AS social group', Good Autism Practice, 18(1), pp. 97-105.

Holmes, C. (2022) 'Report into Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA)', Lord Holmes of Richmond MBE, 10 March. Available at: https://lordchrisholmes.com/report-disabled-students-allowance-dsa/ (Accessed: 30 July 2022).

Hotte-Meunier, L., Johnson, K. and Smith, P. (2024) 'Support service gaps in higher education to employment transitions', Disability Studies Quarterly, 44(3), pp. 78-95.

House of Commons Library (2024) Support for disabled students in higher education in England. Available at: https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8716/ (Accessed: 25 July 2025).

Hughes, J.A. (2021) 'Does the heterogeneity of autism undermine the neurodiversity paradigm?', Bioethics, 35(1), pp. 47-60. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/bioe.12780.

Jindal-Snape, D. (2023) 'Multiple and multi-dimensional educational and life transitions: Conceptualisation, theorisation and XII pillars of transitions', in International encyclopedia of education. 4th edn. Oxford: Elsevier, pp. 530-543.

Johansson, R. (2007) 'On Case Study Methodology', Open House International, 32(3), pp. 48-54. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1108/OHI-03-2007-B0006.

Jones, E.K. and Orchard, V. (2024) 'Neurodiversity and disability: what is at stake?', *Medical Humanities*, 50(3), pp. 456–465. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1136/medhum-2023-012808.

Kalmanovich-Cohen, H. and Stanton, J.D. (2025) 'Moving beyond disclosure: Rethinking universal support for neurodivergent employees', Frontiers in Psychology, 16, p. 1547877.

Kersten, M., Grietens, K., Maes, B. and Vansteenkiste, M. (2025) 'A strengths-based human resource management approach to neurodiversity: A multi-actor qualitative study', Human Resource Management, Early View.

Khan, M.H., Hassan, R., Khan, K.I., Jeon, M. and Khan, A. (2023) 'Insights into creating and managing an inclusive neurodiverse workplace for positive outcomes: A multistaged theoretical framework', Group and Organization Management, 48(2), pp. 1339-1386.

Kitchen, J.A., Hallett, R.E., Perez, R.J., and Rivera, G.J., (2019) 'Advancing the Use of Ecological Systems Theory in College Student Research: The Ecological Systems Interview Tool', *Journal of College Student Development*, 60(4), pp. 381–400.

Kitchen, J.A., Hallett, R.E., Perez, R.J. and Rivera, G.J. (2021) 'Ecological validation model of student success: A new student support model for promoting college success among low-income, first-generation, and racially minoritized students', Research in Higher Education, 62(3), pp. 345-367.

Klemow, K., Berkowitz, A., Cid, C. and Middendorf, G. (2019) 'Improving ecological education through a four-dimensional framework', Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment, 17(2), pp. 71-71. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1002/fee.2013.

Kraemer, B.R., McIntyre, L.L. and Blacher, J. (2024) 'Life after high school: The employment experiences of autistic young adults', Sage Publications, 54(3), pp. 287-302.

Le Cunff, A.L., Giampietro, V. and Dommett, E.J. (2024) 'Neurodiversity and online learning: A systematic review of cognitive load considerations', Computers and Education, 196, p. 104721.

Lincoln, Y.S. and Guba, E.G. (1985) Naturalistic inquiry. Beverly Hills, Calif: Sage Publications.

Longville-Carr, J. (2024) Autistic students' transition to university: Barriers to a positive experience. thesis. Anglia Ruskin Research Online (ARRO). Available at: https://aru.figshare.com/articles/thesis/Autistic_students_transition_to_university_barriers_to_a_positive_experience/25610361/1 (Accessed: 9 June 2025).

Mantzalas, J., Richdale, A.L., Adikari, A., Lowe, J. and Dissanayake, C. (2022) 'What is autistic burnout? A thematic analysis of posts on two online platforms', Autism in Adulthood, 4(1), pp. 52-65.

Marvasti, A. (2019) 'Qualitative Content Analysis: A Novice's Perspective', Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research, Vol 20, p. No 3 (2019): Qualitative Content Analysis I. Available at: https://doi.org/10.17169/FQS-20.3.3387.

McCrone, D.L. and Kingsbury, M. (2024) 'Ecotones in educational transitions: Understanding spatial, pedagogic, and agentic boundaries in student learning', Higher Education Research and Development, 43(2), pp. 156-171.

McDowall, A. and Kiseleva, M. (2023) Neurodiversity at work: demand, supply and a gap analysis. 2022 Neurodiversity in Business Report Commission 50834c. London: Birkbeck Institutional Research Online, p. 65. Available at: https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/50834.

McDowall, A. and Kiseleva, M. (2024) 'A rapid review of supports for neurodivergent students in higher education: Implications for research and practice', Neurodiversity, 2, 27546330241291769.

McKenna, L. (2024) 'Increase the chances of employment success for neurodiverse young adults', A Great Leap Newsletter. Available at: https://greatleap.substack.com/p/increase-the-chances-of-employment (Accessed: 25 July 2025).

McLoughlin, D., Fitzgibbon, G. and Young, V. (1994) Adult dyslexia: Assessment, counselling and training. repr. London: Whurr.

MDPI (2022) 'Students with disabilities in Australian higher education: Growth trends and outcomes', Education Sciences, 12(7), p. 456.

Merriam, S.B. (1988) Case study research in education: A qualitative approach. San Francisco, CA, US: Jossey-Bass (Case study research in education: A qualitative approach), pp. xx, 226.

Merriam, S.B. and Tisdell, E.J. (2016) Qualitative research: a guide to design and implementation. Fourth edition. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley and Sons (The Jossey-Bass higher and adult education series).

Meyer, J.M., Hinton, V.M. and Derzis, N. (2015) 'Emerging Adults with Disabilities: Theory, Trends, and Implications', Journal of Applied Rehabilitation Counseling, 46(4), pp. 3-10.

Milton, D.E. (2014) 'Autistic expertise: A critical reflection on the production of knowledge in autism studies', Autism, 18(7), pp. 794-802. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361314525281.

Milton, D.E.M. (2012) 'On the ontological status of autism: The "double empathy problem"', Disability and Society, 27(6), pp. 883-887.

Milton, D.E.M., Ridout, S., Martin, N., Mills, R., Murray, D., Pavlopoulou, G. and Beardon, L. (2019) 'A critical reflection on the development of the Participatory Autism Research Collective (PARC)', Tizard Learning Disability Review, 24(2), pp. 82-89. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1108/TLDR-09-2018-0029.

Morgan, E. and Klein, C. (2004) The dyslexic adult in a non-dyslexic world. London: Whurr.

Nash-Luckenbach, D.M. and Friedman, Z.L. (2024) 'The neurodivergent college learner: faculty perceptions of supporting individuals with ADHD in higher education', *Quality Assurance in Education*, 32(4), pp. 597–610. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1108/QAE-01-2024-0014.

Navarro, J.L. and Tudge, J.R.H. (2023) 'Technologizing Bronfenbrenner: Neo-ecological Theory', Current Psychology, 42(22), pp. 19338-19354. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-022-02738-3.

Newman, I. (2022) 'COVID-lockdown in English higher education March–June 2020. Were disabled students' needs forgotten?', Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher

Education, 26(3), pp. 85-95. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13603108.2021.2000516.

Nicolaidis, C., Raymaker, D., Kapp, S.K., Baggs, A., Ashkenazy, E., McDonald, K. et al. (2019) 'The AASPIRE practice-based guidelines for the inclusion of autistic adults in research as co-researchers and study participants', Autism, 23(8), pp. 2007-2019. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361319830523.

Nolan, C. and Gleeson, C. (2017) 'The transition to employment: The perspectives of students and graduates with disabilities', Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research, 19(3), pp. 230-244.

Nowell, L.S., Norris, J.M., White, D.E. and Moules, N.J. (2017) 'Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria', International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 16(1), p. 1609406917733847. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847.

Olanrewaju, M. and Ifeduba, E. (2024) 'Using Quirkos for Qualitative Data Analysis: Introductory Insights', Redeemer's University Journal of Management and Social Sciences, 7(2), pp. 1-16.

Oliver, M. (1996) 'The social model in context', in Oliver, M. (ed.) Understanding disability: From theory to practice. London: Macmillan Education UK, pp. 30-42. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-24269-6_4.

Oliver, M. and Carr, D. (2009) 'Learning in virtual worlds: Using communities of practice to explain how people learn from play', British Journal of Educational Technology, 40(3), pp. 444-457. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8535.2009.00948.x.

Oxford University Careers Service (2024) Careers support for disabled and neurodivergent students. Available at: https://careers.web.ox.ac.uk/article/careers-support-disabilities-longterm-conditions (Accessed: 25 July 2025).

Pagespetit, È., Massé, L. and Couture, C. (2025) 'ADHD and academic performance in college students: A systematic review', Sage Publications, 31(2), pp. 145-162.

Pellicano, E. and den Houting, J. (2022) 'Annual research review: Shifting from "normal science" to neurodiversity in autism science', Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 63(4), pp. 381-396. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13534.

Pesonen, H., Waltz, M., Fabri, M., Syurina, E., Krückels, S., Algner, M., Monthubert, B. and Lorenz, T. (2021a) 'Stakeholders' views on effective employment support strategies for autistic university students and graduates entering the world of work', *Advances in Autism*, 7(1), pp. 16–27. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1108/AIA-10-2019-0035.

Pesonen, H.V., Waltz, M., Fabri, M., Lahdelma, M. and Syurina, E.V. (2021b) 'Students and graduates with autism: Perceptions of support when preparing for transition from university to work', European Journal of Special Needs Education, 36(4), pp. 531-546.

Pitard, J. (2017) 'A Journey to the Centre of Self: Positioning the Researcher in Autoethnography', Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 18(3). Available at: https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-18.3.2764.

Quigley, E. and Gallagher, T. (2025) 'Neurodiversity and higher education: double masking by neurodivergent students', *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 0(0), pp. 1–17. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2025.2511369.

Quinn, S. and Anwar-Westander, H. (2023) 'The administrative burden for disabled PhD students: A case study of UK higher education', Disability Studies Quarterly, 43(3), pp. 112-128.

Ralton, T. (2024) Abrahart v University of Bristol: Legal implications for reasonable adjustments. Education Law Journal.

Renn, K.A. and Smith, B.R.G. (2023) 'Ecological models in higher education research: Overview and synthesis', New Directions for Higher Education, 2023(204), pp. 11-22. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1002/he.20491.

Richards, K.A.R. and Hemphill, MA (2018) 'A Practical Guide to Collaborative Qualitative Data Analysis', Journal of Teaching in Physical Education, 37(2), pp. 225-231. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1123/jtpe.2017-0084.

Rollnik-Sadowska, E. and Grabińska, V. (2024) 'Managing neurodiversity in workplaces: A review and future research agenda for sustainable human resource management', Sustainability, 16(15), p. 6594.

Saldaña, J. (2021) The coding manual for qualitative researchers. 4E. Fourth edition. London: SAGE.

Santuzzi, A.M., Waltz, P.R., Finkelstein, L.M. and Rupp, D.E. (2024) 'Moving beyond disclosure: Rethinking universal support for neurodivergent employees', Frontiers in Psychology, 15, p. 1547877.

Seidman, I. (2019) Interviewing as qualitative research: a guide for researchers in education and the social sciences. Fifth edition. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Shakespeare, T. (2014) Disability Rights and Wrongs Revisited. 2nd edn. London: Routledge.

Shaw, A. (2021) Inclusion, disability and higher education: Challenges and opportunities. Bristol: Policy Press.

Shaw, J. and Selman, F. (2023) An asset, not a problem: Meeting the needs of neurodivergent students. Unite Students. Available at: https://www.unitegroup.com/neurodivergent-students-report (Accessed: 25 July 2025)

Shpigelman, C.N., Reiter, S. and Weiss, P.L. (2021) 'The diversity model of disability: Implications for identity and practice', Disability and Society, 36(4), pp. 589-607.

Silver, C. and Lewins, A. (2014) Using Software in Qualitative Research: A Step-by-Step Guide. 1 Oliver's Yard, 55 City Road London EC1Y 1SP: SAGE Publications Ltd. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473906907.

Silver, P., Strehorn, K.C. and Bourke, A. (1997) 'The 1993 Employment Equity Act: Implementation and outcomes for students with disabilities', Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability, 12(3), pp. 16-23.

Singer, J. (2017) NeuroDiversity: The birth of an idea. Lexington: Judy Singer.

Sonuga-Barke, E.J.S. (2023) 'Paradigm "flipping" to reinvigorate translational science: Outlining a neurodevelopmental science framework from a "neurodiversity" perspective', Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 64(10), pp. 1405-1408. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13886.

Stake, R.E. (2010) The art of case study research. Nachdr. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publ.

Steinberg, S.R. and Down, B. (eds) (2020) The Sage handbook of critical pedagogies. 1st ed. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Inc.

Stone, E. and Priestley, M. (1996) 'Parasites, pawns and partners: disability research and the role of non-disabled researchers', British Journal of Sociology, 47(4), pp. 699-716.

Student Finance England (2025) 'Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA)', GOV.UK. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/disabled-students-allowance-dsa (Accessed: 1 December 2025).

Swanborn, P. (2010) Case Study Research: What, Why and How? 1 Oliver's Yard, 55 City Road London EC1Y 1SP: SAGE Publications, Inc. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526485168.

Syharat, C.M., Hain, A., Zaghi, A.E., Gabriel, R. and Berdanier, C.G.P. (2023) 'Experiences of neurodivergent students in graduate STEM programs', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, p. 1149068. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1149068.

Szulc, J.M., McGregor, F.L. and Cakir, E. (2023) 'Neurodiversity and remote work in times of crisis: Lessons for HR', Personnel Review, 52(6), pp. 1677-1692.

Tan, D.W., Edwards, C., Mewburn, I., Simpson, K., Webster, A.A., and Brownlow, C., (2025) 'Understanding the experiences of neurodivergent research students: a mixed methods systematic review', *Studies in Higher Education*, 0(0), pp. 1–17. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2025.2573209.

Tate, A. and Glazzard, J. (2024) ‘Immersed in the Transitioning Higher Education Sector: The Impact of Transitions in the Higher Education Sector in England on Staff and Students’, *International Journal of Educational and Life Transitions*, 3(1), p. 3. Available at: https://doi.org/10.5334/ijelt.77.

Terry, G., Hayfield, N., Clarke, V. and Braun, V. (2017) 'Thematic Analysis', in Willig, C. and Rogers, W. S., The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology. 1

Oliver's Yard, 55 City Road London EC1Y 1SP: SAGE Publications Ltd, pp. 17-36. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526405555.n2.

Times Higher Education (2024) Fifth of UK students report disability, true total likely higher. Available at: https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/fifth-uk-students-report-disability-true-total-likely-higher (Accessed: 25 July 2025).

Timmermans, S. and Tavory, I. (2012) 'Theory Construction in Qualitative Research: From Grounded Theory to Abductive Analysis', Sociological Theory, 30(3), pp. 167-186. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275112457914.

Tomczak, M.T. (2022) 'How can the work environment be redesigned to enhance the well-being of individuals with autism?', Employee Relations, 44(6), pp. 1467-1484.

Tong, P. and An, I.S. (2024) 'Review of studies applying Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory in international and intercultural education research', Frontiers in Psychology, 14, p. 1233925.

Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (2023) *Mapping reasonable adjustments and transitions support for disabled students*, *TASO*. Available at: https://taso.org.uk/news-item/mapping-reasonable-adjustments-and-transitions-support-for-disabled-students/ (Accessed: 12 December 2023)

Tudge, J.R.H. and Rosa, E.M. (2020) 'Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory', in The SAGE encyclopedia of lifespan human development. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Tudge, J.R.H., Hatfield, B.E., Mokrova, I. and Karnik, R.B. (2009) 'Uses and Misuses of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory of Human Development', Journal of Family Theory and Review, 1(4), pp. 198-210. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1756-2589.2009.00026.x.

Tudge, J.R.H., Mokrova, I., Hatfield, B.E. and Karnik, R.B. (2016) 'Still misused after all these years? A reevaluation of the uses of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development', Journal of Family Theory and Review, 8(4), pp. 427-445. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12165.

UMO Services (2025) University to Workplace Transition Programme: Phase Two Report. London: UMO Services. Available at: https://umo.services/university-to-workplace-transition (Accessed: 25 July 2025).

UNESCO (1994) The Salamanca statement and framework for action on special needs education. Paris: UNESCO.

Vargas-Salas, O., Alcazar-Gonzales, J.C., Fernandez-Fernandez, F.A., Molina-Rodriguez, F.N., Paredes-Velazco, R. and Carcausto-Zea, M.L. (2025) 'Neurodivergence and the Workplace: A Systematic Review of the Literature', *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 63(1), pp. 83–94. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/10522263251337564.

Vélez-Agosto, N.M., Soto-Crespo, J.G., Vizcarrondo-Oppenheimer, M., Vega-Molina, S. and García Coll, C. (2017) 'Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory revision: Moving culture from the macro into the micro', Perspectives on Psychological Science, 12(5), pp. 900-910.

Vincent, J. (2019) 'It's the fear of the unknown: Transition from higher education for young autistic adults', Autism, 23(6), pp. 1575-1585.

Vincent, J. (2020) 'Employability for UK university students and graduates on the autism spectrum: Mobilities and materialities', Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research, 22(1), p. 12. Available at: https://doi.org/10.16993/sjdr.656.

Vincent, J. and Fabri, M. (2019) 'Experiences of autistic university graduates in finding and maintaining employment', Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 49, pp. 3174-3186.

Vincent, J. and Fabri, M. (2022) 'The ecosystem of competitive employment for university graduates with autism', International Journal of Disability, Development and Education, 69(5), pp. 1823-1839.

Vincent, J., Ralston, K., MacLachlan, A. and Bardill, T. (2017) '"I think autism is like running on Windows while everyone else is a Mac": using a participatory action research approach with students on the autistic spectrum to rearticulate autism and the lived experience of university', Educational Action Research, 25(2), pp. 300-315. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2016.1153978.

Vital, L.M. and Yao, C.W. (2023) 'An equity-driven ecological model for internationalizing doctoral student research training', New Directions for Higher Education, 2023(204), pp. 47-57. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1002/he.20493.

Wang, S., Wang, F., Zhu, Z., Wang, J., Tran, T. and Du, Z., (2024) 'Artificial intelligence in education: A systematic literature review', *Expert Systems with Applications*, 252, p. 124167. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eswa.2024.124167.

Yin, R.K. (2018) Case study research and applications: design and methods. Sixth edition. Los Angeles: SAGE.

Yip, S.Y. (2024) 'Positionality and reflexivity: negotiating insider-outsider positions within and across cultures', International Journal of Research and Method in Education, 47(3), pp. 222-232. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2023.2266375.

Chapter 7 APPENDIX

7.1 Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

Questions for the Interviews

1. Do you consent to participate in this interview? Have you read the participant's information sheet and know where your data will be used and stored?

2. Describe who you are and what category you fit into for this study. For Example: Student, Client, Support Worker, Coach, Careers Advisor or Employer

3. What would you say are the biggest challenges for you within the category you have just identified?

4. In what ways would you say you have knowledge of the Disabled Students Allowances (DSA)and/or Access to Work (AtW) scheme?

5. Who would you go to if you needed to clarify or update information to enable you to progress in your ability to obtain/give support?

6. What do you know about the accessibility passport (if anything)?

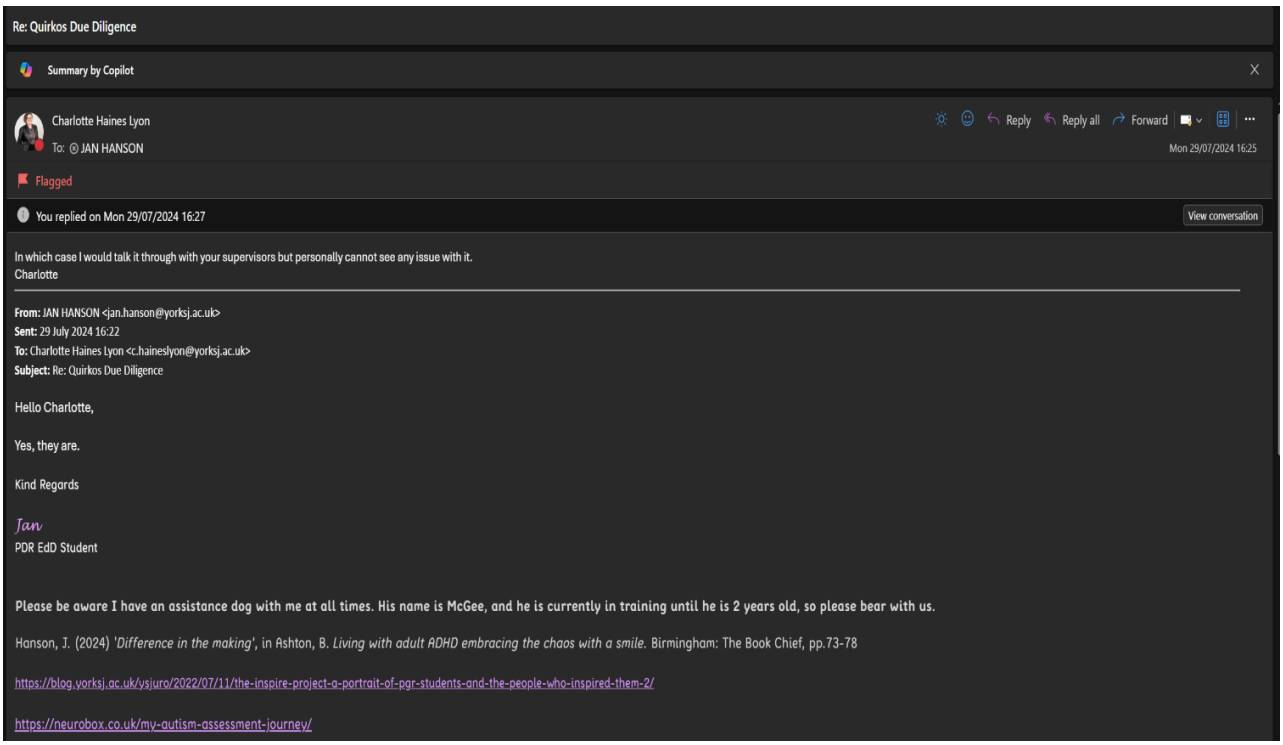
7. Has having access to, knowledge of, and use of an accessibility passport been useful for you?

8. Under the Equality Act 2010, neurodiversity is classed as a disability and, therefore, a protected characteristic.
   The question is, do you consider yourself to be disabled?
   If yes, why?
   If not, why?

If you think of anything else you would like to add to this interview once we have finished, please email me at jan.hanson@yorksj.ac.uk

7.2 Appendix B: Quirkos Due Diligence

This information is required to ensure due diligence for Quirkos.



Re: Quirkos Due Diligence

Summary by Copilot

Charlotte Haines Lyon

To: JAN HANSON

Reply Reply all Forward

Mon 29/07/2024 16:25

Flagged

You replied on Mon 29/07/2024 16:27

View conversation

In which case I would talk it through with your supervisors but personally cannot see any issue with it.
Charlotte

From: JAN HANSON <jan.hanson@yorksj.ac.uk>
Sent: 29 July 2024 16:22
To: Charlotte Haines Lyon <c.haineslyon@yorksj.ac.uk>
Subject: Re: Quirkos Due Diligence

Hello Charlotte,

Yes, they are.

Kind Regards

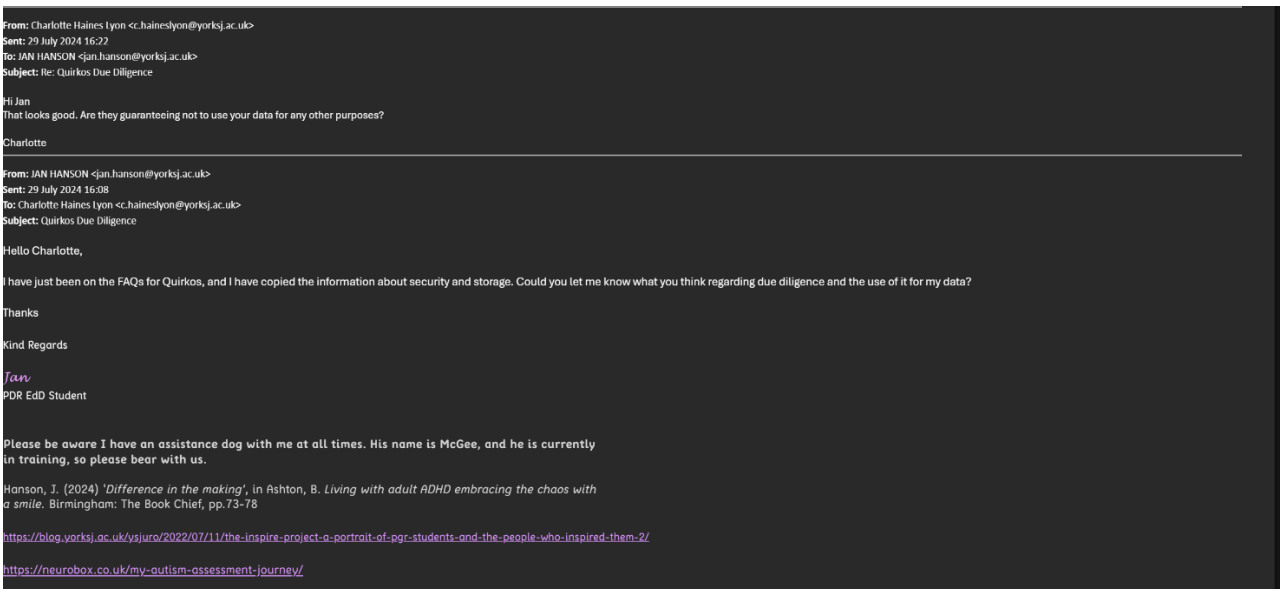
Jan
PDR EdD Student

Please be aware I have an assistance dog with me at all times. His name is McGee, and he is currently in training until he is 2 years old, so please bear with us.

Hanson, J. (2024) *'Difference in the making'*, in Ashton, B. *Living with adult ADHD embracing the chaos with a smile.* Birmingham: The Book Chief, pp.73-78

https://blog.yorksj.ac.uk/ysjuro/2022/07/11/the-inspire-project-a-portrait-of-pgr-students-and-the-people-who-inspired-them-2/

https://neurobox.co.uk/my-autism-assessment-journey/



From: Charlotte Haines Lyon <c.haineslyon@yorksj.ac.uk>
Sent: 29 July 2024 16:22
To: JAN HANSON <jan.hanson@yorksj.ac.uk>
Subject: Re: Quirkos Due Diligence

Hi Jan
That looks good. Are they guaranteeing not to use your data for any other purposes?

Charlotte

From: JAN HANSON <jan.hanson@yorksj.ac.uk>
Sent: 29 July 2024 16:08
To: Charlotte Haines Lyon <c.haineslyon@yorksj.ac.uk>
Subject: Quirkos Due Diligence

Hello Charlotte,

I have just been on the FAQs for Quirkos, and I have copied the information about security and storage. Could you let me know what you think regarding due diligence and the use of it for my data?

Thanks

Kind Regards

Jan
PDR EdD Student

Please be aware I have an assistance dog with me at all times. His name is McGee, and he is currently in training, so please bear with us.

Hanson, J. (2024) *'Difference in the making'*, in Ashton, B. *Living with adult ADHD embracing the chaos with a smile.* Birmingham: The Book Chief, pp.73-78

https://blog.yorksj.ac.uk/ysjuro/2022/07/11/the-inspire-project-a-portrait-of-pgr-students-and-the-people-who-inspired-them-2/

https://neurobox.co.uk/my-autism-assessment-journey/

How Secure is Quikos?

Our servers are hosted with SOC 1 Type II, Type II, ISO/IEC 27001:2013 and PCI-DSS compliance as well as physical security measures. If you create a password for your project, your data and login are end-to-end encrypted while you work with it, encrypted at rest, and our systems are continuously monitored. We have multiple redundant backup systems, so that data is always kept copied and available.

Where will my data be stored?

This depends on your location when you created the account. The service will choose the closest possible server to you, or alternatively the server that fits with the data regulations in your country (e.g. for Canadian customers, your data will be stored in Canada by default). We currently have servers in the US, Canada, the UK, the Netherlands, and Singapore. If you require your data to be stored anywhere different than the default, please get in touch with us.

7.3 Appendix C: Pilot Study Interview Questions

Pilot Study Interview Questions

1. I consent to participate in this interview, and I have read the participant's information sheet and know where my data will be used and stored.

2. When receiving either careers advice or Access to Work information from your university, what was the process for you to get the information? Was it supplied to you, or did you have to seek it out? If you had to seek it out, which department did it come from? How easy did you find obtaining this information?

3. The support you received from your university to prepare you to move into work or to continue with your education. Looking back, what would have helped you more to prepare for this transition?

4. Finally, is there anything you would like to add that we have not already covered about your experience of transitioning from university or the Access to Work scheme?

5. Could you look at the link supplied? It is for the DWP health adjustment passport. Could you write down your opinions of it ready for your interview? Thank you.
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-adjustment-passport

7.4 Appendix D: Pilot Study Initial Thematic Analysis (December 2023)

The following thematic analysis was produced from the pilot study conducted in July 2023. Analysis was conducted manually: printed transcripts were spread on the floor, sorted physically by emerging pattern, and mapped onto flipchart paper. Four themes were identified, each with sub-categories derived from participant accounts.

Theme 1: Information Sources *(Places where participants sought information that already existed)*

- Family support
- University faculty
- University disability support team
- University careers service, including careers fairs and posted information
- Employer HR departments
- External careers counsellors
- Participants' own independent research, including searches of public internet and university Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs)
- Access to Work

Theme 2: Information Delivery *(How information was communicated to participants)*

- Generic 'blanket' emails
- Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)
- Introductory talks
- Careers fairs
- Posters
- End of course questionnaires

Theme 3: Information Providers *(The individuals who gave participants advice)*

- Individual faculty members
- University disability support team staff
- DSA-funded study skills tutors

Theme 4: Types of Information *(The medium through which information was received)*

- Verbal in person: faculty lectures, guest speaker presentations, one-to-one meetings
- Verbal online: Access to Work assessments, study skills tutorials, mentor sessions, careers meetings
- Written physical: own notes, leaflets and booklets
- Written electronic: personal emails, lecture captions, Access to Work forms, downloaded website content

These four themes directly informed the construction of the main study interview schedule (Appendix A) and the focus of the main study research questions.