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Parity of participation for autistic students: mapping provision across UK higher education institutions

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Parity of participation for autistic students: mapping provision across UK higher education institutions

Abstract

This paper systematically identifies, maps and evaluates specific types of provision for autistic students published on university websites at 120 institutions throughout the UK. Within these data we identify trends in relation to geographical region, university group, and the Teaching Excellence Framework rating. We employ Nancy Fraser's (1997; 2000; 2009) theory of social justice to unpack the reasons that underlie the differentials in provision across UK higher education institutions. Findings identify eight categories of provision tailored specifically for autistic students from 'supporting transition to university' to 'social groups' and suggest that there are institutions across the UK with evidence of multiple examples of good practice. Our data show, however, that provision and resources are not distributed equitably, raising implications for autistic students' parity of participation in higher education.

Keywords: autism, higher education, university, provision, Fraser, social justice

This paper systematically identifies, maps and evaluates specific types of provision for autistic students published on university websites at 120 institutions throughout the UK. Within these data we identify trends in relation to geographical region, university type, and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) rating. We employ Nancy Fraser's (1997; 2000; 2009) theory of social justice to unpack the reasons that underlie the differentials in provision across UK higher education institutions (HEIs).

Autism is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition, which affects how individuals process information and perceive the world. Often autistic individuals can have difficulties in communicating, experience sensory sensitivities, and rely on routines, all of which can have implications for social functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Many students in Higher Education (HE) may have diagnoses of Asperger's Syndrome or high functioning autism, however, since 2013 the various diagnostic labels have been collapsed into one autism spectrum disorder diagnosis (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Across the general population, the prevalence rate of autism in the UK is estimated at around 1 in 100 (Brugha et al., 2011) although other international studies suggest that rates could be as high as 1 in 59 (Baio et al., 2018). The numbers of students disclosing autism diagnoses to universities in the

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3 UK is increasing year on year. Chown et al. (2018) estimate that across the sector this number
4 could now be as high as 9000 students with some institutions educating as many as 200 autistic
5 students. This is a dramatic increase since 2003/4 where only 80 students disclosed in the UK
6 (Martin et al., 2008). It is very likely, however, that the autistic university population is much
7 larger than even these estimates suggest, as many (particularly women) go undiagnosed well
8 into adulthood (Hull and Mandy, 2017), others are in the process of receiving a diagnosis, and
9 some choose not to disclose their diagnoses at all (Cox et al., 2017).
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19 Systematic reviews of autistic students' experience of university report social challenges
20 including social isolation; and increased presentation of mental health conditions including
21 stress, anxiety, and depression (Gelbar et al., 2014; Jansen et al., 2018). These findings are
22 consistent with *Author_3* et al.'s (2017) participatory study and various other studies (Anderson,
23 Carter and Stephenson, 2018; Hastwell et al., 2012; Gurbuz, Hanley and Riby, 2019; Van Hees,
24 Moyson and Roeyers, 2015), which describe difficulties in relation to a perceived sense of
25 difference, social interactions, managing change, and living independently. With the rise in
26 autistic students attending university and a growing awareness of the challenges that might be
27 encountered, there has also been a positive move to introduce specific provisions or
28 accommodations to meet these needs. In the United States, Barnhill's (2016) analysis of
29 universities and colleges reports that providing an advisor or tutor and making modifications to
30 testing procedures were the most commonly reported accommodations; and supervised social
31 activities, social skills groups, and housing accommodations were the most frequently reported
32 support services. More recently, Accardo, Kuder, and Woodruff's (2019) study investigated the
33 accommodations and support services preferred by American college students to find that
34 academic coaching, tutoring, and summer transition programmes were the most preferred
35 support services, particularly where they connected students to a member of staff. Taking a
36 similar approach in the UK context, Chown et al. (2018) collected data from 99 universities,
37 largely via freedom of information requests, to find that the most common types of supports for
38 autistic students were consistent accommodation arrangements (92%), face-to-face time (91%),
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3 and provision of academic supports (90%). Their study also reported other examples of
4 provision including transitional support, staff training, and employment trends, although these
5 data were not always quantified. The mixed picture is also identified in Williams et al.'s (2019)
6 review of support for disabled students in England which collected data from 67 institutions.
7 Their report highlighted that only 26% of HEIs in the sample had a specific policy for students
8 with ASD compared to 79% who had policies for students with Specific Learning Difficulties and
9 69% for Mental Health.
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19 *UK higher education sector*

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23 Since 1992, the UK higher education sector has expanded rapidly but without further policy-
24 driven differentiation between higher education institutions (Tight, 2009). Within this context
25 universities began to promulgate specific sector identities and the development of a hierarchy
26 of prestige reinforced by institutional and group branding (Filippakou and Tapper, 2015). The
27 Russell Group was formed in 1994 with the aim of representing 'research intensive' universities
28 and informing higher education policy direction at a UK government level. At the same time, a
29 group of smaller research-intensive but teaching-focused universities formed the '1994 Group',
30 some of which were subsumed into the Russell Group when it dissolved in 2013. Alongside this
31 are a smaller number of institutions which are unaffiliated with either the Russell Group or the
32 '1994 Group' but had university status pre-1992. Finally, the largest section of the sector is
33 made up of post-1992 institutions which tend to be former polytechnics with a strong focus on
34 teaching and an emphasis on 'widening participation' (Boliver, 2015). As Post-1992 is not a
35 mission group identity, many of these institutions are members of the University Alliance,
36 Million Plus, and/or Cathedral Group; however, for the purposes of this paper the broader post-
37 1992 label will be applied.
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56 The stratification of UK's higher education sector is also represented in the distribution of
57 resources and student profiles. Those research-intensive universities, including the Russell
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3 Group and former 1994 Group, receive the largest share (62.3%) of government funding for
4 research with other institutions receiving significantly less (De Jager, 2011; Drayton and
5
6 Waltmann, 2020). Whereas, Post-1992 institutions attract much more diverse student
7
8 populations and receive more than 70% of the (much smaller) widening participation funds
9
10 provided by the government (O'Connell, 2015). This is borne out in the most recent HESA (2020)
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12 data, which suggests that in the 2017/18 academic period, only 6 of the 37 (16%) 'research-
13
14 intensive' institutions either in the Russell Group or previously in the 1994 Group, have
15
16 disabled student populations larger than the sector average of 14% and only one reported a
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18 population of 20%. By comparison 36 out of 67 (54%) HEIs with Post-1992 status had above
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20 average disabled student populations, with 7 reporting numbers above 20% and one as high as
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22 28%.
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26 27 *Teaching Excellence Framework*

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30 The TEF, originally devised by the UK Department for Education in 2016 (Office for Students
31
32 (OfS), 2018), was a central feature of the 2017 Higher Education and Research Act. Its reputed
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34 aim is to raise the quality and status of teaching in higher education institutions (Hubble and
35
36 Bolton, 2018) through measurement of performance and financial accountability (Wood and Su,
37
38 2017). Excellence in the TEF is measured through a series of proxy metrics that include, student
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40 satisfaction, retention, employability and learning gain (Massie, 2018). Universities and colleges
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42 in all parts of the UK can participate in the TEF, and a total of 288 HEIs held a TEF award in
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44 2019. Following the most recent assessment, 77 HE providers are rated gold, 136 are rated
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46 silver and 61 are rated bronze (OfS, 2020).
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51 The TEF purports to situate 'students at the centre' of higher education, with an espoused
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53 emphasis on social mobility and 'choice' (Gourlay and Stephenson 2017; Gillard, 2018) with
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55 gold awarded to those institutions where teaching 'ensures all students are significantly
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57 challenged to achieve their full potential' leading to 'outstanding outcomes for students from all
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3 backgrounds' (Department for Education, 2016: 3). Such a requirement for institutions to
4 demonstrate their engagement with underrepresented and non-traditional groups (low income,
5 Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students, those with disabilities or adult learners returning to
6 education) is welcomed. However, it signals the lack of parity experienced by minority groups, a
7 point emphasised by the recently established Disabled Students Commission (DSC), which has
8 been charged with identifying and promoting practice which impacts positively on disabled
9 students', including those who disclose an autism diagnosis (Advance HE, 2020).
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20 *Social Justice as parity of participation*

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24 This paper draws on the work of Nancy Fraser (1997; 2000; 2009) to offer a theoretical frame
25 for considering the outcomes across the higher education sector for autistic students. Like
26 others (see for example, Keddie 2012; Lynch and Lodge, 2002; Mills et al., 2016; Power, 2012),
27 her three-part model of social justice as redistribution, recognition, and representation is
28 recognised as insightful for better understanding inequalities in education. Fraser (in Bozalek
29 2012, p. 147) argues that,
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39 Social arrangements are just if, and only if, they . . . institutionalise the possibility for
40 people to participate on a par with one another in all aspects of social life. This means
41 that social arrangements are unjust if they entrench obstacles that prevent . . . people
42 from the possibility of parity of participation.
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48 Fraser outlines the three salient barriers to participation as economic inequality, which she
49 characterises as a distributive problem, particularly where resources are 'maldistributed' in
50 relation to their ownership, control, distribution and consumption. The second barrier to parity
51 is recognition but more typically non-recognition or misrecognition. This occurs when the
52 'stigmatizing gaze of a culturally dominant other' forces disesteemed groups to 'internalize
53 negative self-images' thus suppressing their own cultural identity (Fraser, 2000:109). Resisting
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3 a focus on identity alone, however, she argues that problems of recognition are often
4
5 inseparable from the problems of redistribution in an economically unequal society (Lynch and
6
7 Lodge, 2002:13). And the final barrier is political injustice, which Fraser refers to as
8
9 'misrepresentation'. This occurs where power is enacted in the realms of decision-making
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11 which wrongly denies groups the possibility of participation as equals (Mills et al., 2016).
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17 **Methodology**

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19 An instrumental case study approach was adopted, as it facilitated exploration of patterns
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21 (Stake, 1995 cited Hamilton, Corbett-Whittier and Fowler, 2012) within the data associated
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23 with one aspect of the bounded case (the 120 HEIs). Data were derived from the institution
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25 websites, the purpose of which was to show what prospective students with autism or their
26
27 parents/carers might be able to find should they be looking for an institution with such
28
29 provision. Previous research into provision in HE for autistic students illuminated the sparsity
30
31 of specially tailored provision but did not always suggest how many institutions offered specific
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33 types of provision (Chown et al., 2018). This research aimed to find, map and quantify available
34
35 information on the provision that is currently available for students with autism at universities
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37 in the UK.
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42 The data were gathered through web or data mining of 120 HEI websites (N=120), which is a
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44 process used to extract useful and previously unknown knowledge (Johnson and Gupta, 2012)
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46 and one which has been used more recently by researchers to explore issues including: online
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48 learning (Tang, Xing and Pei, 2019); course management systems (Romero, Ventura and Garcia,
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50 2008); academic performance of HE students (Alsuwaiket, 2018); and market segmentation in
51
52 professional education (Davari, Noussalehi and Keramati, 2018). Data or web mining is part of
53
54 both information retrieval and extraction systems, and it can draw upon other techniques
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56 including topic tracking, clustering and categorisation (Johnson and Gupta, 2012).
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3 The research process followed was similar to that used in Injadat, Salo and Nassif's 2016 study
4 of data mining techniques in social media research. Firstly, a search protocol was created which
5 involved identification of research questions (see below), Secondly, a search strategy and
6 selection procedures were outlined, and quality assessment rules applied. The approach for
7 data extraction and synthesis was similarly agreed.
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13 *Research Questions*

- 14 1. What provisions and supports are currently available to autistic students at UK universities
15 (with Research Degree Awarding Powers) based on publicly available information?
16
- 17 2. How are provisions and supports for autistic students distributed regionally?
18
- 19 3. What impact does university type have with respect to distribution of provisions and
20 supports for autistic students?
21
- 22 4. What impact do TEF ratings have with respect to distribution of provisions and supports for
23 autistic students?
24
- 25 5. What could be considered good practice across each of the different categories of provision?
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38 *Search strategy*

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40 A Boolean search strategy (reference) was used to collect data for this research. For each of the
41 120 institutions, the researchers entered the following into the search bar of the Google web
42 browser:
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46 Site:[institutions web address] "autism" OR "aspergers" OR "ASD" OR "ASC" AND "support" OR
47 "provision"
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49
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52 This search strategy brought up all pages from the institutions website which contained these
53 search words. The first five pages of results were then checked for information on provision for
54 students with autism at that institution. Where there was evidence of a provision this was
55 recorded.
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Data extraction and analysis strategy

From the data retrieved we identified 8 types of provision for students with autism (see below).

It was further analysed by regional differences, type of university based on age and mission group and its relationship to the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF).

The types of provision recorded were:

- 1) Evidence of a specific section of the website for students with autism
- 2) Evidence of transition to university provision
- 3) Evidence of Transition to employment provision
- 4) Evidence of peer mentoring
- 5) Evidence of specialist tutoring
- 6) Evidence of social groups for students with autism
- 7) Evidence of self-advocacy or student-led societies
- 8) Evidence of provision for acquisition of or support with daily living skills

Institutions whose websites showed that they offered three or more of the described types of provision were marked as potential examples of good practice. These institutions were then sorted by geographical region, TEF rating and university type: research-intensive (Russell Group and previous 1994-group), unaffiliated pre-1992, and post-1992.

Limitations

The aim was to use data that was freely available to the public, rather than information that required a specific enquiry of Freedom of Information request to the institutions. All data included in this study were found due to its publication on institutional websites. For this reason, where information on autism provision was not apparent in the searches, the

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3 researchers do not assume that this means the provision itself does not exist, only that
4
5 information about that provision is not publicly available.
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8 The methodology did not use an automated web content programme for analysis, and therefore
9
10 was open to human error. Additionally, tags and other “meta” content on a page can camouflage
11
12 some of the pages, so it is possible that some data was not captured. Finally, whilst specific
13
14 search and data extraction strategies were used, content may have been missed as web page
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16 content is ‘so scattered’ (Gunasundari and Karthikeyan, 2012:29).
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22 **Findings**

23 **Spread of provision**

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26 As previously mentioned, 8 categories of provision were identified across the whole data set
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28 (N=120) (see Figure 1). These are outlined in detail below and include examples of institutional
29
30 practice, provided both to illustrate but also to advance good practice.
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35 The most frequent provision recorded was having ‘specific website content for students with
36
37 autism’, with 44 (n=44;37%) institutions having this. Most of the time having a specific section
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39 on the website for students with autism was an indicator that further provision would be good.
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41 Good practice institutions (n=21) were identified as those with three of more types of provision;
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43 19 of 21 had a specific section for students with autism on their website. However, only around
44
45 half of the institutions with a specific section on the website were judged to have materially
46
47 good provision. Results for ‘transition to university’ (n=40) and ‘specialist tutoring’ (n=39) were
48
49 the next most common types of provision; however, they were still offered by fewer than half of
50
51 the 120 institutions, representing 33% and 32% respectively.
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58 Figure 1: Occurrence of types of provision
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HEIs with good provision

Of the 120 HEI websites searched, 21 (n=21) were identified as having three or more types of provision specifically for students with autism, thus being classified as demonstrating 'good' provision. Regionally the South East (not including London) (n=3) and South West (n=3) had the highest number of institutions with 'good provision' (see Figure 2). Whilst there appeared to be minimal differences in geographical spread of "good" institutions. London had relatively low levels of good provision compared to less densely populated locations such as Yorkshire and the Humber and the South West.

Figure 2: Geographical location of HEIs with good provision

When looking at how HEIs with 'good provision' are clustered by TEF rating it is clear that a large majority of institutions with multiple types of provision have a TEF rating of either Gold (n=10) or Silver (n=9), with only one HEI with bronze TEF and no TEF rating (Figure 3). Gold award HEIs represented only 33% of the sample (n=40:N=120) but 48% of those with good provision (n=10:N=21).

Figure 3: Good HEI providers and their TEF rating

The majority of HEIs marked as having good provision were unaffiliated to any particular mission group (n=11) (Figure 4). These institutions have been classed as "unaffiliated old" (n=9), for those who received degree awarding powers before 1992, and "unaffiliated new" (n=2) for those who received degree awarding powers in 1992 or after. Of the university types

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3 represented, the Russell Group had the largest number of institutions in the “good” provision
4 category (n=7: N=21), representing 33%, though Russell group HEIs accounted for only 22% of
5 the total sample (n=26:N=120).
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10 11 12 **Types of provision**

13 14 **Transition to university**

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17 Provision to facilitate the ‘transition to university’ was one of the most frequent types of
18 provision offered in the sector (n=40, N=120). Examples of this provision were spread
19 geographically but was most frequently found at institutions in the East Midlands (n=5) and the
20 South West (n=5) regions. Of the institutions that offered some form of transition to university
21 provision, the majority of HEIs that offered it had Gold (n=18) or Silver (n=19) TEF awards and
22 were either Russell Group (n=11) or unaffiliated institutions, (n=13 pre 1992 and n= 9 post
23 1992).
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33 The majority of ‘transition to university’ provision consisted of one-off induction events
34 between 1-3 days long (n=25). Other transition support identified included information leaflets
35 for students with autism, pre-meetings with a specialist ASD advisor before starting university
36 and guidance provided to academic staff receiving new students with autism into their classes.
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45 *City based, medium sized, new university in the Midlands*

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47 A three-day summer school takes place in early September for students with autism who are
48 commencing their first year at the institution. Students are provided with free
49 accommodation for this residential. There is a campus tour and an introduction talk from the
50 Students’ Union included.
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58 The summer school has various activities which look at daily living skills, rather than an
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3 academic focus. The activities include money management, shopping, cooking and using the
4
5 launderette. There are also sessions which focus on introducing the new students to their
6
7 new city, including a presentation about safety awareness and a tour of Birmingham which
8
9 includes having lunch out. Attendees also attend workshops in managing stress and anxiety
10
11 and talking about relationships.
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14 15 16 **Specialist tutoring**

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19 Specialist tutoring was one of the most common types of provision. 39 HEIs (n=39; N=120)
20
21 were found to have information about this support online. All regions of the UK had a least 1
22
23 HEI with specialist tutoring, with the highest number of institutions with autism specific
24
25 tutoring support in Yorkshire and the Humber (n=6).
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28
29 Of the HEIs that discussed specialist tutoring on their websites at the time of the research, 17
30
31 had gold (n=17) TEF ratings, 19 Silver (n=19) and 1 Bronze (n=1). Two were Scottish
32
33 institutions with no TEF rating. The majority of these institutions were either members of the
34
35 Russell Group (n=14) or were pre 1992 unaffiliated (n=13). It should be noted that it is not
36
37 possible to gauge the quality of the tutoring, nor how easily it can be accessed, simply from the
38
39 web search.
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45 *Medium, Russell Group University in South East*

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47 Successful applicants are invited to contact support services in advance so they can be
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49 matched with a Helper/Tutor who is most appropriate for them. As well as this there is a
50
51 specialist Asperger Syndrome Advisor on staff to support students. This is to ensure that
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53 support packages are in place from the beginning. In addition, there are resources for all
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55 academic staff to help them make specific accommodations for students with an autism
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57 diagnosis.
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Social Group

Social groups for students with autism were infrequently mentioned (n=15; N=120). Of the universities that had social groups 8 were Gold (n=8) TEF rated, 6 were Silver (n=6) and was 1 Bronze (n=1). The Russell group and old, pre 1992 institutions accounted for 12 out of the 15 universities who had social groups (n=12). The information available in the web search varied, with some institutions making only passing reference to the existence of social groups or dated promotional materials which indicated the group's existence. Other institutions had clear information about meeting times and types of activities offered for students who wished to attend. Most of these groups were run by the institutions, but there was some evidence of student led societies being run through the independent students' unions.

Small, unaffiliated post 1992 university in Yorkshire and the Humber

This institution has a social group which meets twice a week and was set up six years ago following consultation with students with autism, who said they would like to meet and socialise with other students who understand what it is like to have autism and be at university.

The group is staff-led and offers a range of activities during term time, including movie nights, drinks and meals out in the city centre, games nights, cinema trips, quiz nights and creative writing nights. The institution explains online its long-term aim to eventually have the group be self-sustaining and led by students for students.

Transition to employment

Provision to support students with autism to transition out of university and into employment was very sparse (n=10; N=120). The examples found were spread across the country, but half of

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2
3 all the provision was located in the North East (n=2) and Yorkshire and Humber (n=3). The
4 majority of HEIs that offered transition to employment were Gold TEF rated (n=7) and in the
5 Russell Group (n=7). Much of this type of provision was basic and involved either lists of
6 autism-friendly employers or signposting to autism related organisation for more support. A
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12 few HEIs organised specialist employment events for students with autism to attend.
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18 *Medium sized, Former 1994 Group university in South West of England*

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20 This university runs a free two-day event for Autistic students or graduates (with or without
21 a diagnosis) in conjunction with a large corporate bank. It aims to help with the transition
22 from university to a range of opportunities like internships, placements and graduate
23 employment.
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28 The first day is spent on campus and includes talks about the history of employment and
29 autism, employment skills sessions and talks from autistic people on their experiences in
30 their different jobs. The second day takes place at the corporate site and includes a site tour
31 and a series of smaller breakout sessions which focus on the different employment routes,
32 opportunities and job roles that participants can consider. Travel and lunch are provided for
33 the participants.
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44 **Daily living skills**

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46 Only 7 HEIs had evidence of provision which addressed students' daily living skills. All of these
47 institutions were Gold (n=3) and Silver (n=3) TEF rated except for one Scottish university which
48 does not have a TEF rating. The majority were Russell Group (n=2) or pre 1992 institutions
49 (n=3). Geographically, these institutions were spread across the UK, but over half were in the
50 West Midlands (n=2) and the South East (n=2) combined.
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3 *Medium/large Russell Group institution in Yorkshire and the Humber*

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5 This institution offers a five-week course designed to equip students with skills to manage
6 stress, emotions and time, and develop assertiveness and resilience. The course uses
7 emotional regulation techniques, mindfulness and stress tolerance techniques. There are
8 sessions on addressing black and white thinking and perfectionism. It is, however, open for all
9 students with a disability, rather than being specifically aimed at student with autism.
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19 **Self-Advocacy**

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21 Self-organised groups appeared to be sparse. Only 7 HEIs had evidence of self-advocacy for
22 students with autism and the data pointed towards one-off historical student-led campaigns or
23 projects rather than a sustained provision. Of the institutions which did have evidence of this, all
24 were Gold (n=4) and Silver (n=3) TEF rated. Five of the 7 universities were pre 1992
25 institutions, geographically widely spread.
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33 *Medium, unaffiliated pre1992 university in the South East of England*

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35 This student group is part of the students' union and states that they welcome any and all
36 students with an Autism Spectrum Condition. Their web page lists socials, events, meetings, a
37 regular discussion group and campaigning as activities for students with autism to get
38 involved in. The society committee is made up of students and students are directed to their
39 Facebook page for more information.
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49 **Peer mentoring**

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51 Provision for peer mentoring specifically for autistic students was sparse and spread out
52 geographically. Of the 6 HEIs that offered it (n=6: N=120), all were Gold (n=3) or Silver (n=3)
53 TEF rated, with three post-1992 and three pre-1992 HEIs. However, peer mentoring was
54 usually only briefly mentioned, and tended to refer to generic peer mentoring schemes through
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3 the library/student services. There were no examples of an autism-specific peer support
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5 programme in the search results.
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10 **Discussion**

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13 These data highlight the existence of areas of 'good practice' in relation to provision for autistic
14 students across the UK. It identifies eight categories of provision tailored specifically for these
15 young people, from 'supporting transition to university' to 'social groups'. The categories of
16 'transition to university' and 'specialist tutoring support' were amongst the most common
17 identified across these UK institutions, which accords with autistic students' preferences
18 identified by Accardo, Kuder, and Woodruff (2019) in their US study. Additionally, the
19 identification of 'social groups' for autistic students is positive, as this responds to one of the
20 most prevalent challenges for autistic students identified across the international literature
21 (Gelbar et al., 2014; Jansen et al., 2018; Andersen, Carter and Stephenson, 2018; Hastwell et al.,
22 2012; Gurbuz, Hanley and Riby, 2018; Van Hees, Moyson and Roeyers, 2015). However, what it
23 signals most is the increase in recognition across the sector regarding the needs of autistic
24 students. Through transition activities and social groups, this group is enabled to develop
25 networks of support and friendship leading to the development of their own cultural identity in
26 the university space (Fraser 2000). This is explicitly borne out in Riccio et al.'s (2020)
27 international study which suggests that university provisions that focus on autistic strengths
28 can contribute to 'autistic pride' and increases in self-esteem. Moreover, greater recognition of
29 the autistic identity and the particular barriers faced by these students has precipitated, to some
30 extent in UK institutions, the redistribution of resources and ultimately the potential for
31 increased participation.
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55 Our data suggest, however, that resources and provision are not distributed equally across the
56 UK higher education sector. Two thirds of the institutions with 'good levels' of provision (three
57 or more) were from Russell group or the former 1994 group. Such 'research intensive'
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3 institutions have the largest share of the UK's £45 billion net assets (IFS, 2020; Furey et al., 2014)
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5 and enjoy what Taylor (2011) refers to as the 'halo effect' across the sector. However, these
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7 institutions educate fewer students with disabilities compared to post-1992 providers; in fact,
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9 just over one third of these institutions have disabled student populations of 15% or more
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11 (HESA, 2020). One explanation for higher representation of good practice among research
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13 intensive universities could be due to recent activities to meet widening participation targets,
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15 particularly among disabled and autistic populations (Graham, 2013; Blunkett et al., 2019).
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17 Another explanation might be that, as our data are based on activities reported on university
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19 webpages, differences are derived from disproportionate expenditure on marketing. Both the
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21 Augur Report (2019) and the UK Minister of State for Universities, Michelle Donelan (2020), are
22
23 critical of institutions that invest their access budgets in their online web presence in order to
24
25 attract potential students. Given that the distribution of economic and symbolic resources
26
27 across the sector are weighted in favour of research-intensive universities (Olive, 2018), it is
28
29 likely that those from post-1992 and unaffiliated pre-1992 have less to spend on marketing and
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31 potentially their autism provisions despite educating larger populations of disabled students. As
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33 an indirect consequence then, these institutions are misrecognised as being less effective or
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35 supportive for autistic students, when it might in fact a matter of marketing expenditure.
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40 Similarly, there is a clear correlation between institutions with 'good levels' of provision for
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42 autistic students and their TEF award with 19 out of the 21 institutions in this category
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44 achieving Gold or Silver awards. The TEF does not use provision made by institutions for
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46 disabled or autistic students as one of its metrics for measuring quality, but as student
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48 experience is central, this overrepresentation of Gold and Silver TEF rated institutions is
49
50 perhaps unsurprising. However, the TEF is not without its critics, Hayes and Cheng (2020)
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52 argue that such performative frameworks lack attention to epistemic equality and have been
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54 characterised to preference productivity, competition, and institutional self-interests in pursuit
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56 of financial incentives (Gourlay and Stevenson, 2017; Hayes, 2017; Neary, 2016; Wood and Su,
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58 2017). Such ranking activities are, according to Pascarella (2001:20) based on institutional
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3 resources and reputational dimensions which do not always correlate to students' experiences
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5 so much as institutions' capacity to play the system. This is similar to what Fraser (2017:2) calls
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7 'progressive neoliberalism', where 'truncated ideals of emancipation and lethal forms of
8
9 financialization' become merged to the extent that freedoms are modelled on the free market.
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11 For this reason, we might be wary of placing too much emphasis on the TEF and what this tells
12
13 us about autistic students' experiences of the support reported on their institutional webpages.
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16 Finally, most examples of provision focused on facilitating the transition for students into
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18 university and supporting them academically once they are there. There was much less
19
20 evidence of social and daily living skills support and support for students transitioning out of
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22 university and into employment. The apparent emphasis on getting students into university and
23
24 focusing on academic support could be interpreted as a pragmatic choice. It suggests that
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26 institutions are being driven by the widening participation agenda but have put in place much
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28 less provision to enable their autistic students' success on completion of their courses (Author,
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30 2020). Only ten universities across the UK reported offering employment support, despite the
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32 fact that this group has the highest levels of unemployment of any disabled group following
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34 graduation (Allen and Coney, 2019). The danger, therefore, is that universities perpetuate what
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36 Berlant (2006) describes as 'cruel optimism' where much is promised as a result of university
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38 education and the associated student debts but the result for autistic graduates is the
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40 actualisation of the inequalities they aim to resolve (Runswick-Cole and Goodley, 2015). Thus,
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42 without the redistribution of resources and a recognition of their specific skills and needs,
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44 autistic graduates will continue to experience significant and sustained disparity in their
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46 capacity to participate fully in society.
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55 **Conclusion**

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57 The publication of this paper coincides with the tenth anniversary of the United Kingdom's
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59 Equality Act 2010, a piece of legislation centred on assuring equal participation for all in society,
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3 which is also a core concept in Fraser's thesis (1997; 2000; 2009). Based on a systematic
4 analysis of published material on websites at 120 institutions throughout the UK our findings
5 suggest that there is evidence of a redistribution of resources designed to support autistic
6 students engage more fully in higher education. It is clear, however, that across the sector
7 provision is skewed towards transition into university and academic support leaving gaps in
8 relation to social opportunities and postgraduate employment success, both of which are
9 identified as key areas of need by autistic students (Riccio et al., 2020; Author 3, 2020).
10
11 Moreover, it appears that those universities with the highest levels of institutional recognition,
12 most access to financial resources, and the greatest capacity to market themselves in line with
13 national 'quality' assessments are able to offer the most to autistic students. Thus, whilst good
14 practice is welcomed wherever it is found, there is a need to address more fully the
15 maldistribution and misrecognition that currently exists across the sector such that all
16 universities are able to offer the provision that is necessary to afford this group the same
17 opportunities, experiences, and outcomes as the rest of the student body. Finally, universities
18 more generally ought to explore means by which their autistic students can represent
19 themselves in order to celebrate their own 'cultural identity' (Fraser, 2000:109) and achieve
20 parity of participation as equals.
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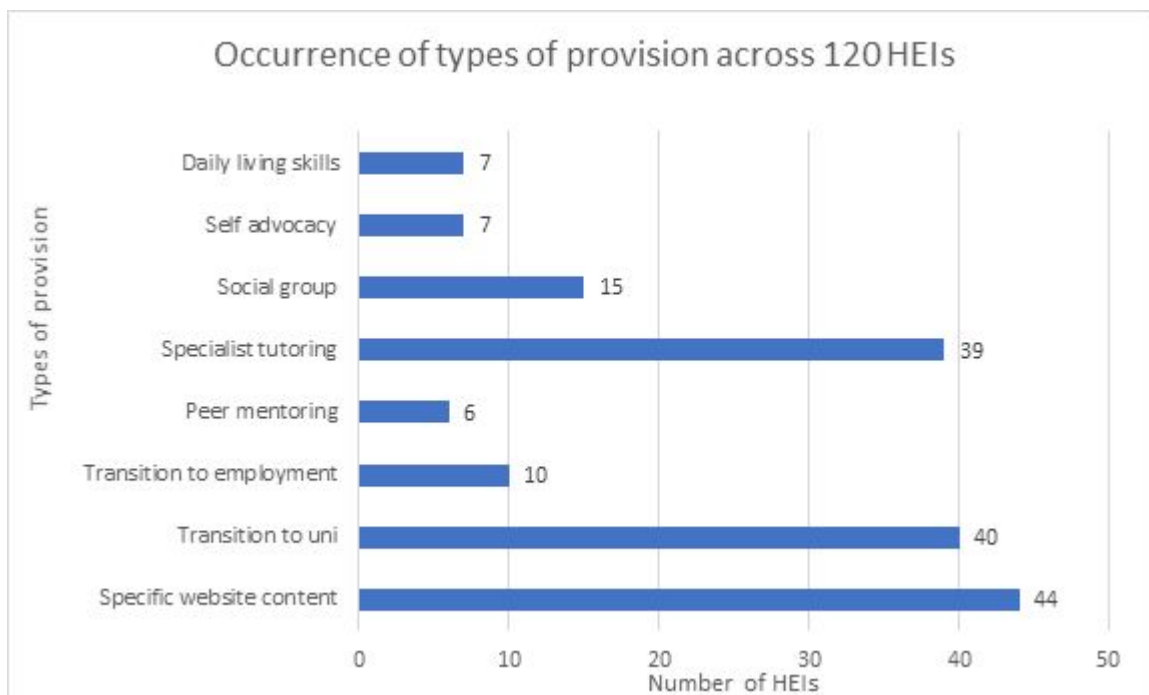
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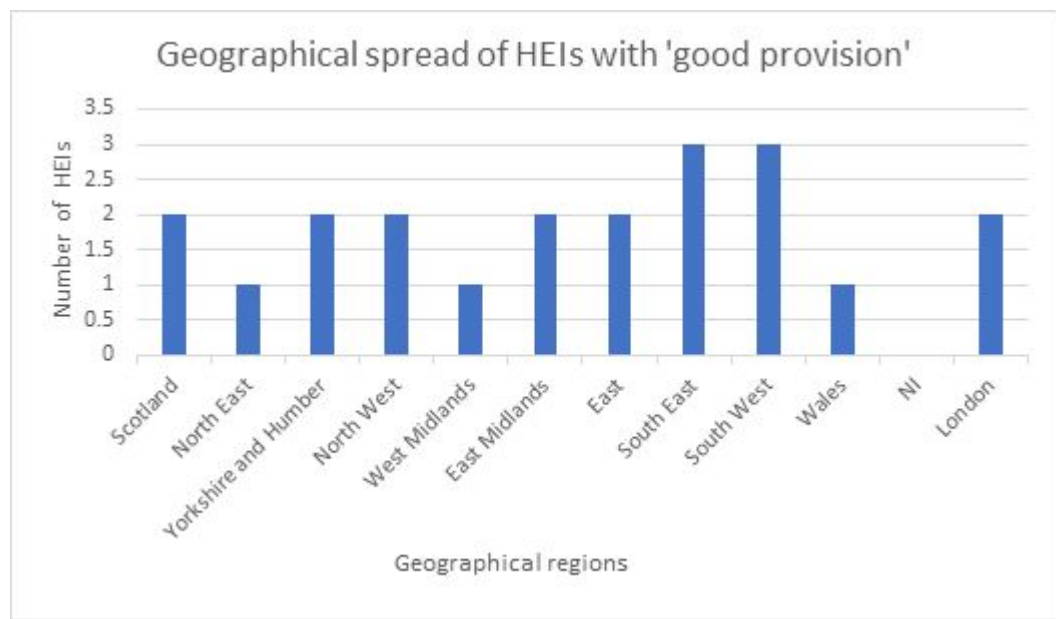
Figure 1 Occurrence of types of provision across 120 HEIs



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Figure 2: Geographical location of HEIs with good provision



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Figure 3: Good HEI providers and their TEF rating

