



Executive Summary

Altogether Autism was approached by the Tertiary Education Commission / Te Amorangi Mātuaranga Matu (TEC) who had identified a gap in information for tertiary learners around best practice to support their autistic learners. They contracted Altogether Autism to consult, research and design a set of guidance documents (Guidelines) to assist learning staff at tertiary education organisations to understand what autistic learners need from them to support them in their educational journey.

These Guidelines are organised around six main topics, based on common themes that emerged from the consultation process. The Guidelines are informed by lived experience, published research and educational best practices.

Altogether Autism consulted with three key groups:

1. Autistic learners with experience on tertiary education
2. The family/whānau of autistic learners with experience of tertiary education
3. Tertiary learners

Overall, autistic and the family/whānau of autistic responders felt the most important areas that required more support and understanding were around communication needs, executive functioning needs and self-advocacy. Family/whānau also commented strongly on the difficulties in finding and accessing support, and the lack of understanding and knowledge for anxiety and mental health issues.

The Guidelines offer information and strategies under six themes:

1. Communication
2. Executive Function
3. Self-Advocacy
4. Sensory Experiences
5. Mental Health
6. Social Interactions



Top Tips

We have identified ten top tips to help lecturers and tutors better support their autistic learners. These tips cut across the themes: for example, access to lecture recordings helps learners who cannot attend class on campus due to anxiety or sensory difficulties, and also makes the material more accessible for learners who struggle with note taking due to executive function difficulties.

Remember that these tips help all learners, not just autistic learners. All learners benefit from access to lecture recordings, for example. There are also many self-identified or undiagnosed autistic people who would benefit from support but may be unable to access this without an official diagnosis. By building as many supports as possible into the way the course is taught and assessed, you give all learners the best chance of success in tertiary education.

1. **Listen to what each individual student needs.** Not everyone has a diagnosis: diagnoses are difficult to access as an adult and learners who did not get a diagnosis in childhood still need support. Rather than making exceptions/accommodations only when required to do so because the student has a diagnosis, recognise the individual need of diverse learners.
2. **Be openly accepting of difference and recognise that every autistic person is different and may have different needs.** Encourage awareness and acceptance of neurodiversity.
3. **Offer different options and accommodations around tutorials, assessments, and exams.** Think about group work – is it essential? Can you offer different options? If group work is a non-negotiable part of your course, think about ways you can make it less stressful and more reflective of the real world. What exam accommodations does the individual need, and can these be implemented, even if they are not standard accommodations offered by student support? Can tutorials be offered in different formats (e.g., on campus, on Zoom, via discussion board)?
4. **Always make lecture recordings available online.** Access to lecture recordings helps with so many of the challenges autistic learners faced. They allow learners to catch up if anxiety or burnout prevents them from attending class in person. They mean learners can watch lectures from an environment that meets their sensory needs. They help learners who have difficulties with executive function – being able to pause and rewind the lecture makes taking notes easier.

5. **Ensure all communication is clear.** Present written and verbal communication in a manner that works for the autistic learner (this might be different for different learners) and is understood by the learner. Understand that communication might be difficult even though the person may seem to understand, and check that they have understood.
6. **Validate the need for flexibility around supports and needs.** Work with the student to identify what works best for them, and work with them to help them meet the requirements of the course in a way that works for them.
7. **Encourage and normalise the use of sensory aides in all places, including exams.**
8. **Encourage disclosure.** Autistic people may be uncomfortable with sharing their diagnosis/es, so utmost care and privacy is important to ensure the best outcomes. Being openly accepting to difference can encourage sharing. Support learners to access accommodations regardless of diagnosis. Listen to what learners say would help them. Encourage your organisation to support learners whether they have a diagnosis or not.
9. **Recognise sensory needs.** The tertiary learning environment may be difficult for some learners: they may find lecture theatres overwhelming or spaces noisy. They may only be able to cope with being there for a short time or may not be able to learn in that space. Recognise and make allowances for this, for example by allowing the person to leave if they need to, providing information in other ways, and making use of sensory profiles.
10. **Recognise executive functioning difficulties and offer supports around these.**