

AN ASSET, NOT A PROBLEM: MEETING THE NEEDS OF NEURODIVERGENT STUDENTS

2023



A lot of people just fail to understand that every day, every second, we are living in a world that was not made for us. It was made for a different sensory processing system. It's like navigating when you are a bit drunk, you are trying to comprehend things that don't make sense, but something that makes sense to you doesn't make sense to others.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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We would also like to thank the University of Bristol for their support and helpful input.

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INTRODUCTION

This report is an exploration of the experiences and needs of autistic students and/or those with ADHD when making the transition to university and living in student accommodation.

The 2022 Unite Students Applicant Index showed that there were lower levels of well-being and a higher instance of anxiety, depression and other mental health conditions among neurodivergent students. Neurodiverse applicants also reported lower levels of social connection, and more social anxiety about coming to university.

To make sense of these findings, and to understand the features of a more inclusive university transition and accommodation experience, Unite Students has worked with the Bristol University Neurodiversity Society (BUNS), a student-led society offering mutual support and advocacy for neurodivergent students at the University of Bristol. Working together, we have given a platform to students' own experiences and recommendations as a way of illustrating the stories behind the statistics, and to suggest ways forward.

This is not an exhaustive review of the needs of neurodivergent students across UK higher education, but we hope that it will contribute to an area of interest and development in the sector, act as a conversation-starter and support us all as a sector to work towards positive change.

THE DATA USED IN THIS REPORT

Quantitative data in this report is taken from a survey of 2,038 university applicants administered via the YouthSight Panel, between 25th June and 11th July 2022.

Qualitative data is taken from a two-hour focus group with neurodivergent students at the University of Bristol

Further details about the data and methodology can be found in the [appendix](#) ➔



NEURODIVERSITY

The term 'neurodiversity' was coined in 1998 by Australian sociologist Judy Singer. She presented it as a positive approach to autism based on a social model of disability. The term has been embraced by many autistic people themselves and has become adopted widely over recent years. Since then, the term has broadened to include other medically recognised conditions such as dyslexia, dyspraxia and dyscalculia, ADHD and, sometimes, OCD and schizophrenia.

On a practical level, the concept of neurodiversity has led to a greater understanding and acceptance of autism and some of its associated behaviours and traits. Neurodiversity has been associated with strengths such as attention to detail, advanced pattern recognition, creativity and writing skills. However, living in a world optimised for neurotypical people can put neurodivergent people at disadvantage, and there is evidence from the US that autistic students found it more difficult to transition from school to university¹.

The concept of neurodiversity has helped to identify ways in which different settings and services can adapt to the needs of neurodivergent people. Importantly, together with the rise of social media, it has helped many

neurodivergent people to find a community, develop a more positive and less pathologising self-image, and to self-advocate. Nonetheless, it should be recognised that support for the concept of neurodivergence is not universal.

In this report, we have focused on university applicants and students with autism spectrum condition and ADHD. This is for two reasons: firstly, that we were able to achieve a good sample size of applicants who self-reported these conditions within the survey, and secondly, that we are aware of some of the challenges experienced by students with these conditions both in student accommodation and more widely across the student experience.

Similarly, the focus group set out to recruit autistic students and/or students with ADHD rather than extending it to those who fit the wider definition of neurodiversity.

We acknowledge that the survey results do not tell the whole story about the needs of autistic people and those with ADHD in higher education. Autism is a broad condition which can be co-present with other conditions and disabilities including language disorders and

learning difficulties. Moreover, diagnosis and support for neurodivergence has developed considerably over recent years. Older approaches, and the disruption caused by the Covid pandemic, will have influenced the support - or lack of it - available to young adults earlier in their educational journey. As such, it should be recognised that those taking part in the survey and focus group have not only qualified for university but have taken the decision to apply, and that they are unlikely to represent the full breadth of people with the two conditions.

¹ Natasha K. Geyer (2021) Beyond Accommodations: Considerations for Supporting and Improving Academic Outcomes for Neurodivergent Students in Post-Secondary Education. [➔](#)

FINDINGS FROM THE APPLICANT SURVEY

The survey covered a wide range of questions relating to the academic and non-academic experience. Survey questions focused on expectations and levels of confidence about different aspects of university, personal characteristics, social and well-being experiences, and the experience of applying to university.

The main report can be found here. [>](#)

Neurodivergent applicants' responses differed from the average in many sections of the survey, including learner identity and financial confidence. However, this report focuses on well-being, social and community as topics most relevant to student accommodation.

The full survey dataset is available in a variety of formats here for those who would like to carry out their own analysis. [>](#)

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SURVEY SAMPLE

Neurodivergent applicants were more likely than applicants overall to be LGBT+, and this was equally the case for autistic applicants and applicants with ADHD. This corresponds with wider research that shows that autistic people² and, potentially, people with ADHD³ were more likely to be LGBT+. This diversity was also reflected in the focus group.

Neurodivergent applicants in the survey, and particularly those with ADHD, were more likely to be in the 25-34 age category than average, possibly indicating a more complex route to starting university and challenges with earlier education. But this finding also tells a positive story about the ability and willingness to re-engage with education, and the work that universities are doing to support this. Another implication of this older age profile is that neurodivergent applicants were much more likely to have lived away from their parental home. They were also more likely than average to be care experienced or estranged from their parents.

² For example: Autistic individuals are more likely to be LGBTQ+ | University of Cambridge [>](#)

³ Rahman Q, Xu Y, Lippa RA, Vasey PL. Prevalence of sexual orientation across 28 nations and its association with gender equality, economic development, and individualism. Arch Sex Behav. (2020) 49:595–606



HEALTH AND WELLBEING

The Mental Health charity Mind states that people with ADHD⁴, and some autistic people⁵, are more likely to experience mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression.

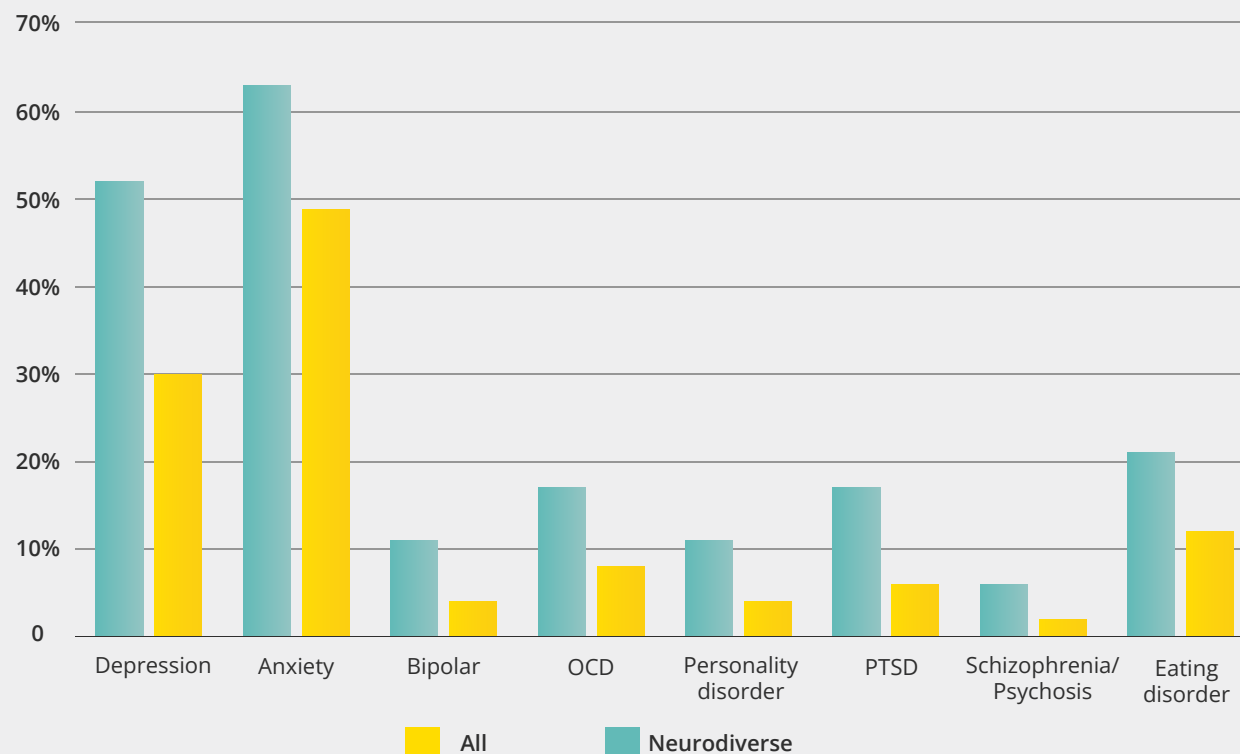
In our survey, neurodivergent applicants were more likely than average to have a range of disabilities and conditions, including:

- Specific learning disabilities such as dyslexia, dyscalculia or dyspraxia
- Mental health conditions
- Physical disabilities
- Other long-term illnesses or conditions

Just over half (52%) had experienced depression and almost two thirds (63%) experienced anxiety in the last two years, which were well above the average for all applicants. They were also more likely than average to have experienced OCD (Obsessive Compulsive disorder), eating disorders, personality disorders and PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder).

On the standard ONS wellbeing measures, neurodivergent applicants scored the same as other students on life satisfaction and believing that their life is worthwhile, but they had a lower score for happiness and were slightly more anxious⁶.

Figure 1: Which, if any, of the following best describe the mental health issues you have experienced in the last two years?



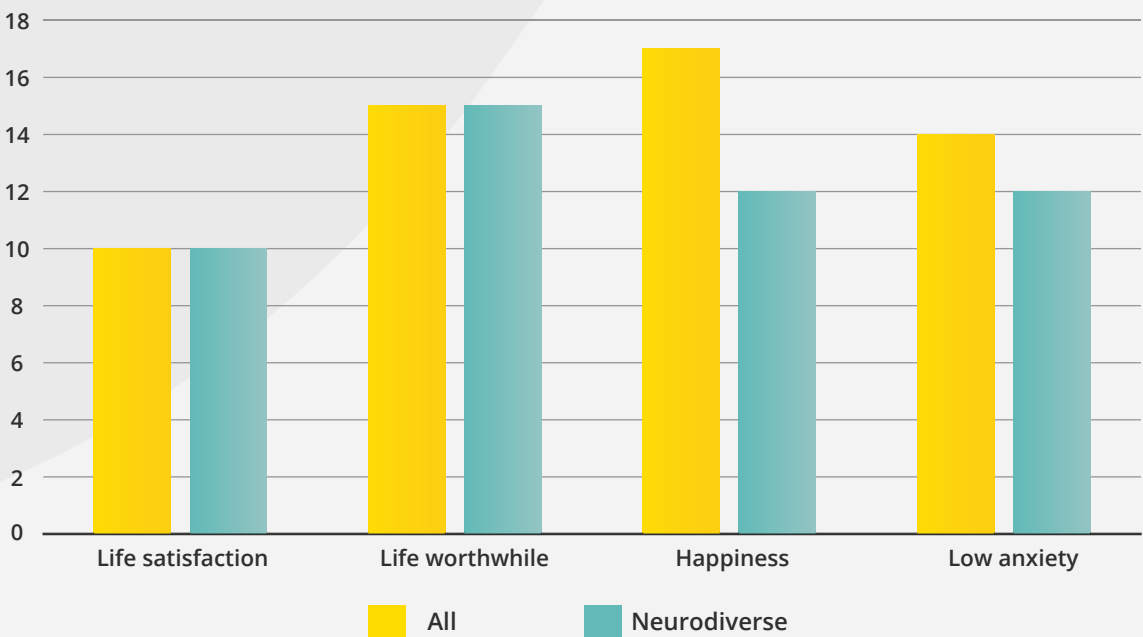
⁴ ADHD and mental health - Mind >

⁵ Autism and mental health - Mind >

⁶ The standard ONS measure on anxiety reports the percentage with the lowest levels of anxiety. Therefore a lower score on this measure indicates a higher level of anxiety.

Furthermore, neurodivergent applicants were less likely than other applicants to agree that they feel loved. They were more likely to agree that they feel ashamed, and that they are rejected by others. Some of these feelings may be associated with the need for “masking” - hiding neurodivergent traits to fit in to a neurotypical world⁷. It seems likely that these feelings contributed to the lower level of happiness reported by neurodivergent applicants.

Figure 2: ONS Wellbeing Measure scores for neurodivergent applicants and all applicants



⁷See, for example, Miriam Harmens, Felicity Sedgewick, and Hannah Hobson. The Quest for Acceptance: A Blog-Based Study of Autistic Women’s Experiences and Well-Being During Autism Identification and Diagnosis. Autism in Adulthood. Mar 2022.42-51.



SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY

In her study, Natasha Geyer notes the need for social support for new neurodivergent students, and the risk that, without this, social isolation and struggles to make meaningful connections may exacerbate existing mental health conditions⁸.

In our survey, neurodivergent applicants were less likely than average to agree that they have good relationships with family and friends, or to feel that they have people to turn to in a crisis. They were also less likely to say they get on well with other students at their school or college, but these results may be skewed by the older age profile of this group.

When it comes to thinking about themselves at university,

neurodivergent applicants were more likely than average to agree with the statement “I am anxious that I won’t fit in at university”. Conversely, they were less likely to want to feel like they belong at university and more likely to say that they have little interest in the social side of university, yet they were equally likely to say they want to be an active part of the student community.

These findings set out the context and informed the questions for the focus group data reported below.

⁸ Natasha K Geyer (2021) Beyond Accommodations: Considerations for Supporting and Improving Academic Outcomes for Neurodivergent Students in Post-Secondary Education. [➔](#)



FINDINGS FROM THE FOCUS GROUP

The focus group brought the quantitative data to life through a detailed discussion about the process of going to university and applying for student accommodation. Some of the participants had not known about their neurodivergence prior to going to university, so the qualitative data provides a broader perspective than the quantitative data. It also offers insight into the actual process of settling in, making social connections and the experience of living in student accommodation as a neurodivergent student.





GOING TO UNIVERSITY



Students talked about a mix of excitement and anxiety when preparing to go to university for the first time.

I definitely found it both exciting and... nerve wracking, that's the word I'm looking for. The whole meeting new people thing. I was excited to get a chance to start life in a completely different way and meet loads of new people but it's also terrifying at the same time.

This aligns with [previous findings](#) from Unite Students and HEPI that the majority of prospective students experience a mix of both emotions. However, for neurodivergent students there were some specific considerations. There were concerns about the social side, including the potential loss of hard-won friendships due to the move to university.

The last few years it was difficult, but I did get a few close friends and I was like 'Oh my God, I'm losing them. What do I do? What do I do?'

However, for some it was an opportunity for a fresh start and hope for a better experience.

It was nice to start again. For me, the year before I'd just been diagnosed. It was nice to start afresh being the true self you are because before obvious with masking and everything you're not being yourself... coming to university was that excitement of trying to meet your people.

Students also mentioned excitement about their academic course and the opportunity to pursue a strong interest.

Some students found it challenging to process all the information they were sent by their university due to their neurodivergence, causing them to struggle in the first few weeks.

When I was moving to uni, there were so many emails coming out... and it turned out when I got here, I had missed some really important things like registering as a student... There was a ton of stuff I just hadn't seen.

They would have preferred a summary checklist of the key administrative tasks involved in starting university.



MOVING INTO STUDENT ACCOMMODATION

Students talked about their need for a high level of information about the accommodation prior to arrival. These included accurate visualisation of the accommodation, including up-to-date photography and floor plans, and details of the facilities. Having a very clear understanding of their allocated room was important for many of the students, and support with way finding and understanding how to access the facilities was also mentioned.

Lack of sufficiently detailed information could result in high levels of anxiety and uncertainty.

We weren't allocated accommodation until a month before... They announced they were releasing it, releasing where we were living on the 24th. From midnight... I was checking my phone every half an hour.

The Covid pandemic had exacerbated this issue, as prospective students had not been able to visit the accommodation in person.

I started about five months before - I went trying to set up doctors, know where my accommodation was, all this kind of stuff. Being so proactive, and it was running into a brick wall because no one seemed to know anything. No one could tell me anything. The whole thing was just so painful.

In previous research we have found that applicants in general tend to be anxious about who they are going to live with. For neurodivergent students these anxieties were dialled up, and there were additional concerns among those who were LGBT+.

I was put with nine other people. None of them share anything in common with me. None of them are neurodivergent. None of them are queer.

There was agreement that having at least one or two other neurodivergent students in the flat would be reassuring and help them to settle in.

You can request a single sex flat; you can request - for example, if you're Jewish, you can request a Kosher flat. Could there be an option to request a neurodivergent flat?

...definitely being put with people that are similar to you in some way would feel a bit more accommodating

Additionally, those in the group who were LGBT+ would have welcomed the opportunity to live with other LGBT+ students, though not necessarily an entirely dedicated flat.

If these allocations are not possible, neurodivergent students would prefer to be informed early and clearly.

Students also spoke about the 'overwhelming' experience of moving into student accommodation and having to move, unpack and then meet new people all on the same day. An option to move in early – even by just one day – would make this process easier.



LIVING IN STUDENT ACCOMMODATION

Students spoke at length about sensory issues and how this had affected their accommodation experience, wellbeing and ability to use the space. Noise was a key theme but other sensory issues such as sensitivity to light, texture or discomfort were also mentioned.

While noise is a common issue for all students in shared accommodation, for neurodivergent students it can be much more than an inconvenience.

Something I struggle with a lot is sensory overload. If there's too much going on, then I can go completely haywire.

Students talked about a high level of sensitivity to noise that went far beyond the usual disruption from noisy flatmates.

Every single day I hear the thudding of the people above and it's really loud... it's very distressing.

They expressed a desire for 'a quiet corner' of their accommodation building. Even designated quiet flats could be a problem if there were non-quiet flats next door, above or below.

Problematic noise could also arise from external sources such as traffic, or from internal fittings such as lights or heating.

I refuse to turn my heating on because when I do I hear the pipe in my room. Oh my gosh, it's so loud! I can't stand being in the room with heating on.

Noisy fittings caused concern for students who were affected, and they worried that their concerns wouldn't be taken seriously.

[I think] the lights in my room are really, really noisy. If I log that as a fixing request... [maintenance] won't know what I want... At the moment I don't feel able to report it because I think it would just be like, they'll just laugh at me.

Students also spoke about the impact of poor communication about how maintenance issues would be resolved, and staff coming to carry out maintenance when they weren't expected. They wanted clearer scheduling and better information about when maintenance issues would be resolved.

Fire alarms could be a source of stress and anxiety. While understanding and acknowledging the need for fire alarm tests for safety reasons, students wondered if there was anything that could be done to accommodate their needs, such as sharing testing schedules in advance and being given a warning about fire drills.

They do, after every holiday, a fire test and it's always at seven o'clock in the morning - but you never know what day it's going to be. For the first couple of weeks a term, I always go to bed really anxious... maybe for autistic students, if it could be communicated?



Some students talked about sensitivity to bright lights and the connotations it had for them as a ‘hospital’ environment, especially a psychiatric hospital. Lower lighting or the ability to dim lights would make a lot of difference to their comfort.

Every time I turn on the lights in my room I have to suffer because there's two lamps that go on simultaneously and they're very bright... Just something to prevent your eyes from bleeding.

Mattress comfort was also raised by a student who had additional chronic illnesses, and who had spent their own money on a mattress topper in order to be able to sleep.

The ability to use common spaces in the accommodation was also a key theme. Students spoke about not feeling comfortable at first to use shared kitchens, and having periods of ‘hibernation’ in which they kept to their rooms. This made it very difficult to eat well.

I think it took me four months to start using the common kitchen because I always came out at night... Because it was quiet and dark and no people, it was just perfect.

A need for privacy was also mentioned, and the stress of using communal bathrooms, and yet they felt unclear about whether being neurodivergent would be considered a valid reason for requesting an en-suite.



SUPPORT NEEDS



Although the students were able to articulate their support needs, they consistently expressed concern about whether these needs were – and would be seen by others as – reasonable and valid.

I think it's just that idea of being taken seriously. Just because you can't see something, just because it's not something more... It's how we interpret and experience the world around us. It's going to be different to others.

The hidden nature of their disability gave rise to concerns that others wouldn't understand their needs.

...that feeling of being an issue, being a problem. Getting in the way and it gets to the point... where I almost don't want to ask for things I need.

In some cases this was based on experience. While university disability teams had expertise in neurodivergence and were able to offer support, other staff members including accommodation maintenance operatives did not always have this level of awareness.

I've been called one of the problematic students because of my chronic illnesses and my access needs. That doesn't make me a problematic student. That just makes me somebody who wants to study at a university and needs more help to do that.

We're an asset, not a problem.

Support and accommodations are available for neurodivergent students, but they could be enhanced further by bringing all the information together in a single document. Some students found it very difficult to process information that came to them at different times and from different sources, and had initially been confused when the university operated as a collection of separate departments rather than a single entity. In addition to these processing issues, they spoke about having to follow up multiple aspects of their support and the impact of having to navigate an unfamiliar system.

I've found the hardest thing for the first couple of months at both universities... was trying to set everything up. There's great long lists of what the university might offer or what you might get funding for or where you can get support, but my experience of it both times round, even when I know what to do, I have to fight for every single one of them, and then try and work out how the hell to put any of it in place because I don't understand how any of the systems work... Along with trying to live in a new place and meet people, I'm also feeling like I'm working a very complex admin job and an advocacy job, and trying not to have a meltdown constantly.

Many of the students struggled with administration in general and would welcome some additional support in this area.



SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

A common experience for focus group participants was anxiety about making friends and taking longer than neurotypical students to develop friendships.

I already accepted that I wasn't going to find very many friends because I hadn't been diagnosed with autism at the time... I already resigned myself to sitting in my room.

Neurodivergence, and queerness in some cases, could feel like a barrier to making social connections.

I like this prospect of meeting new people, but I always end up being too anxious about actually meeting them. I like this concept of something new, but I think while you are an adult you come with a very complicated package, with a whole lot of problems you have to explain to people who are not like you. Like: 'Sorry, I'm queer; sorry, I'm neurodivergent'.

There was widespread experience of 'not fitting in' and one of the participants had experienced bullying. Feeling 'different' could be an unpleasant surprise to those who had previously had an accepting friend group.

Coming here was actually a bit of a shock, because I didn't realise or expect how much different I am to other people.

However, the opportunity to meet and spend time with other neurodivergent students mitigated these issues. It should be noted that the focus group was drawn from the membership of a student-led society – Bristol University Neurodivergent Society (BUNS) – so this analysis does not take into account the views of students who don't wish to be part of such a group. Nonetheless, the impact of BUNS was overwhelmingly positive for those who took part.

I think if it wasn't for BUNS, I wouldn't be at uni anymore. There's many times where the only thing that's kept me going at uni is BUNS... It means everything to me.

BUNS is just fresh air coming at you.

It provides a rare chance to be a part of the majority rather than isolated or in a minority:

Having a good social network, not feeling isolated, not feeling alone, not struggling with mental wellbeing. Not feeling weird

and strange and all of that. Neurotypical people just get that with everyone you meet and it wasn't until I met with people in BUNS for the first time - I couldn't understand, emotionally, what I was feeling. It was this just intense elation and happiness. I literally can't even explain what it was like. It was this inner peace.

I've never seen so many people like me before in the same room.

And an opportunity to decompress from the challenges of fitting into a neurotypical world:

It's a once-a-week opportunity to just spend an hour not masking or anything. Just chilling out, being myself around people like me, which is rare.

Overall, it provides neurodivergent students with something more akin to a mainstream student experience:

Suddenly, it felt like I was in those pictures you see in the prospectus where people are just hanging out with their friends. That was the first time I'd really found what I assumed the university experience would have been.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations were generated by the focus group when reflecting on their own experiences. These mainly cover the first year of the university experience but could be applied to future years of study, particularly if students remain living in student halls.



GOING TO UNIVERSITY:

- Introduction of a buddy system, so that students have a peer mentor who can support them with accommodation-related difficulties. Particularly important in this role would be an understanding of neurodiversity.
- Students to receive a single bullet-pointed summary list of all the administrative tasks to be done prior to university and in the first week of arrival.



MOVING INTO STUDENT ACCOMMODATION:

- A video guide to the accommodation, with specific individuals' rooms shown upon request, including the walk from the accommodation entrance to the room.
- The option to live in a flat with at least one other neurodivergent student (on an opt-in basis) to allow for the sharing of experiences.
- Early move-in option for neurodivergent students to allow time to acclimatise to the new environment without the added pressure of crowds and social interaction.
- Clear communication about allocation options such as when students may be able to change accommodation if they are unhappy with their allocation.



GENERAL UNIVERSITY LIFE:

- A neurodivergent students' guide to university services which can be provided to students upon moving in.
- Student-led group like BUNS to be recommended for all universities. Benefits include peer support, shared experiences, and understanding social interaction.



LIVING IN STUDENT ACCOMMODATION:

- Neurodiversity training for all residence staff, including porters and maintenance staff.
- Clearer communication about maintenance issues such as clear timescales, and understanding that sensory differences may mean that issues that seem minor to staff may be causing the student distress.
- Consideration of 'quiet flat' placement away from noisy areas. If there is more than one quiet flat, allocate them as neighbours.
- Dimmer switches or softer lighting options in accommodation and other student spaces.
- Flexibility for neurodivergent students to have basic cooking facilities in room, for example a microwave and kettle, to reduce anxiety of using the kitchen.
- Longer term, a badging scheme for neurodivergent-friendly student accommodation in which staff are confident in working with neurodivergent students.
- Provision of a sensory room in accommodation to reduce stress and de-escalate meltdowns.

APPENDIX: METHODOLOGY

QUANTITATIVE DATA

Responses were received from 2,038 respondents who were planning to start university in the 2022/23 academic year. The sample has been constructed and weighted to be broadly representative of the applicant population as a whole. Known limitations of the dataset are that it under-indexes non-EU international applicants, and that it over-indexes younger applicants (21 and under).

Overall, 14.2% of applicants surveyed considered themselves to have one or more of these conditions. Of the 2,038 respondents to the survey:

- 172 or 8.4% had Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- 134 or 6.6% had Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC)⁹

Included in these figures are 16 applicants who had both, which represents under 1% of the total sample.

⁹ These figures are broadly in line with the estimated proportion of the total population with ADHD but considerably above the estimated proportion with ASC, according to ADHD Aware. [➤](#)

We did not specifically rule out self-diagnosis in the phrasing of the question, asking: “Do you consider yourself to have a disability, impairment or long-term health condition?” Identification and diagnosis for both conditions have developed over recent years and there can be long wait times for diagnosis on the NHS, so not everyone meeting the diagnostic criteria will have a formal diagnosis. We recognise that there may be applicants in the sample who would not meet current criteria for diagnosis, however it should be noted that 80% of the sample either had already disclosed or planned to disclose their condition(s) to their university, which suggests an overall level of confidence in recognition of their condition(s).

The sample of neurodivergent applicants in this survey is relatively small. This report discusses areas in which responses for neurodivergent applicants differ from the average response of all applicants, and where these differences are statistically significant to the 95% confidence interval. In some cases, the exact percentages are not given because, due to the small sample size, they do not provide a useful indication of the extent of these differences.

QUALITATIVE DATA

Eleven students took part in a focus group. Participants were a mix of undergraduate and postgraduate students at the University of Bristol, and were members of the Bristol University Neurodiverse Society (BUNS). Some had previously attended other universities. They all had experience of living in purpose-built student accommodation in Bristol and/or other cities, including university halls and private PBSA. All participants were autistic and most of them also had ADHD. A few had additional health conditions.

The focus group was transcribed and thematically analysed.

Freya Selman acted as a participant researcher to the project, convening the focus group and providing specialist insight, guidance and editorial input throughout.

