

Supporting Students with Co-occurring Autism and ADHD (AuDHD): A Guide for Disability Officers



AuDHD: Autism and ADHD A Unique Lens

Thursday, 27th February 2025
At 2pm | Online via MS Teams

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Celebrating 25 Years of Accessibility and Inclusion at Trinity College Dublin

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Introduction

Overview

Over the last twenty-five years, the disAbility Service in Trinity College Dublin has worked to support the needs of autistic students and those with ADHD, along with many other kinds of neurodiversity. Naturally, over this period, our understanding of neurodiversity itself and the experiences that fall under the neurodiversity umbrella has evolved rapidly. At the disAbility Service, we continue to embrace these changes as society's understanding of individual experiences grows increasingly, and rightfully, nuanced.

25 Years



Trinity disAbility Service 2000 - 2025

More individuals than ever are receiving diagnoses of autism and ADHD – often later in life. Each year, the number of students registering with the disAbility Service who identify as being autistic and having ADHD continues to grow, and with this rise comes the need to understand that to have both autism and ADHD might not simply be a combination of two easily delineated experiences, but instead, something distinctive entirely. As a result, the term ‘AuDHD’ has evolved amongst the community to capture the uniqueness of this experience.

Navigating university is a particularly unique experience for AuDHD students. Like many students’ experiences of disabilities and conditions, the measures taken to accommodate one’s needs might change in their efficacy on a daily, if not hourly, basis. With this often-individualised experience in mind, we are hosting a research seminar on the experiences of AuDHD individuals.

During the summer of 2024, Laidlaw scholar Juliet Cabraja participated in the **disAbled Inclusive Internship Programme** and worked with the Disability Service. She tirelessly captured existing research into AuDHD experiences and the narratives of Trinity’s own students. In this seminar, Juliet will present her findings.

Juliet will also be joined by Jen O'Connor, Disability and Employability Officer in the disAbility Service, who will share sample student narratives in the hope that staff can gain greater insights into how best to support AuDHD students and students can become increasingly aware of possible supports available to them during their time at Trinity.

This booklet is part of our commitment to raising awareness and improving support structures during our 25th anniversary year. It is also an example of the evolving partnership between students and staff in the co-creation of research and support initiatives within the disAbility Service.

As part of this commitment, the disAbility Hub is forming a dedicated research hub led by disabled researchers. This initiative represents the future of research into neurodiversity and disability, ensuring that lived experiences inform policy, practice, and institutional change. By integrating student-led research with expert guidance, the hub will contribute to a more inclusive academic environment where neurodivergent perspectives shape future supports and interventions.

Declan Treanor

Director of the Trinity disAbility Hub

Autism

ADHD

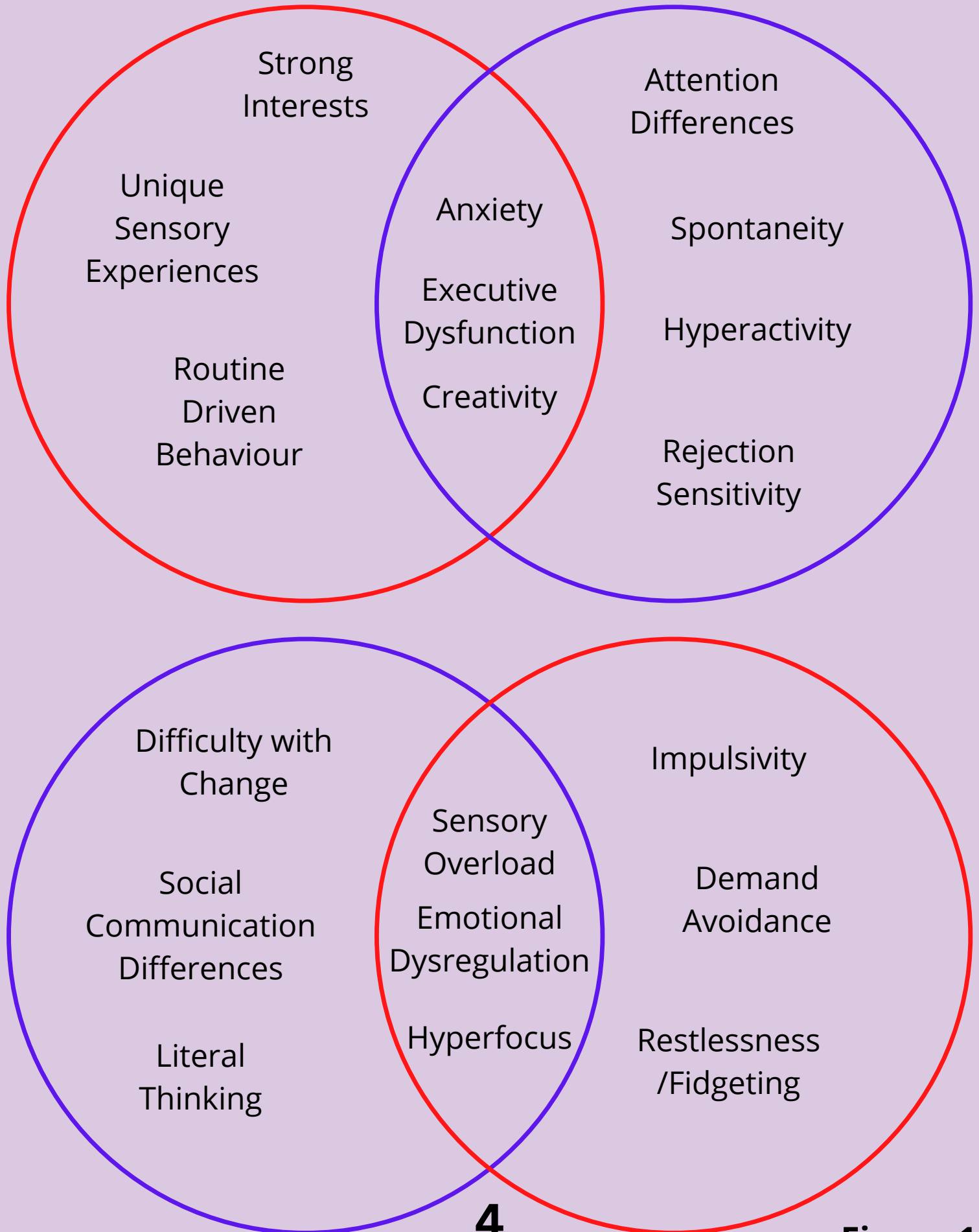


Figure 1 The Intersection of Autism and ADHD: AuDHD.

Autism and ADHD can overlap. It is important to recognise that the presentation of Autism and ADHD can vary widely among individuals, and not everyone will have the same experiences.

Inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsive behaviours are common difficulties for individuals with Autism. In fact, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is one of the most common co-occurring diagnoses for Autistic individuals.

Autism and Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) frequently co-occur, resulting in unique challenges and support needs for students. Understanding the interplay of these conditions is essential for Disability Officers in order to provide the most effective accommodations, strategies, and advocacy for students with AuDHD.

This guide aims to equip Disability Officers with a comprehensive framework for supporting students who identify as both autistic and having ADHD.

AuDHD (Autism + ADHD)



Figure 2

Figure 2 Highlights shared traits and challenges experienced by individuals with both Autism and ADHD, often referred to as “AuDHD.”

Understanding AuDHD

- **Distinct but Overlapping Conditions:** Autism and ADHD are separate neurodevelopmental conditions with distinct diagnostic criteria. However, they often co-exist, creating a unique profile of strengths and challenges.
- **Contradictory Traits:** Some students may experience conflicts between autism-related traits (such as a need for routine and predictability) and ADHD-related traits (such as impulsivity and difficulty maintaining routines).
- **Fluctuations in Traits:** Many students report that at different times, either their autism or ADHD traits are more dominant, which may influence their support needs.
- **Emotional and Mental Health Impact:** The co-occurrence of these conditions may contribute to heightened anxiety, difficulties with executive functioning, and challenges in emotional regulation.

While the symptoms of Autism and ADHD may not look the same on paper, they can look very similar in person. Traits like distractibility and impulsivity, for example, are part of the ADHD diagnosis. While they're not part of the autism diagnosis, they appear in most people with autism.

Key Areas of Support

1. Academic Accommodations

Students with AuDHD may experience executive function challenges, difficulty with sustained attention, sensory sensitivities, and challenges with social communication. Consider the following accommodations:

Exam Accommodations

- Extra time in exams (typically 25%).
- Low-distraction or separate rooms for testing.
- Access to a computer with assistive technology (e.g., speech-to-text, mind-mapping software).
- Use of noise-cancelling headphones or ear defenders.

Assignment Flexibility

- Extensions on deadlines when necessary due to executive functioning challenges.
- Breaking assignments into smaller, structured tasks with interim deadline.

Lecture and Learning Supports

- Permission to record lectures for later review.
- Access to lecture slides and notes in advance.
- Clear and structured guidance on coursework requirements.
- Alternative assessment formats where possible (e.g., oral assessments instead of written exams).

2. Executive Function & Time Management

Students with AuDHD often struggle with executive functioning, including task initiation, organisation, and time management. Disability Officers can support students by:

- Encouraging the use of planning and time management tools (e.g., digital calendars, task lists, Pomodoro timers).
- Recommending the use of study coaches or academic mentors to develop individualised strategies.
- Helping students establish a structured routine for studying and completing coursework.
- Encouraging the use of **accountability strategies**, such as regular check-ins with disAbility Service staff or peers.
- Recognising that some students may experience task paralysis, where initiating a task feels overwhelming, and offering structured guidance to break work into smaller steps.

Autism and ADHD are not the same disorder, but they may be hard to tell apart. In addition, it's very common for one individual to have both diagnoses.

3. Sensory Sensitivities & Environmental Adjustments

Many students with AuDHD experience heightened sensory sensitivities. Adjustments may include:

- **Providing a sensory-friendly space:** Ensuring access to quiet study spaces, low-distraction exam venues, and designated sensory rest areas.
- **Minimising sensory overload:** Encouraging the use of noise-cancelling headphones, sunglasses, or fidget tools.
- **Flexible attendance options:** Allowing remote learning or recorded lectures for students who find crowded lecture halls overwhelming.
- **Offering sensory grounding tools:** Disability Officers can provide small, textured objects such as **crochet animals** or fidget tools to help students manage sensory overload or anxiety.



4. Social and Communication Support

Navigating social interactions can be challenging for AuDHD students. Support may include:

- Encouraging participation in **peer support groups** or neurodiversity societies.
- Offering **workshops on communication and self-advocacy skills**.
- Helping students develop scripts or email templates for common communication scenarios (e.g., requesting accommodations, seeking clarifications from lecturers).
- Facilitating **mentorship programs** to connect students with neurodivergent role models.
- Addressing **feelings of autism-related shame**, encouraging students to explore self-acceptance and advocacy within a supportive environment.

Supporting neurodivergent students includes encouraging participation in peer groups, offering communication and self-advocacy workshops, providing practical tools like email templates, facilitating mentorship with neurodivergent role models, and fostering self-acceptance through a supportive environment.

5. Mental Health and Well-being

Students with AuDHD are at an increased risk of anxiety, burnout, and depression. Disability Officers should:

- Refer students to **mental health occupational therapy and counselling services**.
- Support students in **recognising early signs of burnout** and developing self-care strategies.
- Advocate for **reasonable workload adjustments** if students are experiencing significant mental health difficulties.
- Encourage self-compassion by helping students understand that their fluctuating abilities are valid and normal.
- Provide **structured yet flexible systems of support**, such as weekly check-ins, accountability partners, and goal-setting exercises.

Support students' mental health by connecting them to services, addressing burnout, advocating for workload adjustments, promoting self-compassion, and providing flexible systems like check-ins and goal-setting.

6. Navigating Institutional Processes

Students may require support in navigating university systems and advocating for their needs. Disability Officers can:

- Assist with **communicating with lecturers and academic departments** regarding accommodations.
- Help students understand and access **special consideration policies** for coursework and exams.
- Provide guidance on **internship and placement accommodations**, ensuring that professional experience requirements are met with appropriate supports.
- Support students in applying for **Non-Standard Reasonable Accommodations (NSRAs)**, such as flexible deadlines, deferred assessments, or adjusted capstone project timelines, to align with their needs.

Support students by facilitating communication with lecturers about accommodations, guiding them on accessing special consideration policies, assisting with internship and placement supports, and helping them apply for **Non-Standard Reasonable Accommodations (NSRAs)** like flexible deadlines and adjusted assessments to meet their individual needs.

Best Practices for Disability Officers

- **Person-Centered Approach:** Recognise that each student's experience of AuDHD is unique, and supports should be tailored to their specific needs.
- **Flexible Support Models:** Some students may require consistent, ongoing support, while others may need occasional check-ins during challenging periods.
- **Collaboration:** Work closely with mental health services, academic staff, and career services to provide holistic support.
- **Advocacy:** Promote awareness of AuDHD within the university, ensuring that policies and practices are inclusive of students with dual diagnoses.
- **Regular Review of Accommodations:** Encourage students to revisit their support needs periodically, as effective strategies may change over time.

Adopt a person-centered approach by tailoring support to each student's unique AuDHD experience, offering flexible models of assistance, and collaborating with mental health, academic, and career services for holistic support. Advocate for inclusive policies and regularly review accommodations to adapt to changing needs.

Conclusion

Supporting students with AuDHD requires an understanding of the complexities and interplay between autism and ADHD traits. Disability Officers play a critical role in helping students navigate academic and social challenges while advocating for their individual needs. By providing tailored, flexible, and person-centered supports, we can empower students to thrive in their university experience.

For further guidance, Disability Officers should encourage students to schedule regular check-ins and maintain an open dialogue about their evolving support needs. The goal is not only to provide accommodations but to foster an environment where students with AuDHD feel understood, supported, and empowered.

When students feel understood, supported, and empowered, they create a meaningful and significant place for themselves in academia, fostering a deeper connection to and engagement with their learning. For some, this moment marks the realisation that they belong in college and can envision themselves graduating from Trinity.

Oisín's Story: Overcoming Struggles to Achieve Success

Oisín had always known he was different. From a young age, numbers made sense in a way that people didn't. Mathematics was his safe space—predictable, logical, and structured. But as much as he loved solving complex equations, everyday life was full of problems he couldn't quite work out. His **Autism, ADHD, OCD, and anxiety** created **conflicting challenges** that made university a constant battle between perfectionism and procrastination, **hyperfocus and burnout, confidence and self-doubt**. Avoidance became his biggest enemy.



The Turning Point: Working with His Disability Officer

Recognising that he was struggling, Oisín reached out to the Disability Service. He wasn't sure what to expect, but he was assigned a Disability Officer, Sarah, who quickly became his biggest support and accountability partner.

They started meeting weekly for check-ins—a structure that initially felt strange but soon became the anchor he needed. Each week, Sarah would help him break down his assignments into smaller, manageable steps. Instead of seeing one massive, impossible task, Oisín began to see smaller, achievable pieces.

But these sessions weren't just about academics.

Sarah understood him in a way that others didn't—not just his struggles with deadlines, but the deeper battles he faced. She knew that when he spoke confidently about his ideas, he was still doubting himself internally. That his public presence as a brilliant mathematician was often in conflict with the self-doubt and exhaustion he carried privately.

She noticed the signs of stress before he even spoke—the nervous tic of pulling at his hair, the way he fidgeted with his sleeves when he was overwhelmed, and the way he avoided emails because he feared disappointing people. When he was particularly challenged, he would crack his fingers repeatedly, the tension in his body making it impossible for him to focus.

Sarah, always prepared for moments like these, would quietly offer him one of her crochet animals or soft crocheted grenades, a playful yet grounding way to redirect his nervous energy. At first, Oisín found it odd, but over time, the simple action of squeezing the small, textured shapes helped him regain a sense of control, allowing him to continue the conversation rather than shutting down.

Each session became not just an academic intervention, but a reminder that he wasn't alone. Sarah nudged Oisín towards small but meaningful actions that built his confidence in facing challenges. A simple email to thank a lecturer who had helped him, even when it felt uncomfortable. A conversation about exploring the deep-seated shame he associated with his autism, helping him recognise that self-acceptance was part of his journey.

Little by little, these moments of courage—encouraged and guided by Sarah—helped Oisín redefine what support looked like. It wasn't just about catching up on coursework; it was about reshaping how he saw himself and his place in the world.

Non-Standard Accommodations: A Game Changer

With Sarah's help, Oisín applied for **Non-Standard Reasonable Accommodations (NSRAs)** that fundamentally changed how he managed his workload. Instead of fighting against his brain's natural tendencies, these accommodations helped him work with them.

1. Flexible Deadlines for Continuous Assessments

Before:

- He would avoid starting assignments due to **task paralysis**, leading to **last-minute work** and **increased anxiety**.
- If he started, he would **fixate for hours**, struggling to submit anything **short of perfection**.

After:

- Extensions of **up to four weeks** gave him space to **spread out tasks**, reducing **overload and burnout**.
- Having **structured flexibility** allowed him to submit work when he was at his best, rather than when he was overwhelmed.

2. Deferred Submission of Non-Essential Assessments

Before:

- He struggled to complete multiple assignments at once, often **sacrificing quality to meet deadlines**.
- When he fell behind, his **self-criticism worsened**, making it harder to **re-engage with work**.

After:

- He was allowed to **defer selected non-essential assessments to the summer**.
- This meant he could **focus on core assignments first**, ensuring they were **completed to a high standard**.

He prioritised his core assignments, ensuring they were completed to the best of his ability, knowing that the rest could wait. By allowing himself the space to focus on what mattered most, he set himself up for success—one step at a time.

3. Capstone Project Support

Before:

- His **perfectionism and self-doubt** made independent research overwhelming.
- He felt **stuck**, unsure where to start, and kept **delaying progress**.

After:

- The **Capstone Project deadline was extended to mid-July**, giving him room to **produce high-quality work**.
- Regular **supervisor check-ins** ensured he had **guidance and structure**, reducing his **tendency to overthink and freeze**.

The extended Capstone Project deadline to mid-July gave him the opportunity to produce higher-quality work, while regular supervisor check-ins provided valuable guidance and structure, helping him stay focused and overcome overthinking.

This **Capstone Project**, an integral component of the coursework, provides students with the opportunity to apply their learning in a real and valuable way.

4. Reduced Assessment Load per Semester

Before:

- Too many deadlines at once caused **shutdowns**, where his brain **refused to function** under pressure.

After:

- His assessments were **spread out, preventing the pile-up of deadlines** and giving him **more control over his workload**.

5. Specialist Academic Mentoring

Before:

- Without structure, he often **felt lost**, spending hours working on the **wrong things**.
- He found it hard to **transition between tasks**, making his study sessions **inefficient**.

After:

- His academic **mentor helped him plan his week**, ensuring he **didn't get stuck in hyperfocus or avoidance**.
- He learned how to **break down tasks into smaller, more manageable steps**, making work feel achievable.

Breaking the Cycle

With **Sarah's support**, Oisín began to **trust the systems they built together**:

- **Structured weekly tasks**—so he didn't have to decide what to prioritise.
- **Gentle but firm nudges**—so he wouldn't let his anxiety lead to avoidance.
- **Realistic deadlines with flexibility**—so he could manage his perfectionism without spiraling.
- Accountability that wasn't about punishment, but progress.

Some weeks were better than others. There were still moments of panic, late-night cramming sessions, and days where his brain felt too foggy to function. But he wasn't doing it alone anymore.

Slowly, he started **finishing assignments on time**.

Then, he started **feeling less guilty about asking for help**.

Eventually, he started **believing he could actually succeed**.

A First-Class Ending

By the time final year exams arrived, Oisín had **developed strategies to manage his workload**, even on the hard days. He still had his struggles—the **occasional meltdown, the cycle of hyperfocus and exhaustion, the ever-present self-doubt**—but he also had the tools to **get through them**.

When his final results came in, he could hardly believe it.

First-class honours.

Not just in one module. **In his entire degree.**

The student who had once felt **paralyzed by deadlines, overwhelmed by group work, and ashamed of his struggles**, had **graduated at the top of his class**.

Sarah was one of the first people he told.

He didn't know what to say at first, so he just **sent a screenshot of his results with a single message:**

"We did it."

And for the first time in years, he let himself believe it.

Reframing Our Thinking About AuDHD: An Evidence-Based Approach

Neurodiversity has become an essential framework for understanding cognitive differences, yet the intersection of Autism and ADHD (AuDHD) remains underexplored in academic and institutional settings. Oisín's journey highlights the complexities of living with AuDHD in a system not designed to accommodate neurodivergent minds. Historically, Autism and ADHD have been conceptualised as separate conditions, yet emerging research underscores their frequent co-occurrence and the unique ways they interact (Antshel et al., 2016; Murray, 2020).

Understanding the Overlap of Autism and ADHD

Autism and ADHD share overlapping cognitive, sensory, and executive functioning profiles, leading to distinct challenges and strengths (Leitner, 2014). Studies indicate that individuals with AuDHD experience heightened difficulties in areas such as:

- **Executive Functioning:** Increased challenges in planning, task initiation, and cognitive flexibility (Craig et al., 2016).
- **Sensory Processing:** Atypical sensory experiences, which can contribute to heightened anxiety and overwhelm in academic environments (Kerns et al., 2015).
- **Social Communication:** A divergence in social interaction patterns that often results in misinterpretation and marginalization within traditional educational structures (Christensen et al., 2019).

The conventional academic framework often perceives these difficulties as deficits, requiring additional support. However, reframing these challenges through a social model of disability suggests that neurodivergent students are not inherently disadvantaged; rather, the structures and expectations of the university system fail to accommodate their needs (Shakespeare, 2013).

Moving Beyond Deficit Thinking

Rather than considering neurodivergent students as requiring extra help, we must shift our perspective to one of structural inequity:

- Oisín was not seeking an advantage—he was seeking equitable access to education.
- His intelligence and potential were never in question; the challenge lay in navigating an environment that was not designed with his cognitive profile in mind.
- The support he received did not make things easier—it made them possible.

This perspective aligns with Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which advocates for proactive adjustments in educational structures to remove barriers before they arise (CAST, 2018). Implementing UDL principles, such as flexible assessment methods, clear communication of expectations, and sensory-friendly learning spaces, ensures that AuDHD students can thrive rather than merely survive university life.

UDL fosters inclusivity through flexible assessments and sensory-friendly spaces, helping AuDHD students thrive in university.

The Role of Institutional Support

Research suggests that institutional support significantly impacts the academic success of neurodivergent students (Cai & Richdale, 2016). Key areas where universities can improve include:

- **Flexible Assessment:** Providing alternative methods of demonstrating knowledge (e.g., oral presentations, structured coursework) (Gurbuz, Hanley, & Riby, 2019).
- **Structured Support Systems:** Offering executive function coaching and time management tools tailored to AuDHD needs (Anderson et al., 2018).
- **Faculty Training:** Educating instructors on neurodivergent learning profiles to foster inclusive pedagogy (Brown & Kossyvaki, 2021).

Conclusion: A Call for Structural Change

Oisín's story exemplifies the broader reality faced by many neurodivergent students. The barriers they encounter are not due to lack of ability but rather the absence of appropriate supports. When given the right tools, structure, and understanding, they don't merely cope—they excel.

By integrating research-backed strategies and reframing institutional approaches to neurodiversity, higher education can evolve into an inclusive environment where all students, regardless of neurotype, have the opportunity to thrive.

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