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A framework for Specialist (Autism) Mentoring in UK HEPs

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Abstract: Universities in the UK have seen a remarkable increase in the number of autistic students. These students can receive funded Specialist (Autism) Mentoring to “remove barriers to learning”. Prior research recounts barriers, challenges, and cultures of success that autistic students encounter but little research has been focused on the provision of specialist mentoring.

A guided diary format was developed around questions posed by mentees. 28 mentors, of whom 8 themselves were autistic, kept diaries over the academic year 2020/21. In addition to the themes of prior research, mentors recounted their thoughts on the process of framing and reframing that seems to be at core of the process of mentoring autistic mentees. This consists of diagnostic framing, prognostic reframing with an element of motivational impetus. This framing and reframing was more prevalent in the diaries of autistic Specialist (Autism) Mentors than their allied counterparts suggesting validity. As such it may be less like classic HE mentoring and more akin to the frame resonance of social movements.

Paper: Universities in the UK have seen a remarkable increase in the number of autistic students (person first language is used in line with the UK’s autistic community^{1,2}). First year students disclosing an autism diagnosis has almost doubled in the last five years, and now at least 14,360 autistic students attend UK universities³. UK students may apply for Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) that can fund regular Specialist (Autism) Mentoring to “remove barriers to learning”. In 2020/21 694,750 hours of mentoring was allocated to 19,518 students for autism or mental health⁴. It is not a perfect system, and a number of issues surrounding the bureaucratic burden it imposes on students are ripe for reform⁵.

A review of the growing body of literature regarding the autistic experience of university finds 253 papers, mostly published in the last six years. Within this 96 papers present qualitative research into the barriers, challenges, and factors for success that encountered⁶. Barriers emerge in the imperfect academy when which negative attitudes towards autistic students are magnified through limited

support, poor teaching practice and unhelpful campus environments⁷⁻¹¹. Such barriers compound the stress and anxiety of rising to the challenge of university life. Students speak of the discomfort of a hyper-awareness of others¹²⁻¹⁸. This leads to needing extra personal resources needed for group work, a reluctance to approach tutors, problems with house mates, and in the resulting self-segregation that can occur¹⁹⁻²². Autistic students also recount sensory challenges presented by university and worries over the public and private meltdowns these may cause^{11,23,24}. Furthermore, the students in these works return to a common refrain of striving to justify being at university^{11,13,20,25-30}. Finally, and gratifyingly, a preponderance of students in these papers report on well-ordered campuses, accepting colleagues, and islands of calm that have supported them in their success^{12,14,16,21,22,31-39}.

26 papers consider mentoring provision. 20 of these enquire into peer mentoring of autistic students in the US, Australia and Canada. Only six papers deliberate on the provision of Specialist (Autism) Mentoring in the UK⁴⁰⁻⁴⁵. It is to this emerging phenomenon that this research was addressed.

Specialist (Autism) Mentors (n=28) were recruited from the DSAs list of registered mentors. Eight mentors disclosed their own autism diagnosis. Over the academic year 20/21 mentors submitted six half-termly online diaries. Each of these solicited diary cycles was opened with a question raised by a mentee so as to place autistic hypothesisers at the crux of the research process, rather than perpetuate autistic exclusion from research about autism⁴⁶. Diaries were thematically coded using a loose iterative process to develop grounded theory^{47,48}. 402 specific codes were identified, coalescing into four axial categories: **barriers**, **challenges**, **cultures of success**, and the process of **framing and reframing**.

The ongoing action of Specialist (Autism) Mentoring is one of **framing and reframing**. This is more than recounting the barriers and challenges that autistic students encounter. It is dialogue that addresses why such **barriers** and **challenges** exist through three interrelated domains. **Diagnostic framing** occurs when mentees bring an incident to the session. In a trusting relationship, the mentee locates the issue in a structural barrier, a mismatch of dispositions, a personal challenge, or an outworking of a double empathy problem^{49,50}. There are opportunities for **prognostic reframing** as the mentee and mentor develop strategies to liaise with tutors, find a balance to studies, seek out personalised learning strategies, refine social understanding, deal with organisational burdens, and to create stability in times of instability. Thirdly, **motivational framing** follows as mentors optimistically find silver linings, amplify unacknowledged success, and magnify the encouragement of others. This **framing and reframing** was more prevalent in the diaries of autistic Specialist (Autism) Mentors than their allied counterparts suggesting its validity as praxis.

Whilst the barriers, challenges and cultures of success echo that of prior literature, the process of reframing is a novel finding that advances Specialist (Autism) Mentoring from more classical incarnation of mentoring in HE^{51,52}. The established model often pays homage to a Galbraith and Cohen's 'complete mentor role'⁵³ in which precedence is given to the mentors place within any given institution. Specialist (Autism) Mentoring operates in a different field. Mentors are not funded by the HEP, rather they inhabit the institutional space but are charged with the task of removing barriers within that space. Perhaps it is not surprising then that this emerging model of Specialist (Autism) Mentoring is one that shares ties with the social frame of Snow and Benford's analysis on the operation of social movements with its recognition on participant mobilisation⁵⁴.

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