

# Experiences of educational transition: young women with ASD, and the staff supporting them, speak

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**The article describes research into the factors that facilitate a smooth transition for young women with High Functioning Autism (HFA) as they move between secondary school and Sixth form or Further Education (FE) College. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four young women with HFA and, additionally, with four members of education staff responsible for supporting young women with HFA, across a variety of school and FE settings. This research revealed that transition planning focuses almost exclusively on academic progression and is likely to be an *ad hoc* collection of arrangements, which places an undue burden of organisation upon parents and carers. The data suggests that, in order for transition to be successful, it needs to be systematically planned over an extended time period and to take into account the social, organisational, employment and residential elements which affect an individual's educational experience. The evidence also points to the importance of 'taster' experiences to inform decisions and prepare students for impending change. The final recommendation arising is that support for these students should continue to be sustained after transition points, being reduced only as the students settle into their new environment.**

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## **Autism: a psycho-medical profile**

Autism Spectrum Conditions (ASC) are one of the most common neurodevelopmental conditions affecting people today (Lai *et al.*, 2011) and are characterised by a triad of impairments which include difficulties in social communication, social interaction and social imagination (Baron-Cohen and Bolton, 1993; Wing, 1997; Martin *et al.*, 2008). Wing (2005) also describes ASC as being associated with rigid patterns of behaviour or routine and obsessive specialist interests. As described by the American Psychiatric Association (2013, p. 75), it is a condition characterised by:

*‘Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, as manifested by the following...deficits in social-emotional reciprocity... Deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviours used for social interaction... Deficits in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships... Restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities... Symptoms cause clinically significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of current functioning’.*

These traits can cause pervasive difficulties, including difficulties in accessing education. Nevertheless, the presentation of these traits can be moderated by a range of factors, both intrinsic and extrinsic, which means that the management of social factors and educational environment can enhance their educational success.

Included in this population are individuals with average or above-average intelligence (Wing, 1997; Martin *et al.*, 2008) who, despite their assessed intelligence, experience difficulties with executive functioning and difficulties with social forms of communication that are disproportionate to their intelligence and verbal abilities (Dawson *et al.*, 2007). For example, their speech can seem overly formal or pedantic; their conversation style can appear egocentric, as they may struggle with reciprocal communication and talk with little idea of whether their listener is interested in the subject (Baron-Cohen and Bolton, 1993; Attwood, 1998; Higgins *et al.*, 2008; Woolsey, 2008). People with HFA also struggle with

the non-verbal aspects of social communication, frequently experiencing difficulty making eye contact or using gestures appropriately themselves and finding it difficult to interpret expression and body language in others (Frith, 1991; Baron-Cohen and Bolton, 1993). These traits can lead to people with HFA being misunderstood, and subsequently isolated and ostracised (Robinson *et al.*, 2012; Pesonen *et al.*, 2015). The various language, communication and behavioural difficulties mentioned above combine, making it very difficult for people on the Autistic Spectrum to form and keep friendships, despite commonly reporting that they want friends (Portway and Johnson, 2005; Robinson *et al.*, 2012; Pesonen *et al.*, 2015). Meanwhile, the characteristic repetitive behaviours, obsessional interests and a difficulty coping with changes to routine (Wing, 1981; Baron-Cohen and Bolton, 1993) is liable to cause additional difficulties to the person with HFA as they undergo transition. As with many other difficulties with the educational experience of people with HFA, the common lack of staff preparedness, which teachers report (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008), is likely to compound difficulties during transition.

## **Autism: a gendered condition**

Much of what is known about ASC is based on the experiences of boys, whilst the experiences of young women are hidden amongst the research (Jarman and Rayner, 2015; Kopp *et al.*, 2010). This is largely because far more boys are diagnosed with ASC than young women; amongst those with High Functioning Autism (HFA) the ratio of boys to young women is thought to be 5.75:1. This may, at least in part, be due to bias in the diagnostic criteria, which were originally devised from observations of male subjects only and so are potentially biased (Mandy *et al.*, 2012; Westman Andersson *et al.*, 2013).

It was Asperger himself, whose name is synonymous with HFA, who first posited the notion that autistic psychopathy was just an extreme extension of the male personality (Wing, 2005). The features which suggested this hyper-masculine state were a tendency towards social isolation, formality, depressed non-verbal communication skills and a narrow range of interests (Gillberg, 2002). This theory has been developed by Baron-Cohen and his colleagues at Cambridge University who have termed this the Extreme Male Brain (EMB) theory of Autism (Baron-Cohen, 2002). This theory states that males are more biologically prone to having highly systematising brains, and so are pre-disposed to being pushed, by genetic or environmental factors, into being 'hyper-systematisers'. This then gives rise

to the traits of ASC. By contrast, ‘female brains’ (sic) are likely to be highly empathetic and can sustain a higher level of genetic and environmental influence before they are transformed into ‘hyper-systematisers’, because they have ‘lower levels’ of these traits to begin with. This then means that the ‘female brain’ can sustain a higher level of such genetic or environmental impact before it becomes hyper-systematising. This notion is supported by data (Wei *et al.*, 2013) showing that those ASC commonly prefer objective and logical subjects, such as mathematics, computer science and natural sciences, which are commonly stereotyped as ‘boys’ subjects’.

Other researchers, however, find this typology deterministic and crude, believing the originators to be ‘*misled by an unpersuasive gendering of certain capacities or aptitudes in the human population*’ (Krahn and Fenton, 2012, p. 93). Differences in diagnosis rates may, equally, be attributable to social rather than biological factors, such as the differential socialisation of females in a way that enables them to mask their difficulties more effectively (Krahn and Fenton, 2012). Factors which influence recognition of atypicality include behavioural responses, which for girls are typically less challenging in school (Jarman and Rayner, 2015), and which are less repetitive and stereotyped than that of men with ASC (Mandy *et al.*, 2012). Another observed difference is the nature of the intense interests of women, such as animals or classical literature, which are viewed as more ‘normal’ than those of their male counterparts (Attwood, 2008). The cumulative effect of these differences in presentation and expectations is indicated by data indicating that boys are ten times more likely than young women to be referred for diagnosis (Wilkinson, 2008; McKnight and Culotta, 2012). Regardless of the basis of the differences in diagnosis in men and women, current processes perpetuate the neglect of the experiences of young women.

## **Educational experiences of people with ASC**

Despite these additional obstacles, students with HFA can and do succeed in the educational system and their condition may bring particular strengths and skills. They often excel in practically based subjects such as science or computing (Connor, 2002). Students have excellent rote memories and visual skills, meaning they have a good eye for detail. They develop areas of intense interest, which means they become experts in their chosen topics. Students with HFA often bring a different set of perceptions to a task and will think about a problem in a different way which may enrich the learning experience (Wing, 1981; Vincent *et al.*, 2017).

Students with HFA can bring these strengths to bear if they are supported appropriately in the areas where difficulties are liable to occur, including study skills, communication skills and social support. Suitable support will be needed over a longer period of time than that required by non-ASC students, and to involve a multi-disciplinary team (Higgins *et al.*, 2008). As Howlin (1997) observed,

*‘Transition from one setting to another requires time, patience and careful planning if it is to succeed’ (Howlin, 1997, p. 165).*

At an individual level, staff can help students with HFA by encouraging their strengths and engaging constructively with their differences, rather than forcing them to be ‘normal’; support staff have a key role to play in advocating these strategies to teaching staff. Getting to know how the student’s HFA affects them as an individual, and acknowledging their strengths can both help. Demonstrating empathy and respect is very empowering to students. Flexibility in classroom organisation is also important, for instance offering them a choice of how to present their work, rather than it expecting it to only be done one way (Howlin, 1997; Sciotto *et al.*, 2012). Other, practical examples of helpful strategies include building some physical activity into the lesson to relieve anxiety, providing students with an agenda for the day and breaking tasks down into manageable chunks (Howlin, 1997; Jackson Brewin *et al.*, 2008). According to students with HFA, teachers can help by providing them with a well-structured, well-managed classroom environment. Students who know what to expect are given warning if things have to change and are working in an environment where distractions are kept to a minimum, will find school easier to manage (Dillon *et al.*, 2016). They also need to know who to approach for assistance if they are unsure (Wing, 1981; Baron-Cohen and Bolton, 1993; Howlin, 1997). Nevertheless, it is essential that staff do not become caught in the ‘dilemma of difference’ (Artiles, 1998, p. 32). This states that; *‘The more educational responses emphasize what learners have in common, the more they tend to overlook what separates them; the more they emphasize what separates them and distinguishes each learner, the more they tend to overlook what learners have in common’* (Dyson, 2001, cited in Humphrey and Lewis, 2008, p. 41).

## **Educational transition for people with ASC**

Transition to adulthood, including that from compulsory to post-compulsory education, is one element in the fulfilment of the aims of the UK Government’s

Think Autism strategy. This articulates the vision that ‘*All adults with autism are able to live fulfilling and rewarding lives within a society that understands them...*’ (Department of Health, 2015, p. 9). In reality, a raft of difficulties, both experienced and anticipated, results in lower participation rates than neuro-typical people for all types of post-secondary education and employment (Wehman *et al.*, 2014). When Giarelli and Fisher (2013) interviewed young adults who were making the transition from school, they said they felt as if they were drowning, as everything was changing at once.

Educational transition is recognised as a difficult process for many students but is even more challenging for those with ASC (Mandy *et al.*, 2012; Peters and Brooks, 2016). Their stereotyped and repetitive behaviours associated with ASC make the organisational changes necessarily associated with transitions additionally difficult. Moreover, the changing educational arrangements encountered present specific challenges. Students with ASC are prone to struggle with a plethora of practical problems, including understanding the expectations from different teachers, making sense of their timetable and reliably getting from one place to another on time and with the right materials is very challenging (Dixon and Tanner, 2013). When students transfer to post-compulsory education, the workload is unstructured and there is more ‘free time’ in the timetable, if students are not directed how to use this time, many will fritter it away (Martin *et al.*, 2008). Sensory overload can make the new environment challenging for those with ASC (Peters and Brooks, 2016). Bullying is a particular issue for students on the spectrum, as bullies often target students displaying socially unacceptable behaviour and such behaviours become more apparent as students get older (Dillon and Underwood, 2012). As a result of the various difficulties experienced, those with ASC are likely to require more physical, social and academic support during transition (Dixon and Tanner, 2013).

Pro-active support, in physical, social and academic domains, has been found to help to mitigate the difficulties outlined above (Dixon and Tanner, 2013). Wehman *et al.* (2014) found that less than two thirds of people with ASC took part in their own transition planning meetings but that their involvement led to a more successful transition. Activities which helped students included physical support, in the form of providing them with maps and timetables in advance and showing them where their locker would be; all are ways of aiding the physical transition. Social transitioning techniques included pairing the ASC student with an older student buddy to support them in their first term, or being able to meet and talk to teachers in advance. Provision of somewhere to go if students

became overwhelmed was seen as an important academic adjustment by many students. Other adjustments included having instructions written down as well as presented verbally and being provided with additional teacher aide time to support them over the period of change (Adreon and Stella, 2001; Dann, 2011; Dillon and Underwood, 2012; Dixon and Tanner, 2013; Peters and Brooks, 2016; Tobias, 2009).

Aside from the procedural obstacles to transition, financial factors may also affect its operationalisation. Many ASC students in mainstream education are not in receipt of an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), and the payments arising from this, because their difficulties are not considered severe enough and they receive very little in the form of care and support from adult Social Services departments (Mitchell and Beresford, 2014a). Students not in receipt of an EHCP are unlikely to receive any formal help with transitioning to adulthood, with the result that students with ASC and their families are poorly supported at this time (Browning *et al.*, 2009). A poorly planned transition can then lead to further exclusion from facilities and services.

## Methodology and method

A phenomenological psychological approach was adopted, in which the views of the women with HFA were represented directly. The purposive sample sought to locate young women with a diagnosis of HFA who were able to participate in an interview and were in the final year of compulsory schooling or had just moved from school to an FE college or post-16 provider (a 'sixth form college'). The capture of the views of people with HFA is increasingly understood to be essential to the validity of the data gathered and moral integrity of the research (Ganeson and Ehrich, 2009; Van Manen, 1997, cited in Ganeson and Ehrich 2009, p. 75). However, working with subjects, some of whom were under 18 years of age and all of whom were vulnerable by virtue of their learning difficulty, presented both heightened ethical sensitivities and practical barriers. The use of institutional gatekeepers who can filter the request for contact, based on knowledge of the individuals concerned, is considered good practice (Harrington *et al.*, 2013) so the initial approach was sent to co-ordinators of provision for students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (so-called SEND-cos), College Disability Service Managers, Head-teachers and local autistic societies. Likewise, the consent of the 'gatekeeper' institutions was sought for the conduct of the interview, in addition to the consent of the women themselves and the people with parental responsibility for them.

The study had received ethical approval from the researchers' sponsoring institution and especial care was taken to protect the young women from adverse consequences of participation during both the recruitment and data gathering stages. The work adhered to the principles of the British Educational Research Association's (2011) guidelines, in that the purpose of the study was shared openly, participants were not put under any pressure to give data and all those involved (including parents/carers) were informed about the interviewee's right to withdraw from the study, and to redact their data, without penalty. The welfare of interviewees was at the forefront of the data gathering process at all times. Bearing in mind the additional stresses which could be caused by meeting an unfamiliar person, the presence of parents/carers during the interview was included in the protocol, despite the fact that respondents were of an age where this might not have been expected. Similarly, respondents and their parents/carers were invited to choose a suitable interview venue in an active attempt to minimise distress or disruption to routines. The benefits of the research, in giving expression to the views of the target group, were considered to outweigh the potential risks of interviewing, providing that the meetings were conducted sensitively. Had any participant showed signs of distress or fatigue, the interview would have been terminated straight away; both researchers have extensive experience of working with people with an ASC diagnosis and were vigilant for any signs of distress. It remained a priority throughout the study that the data should only be gathered without causing distress, which would have compromised the data as well as causing avoidable harm to interviewees.

The search for respondents was restricted, for convenience, to a geographical area corresponding to local council areas on the west and south-west side of London and bordering region. Emails seeking suitable interviewees were sent to 157 schools, eight Further Education (FE) colleges, four special schools for children with autism, twelve Sixth Form colleges and twenty-five local autism associations, who were identified from a list produced by the National Autistic Society. Of the schools contacted, eight responded but only one school agreed that a student could be interviewed. The remainder of the schools who responded did not have any participants who met the research criteria, or felt that relationships were so strained with their autistic students and their parents/carers that asking these young women to participate in research was considered inappropriate. FE colleges' responses showed a similar pattern of low numbers and restricted access due to difficult relationships with the student or parents. Three interviewees were identified at the end of the search. One additional woman was identified through personal contacts of the researcher. Two of the participants attended mainstream state-funded secondary schools, one attended an independent (fee-paying) school



and one attended an FE college. The role of the parents/carers as ‘gatekeepers’ to the data gathering process was found to be key; two parents heard about the research through a local branch of the National Autistic Society, one through their daughter’s school and one through personal contacts of the researchers. One parent made a written submission which was incorporated into the analysis.

Difficulties in securing a sufficient number of respondents from the small number of potential subjects, even after wide-ranging approaches to target institutions, led to the decision to widen the range of interviewees. However, the use of data from different populations focusing on the same research subject, enabled the researcher to achieve effective triangulation in the manner described by Morse (2010). This approach is held to increase the verifiability of data (Hamilton, 2011). The researchers sought indirect evidence in the form of the views of professionals who work with young women on the autistic spectrum. The staff interviewees comprised three teachers and a member of support staff, who worked at three different secondary schools and one FE college. Two of the staff members taught at the institutions attended by two of the young women with HFA who were interviewed. The schools and colleges the staff represented were based in urban, suburban and rural areas in the south-east of England.

Research interviews took place in a location selected by the interviewee, either at their school, college, or in their own homes; all young women were offered the opportunity to have someone present with them during the interview. Two students opted to be interviewed at school or college and two opted to be interviewed at home. All four staff, in contrast, were interviewed at school or college. Being in a familiar setting is considered important for putting participants with ASC at their ease, according to Harrington *et al.* (2013). For the staff, one interview took place at the college where the interviewee was employed, the other three interviews were conducted over the telephone. All interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

Semi structured interviews were conducted with all eight participants, using predominantly open-ended questions. Indicative questions are provided in Table 1, although these were modified in response to individual interviewee’ responses. This widely used approach (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008) was intended to enable an unrestricted account to be articulated, and to facilitate expansion on areas of interest to both interviewer and subject. The interviews were digitally recorded, with the consent of the participants and, in the case of students, their parents/carers. The data was pseudo-anonymised, each interviewee was assigned

**Table 1.** Indicative questions posed during the semi-structured interviews

<i>Questions regarding</i>	<i>Student</i>	<i>Staff</i>
<b>Current Education</b>	<p>What subjects/qualifications are you currently studying? Why did you decide to take these subjects? And/or who influenced you when you made your decision?</p> <p>When did you first start thinking about what subjects you would like to do this year?</p> <p>What support do you have at school because of your Asperger/HFA?</p> <p>Do you feel this support meets your needs?</p> <p>What other support would you like to have?</p> <p>What sort of problems does your Asperger Syndrome cause for you at school?</p> <p>How could this process have been improved?</p>	<p>How many girls did you have this year in their last year of school that had an ASC?</p> <p>What support do the girls receive at school because of their Asperger/HFA?</p> <p>Do you feel this support meets their needs or is there more you would like to offer and if so, what is stopping you?</p> <p>What sort of problems does Asperger Syndrome cause for the girls at school?</p> <p>What sort of advantages are there to having Asperger Syndrome?</p>
<b>Transition Planning</b>	<p>You are leaving at the end of this year, what are you going to do next?</p> <p>When did you start thinking about what you would do after you left school?</p> <p>Who helped you make this decision?</p> <p>Has there been any form of transition planning that you have been involved with between yourself and the school?</p> <p>What kind of areas did this cover? Education/Work/Life Skills/Transport/Social Skills?</p> <p>Has anyone else helped with arranging your transition to college and if so, what have they done?</p> <p>What kind of transition activities or preparation for college have you been involved in?</p> <p>Were these transition activities useful?</p> <p>Is there anything that you would have liked to happen that has not?</p> <p>Do you feel like you were fully involved in the transition planning process or was it done to/for you?</p>	<p>When do you first start planning the transition to sixth form or college for girls?</p> <p>Do you have a formal transition planning process and if so how does that work and who does that involve?</p> <p>What kind of areas did this plan cover?</p> <p>Education/Work/Life Skills/Transport/Social Skills?</p> <p>Are there any other areas that you think should be included in transition but are not at the moment?</p> <p>In what ways do you involve the girls in their own transition planning?</p> <p>What kind of transition activities do the girls take part in?</p> <p>What transition information/activities have been the most helpful for the girls?</p>

<i>Questions regarding</i>	<i>Student</i>	<i>Staff</i>
<b>The Next Steps</b>	<p>What support do you think you will need when you go to college?</p> <p>Is there any other support you would like that you aren't going to get?</p> <p>What do you think it is important for your teachers at college to know about AS?</p> <p>What most excites you about this transition you are going to make?</p> <p>What most concerns you about the transition you are going to make?</p> <p>Have you noticed any changes in your feelings or behaviour as the time for coming to leave school approaches? If so, what helps you cope with these feelings?</p>	<p>Who helps/influences the girls make decisions about where they want to go next. This could be people both inside and outside the school.</p> <p>What do you think is the key to successful transition for these girls?</p> <p>Are you able to pass on information to the girls' Sixth form or FE College?</p> <p>What information would you most like to be able to share with the 6<sup>th</sup> Form/FE colleges that your girls go to?</p> <p>Do you think there is enough support at Sixth Form/FE colleges for the girls with HFA? Why/Why Not?</p> <p>What support would you like to see for girls with HFA at Sixth Form or FE College?</p> <p>As the time for transition approaches do you notice any changes in the girls' behaviour/ attitudes either better or worse?</p>

a pseudonym prior to analysis. All data was securely stored and accessible only to the researcher and research supervisor. After transcription, the responses were thematically analysed as described by Davies (2011).

The transcripts were read by the researcher, who then devised a coding system comprising twelve categories, each of which represented a distinct topic of discussion raised in the interviews. The coding of the interviews was 'sense checked' by a third party. After coding had taken place, a copy of the codes and their meanings, along with the transcripts, were passed to a third party to review and comment upon. From here, the researcher read the coded transcripts and deduced themes from the data.

## Findings

### ***The management of educational transition for students with ASC is inconsistent and frequently inadequate***

A significant level of variability in support at transition was evident. While there are some areas of outstanding practice, it would appear that these are due to the commitment of key staff within certain educational institutions. Of the students interviewed, both Kirsty and Alice were aware of the support they would receive at college. Kirsty knew she would get learning support assistant (LSA) support, although less than she was used to. Alice was also going to have LSA support, attached to her class, a mentor to talk to if she needed it and a day a week on a social skills and work experience programme. By contrast, Donna simply had no idea of the level of support she would receive at college. All staff interviewed expressed concerns about the level and consistency of support available to young women with HFA at college and in the sixth form. A lack of specialist support and staff training in the area of HFA at the receiving institutions was noted, with the result that some of the broader difficulties may go unrecognised and/or the student's needs unmet. A further problem that was revealed was that the important role of co-ordinating transition planning (Mitchell and Berrisford, 2014b) was not always assigned to a designated member of staff and commonly fell, by default, to the parents. The findings point to the need for transition to be managed strategically over an extended time period and in a way that incorporates the views of all key stakeholders.

The timely transfer of accurate information about a student is a key element of transition management. Without exception, the young women wanted their new teachers to know about their HFA. This finding is consistent with Scitutto *et al.*'s,

2012 research, where students wanted their teachers to know about their HFA, how it affected them and that they could not always control their behaviour. An additional finding of this study was the timescale over which staff wanted to get to know the students; staff commented on how crucial it was to have a long lead in to transition. They felt that this would enable them to fully understand the needs of their students and allow time to liaise with other staff about them, thereby giving students the best support available. Sue felt that it was essential that the student built at least one good relationship at the receiving institution and having one person there who really ‘got them as a person’.

The staff views on the need to build up relationships based on detailed knowledge of individual students were mirrored by those of the students themselves. They said that they hoped that if staff were aware of their HFA, its affect upon them and the support they needed, it might help them manage better in class. For example, Alice wanted staff to know that if she was sitting quietly but not working, she needed their help but was finding it impossible to request it. Other common problems associated with HFA, which the young women felt that staff needed to be aware of, included difficulty coping with noisy classrooms, which led to feelings of anger and frustration and difficulty coping with their own emotions. Students often reported that they would become ‘wound up’ or angry. Donna said that if she got angry, she would burst into tears which was embarrassing in front of her peers.

Set against these aspirations, the reality described by staff was very different. Most staff said they found it difficult to gain accurate information about new students or to pass accurate information on. Schools were wary about being too honest about the needs of students in case it hindered those students’ progress. Other staff were concerned about writing anything contentious as parents could request to see what had been written. Julie reported it was often easier to gain accurate information in person or over the phone. Two of the staff reported that in their school they try to pass on as much information about the students as possible and try to speak to the receiving school too. Sue said that the school will always try to initiate a conversation with the receiving school or college if they become aware that the new school is finding it difficult to work with the student. The picture that emerged was that, rather than transition being a well mapped-out process targeted to the individual needs of students, it appears to be a loose collection of *ad hoc* arrangements that provides no clarity for teacher, student or parent. For the most part, transition planning, even for students with an EHCP, appears to be a tick box exercise, with students not always being involved in their own transition process.

It is noteworthy that five out of the eight interviewees reported that the support provided to young women with HFA at Secondary School and College was organised mainly or exclusively around their academic needs. This took the form of the provision of LSAs in lessons, help with study skills and examination support. However, three of the five also reported some degree of either personal safety or social skills support or work experience opportunities.

The interview comments highlighted the need for staff to reconceptualise success and see it as far more than the number of qualifications gained by a student; to see success as being about becoming a confident individual, capable of functioning as independently as possible and contributing positively to society in the manner that best suits them. One factor that might assist these students is for them to transfer to a programme of similar academic demand to the one which they have completed at school. This would allow time for the social and practical adjustments to take place before more complex academic challenges are undertaken. It would, however, be counter to the expectation of continuous progress against which schools and colleges are assessed (Ball, 2003). For some students, for at least some of the time, education needs to be understood as being concerned with developing as a person and finding a useful role for oneself in society, whilst maintaining the greatest level of independence possible. Sue felt that a 'sideways' move in academic terms would help these students to get used to all the changes a transition imposes. It would also let them try out new subjects without jeopardising future progress. The potential problems caused by an overly narrow view of suitable post-transition courses was articulated by two more of the staff interviewed, who felt there needed to be more choice for students in terms of the subjects and vocational routes in work-based environments. The data in general indicated that support is not tailored to the young women's needs and is not flexible or responsive in the way that it needs to be. For example, it may be inappropriate for students to have identical support, in college, to what they had in school. Some of the support may no longer be necessary as students mature and become more independent. However, providing some continuity of support over the transition period, that could be reduced as the student settles into the new environment, is essential. At other times students need to take on a different form of support as the demands on them alter.

This point was summarised eloquently by Sue when she said;

*'I think ... currently the view is that education is about gaining qualifications whereas actually if you look back twenty years to ... the Blair government,*

*actually they believed that ... education was ... probably one of the only social ... provisions that touched lots and lots of families and so ... should have a wider remit ... In terms of community support and supporting families but that's not really what the current government think education's about'.*

The interview responses reiterate previous findings which have identified that the scope of students' difficulties may extend far beyond academic ones. For instance, Martin *et al.* (2008) claim that students do not simply have issues in class, but may also struggle with handling money, using transport, cooking and washing, after transition to a more independent setting, and so may need support in these areas. Furthermore, struggles in the areas of employment, residential accommodation and post-secondary education have been previously noted (Wehman *et al.*, 2014; Kirby, 2016). However, if these difficulties can be mitigated by informal and *ad hoc* support, there is insufficient impetus for a systematic reform in practice.

The concern expressed most frequently by students was making new friends and fitting in socially in the new environment. When asked about sources of anxiety, Donna observed that she was concerned about:

*'Meeting new people, which is good, but at the same time not good, if you know what I mean. Because I find it like hard to talk to new people, but at the same time, I want the opportunity to make new friends'.*

Every young woman raised the need to make new friends and meet new people as a concern when transitioning to college. Similarly, all four staff commented on how difficult it was for young women with HFA to make and sustain appropriate friendships. Staff said it was difficult for the young women to fit into a mainstream social group when they did not share the same interests or ability to communicate as their peers. Additionally, the young women could easily be taken advantage of, teased and bullied by their peers without realising what was occurring. These findings echoed existing literature on difficulties with social integration (Ashburner *et al.*, 2010; Lai *et al.*, 2011; Robinson *et al.*, 2012; Hebron and Humphrey, 2014). More worryingly though, are the concerns that three staff either raised directly or alluded to, the issue of young women with HFA being so desperate for friendships and so prone to fixations, that they fixate on a male and leave themselves vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Despite these anxieties, social support does not appear routinely as an element of transition plans (National Health Service website, 2018) although this evidence indicates that it should. The

almost exclusive focus on education excludes other needs such as social and life skills, work experience and Independent travel.

Similarly, Alice was worried about getting to college on time and Donna was concerned about the journey to college, as she became highly anxious on public transport. These are very common concerns for teenagers with HFA transitioning to college (Mitchell and Beresford, 2014b) but not ones that a generic induction experience will address.

Despite general concerns, one example of sustained and holistic support for transition was described, although it was made possible by the very specific context of the school offering it. Head-teacher Sue's students at a state-funded special school, particularly those on the residential programme, received the most holistic package of support including, academic and emotional support, communication, social and life skills, independence and travel skills and work experience. The emphasis on gaining qualifications, rather than developing as a person and making a positive contribution to society, was seen as problematic by staff. Sue said;

*'I think there also needs to be a bit more understanding at local authority level that actually progress doesn't always have to be academic progress ... And that actually we should be measuring progress in terms of independence, communication and wellbeing'.*

Finally, the interview data also indicates that the duration for which support is needed, if transition is going to be successful, should be acknowledged and afforded better resourcing, so that it can be done systematically over an extended time frame. Moreover, planning needs to take account of the full range of barriers which students may experience (which may well be masked by their generally high level of functioning). A clear process is required, so that all concerned parties (school and college staff, parents and students) know what actions need to be taken, when and by whom.

## **Successful transition relies too heavily on individuals, rather than on consistent processes**

There was evidence suggesting that the young women still needed support with the strategic management of transition, despite their age and academic competence.



This was evident from the fact that, even when transition management arrangements were in place, the young women failed to recognise the significance of them. When asked if there had been a transition planning process that they, and their parents, had been involved in, three young women denied any knowledge of such a process, although two had clearly met with a teacher at school to talk about subject choices and support. Only Donna recalled a meeting but was unclear what it was about;

*'I think, we went to a transition meeting and, um, we talked. There was a woman there that was like in charge of my case or something like that ... I don't really know what's going on with that though'.*

Natalie, who had been to a meeting with one of the staff interviewees, Julie, did not mention that this had occurred when she was interviewed about her transition experiences. This implies either that she had forgotten the meeting or had not recognised its importance.

The study provided encouraging evidence that transition activities initiated by staff at FE or sixth form providers really can have a positive impact upon the transitioning students, as has previously been described by Dann (2011). However, their success is heavily reliant on individuals' commitment, in the absence of a mandatory process. The students reported that these activities had not been arranged by their schools but by the prospective colleges, and parents had been key in organising their attendance. Likewise Julie, employed in an FE college as a transition worker, encouraged students to attend taster days so they had an idea of what college would be like in its natural environment, with classes running and students present. However, these could be difficult to arrange, given the need to balance both the college teaching timetable and the student's need to prepare for their GCSEs. In line with previous findings (Adreon and Stella, 2001; Peters and Brooks, 2016), the most common activity was holding 'taster' days, which had been attended by two of the students interviewed. At these, they were given a tour of the facilities and a 'mock' class or workshop. They were able to meet their subject teachers and the other students who would be entering their college with them. The young women reported that these were the most helpful activities, because they really got a sense of what it would be like to be attending college as a student. However, there was no additional or personalised element to the induction relating to the student's special needs; one student said it would have been really helpful if they could have met the SEND Co-ordinator at the same time, had they been available, and discussed support arrangements. School staff

gave an account of sustained preparation for transition, which complements the work of the receiving institutions. Sue reported that she and her team talk to their students about their next educational placement, almost from the point of the student's arrival, simply so that the young women get used to hearing about the future and realise that it will be different. The other two school staff reported that they initiate conversations with parents about future placements when the young women are in year nine (that is, aged 13 to 14 years old) and transition activities continue from that point on.

Beyond these generic preparation and induction activities, having a named member of staff responsible for transition enabled further transition work, with an emphasis on individualised support. Julie, the FE transition support worker, described how she would meet students who were hoping to attend the college while they were still at school, review the EHCP in which the preferred college had been named to see if the student's needs could be met and attended any admissions interviews the student might have at college. Where possible, Julie would try to meet the prospective students more than once before they came to college for interview.

Parents mediate young women's educational pathways to a large degree and establish support mechanisms they judge necessary, according to recent research by Mitchell and Beresford (2014a). The interview data implies that the burden of planning for transition frequently falls on parents who are offered limited support to negotiate this area. In consequence, those parents with higher socio-economic status can mitigate some of the difficulties experienced by the young women, whereas other parents are less able to do so. This is true of all pupils, but may be especially important in learners who are at a higher risk of educational under-achievement. The differing capacities of parents to act as an advocate may inadvertently, exacerbate existing inequalities in provision, including around transition. As Fordyce *et al.* (2013, p. 113) noted,

*'the social networks and advocacy power of their parents were closely related to their socio-economic status. They played a significant role in shaping the young people's experiences of school education, as well as their post-school journeys.'*

The group interviewed was representative of the general population of disabled young people in this respect. It was evident from the interviews that parents/carers were playing a crucial role in co-ordinating and driving forward transition

planning for the young women. All but one of the students in this study said their parents had helped them with transition planning: whether that was helping them to decide what subjects to take, finding out about provision at various colleges, liaising with the Local Authority and/or school or college staff or accompanying students to open days, support was provided. Additionally, parents had attended their child's EHCP reviews, where transition is discussed, albeit briefly.

Parental activity, however, seemed commonly to have placed strain on the relationships between parents, teachers and students; this came to light when trying to contact interview subjects. The recruitment of a further three eligible subjects was impeded because school staff would not let them know about the study, due to the perceived risk of causing further deterioration of already precarious relationships between school and parents.

Despite these difficulties, most of the staff interviewed valued the input of parents in the transition process, recognising that parents have a good understanding of their child and also that parents could be called upon for resourcing, such as for transport to college. Thus, staff found themselves managing relationships between parents, the college and outside agencies, with little support for their brokering role. A compounding factor in these fractious relationships is that the recommendations of teachers are ignored or go unheard by outside agencies, because current education policy is more concerned with the financial cost of education, rather than with the benefits that the most appropriate education could provide both to the individual child and society as a whole. For example, Sue explained that she felt that her Local Authority area would frown upon having to make costly provision and that deterred her from making recommendations for specialist provision that would be expensive, even if they would suit the individual pupil. This, then, required parents to recognise what was in their daughter's best interests and to fight for it.

This lack of support that parents receive in terms of helping their daughter's transition is problematic on two levels. Relying on parents to investigate and advocate for the most appropriate provision for their daughters is fine for parents who have the knowledge, resources and emotional strength to do so. However, what happens to the daughters of the parents who do not have this type of cultural capital at their disposal and no set process to follow? Most probably, these young women end up in large, ordinary FE colleges without adequate support, as their parents are unable to advocate for or provide anything better. Therefore, by relying on parents to bear the burden of fighting for their daughter's further education, an

inequality of opportunity springs up based on one's parents financial and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Mitchell and Beresford (2014a) said someone needed to take a co-ordinating role in transition planning, but that it should not be the parents.

## **Women with HFA express curriculum preferences that defy stereotypes**

People with ASD are often characterised as preferring objective and logical subjects, but this study revealed a very different situation. One key, and surprising, finding of the research was the subjects the young women opted to study and the potential implications this has for one theory of the basis of Autism. Without exception, the young women took Arts subjects as part of their GCSEs and three of the four young women wanted to pursue further study in the Arts field. Table 2 outlines the non-core subjects the young women were taking and their future aspirations.

This pattern was echoed by staff; one teacher commented, *'Young women (with HFA) are great at the arts, at arts based subjects so you know, anything creative, art, drama, music quite often. They'll write poetry, then plays, themselves'*.

This is the opposite of what might have been expected, as the common perception is that students with HFA are drawn towards subjects such as Mathematics, Sciences, Computing and Engineering. Indeed, this expectation was reinforced by one of the interviewees. Kirsty indicated that it made her very logical and so with subjects where logic was important such as Maths, having ASC gave her an advantage as she often got the right answer and was not side-tracked by extraneous information. Conversely, the same quality was noted by another interviewee as being beneficial in studying Arts subjects. Alice said that her fascination with certain topics helped her learn about them easily;

*'Say I get fascinated by a style of art. Then I will just focus on that art, so that helps me for the future as well because I get better at that style of art'*.

In the same vein, two staff commented on how the ability to fixate meant that the young women demonstrated a level of commitment and dedication second to none and this could enable them to produce outstanding work, particularly in creative fields.

**Table 2.** Subjects studied and career aspirations for young women with HFA

<i>Participant</i>	<i>GCSE non-core subjects/college subjects</i>	<i>Further Study</i>	<i>Career Aspiration</i>
Kirsty	Music, Geography, Photography, Health & Social Care.	A Levels; English Literature, Music, Health & Social Care.	Secondary School English Teacher.
Donna	Art, Triple Science, Graphics and History.	A Levels; Maths, Physics, Chemistry and Economics.	Biomedical Engineer.
Natalie	BTEC Level II Art & Design.	BTEC Level III Art & Design.	Unknown.
Alice	Art and Drama.	BTEC Level III Art & Design (Urban Fusion).	Artist.

Mathematics, Sciences, Computing and Engineering continue to be characterised as masculine subjects (ASPIRES, 2013), which indirectly aligns the stereotype of ASD with the theory of the extreme male brain (Baron-Cohen, 2002). This research points towards young women with HFA not having a highly systematising approach, or so-called Extreme Male Brain, but a more creative way of working. The data on curriculum choices supports the concept put forward by Krahn and Fenton (2012), along with Moyses and Porter (2015), that there is, instead, a different male and female phenotype for Autism. The results from this very small sample certainly suggest that the situation is far less clear cut than might be expected, and that extreme care should be exercised to avoid curtailing choices through prejudgements based on a diagnostic label.

## Conclusion

This small-scale research showed that the young women with ASC who were interviewed had concerns relating to educational transition, which corresponded to the range of difficulties which were associated with their ASC. The focus of these concerns were much more diverse than simply academic progress and future attainment, encompassing social and organisational factors. These concerns were not, however, distinct from those previously described for young men with ASC. This commonality suggests that, in functional terms, the limited evidence on young women's experience has not silenced a distinctive voice on gender-defined experiences of transition. Nevertheless, the views of this relatively small population should be actively sought when information on experiences of people with ASC are sought. Significant variability in transition practice was described by the interviewees and this points to the need for a common framework through which transition could be planned and implemented. Such a framework would benefit a far larger population than those with ASD, but the small sample studied here highlighted the extent to which effective transition could maximise their ability to achieve in a new educational setting. The heavy burden which falls upon parents is shared by those with ASC and other disabilities and this may contribute to differential outcomes for students undergoing transition. Both data on the impact of different levels of parental advocacy and, crucially, the mechanisms by which all parents/carers can be empowered to support their child's education most effectively, deserve further investigation.

The data indicates that where there may, however, be a gender distinction is the indirect impact of a gender-related explanation of the condition. If these young women's choices are incorrectly defined by a perception that they possess a 'male

brain', they may be deprived of opportunities that they might have benefited from. In order to protect their right to exercise the same freedom of choice as their non-ASD peers, their learning capacity should never be defined in terms of gender or conceptualised as a neurological gender mis-alignment. The evidence gathered in this study would appear to demand a more nuanced theory of the basis of ASC with which to counter earlier models.

Finally, it is important that both students and parents have extensive input into any transition plans about them/their child. However, the bulk of the responsibility for transition planning should not fall to the parents, unless it is matched with a commensurate level of support. Parents need opportunities to assess prospective schools and colleges, as do their daughters, and they need to have information to inform decision-making and guidance on how to negotiate the system to obtain provision for their daughter.

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