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‘We need to change our way of thinking about education’: A thematic analysis of university staff’s experience supporting autistic students in France.

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Émilie Cappe: Conceptualization, Methodology, Resources, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Funding acquisition. Emma McPeake: Methodology, Formal analysis, Validation, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Kristopher Lamore: Methodology, Ressources, Writing – review & editing. Émilie Boujut: Methodology, Writing – review & editing. Joëlle Khoury: Formal analysis, Validation. Céline Clément: Ressources, Writing – review & editing. Sabine Zorn: Ressources, Writing – review & editing. Catherine Pellenq: Ressources, Writing – review & editing. Marie-Hélène Plumet: Writing – review & editing.

‘We need to change our way of thinking about education’: A thematic analysis of university staff’s experience supporting autistic students in France.

Whilst the prevalence of autistic students attending university in France is increasing, limited research has explored the experiences of university professors and disability support staff in French higher education. The current study sought to fill this gap in the literature using a qualitative research design. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 26 university staff members (14 university professors, 8 disability support office staff, 4 ‘other support professionals’). Data was analysed using thematic analysis. Six main themes were identified: 1) Taking a holistic approach, 2) Adapting communication, 3) Relying on intuition, 4) What diagnosis? 5) The benefits of inclusion and 6) Navigating levels of support. Themes describe how participants engaged autistic students in higher education, their challenges, and their successes. Whilst professionals sought to provide personalised support to students, **the analysis indicates** more training and support is required as university staff reported a range of difficulties supporting autistic students at university. Results from the current study can contribute to the development of policy and practice with regards to the implementation of inclusive practices in French higher education. Of note, participants highlighted the need to access more holistic support from a range of professionals in addition to further training.

Keywords: autism, university, higher education, college, qualitative, France

Sustainable Development Goals: Good health and well-being, Quality education, Reduced inequalities

Classifications: Disability, Higher Education, Inclusive Education

Introduction

The **number** of students declaring an **autism diagnosis** in **French** higher education in France **has increased 58% from 2017 (581 students) to 2020 (1010**

students) (Ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur et de la Recherche, 2019; Ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur et de la Recherche, 2022). Indeed, the number of autistic students attending university has also been increasing internationally (Bakker et al., 2019; Jackson et al., 2018; White et al., 2011). Whilst intellectually capable students seek to benefit from higher education, they often experience poor employment outcomes (Eaves and Ho, 2008; Office for National Statistics, 2022; Newman et al., 2011; Taylor and Seltzer, 2011) and an increased risk of drop-out (Cage and Howes, 2020; Newman et al., 2011; Van Bergeijk et al., 2008). This has led to a plethora of research exploring the experience and needs of autistic students, with a view to learning how to better support autistic students in higher education (Cai and Richdale, 2016; McPeake et al., 2023; Ward and Webster, 2018).

Indeed, autistic students report experiencing a range of social and academic challenges in higher education environments such as: sensory overstimulation, relational difficulties, and time management (Cai and Richdale, 2016; Gurbuz et al., 2019; Hillier et al., 2018; McLeod et al., 2019; Ward and Webster, 2018).

Whilst autistic students report an appreciation for receiving personalised autism-specific support (e.g., specialised mentors, quiet spaces, opportunities for peer support) in the context of adapting to environments designed for neurotypical peers (Accardo et al., 2019; Agarwal et al., 2020; Cai and Richdale, 2016), disability support offices are often more skilled at providing support to students with physical and/or other learning disabilities (Connor, 2011; Geller and Greenberg, 2010). Indeed, higher education institutions typically embody a 'deficit' model of autism, whereby students must disclose a medical diagnosis to receive extra support or accommodations (e.g. extra time in exams) that compensate for identified difficulties. A medical model defines Autism as a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition, characterised by difficulties in

social communication and interactions, information processing, sensory stimulation and restricted/repetitive interests (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). **This conceptualisation of autism ignores the intellectual capacities and strengths of individual students, contributing to pathologising discourses, where autistic people are viewed as ‘abnormal’, ‘dysfunctional’ and/or requiring treatment (Connor, 2011).**

In contrast to a medical model, the concept of ‘neurodiversity’ conceptualises autism and/or other forms of atypical development (e.g. ADHD), as expressions of normal human diversity, which naturally encapsulate a range of strengths and weaknesses (Griffin and Pollak, 2009).

In the absence of inclusive educational environments that appreciate and account for neurodiversity, autistic students have reported difficulties accessing support, contributing to an increased risk of drop-out (Gurbuz et al., 2019; McPeake et al., 2023; Van Bergeijk et al., 2008). The current body of research has so far highlighted the need for college faculty and disability support staff to adapt more inclusive practices and/or to provide more accessible autism-specific support (McPeake et al., 2023; Van Bergeijk et al., 2008). However, limited research has explored the experience and needs of university professors and disability support staff, critical stakeholders in delivering such support.

As college faculty and disability support staff are the keyholders to addressing autistic student’s support needs in higher education, it is therefore essential to consider their **views**, experiences and needs to enhance practice and inform the development of relevant staff training interventions, **on how to embrace neurodiversity, and enact more inclusive practices.**

Experience and needs of college faculty and support staff in higher education.

Limited research has explored the experiences and needs of college faculty and staff supporting autistic students in higher education. Gobbo and Shmulsky (2014) conducted focus groups with college faculty in a small liberal arts college providing special education to students with disabilities in the United States of America (USA), to identify perceived strengths and weaknesses of autistic students, in addition to exploring teaching strategies that educators found useful. Results revealed that faculty perceived the restricted interests of autistic students as a strength. Nevertheless, consistent with autistic students self-reported experiences of higher education (e.g., Gurbuz et al., 2019), faculty observed difficulties with social skills, understanding audience, abstract concepts and identified anxiety as a barrier to learning. College faculty in this study therefore suggested fostering more explicit communication, allowing autistic students to pursue their passions, and helping autistic students to identify signs and reduce triggers to their anxiety. Whilst these are useful suggestions for college faculty working with autistic students, this research was conducted in an institution providing special education to students with disabilities. Therefore, faculty with limited understanding of disability and/or autism, working in larger institutions, may struggle to identify and work successfully with autistic students.

Certainly, college faculty working in non-specialised higher education have reported difficulties identifying if they had ever taught students with autism owing to autism's 'invisible' nature (Zeedyk et al. 2018). Furthermore, college faculty may have concerns regarding the inclusion of students with autism and/or learning difficulties in higher education. Gibbons et al. (2015) reported from a large survey of college faculty, that staff may have reservations over the time and resources that students with autism and intellectual disabilities require.

However, college faculty are not the only members of staff who interact with autistic students. Disability support offices are the first point of contact for students declaring their disability to higher education institutions and thus are the gatekeepers to additional supports. Despite this, limited research has considered the experiences and needs of disability support staff in higher education.

Knott and Taylor (2014) conducted three focus groups (two with staff and one with students) at a large university in the United Kingdom (UK), with a view to comparing student and staff perspectives on life at the university as an autistic person. Staff comprised a range of professionals including disability support officers, and careers and mental health advisers. Results illustrated major discrepancies between student and staff perspectives. Of note, support staff were largely unaware of the everyday stressors experienced by autistic students at the university (e.g., the impact of sensory issues and anxiety). Therefore, such disability support staff are likely to benefit from additional training on how best to support autistic students in a higher education environment. Further survey research with disability support staff has also highlighted the need to educate campus communities and raise more general awareness of autism (Brown and Coomes, 2015; Saggars et al., 2019).

Whilst enhancing autism awareness is useful, awareness alone may not suffice. According to college faculty in a large survey conducted in a private urban university in the USA (McKeon et al., 2013), staff also emphasised a need for practical training on how to adapt instructional strategies to successfully support autistic students.

Autism and Higher education in France

Whilst qualitative research has explored the experience and needs of autistic students (McPeake et al., 2023; Pellenq & Mamelli, 2022), the experience and needs of college faculty and/or disability support staff in France has yet to be investigated.

Disability support offices are available in each French university for students who wish to formally declare a disability to be granted additional support such as extra time, tutor support, notetakers, etc. (LOI n° 2005-102 du 11 février 2005 pour l'égalité des droits et des chances, la participation et la citoyenneté des personnes handicapées, 2005).

Whilst the French government has implemented a national strategy for Autism (Ministère des solidarités et des familles, n.d.), which includes the 'Atypie-Friendly' project; a national programme to support neurodiversity in French higher education (Atypie-Friendly, n.d.), this programme is only currently available in 24 of 100 or so French universities. As well as being a point of contact for autistic students in each of the 24 participating universities, the project also seeks to provide training and outreach support to students and staff members on French university campuses.

Despite the availability (albeit limited) of such resources and support, a recent qualitative study examining the experience of autistic students at university, highlighted the complex journey that autistic students may face in completing higher education in France (McPeake et al, 2023). Indeed, consistent with previous research (Cage and Howes, 2020; Jackson et al., 2018), autistic students experienced difficulties completing higher education and reported an elevated risk of drop-out without adequate support. It is therefore imperative that French universities reflect on how to provide effective support to autistic students, whilst considering the views of support providers such as disability support staff and college faculty.

With a view to improving staff training interventions and practice, the current study will thus investigate the following research question: how do university professors and disability support staff currently experience supporting autistic students in French higher education?

Method

Method and findings are reported as per the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) (Tong et al., 2007).

Participants

Interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 26 university staff members who had experience supporting at least one autistic student. Participants were recruited via mail sent to disability support offices in 12 French higher education institutions located across the country including both urban and rural regions. In addition to being invited to participate, disability support offices were also asked to distribute the study information to university professors who may be interested in participating. As a result, 6 of the 14 university professors recruited also held a specific disability support role, acting as a point of contact for students with disabilities or other specific needs within their unique academic discipline. This unique role also involves mediating supports with teaching staff and students, to both accommodate students' needs and maintain professional and academic standards within their discipline. **Of the 14 professors who participated, 9 were Assistant Professors, 1 Professor Emeritus and 4 university lecturers.**

Professors were from a range of academic disciplines including science, mathematics, psychology, sociology, education, journalism and the arts. In total, 14 university professors, 8 disability support office staff, 1 psychologist, 1 Research Assistant, 1 Peer Support Worker, 1 careers adviser elected to participate (see table 1). Participants were aged between 22 and 70 years ($M= 43.8$, $SD = 10.45$). A fictional name was generated for each and identifying information has been redacted to preserve anonymity.

Procedure

Interviews were conducted once between January and March 2023, took on average 34 mins to complete (range: 15-54 mins) and took place via Zoom, an online video messaging platform (Zoom video communications inc., 2023). Interviews were conducted by *1st author*, and supervised by *9th author*. An interview guide (see table 2) developed for the purposes of the current study was used to explore topics such as: representations of autism, perceived needs of autistic students, direct experience supporting autistic students and the skills and resources required to successfully support and engage autistic students at university.

From a phenomenological perspective, a semi-structured style was used to probe participant responses and check researcher understanding, under the ontological assumption that participants responses reflected the ‘unique realities’ of their contextually situated experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2020). The guide (see table 2) was thus used flexibly to obtain rich in-depth subjective accounts of experience and perception.

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by a company specialized in verbatim transcription and checked for accuracy by *1st author*.

Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from *details have been removed to comply with blind review*. Participants were not personally known to the interviewer *1st author.*, a recent graduate of a Clinical Psychology masters in France, who had 1 year experience supporting autistic adults in an adult mental health team. This experience enabled interviews and subsequent analysis to be conducted sensitively, with the interviewer reflecting on her own experience supporting autistic adults.

Preliminary contact was made with each participant by *1st author* to verbally outline the study and answer any questions. In addition to providing written informed

consent, all participants were informed at the beginning of the interview that they were free to stop the interview at any time and were given an additional opportunity to ask questions.

Data analysis

Lived experience and perceptions of university and disability support staff supporting autistic students in French higher education were analysed using the six-step recursive phases of **reflexive** thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2020, 39)- '*familiarisation; coding; generating initial themes; reviewing and developing themes; refining, defining and naming themes; and write up*'. This method **was chosen as it** facilitates analysis of patterns of meaning in textual data across cases, **and acknowledges researcher subjectivity as a resource for data analysis within a qualitative paradigm** (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2022). Coding and theme development phases were conducted using qualitative software NVivo 12 (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2018).

Analysis adopted a phenomenological approach whereby interview transcripts were coded inductively for semantic meanings that captured the contextually situated subjective perceptions and lived experience of participants (Guest et al., 2012; Langridge, 2017).

Analysis

Six main themes comprising 21 sub-themes were identified from interview data. See figure 1 for **list of themes**. Themes describe how professionals (university professors and disability support staff) engaged with autistic students, as well as their challenges and successes.

Theme 1: Taking a holistic approach.

Almost all participants recognised the diversity of autism profiles and discussed the need for and benefits of providing support to the ‘whole’ person.

Autism is hard to fit into a box.

Professionals commented on how no one autistic student is the same and understood autism to represent a diversity of different profiles:

We need to understand that autistic students are all different and that’s it not just about saying autistic people are different from neurotypical people.

(Maria, University Professor)

These differences meant professionals felt a need to demonstrate considerable flexibility with a view to providing effective personalized support. Professionals therefore rejected a one-size-fits-all approach supporting students:

I have sometimes the impression that we are given this mould for how to support students with disabilities, but there is no mould! That’s what we need to emphasize, providing support on a case-by-case basis. That’s what important.

(Simone, University Professor and Disability Support)

Finding support from ‘real’ professionals.

As university professors and disability support staff, participants questioned their legitimacy and their role in providing support to autistic students. Effective support was therefore to be found by connecting students to ‘real professionals’ who could provide specialized support. Professionals therefore considered teamwork and access to a holistic range of healthcare professionals to be essential:

The student medical centre really supports us...we have a super team!

(Lynda, University Professor and Disability Support)

However, teamwork and finding ‘real professionals’ was the exception rather than the rule, as the majority of support professionals in this sub-theme commented on their difficulties to link in with other services:

We don’t really have any real professionals who are available to provide more individualized support, especially for the more complex cases who really need support in managing university life.”

(Alison, Disability Office)

University professors also commented on a lack of specialised support:

He’s looking at me, he’s looking out the window, he’s looking at the ceiling and for me it’s impossible to tell him every two minutes ‘pick up your pen and write! Stop staring at the ceiling, stop looking out the window’. That’s what a member of support staff should be there for...If you ask me what my needs are as a professor, I need someone who can be present with that student all the time. Because if not, it’s just not possible. He won’t be able to manage.”

(Anais, University Professor and Disability Support)

Furthermore, professionals commented on how autistic students could also require support in a range of domains unrelated to their academic studies such as:

...how to take public transport, how to get organized,
how to do your grocery shopping, how to plan etc.

(Laurence, Disability Office)

The unknown future.

The transition to university and adult life could be marked by uncertainty and the unknown:

Parents call me, and they will often say to me ‘why is my child no longer able to receive the same kind of extra support?’ Because up until secondary school,

they will have had access to special needs assistants, and at university that just doesn't exist.

(Simone, University Professor and Disability Support)

Indeed, without adequate support, professors observed risk of drop-out.

Furthermore, some were concerned that some students had chosen studies for which they were not best suited and required support to be able to put words on these difficulties and re-orient:

The other big difficulty is ... whether to continue your studies... when we are experiencing constant failure or from an academic point of view, we can see that it is clearly not working, it's about being able to become aware of that and find the words to say we need to find something else. That can be complicated.

(Timothy, University Professor and Disability Support)

Certainly, professionals found it challenging to consider the future and help students to envision a professional career beyond their studies:

University is not just about the academic content... and then washing your hands of students... But it's about the preparation for the future, organizing work experience and addressing what kind of professional they can become after university. It's about being able to answer their questions about how to recognize their disability in the workplace.

(Maria, University Professor)

Indeed, professionals shared their concerns that students may not be able to cope or successfully integrate the workplace due to stigma and negative representations of autism. Professionals therefore felt it important that holistic, personalised support that considers the future support needs of the student be provided.

Theme 2: Adapting communication.

According to professionals, providing effective support was only possible if effective communication had first been established. Professionals therefore reflected on their challenges and successes when it came to adapting communication with autistic students.

The need for proactive reassurance.

Understanding students' needs initially took place in the context of a supportive, proactive relationship with a member of university staff. Professionals (n= 20) therefore commented on the need to establish a relational point of contact with students at the beginning of the year, with the twofold objective of establishing and implementing supports, as well as remaining a point of contact for the student throughout the remainder of the academic year:

There are always communication challenges at the beginning... it's about finding the best mode of communication and creating a trusting relationship with the person.

(Laurence, Disability Office)

Once a trusting relationship had been established with the student, whether it be a staff member from Disability Support services or a university professor, professionals often experienced very high levels of contact. Support professionals therefore perceived providing "reassurance" as an essential part of their role, helping the student to make sense of difficult situations and providing structure to help students succeed in their academic work. However, professionals felt it important to engage proactively with the student:

He really likes when things are extremely structured and clear. So, we have regular meetings to check that everything is going well, etc. And so that reassures him a lot, I know that. With other students I just say, 'If you need

something, let me know.

(Clara, University Professor and Disability support)

Nevertheless, support professionals were not able to make contact and provide the opportunity for effective relational support with all autistic students. Professionals therefore commented on the need to be vigilant and proactive in anticipating student's difficulties:

Often, we try to anticipate. For example, exams take place generally between the 5-10 December, I try to organise myself so that we have a catch up in November to talk about potential difficulties.

(Adrien, Peer Mentor)

How to provide reassurance and structure without overwhelming students more?

Providing reassurance and structure to students was not always an easy task with some professionals discovering that their way of communicating could make matters worse. Therefore, professionals questioned how to communicate just the right amount of information and provide reassurance effectively:

There were times when I realised that I was completely wide off the mark. I was trying to explain, explain, explain without understanding that too much information kills the information for autistic people.

(Pascale, University Professor)

I must give him deadlines but without putting additional pressure on him or without saying 'careful in three months or in one month you will have an essay that is 20 pages' for example. He needs a deadline but not pressure... We try but it practically never works... I feel a little bit lost and my colleague too about how to help structure this student's work, particularly written work as he tends

to go off on a tangent.

(Ernesto, University Professor)

Support professionals could therefore feel at a loss for how to provide support and were often unsure if their attempts at providing reassurance and offering structure had been effective. Indeed, one professional had learned from personal experience having developed an informal support relationship with an autistic student that:

[autistic students] need clear structure... but at the same time... if we give them too much structure too soon, they will become more anxious.

(Jacqueline, Research Assistant)

Hence, university staff and professors commented on their need for more support to understand autistic students' support needs and to adapt communication accordingly.

Theme 3: Relying on intuition: more training and support is needed.

Professionals perceived a lack of training and information concerning autism and how it relates to their professional practice. Professionals therefore reported conducting their own research and relying on intuition, occasionally making mistakes and experimenting to learn and adapt.

A lack of role-specific training and support

Professionals commented on their lack of training to engage in support roles, often learning on-the-job and making decisions based on their personal intuition. Some of them complemented their intuitive practice with their own personal readings and interest in autism:

I read up on it myself. I started by looking on YouTube, on blogs, listening to activists...

(Alison, Disability Office)

Nevertheless, a heavy workload meant that professionals could also struggle to find the time to educate themselves:

In my case, I have not received any training in autism because it's difficult to find time away from teaching because I have a lot of classes so it's really hard.

(Timothy, University Professor and Disability Support)

Professionals therefore commented on their desire to receive more role-specific training and support in their roles:

There is no role-specific training for this job, although that would be useful. And I would like that they develop or propose that, but for the moment, it's not the case... It's true that I can feel alone, left alone to deal with difficult situations.

(Adrien, Peer Mentor)

Lacking resources and institutional recognition

Professionals also commented that higher education institutions didn't recognise the scope of their work in supporting students. This lack of recognition was manifest through the lack of allocated resources to supporting students with additional needs. Lack of allocated resources often meant that support services were under-staffed and unable to provide quality support to students owing to the sheer quantity of students with disabilities requiring additional support:

Interviewer: How many students with disabilities do you support?

Marianne (Disability Office): Right now, we are at 477 students.

Interviewer: You're the only person in the office?

Marianne (Disability Office): Yes. It's a lot but well, I have made it clear to management that it won't be sustainable on the long term. Especially now that we realise, we don't have as many students with additional needs as compared to other universities of equivalent size. And we know that this number is going

to rise. So, there will be a recruitment drive... I think... I hope!

Furthermore, for university professors with the additional role of providing ‘disability support’ within their unique academic discipline, their lack of remuneration for the post was further evidence for this ‘poorly recognised’ role within French universities:

I’m paid five hours a year to be a disability support contact... it’s crumbs. They give us crumbs! ... It means they don’t recognise the work.

(Simone, University Professor and Disability Support)

Developing an understanding of autism and becoming more accepting of diversity

As professionals had received little to no training on their support role/in autism, professionals discussed their initial surprise and acceptance regarding certain behaviours from autistic students. Nevertheless, support professionals feared that other colleagues who had not yet developed an understanding of autism could react negatively:

She has a very particular manner about her, and I’m scared that during the in vivo exam that there will be other members of the jury that... that it might go badly for her.

(Paul, University Professor)

Disability support staff therefore often discussed the need to intervene at the request of students to handle misunderstandings and help university professors become more understanding and accepting of neurodiversity in their classes:

My interventions target course directors and professors. And that’s important because if there isn’t that link, things can go badly. Because there can be misunderstandings when the student says nothing or gives off a sort of

nonchalance or aggressivity... when in reality it's not like that at all.

(Simone, University Professor and Disability Support)

Professionals therefore emphasised the need to increase autism awareness:

[We need] a certain level of autism awareness. To not be surprised by certain things, by certain behaviours that shock people who are unaware.

(Karine, University Professor)

Theme 4: 'What diagnosis? I'm not even supposed to know they are autistic'.

Professionals referred to the importance of having access to a diagnosis despite not being healthcare professionals and being denied such access owing to doctor-patient confidentiality.

Access to diagnosis enhances understanding.

Having access to a diagnosis was nevertheless considered important by certain professionals so that they could adapt and provide more effective support:

I admit that I am happy when they tell me because it helps me to understand certain behaviours and my colleagues feel the same. It's complicated when we don't know what is going on.

(Lynda, University Professor and Disability Support)

Other professionals discussed the benefits of conducting personalised outreach with the consent of autistic students to help explain autism to their university professors and classmates:

It can also be very interesting to get the student involved in outreach to help explain how they function... one student prepared a presentation for his professors and his classmates. We got really good feedback from that. He even gave the same presentation to his colleagues on his work placement. It really helped him to integrate.

(Alison, Disability Office)

The impact of not having access to a diagnosis.

However, as university professors and disability support staff, professionals were unaware of a diagnosis unless the student chose to declare it on an informal basis. Therefore, some professionals feared how shame and stigma might prevent students from being open about their difficulties. Alternatively, professionals commented on how students may expect or presume that support professionals have access to their diagnosis, adding an extra layer of confusion to support plans and putting the onus on the student to disclose to each individual professor or member of support staff:

As disability support, we know nothing. And that creates misunderstandings with the student who will come to see us thinking we have that information, when we know nothing. Then there is that very sensitive moment where we have to discuss that with the student, when it is already quite daunting for them to come and see us! So, we must figure out this issue of doctor-patient confidentiality, which I respect, but it's a massive issue because the student thinks we already have access to that information.

(Simone, University Professor and Disability Support)

Furthermore, not having access to a diagnosis could create uncomfortable situations as much for university professors as for the students themselves:

She kept putting on gloves when we are only supposed to wear gloves for chemical products that are dangerous. So, I said to her, 'that's not necessary, you can take off your gloves'. And that put her into a state of panic... I quickly realised she must have a problem. However, I still don't know what that problem is... It's a situation that made that student feel uncomfortable and me too.

(Marguerite, University Professor)

Disability support professionals also had to navigate implementing supports with university professors whilst respecting the student's wishes to not disclose their diagnosis:

[We need support] on how to provide outreach on student's support needs with academic staff without disclosing their diagnosis when the student doesn't want to say... that's the difficulty. The student has an invisible disability. We need to say he needs X support without saying why... when we could just say or the student could authorise us to say, 'I have autism'. And usually that will resonate with academic staff. But not being able to explain that, that complicates things.

(Nora, Disability Office)

Theme 5: The benefits of inclusion and the positive role autistic people play in society.

Professionals commented on how rewarding it was to work with autistic students and the original contributions that autistic people can make:

It's great because he is able to contribute new ways of thinking to our research that are completely original. He can ask questions that are really surprising but interesting.

(Ernesto, University Professor)

A rewarding experience: we need to change current representations.

Despite the rewarding experience of working with autistic students, professionals discussed the need to change current societal representations of autism in France:

I actually consider difference to be an added value. But how do we change society's current representations? It's a strength. How do we make it a strength?... Honestly if I had encountered autistic students with the

representation of autism in mind that we have in France, I can tell you I would have been lost... when we say to a normal French person that somebody is autistic, that means that the person has a severe intellectual disability, that they are unmanageable.

(Simone, University Professor and Disability Support)

Indeed, others argued that we need to take a more strengths-based approach to autism, instead of just focusing on student's difficulties. Further, some professionals commented on the presence of negative representations still present in the university context:

I think there are certain representations of autism where teaching staff, they have the impression that... It's difficult for me to talk about here because they are views that I don't endorse. But we could say that for them... we send them rejects who don't have their place at university and I sometimes hear things like, 'no but not autistic people now? No but what next?

(Ariane, Disability Office)

The benefits of inclusive education for all.

Professionals also discussed the benefits of inclusion and how adapting educational practices for autistic students will likely have benefits for all. Inclusive practices included providing more explicit content, using technology, providing more structure at university and considering the broader mental health needs of students:

Adapting your classes to clearly formulate academic content that will be really helpful not only for autistic students but for everyone.

(Nora, Disability Office)

Theme 6: Navigating levels of support.

Professionals reflected on the tension between knowing how to modify the university environment to provide just the right amount of support to students, without comprising the quality of university-level education.

Need to change our way of thinking about education.

Professionals commented on the need to change our way of thinking about education; key to this thinking was the idea that disability comes from the environment and that making adaptations to accommodate students with disabilities is not a particularly complicated task. Nevertheless, support professionals commented on rigid ways of thinking about education at university and resistance to implementing supports:

There was one [professor] who refused to allow a student with sensory issues, who was sensitive to light... he really needed these sunglasses that were made for him, but his placement supervisor refused to allow him to wear them on placement. I had to contact this colleague to remind him, it's not a fashion accessory and that the student absolutely needed to wear these sunglasses otherwise it would be extremely painful for him.

(Ada, University Professor and Disability support)

Therefore, whilst it was relatively 'easy' to make this sort of accommodation, support professionals found other colleagues unwilling to implement supports. Support professionals therefore underlined how teaching staff may have a limited understanding of disability:

Unfortunately, professors have their teaching diplomas but in the domain of disability, they don't know anything... I need all university professors to receive training... because we implement supports but for the course syllabus and exams, we are not at all implicated... And there is also the fact that professors are not at all familiar with the legalities and that they can't just do as they please.

(Léonie, Disability Office)

Striking the balance between fairness and inclusion.

Indeed, support professionals commented on how teaching staff may not want to implement adaptations/supports because they feared that implementing such supports would mean sacrificing fairness of education and quality of learning outcomes:

And it's nearly... that it creates...how to say, that [implementing additional supports] favours students with disabilities in academic outcomes. That's very serious to say that but actually they are really honest about that. They say it openly. Students too.

(Simone, University Professor and Disability support)

Therefore, changing attitudes at university is required so that all actors understand the purpose and role of additional supports at university:

We need to raise awareness... Supports are there to compensate for difficulties. They are not something that is unfair.

(Laurence, Disability Office)

Discussion

This study qualitatively examined the experience of university professors and disability support staff supporting autistic students at university in France. This study highlights the importance of adequately resourcing disability support at university and providing autism-specific training and support. Moreover, as the first study to explore the experience and needs of university support staff in France, this study makes an important contribution to the literature. Qualitative interviews yielded rich data with results indicating, whilst professionals seek to provide effective personalised support to students, they encounter a lack of training and resources to support their work.

Furthermore, negative perceptions and stigma were of concern to participants in the current study, as they reported a lack of autism awareness in French universities. Participants reported a range of instances where they and other university staff had struggled to accept neurodiversity in their classes, leading to uncomfortable moments that negatively impacted both staff and students. Participants in the current study particularly commented on the need to receive more training and support with regards to how to provide reassurance and structure autistic student's academic work at university. Indeed, autistic adults self-report high levels of anxiety and the need to receive reassurance in their communication with others (Robertson et al., 2018). Therefore, this would appear to be a key skill to develop in staff supporting autistic students at university.

Additionally, consistent with European research (Pesonen et al., 2020; 2022), professionals felt that future planning and employment support for autistic students was underdeveloped at university. Professionals noted a stark contrast between supports that had previously been provided at secondary level (e.g., special needs assistant) that were no longer available at university. This would suggest that service providers may therefore need to assess supports based on what has previously been provided to the student, with a view to ensuring a smooth transition from secondary to university-level education, based on each student's highly individual needs.

Furthermore, as university and disability support staff, participants are not considered healthcare professionals in France and therefore do not have access to a student's diagnosis unless the student self-discloses. Participants therefore reported difficulties supporting students without a full understanding of their profile, support needs and/or diagnosis. Therefore, a more coordinated service involving healthcare professionals may be required to more fully support university staff in direct contact

with autistic students. Should a more coordinated service be provided, this would remove the onus from students to disclose their diagnosis to individual staff members. Indeed, it is important to note that autistic adults may be reluctant to disclose their diagnosis owing to negative perceptions of autism and stigma (Thompson-Hodgetts et al., 2020).

Indeed, consistent with the experience of teachers in mainstream secondary education (Morewood et al., 2011), participants in the current study reported a need for flexible provision of support as no two autistic people are the same. Professionals therefore perceived access to a holistic range of professionals who can meet the individual support needs of students as essential. In other countries such as Ireland, trained Disability Officers complete needs assessments once a student discloses their disability with a view to referring students to other members of a multidisciplinary team for ongoing support e.g. Assistive Technology Officer, Psychologists, Occupational Therapists etc. (McCarthy et al., 2018). However, the role of disability officers in France is more focused on the co-ordination of special accommodations with academic staff and the provision of ongoing support, despite participants in the current study highlighting a concerning number of under-staffed disability offices. Indeed, one disability support officer in the current study reported a caseload of almost 500 students, limiting their ability to provide ongoing support.

Alternatively, instead of embracing a medical model of autism, whereby access to a diagnosis and specialised support are considered desirable, perhaps more flexible systems, and broader definitions of 'normal' that embrace the concept of 'neurodiversity' within French higher education would be more pertinent. Embracing 'neurodiversity' would mean making environments more accessible rather than helping students compensate identified deficits according to a medical model (Griffin and

Pollak, 2009). An example of this would be Universal Design for Learning, an inclusive educational framework that encourages multi-modal teaching and learning that acknowledges a normal human diversity with regards to how people learn (Fornauf and Erickson, 2020).

Further, also consistent with previous research (Cage and Howes, 2020; McPeake et al., 2023), professionals observed an elevated risk of drop-out among the autistic students they supported. Professionals in the current study understood drop-out to be the result of disability services that were unable to meet the needs of students, in addition to students potentially choosing subjects to which they were perhaps not best suited. This would suggest that greater support may therefore be required to bridge the transition from secondary to higher level education, to help students choose appropriate subjects and identify pertinent supports to enable them to achieve success at university. Indeed, support professionals described communication difficulties and the need for additional training and support to be able to assess autistic students' support needs at university.

Furthermore, consistent with previous research (McPeake et al., 2023), professionals, also reported the need to establish proactive relational support with autistic students. This relationship could then serve to mitigate eventual difficulties and provide support to the student on an ongoing basis throughout the academic year. Crucially, professionals felt it was their responsibility to be proactive and to help students identify and prevent difficulties from escalating. However, if such support is to be successfully facilitated, professionals reported requiring additional time to be able to fulfil such duties to a high standard. Indeed, participants in the current study described a lack of training, support and institutional recognition across a range of support roles, including professional support staff working in disability offices. Importantly,

university professors who also had the additional role of providing disability support within their unique academic discipline, were only afforded a few hours a year for the role, which did not appear to reflect the high levels of contact they received from autistic students, once a supportive relationship had been established. Universities may therefore wish to increase the number of hours allocated to support professionals in these roles or indeed consider reviewing current support structures to create new roles that specifically address supporting students with disabilities at university. The current study therefore suggests that in addition to allocating extra time and resources, French universities urgently need to consider the training and support needs of staff, **as well as adapting more inclusive practices that support and welcome neurodiversity.**

Limitations and future directions

This study has a range of strengths and limitations. The current research was rooted in a phenomenological approach (Langridge, 2017) and analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2020); therefore, participant responses were taken to reflect a contextually situated subjective reality. Although impossible to circumvent in qualitative research, the self-selection bias and subjectivity of participants should be noted (Robinson, 2014). Interviews were conducted with university staff who elected to participate following an invitation disseminated by disability support offices. Therefore, the findings of the current study reflect the views of a limited number of staff who may have been more predisposed to discussing the challenging aspects of their work.

Furthermore, the current study was predominately researcher-led, and therefore did include autistic people in the conceptualisation, analysis or write up of the study. It is recommended that future research consider the use of participatory approaches (e.g. Moliner et al., 2021) that actively include the voices of autistic people.

Conclusion

As the first study to examine the experience of university professors and disability support staff at university in France, qualitative interviews yielded rich data from professionals currently supporting autistic students. The current study would suggest that disability offices in French universities, are understaffed by professionals with limited training and resources to effectively coordinate support plans and/or provide support to students on an ongoing basis. Policymakers will need to urgently assess the resourcing of disability support offices in French universities as providing effective support is, critical in helping autistic students to achieve success at university and reduce risk of drop-out (Cage and Howes, 2020; McPeake et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the current study suggests that raising awareness of autism in French universities should be a focus for the future and that university professors in particular, should be a target. Raising awareness of autism amongst university professors is likely to reduce the negative impact of misunderstandings that can occur between staff and neurodiverse students. Universities should therefore be encouraged to actively engage with resources and outreach currently available through *Atypie-Friendly*, the national programme for supporting neurodiversity in French higher education. Future research may wish to consider how to promote engagement and explore the barriers that French universities currently face in engaging with such material, as participation in the programme is still limited with only 24 participating universities (Atypie-Friendly, n.d.).

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Table 1. Demographic information for participants (n= 26)

Variable	N
Gender	
Female	20
Male	6
Role	
University professor	14
<i>Of whom also had disability support role</i>	6

Disability support office staff	8
Other	4
<i>Clinical Psychologist</i>	1
<i>Research assistant</i>	1
<i>Peer support worker</i>	1
<i>Careers counsellor</i>	1
<i>University location</i>	
Angers	2
Grenoble	12
Lille	2
Lyon	1
Paris	4
Perpignan	2
Strasbourg	3

Table 2. Interview schedule (translated from French)

Question	Possible prompts
How do you feel about including people with disabilities at university?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>How do you experience current inclusive practices at university?</i>• <i>Are we inclusive?</i>
What do you know about autism?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>From your experience, how would you describe an autistic person?</i>
What is your experience of supporting autistic students in your role at university?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>What is required to successfully support autistic students in your role?</i>• <i>Do you encounter any difficulties?</i>
In your experience, what are autistic students support needs at university?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>What can we improve upon or what needs to be put in place?</i>
From your experience, what is the difference between supporting autistic students and other students with disabilities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Is there a difference?</i>
What are your needs as a professional supporting autistic students at university?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>What are the skills required to be able to be able to do this work?</i>• <i>Which of these skills would you like to develop?</i>

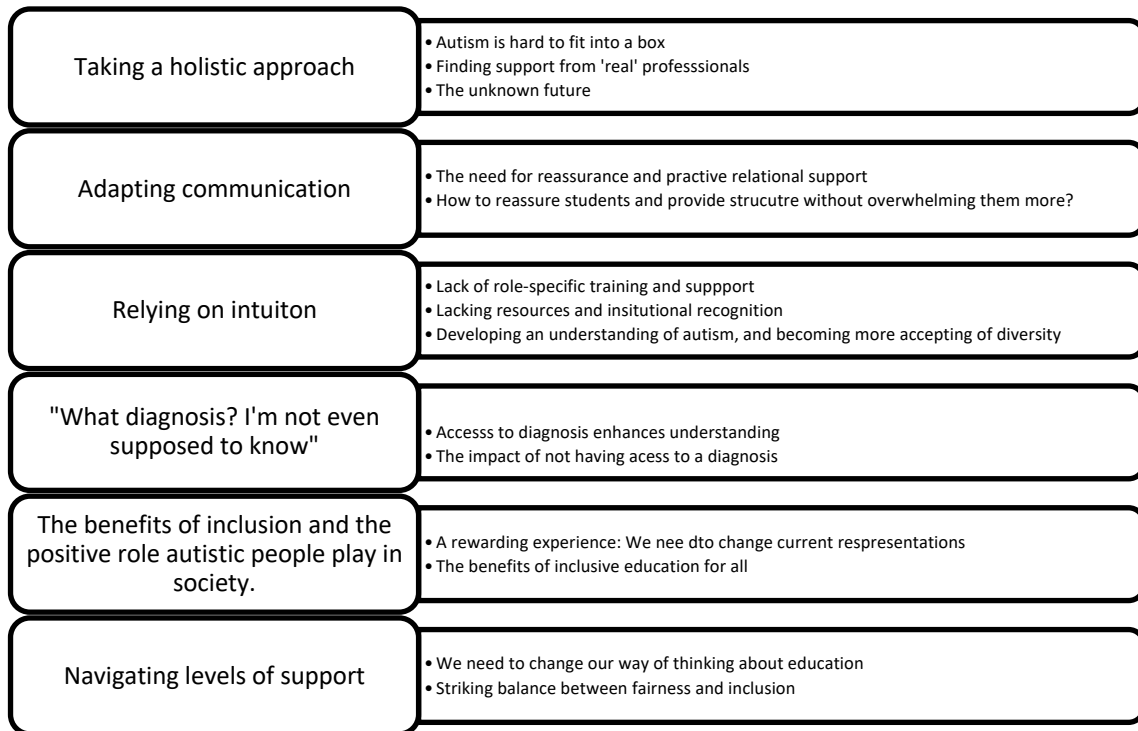


Figure 1. List of themes.