

Article

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THE ROLE OF TERTIARY EDUCATION IN OUR LIVES  
AS AUTISTIC STUDENTS | ĀKONGA

Nicolina Newcombe

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# THE ROLE OF TERTIARY EDUCATION IN OUR LIVES AS AUTISTIC STUDENTS | ĀKONGA

Nicolina Newcombe

## INTRODUCTION

This article describes the purpose, process, and implications of a poster titled *The Role of Tertiary Education in Our Lives as Autistic Students/Ākonga*. The poster was constructed by five autistic people with experience of tertiary education for the Neuroability Symposium held at Otago Polytechnic | Te Pūkenga in 2023. All poster co-authors agreed to have their content quoted in this article. The author of this article was the first author of the poster.

The poster project was initiated by my desire to contribute to the Neuroability Symposium. On searching for a topic, I noticed a discrepancy between how autistic tertiary students were being characterised in existing literature and my personal experience based on nearing completion of my eleventh qualification, a doctorate in education.

Problematic issues are undoubtedly a component of tertiary education for autistic students (Cox et al., 2017; Elias & White, 2018; Knott & Taylor, 2014; Nuske et al., 2019; Van Hees et al., 2015; VanBergeijk et al., 2008). Yet many of us love tertiary education and become highly qualified (Connor, 2013; McMahon-Coleman & Draisma, 2016). As Cai and Richdale (2016) note, we present with a high potential for educational success. *The Role of Tertiary Education in Our Lives as Autistic Students/Ākonga* challenges existing literature about autistic tertiary students by exploring why we choose to engage in tertiary education in Aotearoa New Zealand. The implications for educators are to revisit their assumptions about autistic tertiary students and to value the purposes and benefits of tertiary education that are relevant and meaningful for us, rather than solely focussing on qualification completion.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The relevant existing literature mainly reports on the challenges, risks, and barriers of tertiary education, as well as the needs of autistic students (Cox et al., 2017; Elias & White, 2018; Nuske et al., 2019; Van Hees et al., 2015). This includes our ostensibly excessive demand for support (Knott & Taylor, 2014) and our so-called dependence on non-autistic people to enable our success (VanBergeijk et al., 2008). At the same time, autistic strengths are under-reported. For example, participants in Knott and Taylor (2014) discussed the impact of time management deficits on their tertiary education experience, but the study failed to select participants whose autistic traits confer on them exceptional time management. Such negative bias in the literature could have resulted from a lack of autistic authorship (Botha & Cage, 2022). While some of the literature includes autistic people (Anderson et al., 2018; Bolourian et al., 2018; Bruwer, 2019; Cai & Richdale, 2016; Cox et al., 2017; Knott & Taylor, 2014; Nuske et al., 2019; Van Hees et al., 2015), I did not find any peer reviewed research on this topic with an autistic author.

Published information about autistic tertiary students in Aotearoa New Zealand focusses on guidelines for support (Altogether Autism, 2022b), the effectiveness of peer and academic supports (Bruwer, 2019), and the impact of those interventions on qualification completion rates (Broadstock, 2022). Altogether Autism (2022a) interviewed an autistic tertiary student about her experience where she discussed the impact of hypersensitivity on her learning opportunities. The interviewee also identified her autistic strengths as being beneficial in tertiary education: "if I can use those traits, my work is easier, I do it faster and I get better grades," although use of a pseudonym in this article could imply that the author or interviewee considered autism to be stigmatising (Altogether Autism, 2022a). Altogether Autism has published guides for supporting autistic tertiary students in Aotearoa New Zealand by autistic authors Timothy Folkema (2022a, 2022b) and Rachael Wiltshire (2022a, 2022b, 2022c).

Autistic tertiary students have strengths that provide advantages in a learning environment. In terms of executive functioning advantages, autistic people often have outstanding focus, with enhanced memory capabilities and attention to detail, the benefits of which are compounded by our consistency and determination (Anderson et al., 2018; Anderson & Butt, 2017; Broadstock, 2022; Van Hees et al., 2015). We also have personal attributes that support excellence in tertiary education, such as creativity, originality, and passion (Anderson et al., 2018; Anderson & Butt, 2017; Broadstock, 2022). Alongside our strengths, autistic tertiary students do experience additional challenges in education, including one or more problems with social communication, managing change, executive functioning, and sensory sensitivities.

Tertiary education can be an overwhelming source of social and sensory demands (Altogether Autism 2022a; Anderson et al., 2018; Corlett, 2022), loneliness, and psychological distress (Bolourian et al., 2018; Connor, 2013) for autistic students. These experiences can result in lower completion rates (Cox et al., 2017) and underachievement (Elias & White, 2018). Anderson and Butt (2017, p. 3036) illustrate the impact of withdrawal and failure on family members of autistic tertiary students, naming their key theme "crises at college." Yet tertiary education can also confer key benefits for us.

The tertiary environment can form a sanctuary for autistic students. Universities and institutes of technology are places where people who feel different are more likely to blend in (Cox et al., 2017) and many autistic students find friendship in courses and clubs related to shared interests, such as information technology (McMahon-Coleman & Draisma, 2016). The student role is widely accepted and provides a respectable opportunity to explore our special interests (Bolourian et al., 2018). For many autistic students, "college can be about as close as you can get to Heaven on Earth" (Perner, 2002, as cited in McMahon-Coleman & Draisma, 2016, p. 16). Responding to the existing literature, I initiated the process of recruiting co-authors to answer the question, "What is the role of tertiary education in your life?"

## METHOD

The recruitment of co-authors and the poster making happened simultaneously as co-authors self-selected based on their internal motivation to take part in this project. Firstly, I advertised the poster project on a Facebook event page I made for a party at my house. Some poster drafting occurred at that party, and I also used the event to inform other potential co-authors about the poster. Secondly, I organised a watch party for the Yellow LadyBugs Conference, an organisation that supports autistic girls and gender diverse students, and some attendees worked on their contributions to the poster on that day.

Five autistic co-authors created three images and two written responses. Salient points were extracted from the written responses and recorded on digital sticky notes. I printed the written components from the poster, cut them into sentences or small chunks, and took them to Mates Space, a fortnightly get together at a peer support organisation run by and for autistic people called Voices from the Spectrum. Those of us who were involved in the project discussed the excerpts and wrote down some early themes. These themes included tertiary

education as an organising structure, motivator, and way to measure progress, as well as a place to find fun, activities, purpose, and money. I subsequently reviewed these initial themes and constructed four overarching themes for the excerpts that were ultimately used in the poster. These were:

1. A structure and setting:
  - “Tertiary education grounded me after school ended.”
  - “I need a structured plan for learning.”
2. Self-actualisation:
  - “Uni makes you feel good. Lots of little achievements every day and that’s important.”
  - “Problem solving is fun.”
  - “To find myself and my passions.”
3. The path of least resistance:
  - “I didn’t know what else to do.”
  - “It was easier than getting and maintaining a job and way more satisfying.”
  - “A source of income.”
  - “It is easier for me to get a scholarship than a job.”
4. To meet my autistic needs:
  - “My sensory needs were significantly better met at uni than they had been at school and my supermarket jobs.”
  - “More social opportunities for shared activities, like using the same study rooms at uni, workshops, projects.”

Tertiary education fulfils special roles in the poster’s co-authors’ lives. Briefly, Josh Cole is an autistic ADHDer with a Bachelor of Science (Ecology). Sarah Hoefhamer is autistic and has a Post Graduate Diploma in Science with distinction. Anita Lee is autistic with a Bachelor of Civil Engineering. Leanne understands herself to be on the autism spectrum; she has a Master of Psychology and specialises in the science of behaviour. We have all demonstrated significant achievements in the tertiary education arena. As noted, this project was initiated in response to a call for voices by the Neuroability Symposium. Unlike many posters that communicate completed research, we undertook this project as recreation, ultimately demonstrating our love for academic thinking.

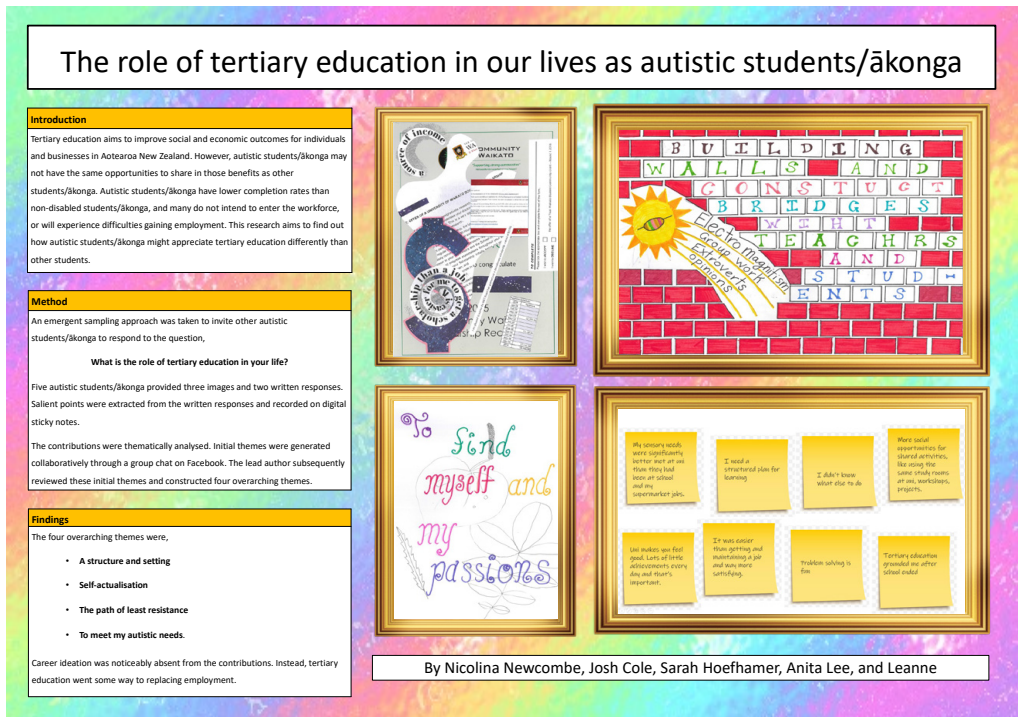


Figure 1. Poster created for the Neuroability Symposium 2023 by Nicolina Newcombe, Josh Cole, Sarah Hoefhamer, Anita Lee, and Leanne.

## DISCUSSION

Our small sample size of five autistic co-authors revealed a favourable perspective on tertiary education compared to what was discussed in the peer reviewed literature. My personal enthusiasm as an autistic student coupled with sampling among peers may have introduced a positive bias into this project. Like autistic traits, which can be advantageous or disadvantageous within a given setting (Russell et al., 2019), the limitation of this project also comprises its value by contributing the notions of tertiary education being “ground[ing],” “feel good,” “fun,” “important,” “easier,” “better,” “satisfying,” and providing “more social opportunities” to an area of research that is dominated by negative discourses.

In addition to portraying tertiary education as a favourable experience, this poster also illustrates its comparative advantage over alternative pursuits. While Altogether Autism (2022a), Anderson et al. (2018), and Corlett (2022) have discussed sensory challenges in the tertiary environment, they did not compare it with other places where adults are normally expected to be. Tertiary education can be the optimal choice for autistic people who are seeking “achievement” and “satisf[action].” Furthermore, the co-authors of this poster agree with McMahon-Coleman and Draisma (2016) in asserting that tertiary education often meets our need for desired social contact through structured social activities that are provided on campus.

Career ideation was noticeably absent from contributions. This aligned with Anderson et al. (2018) and Bolourian et al. (2018) who noted that many autistic tertiary students do not intend to enter the workforce or will experience difficulties gaining employment. Instead, tertiary education went some way to replacing employment.

While tertiary education offers numerous benefits to us as autistic students, it typically has a limited duration. Therefore, it remains imperative that we seek or create additional opportunities that align with our unique ways of being beyond the limits of what is practicable within tertiary education.

The implication for educators is to see autistic tertiary students not necessarily in terms of challenges and needs, but also in terms of strengths and motivations. We are asking educators to engage with us in the process of education, rather than only the outcome, as this opportunity might be our central goal and not intended to be a conduit to something else. Finally, we ask that educators recognise and foster the special role of tertiary education in our lives.

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Nicolina Newcombe has a PhD in Education and is a late diagnosed autistic woman. Her research interests span inclusive research, models of disability, learning (intellectual) disability, autism, and Te Tiriti o Waitangi. She also has a Master of Māori and Pacific Development.

📄 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1833-6082>

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