Autistic students as partners in the design of tailored employability provision

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Abstract

A recent study of the destinations of graduates found that of all disabled graduates, autistic individuals are least likely to be employed (AGCAS, 2022). These outcomes for autistic people in the UK are widely recognised in literature (Remington and Pellicano, 2019, Vincent, 2020,) and highlight the way in which these individuals are marginalised. This article outlines the participatory action research project conducted at a UK university over the past two years that explored how to provide effective careers and employability support for autistic students. Understanding that it would be important to involve individuals whom this employability support would seek to benefit, a careers practitioner recruited autistic volunteers to act as consultants. With the exception of the final analysis, these autistic student consultants were engaged in all stages of the project, from analysing an initial survey of all autistic students in the university, to co-designing the careers-related programme and evaluating the effectiveness of these activities. This participatory methodology not only provided the careers practitioner with a deeper appreciation of the lived experience of being autistic and real insights into what provision to include in the future, but was also perceived to have an emancipatory impact on some of participants involved, with signs of a 'ripple effect' within the university. This article concludes with recommendations for careers practitioners and researchers who are eager to bring about change at their own educational institutions, resulting in more positive employment outcomes for autistic individuals.

Introduction

In addition to offering an academic experience that supports the gaining of knowledge and development of skills, it is widely recognised that universities have a key role in enabling people to successfully take up employment after graduation (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2016). Indeed, Artess et al. (2017) argue that developing the employability of students is a moral duty of universities; in return for investing their time and money in participating in Higher Education, there is an expectation that individuals will have successful outcomes when they graduate. There is a year-on-year increase in the number of autistic students enrolling in higher education (Goddard and Cook, 2021). A recent study of the first destinations of disabled graduates in the UK found that at all qualifications levels, autistic graduates are most likely to be unemployed (Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS), 2022). Evidence of these low employment outcomes for autistic

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individuals has been much reported upon (Bancroft et al., 2012, National Autistic Society (NAS), 2016, Van Hees et al., 2015, Vincent, 2020). Pesonen et al. (2020) assert that despite this identified employment gap for autistic graduates, there is a paucity of relevant support to prepare autistic students for the workplace. Concurring with this, Vincent et al. (2017) state that evidence suggests a significant lack of understanding regarding autism in higher education.

A number of approaches to supporting autistic students to prepare for the workplace and to succeed in employment are reported in the literature. These include supported internships (Remington and Pellicano, 2019, Vincent, 2020), guidance on preparing for interviews (Dipeolu et al., 2013) and job coaching (Gilson and Carter, 2016). Pesonen et al. (2020) report that some autistic students found in-curriculum information lectures and mock interviews provided by careers professionals to be helpful, but that careers services should promote their support more effectively as many autistic students were unaware of what assistance they could receive. Given this, Pesonen et al. (2020) suggest that careers-related initiatives for autistic students should start from first year of a person's studies. Briel and Getzel (2014) found that autistic students were less likely to approach careers centres for input about careers than family, friends or academic staff, despite noting that these centres provide a wealth of resources and information. They suggest that there should be an increased dialogue between careers professionals and autistic students, both to aid students to make better use of their services, but also to ensure that the careers provision suits the needs of these students. Vincent (2019) concurs with this necessity for careers professionals to understand the needs of autistic students relating to employment, recommending autism-specific training, to assist this endeavour.

This paper investigates the impact of an employability-related participatory action research project (McNiff, 2013) that a careers practitioner conducted with a group of autistic students at a university in the UK. These activities formed the second cycle of a PhD that is exploring how to support and empower autistic students to successfully progress to employment after they graduate. Prior to the activities outlined below, a reconnaissance cycle was conducted, which involved obtaining valuable insights from autistic graduates and careers practitioners currently delivering support for autistic students and graduates. These findings informed the planning of the activities and the following question that was generated through these participatory activities: what can be gained from forming a collaborative group of autistic students, which aims to explore how to develop employability-related support for autistic students at their university?

The answer to this question proved to be more meaningful than anticipated; there has been a development of a deeper appreciation of what it means to be autistic and how to authentically act as an autism ally (Martin, 2020). By participating with the students, an understanding about what will best equip autistic students to prepare for the workplace has been developed. These two key factors have provided participants with many ways to enhance practice when seeking to provide careers and employability support for autistic students. A third area of impact is that there have been indications of transformation and empowerment for those involved and even within the institution itself.

The case for participatory action research (PAR)

Action research was chosen as a suitable approach, due to its fundamental aim to produce practical knowledge (Reason & Bradbury, 2008) and to improve practice (Elliott, 1991), with the positionality of the practitioner at the centre of both the research and the practice (McAteer, 2013). This study endeavours to be emancipatory and as such is underpinned by an emancipatory paradigm (Habermas, 1968/1972); here the concern is not only to understand phenomena, but also to transform them through an action research process (Kemmis et al., 2014). There is a particular focus on emancipating the disempowered, redressing inequality and promoting individual freedoms (Cohen et al., 2018). The concern with promoting justice and stimulating positive change through research resonated deeply with the reasons for choosing the research topic. Rather than simply to improve practice, a motivating factor for this study was to contribute to a wider agenda of changing the society, in relation to autistic graduates and their prospects in the workplace, in line with the emancipatory approach. Reason (1994) argues that it is only when participants are involved with directing the research in a substantial

way that one is truly conducting research with these people in the most meaningful sense. Kemmis et al. (2014) concur with this, stating, 'others may also research social and educational life, but participants have special access to how social and educational life and work are conducted in local sites by virtue of being 'insiders'' (p. 5). PAR is therefore a form of study that is collaborative in nature and where the individuals or communities are co-researchers, involved in planning, designing and analysing the data.

In terms of conducting participatory research with autistic individuals, Parsons et al. (2019), note that adopting this approach led them to consider the meaningful participation of autistic people and resulted in findings associated with social inclusion and agency. Gillespie-Lynch et al. (2022) found that collaborating with autistic students to produce training had real benefits, including an enhanced accessibility of the training, in addition to an increased self-confidence and an ability to self-advocate for the students. Similarly, Crane et al. (2021) describe how their participatory peer-support programme for autistic adults had notable benefits for the autistic people involved, including a sense of unity and the development of a positive view of autism. This concurs with Searle et al. (2019), who found that their participatory project with autistic university students also led to those involved feeling more positive about being autistic and having increased levels of confidence. Finally, the participatory study conducted by Vincent et al. (2017) which included seven autistic students, has led to the promotion of inclusive practice within their institution, a deeper understanding of themselves and a realisation of their collective ability to inform socially just pedagogies. There are clearly many benefits of this research approach; however, when seeking examples of participatory studies in a higher education setting related to supporting autistic individuals to develop their employability, there is a notable lack of research. Clearly this area could benefit from further examination.

Methodology

Context

This study forms the second cycle of a PhD project that aims to explore what university-based careers practitioners can do to support autistic students for success in the labour market after graduation. The researcher is a careers practitioner in a university based in the UK.

Research Aims

Whilst there is an increase in research related to autistic graduates and their progression from university to employment, there is a gap regarding the role careers practitioners in higher educations can play in removing barriers and supporting this transition. This study aimed to explore the specific employability provision careers practitioners could develop, to gain understanding of what autistic students' perspectives on employment and to contribute to the evidence base on effective practice when working with autistic students. It was recognised that it was vital to include the perspectives of those this provision would seek to support. The research was directed by the following questions:

- What employability provision will support autistic students to prepare for the workplace?

- What are the challenges for autistic students regarding employment?

- What ways can autistic students be supported to overcome these challenges?

Method

First, a questionnaire was emailed to all students who had informed the university that they were autistic. The questionnaire sought to ascertain what careers and employability support would be most useful, in terms of format, topic and timing (number of respondents = 22). An invitation to become co-designers and co-analysers of the study was included at the end of the questionnaire; the researcher also sent this invitation to contacts within the institution. Those that volunteered were called Consultants (n=6).

The participatory study had three stages:

1. the planning stage before the programme
2. immediately after the programme
3. six months after the programme

At each stage, the Consultants chose how they wanted to participate in the study: by focus group, one-to-one discussion or email. In this way, it was hoped that the Consultants would be able to contribute in a way that suited their preferences (Macleod et al., 2014).

1. The planning stage

At the planning stage, three Consultants chose to participate by focus group, one by interview and two via email. Given the literature that suggests autistic individuals may opt for online modes of communication (Jones et al., 2001), this was perhaps a surprising finding and implies that assumptions about preferred forms of contact should not be made by practitioners.

The results of the questionnaire were co-analysed by the practitioner and the Consultants. Based on this, a plan for a careers and employability programme for autistic students was produced. The challenges in co-analysing due to the varied ways in which the Consultants were participating were overcome by arranging for an initial analysis to take place during the focus group, then circulating a summary of this analysis to the other Consultants. These Consultants then contributed to the analysis via one-to-one interview or email and then these contributions were added to the summary, which was then circulated to all Consultants. At this point, Consultants were asked if they were in agreement with this summary analysis and on the planned programme.

The careers and employability programme consisted of a series of online workshops. The three co-designed workshops, which involved external speakers and autistic graduates, took place during the second semester of the academic year.

2. Immediately after the programme

After the workshops, the Consultants were invited to provide feedback on the programme and to discuss next steps. This time, Consultants opted for one-to-one interviews with the careers practitioner (n=4); the practitioner also gained reflections from an academic who had acted as a critical friend during this study.

3. Six months after the programme

Six months later the Consultants were contacted again, to share their perspectives now that more time had passed. By this time, two had graduated and were in full-time employment. Four Consultants participated in this stage and again, all opted to participate via one-to-one interviews with the careers practitioner.

Throughout this project, the sole researcher for this project (also a member of careers staff) sought to minimise the potential power differentials (Somekh and Zeichner, 2009) by demonstrating a non-judgemental and non-authoritative communication approach. As the only non-autistic member of the group, the researcher sought to show value to the participants' perspectives as the experts (Thompson-Hodgetts, 2022) and demonstrated feedback and critique of current practices would be welcomed.

Participants

First, ethical approval was sought by from the institution where the researcher's PhD is based (Application for Ethics Review reference ERN_19-0733A). Participants in the initial survey were recruited via an email sent to all students who had informed the university that they were autistic. Consultants were recruited via an invitation at the end of the survey and also via the career

practitioner's institutional network. Written consent was obtained from every person prior to their participation in the study. Details of the Consultants and their involvement are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Details of the Consultants and their Involvement in the Study

Pseudonym	Gender	Undergraduate (UG)/ Postgraduate (PG)?	Degree discipline	Year of pro-gramme	Stages involved	Mode of participation as a Consultant
Joe	M	UG	Education & Inclusion Studies	2	1. the planning stage, 2. after workshops & 3. six months later	Focus group and interviews
Matthew	M	UG	Human Resource Manage-ment	3	1. the planning stage, 2. after workshops & 3. six months later	Interviews
Lucy	F	UG	Nursing	3	1. the planning stage, 2. after workshops & 3. six months later	Email and interviews
Amir	M	UG	Sport Coaching	1	1. the planning stage	Email
Alex	M	PG	Social Work	1	1. the planning stage, 2. after workshops & 3. six months later	Focus group and interviews
Tim	M	UG	Sport Coaching	3	1. the planning stage	Focus group

Analysis

Focus groups and interviews were recorded using the recording feature on Zoom and were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were analysed (along with the emails from two Consultants who had chosen to participate using this format) using NVivo software and adopting Braun and Clarke's six phase approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). These phases involved:

1. Familiarisation with the dataset by reading transcripts a number of times and re-listening to the recordings
2. Systematically creating codes which capture specific and particular meanings across the dataset
3. Generating initial themes to capture the pattern of meaning, or shared idea from across the dataset
4. Developing and reviewing these themes by re-engaging with the coded data and the whole dataset
5. Defining and describing themes, ensuring that each is clearly outlined
6. Writing up by bringing together the analytic narrative and illustrating using data extracts (Braun & Clarke, 2022)

The result was one topic summary and three themes. Braun & Clarke (2022) define a topic summary as a summation of all that has been said about a particular *subject*, rather than a shared meaning or concept. This topic summary was on the careers and employability programme itself (ideas for what it should look like and later, what improvements should be made); this and the three themes are described in the following section.

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Findings

The analysis revealed one topic summary relating to the programme itself and three main themes. The topic summary is entitled Collaboration in Action and as described below, enabled the careers practitioner to develop the programme and to gain insights into improvements which could be made in the subsequent cycle. The three themes are also described: the perceived divide; the lived experience of being autistic; and the impact of participating. In this section, the autistic voices are at the forefront of the reporting, in keeping with the participatory nature of this study and in an attempt to seek a more socially just approach (Vincent et al., 2017).

1. Collaboration in action

The topic summary related to providing suggestions for the programme at stage 1, in addition to reviewing the programme and for improvements that could be made in the next cycle of the project, at stages 2 and 3. In this way, the careers practitioner was able to gain advice regarding how to incorporate inclusive practice from the beginning and to improve the quality of the programme into the next cycle of the research.

Table 2. Topic Summary: Collaboration in Action

Stage 1	
Topics to include	*'For me, I think it's really important talking about...reasonable adjustments in the workplace and also explaining...yeah...explaining your autism to employers.'* (Joe) *'I was particularly interested in the actual experiences of autistic graduates, because I really wanted to find out how it's really been.'* (Alex) *'I don't know about everyone, but...nerves* (at interview) *can be quite a big thing. Like, it could be a case of like help with just like strategies before going into the room - like calming strategies or coping mechanisms...it could be different for everyone, but that could be something that's quite important.'* (Tim)
Ensuring accessibility	*'I think an online live workshop will be very good, if it's recorded as well so you could go back and have a look at it as well... maybe you could get like a transcript as well - maybe an alternative...method of showing presentation, because some people prefer it live, or some people prefer it listening to it back or seeing it written as well.'* (Joe)
Stage 2	
Some successful elements	*'It's nice to see things actually happen. Because there's been a few times where, like you've gone up to people and said, 'can we do this, it would be really beneficial and you know, do this'. And then they're like 'Yeah, yeah, yeah, we'll do that' and then you just hear nothing from them. And so it's actually quite nice to see that things are starting to change, and it's starting to get there.'* (Lucy)
Timing issues	*'I think the timing to certain extent, can affect things - I think if it was able to begin at the start of the* (academic) *year, so that you can operate it throughout and get in contact with people while they have time and they're more open to attending, because when it got started in December and later on in the year in the second semester, people are starting to have assignments build up so they may not be as open to attending new things…'* (Matthew)
Creating accessible online resources	*'…it's all about ease of access as well, and for when, for instance, as well, when you're putting together the information: bear in mind as well… the information should be easily readable for people as well, and not …too much, you know…very complex language, it shouldn't be used.'* (Joe)

Stage 3	
Ensuring the accessibility of one-to-one meetings	'…with autism, you can be quite anxious about the unknown. So some friendly, you know, perhaps it's an outline of yourself…in the form of an email that kind of takes some of the mystery away, perhaps… what's going to happen or rather, just who you're going to meet and what it's going to be like, in the actual one-to-one session.' (Alex)
Deepening departmental relationships to aid promotion	'it seems as though the disability team are quite separate to the careers team and it would be great to have a like a two way communication stream…' (Joe)

At stage 1, the consensus was that the careers and employability programme would consist of a series of online workshops, on the following topics: 1. disclosure and adjustments, 2. learning from the experiences of autistic graduates, 3. preparation for interviews. Ways in which these workshops could be made inclusive were suggested by the Consultants; these included recording the workshops, the provision of transcripts and the opportunity for students to ask questions anonymously.

At stage 2, after the workshops, there was agreement that some elements had been a success with one Consultant noting how pleased she was that this project was occurring and had resulted in tailored provision for autistic students. Whilst there was positivity about the workshops continuing during the next academic year, there was consensus that some aspects needed adjusting, such as the timing of the workshops. The length of time taken for the research ethical application process led to a delay in organising the workshops, resulting in them taking place during the second half of the second semester, clashing with end-of-term assignment deadlines. All agreed that the workshops should occur earlier in the semester next time. There were also some suggestions that the workshops should be shorter in the future, perhaps half an hour rather than an hour, to help those who struggle to concentrate for longer periods. It was noted by several Consultants that some autistic students would not choose to come to a live webinar, so an action for the following cycle of the research project was to develop the online resources for autistic students on the careers website. Consultants had advice on how to make these resources accessible.

Six months later, at stage 3 of the study, Consultants suggested that a multi-pronged approach to supporting autistic students should be taken, as a way of accommodating all needs. In addition to again providing tailored online workshops, suggestions were to add two new formats of support. One of these new types of provision were the online resources mentioned above. The other new form of support suggested was accessible one-to-one careers meetings. Several Consultants noted that autistic students would be more likely to attend a one-to-one meeting if careers practitioners sought to 'remove the mystery' by providing information beforehand. Suggestions for increasing the accessibility of one-to-one meetings also included providing a picture of the room where the meeting would take place and shortening or lengthening the time of the meeting, according to the needs of the student. In order to be able to understand these needs, it was noted that it would be helpful for all careers practitioners to have training in autism awareness.

Finally, when considering how to ensure that all autistic students were aware of how they could access careers and employability support, there was an acknowledgment that email, one of the key ways the workshops had been promoted, was not always a good way to communicate with students. The Consultants suggested developing or deepening relationships with other departments within the university (such as the Disability Service), so that there could be promotion and referral from these teams.

2. The perceived divide

At the beginning of the project, a key theme was the perceived gulf in understanding between employers and themselves. This theme had two sub-themes: employers' lack of autism awareness and

the need to de-mystify the workplace. Codes and example quotes for each sub-theme are shown in Tables 3 and 4.

2.1 Employers' lack of autism awareness

There was real concern about how an employer's lack of understanding about autism may cause them to respond if an applicant informed them that they were autistic. The fear of an employer's negative reaction led to suggestions that autistic individuals should address this by being able to explain to employers about their autism. It was noted that this perceived need to self-advocate might include highlighting strengths that a person might have due to their autism in addition to the needs they may have. There was a feeling that the responsibility for bridging this gap in understanding lay with them, as the autistic applicants or employees. Several Consultants indicated that concern relating to sharing information about their autism could cause anxiety. Finally, due to this concern regarding a lack of understanding or awareness from some employers, there was a desire to find out how to identify disability-friendly employers.

Table 3. Sub-theme 2.1: Employers' Lack of Autism Awareness

Employer's lack of understanding	*'the employer might just be like 'I don't have time to go and read up on such-and-such'…so they might just do what's recommended on the first page of Google or something…and that support might not be the necessary support that a person needs.'* (Tim)
Onus on the autistic individual to bridge the gap	*'…so people with unseen disabilities such as autism…people sometimes don't want to disclose because there's stigma attached to it…it's breaking down that stigma and also trying to encourage people to disclose, because that's when support can be put in place.'*(Joe) *'There is a stereotype with autism and it's important to put yourself across…explaining how some traits may need extra support in the workplace, but also how other traits can actually be of benefit to the employer.'* (Lucy)
Anxiety caused by perceived gap	*'especially how to explain it to employers, because you're quite worried that if you say it wrong or they take it the wrong way, then that could cause you not to get the job, or be discriminated against, you know?'* (Matthew)
The need to find those who understand	*'…so it's like, how do you find those employers that will actually welcome you with open arms and help you feel included in the company ethos?'*(Joe)

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2.2 The mystery of the workplace

A second component of the perceived divide between themselves and employers was the mystery of the workplace and the need to remove this.

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Table 4. Sub-theme 2.2: The Mystery of the Workplace

The 'unknown-ness' of the recruitment process	*'I just find it difficult to navigate...I feel like I'm entirely clueless.' (Alex)*
Solutions to remove the mystery	*'…it would be interesting, hearing about case studies and people that actually are in employment at the moment, with autism, and how they're doing in the workplace…'* (Joe)
	'The solution I could see is…maybe having like a bite size version, breaking down key points or something like that.' (Matthew)

This theme of the 'unknown-ness' relating to employment emerged at the start of the study. Learning from autistic graduates was identified as a suitable method of gaining more understanding; there was also a suggestion that hearing from employers would help to remove the mystery. During the interviews immediately after the workshops, this theme emerged again. However, one Consultant noted that they now knew where to go for help, due to their involvement in this project. Six months later, when interviewing the Consultants again, two described solutions to help with demystification about the recruitment process. One suggested short versions of the workshops, which split the key points into digestible sections; another proposed a flowchart, or a webinar providing an overview, to help autistic students know what to expect.

3. The lived experience of being autistic

The lived experience of being autistic was a key theme; this included the challenges encountered, particularly relating to employment, and the associated strengths. This particularly helps to address the research question regarding the employment-related challenges for autistic students. Codes and example quotes are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Theme: The lived experience of being autistic

Being 'othered'	*'you can be told quite a lot like 'Oh why did you do that?', or you'll just get little negative comments that'll build up...it creates this kind of...mentality, when people have autism that you shouldn't ask questions, or only ask questions and answer questions whenever you kind of know the answer and don't try to embarrass yourself...'* (Matthew)
	'Online webinars and discussions provide some anonymity so nobody feels stupid asking an obvious question' (Amir)
The challenge of social interactions	*'I tend to be quite sort of averse to social things just because it's like a lot of effort really for me. But at the same time, I'm aware that, you know, you kind of have to do these things'* (Alex)
	'If I've had like…a rough day or day with people overload, it's really tiring as you just need that break away from people, so you can…recharge, kind of thing' (Lucy).
	'but unfortunately due to us being in what feels like a pressure situation, it could be like we begin to stutter, or we begin to, like we forget what we want to say, go off on a tangent, stuff like that, instead of getting to like what that employer wants straight away.' (Tim)
Recognition of autistic strengths	*'I think one of the big things at the moment is the recognition of kind of autism's ability for patterns – pattern-spotting, creativity and stuff like that and understanding the ability to process information'* (Matthew).

Early in the project, a predominant concept related to the anxiety caused by being misunderstood and judged by others. Being 'othered', where people are made to feel outside of a perceived 'norm' (Foucault, 1980) was troubling. For several Consultants, the idea of asking questions in front of others in workshops caused concern; they both mentioned worry about how others would perceive them. Another concurred with this, acknowledging that these concerns can be based on past negative experiences. This important theme led to discussions about ways in which students participating in the workshops could ask questions anonymously, so that anxiety about asking questions could be removed.

The draining nature of social interaction was another dominant code relating to the lived experience of being autistic. Several described how verbal communication, or working with others, could be exhausting. One Consultant noted that given how challenging and fatiguing social interaction and related behaviours can be for some autistic people, there should be adjustments put in place in relevant activities during the recruitment process. Interviews, a main component of the recruitment process that require social interaction, were highlighted as a key cause for anxiety, particularly at the beginning of the project; one described how nerves could have a detrimental effect in this situation. Due to the challenges described relating to anxiety and possible verbal processing issues, there was a consensus that preparing for interviews should be the topic of one of the workshops.

A final notion on being autistic related to the strengths that autistic people have. Immediately after the workshops, one Consultant described how important autism awareness training could be for helping non-autistic individuals to recognise the skills autistic graduates may bring. It was interesting that identification of these strengths occurred at later stages in the project; at the initial stage, only one Consultant raised the concept of positive traits and how important it was to support autistic individuals to be able to explain how these may benefit an employer. The articulation of autistic strengths by several Consultants during the later stages of the study was not due to specific questions on this topic in interviews at these stages. Instead, this development could be due to involvement in the study, or the fact that two of the Consultants had subsequently progressed to employment and had discovered this for themselves.

4. The impact of participating

There were many indications that participating in this project had resulted in a positive impact on those involved, in terms of enhanced readiness for the workplace, a sense of belonging and even empowerment. The codes and example quotes of this theme are shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Theme: The Impact of Participating

Enhanced work readiness	*'when you put on the sessions…each one has been really interesting and has given me another level of understanding each time'* (Joe)
	'I'd always thought of like…the conditions being like disabilities, like 'oh you know, autism – they're disabled'…but it made me think a lot more deeply about my conditions and the way I operate and how it can't necessarily be seen as bad, I'm just different. I operate in a different way and if I'm given support and given say a workspace… that is suited towards me, then I can perform just as well, if not better – than others that don't have my condition'. (Matthew)
Sense of belonging	*'It has created kind of like a collective really…like a community of people right across [the university]…doing different courses and different areas of study, but also with the unified type of goal of trying to improve the area of inclusion…'.* (Joe)
	'We've got – we've got something in common…you know, it might be nice to try and forge some friendships there…it would be nice to really know people who were, you know, with the same disability really…' (Alex)

	'…hearing the experiences of like others…just kind of everything around the conditions…that has really helped because when you first get a diagnosis, it can be overwhelming, you can think…what would I be like if I didn't have this condition? Whereas…now I can…bring that forward and understand 'Okay, this is how I can use this in the future…' (Matthew)
Indications of a transformative effect	'…it's kind of helped me realise where I want to go as well…it's kind of led me to think, 'ooh, this could be interesting to help with change, and you know, to make sure that there's inclusive cultures there [in the workplace].'' (Joe) '…really, I'd like to go and try working in…it's called EDI, so Equality, Diversity – in HR, so that's what I'd like to go into – off the back of this…It's just really given me just that kind of breadth of knowledge and understanding about the way that neurodiversity can manifest itself. And being able to see that, to understand all this has just….really helped me because, if I want to go into EDI… It just demonstrates for me… how valuable it is to understand and help people perform to the best of their ability.' (Matthew)

Work readiness skills are defined as those that enable an individual to be successful in the workplace and include metacognitive, behavioural and interpersonal characteristics (Lee et al., 2022). Emerging concepts related to a deepened understanding of the workplace and a preparedness for employment. Immediately after the workshops, one Consultant remarked that involvement in the project and in particular, hearing about the experiences of others, had resulted in a reframing of the way he viewed himself as an autistic individual. This positive shift in self-identity had caused this Consultant to feel more confident about sharing information about being autistic with employers.

Another code related to the enjoyment in participating in this project and a sense of belonging. Consultants described the feeling of commonality that had been created by the project and one described a keenness to develop this community further. Another concurred with this, describing how being in this type of community and speaking with other autistic people can help to come to terms with, and to embrace, being autistic.

One of the most exciting elements of the post-workshop phase were the signs of an on-going impact of the project. These elements include indications of an empowering impact on those involved, as well as a range of activities at an institutional level and beyond. The positive change in self-identity described earlier for one Consultant hints at an empowering impact of participating in this project. After the workshops, further glimpses of this could also be seen through two of the Consultants describing an emerging criticality about equality and diversity in the workplace. In both cases, this was leading to an eagerness to pursue careers relating to promoting inclusion for disabled people.

In addition, the academic who acted as a critical friend during the project described how she had been impacted by the project, stating that she had been struck by how helpful it was to hear the voices of the autistic students and how this could lead to the provision of more effective support. This colleague noted that she was determined to use this approach in her own research and was considering how to incorporate participatory approach with other student groups too. The practitioner has increased confidence through developing the support for autistic students using the participatory process through development of knowledge that this support is appropriate and accessible. There has been a development of a deeper understanding of the needs of autistic students and a greater determination to continue with PAR.

There are also signs that this ripple effect is continuing and is having an impact across the institution and even beyond. The practitioner invited several of the Consultants and the critical friend to join a disability employability group she facilitates; this has resulted in a careers event during Disability History month (which two Consultants spoke at), and a podcast for the university. Subsequently, the practitioner has been urging careers professionals at other universities to consider a participatory approach to developing employability support for autistic students through writing an article for a

professional journal (Coney, 2022) and, along with one of the Consultants, through speaking at several national and even an international conference.

Discussion

During this study, the practitioner experienced first-hand the collaboration-in-action that can occur in participatory research. This concurs with the aims of action research as a powerful tool for improving practice (Cohen et al., 2018) and for transforming practitioners' understandings of their practice (Kemmis, 2009). The evidence of the utility of this tool is shown in the development of the tailored programme for autistic students and the subsequent plans for improvement. The researcher for this project is a non-autistic practitioner seeking to improve employability provision for autistic students. The contributions and insights from the Consultants confirmed the practitioner's belief that the inclusion of autistic people as participants was essential in this study. This belief is argued by Reason (1994, p. 41), 'one can only do research with persons in the true and fullest sense, if what they do and what they experience as part of the research is to some significant degree directed by them'.

The perceived divide between the autistic participants and employers was a significant theme emerging from the data. The stigma attached to autism (Shayterman, 2009) can negatively influence employers' likelihood of employing autistic individuals (Bublitz et al. 2017), which echoes the felt concern of the students in this study about the lack of employer understanding. Chen et al. (2015) note that employers' attitudes are a key factor in determining the likelihood of whether an autistic person obtains a job and if they sustain this employment. Autism awareness training for employers is needed in many organisations (Scott et al., 2018), having the twofold benefit of potentially reducing the stigma related to autism and increasing the proportions of autistic graduates in employment. The mystery of the workplace encountered by students in this study, where there can be challenges for autistic individuals in understanding expectations, has been reported in other studies (Black et al. 2019, Coney, 2021). Indeed, it is recognised that autistic people can experience difficulty with job searching (Hendricks and Wehman, 2009) and in the interview process (Van Bergeijk et al., 2008) due to differences in social understanding. The apparent gap observed by the autistic students between employers and themselves, where there appears to be a lack of understanding on both sides, resonates with Milton's 'double empathy problem' (Milton 2012). Milton defines this problem as 'a disjuncture in reciprocity between two differently disposed social actors which becomes more marked the wider the disjuncture in the dispositional perceptions of the lifeworld' (Milton, 2012, p.884). Milton asserts that autistic people may lack insight about the perceptions and expectations of non-autistic people – but that it is also true that non-autistic people may lack insight about the perspectives and culture of autistic people. It is important to note that as autistic people are in the minority in human populations, the implications of this double empathy problem will not be equally experienced. The autistic students in this study articulated elements of this gap in understanding in a workplace context and described the anxiety that this awareness can cause.

A key aim of this study was bringing the autistic voice to the fore, or centre stage (Beardon et al., 2009). It is not surprising then, that one of the emerging themes was the lived experience of being autistic. The notion of 'othering' (Foucault, 1980) highlighted by the Consultants is noted in the literature (Hastwell et al., 2012, Vincent et al., 2017) and is in direct contrast to the concept of appreciation of difference described by the neurodiversity movement (Robertson and Ne'eman, 2008). The burden and resulting exhaustion from social interaction in situations where conformity to social norms is expected is a theme that is recognised in the literature (Cai and Richdale, 2016, Vincent et al., 2017). In addition, the challenges and anxiety relating to interpreting interview questions and providing answers which conform to recruiters' expectations for some autistic individuals is well documented (Pesonen et al., 2022, Van Bergeijk et al., 2008). There are a number of projects seeking to support autistic individuals to develop an ability to succeed in interviews (e.g. Smith et al., 2014, Strickland et al., 2013) with calls for the provision of adapted or even alternative methods of recruitment which are not so exclusionary (Davies et al., 2023). Recognising autistic strengths emerged from this study as an important step for autistic individuals when approaching the labour market. Van

Hees et al. (2015) describe a range of autistic strengths, including analytical skills, focus and observation. Clifton and Harter (2003) note that individuals gain more when they focus on their aptitudes than when they seek to improve the areas that challenge them. Wong et al. (2018) concur with this and suggest that much could be gained if management adopted a strengths-based approach to recruitment.

The most rewarding element of this study has been to observe the positive impact of participating on those involved. This impact included a deepened understanding of employment and a work readiness. Gaining understanding is a key element of action research (Cohen et al., 2018); this developed comprehension can relate to those involved understanding themselves better, but also can be connected to deeper insights of the context and structures those involved are situated in (Kemmis, 2009). The reframing of the way they saw themselves described by one Consultant, appreciating that he was simply different and that this could be positive, is an example of how the project supported him to rework his ontological realities of personhood (Madriaga and Goodley, 2010). This perspective is in line with a neurodiversity model of autism, where difference is accepted and appreciated (Robertson & Ne'eman, 2018). The evident enthusiasm some Consultants showed for the sense of community they experienced is contrary to some opinions, who assert that autistic people do not desire friendships (Martin, 2008). In a study of autistic adults, Crompton et al. (2020) found that autistic people felt this sense of belonging when with other autistic people; they note that spending time in their autistic community can be beneficial for them. Finally, the practitioner was particularly pleased to observe indications of a transformative impact. As noted earlier in this paper, PAR can be an effective tool for producing understanding of a practice (Kemmis, 2009), promoting change and empowering people through the process of constructing and using their own knowledge (Reason 1994, Cohen et al., 2018). Collaborative action research has been found to aid the development of socially just practices for autistic students in higher education and to provide these students with a voice (Vincent et al. 2017). Trickett and Beehler (2017) note that participatory projects are designed to have both immediate and long-term processes that leave a 'community footprint' (p.527). Through this project where autistic students acted as co-creators, whilst there has been an increase in understanding for all involved, there are glimpses of transformational change too – at an individual and at an institutional level.

Several limitations of this study should be noted. First, it must be considered that those who volunteered to be Consultants may not be representative of the wider autistic community at the institution; this would have implications for whether the resulting employability activities really did suit all. The practitioner sought to address this potential issue by sending the invitation to volunteer to all autistic students who had informed the university that they were autistic, but it is difficult to ascertain if all views were represented. Secondly, as the researcher and member of staff in the institution, it is important to note the potential power and privilege they had in the project (Danieli and Woodhams, 2005). The researcher sought to diminish this to create equality during the project, by creating 'ideal speech situations', (Somekh and Ziechner, 2009, p.8), where communication between individuals is unhindered by issues of status, but it is difficult to say if this had an impact on the outcomes.

Conclusions

This article makes an original contribution to knowledge in seeking to demonstrate the power and functionality of collaborating with autistic individuals when developing a tailored careers and employability programme. The findings of this study highlight the benefits of this partnership in three ways. First, participating in this way can aid an individual careers practitioner's understanding and appreciation of the challenges that autistic students can experience relating to the university environment and the workplace. This is a vital aspect when seeking to support autistic students and can assist the practitioner to have a greater degree of empathic understanding (Beardon et al., 2009) and to be an ally to autism acceptance (Goldsmith, 2021).

Secondly, by partnering with autistic students in the creation of a careers and employability programme, the practitioner can gain real insights into what constitute the greatest needs and concerns for these students. This includes the topics, format, timing and accessibility considerations. This approach should enhance inclusivity and effectiveness for those the programme is seeking to support. More than this, the inclusion of the autistic voice *should* be an essential element in the design of careers provision. The collaborative approach described in this study resonates with Freire's work (Pedagogy of the Oppressed), where dialogue is proposed to enable learning. Freire asserted, 'One cannot expect positive results from an educational or political action program which fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people. Such a program constitutes cultural invasion, good intentions notwithstanding' (Freire, 1970, p.95). Traditionally, albeit unwittingly, careers practitioners have wielded all the power and autistic individuals have tended to be assigned the role of passive participants (Parsons et al., 2020).

Thirdly, a participatory approach can also empower those involved in the project, including the practitioner. Freire (1970) describes the essence of education as the practice of freedom. Reason and Bradbury (2006) believe that the process of inquiry leads not only to new knowledge, but also to 'new abilities to create knowledge' (p. 2) and in this way has an emancipatory element for those involved. This project has demonstrated that for all participants, there has been an increase in agency; for some, there are glimpses of emancipation. These glimpses include a change in self-identity as an autistic person and feeling inspired to pursue a career related to inclusion in the workplace. The practitioner also experienced some elements of transformation, including a sense of increased confidence in practice, a deep appreciation for the challenges and strengths of being autistic in a largely non-autistic world, and an eagerness to urge fellow careers practitioners to adopt this approach.

The key recommendation for careers practitioners in higher education is to seek the autistic voice when designing provision for autistic students and graduates. As mentioned above, this will facilitate insights into concerns and priorities and how to ensure provision is as inclusive as possible. Given that a finding in this study was that some autistic individuals would prefer alternative approaches to workshops, consider offering a range of support, including online resources to accommodate the needs of as many as possible. Implementing the approach described in this study can also lead to an increased employability for the autistic students involved. The practitioner observed (and the Consultants articulated), enhanced levels of confidence, self-awareness, team-working and self-advocacy skills; these are all essential elements of employability (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007).

Researchers who are considering ways to gain understanding of the perspectives of individuals are urged to consider PAR as an effective approach. This would particularly apply to those who are practitioner-researchers, as a specific strength of this methodology is the positionality of the researcher at the heart of the research process (McAteer, 2013). A further benefit, as noted by Elliott (1991), is 'the fundamental aim of action research is to improve practice' (p.49). Opting for a participatory approach to the action research will provide researchers with opportunities to gain deeper understanding, ideas for positive change and possible emancipation, as highlighted in this paper.

When reflecting on the experience of using a PAR method to explore the development of employability provision, the practitioner has enjoyed the process and is convinced that involving those whom the research is seeking to support is the most effective way to enhance delivery. There can be transformative effects when working with those who are marginalised too. The PAR project is now in its next phase and the ripple effect of its impact is continuing with the potential for further change and impact.

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