
Social Life Influences on the Academic Success of Neurodiverse University Students

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Abstract

University academic success is influenced by a number of variables. One of the factors influencing both neurotypical and neurodiverse students' academic success at university is their social life. Students that are neurodiverse, however, also face additional challenges in maneuvering through their social life in comparison with neurotypical students. This paper argues that academic success for neurodiverse individuals is significantly influenced by their experiences in university social life. The social model of disability is the theoretical framework used in this article to examine and understand the relationship between the experiences in the social life of neurodiverse university students and their academic success. This paper argues that to increase the level of support provided to neurodiverse students, all stakeholders must work together.

Keywords: *Academic success, Higher education, Neurodiversity, Neurotypical, Social life*

1.Introduction

There has been an upsurge in the admission of neurodiverse students to universities. The dynamics of navigating university social life still need to be changed, despite the fact that the rate of university access has increased, in order to raise the rate of academic success. According to Dwyer et al, (2022), although neurodivergent students still encounter difficulties and impediments on college campuses, their access to higher education has grown. Higher Education must take into account students' social experiences and find strategies to support them if it wants to increase academic success. Examining how students' social lives affect their academic success is crucial because

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improved academic and social environments encourage learning, which will ultimately improve students' academic performance. All obstacles to learning must be removed if universities want students to achieve high levels of academic success. It can be argued that students' university experiences would be better if they also have successful social lives for a variety of reasons. Having friends to engage with may not only prevent loneliness but also assistance can be given if there is a need. Furthermore, there would be more opportunities to develop these crucial friendly relationships, helping students to become 'well-rounded', which most future employers would value.

Many students may experience anxiety when transitioning from high school to university. Studies have indicated that students experience social, cognitive, and psychological shock when they go from the high school setting to the university environment (Edjah et al., 2020). One problem is the disconnection between students' prior expectations and the realities of university life, which, if not addressed, can lead to severe distress, subpar academic performance, and higher dropout rates. Student drop-out is influenced by the student's social and academic adjustment to the university (Bernardo et al., 2016). This demonstrates that in order for students to be ready for the demands of higher education, the transition from high school to postsecondary education must be seamless. There are some parallels between staff and student expectations regarding what criteria drive academic performance, according to research, but there is also evidence of dissonance (Hassel & Ridout, 2018). This suggests that what students believe to be important to academic performance may not coincide with the assumptions made by the lecturers. The fundamental components of a neurodiversity-based approach to teaching students with learning disabilities are highlighted by Armstrong (2017) as follows: providing neurodiverse students with a more nuanced understanding of the causes of their disabilities; emphasising, finding, and maximising students' strengths rather than correcting deficits. Aside from functional disparities in disabilities and the need for accommodations, the neurodivergent students also face stigma and prejudice. This suggests that the students need support in a number of areas. It is important to emphasise workaround strategies

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that allow students to manage their academic work without letting their disability interfere and providing students with knowledge about the adaptability of the brain, growth mindsets, and the importance of neurological diversity. Although this phenomenon has been extensively investigated, more needs to be known about how socialisation affects neurodiverse students. Moreover, little is known about how neurodiverse individuals' social lives affect their academic progress. As argued by Edjar et al (2020), it is important to remember that students' strong academic and social lives are essential for their success. The main questions that will be addressed in this article are the ways in which social life influences the academic success of neurodiverse university students.

2.Contextualising and conceptualising neurodiversity

Neurodiversity is a concept that encompasses the following: dyslexia, dyspraxia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, dyscalculia, autism spectrum, and Tourette syndrome (Clouder et al., 2020). Clouder et al (2020) further clarified that neurodiversity focuses on variations in individual brain function and behavioural features, which are thought to be a normal element of population variance. Armstrong (2017) similarly defines neurodiversity as the recognition of these various distinctions. It can be argued that individuals exhibiting these variations are treated differently by society, in as much as they are treated in terms of differences in race, ethnicity, and other types of human variation. Neurodiversity is used to explain how human brains can differ in a variety of ways, including how we organise our attention, interpret social and sensory information, and plan and carry out movement (Bertilisdottir-Rosqvist et al., 2020). According to Singer (2017), neurodiversity refers to the non-pathological variance in the human brain that affects mobility, sociability, learning, attention, mood, and other mental functions at a group level. Therefore, neurodiversity explores the various ideas and actions that define what it is to be unique and human. According to this perspective, a person is considered neurodivergent if their neurology differs from that of the majority (neurotypical).

Within the wide range of neurodiversity, some individuals are classified as neurotypical (NT), or having information processed in a

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way that is consistent with the presumed societal "majority" or "norm," and those who are neurodivergent (ND), having information processed differently from this anticipated norm (Spaeth & Pearson, 2021). Developmental variances like autism, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and dyslexia are included in the term "neurodivergent," as are acquired forms of neurodiversity like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or brain injury (Spaeth & Pearson, 2021). Arguably, students may suffer severe consequences, such as social isolation, if variances in their social communication styles are not taken into consideration. For a neurodivergent person, receiving criticism for behaviour deemed to be 'bad' or different from the norm, can have devastating emotional effects, which could in turn, negatively impact their academic success, which was the focus of this study.

2.1.The social model of disability: A theoretical framework

The social model of disability was applied in this study to explore how neurodiverse students' social lives affected their academic success. This model recognises the environmental impact on how a disability is experienced (Clouder et al., 2020). This model draws attention to how disability is a product of social construction (Wells-Jensen & Zuber, 2020). Academic institutions, as socially constructed environments, can play a part in minimising difficulties experienced by people with disabilities (Clouder et al, 2020). Thus, it can be argued that attitudes, perceptions, and societal structures in higher educational institutions can strongly impact the ways in which neurodiverse people are seen by others and by themselves in terms of their identities and socialisation, which then may influence their ability to succeed academically.

In contrast to barriers to inclusion, the social model of disability focuses on aspects of the negative impact of society on disability and how these might be effectively addressed (Levitt, 2017). As a result, it turns attention away from personal disability, and toward societal institutions; and thus is an effective tool for achieving the emancipation of individuals with disabilities (Woods, 2017). Therefore, this model was selected to determine the ways in which

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the university's social and structural environment is enabling or constraining neurodiverse students.

Divergent neurotypes are viewed as advantageous to society by the social model because they can contribute to innovation, creativity, divergent thinking, and artistic abilities. The model assesses the context and environment and how they can be adversely affecting the individual. The social model aims to identify and alter the ways that cultural norms and institutions exclude, reject, or fail to accommodate individuals. The social model of disability will be used to evaluate how the social lives of neurodiverse university students will affect their academic success in the current study. Ghosal (2019) emphasised the necessity to concentrate on the social characteristics that constitute disability, particularly with regard to how the interaction of the social and physical environments imposes constraints on specific categories of people.

The social model of disability contends that social factors, rather than inherent ones, have a greater impact on mankind (Retief & Letsosa, 2018). One could argue that, if neurodiverse students receive enough help during their lectures, they can perform on par with their neurotypical peers, underscoring the significance of choosing this model for this study (Elison-Chang, 2018). Therefore, society must improve how neurodiverse students are labelled to remove unfavourable impressions (Retief & Letsosa, 2018). Therefore, it is important to remove any negative social influences that could prevent neurodiverse children from performing on par with their neurotypical peers.

The idea that society is to blame for the debilitating of people with disabilities is a key component of the disability model and will be crucial to comprehending the points made in this study. This suggests that efforts should be focused on societal transformation or altering parts of the built environment rather than personal adjustment and rehabilitation in order to bring about any significant change (Retief & Letsosa, 2018; Wells-Jensen & Zuber, 2020). Thus, the social model becomes crucial since it concentrates on addressing the social and environmental elements that are widespread in society that generate barriers to participation for people with disabilities, a claim that can be applied to the university setting. This is because beliefs and attitudes

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that are prevalent in society at large frequently manifest themselves in other contexts, such as academic institutions. In order to encourage society, and the university in particular, to apply measures that accommodate these students to achieve higher involvement and improvements in their social and educational success, the model will help deter the exclusion of neurodiverse students. According to Ghosal (2019), the social model aims to remove unnecessary obstacles that prohibit persons with disabilities from participating in society, accessing the workforce, and living independently. It can be applied in a university setting to lower obstacles to inclusion and promote awareness of the challenges faced by neurodiverse individuals.

2.2. University students' social life and academic experience

The complexity of the student experience is acknowledged by Raaper (2021). If the student experience is difficult for neurotypical students, it is obvious that neurodiverse students will not find it simple. When neurodiverse students are accepted into colleges, they must form new friendships and become used to life in higher education (HE). When they enrol in college, some neurodiverse individuals find it challenging to form social connections. Social relationships are a particular issue for autistic students, according to research on their experiences in higher education (Gurbuz et al., 2019; Longtin, 2015). The pupils must manage connections with their classmates and forge bonds with those who can accommodate them (Knott & Taylor, 2014). The students are faced with a problem since they must find those within the institution who are accommodating them. Feelings of loneliness, a lack of identification with the university, and a lack of social identification with other students may surface if the students have social issues. These social challenges do not indicate a lack of social desire (Creswell et al., 2019). Despite the pupils' willingness to interact socially regularly, conventional views make it difficult for them to do so. According to Lever and Geurts (2016), feeling lonely, like one does not belong, or like one is not a member of the student community, could be related to non-completion, hence this may be a crucial element influencing experiences at university (Anderson et al., 2017). In extreme circumstances, failing to integrate properly into the student body can

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result in dropping out of school altogether and withdrawing from academic pursuits.

Long-term mental health problems caused by these loneliness sentiments may have a negative impact on the student's performance. Mental health problems can affect daily duties, impede with learning, and have an impact on academic achievement (Gelbar et al., 2015; Van Hees et al., 2015). According to Gobbo & Shmulsky (2014), academic success is significantly influenced by university social life. Lack of significant social connections among students has a detrimental impact on their academic performance. Other neurodiverse individuals may nevertheless perform well because of the student's social adjustment to university life, motivation, commitment, and capacity to satisfy academic demands (Bernado et al, 2016). This demonstrates that not all neurodiverse individuals experience loneliness and struggle to integrate into campus life.

Regular attendance at classes promotes social interactions, fostering connections between students, parents, teachers, and other university personnel (Bernado et al, 2016). These positive connections aid in academic success as well as students' social and academic adaption. Additionally, socialising that is related to academic work is extremely beneficial as it provides an excellent opportunity for research collaboration. These beneficial relationships between the stakeholders would be fostered in large part by the student support services provided by the universities. In order to handle the academic work and prevent university dropouts, there is a need for social and institutional assistance.

As they progress into higher education, neurodiverse students could feel anxious. These emotions may be crippling, and depending on the type of condition, they may even be very severe. Ward and Webster (2017)'s interview study revealed that even autistic students who thrive in HE experienced anxiety and depression. Comorbid mental health conditions may make failure more likely. Sensory sensitivity issues may make it difficult for neurodiverse adolescents with ASD to socialise, lead to stress and worry, and keep them from concentrating on their academic work (Anderson et al., 2017). If the environment overwhelms the students, they may decide to leave university. According to the social model of disability, someone is

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considered "disabled" when their needs cannot be met by the environment (society). To completely accommodate neurodiverse pupils, organisational impediments, communication barriers, environmental barriers, and social and cultural barriers must all be addressed. Sincerity, fairness, and a readiness to listen to others are just a few of the personality traits Gurbuz et al. (2018) identified as being helpful to students with ASD in their social interactions in higher education.

According to Hong (2015), many institutions are still ill-equipped to support the neurodiverse students beyond the fundamental state need of equal access and practical adjustments. Within HEIs, neurodiverse students frequently encounter disabling impediments. These include both psychological and actual impediments. The presumption about neurodiverse persons that explains, justifies, and spreads bias, discrimination, and exclusion is referred to as an attitude barrier (Hogan, 2019). These attitude barriers have an impact on the students psychologically since they tend to lower their self-esteem. Academic performance is likely to suffer as a result of low self-esteem. Physical barriers include a wide range of obstacles that restrict equitable access, including stairs, steps, narrow passageways, entrances, kerbs, restrooms, housing, poor lighting, uncomfortable sitting, and malfunctioning elevators. Physical barriers are linked to physical and architectural environments (Hogan, 2019). These barriers are the ones which are disabling to the students, and this may interfere with their academic success. The students are unable to enter several locations where they can interact with their peers because of physical restrictions.

2.3. Neurodiverse students' academic success

Clouder et al. (2020) declare that the gap between what is required and what is accessible to assure neurodiverse students' success in higher education, where it is obvious that good intentions are insufficient, widens due to the fear of stigmatisation and labelling. Institutions should make an effort to lessen the stigmatisation of students with neurodiversity. Students are more likely to succeed academically if they perceive that they are treated similarly to their neurotypical peers. In educational institutions, student success is

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crucial because it is frequently employed as a performance indicator (Alyahyan & Düşteğör, 2020). Since success is correlated with students' performance, ongoing success will inspire students to put in more effort, which will eventually translate into improved academic performance. Higher education institutions must prioritise student achievement since it is seen as an important metric for judging the calibre of educational institutions (National Commission for Academic Accreditation & , 2015). Academic success was characterised by York, Gibson, and Rankin (2015) as academic achievement, satisfaction, skill and competency development, perseverance, achieving learning goals, and career success. Academic success for students is determined by how well they perform on an exam for a particular subject, at the end of the academic year, or when they graduate (Alyahyan & Düşteğör, 2020).

Academic success for neurodiverse students, such as blind students, depends on social interaction. They require the assistance of the sighted classmates who are in the same group, attending the same lectures, and completing the same assignments. Socializing is therefore essential. When the right techniques are used, neurodiverse children' academic success can be increased. According to Alyahyan & Düşteğör (2020), taking preventive measures and early identification of at-risk children can significantly increase their achievement.

Even though ASD is frequently linked to social challenges, this heterogeneous group of students may show some social aptitude. Gelbar et al. (2015) and Zeedyk et al. (2016) found that individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) can be intellectually competent within a particular topic but lack a variety of practical, social, and emotional skills necessary to succeed in higher education. Students with autism were described as autonomous, keen listeners, and self-assured enough to tackle assignments when necessary. They added that the university environment gave them a chance to put their skills to the test (Gurbuz et al., 2018). Some students reported difficulty with group projects, class engagement, presentations, asking questions, and interacting with peers (Anderson et al., 2019, Gurbuz et al., 2018). In compared to their neurotypical classmates, this cohort has a higher rate of course repetition and dropouts without degrees,

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according to earlier studies (White, Ollendick, & Bray, 2011). Many people with ASD can handle the intellectual and academic requirements of college, but they have difficulties with other aspects that are crucial for academic success (Dijkhuis, Sonnevile, Ziermans, Staal, & Swaab, 2020). According to Trevisan and Birmingham (2015), the scant research on college students with ASD stresses that the difficulties these students face are frequently not caused by variations in their cognitive abilities. Students with ASD expressed difficulty beginning social connections, expressing themselves to others, and making new acquaintances, according to Gurbuz et al (2018) 's research. Additionally, they described students' social loneliness, isolation, and excessive, erratic, and occasionally shallow social activities (Gurbuz et al., 2018). Students with ASD noted the value of a social network and considered social interaction to be draining but vital, according to Van Hees et al. (2014). This study also discovered that these kids frequently struggle to fit in, having trouble handling the social demands of conversation and participating in social activities. Understanding neurodiversity requires admitting that there is no such thing as "normal" brain function; deviations are just part of the human brain's expected range of variation. In addition, neurodiversity acknowledges that differences do not indicate deficiencies (Coghill & Coghill, 2020). According to Pluut, Curşeu, and Ilies (2015), emerging adults must prioritise between social relationships and academic pursuits because they cannot always be done at the same time. As a result, students frequently have to pick one over the other (Van der Zanden, Denessen, Cillessen & Meijer, 2018).

3.Methodology

Secondary sources of information, including books, journal articles, and eBooks, were employed in this conceptual work. Despite the broadness of my topic, I focused on students with hard of hearing, visual impairment, and autism spectrum disease. Instead of using a debate-based method, I injected themes first before having a discussion about them. The social model of disability was utilised to frame the conversation because a university is a micro-society.

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4.Results and Discussion

Success in college should not be hindered by a student's social life. Social networks are important because they help students establish study patterns, such as choosing whether to study in a library or another setting. Students might set goals for one another when they collaborate with others. Peers can talk about impending assessments as well. The interaction between neurodiverse and neurotypical students is necessary since it may be beneficial to the students. For instance, visually impaired pupils interacting with sighted people will assist their academic work, such as reading.

However, juggling a social life with study is not always possible. Failure could result from a failure to strike a balance between social pleasure and intellectual expectations. Students may face either a study-to-leisure conflict when studying interferes with social life or a leisure-to-study conflict when social life interferes with studying, depending on their priorities (Pluut, Curşeu, and Ilies 2015). There are several theories as to why these two forms of intrapersonal conflict are linked to academic performance. According to sociological ideas, a student's ability to succeed in school may be hampered by a conflict between their social and academic lives because they run out of time, become exhausted, and obsess over their options (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

Support and guidance are required if the neurodiverse student's life has many responsibilities. Students must have fulfilling social experiences if they are to succeed intellectually. Academic success is associated with positive peer dynamics. According to Véronneau, Vitaro, Brendgen, Dishion, and Tremblay (2010), a lack of social adjustment results in future academic challenges and, ultimately, academic failure.

Social life can occasionally stop supporting studies, which results in procrastination and avoidance instead. The difference between social time and study time must be made. Many ND students have a lifetime of bad educational experiences behind them when they enrol in higher education (Anderson, Sosnowy, Kuo, and Shattuck, 2018). Due to a lack of knowledge about neurodiversity and how to effectively serve young ND people, the conduct of ND youngsters is sometimes mischaracterized as "difficult" (Brownlow, Lawson, Pillay,

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Mahony & Abawi, 2021; Moyse 2020; Wood, 2019; Roberts & Webster, 2020). They probably endured frequent criticism for their actions as a result. Additionally, a large number of young people with ND are participating in programmes meant to "better" their 'impairments,' according to Bottema-Beuttal, Park, and Kim (2018). A large portion of the autistic and neurodivergent community views such therapies as being extremely contentious since they conceive actions that are essential to the person's identity as wrong (Leaf et al. 2021). ND persons may learn to "mask," or adapt or repress aspects of their identity and conduct to fit in with others' expectations or escape negative evaluations, as a result of negative reactions to their natural ways of existing and communicating (Pearson & Rose, 2021; Schneid et al. 2020; Hull et al. 2017; Perry, Hull, Mandy, & Cage, 2021). These characteristics may also interact with any decline in academic achievement (or perceived progress), creating a vicious cycle in which the loss of coping mechanisms and help-seeking results in real or perceived academic failure (Clouder et al. 2020). This failure may then be accompanied by intense negative emotions, which may further increase the perception of failure and cause fearful feelings. However, research indicates that greater information does not always translate into more welcoming attitudes or behaviours (Cage, Di Monaco, & Newell, 2019), putting People with neurodivergent backgrounds who are in a difficult position while pursuing higher education.

A neurodivergent learner may act differently in terms of attendance and focus for a number of different reasons. According to MacKay (2009), "attendance does not exist as a vacuum," which means that attendance by itself is not a useful indicator of engagement because numerous factors influence whether a student actually shows up for class. It may be stressful for a neurodivergent student to attend class (especially if they risk being penalised), it may be socially impossible, or it may be difficult because they are required to work at a pace or in a way that is unpleasant or distressing (Spaeth & Pearson, 2021). Due to variations in attentional processing, attentional demands can be difficult for all students, but they can be especially difficult for neurodivergent students. Students with ADHD may find it challenging to concentrate on one thing at a time, and they may need extra mental stimulation to stay alert (Spaeth, 2019).

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It is important to consider group dynamics at HEIs since they can affect student success. The majority of a group's time is spent on the tasks that either make the group successful or unsuccessful. A group that participates in academic exercises like group discussions is likely to achieve academic success.

5.Conclusion

Academic success for neurodiverse individuals depends on addressing social interaction difficulties. It is impossible to overstate the value of having a social life because it is essential to students' mental health and their ability to engage with others. Academic success will remain difficult for students with neurodiverse traits without the right kind of assistance for developing healthy social interactions. The academic success of the pupils would increase if the stakeholders worked together to increase the promotion of inclusivity and healthy social relationships. People frequently form lifelong friendships in college. Students must, however, choose between their education and their social lives and decide which of these two objectives they want to achieve. In order to prevent students from feeling as though they have missed out on either their academic or social lives, both must be balanced.

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