DARLENE MCLENNAN: Thank you for joining us today. For those who don't know me, I'm Darlene McLennan, I am the Manager of the Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training, ADCET for short. Really excited to be having this webinar. It is a topic I know many have asked for and we've done a number of webinars and we've developed a range of content on our website as well.

Just some housekeeping before we start. So this webinar is being live captioned. To activate those captions you can click on the cc button either at the bottom or the top of your screen and we also have captions in the browser and we will put the link in now into the chat so you can access the captions through your browser.

I'm on lutruwita country, Tasmanian Aboriginal land, and in the spirit of reconciliation, ADCET and myself respectfully acknowledges the lutruwita nations and also recognise Aboriginal history and culture of the land. And I want to pay my respects to Elders past and present, and to the many Aboriginal people who did not make elder status. I also want to acknowledge all the countries participating in this meeting and also acknowledge their elders and ancestors, and the legacy to us and any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People joining us today. I invite you, if you haven't been with us before, and I see people are already doing it, invite you to put into the chat the country you are on today as a show of respect.

Okay. The webinar today is Autistic students' experiences of University in Australia. Presented by Dr Diana Tan and Marion Rabuka. This explores autistic students' experiences when enrolling and attending University, and they will also cover recommendations for creating a neuro‑affirming environment for students at University.

Just a couple of other housekeeping details. As I said, this session is being captioned by the wonderful Helen from Bradley Reporting and will be recorded. The session will be added to ADCET in the coming days. If you are having any technical difficulties, you can email us at admin@adcet.edu.au.

Marion and Diana will talk for around 50 minutes and then we will go over to questions. I invite you to add the questions you have into the Q&A box. That's where I will take those questions from. But also encourage you to chat with each other or chat with us in the chat box, which is just general. But if you have any questions you would like to ask the presenters, please put that into the Q&A box. Well, that's it from me. I will see you at the end of the presentation. I will now hand over to Diana to make a start. Thank you, Diana.

DIANA TAN: Thank you, Darlene, and ADCET for inviting Marion and I to present out work. Before I begin, I want to acknowledge the Wallumattagal people on the beautiful Dharug land where my family live, play and work and where the bulk of this work was introduced. I extend my respect to Elders past, present and emerging and any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples here with us today.

I'm Diana. I have my camera on, and I think you can see me. I am a southeast Asian woman with short length hair and light brown skin. I am wearing a pair of green rimmed glasses with navy blouse with white polka dots.

Here is the agenda for today. I'm going to first provide some background information which should help you understand why we think this area of research is important. And in this work, we address two research aims. I will talk about the first research aim and how we went about conducting this research.

Marion will then take over and share our findings from addressing the first research aim. I will then talk about the second research aim, some preliminary results and general discussion.

I thought I should add a content warning for this talk because we are going to be sharing some firsthand accounts of autistic students' experiences of stigma and discrimination at Universities. Please feel free to do whatever you need to do to take care of yourself.

We will start with a little bit of a background. In Australia, there are key policies, such as the Fair Chance for All policy introduced in 1991 and the Disability Discrimination Act in 1992, that sought to protect the rights of people with disabilities, including their rights to inclusive education.

It has been suggested that the introduction of these policies have directly led to a tenfold increase in the number of disabled students enrolling into Universities in the last 30 years. While this is an encouraging trend, a closer look at disabled students' completion rates and experiences at Universities suggest that higher education remains inaccessible.

Take autistic people as an example. Compared to people with other forms of disability, we know autistic people are twice less likely to hold a bachelor degree or higher. And compared to people without disability, autistic people are four times less likely to hold a degree. What these statistics tell us is what policy changes have led to more students enrolling from this population, there is so much more that needs to be done to keep them at Universities, to be successful, to have a good time at Universities.

Many studies have made some progress into understanding the barriers faced by autistic students at Universities and factors that impeded them from being successful. Many autistic students felt a deep sense of otherness and struggled to deal with other people's stereotype beliefs of autism and autistic people. There is also a lack of understanding and awareness about autism and statistic people which sometimes lead to lack of appropriate support and accommodations.

Crucially, many autistic students reported a fear of discrimination, felt unsafe to disclose their identity. This presented them from accessing support services. The recent Senate Inquiry into Services Support and Outcomes of Autistic Australians, also highlighted this issue in a section of findings on autistic students' experiences of higher education. A parent of one autistic person said: "His life at University has been impacted by his refusal to tell the University that he is autistic. He feels that it would single him out and expose him to the same bullying he experienced at high school."

All of these works led us to conceptualise our first research aim. From previous research findings, we know that autistic University students’ experiences stigma and discrimination in higher education and these occur regularly, and it is highly prevalent, but there hasn't been any studies that delved into the contexts and circumstances in which these experiences occur.

The first aim of our research was to address this issue because such experiences and nuance are context dependent. We chose to use a qualitative approach to address this aim.

I'm going to now talk about our method in approaching this research question. So we advertised our study on social media in November 2021, where we invited autistic people above 18 years of age, they use English, and were formally diagnosed or self‑identified as autistic and had prior experience with University, and these included graduates, current students and those who discontinued.

21 autistic people completed interviews with us. At the time of the study they were between 23 and 26 years old, mostly domestic students and mostly women. About half of them identified as autistic before or during University and about half are current students.

Interviews were conducted one‑on‑one in a semi structured format. Participants were given many choices on how they wanted to complete interviews, including a choice between an autistic or non‑autistic interviewer, and interview formats including video conferences on Zoom, phone call, email, or live text messaging.

Our interviews covered five key topics on our participants' experiences with their autism diagnoses or self‑identification, transition to University, interactions with their peers, academic and professional staff, and navigating the University system. During our discussion we avoided any terms related to discrimination and only delved into these topics when participants brought them up. This is to avoid asking leading questions which may influence the way participants responded to the question.

Transcripts were analysed using Braun & Clarke's recommendations for conducting reflexive thematic analyses. This uses a data‑driven approach without any prior expectations which allows us to use participants' ordinariness to address our research question. Our research also adopted a participatory approach where autistic and non‑autistic researchers worked together and shared information every step of the research. This includes conceptualisation, design, analyses and dissemination. I will now hand over to Marion who will share our findings from this study. Marion.

DARLENE: Sorry, Marion, I don't even have to say it.

MARION RABUKA: Sorry, I'm muted. Started well.

DARLENE: I will leave you with it.

MARION: I will start again. I'm Marion. I have my camera on. I am a white woman in my 50s with light brown and silver streaked hair that's tied back, I am wearing purple rimmed glasses and have on a dark teal jumper.

From our analysis we felt participants' experiences of discrimination could be described in four themes and nine subthemes. In a flowchart shown here the top row consists of four boxes filled in maroon colour representing the four main themes. The subsequent rows are boxes in white colour, three underneath the first theme and two underneath themes 2 to 4 representing the 9 subthemes. I will be presenting quotes representing each theme and subtheme in the next few slides.

Okay. The first theme reinforces what many previous studies have shown, that autistic people's disability is something people don't have a clue about. Our first subtheme describes how many autistic people felt profoundly misunderstood, particularly by University support services which "had very poor understanding of how autism affects capacity and how we approach University tasks."

Our second subtheme describes our participants' fear of not being believed. Our analysis revealed that this fear was not unfounded. Upon disclosing being autistic one participant was told that: "I would not make a very good teacher and that I should probably not continue with my course." Another participant who was an autistic autism researcher shared her experiences of applying for ethics approval for their study. "I felt like I had to prove more as I was seen as a potential harm because of the fact that I'm autistic, as in how can I be trusted to understand when someone is distressed?"

Our third subtheme describes how many of these experiences are compounded by other marginalised identities. For example, one participant who was a migrant said to us, "My history is complicated as an autistic person by also being half Italian. When I went to Uni, I had people say how exotic it was I was there, so some of the stuff is hard to pull apart from getting an extra set of messages that I didn't deserve to be there anyway."

Okay. The second theme was based around the inaccessibility at Universities. There were two subthemes. First, besides the inhospitable built environment within Universities, our participants felt that access to support services was paradoxically difficult. University processes that are meant to help autistic students were described as a massive bureaucracy with lots of hoops to jump through and a million forms you need to fill out. The entire system has been described by a participant as symbolic violence, a deliberate violence to make people like me give up."

The second subtheme highlights the unequal power dynamic within the academic establishment. Oftentimes our participants would go through the arduous process of getting support and having their individual learning plans approved by disability services, but then lecturers have the discretion as to whether or not they implement these plans.

One participant shared a harrowing experience of having their accommodation request denied by a lecturer. A lecturer said she doesn't want any adjustments for students with disabilities and also she said, "She got lots of emails from access and inclusion that I was struggling with a course but she said, 'When I got those emails, I didn't trust those emails because you didn't look like you were struggling in my course. You didn't need so much support. You should be more confident with yourself.' Though the truth was I needed support but she refused to implement adjustments for the entire semester."

The third theme focuses on the onus being on autistic students. There were two subthemes. First, many students had to really advocate for their own support needs. Autistic students had to keep pushing for what they need until it resolves; continuously ask for support; and even to prove your worthiness as a disabled person to get those supports. One participant described, "This is the sort of thing they're saying, we help all people, we like diversity and all that ‑ that's complete bullshit. You expect a person who's from the minority to do all of the work and what are you actually giving in return?"

Okay. The second subtheme focuses on the costs of advocacy. While many autistic students were proud of their advocacy skills, they came at a cost. Many participants shared the emotional burden of such advocacy which impacts on one's dignity, that somehow it's a failure to ask for help. One participant perceives this to be stigma that a lot of people carry and have internalised around disability services "because they've internalised the shame of disability for whatever reasons."

The fourth theme focuses on how getting through University were a matter of grit and stubbornness. There were two subthemes. Many participants attended Universities several times. Through these experiences they felt they had "a better understanding of how I work, learned a little bit more about what I can and can't do, and recognise when things are getting too much and drew boundaries but this is all a very expensive lesson to learn".

The second subtheme describes how some autistic students cared and advocated for other marginalised students. Despite the toll advocacy could take, many participants provided peer support or peer mentoring. Founded inclusive spaces like Pride Society, developed disability ally training and sat on academic boards to influence higher education policies.

Our paper is now published in a Journal Autism. Shown on the right‑hand side of the slide is a screen capture of our paper. It is free to access in the URL shown on the slide. I believe it's also been put into the chat for access. Now I hand over to Diana to talk about the second research aim.

DIANA: Thanks, Marion. I will now take us through the second research aim. In light of the results from research aim 1, and given the richness of our data, I think most of our participants talked to us for over an hour so that has given us a lot of rich and a wealth of data from the transcript.

So we were able to ask additional research questions from the same transcripts. And we asked two more questions. First, in the first study we know that many autistic students felt that people don't have a good understanding of how they approach University, so we wanted to ask the question: how do autistic students approach Universities? We then asked a further question of how Universities can better support autistic students' ways of learning?

So these are the results from our preliminary analyses. They are not finalised yet, so just bear with me. From our analyses we felt that the research questions can be addressed in four main themes and 10 subthemes. In a flowchart shown on this slide the top row has four boxes filled in maroon colour representing the four main themes. The subsequent rows consist of boxes filled in white colour with three underneath the first and third stream and two underneath the second and fourth theme and these represent the subthemes. I will be talking through each theme and subtheme in detail over the next few slides.

The first theme describes how autistic participants had to fight really hard to get through life in and outside of University. There are three subthemes related to this. The first, many participants have had a rough life. While going through University many were also experiencing homelessness, living in unsafe situations, dealing with harassment and discrimination and they were processing a lot of trauma from childhood around that time.

Many entered University from a high school experience that was pretty horrific where they weren't accepted into any friendship circles and were chronically bullied. All of these experiences affected the way autistic students engaged with University.

The second subtheme talks about how Universities can be a sensory nightmare for many autistic students, many of whom experienced so much difficulty around class sizes and lecture halls with so many people and so many smells. So much so that they could not process the auditory stuff or hear what the lecturers are saying. They just couldn't be in that space.

For exams in particular, students found that smaller locations were better. For one participant who wasn't given the accommodation she needed, her grade "wasn't a reflection of my ability. It was a reflection of my intense anxiety when I'm in a bad sensory environment."

The third subtheme describes how autistic students process information differently. Quite often our participants found there was no processing time even though it takes them longer to process things. One participant described this issue really well: "I am a good student, not despite the fact that I'm autistic, it's because I'm autistic. The hyperfocus and just the attention to detail, organisational skills, these things make me a good student. But at the same time the poor working memory, the inability to get instructions, the social stuff, the networking stuff, all of that stuff I can't do. It doesn't make sense against this thing that seems really academic."

To compensate for these processing differences, often without much support, many autistic students felt that they spent so much time covering up these challenges that other people always see the high achiever but none of them ever saw the burnout, they don't see the work underneath. For one person they said: "It takes me about 200 hours to write 2,000 words and I will get a HD but it's just a slow process."

The second theme describes how autistic people took a lot longer to try and make sense of the system than other people. There are two subthemes related to this. First, autistic students felt that once you hit Uni, you are on your own. Like most students many autistic students initially felt excited about going to University as they saw it as "an opportunity to reinvent myself", but their transition into University life was described as really difficult. They felt like they were on their own to figure out what's the known in a completely different environment and form of studies to school, and often without any good frame of reference for what you're supposed to do, especially for those who were doing universities for the first time.

Importantly for many participants, "It was not only the transition into learning environment, but it was also the transition to living independently and having to self‑manage so many aspects of my life."

The second subtheme describes how participants' experiences are finding many unwritten rules at University. They didn't understand including the expectations around teacher/student relationship, expectations from lecturers and tutors; the online portal, et cetera.

Wayfinding was a particular issue experienced by many. One participant said, "Campus maps didn't have the room numbers and the room numbers didn't make sense. And different buildings had different room numbers and naming conventions. I would be an hour early to class because it's like I have to find this room. I found it really difficult."

So what can Universities ‑ what can we do about it? The third theme describes what it means to foster an enabling environment for autistic students. There are three subthemes related to this. First, an induction into University life that address challenges with transition. Many autistic students "sometimes the biggest step is getting to know the people and the Uni, and feeling comfortable in your environment, not actually your capability of doing the study."

Some of our participants also came up with other suggestions like, "An induction or a transition process where all of the ins and outs and all of the unwritten rules, that hidden curriculum stuff was explained." And also, "Having someone show me around initially would have been good for the wayfinding stuff in the University."

The second subtheme focuses on normalising alternative forms of communication and assessment. For most students, flexible structures and pedagogical approaches work well. This includes priority timetable preferencing, offering different ways of communicating such as phone calls, in‑person/online meetings or emails; providing information in different formats, in particular making lecture recordings available because they allow participants to pause, rewind and understand what the lecturers are saying. It gives them the processing they need.

Closed captioning and transcripts were useful because many autistic students find it easier to read. Flexible marking rubric is also helpful. In the case of one participant they were able to negotiate flexibility around marking rubrics for their presentations so they are not unfairly marked down for certain things like body language. Ultimately, as one participant said, "We see the world differently, we produce differently. So having the option to present our work differently would be wonderful."

The third subtheme focuses on making it okay to ask for help. Many participants didn't actually know that support services exist. Even when they knew about it, many think there is an unspoken perception that you don't seek those services at University. So there needs to be more effort in promoting these services and normalising asking for help. One participant shared a positive experience with us: "I had a tutor tell me that more than half the people in psych had an EAP and she/herself had an EAP, and that normalised it for me and made me feel like it was okay to ask for more help."

The fourth and final theme focuses on building a sense of belonging for autistic students. The first theme looks at what it means for autistic students to be afforded the freedom to just be. One student had a positive experience at a University where, "It was built into the ethos and spirit of the school that there are lots of different people with lots of different lives and lots of different reasons and lots of different challenges. And so it was just the done thing to be understanding."

This doesn't happen a lot, but when autistic people were in a neuro‑affirming environment, they felt a deep sense of acceptance and lack of judgment, a sense of freedom. They were able to really thrive, especially when they found people like them. For one participant they had autistic tutors which made them feel that University got to be at least open to seeing the value of who autistic people are.

The second subtheme emphasises the importance of individual responsibility in supporting autistic students. Some of the most positive experiences our participants describe came from lecturers who were "really proactive and reaching out to me and making sure I was doing okay; lecturers who were willing to take time out to explain things to me, willing to go away and do a bit of work to understand how to support them." It is not entirely up to autistic students to educate them.

If you think about the power imbalances autistic people felt from the first study, we should be able to appreciate the power of taking individual responsibility and the effect it can have on autistic students.

I would now discuss the findings from these studies. The findings highlight that there is a lack of autism understanding amongst non‑autistic University staff and students. Naturally, the obvious solution is to improve our autism understanding. Several studies have found that, indeed, improving autism understanding amongst non‑autistic staff and students is linked to a reduction in stigmatised attitudes toward autistic students.

But there is an important caveat to keep in mind. A recent study by von Below and colleagues interviewed University staff in Scotland, I believe, about their attitude towards inclusive education at Universities, to which many University staff have agreed that it is important to ensure that higher education is accessible for disabled students.

The study authors went a step further and asked University staff to provide examples on the things that they have done to ensure accessibility. But many of them weren't able to do so. So what this study highlighted was the attitude behaviour where attitude doesn't necessarily translate into actions or behaviours, and it is the behavioural change that is crucial in this case.

I think improving autism knowledge and our knowledge of other forms of neurodivergence is an important first step in our professional development. But what is really going to change things is putting knowledge into action and an ongoing reflection on our inclusive practices to evaluate whether or not our strategies are working. If possible, our neurodivergent students and colleagues need to be a part of this reflection, our evaluation.

Autistic students often deal with microaggressions at Universities as shown in our first study. I think this can be counteracted with micro‑affirmations, to affirm our autistic and otherwise neurodivergent students that they belong at Universities. Patrick Dwyer, along with several other scholars, have put together a brilliant set of recommendations for developing neuro‑affirming Universities. One recommendation that really stood out to me was to invest on neurodivergent‑led initiatives and leadership. This not only embraces the value of participatory and user‑led approach, it increases visibility and representation of neurodivergent leaders within Universities.

So it is the same sort of conversation that we are having around ethnic and gender representations in higher education. We need representations from neurodivergent leaders as well. But I think, importantly, we need to make Universities a safe place so that people can feel safe to reveal their autistic or neurodivergent identity to improve these representations.

Our findings also show that support services are difficult to access. We need to reconsider certain requirements, especially mandatory requirements, particularly around the provision of diagnostic letters. Because of the barriers to getting these diagnoses, including prohibitive cost of assessments, long wait times and poor knowledge around how autism presents in marginalised populations. Importantly these diagnostic letters are highly personal and highly deficit focused that many autistic students do not feel comfortable sharing as they don't represent who they are as a whole.

In designing these processes we need to think about the academic measures that autistic people face, alongside the administrative burden of accessing these services which can be exacerbated by executive dysfunctions.

Universal design for learning is an excellent framework for ensuring learning materials and processes are accessible from the get‑go. For example, if an autistic student only requires closed captioning, they shouldn't have to go through the entire process just to get this. If closed captioning was provided from the get‑go this could potentially free up resources to help other students with more complex requirements.

Lastly, our findings suggest that many autistic students experience trauma which affect the way they engage with Universities. Self‑advocacy also comes at a cost. Therefore, University and service providers could benefit from adopting a trauma‑informed practice. The Blue Knot Foundation has developed an excellent guideline for this specifically for people with disabilities, which I highly encourage you to check out. I believe it is now copied into the chat box.

We are now working with a learning designer to refine these recommendations and we hope to provide more specific strategies around how we can better support autistic students in a publication to come.

Thank you so much for listening. If you have any questions, we are happy to answer them. If you only think of these questions after the webinar, which you often do, feel free to email me. I will be happy to answer them. Thank you.

DARLENE: That's fabulous. Thank you, Diana. We actually have lots of questions and there has been a great lot of chat amongst the participants, which is wonderful. So I will probably start with the one that's got ‑ I encourage people to upvote. I will start with the first one that's got four of the thumbs‑up. Was there a difference in the experiences of practitioner diagnosed autistic students with diagnostic paperwork versus self‑diagnosed autistic students who didn't have the paperwork to support themselves?

DIANA: That's a great question. Amongst the 21 participants, one of them was self‑identified. So they were in the process of going through diagnoses. But about 50% went through Universities without having a diagnosis. So I would say that without the diagnostic paperwork, they don't get access to the support services that could otherwise help with their learnings at Universities. So arguably they had a much harder time than those with diagnosis.

Having said that, half of the students had diagnoses and still felt like they weren't well supported. So, yeah, there is a third instalment of this series of studies where we will be focusing on the experiences of those who went through Universities without diagnoses. So I think there will be more that we could elucidate from that study. Is there anything else you want to add, Marion?

MARION: I was going to say we're talking about students who have been to University over a long period of time as well, given the age ‑ like some participants were in their 50s and had been at University when they were a lot younger. So access to inclusion and support services probably didn't even exist at that point in time when they were first at University.

DARLENE: It is a challenge too, though. I think all of us kind of advocating in the sector kind of come from a social model and human right model, yet we still live in this medicalised model and diagnosis still seems to play a big part.

MARION: And my experience is it's not just having a diagnosis. You also have to have reports that outline why being autistic requires you to be in need of support and what your learning needs ‑ you know, how they are different as well, which is really difficult because often when people have been through a diagnostic process, tertiary education is not the reason for doing it, and not necessarily addressed in those reports. It can be really difficult, even if you have the privilege of having a formalised diagnosis to support that process at a tertiary institution.

DARLENE: Yeah, no, definitely. Kind of what reasonable adjustments, identify with a good educational psychologist is a powerful document but we know it's very expensive, hard to get to. And there are practitioners out there that have the ability to do that with the student, which is fabulous.

One of the other questions: are there plans to replicate the study to examine students with ADHD who, you know, probably have identified they have similar experiences?

DIANA: Yeah. Many of our participants in this study had co‑occurring conditions as well. ADHD represents a huge proportion. And also other forms of neurodivergence, like dyslexia, PTSD, et cetera. So what this study has inspired us to do is to broaden our scope to cover a wider range of neurodivergence. What we would do maybe sometime next year is to, yeah, essentially what the question was saying, to replicate this study covering a wider range of neurodivergence.

MARION: And certainly a co‑occurring condition, such as ADHD, from the interviews seemed to make life at University much trickier and more complex.

DARLENE: Someone wrote it looks like these interviews were done when a lot of the classes were still hybrid or online. We're now seeing that a lot of professions are, you know, being returned to face‑to‑face and so forth. So was availability of online lectures, tutorials, networking discussed by participants and was it a concern?

MARION: I actually went back to the data and had a look. So only 10 of the participants were current students when we did the interviews. As I said before, we had people up into their 50s who participated and had, you know, the hybrid versions or online wasn't even an option. So it was a very mixed group of people.

DIANA: Yeah. I can distinctively remember a few interviews that I did where participants said that they couldn't have done University if not for the online access to these courses. And they were only online because of COVID. So I do worry, like with Universities moving back to face‑to‑face, and limiting online options, it would really restrict many autistic students from being able to complete Universities. Yeah, that's definitely accessibility issue in that direction.

MARION: And probably a choice for people to pick distance education where they can as well.

DIANA: Yeah, yeah.

DARLENE: Excellent. Did your research reveal any insights on how disability support services can model, can be created to provide supports and adjustments especially for those who don't have a formal diagnosis?

DIANA: I think universal design comes to mind because it essentially focuses on making things accessible as a default. If it is made a default then people don't have to go through support services, which is often difficult to access. Making your environment neuro‑affirming is another framework that comes to mind as well.

If we send the message to neurodivergent students that they are welcome here, that we value having them at University, then, again, it sends an affirming message to a neurodivergent student. As to how we go about doing that specifically, our team is still working on developing some specific guidelines to provide more tangible strategies on how we might go about doing that.

That paper that I mentioned by Patrick Dwyer, there are really good recommendations around neuro‑affirming and Universities on there as well, so I would really encourage you to have a look. And importantly, that work was led by neurodivergent scholars, so they know what's missing and they have really good suggestions on how to fill those gaps.

I have applied for funding to develop a proper guideline as well and to test the effectiveness of the guideline. So fingers crossed I get further funding for this work too.

DARLENE: That would be brilliant. And please, keep us in the loop because we would love to put that on ADCET and promote it widely. It's something, as I said at the beginning of the webinar, we're certainly inundated with questions and people wanting to know more information and any guide to support that is great.

Someone has asked about the dual diagnosis of ADHD and autism at university. I like how they wrote that, that the brain that's constantly at war with itself. Was there any kind of experience in the cohorts that were involved in this ‑‑ was there anybody with that dual diagnosis that you could talk to at all?

DIANA: Marion, do you want to speak to this?

MARION: Having ADHD was a really common co‑occurring condition and created additional, more complex struggles, I think.

DARLENE: Mmm. There's certainly been a little bit more research out there now about the two, yeah, because I think previously 20 years ago they couldn't see ‑ you couldn't be on the autism spectrum as well as have ADHD which seems strange.

MARION: I think the data is if you have one there is a really high percentage that you have the other. Yep.

DARLENE: I'm just going to post a link in the chat that Diana spoke before about UDL and how that can play a powerful part in ensuring if you are a teacher, or academic, and so forth, that your teaching should be as inclusive as possible, and often people don't need to do a diagnosis if there is a flexible approach to assessments, a flexible approach to the teaching and learning.

So we are hosting a UDL Symposium. It will be a face‑to‑face event in Melbourne as well as an online event. I really encourage people to put an abstract in or to register for that event. We're really excited. We have Thomas Tobin coming over from America to speak at, so it will be lovely ‑ I mean, yeah, we want to make it as inclusive as possible, so the event will be online and face‑to‑face, but really looking forward to getting some people in the room and having some great conversations around UDL and how we can bring about, yeah, a more UDL lens across all the whole of the tertiary sector.

One of the questions we've got was is there any quick wins you can call out from your studies that could help us in the processes or spaces that we have within our institutions?

DIANA: That's a good question. I think relationship is everything. Putting time and investing on developing a relationship with your autistic clients or students will make a world of difference. So I would call that a quick win, if people are able to put in time and invest resources into supporting autistic students, because often ‑ quite often some of our autistic students felt that the systems are disconnected. So they go to disability services, they were told one thing, and they had to take the same thing, to take their EAP and take that to their lecturers who had no idea about what sort of adjustments they need to make to fulfil the EAP requirements. Students find themselves having to advocate for themselves multiple times because they have got different lecturers for different units. They do that from semester to semester.

Think about how much advocacy they have to do. And if someone is able to take that load off autistic students, I would say that that is a quick and pretty big win. Yeah, that's my perspective. Marion, do you have anything ‑ ‑ ‑

MARION: I was going to say I think if you have autistic students who tell you what their needs are, then you need to listen to them.

DARLENE: Yeah. That's great. Somebody has written "I'm a clinical facilitator of nursing students on placements in a hospital environment. I'm trying to use UDL principles when designing support tools. Any autism specific guidance around, yeah, kind of putting into that practice?"

DIANA: The one thing I can think about ‑ because I'm just thinking about a couple of students who are in that position. So they were placement students in hospital environment. And sensory challenges is a huge one. So making sure that that placement environment has a place to help them decompress in a sensory friendly environment will be really, really helpful. And checking in with your placement student frequently because it gives them an opportunity to share any concerns that they have without them taking the first step. I think that's important.

DARLENE: Yep.

MARION: I also think it's important to be affirming as well. We had a significant number of people who were in helping professions. They were often told they were unsuitable based on being autistic for their profession. And I think it's really important that we do have healthcare workers and teachers, and people in other health professions, caring professions, that are autistic. The autistic community really needs that.

DARLENE: Excellent.

MARION: And workplaces are not autistic friendly generally. They will need additional support.

DARLENE: Yep. I have posted two links into the chat. One was around a report that was done a number of years ago now ‑ it feels like yesterday ‑ around the built environment and autism. It was a great study that was done and actually done with students. And they took photos of the environment that they were studying in and the impact on them. So it's quite a powerful piece to really understand the built environment and how it can impact the students with neurodiversity.

Also, I have posted the information that we have on autism. There is a whole heap of research and information that people might find useful.

So another question is in today's higher education landscape, many students experience challenges in forming meaningful connections and building friendships in University. This sense of isolation can persist throughout their entire degree program significantly impacting their academic journal and overall wellbeing. Neurodiverse students, in particular, might find these challenges exacerbated due to varying social interactions, needs and preferences.

Given this context, I'm seeking insight to coordinate diverse students in developing and nurturing friendships. Was there anything you found in that? We have a number of content around the mentoring programs that exist within some Universities which have proven to be quite successful for students. They can be a variety of mentoring with other students on the spectrum, or other neurodiverse students, to fourth year psychology students, so depending on how the different systems, yeah, are kind of made up. Was there anything from your studies that you could suggest?

MARION: I think the most meaningful connections people had at University were with other neurodivergent students. Yep. So finding people like you who accept you for who you are.

DIANA: Yep.

MARION: And I guess there is mutual support that occurred as well where autistic students are helping other autistic students navigate the system.

DARLENE: That's great. All right.

DIANA: Sorry, in addition to that as well, a couple of students we interviewed told us that it would have been helpful if they have another student in the same course but in a higher year to help guide them through what's expected of their course work and how to navigate assignments and things like that. It will be great if these people are neurodivergent but they don't have to be. They just need someone to give them a safe space to ask these sort of questions.

DARLENE: And the challenge with the hidden agenda often within our institutions, it's quite frustrating and also ‑‑

DIANA: I struggle with it myself. So everybody can struggle with navigating a system. I can imagine how challenging it is for our students and especially neurodivergent students.

DARLENE: Also how often we write, as academics, how we write can be opposite to what is trying to be said, so it can be challenging for everybody. In the analysis, did you collect any around the retention of students with neurodiversity in our study? We are challenged by this because of our dataset. Recently the government changed the dataset that autism wasn't a part of that. It was a subcategory of ‑ I can't remember what it is under now but it isn't named neurodiversity worst luck. We don't have the true numbers of students on the spectrum or are neurodiverse types. So it is hard for us to know that retention. What did you find in this study?

DIANA: We didn't mention retention ‑ well ‑ ‑ ‑

MARION: In the table, in the article, that does talk about the number of degrees completed and the number of degrees discontinued.

DIANA: Yes.

MARION: So that was in the link.

DIANA: Many students have experienced discontinuing from their studies and then coming back to it, and then discontinuing it, coming back to it. So some of them eventually got a degree, but I can remember at least one of them didn't. And for that one participant who didn't eventually get a degree, they were saying how difficult it was to have so much education there and not to have a degree to show for it. And that is really problematic because they are ‑ we don't have an environment that helps them to make sure that people succeed. And then instead we give them a huge ‑ a lot of debt that they have to deal with post‑education.

So, yeah, we didn't formally collect that data but I think, yeah, many of them have experienced discontinuing from their studies. And I think studies from other countries as well have shown that retention is poor amongst autistic students.

MARION: From looking at the table at the time of our interviews, 4 participants had not completed their degree. And 8 ‑ so the number of degrees that were discontinued, all but 8 had discontinued degrees. And lots of multiple degrees as well.

DARLENE: Yeah. Now, there is a couple of big juicy questions come in right at the last minute. I'm going to contextualise a couple of them. One is just, is there any clear findings regarding the areas in which students with ASD excel at University?

MARION: I think people excel in things that they love, just like anyone else. If you have an interest ‑ I mean, it wasn't part of our data, but if you have an interest, you know, you will do well.

DARLENE: And this person kind of ‑ ‑ ‑

MARION: Anything to add?

DIANA: You said it perfectly.

DARLENE: This person goes on to say it would be great to see research of the unique strengths of neurodiverse students.

MARION: The number of degrees was very varied as well.

DIANA: Yeah, it's not engineering and computer science. There is a huge range. And I think a good proportion came from helping profession, isn't it?

MARION: I think 45% I worked out at one stage. Also we had people who might have started doing something that was very science or technology‑based but did a different degree in the end that was a helping profession or the opposite. Like sometimes first degrees and second degrees were vastly different.

DARLENE: There is a question around did you measure the level of grit in the students you interviewed and how that impacted on the retention and success at University?

DIANA: No. So grit was a word used by a participant which we've used to describe this theme. So they thought going through University was really a matter of grit and determination.

DARLENE: Yeah.

MARION: And I think that came through the interviews, and certainly I felt very honoured that our participants shared their experiences at University and the challenges that they had.

DARLENE: Yep. This will be the final question, and it is a big question so, you know, it might be hard to answer it, but we are in a change process within the University sector now with the recent release of the Accord. Someone has asked what systematic change do you think is required to enable more to increase the autistic enrolments and success within Universities? What else needs ‑ what systemic changes need to be made?

DIANA: That's the resources. I agree with what you said earlier on, Darlene, that the University Accord has missed the mark on students with disability because there is no way that we have done enough for students with disability. So I would say that the systemic change is to put in resources to really support these students.

DARLENE: The challenge is going to be, I think, at the moment in the Accord, yes, there was certainly some challenges around the data and also the language being used, but there seems to be a strong commitment to needs‑based funding, and I think for those that deal with the school sector know that isn't the panacea it is portrayed as. It is important the sector continues to stay engaged and continue to be aware of this space and ADCET will continue to advocate to ensure students with neurodiverse backgrounds are well represented in these conversations to ensure they continue to succeed in tertiary education.

Diana and Marion, thank you so much for your presentation. You can tell by the chat, it's going off, people loved it, absolutely great. It's fabulous. It is great to see this research being done and it's great to hear your passion and your thought into how to we can improve things. I hope this will be an ongoing partnership with ADCET. As I said, we're really happy if a guide gets created or anything else, we're really happy to promote and continue the conversation with you going forward.

The lovely team, or Kylie in the background, she will post some links to the next webinars we've got coming up. We've got the fabulous Thomas Tobin. If people don't know about Thomas Tobin, he is presenting on how to do UDL presentation. When he last presented to us, how he did it was fascinating even though he didn't tell us. I asked him to unpack how he presents. So he's going to present to us and unpack that, which is absolutely fabulous. That's coming up.

And we also have another one coming up on the 23rd of April which is autistic students and the transition to University, which is from our dear friend Allison and her PhD. So that's another great one coming up. Hopefully the links are now there.

And also just please, if you are interested in the UDL Symposium, really calling for abstracts that are really looking at UDL. So please, get some abstracts in and join us in Melbourne or online in June.

Thank you to our presenters and thank you everybody for joining us. It's fabulous to have this conversation. And, yeah, well done. Thank you.

DIANA: Thanks so much. Thanks everyone.

DARLENE: Cheers, bye.

MARION: Thank you, bye.