

# Transitioning to University

## Autistic Students Guide

The Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education  
and Training (ADCET)



**ADCET**

Australian Disability  
Clearinghouse on  
Education and Training

Supporting you. Supporting Students.

# Contents

Introduction .....	3
Part 1: Your Autistic Identity at University .....	6
Part 2: Navigating University Systems .....	13
Part 3: Practical Strategies for Thriving .....	37
Additional Resources .....	53
Resource 1: Your Strengths and Interests .....	57
Resource 2: Adjustments Workbook .....	60
Resource 3: University Terminology Glossary .....	68
Resource 4: Starting University Checklist .....	71
Resource 5: Quick Energy and Capacity Check-in .....	72
History of this guide .....	74
Feedback .....	75
References .....	76



# Introduction



## Section Overview

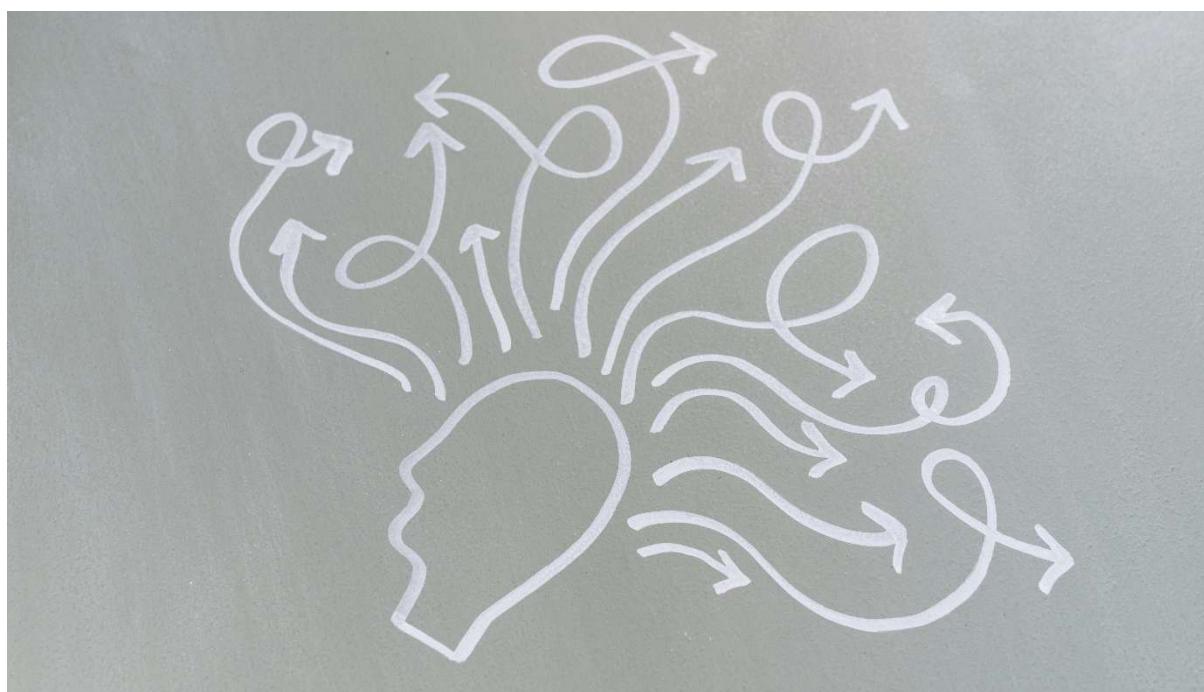
In this section, you will find:

1. Who this guide is for
2. A note on language
3. How to use this guide (including the various formats available and how you might use them)

Whether you're already a university student, about to start, or just thinking about it – congratulations! Getting to this point is a significant achievement, and you should feel proud of yourself.

Choosing to pursue higher education takes courage, determination, and a willingness to learn. As an autistic person, you may have faced additional challenges along the way – perhaps struggles at school, people who doubted your abilities, or had your own uncertainties about whether university was "for you." The fact that you're reading this guide shows your commitment to your goals and your belief in your potential.

You're not alone in this journey. Across Australia, thousands of autistic students are thriving at universities, contributing to research, building careers, and creating positive change in their communities. You're part of a growing movement of autistic people claiming their place in higher education.



## Who this guide is for

This guide is written for autistic students who are:

- Starting university for the first time
- Already at university and looking for additional support and strategies
- Considering returning to study after a break
- Thinking about university but unsure if it's right for them

You might have been diagnosed as autistic recently or years ago, or you might identify as autistic without a formal diagnosis. You might be 18 or 48 or 98, or somewhere in between. You might be studying full-time, part-time, online, or on campus. Whatever your situation, this guide is designed to support you.

## A note on language

In this guide, we use identity-first language and say "autistic students" rather than "students with autism." This reflects how many autistic people prefer to be described and recognises autism as an important part of identity, not something separate from who you are. We also acknowledge that everyone has different preferences for how they are described and encourage you to use the language that you prefer when describing yourself and your experiences.

This guide is grounded in the neurodiversity paradigm (you'll read about this soon!). We focus on your strengths while honestly acknowledging challenges you might experience. Being autistic brings both advantages and areas where you might need different approaches or support. Both are part of your complete picture.

## How to use this guide

You might read this guide all at once, section by section, or just refer to each part as you need it. You can use the contents page to find sections that are relevant to you, and the section overviews to preview the content it will include.

Remember, this guide is to help you with your higher education journey. You can read as much or as little of it as you like. None of the activities are compulsory, and you shouldn't feel pressured to read or complete the entire guide at once. You can refer to this guide any time before, during, or after your studies.

You can type or write your notes in boxes that look like this:

Notes...

## Formats

This guide is primarily designed to be used digitally: it includes links and interactive sections that you can engage with.

- You can use 'Ctrl+F' to search for key terms relating to the information you want to read about.
- You can use your text-to-voice or screen reading software to read this guide aloud to you.
- An online version of this guide is available [on the ADCET website](#).

If you wish to print this guide or complete the resources on paper, we recommend downloading and printing the PDF version for the best experience.

You will come across a few unique content types in this guide:

### Section Overview

Each section will include an overview at the top to outline what information is included throughout the guide.

### Case Studies and Research Tips

You can find case studies and research tips in orange boxes with dotted outlines and a magnifying glass icon. They include bonus information that you might find interesting, or you might choose to ignore them.

### Reflection Questions and Suggestions

You can find reflection questions and suggestions in pink boxes with solid outlines and a light bulb icon. You can think about these, write down your thoughts, talk to a friend or family member about them, or ignore them.

### Activities and Resources

You can find activities and resources in green boxes with dashed outlines and a pen and paper icon. You can think about these, complete the activity in full, write down your thoughts in note form, talk to a friend or family member about them, or ignore them. Numbered resources mentioned in **bold** can be found at the end of this guide.

# Part 1: Your Autistic Identity at University

## Section Overview

In this section, you will find information about:

1. Why universities need autistic minds
2. The neurodiversity paradigm
3. Your unique neurological profile
4. Identity and self-understanding
5. Autistic culture and finding your people
6. An overview of the guide's content

## Why universities need autistic minds

Universities are places of learning, discovery, and innovation. They work best when they bring together people with different ways of thinking and different perspectives on the world. As an autistic student, you bring valuable qualities that universities need.

Research shows that autistic students often have strengths that are particularly valuable in higher education. These might include:

- **Deep focus and attention to detail** - the ability to concentrate intensely on topics that interest you
- **Systematic thinking** - approaching problems in logical, methodical ways
- **Pattern recognition** - noticing details and connections that others might miss
- **Direct communication** - saying what you mean clearly and honestly
- **Persistence** - staying committed to understanding complex topics
- **Fresh perspectives** - seeing things differently and asking questions that others don't think to ask

These qualities are exactly what universities need for research, innovation, and advancing knowledge. Many academics at university are likely to be undiagnosed autistic and neurodivergent people – they have excelled due to their deep and persistent interest in a niche topic!

## The neurodiversity paradigm

The neurodiversity paradigm is a way of thinking about autism and other neurotypes that treats cognitive differences as natural human variation, not as medical problems to fix. Just like we have diversity in how people look, speak, and experience the world, we also have diversity in how our brains work.

This framework sits alongside the social model of disability, which argues that disability isn't caused by our bodies or brains, but by environments and systems that weren't designed with us in mind. A building without a ramp disables wheelchair users; a lecture delivered only verbally without visual supports can disable autistic students who process information differently.

The neurodiversity paradigm builds on this idea with three core principles:

- 1. Neurodiversity is natural variation.** Different neurotypes - autistic, ADHD, dyslexic, and so on - have always existed in human populations. This isn't new, and it isn't going away.
- 2. There's no "normal" brain.** The idea that there's one right or healthy way for minds to function is a cultural belief, not a scientific fact. Neuronormative expectations - ideas about the "correct" way to communicate, learn, or process information - marginalise those of us who think differently.
- 3. We face the same power dynamics as other marginalised groups.** Just as other forms of human diversity involve questions of power, access, and justice, so does neurodiversity.

This guide is grounded in this understanding. It's not here to help you "overcome" being autistic or to teach you how to mask your needs. It's here to help you understand your rights, access the support you're entitled to, and navigate university in ways that work for your brain.

If you want to learn more about the neurodiversity paradigm, check out some of the books, podcasts, and blogs listed in the **Additional Resources** section on [Page 53](#).



### Resource 1: Your Strengths and Interests

**Resource 1** will help you to think about your strengths (things you do well), interests (things you enjoy or like doing), and how could you use these at university!

Do you have passion areas or interests that could help other people learn, or that you could apply in the classroom, in a club, or in a project?

You can find **Resource 1** at the end of this guide [on Page 57](#).

## Your unique neurological profile

Being autistic means your brain processes information differently from non-autistic people. This isn't better or worse – it's simply different. Just like some people are left-handed and others are right-handed, some brains are autistic and others are not.

We all have strengths, and all have support needs. You might have exceptional pattern recognition, deep focus in areas of interest, or creative problem-solving approaches. You might also need additional time for assignments, quiet spaces to study, or clear communication about expectations.

### Case Study/Research Tip

Recent Australian research with 33 neurodivergent university students found that many described having both significant strengths and areas where they needed different approaches (Gibbs et al., 2024).

In a study conducted by Macquarie University (Tan et al., 2024), one student shared:

"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... all of that stuff I can't do." (ADCET, 2024).

The challenges you face at university often stem from systems designed for neurotypical students. When assignments require you to work in ways that don't suit your brain, or when support services ask you to prove your needs with diagnostic paperwork, those are system problems, not problems with you or your brain.



Every autistic person is different. Understanding how your brain works can help you make the most of your university experience and get the support you need.

Things that often work well:	Things that can be challenging:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning about topics you're passionate about</li> <li>• Having time to process information at your own pace</li> <li>• Clear, concrete instructions and expectations</li> <li>• Consistent routines and timetables</li> <li>• Online learning options that let you control your environment</li> <li>• Assignments that let you demonstrate your knowledge in your preferred way</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Noisy, crowded campus environments</li> <li>• Unclear instructions or constantly changing communication expectations/requirements</li> <li>• Group work that requires complex social navigation</li> <li>• Unwritten social rules and expectations</li> <li>• Processing verbal information quickly in lectures</li> <li>• Managing multiple competing deadlines</li> </ul>



### Case Study/Research Tip

Research by Gibbs et al. (2024) found that some autistic students enjoy learning and working with other students in busy, interactive spaces. On the other hand, some autistic students say they learn better in quieter, less crowded environments. There's no single "right" way to be an autistic student!

## Identity and self-understanding

Your autistic identity is yours to define. Some autistic people:

- Were diagnosed as children
- Were diagnosed as adults
- Haven't been diagnosed but recognise themselves as autistic
- Have always known, or known for a long time that they're autistic
- Are still figuring out what it means to be autistic
- Have other identities (cultural, gender, sexuality) that intersect with being autistic

All of these experiences are valid. Regardless of how you learned that you were autistic, the most important thing is understanding yourself well enough to know what you need to succeed.



### Reflection Question

What does being autistic mean to you? What is your autistic identity? How do you describe your autistic experience?

## Autistic culture and finding your people

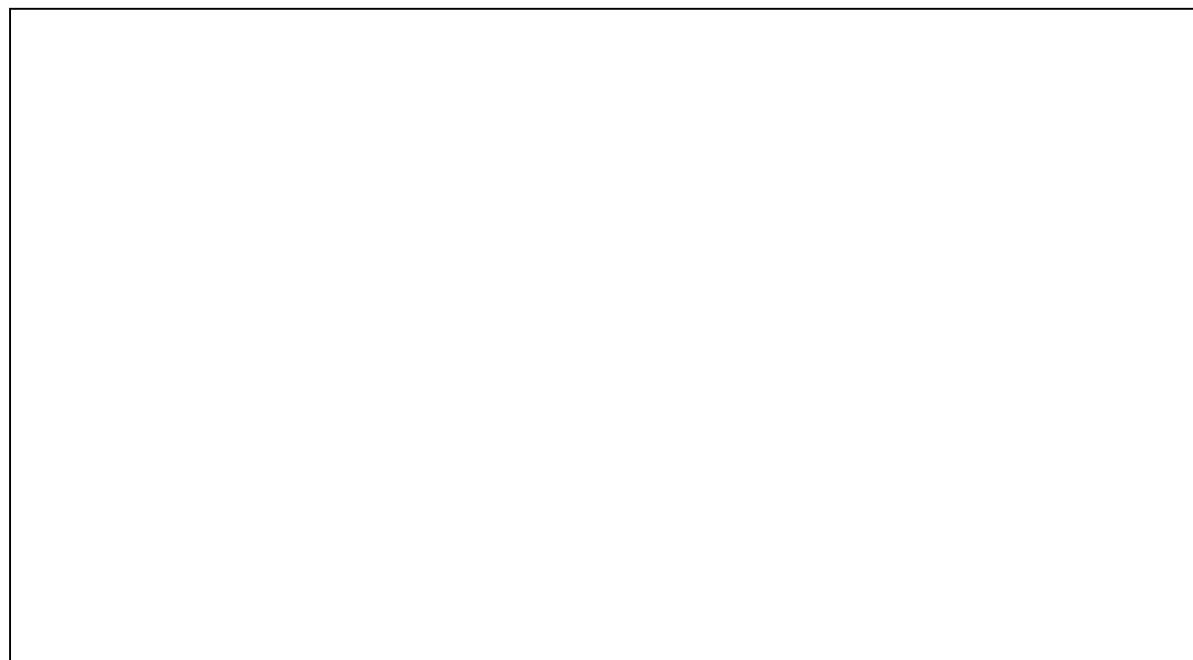
Being autistic isn't just something about how your brain works – it's also about being part of a community with shared experiences and culture. This growing autistic community celebrates autistic ways of being, and values and appreciates things like:

- Direct, honest communication
- Deep interests and expertise
- Sensory preferences and needs
- Different ways of moving and expressing ourselves
- Supporting each other's strengths and challenges

At university, you might find other autistic students, staff, or researchers who share your experiences. Many universities now have neurodiversity groups or societies where you can connect with others.

### Case Study/Research Tip

A study by Tan et al. (2024) interviewed 21 autistic people about their university experiences in Australia. While many faced significant challenges and discrimination, the research also highlighted the incredible resilience and advocacy of autistic students. Many participants went on to support other marginalised students, founded inclusive societies, developed disability training for staff, and influenced university policies!



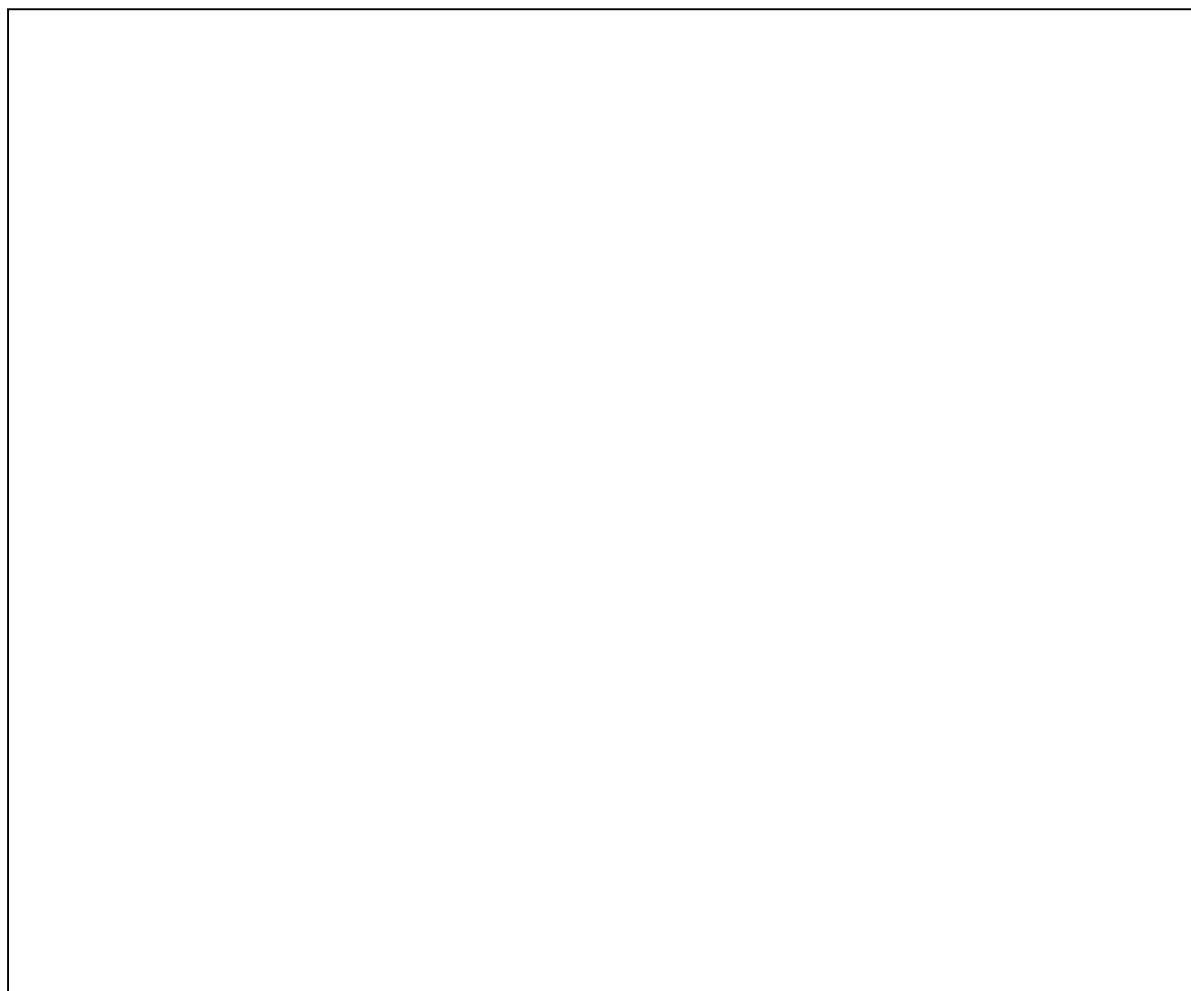
## Looking ahead

Getting to know your autistic identity can be a helpful starting point for many of the ideas in this guide. Check out the books, podcasts, and blogs in the **Additional Resources** section if you're looking for ideas and inspiration to think about what being autistic means to you.

In the next sections, we'll explore how to:

- Navigate university systems and get the support you need
- Develop practical strategies for studying and campus life
- Build authentic relationships and find your community
- Maintain your wellbeing while pursuing your goals

**Remember:** you belong at university. Your autistic mind brings valuable perspectives that the university community needs. While there may be challenges along the way, there are also many opportunities to thrive and succeed in ways that work for you.



## Part 2: Navigating University Systems

### Section Overview

In this section, you will find information about:

1. Putting supports in place, including disability supports, reasonable adjustments, and how to get support if you don't have a formal diagnosis
2. How to prepare for starting university
3. What to expect from university classes and learning
4. How assessment works at university
5. Co-curricular opportunities during university
6. How to get help when you need it

University systems can feel overwhelming at first – there are new processes, unwritten rules, and lots of moving parts. The good news is that once you understand how things work, you can make the system work for you. This section will walk you through the key stages of university life and help you develop strategies that play to your strengths.

### Reflection Question

What are you looking forward to at university? Remember these things as you get organised and set up to start your studies!

## Putting supports in place: disability support services and your rights

Under Australian law, universities must provide reasonable adjustments and disability support services to support your learning. Universities need to:

- Ensure that you can participate in your learning and assessment without discrimination
- Provide reasonable adjustments to support your learning
- Ensure privacy and confidentiality regarding your disability
- Ensure freedom from harassment and discrimination
- Provide access to complaint processes if your rights are violated

You don't have to use these services, but understanding your options can be helpful. Even if you're unsure about your needs or whether you'll use the service, it's best to contact them early in your university journey. This keeps your options open and means that if you do need support, you can access it quickly.

### **Research Tip**

Disclosure means telling someone about your disability, medical condition, or impairment. An autistic student said: "Another thing that I've found very interesting is the whole process of disclosure, because research has also shown that many of us Autistic tertiary students don't disclose our diagnosis" (Reframing Autism, 2025).

If you do choose to disclose:

- Focus on your strengths as well as your support needs
- Provide context about how your autism affects your learning
- Suggest specific ways people can support you

## Reasonable adjustments

One of the key ways that universities can support you as an autistic student is by providing '**reasonable adjustments**'. These are tools, options, supports, and information that will help you participate in your learning in ways that work for you. Adjustments are designed to remove barriers that could otherwise disadvantage students or create an uneven playing field.

The 'reasonable' in 'reasonable adjustments' means that your adjustments cannot fundamentally alter any academic requirements, don't cause undue hardship to the university, and need to be directly related to your disability and learning needs.

**Remember:** asking for support isn't a sign of weakness – it's about creating equal access to education. As research shows, students who access appropriate support are much more likely to succeed at university.

### Research Tip

Here are some adjustments that autistic students have found beneficial across a range of study stages and programs (Gibbs et al., 2024):

- Extended deadlines for assignments
- Alternative assessment arrangements
- Note-taking support or recording permissions
- Quiet spaces for exams with rest breaks
- Liaison with academic staff about your needs
- Access to assistive technology

## Accessing disability support services

If you decide that you'd like some support with your study, you will need to register with the disability support service. You can find this service by googling '[your university name] disability support service', asking a lecturer or tutor, going to the student services hub, or asking another student.



### Resource 2: Adjustments Workbook

Use the **Adjustments Workbook** to help you think of adjustments that might help you at university: you can create a list that you can bring to your meeting with disability services to help you advocate for your needs. You can find the **Adjustments Workbook** on **Page 60**.

## The process

1. You will submit a request, usually by online form or email, to register with the service.
2. You'll typically need some form of documentation about your disability to register: this might include a letter or report about your autism or any other disability, impairment, mental illness, health condition, or injury you might have. This might relate to being autistic, as well as other experiences you have which influence the way you learn and participate.
3. You can prepare for your meeting by thinking about what you might need to best support you in your studies (see **Resource 2** on **Page 60** to help your planning).
4. You'll meet with a disability advisor to discuss your specific needs: you can usually choose to meet online or in person.
5. They'll create a Learning Access Plan (LAP) or similar document - many universities have a different name for this.
6. At some universities, this plan gets shared with relevant staff, with your permission, so that your adjustments can be implemented. At other universities, **you** will be responsible for sharing this plan with the staff members who need to know about your adjustments. Check with the disability service which option will apply to you.
7. You will usually have your plan reviewed at least once per year, and you can request a review or update if you'd like changes to your adjustments, don't think they are working, or if your situation changes.

 **Suggestion/Tip**

Here are some quick tips for accessing disability services:

- Make contact early, even if you're not sure what support you need.
- Come prepared with information about your learning style and previous accommodations.
- Ask questions about processes and timelines.
- Request written copies of your accommodation plans.
- Provide feedback about what's working and what isn't.
- Student unions often have advisors who understand university processes if you get stuck: they represent and work for you, not the university.



## If you do not have a formal diagnosis from a medical practitioner

### Information

While this guide recognises the validity of self-identification, some supports at university may only be available if you have a formal diagnosis from a medical professional. If you do not have a diagnosis or paperwork from a medical professional, there are still many options for seeking support.

Many universities will not offer adjustments such as assessment extensions, exam or assessment modifications, physical equipment, or assistive technology if you do not have a formal diagnosis from a medical practitioner. However, there are still many ways you can engage with supports and tools:

- Look out for peer networks and mentoring programs for neurodivergent students and students with disability. These rarely require disclosure or diagnosis, especially when they are run by students.
- Investigate free technologies and resources like the student version of Notion (a note-taking software), browser-based captioning, and other applets or extensions that can improve your digital learning experience.
- Practice your self-advocacy skills to ask lecturers and tutors for informal adjustments, like clarification on assessment rubrics or feedback on drafts.
- Explore **Part 3: Practical Strategies for Thriving** to learn about the tools and techniques that you can experiment with to support your own learning.

### Reflection Questions

What might help support you in your university studies? Think about:

- How you learn best or prefer to learn
- Things you find difficult when learning
- Adjustments or tools you used during school, or what you use at work to support you
- Have a look at **Resource 2 – Adjustments Workbook on Page 60** for more ideas!

You can also ask neurodivergent classmates or support staff about what's helped other students, and give those ideas a try. If they don't work for you, they can still give you a good starting point for finding other options.

## Getting ready: Setting yourself up for success

Your university journey starts before semester does! Have a look at the sections below which summarise the key areas to focus your preparation on before you begin your studies.

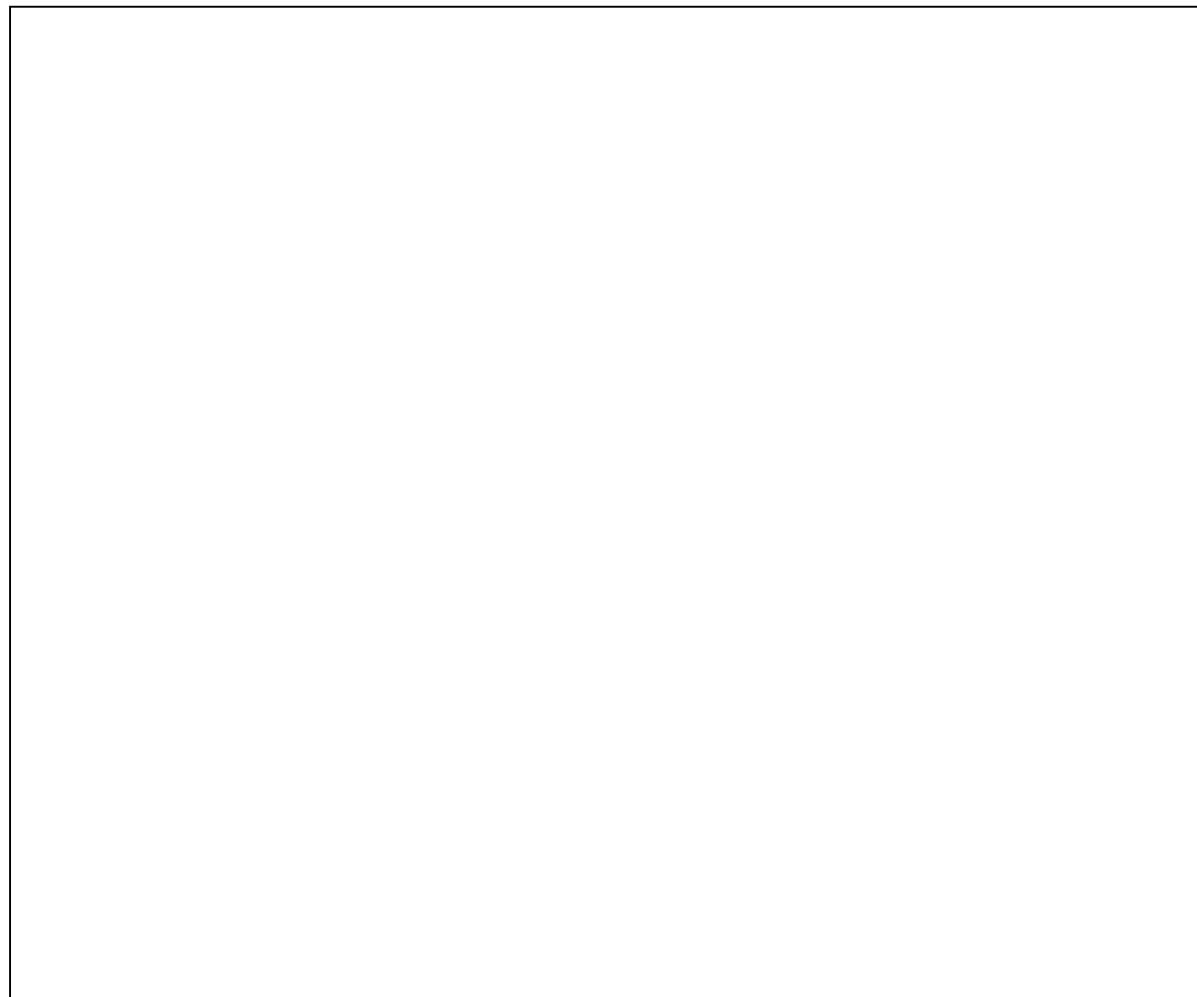
### Definitions and key terms

There are a lot of new terms and words you will encounter at university. Understanding these and knowing the difference between them will help you navigate your studies more easily.



#### Resource 3: University Terminology Glossary

Use the **University Terminology Glossary** to review and understand the terminology you will encounter at university. You could highlight parts of the glossary and make notes to help you understand and remember these words. You can find the **University Terminology Glossary** on **Page 68**.



## Administrative tasks and enrolment

Once you have accepted your offer to study, there will be a series of tasks that you need to complete in preparation for commencing at university. It's important to think about how you will approach these before semester commences to avoid becoming overwhelmed, and get support early.

### **Resource 4: Starting University Checklist**

You can complete the **Starting University Checklist** to help you complete these tasks and plan for your first semester at university. You can find the **Starting University Checklist** on [Page 71](#).

Some of the key tasks to look out for include:

- **Acceptance of your offer:** After you get your offer to study at university, you will need to accept the offer to tell your university that you will be attending. You will receive instructions about how to do this, usually by email, including who you can contact if you need help.
- **Enrolment:** Once you have accepted your offer, you will need to enrol in the courses you are going to study. This will usually be done online through a student administration website, and you will receive instructions and reminders about this. All universities and programs are different, but most programs will have a webpage outlining which courses or units you will need to do each semester, or a list of units you can pick from if there are electives in your program.
- **Getting access to student systems:** Before you start your studies, you will need to gain access to systems like the student administration portal, your student email account, the university timetable, and the online learning management system (LMS). Keep an eye on your emails and make sure you complete each task as it becomes available: you will receive instructions about how to do this, including who you can contact if you need help.
- **Getting your student card:** Your student card will be your identity (ID) card at university. You will use it to access buildings, borrow from the library, print, can access student discounts. You may need to visit a physical location to arrange this, or you might be able to order it online: you will receive instructions about this before you start at university.
- **Tip:** Print out or file the emails you get from your university: this is so you can save them and refer back to them if you need information.

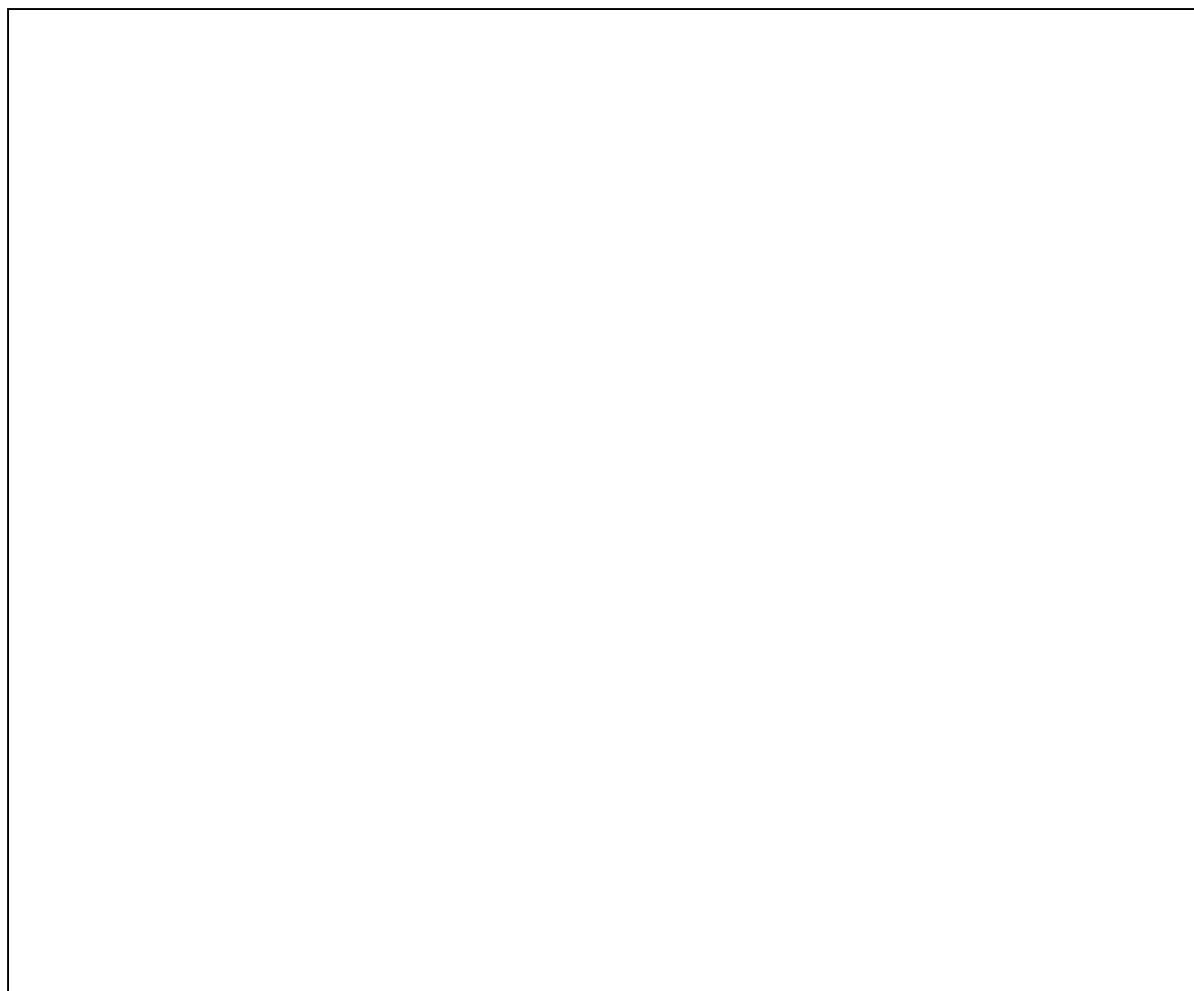
## Orientation

Most universities will have an orientation week or day at the start of the teaching period before classes begin. There will be events, information sessions, and social activities to help you prepare for university. Orientation may feel busy, but it's a great way to get familiar with the campus, learn important information about university life, and meet new people.

Here are some tips for making orientation work for you:

- Attend information sessions that are directly relevant to your course
- Bring a support person if that helps you feel more comfortable
- Take notes or photos of important information
- Don't feel you need to attend every (or even any!) social event – choose what feels manageable, relevant, or interesting for you

There is more information in the next section, **Starting classes: Understanding the university learning environment**, about preparing for your classes specifically.



## Familiarising yourself with campus

Before classes begin, spending time getting to know your campus can reduce anxiety and help you feel more confident. This preparation plays to common autistic strengths like planning and attention to detail.

### Physical navigation

- Download the campus map from your university's website – you can also look at [StudentVIP's 'Lost on Campus' app](#), which is often more detailed than what a university will provide and can include images and descriptions of the buildings and rooms on campus
- Visit during quieter times (like school holidays) if possible
- Take photos of key locations to help with visual memory
- Find at least two routes between important places in case of disruptions
- Locate essential facilities: toilets, food outlets, quiet study spaces, disability services

### Finding your sanctuary spaces

Many autistic students benefit from having quiet, low-sensory spaces. Look for:

- Less crowded areas of the library
- Outdoor spaces with minimal foot traffic
- Disability support areas (many universities have specific quiet spaces)
- Student lounges that are typically less busy



#### Case Study/Research Tip

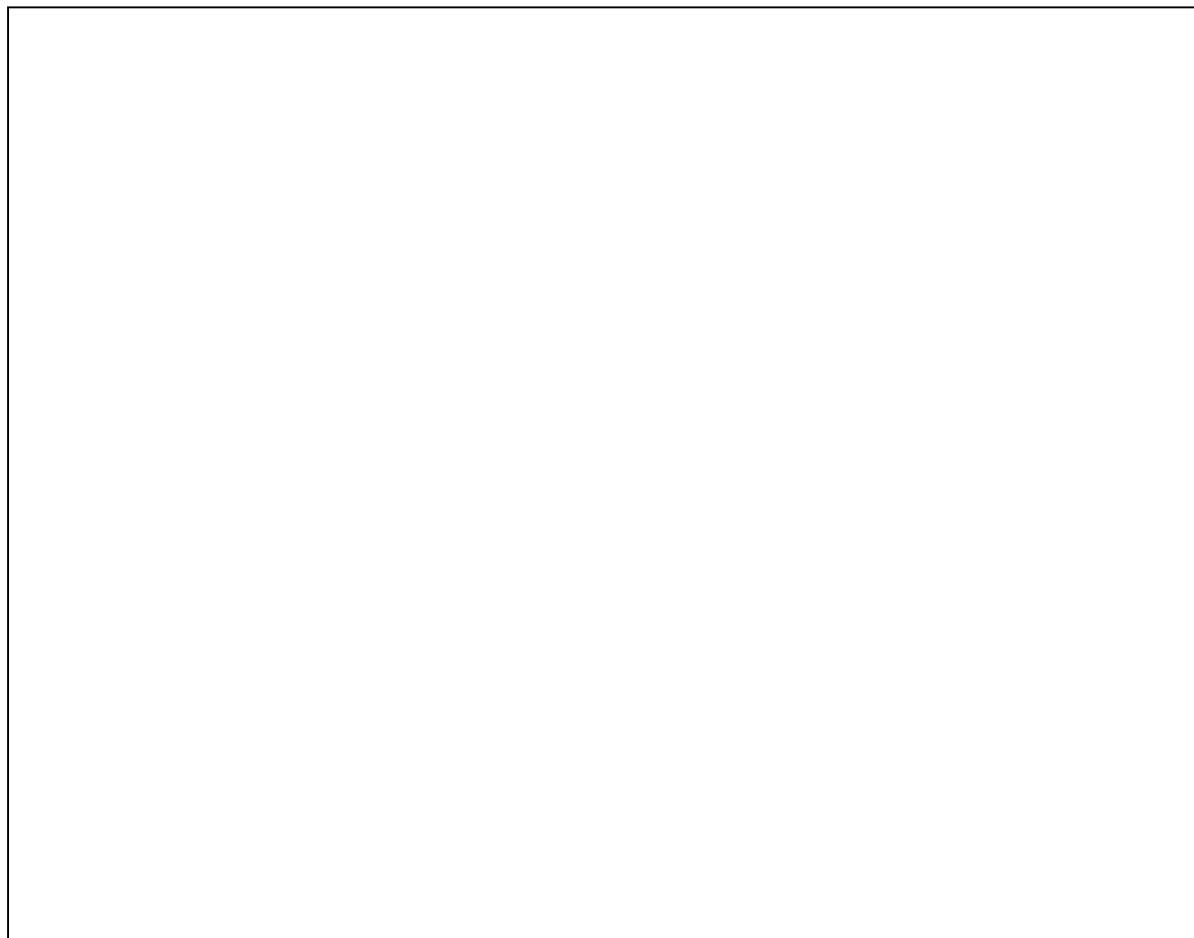
As one student noted: "Being able to visit campus was really important, getting to know the environment and where you'd be studying. For me, being able to choose a smaller campus was really helpful because I find it very difficult to remember where to go" (Reframing Autism, 2025).

## Understanding transport and timing

Think ahead about how you are going to get to university. Will you take public transport, drive, or have someone else drive you?

Here are some tips for planning your transport:

- Use Google Maps or a public transport app to save your journey so you can find it easily when you need to
- Practice your journey to campus at different times
- Allow extra time for unexpected delays or route changes
- Consider alternatives like cycling or walking if public transport feels overwhelming
- If you're driving, look at parking options and space: parking is often expensive and hard to find on campus, and you might need a permit before you arrive. These can usually be found by googling "[campus name] parking permit". Some permits are only valid in some areas or parking buildings on campus, so check carefully before you purchase your permit.



## Starting classes: Understanding university learning environments

University learning is different from high school. The way that you learn and complete assessment might be different to how you have done this at school. This section explains the different learning environments you might experience and the types of assessment you may be asked complete.

### Readings and preparation

In many programs, you will be expected to have read or reviewed learning content before you attend a lecture, class, or lab session. This content might be:

- Readings from a physical textbook
- An online resource
- An academic journal paper
- Watching a prerecorded lecture or video
- A quiz or activity, or a post on an online forum

Context can be compulsory, prescribed, or required, meaning you must read or complete it; it also might be optional, meaning you might find it helpful for your learning but it is not mandatory.

This information will be available through the Learning Management System (LMS) that your university uses. The LMS, sometimes called Wattle, Blackboard, Canvas, or Cloud, is where you will find all of the information about your learning and assessment. This includes what you will learn throughout the semester and when, and the activities you will do. Make sure you check this site regularly!

While most of this content will be provided to you as an online link, you may occasionally need to purchase a physical textbook or access something from the library. If you need a physical textbook, you can often purchase these for a significantly reduced price second-hand – have a look online and ask other students to find out the best way to access physical resources.



## Lectures: Large group learning

What to expect	Strategies that work
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 50-300+ students in large theatres or halls</li> <li>• Lecturers present information with limited interaction</li> <li>• Material usually builds on prescribed readings you will receive in advance</li> <li>• May be recorded, but not always</li> <li>• Can be 1-3 hours long</li> <li>• May be presented by a guest lecturer with specialised knowledge on that week's topic, or a regular lecturer</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sit where you feel comfortable – near exits, away from high-traffic areas, or closer to the front for better audio</li> <li>• Bring noise-cancelling headphones if background noise is distracting</li> <li>• Take breaks if lectures are long – step outside briefly if needed</li> <li>• Use lecture recordings to review content at your own pace</li> <li>• Take notes in whatever format works for you – handwritten, typed, or audio recordings</li> <li>• Look on your unit's online learning page to see whether lecture slides will be provided before/after class. If they are, you may not need to take as many notes. If not, you may be able to request them as an accommodation</li> </ul>

## Tutorials and seminars: Small group learning

What to expect	Strategies that work
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 10-30 students in smaller rooms</li> <li>• More discussion and interaction expected</li> <li>• May include group activities or presentations</li> <li>• Attendance is usually monitored and may be compulsory</li> <li>• Sometimes taught by the same person who gives the lecture, but usually by a tutor with specific knowledge of the content, but not necessarily the unit or assessment requirements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preparing a few relevant comments or questions beforehand if you find this helps you to express your thoughts better</li> <li>• Using written notes to organise your thoughts before speaking</li> <li>• Sitting where you can see the tutor and other students clearly</li> <li>• Approach or email the tutor after class to ask questions if you don't want to ask during class</li> <li>• Bring any sensory supports you need (within safety requirements)</li> <li>• Communicate with tutors about your learning preferences and requirements</li> <li>• Consider timing of classes – are you more focused in mornings or afternoons?</li> </ul>

### Research Tip

While you might be nervous to share your learning access plan or adjustments with your tutor or lecturer, it can be very helpful and validating.

One student shared: "I had a tutor tell me that more than half the people in psych had an Educational Access Plan 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" (Tan et al., 2024 via ADCET, 204).

## Laboratory and practical classes

What to expect	Strategies that work
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Require following precise procedures and safety protocols</li> <li>• May involve group work and shared equipment</li> <li>• Usually have strict attendance requirements</li> <li>• Can involve sensory challenges (chemicals, equipment noise, bright lights)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review procedures beforehand when possible</li> <li>• Bring any sensory supports you need (within safety requirements)</li> <li>• Communicate with demonstrators about your learning preferences and requirements</li> <li>• Consider timing of classes – are you more focused in mornings or afternoons?</li> </ul>

## Online and blended learning

Many universities now offer flexible learning options that can work well for autistic students.

Benefits of online learning	Potential challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Control over your physical environment: you can learn where you want to!</li> <li>• Ability to replay content and process at your own pace</li> <li>• Reduced sensory overload and social demands when you learn from home</li> <li>• Familiar technology and settings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can be less structured than face-to-face learning: you will need to plan your time carefully</li> <li>• May feel isolating without regular in-person contact: have a look at opportunities to connect with other students which interest you</li> <li>• Technical issues can be frustrating: try to test your technology in advance and plan extra buffer time for when things don't work out</li> </ul>

## Approaching assessment: Demonstrating your knowledge

Assessment at university includes various formats, each with different demands and opportunities. Different programs will use different types of assessment. If you have a learning access plan or adjustments, some of these assessment features might be altered for you to make them more accessible, e.g. taking an exam in a smaller quieter room.

When you get information about your assessments, it should include instructions on how to complete the assessment, and a marking guide that will tell you what your marker is going to be looking for so you can optimise your performance.

### Understanding different assessment types

Written assignments	Exams
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Essays requiring critical analysis and argumentation</li> <li>• Reports following specific formats and structures</li> <li>• Literature reviews synthesising multiple sources</li> <li>• Research projects investigating specific questions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May be multiple choice, short answer, or essay format</li> <li>• Usually time-limited and held in large venues</li> <li>• Often worth significant percentages of your final grade</li> <li>• May require memorisation of facts and concepts, or may be 'open book' where you can bring in notes</li> </ul>
Presentations	Practical Assessment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual or group presentations to class</li> <li>• May be formal or informal in style</li> <li>• Often assessed on content, delivery, and visual aids</li> <li>• Time limits typically enforced</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Laboratory reports and practical demonstrations</li> <li>• Portfolio submissions showing ongoing work</li> <li>• Creative projects in relevant disciplines</li> <li>• Field work and placements in some courses</li> </ul>

## Strategies for academic success

### Playing to your strengths

- If you have strong attention to detail, use this for research and referencing
- If you prefer systematic approaches, create templates and checklists
- If you have deep interests, look for ways to connect assignments to your passions
- If you think logically, focus on clear argument structure

#### Research Tip

Research shows that autistic students can struggle with starting assignments and managing deadlines (Gibbs et al., 2024).

Effective strategies include:

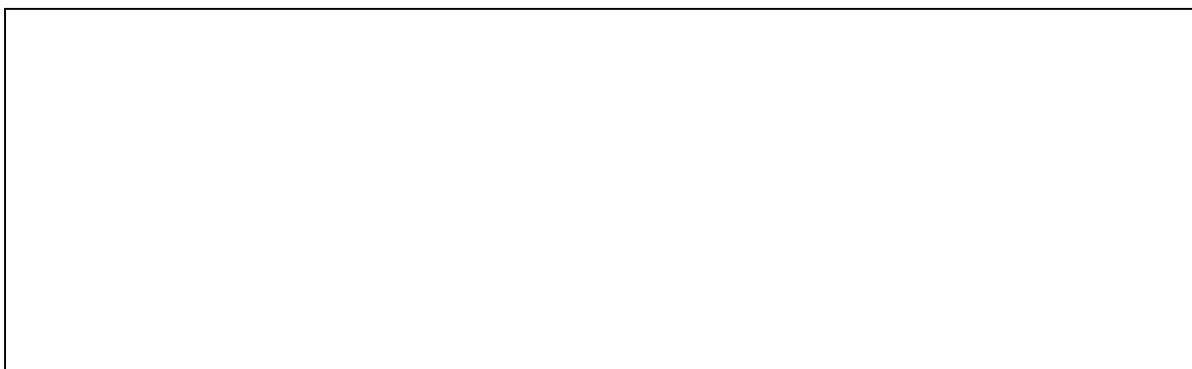
- **Break large tasks into smaller steps:** Instead of "write 2000-word essay," list specific tasks like "find 5 sources," "create outline," "write introduction"
- **Use visual planning tools:** Wall planners, calendars, or apps that show deadlines clearly
- **Start early, even if it's just planning:** You don't need to write perfectly from the beginning
- **Set up your environment:** Minimise distractions and create conditions where you can focus

## Getting help

You aren't expected to be able to complete all your university assignments perfectly without any help. Check out the section called **Support systems: getting help when you need it** for information about how you can find supports for completing your assessment.

Importantly, if there are parts of your assessment that just aren't working for you, you might be able to get an adjustment: see 'putting supports in place' for more information about accessing disability supports.

You may also be able to ask for examples of past students' work to see how they structured their assignment.



## Co-curricular activities: Beyond the classroom

University life extends beyond formal classes, and these activities can enrich your experience and help you find your community. Structured activities are also a great way to meet people with shared interests who may become new friends.

### Student clubs and societies

Most universities have lots of clubs and societies which will run activities and events for members. You can find these clubs and societies by Googling '[your university name] clubs and societies'].

Benefits of getting involved	Choosing what works for you
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Meeting people with similar interests</li> <li>Developing skills outside your academic area</li> <li>Building networks for future career opportunities</li> <li>Having fun and balancing study with other activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Look for clubs related to your interests or academic field</li> <li>Neurodiversity or disability advocacy groups can provide community and support</li> <li>Academic societies often have events relevant to your studies</li> </ul>



#### Research Tip

Many autistic students become passionate advocates for positive change. Research shows (Tan et al., 2024) that autistic students often go on to:

- Develop disability awareness training for staff
- Sit on academic boards to influence policy
- Create peer support networks for other neurodivergent students
- Found inclusive societies and community groups

Getting involved in student advocacy is a great way to meet people, advocate for change, and build confidence in self-advocacy.

## Work and volunteering

While you study, you might need to work to earn money to support yourself. You might also choose to work or volunteer to develop new skills. Here are some tips for balancing study with work:

- Consider your energy levels and processing needs when planning work hours
- Start small and build up your involvement gradually
- Look for positions and opportunities that use your strengths and are aligned with your interests or career goals
- Communicate with employers about any adjustments you might need
- Let your boss know that you are a student and may be less available during busier study periods, and that your availability might change each time you start a new unit
- Remember that some students need to work fewer hours to maintain their academic performance
- Use volunteering to practice professional communication and teamwork skills

If you receive an income support payment, such as a Centrelink payment, check if there are any limits on the number of hours you can work before your payment is reduced or removed.



## Support systems: Getting help when you need it

It is ok to ask for help when you need it. Transitioning to university can be challenging for all students, autistic and non-autistic. You can get help from your university: most universities offer academic support, as well as personal and wellbeing support.

### Academic support

When to seek help	Where to find support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The assignment requirements are not clear to you, or you are unfamiliar with the format</li> <li>You need clarification about course content.</li> <li>You're finding it hard to manage your workload, or might miss a deadline.</li> <li>You want tips on study skills and techniques that might work best for you.</li> <li>You want feedback on your progress or accountability with your study.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Lecturers and tutors:</b> Most have regular consultation hours for student questions. You can also send an email or use the online learning system.</li> <li><b>Learning support services:</b> Help with study skills, writing, and academic strategies. You can usually find these through your university library.</li> <li><b>Subject-specific support:</b> Many courses have additional help sessions or online resources.</li> <li><b>Peer support:</b> Study groups, tutoring programs, or online forums.</li> <li><b>Disability support:</b> See “Putting supports in place” for more information.</li> </ul>

## Personal and wellbeing support

University Counselling	External options
<p>University counselling services provide free and confidential support for students, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help with stress, anxiety, depression, and adjustment difficulties.</li> <li>• Understanding of student life and academic pressures.</li> <li>• Can provide strategies for managing university-specific challenges.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintain connections with existing support networks (family, friends, healthcare providers).</li> <li>• Consider autism-specific support groups or online communities.</li> <li>• Look after your physical health through exercise, nutrition, and sleep.</li> <li>• Recognise when you need professional help and seek it early</li> <li>• See 'Additional Resources' for more ideas.</li> </ul>



### Reflection Question

What existing supports and connections do you have from other parts of your life that might assist you at university?

## Self-advocacy

Self-advocacy means speaking up about what you need, and how you think something could be better. Self-advocacy is a skill that develops over time. It's about understanding your needs, knowing your rights, and communicating effectively to get the support that helps you succeed. More information about your rights and entitlements can be found in the **Additional Resources** section on **Page 53**.

Remember that university systems were often designed without autistic students in mind, but that doesn't mean you can't succeed within them. The key is understanding how things work and finding ways to adapt them to your needs.

Effective self-advocacy involves explaining your needs clearly and suggesting practical solutions. Here are some tips for self-advocacy at university.

### **Tip 1: Focus on your functional needs**

Autistic people have lots of different strengths and support needs: saying "I am autistic so I need help" might not give another person a good understanding of what you need, especially if they don't know a lot about autistic experiences.

Try: "I process auditory information better when I can also read it, so access to lecture transcripts would help me learn more effectively". This focuses on your functional capacity and needs and is more specific.

### **Tip 2: Suggest specific solutions**

- Research what accommodations are available and which ones address your specific needs (see **Resource 2** for ideas)
- Propose trial periods for new accommodations
- Offer alternative ways to demonstrate your learning if standard methods don't work
- Be flexible and willing to work collaboratively on solutions – you should also be able to expect that the disability service staff will offer you the same flexibility and willingness.

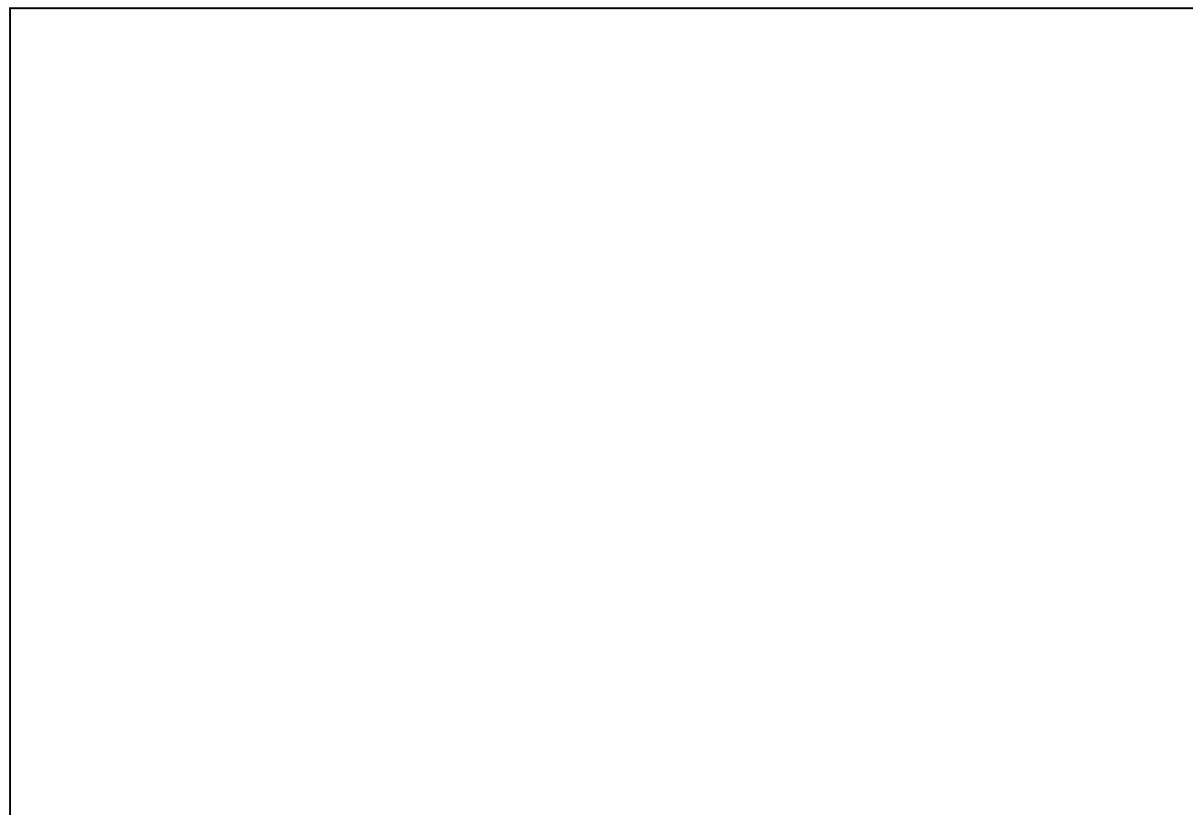
### **Tip 3: Document important conversations**

- Follow up verbal conversations with email summaries
- Keep records of accommodation requests and responses
- Save copies of your official accommodation plans
- Note when accommodations are working well, or need adjustment

## Academic appeals and complaints

When something goes wrong or you don't have the experience you expect, you can make an appeal or a complaint. An appeal is when you request that a decision, like a grade or an application, is reviewed. A complaint is when you tell your university about something you think has gone wrong or hasn't been done properly and ask for them to fix it. Here are some tips for when you think about asking for an appeal or making a complaint:

- Start with informal discussions with relevant staff, and use official complaint processes if informal approaches don't work.
- Know your rights under anti-discrimination legislation – you can find information on the [Australian Disability Clearninghouse for Education and Training](#) website
- Keep detailed records of interactions and decisions.
- Student advocacy services can help with complaints and appeals, including where you should send your complaint or appeal and what information you should include.
- External advocacy organisations can also provide advice and support.
- The [National Student Ombudsman](#) and the Australian Human Rights Commission provide formal complaints pathways.



## Part 3: Practical Strategies for Thriving

### Section Overview

In this section, you will find information about:

1. Study approaches you can experiment with that work with your brain
2. How to build relationships and community at university
3. Looking after your health and wellbeing

Now that you understand university systems and how to navigate them, it's time to focus on the practical strategies that will help you not just survive, but thrive at university. This section is about working with your autistic brain, building meaningful connections, and creating the conditions where you can do your best work.

### Research Tip

As one autistic student noted: "I'm quite proud of still making it through with a decent GPA. I was a single parent... I had no money, no resources, it was a pandemic and I still finished with two thesis high D, HDs, and a 6.0 GPA. I'm really proud of that" (Tan et al., 2024, p. 1350).



## Study approaches that work with your brain

### Study environments and sensory considerations

Creating the right environment for learning can make an enormous difference to your ability to focus and process information.

#### Designing your optimal study space:

Research shows that many autistic students perform better when they have control over their environment (Gibbs et al., 2024). While your study environment is not always something you are able to control, here are some ways you might be able to adjust it, or request adjustment to create more sensory-affirming spaces. Consider:

Sensory factors	Location options
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lighting: Natural light, adjustable lamps, or specific lighting that doesn't cause strain</li> <li>Sound: Noise-cancelling headphones, white noise, music, or complete silence</li> <li>Temperature: Dress in layers or choose study locations where you can control temperature</li> <li>Texture: Comfortable seating, fidget tools, or familiar objects that help you focus</li> <li>Visual environment: Minimal clutter, organised materials, or visual supports like charts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Home study: Complete control over environment, familiar surroundings, access to your own food and facilities</li> <li>Library quiet zones: Structured environment, minimal social interaction, access to resources</li> <li>Small study rooms: Control over space while still being on campus</li> <li>Outdoor spaces: Fresh air and natural environment if weather permits</li> <li>Disability support centres: Often have quiet, low-stimulation study areas specifically designed for students with different needs</li> </ul>

## Time management and organisation systems

University requires you to do more self-directed learning with less scaffolding from teachers compared to the school environment. This can actually work well for autistic students who thrive with clear systems and routines.

### **Reflection Question**

Do you have systems or approaches in other parts of your life that might help at university? Are there things you've tried before that work, or don't work?

## Creating visual planning systems

Many autistic students benefit from visual organisational tools that make deadlines and commitments concrete and visible.

### **Suggestion**

Here are some ideas for planning systems...

Semester overview planning:

- Create a large wall calendar showing all major deadlines and commitments, or use an online calendar that syncs across your different devices
- Create recurring events for weekly classes, study and reading time, or commitments to build routine
- Use colour coding for different subjects or types of tasks
- Include personal commitments, work, and social activities alongside study
- Mark important dates like census dates, exam periods, assessment deadlines, and semester breaks

Weekly planning:

- Use a weekly planner that shows your actual timetable alongside study time
- Block out time for specific activities (lectures, study, meals, exercise, rest)
- Build in buffer time between commitments and include travel time
- Schedule regular review times to update and adjust your plans

## Breaking down large tasks

One of the most common challenges for autistic students is getting started on large assignments.

### Research Tip

Research shows this affects many students: "starting is always like the hardest point. Once I get on a roll, I can smash out a big chunk and in like a day" (Gibbs et al., 2024, p. 2676).

Strategies you could try include:

- Collating and reading what you'll need to complete the assignment (e.g. assignment instructions, marking rubric, journal articles, weekly readings) – if you aren't sure about something or need to clarify instructions, ask questions early!
- Break assignments into 5-7 smaller, specific tasks – you can use online productivity tools like goblin.tools to help you with this
- Set up your document with your name, student ID, and headings for each section for written assignments to create structure and reduce 'blank page' anxiety
- Set deadlines for each component, not just the final submission
- Start with tasks you find most interesting or manageable
- Use timers to work in focused bursts with regular breaks
- Celebrate completing each stage

## Managing energy and capacity

Understanding your own patterns of energy and focus can help you plan more effectively:

- Notice when you're most alert and schedule demanding tasks for these times
- Recognise signs that you're becoming overwhelmed before you reach crisis point
- Plan recovery time after particularly demanding periods
- Use your strongest focus times for your most important work

Remember that looking after your body and brain comes first. When we take care of ourselves, our energy and focus for study will improve.

Many autistic people can find it a challenge to describe their emotions or physical feelings – this is called **alexithymia**. Sometimes, we're not sure why we are feeling 'off', where our anxiety might be coming from, or why our energy is low.

We can also forget about making sure we are drinking enough water, eating nourishing food, going to the bathroom, sitting comfortably, and staying warm or cool enough when we are hyper-focused or when our executive functioning is low. This can impact our ability to do our best work at university.



### Resource 5: Quick Energy and Capacity Check-in

The **Quick Energy and Capacity Check-in** resource includes some easy questions to ask yourself to help you understand your energy levels, and how you might be able to make yourself more comfortable.

You can use this when you're feeling 'off', or even before you start an assignment or study session to help look after yourself. You can print this out and stick it above your desk as a reminder. You can find the **Quick Energy and Capacity Check-in** sheet on **Page 72**.

## Note-taking

Different brains process information differently, and finding the right approach for you can transform your learning experience.

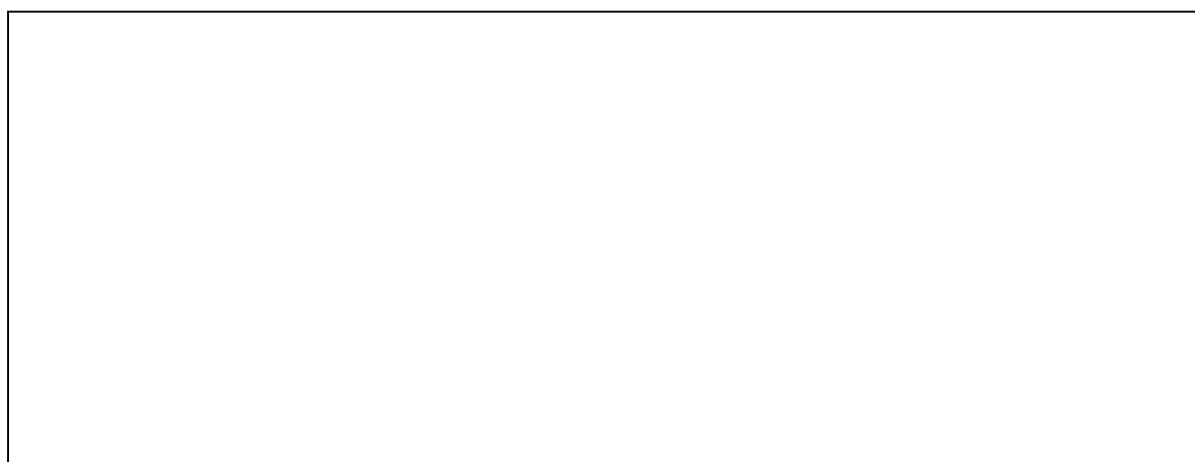
Experiment with different ways of capturing and reviewing information:

- **Audio recording:** Record lectures (with permission) to review at your own pace
- **Visual notes:** Use diagrams, mind maps, or flowcharts to represent relationships between ideas
- **Digital tools:** Apps like Notion, Obsidian, Craft, or OneNote that let you link and search information
- **Physical writing:** Some people process better when writing by hand
- **Video resources:** Supplement lectures with online videos that explain concepts differently

## Processing time considerations

Many autistic people need more time to process complex information, but this can actually lead to deeper understanding. Here are some tips:

- Read materials before lectures when possible
- Review lecture recordings at slower speeds or with pauses
- Ask for clarification immediately rather than hoping things will become clear later
- Use office hours or consultation times with teaching staff
- Form study groups with people who complement your learning style
- Find additional online resources on course content to use as a primer before your lectures or classes



## Leveraging your autistic strengths

Your autistic brain has qualities that can enhance your university learning. The key is recognising these strengths and building your study approaches around them.

**Remember:** the best kind of study skills and techniques are the ones that work for you. They might not be the first ones you try, and you might need to experiment!

### Research Tip

One student explained: "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" (Tan et al., 2024, via ADCET, 2024).

### Possible strength 1: hyperfocus and deep interest

Many autistic students describe the ability to become completely absorbed in topics that fascinate them. This is called hyperfocus and may be something you have experienced. In fact, the degree you are studying might just be that area of hyperfocus we are talking about!

However, being interested in the topic of your degree does not mean you will be interested in all of the compulsory units that are a part of it. Here are some tips to help you find the interesting parts of content where possible, and draw on your hyperfocus to be super productive and get things done!

*How to use this strength:*

- Choose elective subjects that genuinely interest you when possible
- Find ways to connect assignments to your special interests or passions
- Use your ability to go deep as an advantage in research projects
- Set up your study environment to minimise interruptions when you're in flow

## Possible strength 2: Attention to detail and systematic thinking

Your ability to notice patterns, remember specifics, and approach problems systematically can be invaluable in academic work.

*How to use this strength:*

- Consider enrolling in subjects requiring precision (sciences, mathematics, language learning, visual arts, research methods)
- Use your eye for detail in editing and proofreading your work
- Create comprehensive reference systems and note-taking methods
- Develop templates and checklists for complex assignments

## Possible strength 3: direct and honest communication

Your tendency to say what you mean clearly and honestly can be refreshing in academic discussions and presentations.

*How to use this strength:*

- Contribute unique perspectives in tutorials and seminars
- Ask clarifying questions that others might be too polite to ask
- Provide genuine, constructive feedback in peer review activities
- Build reputation for reliability and authenticity



### Reflection Question

Think back to your autistic strengths: how can you apply these in your learning?

## Building authentic relationships and community

University can feel isolating, but there are many opportunities to build meaningful connections with people who share your interests and values.

### Communication strategies that work for you

Rather than trying to fit into neurotypical communication styles, focus on developing your authentic communication while building skills for different contexts.

#### **Suggestion**

Think about playing to your communication strengths:

- Use your directness as an advantage in academic discussions
- Ask the clarifying questions others might be thinking but not voicing
- Contribute unique perspectives based on your experiences and interests
- Be the person who remembers important details others might forget

### Managing challenging situations

Research shows that communication difficulties between autistic and non-autistic people often go both ways – this is called the "double empathy problem." It's not that autistic people are bad at communicating; it's that autistic and non-autistic people have different communication styles that don't always match up well.

Understanding this can help you:

- Recognise when communication breakdowns aren't your fault
- Develop strategies for communicating with non-autistic staff and students
- Find people who "get" your communication style
- Advocate for your communication needs

Here are some tips for managing some situations that might come up during your studies.

In tutorials/classes...	With teaching staff...	In group work situations...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prepare a few relevant comments or questions beforehand</li> <li>• Use notes to organise your thoughts before speaking</li> <li>• Know that it's okay to take time to think before responding</li> <li>• Remember that not everyone needs to contribute to every discussion in every class</li> <li>• Sometimes you will get questions and topics in advance – you can prepare for these, but sometimes the conversation will stray from the planned agenda</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Email can be an excellent way to ask questions and get clarification</li> <li>• Use consultation hours when you need more detailed explanations</li> <li>• Be specific about the support that you need, referring to your learning access plan or functional capacity (see the section on <b>Self-advocacy</b>)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Suggest clear task division based on everyone's strengths</li> <li>• Ask for written records of decisions and deadlines</li> <li>• Communicate your preferred working style early in the process</li> <li>• Use collaborative online tools that make communication more structured</li> <li>• If others aren't contributing, reach out to teaching staff early and ask for support</li> </ul>

## Finding your academic community

University is about more than just classes – it's about finding your intellectual and social community!

### **Suggestion**

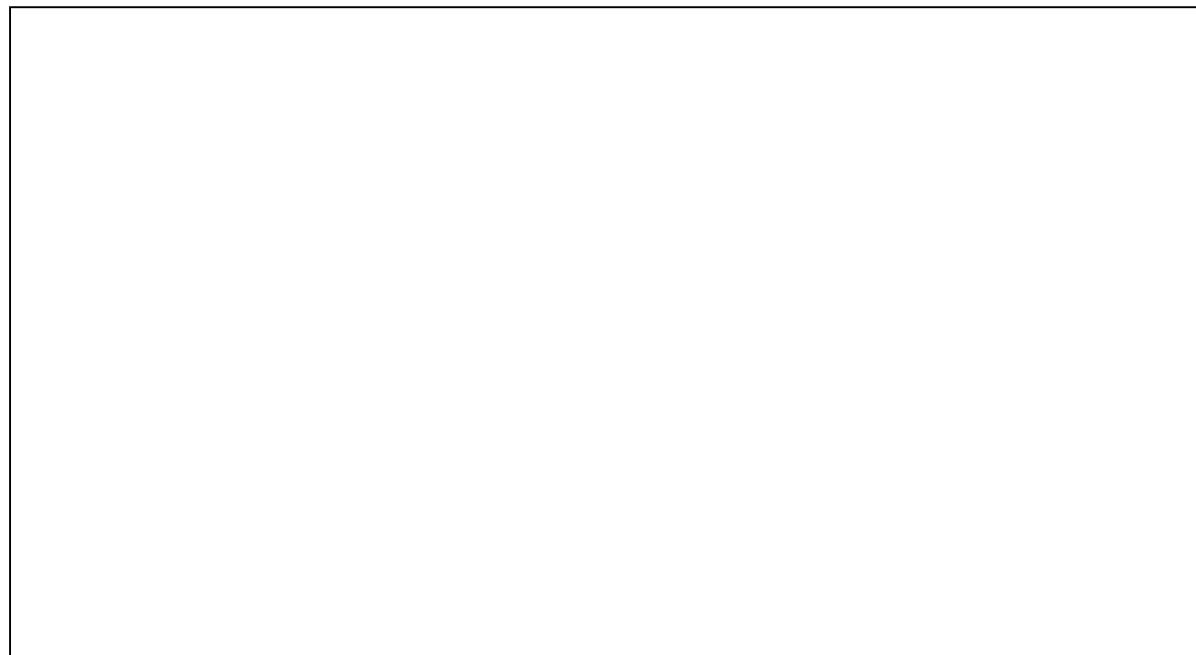
Look for people who share your passions. You can find them through:

- Academic societies related to your field of study
- Clubs focused on your special interests or hobbies
- Research groups or labs where you can contribute to meaningful projects
- Online communities related to your studies

Connecting with other neurodivergent students can also provide mutual understanding and support. Consider joining:

- Neurodiversity or disability advocacy groups
- Study groups specifically for students with different learning styles
- Peer mentoring programs
- Online forums and social media groups

A growing area of research establishes that autistic people often prefer fewer, deeper relationships rather than large social networks. Focus on building a few meaningful connections rather than trying to be social with everyone.



## Working with lecturers and tutors

Building positive relationships with teaching staff can significantly enhance your university experience and academic outcomes.

### Research Tip

Research with autistic students (Gibbs et al., 2024) found they particularly valued staff who:

- Knew them individually beyond just their name
- Were consistent in their teaching and expectations
- Were respectful of the student-staff relationship
- Understood different learning needs

## Strategies for building these relationships

- Attend consultation hours with teaching staff when you have genuine questions or need clarification
- Though it is often hard to articulate exactly what you are struggling with, teaching staff will find it easier to support you if you are specific about what you're finding difficult with rather than saying you "don't understand"
- Show appreciation for helpful explanations or support
- Follow up on advice or suggestions they provide
- Maintain professional boundaries while being authentic about your learning needs. Teaching staff may feel uncomfortable if you share extensive details about your personal life, as you may feel uncomfortable talking about them. Try to keep your conversations focused on your learning.

## Wellbeing and self-regulation

University can be demanding, and maintaining your wellbeing is essential for long-term success.

### Managing overwhelm and preventing burnout

Recognising your early warning signs and having strategies in place can prevent minor stress from becoming major problems.

Early warning signs	Burnout prevention strategies	Recovery strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulty concentrating or making decisions</li> <li>• Increased sensory sensitivity</li> <li>• Changes in sleep or eating patterns</li> <li>• Feeling more irritable or emotional than usual</li> <li>• Physical symptoms like headaches or fatigue</li> <li>• Withdrawing from social contact</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build regular breaks and downtime into your schedule</li> <li>• Maintain routines that support your wellbeing</li> <li>• Monitor your workload and adjust expectations when necessary</li> <li>• Stay connected with support networks</li> <li>• Practice self-compassion when things don't go according to plan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have a "crisis plan" prepared for when you're overwhelmed</li> <li>• Know who you can contact for support (friends, family, counselling services)</li> <li>• Identify activities that help you recover (rest, special interests, sensory regulation)</li> <li>• Consider reducing your study load to part time temporarily if needed</li> <li>• Use university counselling services or other professional support</li> </ul>

## Sensory regulation strategies

Managing sensory input is crucial for maintaining focus and preventing overwhelm.

Sensory breaks	Sensory toolkit	Managing sensory overwhelm
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Schedule regular breaks in low-stimulation environments</li> <li>• Use techniques like deep breathing or progressive muscle relaxation</li> <li>• Engage with preferred sensory experiences (music, textures, movement)</li> <li>• Step outside for fresh air and natural light when possible</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Noise-cancelling headphones or earplugs</li> <li>• Sunglasses for bright lights</li> <li>• Fidget tools or stress balls</li> <li>• Comfortable clothing layers</li> <li>• Snacks and water bottle</li> <li>• Essential oils or other preferred scents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arrive to classes early to choose optimal seating</li> <li>• Use movement breaks between classes</li> <li>• Identify quiet routes around campus</li> <li>• Have backup plans for when spaces are too overwhelming</li> <li>• Consider online options for particularly challenging environments</li> </ul>

## Maintaining connections with existing support networks

University is a time of change, but maintaining important relationships and support systems provides stability.

Family and friends	Healthcare providers	Online communities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicate about how university is affecting you and what support you need</li> <li>• Be specific about how people can help (practical support, emotional support, space)</li> <li>• Share your successes and challenges so people understand your experience</li> <li>• Maintain regular contact even when you're busy with studies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep regular appointments with GPs, psychiatrists, psychologists, or other providers</li> <li>• Inform them about university-related stressors or changes in your life</li> <li>• Ask about strategies for managing academic stress</li> <li>• Ensure you have ongoing access to any medications or treatments you need</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stay connected with autistic communities that provide understanding and support</li> <li>• Share your university experiences to help other autistic students</li> <li>• Seek advice from others who have navigated similar challenges</li> <li>• Contribute your knowledge and experience to support others</li> </ul>

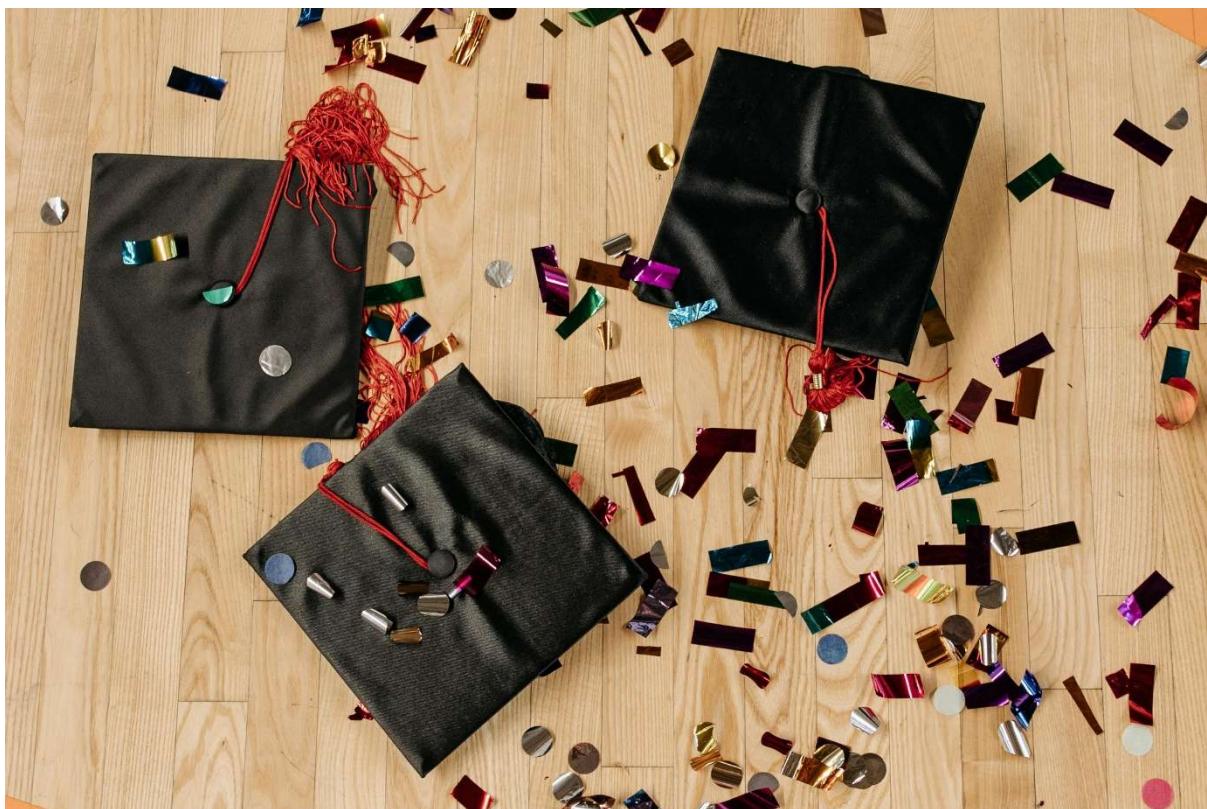
## Putting it all together

Thriving at university isn't about being perfect or never struggling. It's about understanding yourself, using your strengths, getting support when you need it, and building a life that works for you.

Remember that success looks different for everyone. For some autistic students, it might mean graduating with top grades and pursuing postgraduate research. For others, it might mean completing a degree part-time while managing other life commitments. Some might change directions multiple times before finding their path. All of these journeys are valid.

What matters is that you're working toward goals that are meaningful to you, in ways that respect your neurotype and support your wellbeing. University can be a place where you discover your passions, develop your talents, build lifelong relationships, and contribute to knowledge and society in ways that matter to you.

Your journey through university is an achievement worth celebrating, whatever form it takes.



# Additional Resources

## Section Overview

In this section, you will find lots of different places you can go for more information to help you along your university journey as an autistic person.

Research tells us that your time at university is not just going to involve academic learning, but developing a better understanding of your autistic identity. Below are some books, podcasts, websites, and other resources you might find interesting or a source of support during your time at university.

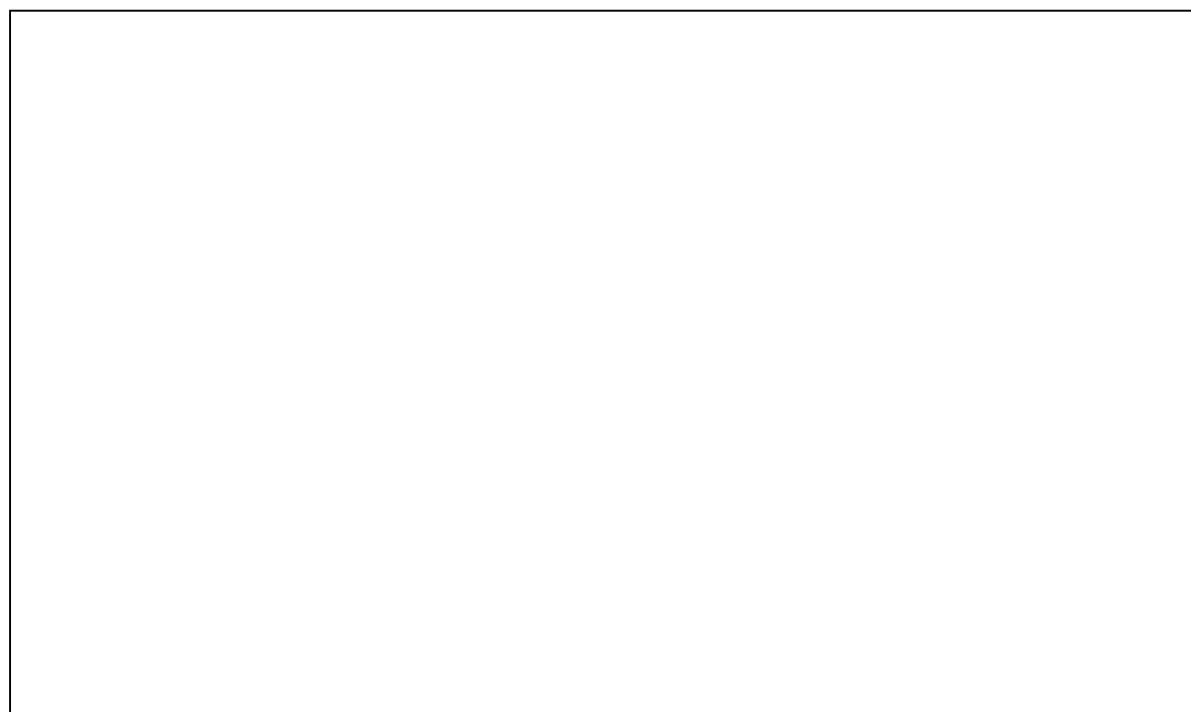
These resources are all grounded in the neurodiversity paradigm and focus on autistic strengths rather than deficits. They'll help you understand your rights, develop self-advocacy skills, and connect with community - all essential for thriving at university as your authentic autistic self.

Links are provided to help you locate these resources, but make sure you shop around for the best price if you are going to buy something – we might not have found the best deal for you!

## Learning about autism and neurodiversity

- **Book - [Growing into Autism by Sandra Thom-Jones](#)**: An Australian autistic academic's perspective on late diagnosis and embracing autistic identity in higher education contexts. Particularly valuable for understanding how autism can be a strength in academic settings.
- **Book - [The Year I Met My Brain by Matilda Bosely](#)**: A young Australian journalist's honest account of navigating ADHD whilst building a career. Great for understanding the intersection of neurodivergence and professional development.
- **Book - [Unmasking Autism by Devon Price](#)**: Explores the hidden costs of masking autistic traits and provides practical strategies for authentic self-advocacy. Essential reading for understanding how to thrive as your authentic self at university.
- **Book - [Autistics at Work by Sandra Thom-Jones](#)**: An Australian autistic academic's perspective on navigating the workplace as an autistic person. It includes ideas about making your workplace accessible for you. A great read for autistic people, and those who work with autistic people.

- **Book - [We're All Neurodiverse by Sonny Jane Wise](#):** An introduction into the neurodiversity paradigm, helping us understand neurodivergent experiences such as autism in a new way.
- **Book - [Untypical by Peter Wharmby](#):** A relatable exploration of autistic experiences in education and employment, with practical insights about self-advocacy and understanding your own needs in academic environments.
- **Book - [Different, Not Less by Chloe Hayden](#):** A memoir by young Australian actress, activist, and content creator Chloe Hayden about growing up autistic and ADHD. Combines personal storytelling with practical advice about self-advocacy, mental health, and pursuing your dreams whilst navigating a neurotypical world - particularly grounding for young autistic people entering university!
- **Podcast - [The Autistic Culture Podcast Network](#):** A series of shows exploring autistic community, identity, and culture from an insider perspective. Helps build understanding of autistic strengths and community connection, which can help you develop your autistic identity at university.
- **Podcast - [The Neurodivergent Woman Podcast](#):** Focuses specifically on women's and non-binary people's experiences of autism and ADHD.
- **Academic Article - [The neurodiversity concept was developed collectively: An overdue correction on the origins of neurodiversity theory](#):** an academic perspective on the development of the concept of neurodiversity.



## Building skills and looking after your wellbeing

- **Book - Self Care for Autistic People by Megan Anna Neff**: Evidence-based strategies specifically designed for autistic nervous systems, covering everything from sensory regulation to social energy management - crucial skills for university success.
- **Workbook - The Neurodivergent Friendly Workbook of DBT Skills by Sonny Jane Wise**: A short and inclusive workbook to help you build skills and confidence with everyday wellbeing, mindfulness, distress tolerance, emotional regulation, and sensory needs. Can be purchased as a digital or printed copy.
- **Workbook - The Neurodivergence Skills Workbook for Autism and ADHD by Jennifer Kemp and Monique Mitchelson**: A longer and more detailed workbook for developing skills and confidence in self-compassion and self-advocacy.
- **Youtube Channel - How to ADHD**: While ADHD-focused, highly relevant since most autistic people also have ADHD traits. Excellent practical strategies for executive function, time management, and study skills that work with neurodivergent brains.

## Learning about higher education and your rights

- **Fact Sheets - [Disability Standards for Education \(DSE\) Resources by Children and Young People with Disability and the Department of Education](#):** Essential for understanding your legal rights to reasonable adjustments in education. Empowers you with knowledge about what universities are required to provide and how to advocate for appropriate supports.
- **Website - [The Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training \(ADCET\)](#):** Your go-to resource for understanding your rights and available supports in Australian higher education. Provides evidence-based guidance on reasonable adjustments and inclusive practices.
- **Podcast - [The ADCET Podcast Collection](#):** A series of shows featuring Australian disability practitioners and students discussing inclusive education practices. Provides insights into how universities can and should support autistic students.
- **Podcast - [The Higher Hopes Podcast](#):** Discussions of higher education cultures and systems, and how we can make them better. Features host and guests with lived experiences including disability and neurodivergence.
- **Podcast - [On the Reg](#):** A productivity and work-life podcast by The Thesis Whisperer's Inger Mewburn and Jason Downs, offering practical, implementable productivity strategies for academics and students. Excellent for learning time management and work strategies that can help with the demands of university study.

## Resource 1: Your Strengths and Interests

Think about your strengths (things you do well) and interests (things you enjoy or like doing). How could you use these at university? You can use the table below to help you.

<b>My strengths</b>	<b>My interests</b>
Strength:	Interest:
How I can use it:	How I can use it:
Strength:	Interest:
How I can use it:	How I can use it:

Strength:	Interest:
How I can use it:	How I can use it:
Strength:	Interest:
How I can use it:	How I can use it:
Strength:	Interest:
How I can use it:	How I can use it:

Strength:	Interest:
How I can use it:	How I can use it:
Strength:	Interest:
How I can use it:	How I can use it:
Strength:	Interest:
How I can use it:	How I can use it:

## Resource 2: Adjustments Workbook

This activity is designed to help you think about what supports might help you succeed at university. There's no right or wrong way to approach this - you know yourself best! Use this as a starting point to identify what might be helpful before meeting with your disability support services.

### How to use this workbook

1. Read through each section and tick or highlight anything that sounds like it might be helpful for you
2. Add your own ideas - these lists aren't exhaustive, and your needs are unique
3. Think about your strengths too - what already works well for you that you want to protect or build on?
4. Consider different contexts - what you need might vary between lectures, tutorials, assessments, or social situations
5. Don't feel you need everything - pick what feels most important or urgent for you right now

**Remember:** asking for adjustments isn't asking for special treatment - it's about creating equal access to your education.

## Academic learning and assessment supports

### Information capture and processing:

- Access to peer note takers or professional note taking services for lectures and tutorials
- Lecture recordings or transcription services so you can review content at your own pace
- Written summaries of key points from verbal presentations or discussions
- Early copies of lecture slides, reading lists, or tutorial discussion points
- Speech recognition software or other assistive technologies for written work
- Alternative formats for course materials (e.g., audio versions, larger fonts, simplified layouts)

### Assessment arrangements:

- Alternative examination arrangements (separate rooms, extended time, alternative formats)
- Assistive technology access during exams and assessments
- Alternative assessment formats that play to your strengths (e.g., portfolio instead of exam, written instead of oral presentation)
- Extended deadlines or staged submission dates for large assignments
- Clear, detailed assessment criteria and marking rubrics provided well in advance

### Tutorial and class participation:

- Smaller tutorial groups or consistent tutors
- Advance notice of discussion topics or questions
- Options to contribute in writing (polls, forums, email) rather than speaking aloud
- Designated speaking order rather than spontaneous contributions
- Permission to step out of class if you need a sensory break

For research/higher degree students:

- Flexible supervision arrangements and meeting formats
- Written communication options with supervisors
- Structured milestone planning and clear thesis requirements
- Alternative thesis formats (e.g., thesis by publication)
- Extended candidature timeframes where appropriate

Your ideas and notes:



## Environmental and communication supports

### Sensory environment modifications:

- Access to quiet study spaces or reduced-sensory zones
- Seating away from high-traffic areas, doors, or distracting elements
- Adjustments to lighting (avoiding fluorescent lights, dimmer options)
- Temperature-controlled spaces or permission to adjust your immediate environment
- Noise-reducing options (carpeted rooms, sound dampening, permission to use noise-cancelling headphones)
- Consistent, predictable classroom locations
- Avoiding hot-desking arrangements - having a designated workspace

### Communication and information processing:

- Clear communication protocols with staff about your preferred communication methods
- Reasonable response timeframes that account for your processing needs
- Written information about course structures, expectations, and requirements provided in advance
- Permission to have a support person present during meetings, presentations, or fieldwork
- Extended time for processing information and completing complex tasks
- Email communication preferred over phone calls or unscheduled drop-ins

### For research/higher degree students:

- Advance notice of conference presentations or public speaking requirements
- Flexible attendance arrangements for seminars or workshops
- Hybrid or remote supervisory meeting options
- Clear, final versions of all milestone documentation and requirements
- Structured research planning tools and templates

Your ideas and notes:

## Study skills and transition supports

### Case management and planning:

- Regular check-ins with a disability support coordinator
- Help developing study engagement strategies that work with your brain
- Collaborative development of personalised planning and time management systems
- Support with self-advocacy skills and communicating your needs to academic staff
- Transition planning that builds on your existing strengths and interests

### Peer connections and social supports:

- Peer connection programs with other autistic or neurodivergent students
- Support with campus navigation and finding your way around
- Social skills support or structured social opportunities that feel comfortable
- Study groups or peer support that accommodates different communication styles
- Mentorship opportunities with other autistic students or graduates

### Skill development:

- Academic writing support that understands neurodivergent thinking styles
- Time management and executive functioning strategy development
- Research skills workshops (for research students)
- Sensory-friendly writing retreats or study intensives
- Technology training for assistive tools or university systems

### For research/higher degree students:

- Structured peer support networks within research communities
- Writing retreats with sensory considerations
- Research skill development workshops
- Career development support that recognises autistic strengths

Your ideas and notes:

## Reflecting on your notes and ideas

1. What are your top 3-5 priorities right now?
2. What are your key strengths that you want to make sure are recognised and supported?
3. What concerns or questions do you want to discuss with disability support services?
4. What would success look like for you at university?

## Taking this to your meeting

Bring this brainstorm with you to your disability support services meeting. Here are some tips for when you advocate for your needs:

- Remember that this is a collaborative process - you and the disability support team are working together
- You don't have to justify your needs, but explaining how things impact you and how the adjustment would help can help staff understand what adjustments might work best
- It's okay to ask for time to think about suggestions or to try adjustments and modify them based on your experience
- Your needs might change over time, and that's completely normal

You've got this! ☀

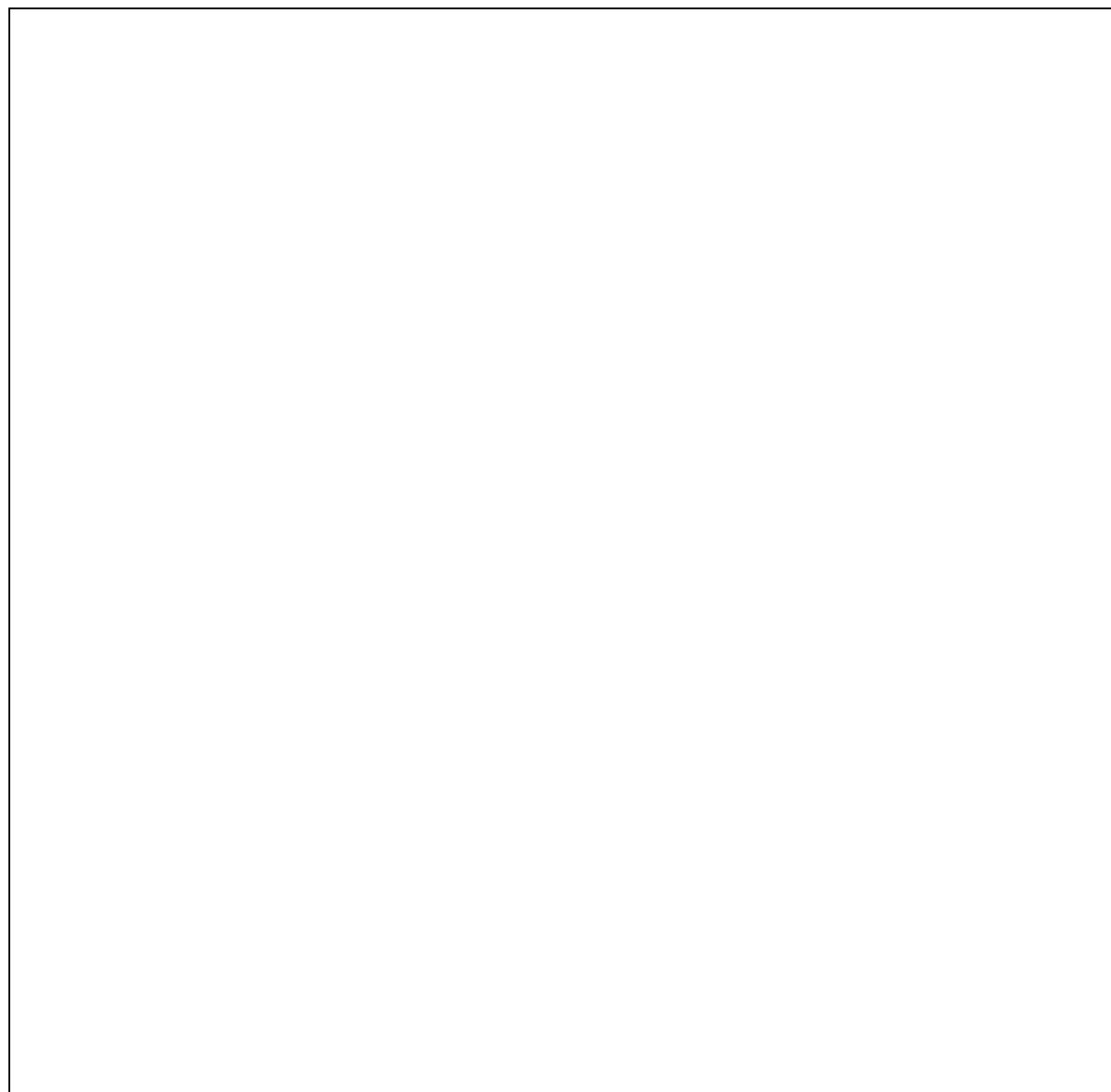
## Resource 3: University Terminology Glossary

There are many new words and concepts you will encounter at university. It's important to understand the difference between these different terms – save this glossary somewhere you can find and search for definitions when you need them!

Term	Definition
<b>Program</b>	Your overall qualification or degree (e.g., Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Science). This is what appears on your graduation certificate.
<b>Course</b>	Often used interchangeably with 'program' to refer to your whole degree, though some universities use it to mean individual units of study. Check your university's terminology!
<b>Unit / Subject</b>	An individual component of your program, usually studied over one semester or trimester. Different Australian universities use either 'unit' or 'subject' – check which term your uni uses!
<b>Core unit / Compulsory unit / Required unit</b>	A unit that is essential to your program and must be completed to graduate.
<b>Elective unit</b>	A unit you can choose from a range of options to meet your program requirements. Electives let you explore interests or broaden your knowledge.
<b>Major</b>	A specialised area of study within your program, usually requiring 8-12 units in that discipline (e.g., Psychology major within a Bachelor of Arts).
<b>Minor</b>	A secondary area of study, smaller than a major, usually requiring 4-6 units in that discipline.
<b>Prerequisite</b>	A unit (or qualification) you must complete before you can enrol in a more advanced unit. For example, 'Introduction to Psychology' might be a prerequisite for 'Developmental Psychology'.

<b>Double degree</b>	Studying two programs simultaneously (e.g., Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Laws). Usually takes longer than a single degree but less time than completing both separately.
<b>Semester</b>	A teaching period, usually around 12-15 weeks. Most Australian universities have two main semesters per year (Semester 1: February-June; Semester 2: July-November).
<b>Trimester</b>	A teaching period at universities using a three-term year instead of two semesters. Each trimester is shorter than a semester.
<b>Credit points</b>	The value assigned to each unit, representing the workload. Most units are worth 6 or 12.5 credit points. You need to accumulate a certain number (usually 144-192) to graduate.
<b>Full-time study</b>	Usually means studying 3-4 units per semester (around 37.5-48 credit points per year).
<b>Part-time study</b>	Studying fewer units per semester than full-time, which extends the time to complete your program.
<b>Enrolment</b>	The process of officially registering for your units each semester.
<b>Census date</b>	The final date to withdraw from a unit without financial penalty or academic record. After this date, you're committed to the unit.
<b>Timetable</b>	Your personal schedule showing when and where your classes are held.
<b>Lecture</b>	A large class where content is presented, usually to many students at once (sometimes hundreds!).
<b>Tutorial</b>	A smaller class for discussion, questions, and activities related to lecture content. Usually 15-30 students.
<b>Workshop / Practical</b>	Hands-on classes where you apply what you've learned. Format varies by discipline.

<b>Assessment</b>	The tasks you complete to demonstrate your learning (e.g., essays, exams, presentations, practicals).
<b>Academic integrity</b>	Following honest practices in your study, including proper referencing and submitting your own work.
<b>Extensions and special consideration</b>	Processes for requesting extra time or alternative arrangements for assessments, usually due to illness or unexpected circumstances.
<b>Student portal / LMS</b>	Your university's online system (like Canvas, Moodle, or Blackboard) where you access unit information, submit assignments, and find resources.



## Resource 4: Starting University Checklist

These are some common tasks you will need to complete before you start your first semester at university.

If you're not sure where or how to complete these tasks, you can first Google “[task] at [your university name]”. If you can't find the answer online, you will be able to contact student services via phone, email, or often using a live chat function on the university website. There are lots of staff whose job it is to help you out and make sure your start at university is successful!

Done?	Action
	Accept your university offer
	Enrol in your courses/units
	Get your student ID card
	Set up online systems (e.g. email) and learn how to access course materials
	Find out if you need to purchase any physical resources (e.g. lab equipment) or textbooks
	Choose tutorial times for your classes if available/relevant
	Find out how to access library resources
	Register with disability services if you plan to access support
	Think about putting together a timetable or weekly schedule if this helps you
	Consider how you will travel to university, map your public transport route or investigate parking options if relevant
	Arrange any physical resources you might need for study, e.g. notebooks, laptop, bag, pens...

## Resource 5: Quick Energy and Capacity Check-in

Work through these questions and tick yes or no. If you answer 'no' to any question, consider whether addressing that need might help you feel better or work more effectively.

### Checklist

Question	Yes	No
1. Have I had enough sleep / did I sleep well?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Have I eaten something in the last few hours / am I hungry?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Have I had enough water today / am I thirsty?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Have I taken my medication (if applicable)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Am I physically comfortable? (Not too hot/cold, clothes feel okay, no uncomfortable sensations)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Have I been outside or seen natural light today?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Is my caffeine intake balanced? (Not too much or too little for me)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Have I moved my body recently? (Even just a short walk or stretch)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Have I been to the bathroom recently?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. Have I had a break from screens/intense focus in the last hour or two?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. Is my sensory environment right? (Enough/not too much light, sound, smells, temperature...)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## Taking action

**If you answered 'no' to any questions:** Your body might be telling you it needs some basic care before you can focus effectively. Consider addressing one or two needs first – you might be surprised how much better you feel!

**If you answered 'yes' to most questions:** Your physical needs seem to be met. If you're still feeling 'off', it might be helpful to consider other factors like sensory overload, social battery levels, or whether you need some time to stim or decompress.

## Quick tips for common 'no' answers

- **Sleep:** Even 10-20 minutes lying down with your eyes closed can help reset your system
- **Food:** Keep simple snacks handy that don't require preparation (nuts, fruit, crackers, protein bars), or your favourite safe foods
- **Water:** Keep a water bottle within reach and set reminders to take a drink if needed
- **Medication:** Set an alarm or use a medication tracking app
- **Physical comfort:** Adjust temperature, change into comfier clothes, or move to a different position/location
- **Outside/natural light:** Even 5 minutes outside or sitting by a window can help
- **Caffeine:** Notice your patterns – too much can increase anxiety, too little might affect focus
- **Movement:** A quick walk, some stretches, or even just standing up and shaking out your limbs can help
- **Bathroom:** Don't wait! 'Holding on' takes energy and affects concentration
- **Screen breaks:** Follow the 20-20-20 rule: every 20 minutes, look at something 20 feet away for 20 seconds

**Your wellbeing matters.** Taking care of yourself isn't selfish – it's how you set yourself up to do your best work and enjoy your university experience.

## History of this guide

“Transitioning to University: Autistic Students Guide” is the culmination of the expertise and work of autistic people and disability practitioners over many years.

### Original version (2015)

This resource was originally developed in 2015 as part of the former National Disability Coordination Officer (NDCO) Program. Initially entitled “How to Transition to Tertiary Education: Helpful Hints for People with Autism Spectrum Disorder,” this version was developed by Debbie Hindle, Resource Project Officer, in conjunction with a Project Steering Committee:

- Amanda Richdale (Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre, Latrobe University)
- Berinda Karp (TAFE Western Sydney)
- Shaun Corcoran (Bendigo TAFE)
- Mary Brake (Tasmanian Education Department)
- Marita Falkmer (Autism Cooperative Research Centre and Curtin University)
- Julie Harrison (Australian National University)
- Colleen Hooper (Mission Australia)
- Sue Hancock (Australian National University)

The 2015 version was also reviewed by the following individuals:

- Catherine Jolly
- Liam Salter
- Yenn Purkis
- Emily Brake

## 2025 Update

In 2025, the resource was reviewed and rewritten to reflect contemporary understandings of autism and neurodivergence, with a focus on higher education. This process was led by Ebe Ganon, Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training (ADCET) Project Support Officer. The content in this updated version has been reviewed by autistic students and researchers, including:

- Ari Star: HDR student and research assistant at the Macquarie University School of Education; 2025 Student Representative to the Australasian Society for Autism Research
- Janet Davey: PhD student at the Australian Centre for China in the World (Australian National University)
- Aaron Saint-James: undergraduate student, research officer, and accessibility consultant at the University of New South Wales; co-founder of the UNSW Diversified Project

This resource has been produced in a range of formats – the content exists in live form on the ADCET website, with various downloadable and printable formats available and in circulation.

## Feedback

To provide feedback on this resource, please contact [ADCET.Admin@utas.edu.au](mailto:ADCET.Admin@utas.edu.au). Updates may be implemented to the live online content available on the ADCET website.

## References

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