Welcome to the autumn edition of the Altogether Autism Journal. In this edition we have focused on education. If you are a parent or a teacher and have children and students that are about to embark on term two of school, or you are studying yourself then we hope this season's publication is of interest to you. We have sought to include articles from a mixed perspective, addressing some of the issues you may be facing and answering some of the questions you may have, whether that be at primary school or university.

The autumn months have been an extremely busy time for us and we have particularly seen an increase in the amount of more complex situations and questions being put to us, all of which we have enjoyed researching. On that note I would like to introduce two new researchers to our team, Catherine Trezona and Surrey Jackson. In their new roles as Researchers at Altogether Autism, Catherine and Surrey will be researching these complex information requests, collating responses from our Professional Experts Group and Consumer Reference Group and will be writing articles for the Journal.

Catherine will be working with us three days a week; Catherine has recently completed a Master's degree in health psychology at Massey University. Her master's research centred on the lived experiences of children and their parents as participants of Bodywise, a child weight management programme run by the Waikato DHB and Sport Waikato. Catherine lives in the country and is an enthusiastic vegan cook. She is passionate about research with a particular interest in lived experience.

Surrey will be working with us two days a week, in the rest of her time Surrey is a PhD candidate at the University of Waikato. Her PhD research is in the area of Experimental Behaviour Analysis on motivation and behaviour. In addition to being a student at the University of Waikato Surrey has tutored Psychology, research methods and Behaviour Analysis for the past five years. Surrey has a special interest in animal behaviour and welfare and lives in Hamilton.

If you have a question or situation that you would like help with then please email our Researchers or Information Coordinators on info@altogetherautism.org.nz or Freephone 0800 273 463.2244.

Sincere thanks to all writers who have helped with this edition.

Paula Gardner, National Manager

The Autism Spectrum (AS), Communication and Education

By Dr Emma Goodall

Emma is a university lecturer, educational autism consultant, author of the handbook for parents and teachers; “Understanding and facilitating the achievement of autistic potential”, public speaker and presenter, self-advocate and occasional actress. Emma has Aspergers.

When autistic spectrum children are accepted and valued they participate more in education. For parents and wider whanau this can mean helping the pre/school to understand their child's communication profile and for educators it can mean needing to use unfamiliar ways of communicating. Other professionals such as Speech Language Therapists (SLTs) may or may not be involved to support this process.

Communication is the way we not only signal wants and needs but it forms the basis for the transmission of knowledge from one person to another. As an example text, words, pictures, music and videos can all be forms...
of transmitting knowledge, but without shared meaning, there is no communication. Thus when I watch a Japanese film, which I love to do, if there are no subtitles, I cannot often understand the details in the story. Instead, I have built up an understanding of Japanese cinematic styles and imagery of rural and cityscapes. I have received some knowledge, though perhaps not that which was intended by the film makers!

In schools, where knowledge is being shared in ways that are not accessible to all AS students, these students may well not acquire the lesson plan goals, nor score well on any resultant test. Parents and whanau are uniquely equipped with prior knowledge of their AS child, and the knowledge that has been built up around the child’s preferred communication, as well as their difficulties, is both useful and a step towards enabling success in the education system.

Many ‘non-verbal’ AS students can and do verbalize sometimes, usually with a trusted person in a safe space. For some of these AS students it may be that they can respond verbally if they have a teddy or puppet that they can speak through. However, speech should not be pushed as for AS people speaking can be very stressful. If an AS child can and does or wants to talk, that is one thing; if they do not wish to talk or struggle hugely, ensure that there are other communication systems in place.

Many schools are good at having visuals in the classroom and are able to use them to varying degrees, for example as a visual timetable for the class or a first/then visual for a particular child. However, there seems to be less in place in schools to provide non or partially verbal children with the means to use visuals to communicate to others (ie for the child to have free access to visuals or other communication systems). When schools use PECS (a formal and trademarked picture exchange communication system), the student will have their own PECS book and board, however in other schools the student may only receive visuals and not use them of their own volition. This does not seem to be a deliberate policy, more of an oversight and misunderstanding of how non-verbal communication exists (ie just as two way as verbal communication). If your child uses some kind of visual or textual system in the home, just ask the school to use it too and offer to spend half an hour before or after school in the first week to show the school how to use the system. If you are lucky enough to have an SLT involved, they would do this step for you!

It may be that you have no idea what system of communication would suit your non or partially verbal child, nor be able to access an SLT. In this case, if your child does not yet read or type, then you basically have a choice of photo type visuals, cartoon type visuals or drawn/icon type visuals. Each of these systems has its

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Communication Type</th>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>Difficulties</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verbal</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Photo visuals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sign language (or Makaton)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Written</td>
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| Preferred way to receive information | |
|-------------------------------------| |
| Preferred way to communicate needs/| |
| wants                              | |
| Preferred way to ask for help      | |
| Typical way of showing need for help| |
| Typical way of communicating sensory overload | |
| Typical way of communicating need for quiet/space | |

If your child has a non-standard set of words/visuals/signs providing a brief dictionary can be very useful:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Word/visual/sign used by X</th>
<th>What this is communicating</th>
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Schools will generally respond positively to information provided to them by whanau as long as it is not too detailed and time consuming to read. Even though it is important, if every parent in the class provided 20 pages for the teacher to read at the start of the year, the teacher would quickly become overwhelmed. I suggest one to two pages of A4 maximum with the following layout, type examples have been provided on page 2 to make it clearer.

So for example, if your child calls their teddy Blue (even though it is green), it is important their teacher knows this, otherwise the teacher assumes your child either does not recognize their colours, is colour-blind or is developmentally delayed in this area! A typical area of confusion is when AS students say yes, when they do not mean yes in a conventional sense. For some on the spectrum this reflects their difficulty with closed questions, for others it can be a learned response to cover slow processing or auditory processing difficulties.

With older AS students, teachers and schools may need reminding of your child’s literal understanding and use of language as a highly verbal child is not always understood to still have areas of difficulty with spoken language.

### Individual Education Plans (IEPs) - a different perspective

**By Dr Emma Goodall**

Schools have IEPs because they are a legal requirement for students with ORS (Ongoing Resourcing Scheme) funding, they may also choose to have IEPs for other students who are struggling with aspects of school. The Ministry of Education has a variety of templates for schools to use or they are free to devise their own. Internationally this seems to be the case, no matter what the plans are called. However anecdotal evidence (observed in various countries over the last 20 years) indicates that even the most caring of teachers are unlikely to even try and implement any IEP over 2 pages in length, with most going straight into the filing cabinet and remaining there until the review 3-12 months later.

If your child has ORS funding, they should have a minimum of 2 IEPs a year. My research indicated 4 shorter IEPs held each term was more effective for the child and their teacher. Short IEPs (1-2 pages A4 max of 3 goals) seem to be the IEPs that are the most widely used, often staying in the teacher’s planning folder to be checked weekly and also being shared with other staff involved in supporting the student. Some schools seem to think that there should be a goal for every area of the curriculum or for each key competency. This may or may not be relevant for your child, if it is not, speak up and suggest that fewer but more relevant SMART goals are set.

**Specific**

**Measurable**

**Achievable**

**Relevant/realistic**

**Time bound (ie to be achieved before the next IEP)**

Additionally some schools ask the class teacher to be responsible for the IEP whilst others refuse to let this happen and it is firmly in the domain of the SENCO (special needs coordinator) or the DP (deputy principal)/AP (assistant principal) or Principal. Rarely do teacher aides attend, even though often they are tasked with carrying out most of the IEP activities tasks! This is because IEPs are usually held outside of school hours and teacher aides are not available (or paid) to attend.

There has been a lot of New Zealand research about the need to involve students in their IEPs, something that I

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Individual Education Plans (IEPs) Continued...

admit to be reluctant to do. The reason for their involvement is that they should be able to set at least one of the three goals (with family setting one, and school the final one), and that they should be able to celebrate their IEP successes at each successive review and new IEP. My reluctance is because of the tension that is often present at IEP meetings, where either whanau and/or teachers/schools are being defensive. In years past IEPs were used to ensure continued access to funding, which, as it is needs based, tended to ensure IEPs were very negative and full of what the child can’t do. As this is no longer the case, IEP meetings should be much more positive and look at what the child is able to do, what next steps (goals) should be set and then how to get there.

Sadly from a whanau and child perspective, that ‘how to get there’ can result in some quite overwhelming emotions and/or confronting conversations – which are usually around funding issues. Some ardent proponents of student involvement in their own IEPs have got around this by having a video submission or attendance at a small part of the meeting or even through the use of narrative assessment. I would suggest that if you feel the meeting will be negative, to not take your AS child along as our fixated thoughts can become stuck in perceived and overheard negativity about our potential and our skills.

From a whanau point of view, IEPs can often feel overwhelming and daunting. A mother, whom I was representing and supporting, recently remarked to me as we left an IEP; “I feel as if there was so much unspoken and I saw that look across the table when I asked if my child could stay for the whole school day.” Sadly, she was right! One of the ways to combat this is to insist on a piece of your child’s work that is representative of success to be present in the room and to direct focus to that at the start and end of the meeting. Unfortunately, because goals are things that your child cannot yet do, even the discussion around goals can be distressing. To avoid this, if your child has not already picked a goal, before the meeting, sit down with them and think about what you would like for your goal and what they would

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Example IEP</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Short term goal</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Joe will be able to walk home safely by himself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That Joe will be able to learn 4 square and play this with peers at playtime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That Joe will engage in reading during silent reading</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Individual Education Plans (IEPs) Continued...

like for theirs. Take a few extra goals with you to discuss should you not be in agreement with the school’s ideas.

Be aware that the short term IEP goals should fit a longer term goal that is a shared vision for the child. Often in primary school teachers and/or parents want AS children to have friends and set this as a goal. However, this misses out a vital pre-step of – having a sense of belonging to the class/school. This is a goal that focuses on the class as much as the individual and usually involves strategies that demonstrate the strengths and skills of your child to their peers. Whereas, a friendship goal usually involves social skills training for JUST your child or a group of AS students, and does not take into account that your child needs to be valued by their peers too.

For students IEPs can be completely hidden and meaningless, or hidden and a vital part of their education, or a shared process that helps them to understand that they have some control over their journey in life. I would argue that having SMART goals that are reviewed termly is more important to your child that attending a meeting twice a year where there is endless discussion and goal setting that makes little difference to the curriculum content or delivery for them. If the AS student is present it is an ethical duty to hold the meeting in a manner that is beneficial to the student and not soul destroying. This means ensuring the positives are celebrated and skills needed phrased as ‘next steps’ and not ‘things x can’t do’.

To ensure your child’s IEP is as meaningful and useful as possible, ensure that there are not too many goals (after all, as adults if we try to do too many things at once we usually fail at everything instead of achieving in a smaller number of things). Also insist that not only the goal is written down on the IEP but also what that goal will look like once it has been achieved, and exactly what strategies are going to be tried and by whom and with what frequency. An example is given on page 4.

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facebook: [https://www.facebook.com/healthypossibilitiesAutism](https://www.facebook.com/healthypossibilitiesAutism)
or directly via: healthypossibilities.net@gmail.com

Special Assessment Conditions for NCEA

What are Special Assessment Conditions?
When working towards the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA), most students undertake internal assessments throughout the year and sit end of year examinations under regular conditions (e.g. all students together, set amount of time, no talking, etc). Special Assessment Conditions, or SAC, are changes to those regular internal assessment and examination conditions to enable students with a permanent or long term disability to be assessed fairly. The disability might be a medical, physical, or sensory condition, or a specific learning disability. SAC must reflect the usual way that the student learns. For example, a student applying for extra time for NCEA should have a history of having extra time for assignments and exams.

SAC include:
- Additional time to complete work.
- Reader or writer or both.
- Rest breaks.
- Separate accommodation.
- Use of technology to complete and present work (e.g., computer).
- Other (e.g., enlarged paper, braille paper).

Why might a student with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) need SAC?
SAC may be needed for a student with ASD for the following reasons:
- Handwriting is difficult to read.
- Handwriting is very slow.
- Behaviour is disruptive to other students.
- Require regular breaks.
- Obsessive compulsive behaviours may take up exam time.
- Organisational skills and time management skills may mean they do not finish the exam in the usual time allocated.
- Concentration skills may be impaired in exam situation.
- Sameness in routines (e.g., if the student usually has a teacher aide they will probably need one during exams).
- Sensory issues associated with the exam conditions (e.g. large room, bright lights, sound of others’ breathing, clock ticking, scratching writing sounds, room with different lighting) may overwhelm the student.
Special Assessment Conditions for NCEA Continued...

- Use of a reader/writer could interfere with the concentration of other students.
- Heightened anxiety, impairing student’s ability to demonstrate knowledge.
- Anxiety management techniques may disrupt other students (e.g. breathing techniques).

What SAC are students with ASD likely to get?

According to the NZQA, ASD is classed as a medical condition. Students with ASD are likely to qualify for separate accommodation. In order to qualify for additional SAC, the student must also have a specific learning difficulty that has been assessed by an independent professional.

What is a specific learning difficulty?

According to NZQA, a specific learning difficulty may be apparent in a student by the following:

- A discrepancy between what they understand when they are reading compared to when they are listening.
- Low accuracy of reading.
- Low reading comprehension.
- Slow speed of reading.
- A discrepancy between what they mean when they are writing and when they are talking.
- Slow speed of writing.
- Communication is hindered by the student’s spelling or punctuation.

What is an independent professional?

The independent professional is likely to be a registered psychologist with a Level C (or Level 3) Assessor Qualification, who is registered with the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER, http://www.nzcer.org.nz/). Assessors who are registered to administer Level C tests will have completed advanced testing courses and have had clinical experience in the use of tests and interpreting the results. Level C tests include individual tests of intelligence and achievement, and personality scales.

What evidence is required for SAC?

If your child has ASD without any other difficulties, as a minimum, you will require a ‘current psychological history/report’, confirming that this is the case, which should help to determine eligibility for separate accommodation.

As previously mentioned, if your child also has a specific learning difficulty and requires additional SAC, you will require a psychological assessment to be undertaken and report to be written by a Level C Assessor. If a Level C Assessor is not available in the area, a correctly qualified Resource Teacher of Learning and Behaviour (RTLB) may be able to conduct the assessment. This report is needed before the first year of national qualifications (NCEA 1, Year 11) and is valid for four years, so should cover NCEA years 2 and 3 also. NZQA recommends the report to be conducted late in Year 10.

The report must:

- Define and detail the extent of the specific learning difficulty.
- Say that the student is competent to perform in the exam, but will not be able to perform to the best of their ability due to the specific learning difficulty.
- Recommend SAC to address the specific needs of the student.
- Explain why the student qualifies for these conditions based on the results of the tests that were conducted by the assessor.
- Address the likely impact on the student’s performance of not having the SAC.

In addition to the report, there is a mandatory data summary sheet on the NCEA website for assessors to complete and provide to the school.

When completed, the report must then be given to the school. The school will then make the application for SAC on behalf of the student. With reference to the report and any other evidence they have collected (e.g. extra help the school has provided for the student throughout the year), the school must demonstrate why SAC are required. The exam/assessment conditions should reflect the normal way in which the student works, and the need for such conditions should have been documented by the school over the years.

How do I get a report from a Level C Assessor for my child?

There are several ways in which you could go about...
Special Assessment Conditions for NCEA Continued...

locating a Level C Assessor. If your child regularly sees a psychologist or has had contact with one in the past, you may want to approach them to act as an assessor. The school may have some idea of Level C Assessors in the area that other families have used for the same purpose. Other parents may be able to recommend a Level C Assessor they have used.

When you have located a Level C Assessor, you need to tell them that your child requires a report for SAC for NCEA, and to give them a brief summary of your child’s issues. You need to specify the questions that you want the Level C Assessor to answer. For example, the extent of the child’s learning disability, whether the child is competent to sit the exam, how the learning disability will affect the child’s performance in the exam, which SAC will address the specific needs of the child, and an explanation for this based on the results of the tests conducted.

The tests used will depend on the questions being asked. The Level C Assessor should advise as to which tests will answer the questions, and should themselves be able to analyse the results of the tests. As well as testing the child, the assessment process may also involve the interviewing of parents and teachers. The questions asked should be addressed in the report, based on the test/assessment results.

Ask the Level C Assessor for a quote for their services. You may receive a fee for the whole service or an hourly rate. If you are only given an hourly rate, you will also need an estimate of the time involved for the actual testing and for the writing of the report.

As with the purchase of any good or service, approach other Level C Assessors to obtain comparative quotes. When you have agreed on a quote, arrange a time for the assessment and pay when you have received the report. This report should be given to the school by February of the year in which the exams are to be undertaken, but earlier if possible.

Are there alternatives to the Level C Assessor report?

If you cannot afford a Level C Assessor (and cannot get funding) or the school does not have access to a Level C Assessor in the region, the school can apply for SAC using “Alternative Evidence”.

Alternative evidence is required to include confirmation from the school of the following:

- That the student’s learning has been assessed over the previous two years in order to identify the learning problem and the need for assistance.
- That the student can perform at a higher level with the assistance; comparative evidence is required for this.
- That the student is receiving ongoing support to help with the problem.
- That a learning support programme specific to the child has been implemented by the school.

According to NZQA, it is the school’s job to gather the alternative evidence, and the application must be signed off by the principal.

Another reason for using alternative evidence may be that a student has moved from overseas and does not have evidence from a suitably qualified NZ professional.

What is the process of applying for SAC?

While the same report may be used for three years, a new application to NZQA for SAC must be made by the school for the student each year. If SAC are received by the student one year, it does not automatically mean they will receive the same conditions again the following year.

Documentation that is required for each application includes:

- Details of the learning difficulty.
- How this means the student is impaired.
- The possible SAC that may be beneficial.
- Evidence of the specific learning difficulty (if there is one, including a report by a Level C Assessor).
- Comments from teachers.

What does a reader/writer do?

The main aim of the reader/writer role is to help the student overcome their learning disability while ensuring exam conditions are maintained so that it remains fair to other students. The reader/writer may read the exam paper to the student, or write down the student’s spoken answers, or do both. The reader/writer will only perform the task that is approved by the SAC and will be in a separate room with the student, away from the other students.

When should I find someone to be a reader/writer?

NZQA recommends that the external NCEA exam should not be the first time that the student and reader/writer meet, and suggests that they at least work together for the internal school practice exams. NZQA suggests that reader/writers should be trialled with potential SAC students in November of the year preceding the NCEA exams.
Special Assessment Conditions for NCEA Continued...

How do I find a reader/writer?

It is possible that the school will have a list of possible reader/writers for your child. When “reader writer ncea” was Googled (06/03/14), among the 6,110 hits were school newsletters with advertisements for reader/writers.

Altogether Autism suggests that if your child has an aide to help with schoolwork throughout the year (and if they are suitably qualified), it would be beneficial to also have this aide as the child’s reader/writer.

Who can not be a reader/writer?

A reader/writer can not be a teacher, tutor, friend, relative, another candidate, another student at your child’s school, or anyone else with a close personal relationship to your child.

What are the qualifications required of the reader/writer?

NZQA do not specify any qualifications that they require readers/writers to have. Altogether Autism suggests that families should ensure that the reader/writer knows about ASD before working with the child and understands the particular behaviours of the child.

What is the SAC application timeline?

Please note that the dates below are estimates based on SAC applications for 2014. Consult your child’s school for definite dates.

October-December (in the year preceding the NCEA exams)

- If your child’s school recognises that they may be a candidate for SAC, you may receive a letter stating so, and requesting that you obtain a report from a Level C Assessor if you do not have one that is current.
- The school may begin to collect information to support your child’s SAC application (e.g. the trialling of a reader/writer).
- If you have never before discussed SAC with the school, approach them and discuss the SAC that may be appropriate for your child. This will give you time to arrange for a psychological assessment to be conducted and a report to be written.

January

- The school will continue to collect information for the SAC application.
- If your child has a current report from a Level C Assessor, and they have SAC approved, they will be able to have SAC for internal assessments.
- Teacher aides should be identified and trained by the school.

February

- Applications can now be made by the school to determine whether your child is entitled to SAC; there is a new online application tool to do this that was developed in 2013.
- If not earlier, copies of the Level C Assessor report should be given to the school by February to allow them to apply for all NCEA assessments.
- If applications are to be made using alternative evidence, the school should be discussing and compiling the documentation required.

April

- April 10 is the final day for school to submit SAC applications for entitlement.
- April 19 is the final day for applications using alternative evidence.
- New applications will not be accepted after the end of Term One, unless an applicant has a newly identified disability/condition.

May

- The applications for entitlement are processed and NZQA will indicate whether the applicants are approved or declined for SAC.
- The school will then contact you to inform you of the outcome.
- If SAC for your child have been declined, appeals must be made within 15 days. Extra information must be provided for appeals.
- Any time from now, school will discuss with students about which of the approved SACs they will use for each examination subject.

July

- Online applications for SAC for external examinations open on 1 July.

August

- Applications for SAC for external examinations close on 25 August.
- You should be informed about what SAC were approved for your child for external examinations.
- Suitable examination assistants to act as readers and/or writers should be identified by the school and begin training, if not done prior.
- The closing date for applying for SAC for external examinations using alternative evidence is also early August.

November

- Examinations are underway.
Special Assessment Conditions for NCEA Continued...

What are my options if my child is denied SAC?

The school may appeal a denial of SAC by the NZQA by writing to the Chief Executive within 15 days of the notification of that decision. Any decision made by the Chief Executive is final.

Are there alternatives to SAC?

The school may also help to manage the learning difficulty by increasing the internal assessment component of the student and/or by entering the student into fewer external exams.

What does the Ministry of Education expect?

From the website (http://www.nzqa.govt.nz/), the information NZQA provides about SAC and reader/writers is directed at the school. NZQA advises the schools to identify children who would benefit from SAC. However, if you have not been approached by your school and believe your child would benefit from SAC, you should approach the school. NZQA also recommends that schools ensure that they have all of the required documentation to support the application for SAC, and that the school take care of the application process. The school should be involved with the collection of data to assist the SAC application process, as well as the hiring and training of the reader/writers.

Article updated in March 2014 by Altogether Autism with information from the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) website (http://www.nzqa.govt.nz/) and through email correspondence with NZQA staff.

Disclaimer: The statements expressed in this article are the opinions and interpretation of the author only. While every attempt has been made to present current and accurate information, the information from the sources available is somewhat confusing, and we cannot guarantee that inaccuracies will not occur. Altogether Autism will not be held responsible for any claim, loss, damage or inconvenience caused as a result of the information in this article.

By Aimee Harris, Psychologist

Ministry of Education comments on Special Assessment Conditions for NCEA

It is important that students at all schools have access to special help if they need it at exam and internal assessment time. The Special Assessment Conditions process gives all New Zealand secondary schools a nationally consistent way to apply for assessment entitlements on behalf of their students with particular needs.

Schools are responsible for identifying students for Special Assessment Conditions, carrying out school-based assessments, managing the Special Assessment Conditions application process and accessing community supports (such as readers and writers). While it is ideal to involve families/whānau in this process, it is not a parent’s/caregiver’s responsibility to make the Special Assessment Conditions application or find a reader/writer for their child.

In 2013, the Ministry of Education (the Ministry) and the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) reviewed the use of Special Assessment Conditions in NCEA.

The review found lower decile schools were much less likely to apply for NCEA exam help for their students with special learning needs, and that the $400-$700 cost of an independent expert assessment was one of the major barriers.

The Ministry and NZQA are working together to make access to Special Assessment Conditions fair and clear. As a first step, NZQA has streamlined the alternative evidence application. This option hasn’t been as widely used or as easy to use as it should be. School are encouraged to use the redesigned alternative evidence application method. It is based on teacher observation and assessment information rather than an independent expert’s report. This process is free to students and their families/whānau.

For more information and tips for schools preparing an alternative evidence application, go to the related resources on this page of the Ministry’s website: http://www.minedu.govt.nz/NZEducation/EducationPolicies/SpecialEducation/OurWorkProgramme/SuccessForAll.aspx

Useful Websites
www.lbctnz.co.nz
www.nzcer.org.nz
www.nzqa.govt.nz
Supporting Students on the Autism Spectrum in the University Environment

The Autism Spectrum Disorder Guidelines state that “further education should be an option for all people, regardless of ability or disability” (New Zealand Autism Spectrum Disorder Guideline, 2008, p. 168). Despite this and in contrast to what is available overseas (e.g. some colleges in America have specialised Autism programmes), formalised services for New Zealand University students on the spectrum is limited, and little has been written on the area of supporting University students with Autism. Research on the higher educational achievements of people on the Spectrum is also very limited. Some overseas longitudinal studies have included statistics on university achievement (e.g. Cederlund, Hagberg, Billstedt, Gillberg & Gillberg, 2008). However, no similar research can be found from a New Zealand perspective and no statistics can be found that highlights the number of individuals on the spectrum studying in tertiary institutions.

Challenges to University Study

There are a number of challenges to University study for people on the Autism Spectrum; difficulties with social interaction, functioning and sensory issues can create barriers to achievement. In addition the very nature of the University setting can exacerbate these issues. Universities lack the structure and routine of other educational settings and they also lack clear instructions as to what students should do and when they should do it. For example when you start University no one informs you that you may need to create your own timetable, look up required books yourself and find out when and where your own exams are. Often these requirements are learned through trial and error as well as observation of peers (something that Universities heavily rely on). A second key challenge to higher education is a lack of contact with staff members or people in a position to be able to help. For undergraduate students contact with staff is rare. There may be one lecturer for a class of several hundred first year students meaning the odds are that you will never speak to the people that teach you (unless you continue on to graduate study where class sizes are much smaller). In addition lecturers often change and papers can be co-taught and with multiple staff running one course it can be difficult to develop a relationship. Access to tutors is likely to be more consistent but again busy classes and short contact time can leave students little chance to build relationships of support.

Internal Support Models

However, there are support options available within Universities. Student Services departments at Universities have disability services who work closely with students on the spectrum to provide practical help and support. Provided services can include the use of reader/writers as well as organising allowances such as extra time for examinations and sitting exams in private rooms. Barriers to receiving these kinds of assistance include the possibility that formal diagnosis might be required and the necessity that students must be their own advocates and arrange initial meetings with support services.

In addition to formalised disability services it is recommended that students take full advantage of any other help services offered by the University or individual course (research has shown that services offered can often be under-utilised by people with Autism due to difficulties with self-advocacy (www.aspergercentre.com). It can be very worthwhile approaching staff at the beginning of the courses to discuss possible support strategies. These may include asking permission to voice record lectures, requesting that written information about what the course entails be given as early as possible, requesting that permission be granted to leave the room as and when required during tutorials, and organising a specific contact person for the remainder of that course. During the course of any one semester University staff will deal with students that have fallen ill, have grievances or other issues and there are systems in place to provide allowances for students that are struggling for whatever reason and staff can direct students to the
proper channels to obtain these. In addition many courses may have extra resources such as the provision of video recorded lectures that students may not be aware they can access.

External Support Models

As outlined in the Autism Spectrum Disorder Guidelines the use of Student Support Services may need to be combined with support from outside sources. Something that has been successfully used in American Universities is the use of peer mentors. Peer mentors are fellow students who provide social role modelling. Occasionally peer mentors are students on the spectrum who are further into their studies. There are no existing peer mentor systems that can be found in New Zealand universities so any arrangement would have to be set up privately.

Another method of obtaining private help is to hire a therapist to work specifically with a student. Joshua Levine is a Board Certified Behaviour Analyst who has worked privately with University students with Asperger’s syndrome in New Zealand. Previous work that Joshua has carried out successfully includes developing schedules with students and weekly meetings to help them stay on top of their course work; social skills training in social settings (e.g. club groups); and work place based support, all of which was faded out over the student’s first year of University.

In short, the University environment presents a number of very real challenges. Whilst specialised support is limited planning and utilising all available support services can aid success.

By Surrey Jackson
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References and Further Reading

## Regional Contact Details

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