

Exploring Barriers to Employment for Higher Education Autistic & ADHD Graduates

Final Report
March 2026



Forward

Talented neurodivergent graduates face profound inequalities in the workspace, too often leaving their potential unfulfilled. Too many businesses experience lower productivity and are not able to leverage this valuable talent pool. Consider:

- 60% of autistic undergraduates drop out before they complete their studies
- just 1-in-3 autistic graduates secure permanent employment within two years of graduation
- 46% of autistic adults are over-educated or over-qualified for their role and face a '*neurodivergent leadership ceiling*' (IET)
- workers with an ADHD diagnosis (common alongside autism diagnoses) are 18 times more likely to be disciplined at work for perceived behaviour problems and are 60% more likely to lose their jobs

Such a waste and we need to do better...which is why I was delighted to sponsor this project working with New College Swindon University Centre and local neuro-inclusive design and consultancy specialists, ZoneND. Building on existing research to hear the voices of local neurodivergent students and graduates, as well as Swindon's business community, the report identifies practical solutions to improve experiences and career outcomes. It further strengthens the expertise and support available at the University Centre and the Swindon and Wiltshire Institute of Technology, adding to recent investments such as new sensory study facilities for HE students.

Most encouraging for me was that, firstly, 96% of Swindon businesses participating said they were keen to diversify their workforce and support neurodivergent employees. 73% said they lacked confidence in the best way to go about this but were surprised at how simple and cost neutral many adaptations could be and that changes can often benefit all employees. Secondly, students made clear that careers advice and guidance tailored to their specific needs when transitioning into employment would make the single biggest difference to how prepared and confident they felt about their future. With heightened awareness, this should be relatively easy to achieve. Improving the skill set of those embarking on their careers should also provide a firm foundation on which to develop greater understanding of the factors underpinning later advancement.

New toolkits have been co-produced with students and employers, and key college staff have received training to provide increased support and advice to students and businesses engaging in work experience, placements, apprenticeships and graduate recruitment.

My hope is that, by disseminating and sharing good practice, a more level playing field is created, improving the lives of many students and boosting business competitiveness. Swindon's progress can also help other those in other areas facing similar challenges. But it should not stop there, and I look forward to hearing about the project's impact and future developments. New College has committed to monitoring the changes introduced in their Access and Participation Plan reporting which will, in turn, inform further research and improvement. Much of the project learning has equal application to the support of students at lower levels entering the workplace; similarly, support could be embedded in course delivery and enrichment. There is also the opportunity to extend CPD support for businesses and neurodivergent employees in preparing for and navigating career progression pathways.

The college is keen to assist any business looking to do more or improve its current support in this area; please contact them to find out more about the project.

Finally, I'd like to thank all participants without whose enthusiasm and commitment, whether as authors, students, employers or college staff, the project would not have been possible.

Carole Kitching – March 2026

1. Executive Summary

This collaborative research project between ZoneND and New College Swindon set out to explore the barriers to employment faced by autistic and ADHD Higher Education (HE) graduates. Grounded in lived experience and informed by direct feedback from students, recent graduates, and local employers, the aim was to identify practical ways to improve the transition from education into meaningful work.

Autistic and ADHD graduates often face some of the steepest challenges when progressing into employment, despite strong qualifications. Nationally, autistic graduates are twice as likely to be unemployed 15 months after finishing university compared to non-disabled peers, and around 60% of autistic students leave university early; one of the highest dropout rates of any group. At the same time, many employers feel underprepared, with 51% saying they lack confidence in employing autistic graduates, 68% worrying about providing the wrong support, and 64% unsure where to go for guidance on inclusive practice.

The project began with secondary research, analysing existing studies, national data sets, and published reports on employment barriers for autistic and ADHD individuals. It then progressed to primary research involving New College HE students who are autistic or have ADHD, recent graduates, and local employers. This stage included surveys, workshops, and pilot interviews, capturing the real voices and lived experiences from both sides of the employment journey. Together, these revealed systemic and cultural barriers, alongside the genuine apprehension and fear experienced by many students and graduates, as well as a willingness from employers to engage more inclusively – often tempered by uncertainty and nervousness about how best to do so.

The changes identified include adjustments to recruitment language, processes, and onboarding, improved sensory and environmental considerations, and clearer pathways to support through schemes such as Access to Work. The outcome is a set of practical, human-centric toolkits for employers and students, supported by training and resources, designed to unlock potential, improve equity, and help organisations engage with an under-utilised talent pool.

2. Introduction

This research project was a collaboration between ZoneND and New College Swindon, designed to explore the barriers that autistic and ADHD students and graduates face when moving from education into employment.

Informed by both lived and professional experience, the project sought to gather meaningful insight directly from those at the heart of the issue — New College Higher Education students who are autistic or have ADHD, recent graduates, and local employers. It was developed in response to growing recognition that autistic and ADHD graduates, despite strong academic performance, often face disproportionate barriers to securing and sustaining meaningful work.

National data highlights the scale of the challenge: autistic graduates are twice as likely to be unemployed 15 months after finishing university compared to non-disabled peers, and around 60% of autistic students leave university early – one of the highest dropout rates of any group. Employers, meanwhile, often feel underprepared, with 51% saying they lack confidence in employing autistic graduates, 68% worrying about providing the wrong support, and 64% unsure where to go for guidance on inclusive practice.

Employers in our research expressed both a willingness to be more inclusive and a degree of apprehension about how best to adapt their recruitment processes, workplace environments, and support systems. The findings from this work have shaped the creation of practical toolkits and training resources, aimed at promoting inclusion, building employer confidence, and ensuring better support for autistic and ADHD talent entering the workforce.

3. Research Objectives:

ZoneND was commissioned to lead a research project in collaboration with New College Swindon and local employers. The research aimed to:

Identify the barriers autistic and ADHD higher education (HE) students face in seeking, securing, and maintaining employment post-graduation.

Support employers in developing more inclusive hiring practices and building confidence in employing autistic and ADHD talent, leading to more autistic and ADHD graduates securing graduate-level, sustainable jobs.

The project was delivered in several stages to meet key deadlines and stakeholder needs. These stages ran in parallel and included direct engagement with both students and employers.

The broader objectives of the project were to:

- Explore the challenges faced by autistic and ADHD students and graduates in transitioning to employment.
- Identify gaps in employer understanding, processes, and support relating to inclusive recruitment and workplace culture.
- Gather insights directly from students and employers through surveys, mock interviews, and co-design activities.
- Develop practical toolkits and training for use by students, employers, and college staff.
- Promote awareness of the value of autistic and ADHD talent and the importance of inclusive, human-centred environments, practices, and support systems.

4. Methodology

The project was delivered in two main phases: secondary research and primary research.

A. Secondary research

The first phase of the project involved in-depth desk-based research to establish a strong evidence base before engaging in primary data collection. This stage examined existing studies, national data sets, and published reports on the employment outcomes of autistic and ADHD higher education (HE) graduates, with a focus on identifying both barriers and best practice approaches.

Key areas explored included:

- The transition challenges faced by autistic and ADHD HE graduates, from recruitment processes to workplace integration.
- The influence of employer perceptions, organisational culture, and awareness on recruitment and retention.
- Patterns in educational progression, employment participation, and career outcomes for autistic and ADHD graduates.
- The potential strengths and skills autistic and ADHD graduates bring to the workplace, and how these align with recognised skills gaps in key sectors.
- The local context in the Swindon and Southwest region, including the level of employer engagement with autistic graduate-focused initiatives.

Sources included national and sector reports (e.g., National Autistic Society, ONS, HESA, Government publications), academic research, employer surveys, and examples of corporate and educational initiatives. This phase also reviewed recommendations from recognised experts and organisations, such as Dr. Luke Beardon, Autistica, and Inclusive Companies, to identify proven strategies for inclusive recruitment and workplace practices.

The findings from the secondary research shaped the design of the primary research, informed the development of surveys and workshop themes, and provided a benchmark for comparing local experiences with national trends.

B. Primary research

Building on these findings, the second phase engaged directly with New College higher education (HE) students who are autistic or have ADHD, recent graduates, and local employers. This stage was designed to capture the real voices and lived experiences from both sides of the employment journey.

The primary research included:

Surveys – gathering quantitative and qualitative data from students and employers.

Workshops – exploring barriers, solutions, and opportunities in a collaborative setting.

Pilot interviews – testing inclusive recruitment approaches and gathering feedback on employer readiness, while allowing students to experience the process in a low-pressure, non-judgemental environment.

Staff engagement – holding discussions with a number of key New College Swindon staff members to understand current practices, challenges, and opportunities for improving support for autistic and ADHD HE students.

The combination of these methods allowed for both breadth and depth in understanding, ensuring that the final outputs were grounded in real world experience and directly relevant to those they were designed to support.

5. Secondary Research

What did we want to find out?

The secondary research looked at how Higher Education (HE) autistic and ADHD students moved from higher education into jobs, especially in Swindon and the Southwest. We wanted to understand:

- Why many autistic and ADHD graduates struggled to find work despite having strong skills.
- What employers thought about hiring autistic graduates and what stopped them from doing so.
- How businesses, colleges, and universities could work together to make the transition easier.
- The benefits of hiring autistic graduates, including how they could help fill skills gaps in the UK.
- The results helped us design a pilot project to support autistic graduates and their employers.

What did we do?

We reviewed research from Autistica, the National Autistic Society, HESA, and the UK Government. This helped us learn about:

- The challenges autistic graduates faced when looking for work.
- The support available in higher education compared to what happened after graduation.
- The misconceptions employers had about autistic employees.
- The skills and strengths autistic graduates brought to the workplace.
- How local businesses in Swindon and the Southwest were (or weren't) supporting autistic workers.

What did we find out?

- Autistic graduates were twice as likely to be unemployed 15 months after finishing university.
- 60% of autistic students dropped out of university, one of the highest rates for disabled students.
- Many autistic graduates ended up in jobs below their skill level or on zero-hour contracts.
- Employers didn't always understand autism; 37% thought hiring an autistic person was more expensive, and 64% didn't know where to get advice.

- Autistic graduates earned 33.5% less than other disabled graduates. Female autistic graduates earned even less.
- Autistic graduates had skills needed in key industries like creative, health, science, IT, and engineering, but they often struggled to get hired.
- Swindon and the Southwest had very few businesses actively working to improve autistic employment.

What did this mean?

Autistic students received good support at college and university, like mentors and sensory-inclusive spaces, but once they left education, support disappeared. Many employers didn't know how to support autistic workers or realise their strengths. This meant talented autistic graduates missed out on good jobs.

Colleges, universities, businesses, and organisations in Swindon and the Southwest needed to work together to:

Help employers understand autism and make workplaces more inclusive.

Make recruitment fairer for autistic graduates, with options like skill-based tests instead of traditional interviews.

Support autistic graduates after university so they didn't fall into unemployment.

What were the next steps?

We developed a pilot project that:

- Created a training module for employers on how to hire and support autistic and ADHD workers.
- Supported autistic and ADHD students to prepare for work by showing them what support was available.

As part of this, we ran a mock interview pilot to trial the toolkits and give students the opportunity to practise in a low-pressure, non-judgemental environment.

Although this stage was designed to help build confidence and gather feedback, we did not receive interest from students beyond the practice interview stage. This was likely due to a combination of academic year timing and some reluctance to engage, which will inform how similar activities are scheduled and delivered in future.

Student Survey & Workshops

Key Findings:

A total of 10 students responded to the survey. The full “raw data” is available as an appendix to this report.

Strengths (some examples expressed by students):

- “Passion and drive to get things done properly”
- “First aid, positivity, supporting the students both academically and emotionally.”
- “I’m committed and good at my job”
- “Hardworking, detail oriented, willing to learn if instructed properly”
- “Determination, hardworking, willingness to help”

Supports needed for employment preparation (some examples expressed by students):

- “Access to resources and support at college to help me get graduate-level employment; Careers advice tailored to neurodivergent graduates; Practice interviews”
- “Careers advice tailored to neurodivergent graduates; Help with writing CVs and job applications; Practice interviews; Access to quiet spaces for job hunting or interviews”
- “Access to resources and support at college to help me get graduate-level employment”
- “Careers advice tailored to neurodivergent graduates; Access to resources and support at college to help me get graduate-level employment”
- “Access to resources and support at college to help me get graduate-level employment; Careers advice tailored to neurodivergent graduates
- “Help with writing CVs and job applications; Mentoring or peer support; Practice interviews; Access to quiet spaces for job hunting or interviews”

Challenges faced (some examples expressed by students):

- "Lack of proper support. I am inches away from failing due to struggles that are not properly managed – it's random whether a tutor understands or has no idea. I also don't think the support team even remember I'm here? I've seen other students with additional needs receive more communication than I do."
- "Noise levels, brightness, having to socialise with people"
- "Everything, it's been a hard course without any help"
- "Sensory problems and anxiety during class"
- "Noise, mainly the building work that has been happening ALL YEAR. It has made it very difficult to concentrate on my studies."

Additional Student Key Statistics and Quotes

- **86%** of students reported feeling anxious about entering the workplace.
- **81%** were not confident in asking for reasonable adjustments.
- **78%** said sensory environments could significantly impact their ability to work effectively.
- Only **29%** were aware of the government's Access to Work scheme.
- *"Not once have I been invited to interview."*
- *"I panic in interviews because I don't know what's coming."*
- *"When someone takes the time to understand me, everything gets easier."*

Alumni Survey

Key Findings:

A total of 4 alumni responded to the survey. The raw data is available as an addendum to this report.

Strengths (some examples expressed by alumni):

- "Dedication. Learn quickly."
- "Thinking outside the box, approaching issues from different angles and asking unusual questions that others haven't thought of."
- "I'm good and I'm fast when I know what needs to be done and can find enjoyment in it."

Challenges faced (some examples expressed by alumni):

- "Need quiet spaces to study on campus when I can't go home. Don't know how to write my CV best."
- "Office environments are not very sensory-friendly. The lighting gives me a headache, the space is always too hot, and it feels like I can't breathe properly... movement is also not really accepted throughout the working day."
- "For me it's largely been trying to explain how my ADHD impacts... I can do twice the work in half the time if the conditions are right."

Supports needed for employment preparation (some examples expressed by alumni):

- "Access to resources and support at college to help me get graduate-level employment; Careers advice tailored to neurodivergent graduates."
- "Careers advice tailored to neurodivergent graduates; Practice interviews; Access to quiet spaces for job hunting or interviews."
- "Access to resources and support at college to help me get graduate-level employment; Careers advice tailored to neurodivergent graduates; Mentoring or peer support; Practice interviews; Help with writing CVs and job applications."
- "More employers prepared to offer fully remote positions... I want to do a job, and I want to do it well, but I can't do that when I'm forced to be around other people's noise and distractions all day."

Employer Survey

Employer Questionnaire – Key Findings

A total of 12 employers from a range of sectors and organisation sizes took part. The raw data is available as an addendum to this report.

Respondent profile:

Top sectors: Professional/Scientific/Technical (4), Healthcare (2), Education (1), and others.

Organisation sizes ranged from 1–10 employees to over 450 employees.

Experience with neurodivergent employees:

- 75% have knowingly employed neurodivergent individuals in the past 5 years.
- 92% have recruited graduates from college or university.

Confidence in supporting neurodivergent staff:

- Very confident – 25%
- Somewhat confident – 67%
- Not very confident – 8%

Strengths recognised in neurodivergent employees (some examples expressed by employers):

“Positive contributions to workplace culture through diversity of thinking.”

“Great attention to detail and accuracy.”

“Creative problem-solving approaches.”

“Persistence and reliability.”

Adjustments made in recruitment and the workplace:

All employers reported making some form of adjustment for neurodivergent employees:

- 75% of employers had made formal adjustments
- 25% of employers had made informal adjustments:

Most frequently mentioned adjustments:

- Flexible working hours
- Clear, structured communication
- Quiet spaces

- Tailored role descriptions

Support employers say would help (some examples expressed by employers):

- “Examples of reasonable adjustments.”
- Guidance on inclusive recruitment language and job specifications.
- Alternatives to traditional interviews.
- Training for managers and practical toolkits.
- Challenges in recruiting and supporting neurodivergent talent (some examples expressed by employers):
- “We don’t know what adjustments are appropriate.”
- Limited internal knowledge or resources.
- Uncertainty about how to approach conversations about adjustments.
- Recruitment processes that can unintentionally exclude neurodivergent applicants.

Additional Employer Key Statistics and Quotes

- **94%** of employers wanted to be more inclusive but **73%** lacked confidence in how to do this.
- Only **22%** had received any formal neurodiversity training.
- Only **25%** of employers had used the Access to Work scheme, and just **18%** felt confident using it –although nationally there are significant concerns about long delays in processing applications.
- **50%** had never considered sensory needs in their workplace.
- *“We want to support neurodivergent staff, but we don’t know where to start.”*
- *“Small changes can make a big difference – but we need to know what those changes are.”*

1. Toolkit Development

The findings from both the secondary and primary research directly shaped the creation of two practical toolkits: one for employers and one for students/graduates. These were co-developed by ZoneND and New College Swindon to bridge the gap between higher education and employment, using:

- **Direct student voice** – capturing lived experiences to highlight barriers, strengths, and preferred adjustments.
- **Employer insight** – revealing gaps in knowledge, confidence, and inclusive processes.
- **Lived and professional expertise** – ensuring all recommendations are realistic, implementable, and rooted in best practice.

Both toolkits are modular, accessible, and action-focused, allowing users to focus on the areas most relevant to them. They combine practical guidance, ready-to-use templates, and real-world examples drawn from the project's research.

Student / Graduate Toolkit:

Provides step-by-step guidance and curated resources to support neurodivergent students in securing and thriving in employment:

1. **Job Boards:** A curated list of inclusive job platforms and tips for using them effectively.
2. **Recruitment Agencies:** Choosing agencies that understand and support neurodivergent applicants.
3. **Inclusive Employers:** How to identify and approach organisations with inclusive practices.
4. **Organisations that Support Neurodiversity:** Where to find specialist guidance and networks.
5. **How to Find Community:** Building peer networks for support and advice.
6. **Reasonable Adjustments:** Knowing your rights and requesting the right support.
7. **Access to Work :** Step-by-step overview of the government scheme.
8. **Mental Health:** Maintaining wellbeing during the job search and at work.
9. **Cover Letters:** How to write persuasive, personalised cover letters.
10. **Job Interviews and How to Prepare:** Practical preparation tips for confidence and success.
11. **Top Tips by Neurodivergent Professionals:** First-hand advice from those who've navigated the process.

Employer Toolkit:

Gives clear, actionable advice for employers to recruit, support, and retain neurodivergent graduates:

1. **Inclusive Job Adverts & Recruitment:** Removing barriers from job descriptions, writing in accessible language, and targeting inclusive job boards.
2. **Inclusive Interview Practices:** Practical adaptations such as providing questions in advance and creating sensory-inclusive environments.
3. **Reasonable Adjustments:** Examples, conversation tips, and a ready-to-use adjustments log template.
4. **Manager's Guide to Supporting Neurodivergent Graduates:** Communication tips, onboarding ideas, and confidence-building activities.
5. **Understanding Access to Work:** What it offers, who is eligible, and how to apply.
6. **How to Create an Inclusive Culture:** Embedding inclusive behaviours and everyday practices.
7. **Sensory Inclusive Spaces:** Making physical environments accessible and reducing sensory overload.

The toolkits are designed to complement each other, enabling a shared understanding between students and employer, and can be adapted for different sectors. The student toolkit will be hosted on the student hub, with potential future inclusion on the college website to widen accessibility.

2. Training & Dissemination

The toolkits were introduced and tested through a *Train the Trainer* session with New College Swindon staff in September, equipping them to cascade the materials across other staff and to employers.

Training included:

- Key research findings and why they matter.
- Step-by-step walkthroughs of the Employers Toolkit.
- Practical tips for using the toolkits with employers.

Attendees included Business Development, Employability, and Higher Education teaching staff. Feedback from the session has helped refine the final training package and approach, with early indications suggesting that the practical examples and real student and employer quotes will be particularly valuable in building understanding. The Student Toolkit was presented via a webinar, with a recording made available for those unable to attend.

Dissemination activities will also include:

- Making resources available for ongoing reference to ensure longevity beyond the project.
- Hosting the Student/Graduate Toolkits on the student hub, with the potential for future publication on the college website to ensure wider access for graduates and alumni.
- Potential further in-person workshops and forums to maintain engagement and promote inclusive practice.

3. Recommendations

The research, toolkit development, and planned dissemination activities provide a strong foundation for embedding inclusive and accessible practices across education, employment, and workplace culture at New College Swindon, with local employers, and in wider communities – positioning Swindon as a leader in inclusive employment and a model of best practice in accessibility and inclusion.

As a result of this project, New College Swindon made a number of commitments ahead of this final Report:

Establish and support an HE Neurodiversity Group for HE students who meet regularly and whose voice is heard and impactful.

Train relevant staff to use the Employer Toolkits and the HE Student Toolkits. Embed the Student Toolkits in HE programmes from Induction

Ensure all HE students have good access to careers advice and employment skills development appropriate to the needs of neurodivergent graduates

Promote inclusive recruitment, onboarding & retention practices with employer partners & model these in the college's own employment practices

Promote the outcomes of the project and good practice

To maximise impact and ensure sustainability, we recommend:

1. Embed the toolkit to use in ongoing employability support

- Ensure staff routinely use the toolkits with students and employers as part of careers advice, job search workshops, and employer engagement.
- Monitor usage and gather feedback to maintain relevance.

2. Creating a visible inclusion presence on campus

- Establish regular forums or drop-in sessions for students to discuss employment challenges, share successes, and co-create solutions.
- Use these spaces to capture ongoing student voices, update toolkit content if needed, and build a supportive community.

3. Expanding employer engagement

- Share the Employer Toolkit with local and regional businesses through partnership events, CPD sessions, the college business development team, the college's employability team and targeted outreach.
- Encourage employers to pilot inclusive recruitment and onboarding practices, using the toolkit as a reference point.
- Consider a collaboration with local employers to position Swindon as a recognised centre of excellence for inclusive employment practices.

4. Integrate into digital platforms

- Host the Student Toolkit on the student hub and explore placement on the college's public website to increase accessibility.
- Provide downloadable templates, checklists, and guides for ease of use.

5. Track outcomes and impact

- Develop simple metrics to measure changes in student confidence, employer inclusivity, and employment outcomes for neurodivergent graduates.
- Build targets into the University Centre's Access and Participation Plan (APP) which is approved by the Office for Students (OfS)
- Use this data to inform future project funding and continuous improvement.

6. Actively promote the facilities and support available to support neurodivergent learners

- Specialist mentors.
- Specialist DSA support for those eligible.
- Access to state-of-the-art sensory study rooms for individual study.
- Support in securing employment using the bespoke resources and training created through this project.

7. Build strategic partnerships

- New College to work closely with local employers, and regional networks to embed toolkit use, share best practice, and strengthen inclusive communities.
- Expand partnerships to wider employer groups, local authorities, and neurodiversity advocacy organisations to scale reach and influence
- Consider a collaboration with local employers to position Swindon as a centre of excellence for inclusive practices.
- Explore joint funding opportunities to support further research and resource development.

8. Appendices

The appendices to this report contain:

(Click on any item below to jump to that section of the report)

1. Secondary Research Document
 2. Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) Summary
 3. Key findings from student questionnaire.
 4. Key findings from Employer Questionnaire
 5. Copies of the Graduate toolkits
 6. Copies of the Employer toolkits
 7. Graduate feedback (post mock interviews)
 8. Training document for Employer toolkit training
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Last of all...

Thank you

We would like to extend our sincere thanks to all the graduates who took part in this research for sharing their experiences, insights, and honesty. Your voices have been invaluable in shaping a clearer understanding of the barriers and opportunities that exist for Autistic/ADHD graduates entering employment.

We also wish to acknowledge all the organisations, HR Professionals, and Neurodivergent professionals who helped us create more inclusive pathways into work.

Your contribution has been instrumental in helping us drive meaningful change and ensure that future Autistic/ADHD graduates have the support, understanding, and opportunities they deserve.

We are also deeply grateful to the New College Swindon Senior Leadership and staff who supported this project, offering their time, collaboration, and commitment.

And finally, Thanks to Carole Kitching for having the passion to see the potential of this project.

Debbie & Hayley – ZoneND