Barriers and Facilitators to Supporting Canadian Autistic Postsecondary Students: Experiences of Accessible Learning Staff and Administrators

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Abstract

Background: Specific supports like social skills training, support groups, and mentorship programs can improve autistic postsecondary students' chances of success. To improve inclusion practices, it is vital to understand the experiences of key staff and administrators who support autistic students during their postsecondary education. This mixed-methods study provides insight into the scope, strengths, and weaknesses of autism-specific services among Canadian universities from the perspective of university staff and administrators associated with accessibility services.

Method: Thirty-six staff and administrators ($N = 36$) from publicly-funded Canadian universities responded to an online survey, and eight participated in a follow-up semi-structured interview. Descriptive statistics and reflexive thematic analysis were conducted.

Results: Half of the participants endorsed having support for autistic students; the most common being for transition to university. Main obstacles to providing autism-specific supports included a need for more funding, knowledgeable staff, and institutional support. In the interviews, participants reported a strong desire to support autistic students; however, noted several barriers, including under-resourced challenges faced by staff and limitations to funding.

Conclusions: Findings highlight financial and practical challenges to supporting autistic students on postsecondary campuses. We advocate for the implementation and evaluation of wrap-around services for autistic students to enhance their success and promote social inclusion. Achieving this will require changes at all levels of the university system, including leadership and policy decisions involving autistic advocates' perspectives.

Keywords: autism, higher education, postsecondary education, supports, academic staff

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Graduation from postsecondary education is associated with a myriad of benefits, including higher job satisfaction and earnings and better health outcomes (Barrow et al., 2013; Frank et al., 2015). Yet, access to and success in postsecondary education can be challenging for students with neurodevelopmental conditions, particularly autistic students (Anderson et al., 2018; Cage & McManemy, 2020). In recent years, increased academic research and advocacy attention has been centred on identifying the needs of autistic students and focusing on how best to support them in their postsecondary success (Irvine & MacLeod, 2022; Newman et al., 2011; White et al., 2011). Autistic students report unique needs in postsecondary settings, as well as diverse support efforts (Ames et al., 2022; Nachman et al., 2021; Vincent et al., 2021); however, there are disparities in the distribution and implementation of supports across Canadian institutions, calling for the inclusion of autistic students in postsecondary settings with evidence-based practices (Ames et al., 2022). Given the notable disparities across the Canadian landscape, the current paper focused on understanding the barriers and facilitators associated with providing autism-specific supports across postsecondary campuses from the unique perspectives of accessible learning staff and administrators. With this understanding, it is anticipated that we can identify gaps in services and knowledge needs to inform the development of inclusive practices across institutions.

Autistic students demonstrate many strengths that position them for success in higher education (Anderson & Butt, 2017; Scott & Sedgewick, 2021). To achieve this success, understanding the unique educational experiences and needs of autistic students is imperative. Van Hees and colleagues (2015) interviewed 23 autistic students about their challenges and support needs. Students reported that transitioning from high school to postsecondary can be

particularly challenging due to unexpected changes, management of pre-existing unique needs, and shifts in social relationships and expectations. Students also faced an increased need for advanced information processing, adapting time management skills, and substantial life changes such as independent living, all of which can significantly influence students' well-being and success (Van Hees et al., 2015). A recent review of 78 studies on the experiences of autistic students highlighted how everyday campus stressors such as social networking and student-to-faculty conversations have been noted as incredibly challenging to navigate (Irvine & MacLeod, 2022). New socialization expectations, among other factors, have constructed stressful environments that reportedly influence adverse mental health outcomes (Irvine & MacLeod, 2022; McMorris et al., 2019). Additionally, autistic students have also identified challenges related to a lack of knowledge and understanding of autism among faculty and staff (Glennon, 2016; Tipton & Blacher, 2014), as well as peers (Gillespie Lynch et al., 2015), and difficulties navigating systems and the complex ecosystems of postsecondary institutions (Scott & Sedgewick, 2021). Given the identified diverse needs reported by autistic students, additional supports and services may enhance the likelihood of student success.

A growing body of literature has emerged on the inclusion of autistic students in postsecondary settings and their need for specific supports (e.g., Anderson et al., 2019; Duerksen et al., 2021; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2012). Anderson and colleagues (2019) reviewed 24 studies of interventions for autistic postsecondary students. The authors found a broad range of interventions that may be helpful for postsecondary students spanning social (e.g., social skills training, support groups), occupational and mental health, and academic domains. Some evidence suggests that the prevalence of such supports for autistic students is increasing (Barnhill, 2014; Viezel et al., 2020). Indeed, recent environmental scans based on information

garnered from institutional websites across the United States (Nachman et al., 2021), United Kingdom (Vincent et al., 2021), and Canada (Ames et al., 2022) identified diverse sets of supports, including transition to postsecondary services, support groups, skills training, and mentorship programs, to name a few. However, they also outlined disparities in the distribution of services across institution type and geographic location. In Canada, Ames and colleagues (2022) showed that, among the 15 (6%) of institutions with autism-specific supports identified through a web search, universities and institutions in Central Canada (i.e., Ontario) had a disproportionate number of provisions. Following this scan, it was evident that an understanding of why and how some institutions can provide supports, whereas others cannot, is needed to begin to identify knowledge needs, service gaps, and best inclusion practices to ensure that the unique needs of autistic students are met.

Staff and administrators associated with academic accessibility services across campuses are often the first contact for autistic students, connecting them to additional supports, so may be able to speak to these research questions. Several studies have previously surveyed academic accommodation and diversity and inclusion staff, providing foundational knowledge in understanding the experiences of key staff and administrators who support autistic students during their postsecondary education (Brown & Coomes, 2016; Dymond et al., 2017; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014; Hu & Chandrasekhar, 2021; Knott & Taylor, 2015). Gobbo and Shmulsky (2014) conducted focus groups with faculty members at one college in the United States to determine the strengths and weaknesses of postsecondary autistic students and effective strategies for promoting success. Authors provided recommendations for academic accommodations that included staff adherence to class structure, attending to each lecture's emotional climate, and further education about autism for faculty. Knott and Taylor (2015) also

conducted focus groups with both autistic students and university staff to examine the achievements, challenges, supports, and barriers for students. Thematic analysis revealed key differences between staff and student perspectives. Where staff relayed that diagnosis disclosure was valuable for formal social support, this view was contested by the students who expressed a desire for support regardless of a formal diagnosis. In another study, the barrier that counselling center directors most frequently endorsed is the experience of being understaffed to respond to high clinical demands. The second most common barrier is the lack of staff interest or expertise in treating autistic students (Hu & Chandrasekhar, 2021). Brown and Coomes (2016) surveyed 146 directors of disability services to determine what they perceived as best practices for autistic university students. Broadly their research suggested employing proactive and customizable accommodations grounded in 'equalizing the playing field' for autistic students (Brown & Coomes, 2016). Dymond et al. (2017) conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 parents of autistic adults and six university personnel at one public research university and found that transitional supports widely facilitated successful postsecondary outcomes. Students felt supported and confident in a new environment by developing an intentional and comprehensive transition plan that fitted individual needs and prioritized family and staff involvement (Dymond et al., 2017). Practically such accommodations could include meetings with a counsellor or disability services staff before starting postsecondary studies to discuss support needs, identify accommodations, and ensure supports and services were in place (Dymond et al., 2017). Together, these studies highlight the benefits of providing adequate and timely supports for autistic students; however, most of these studies were conducted in the United States at one institution. Consequently, there is limited information about the barriers and facilitators to

supporting students from both a need (or desire) and logistical (or practical) perspective, impacting the generalizability of the previous findings.

To gain a better understanding of barriers and facilitators to providing autism-specific supports in the Canadian context, this mixed-methods study described the scope of supports available, the strengths and weaknesses of services, and what is perceived as ideal support from the perspective of university staff and administrators associated with institutional academic accessibility centres. As such, the research questions are:

1) What autism-specific supports are available at Canadian institutions?

2) Approximately how many autistic students attend Canadian universities and of these, how many access supports?

3) What are the barriers and facilitators of providing autism-specific supports?

Method

Participants and Procedures

Participants from this study consisted of staff and administrators from publicly-funded Canadian universities. Given that many available autism-specific supports identified in Canadian postsecondary settings were at universities (11/15; Ames et al., 2022), in this project, we focused solely on the experiences of staff and administrators at universities. University institutions were selected using the Government of Canada's *Master List of Designated Educational Institutions* (Ames et al., 2022; Government of Canada, 2015). Eligible participants were required to be at least 18 years of age.

Study procedures were primarily approved by the UNIVERSITY harmonized ethics board (#H22-00630). However, given that our research involved contacting staff and administrators at institutions across Canada, ethical approval was sought across all 91 institutions

(Government of Canada, 2015). After contacting the ethics boards for universities across Canada, 53 institutions either provided or did not require additional ethical approval, and 8 were included in the harmonized ethics process. As such, 61 institutions were included in the recruitment process. From these institutions, publicly available email addresses for staff and administrators from the institution's respective academic accessibility office were sent recruitment materials for participation in a 15–20 minute anonymous online survey. We emailed 139 staff and administrators. We also asked those invited to share the survey with those who may be knowledgeable regarding autism-specific supports (or academic supports more generally) within their institutions. Data collection occurred between March 2022 to July 2022. At the end of the survey, participants were given the option to provide their email address if they were prepared to partake in a follow-up semi-structured interview. Participants were interviewed via Zoom by EC (supervised by MA) or MA individually in May-July 2022. MA manually transcribed and de-identified interviews with an additional research assistant checking for accuracy. All participants were assigned a gender-neutral pseudonym to protect them or their institutions from identification. No incentives were provided for participation.

Online Survey

The quantitative survey included demographics (e.g., age, gender, racial identity, province) and institutional characteristics (e.g., approximate study population and information about the institution's autistic student body). To ensure participants' anonymity, the institution's name was not collected in the survey. Participants were asked whether their institution had autism-specific supports (i.e., outside of traditional academic accommodations). If a participant answered "yes" to this question, they were presented with additional questions related to types of support; for example, how students were connected with the supports, whether a diagnosis was

required to access supports, and how these supports were funded before being asked questions regarding potential facilitators and barriers to accessing these supports. If a participant indicated that their institution did not have autism-specific supports, they were directed to questions related to barriers to developing and implementing such supports, as well as the desire for said supports.

Interview Protocol

The interview protocol was developed collaboratively across authors. The created items aimed to elicit participants' experiences regarding the available autism-specific support, or lack of support, at their institution (see Supplemental Materials – Qualitative Interview Questions). The interviews were semi-structured and included open-ended questions for those with supports: (a) participants' role with a provision providing; (b) how students are connected to supports; (c) strengths and weaknesses of the provision(s); (d) barriers for progress/evaluation. For those without supports, questions focused on: (a) the need for support for autistic students; (b) barriers to developing and implementing autistic-specific supports; (c) services most helpful for autistic students; (d) possible benefits of having autism-specific supports.

Researcher Reflexivity

Our research team is comprised of three academic researchers and one graduate student across counselling, clinical, and educational psychology disciplines. EC and JV conducted the qualitative analyses. EC is a racially diverse/ambiguous, autistic, lesbian, femme person currently in their first year of a graduate counselling psychology program. JV is a White male Irish neurotypical academic based in the United Kingdom who is also the parent of an autistic child. MA completed the quantitative analyses. MA is a White, neurotypical, second-generation Canadian researcher who works in an academic setting and is a psychologist in private practice. CM is a White, cisgender, neurotypical Canadian academic and psychologist. Before coding the

qualitative data, EC and JV bracketed their assumptions by reflecting on how their identities and experiences might influence the data interpretation (Morrow, 2005). Specifically, we anticipated that due to both authors' vast experience with autism, professionally and personally, as well as their active involvement in higher education, their perspectives might be influenced. We took steps to manage these perspectives, detailed in the data analysis section.

Data Analysis

For the online survey data, descriptive statistics (i.e., mean, frequencies) were conducted in SPSS Version 27 (IBM Corp, 2020). Qualitative data analyses used an inductive approach through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). This approach offers a flexible but standardized means of identifying and categorizing the primary patterns within a data set (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2006) in which codes are seen as subjective and inseparable from the researcher's identities and experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). We followed the six main phases of thematic analysis, including familiarization, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and writing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021a; 2021b). Following transcription, both EC and JV separately familiarized themselves with the data, wrote memos that summarized initial reactions and identified codes using the data analysis software, NVivo 12. We used multiple strategies to establish the trustworthiness and credibility of our data (Levitt et al., 2018), which included meeting together via Zoom to corroborate and refine codes, categories, and themes and, ultimately, achieve consensus. Lastly, the finalized analysis was presented to the research team for other authors to provide input on potential missing codes and important contextual components, as well as develop the thematic map.

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Results

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However, 6 cases were removed due to incomplete data[1], resulting in $N = 36$ (86%

retention rate). Most survey participants identified as female ($n = 26$; 72%), White ($n = 30$;

83%), and held a graduate degree ($n = 24$; 67%). Participants represented the Atlantic, Central,

Prairies, and West Coast regions of Canada. Example position titles held by participants included

advisor, counsellor, or learning specialist (some titles slightly modified/shortened to protect

confidentiality), with the length of the position held ranging from a few months to many years.

Sizes of student bodies ranged from 0-9,999 ($n = 6$; 17%) to over 30,000 ($n = 7$; 19%). From the

quantitative survey, 8 participants representing seven institutions across Canada volunteered for

the qualitative interview. No identifying (i.e., demographic) information was collected to protect

anonymity.

Quantitative Survey

When asked to approximate the autistic study body at their institution, many participants

($n = 9$; 25%) reported not knowing this information (e.g., "don't know"). Other participants

provided a range from less than 10 to several hundred autistic students (up to 500). When asked

how many autistic students access their institution's general academic accommodations, again

many participants ($n = 7$; 19%) were unsure and answers ranged from less than 10 to a few

hundred (up to 200).

Half ($n = 18$; 50%) of the survey participants reported that their institution provided

autism-specific supports. Among those who offered such supports, transition to university ($n = 8$)

was most endorsed, followed by social groups ($n = 7$), and peer mentoring programs ($n = 6$).

Other kinds of supports endorsed included information on the institution's website, employment

support, specialist tutoring, study groups, self-advocacy groups, student-led societies, daily

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[1]One case had no responses (100% missing), 1 did not have responses past the demographics section, and 4 cases did not complete the question querying the availability of autism-specific responses onwards.

living supports, autistic advisor, and faculty and staff training. Some participants ($n = 7$) reported that a diagnosis was required to access supports and that students were connected to these supports through[2] their academic advisor ($n = 12$), information found on the website ($n = 8$), were self-referred ($n = 8$), or through other means (e.g., newsletter, recruitment events). With regards to funding, there was variability in how supports were reportedly funded, including through operating dollars, government funding, donor support, and research funds.

All participants answered questions regarding potential barriers. In an open-ended question asking participants about their institution's barriers to the development and implementation of autism-specific supports, themes included funding ($n = 10$), [knowledgeable] staff ($n = 5$), and awareness and institutional support ($n = 5$) to be barriers. Similarly, limited allocated funding ($n = 18$), restricted personnel with specialized training/knowledge about autism ($n = 16$), and inadequate institutional support ($n = 15$) were all highly endorsed in a select all-that-apply item. Some participants noted a limited demand for assistance among autistic students ($n = 10$). When provided with types of supports that may be desired, the most commonly desired supports included guidance in transition to university ($n = 21$), faculty/staff training/resources ($n = 18$), employment support ($n = 19$), peer mentoring ($n = 19$), social groups for autistic students ($n = 18$), and self-advocacy groups ($n = 16$). However, information on the institution's website, specialist tutoring, peer-led study groups, student-led societies, support with daily living, and autistic advisors were also endorsed (n's ranged from 10-14). Participants also rated how much autistic students, caregivers/family, other professionals, faculty/staff, and administration expressed an interest in autism-specific supports on 1 (*none*) to 4 (*high*) Likert scale. Rated interest was highest for caregivers/family ($M = 2.46$, $SD = 1.06$), followed by other professionals

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[2] "Select all that apply" response item.

($M = 2.39$, $SD = 1.03$), autistic students ($M = 2.29$, $SD = 0.86$), faculty/staff ($M = 2.04$, $SD = 0.77$), community organizations ($M = 1.68$, $SD = 0.72$), and administration ($M = 1.48$, $SD = 0.75$).

Qualitative Results

Our analysis categorized participant responses into five main themes: (a) current supports offered; (b) rationale for supports; (b) benefits of supports; (d) ideal support provisions; and (e) barriers to supports. Themes/subthemes related to the main themes are described in Figure 1. Themes, categories, and indicative codes can be found in Supplemental Table 1.

Current Supports Offered

Subthemes within this theme included personnel, transition support, gatekeeping, and social support. Our data suggest, that regardless of having autism-specific support(s) or not, all participants reported a range of different supports available for autistic students. These included having a case coordinator overseeing provision and 'being that first point of contact' (Kris). Most institutions had transition supports, but these tended to be more general face-to-face and online orientation programs for any student with a disability, not typically autism-specific. Another support was identifying accommodations and referrals, including providing 'an extra support letter they can present to their instructors to explain the autism diagnosis for them' (Lou). Two institutions reported student access to formal educational assistants[3] who might 'act as a scribe, help them regulate their emotions, and could be life skill support' (Kris) and peer mentors who 'help show them the ropes' (Avery). Several participants reported that their institutions provided social support, including a 'facilitated group discussion to focus on their academic needs' (Morgan), or 'high priority matters' (Alex), including opportunities to debrief

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[3] This term does not apply to the individuals' role but was rather a term that was created through the qualitative analysis process to maintain privacy.

about 'relationships and... different kinds of friendships' (Kris) as well as more relaxed activities like play games, snacks, trips, movies, or outings (Avery, Kris).

Of the eight participants interviewed, two reported specific support for autistic students at their postsecondary institutions. These were noted to be diverse, well-developed, and met many autistic student needs. Additionally, they were both autistic-led in some capacity. Their supports sought to provide comprehensive care for autistic students; however, notable limitations (see the section below re: Barriers to Supports) stifle their reach.

Rationale for Support

Participants all discussed the discernable need to have or establish specific supports for autistic students (see Figure 1 and Supplemental Table 1 for subthemes). Importantly, students, staff, and families were all acknowledged as having particular rationales for enhanced services. All participants noted that they had experienced autistic students advocating for support. Notably, the two participants (Avery, Willow) who had expressed specialized supports at their institution stated that such supports had come about due to student advocacy. Furthermore, it was noted by these participants that student advocacy was brought about by desires to succeed in school, live more independently, communicate more effectively, maintain a better work-life balance and build/maintain social connections.

Participants expressed their desire to see more supports 'I would love there to be more supports' (Rowan). Their rationale related to reducing the 'pressure on other staff and faculty and resources' (Alex) or to 'put out the fires that come from a student that isn't supported, right and the stress that's kind of attached to that, not just for the student but for the staff' (Rowan). Finally, several participants disclosed that families and caregivers would seek out support in the hope that the university would be able to support their autistic child. However, as one participant

noted, 'these students are too under-resourced, and probably their families, to a large degree, are too under-resourced' (Morgan).

Benefits of Support

This theme centers on the benefits of support, which were characterized by academic success, a sense of belonging, and greater independence. Of the two participants whose institutions offered specific support (Avery, Willow), they both spoke to the direct benefits. For instance, 'for students that want to socialize with each other, they are able to do that and they are able to get the advice from each other which is sometimes more valuable than somebody who's neurotypical' (Willow). We asked all participants to think about potential benefits arising from supports for autistic students (see Supplemental Table 1). Overwhelmingly, participants posited that supports bolstered student independence and capabilities during university, 'directly impacting many facets of success' (Robin). Moreover, supports provide students with the means to engage socially; for example:

> social groups, support groups, peer supports, or peer-led supports as well I think is a really powerful way of doing things too [because it allows] people that they kind of like share, similarities and barriers to say to "Hey, I've experienced the same as you, here's how I got through them" (Rowan)

These kinds of social spaces serve two functions, both to build a sense of community and, more importantly, to legitimize neurodivergent experiences through autistic-led capacity building.

Ideal Supports

Participants expressed hope and creativity for future supports, which were typically holistic and autistic-led (see Table 1 for subthemes). They outlined ideal supports to address the 'struggle with transitions' (Robin) for many autistic students, including the 'expansion of new student orientation' (Robin) to cover 'managing registration', 'setting up schedules... organize their classes and understand expectations of university' (Morgan). Some participants noted the

benefit of 'having an autistic space' for social groups (Morgan), including 'peer-led supports' (Lou, Rowan). There was recognition that ideal support would be 'ongoing' and 'direct' (Avery) and represent 'a comprehensive, ecological approach' (Morgan) which enables 'daily living tasks' like 'housing', 'shopping', 'budgeting' (Willow), as well as academic accommodations. Importantly, ideal support would be managed by one 'dedicated' staff member with enhanced training (Alex). See Supplemental Table 1 for further examples.

Barriers to Support

Despite the passion with which most participants described their work, ~~a salient narrative emerged related to barriers experienced in implementing or maintaining specialized supports~~ barriers were identified, with particular emphasis noted by subthemes regarding practical, financial, attitudinal and evidential challenges. Many participants noted resource constraints: 'it is hard to develop something because if they don't have time and we don't hire, or don't have money to hire' (Alex). All reported under-resourced challenges faced by staff as a barrier to expanded services. One participant stated, 'the neurotypical staff may not be able to [connect with autistic students]' (Avery). Furthermore, the scarcity of resources emerged as a pressing concern among the participants. They voiced their worries regarding the lack of necessary tools, materials, and personnel required to support autistic students adequately. These concerns were not limited to their individual experiences, as the participants also expressed that their colleagues shared similar sentiments. The collective consensus among the participants underscored the pervasive nature of resource shortages, leaving staff members feeling overwhelmed and ill-equipped to provide the level of support necessary for autistic students to thrive. Overall, ***time*** and ***money*** were the most significant barriers to realizing the ideal supports. It often prevented current supports from running effectively, where there was not adequate staff, and resources, and

'students were not incentivized to participate' (Avery). Participants reported fractured 'silos' where services are not connected, over-stretched staff who recognize 'it's not my role to make a new program' (Rowan), and managers who are 'lacking the data' (Morgan) to make a strong case to senior leaders for better funding arrangements.

Discussion

Here, we sought to gain a greater understanding of the barriers and facilitators of supporting autistic postsecondary students within the Canadian university context in order to identify knowledge gaps and inform best practices to providing standardized universal practices (albeit ambitious). Our findings, first and foremost, highlight the desire of staff and administration to support autistic students and the identified benefits of having additional supports. Yet, these desires are hindered by a lack of resources, including personnel and funding. Our data also highlights the very limited knowledge of the number of autistic students attending Canadian institutions, as well as the requirement of a diagnosis to access services.

Our findings demonstrate the strong desire that accessibility practitioners have to support their autistic students better and see them succeed. However, practical, attitudinal, and financial barriers mean that this is not currently possible. This resonates with wider evidence demonstrating that staff and administrators can see value in providing a diverse range of supports geared towards autistic students to promote success (Brown & Coomes, 2016; Dymond et al., 2017; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014; Knott & Taylor, 2015). However, integrating these supports into the institutional landscape remains challenging, with participants citing resources, namely knowledgeable personnel, funding, and fractured systems, as barriers and pointing to the need for buy-in from institutional leadership and connecting institutional systems. Waisman (2020) surveyed 79 higher education leaders, faculty members, professional staff, and autistic students

who spoke about the importance of inclusive leadership for developing diverse and equitable spaces in higher education for autistic students. The hallmarks of such leadership include making diversity a priority, being willing to innovate systemic disabling policies and attitudes, and being open to taking evidence-based risks to transform the institutional landscape for autistic students (Waisman, 2020). There is some evidence of a shift in how universities and colleges support their autistic and neurodivergent students in these regards. In the United States, Dwyer et al. (2023) outlined a system-wide approach to creating neurodiversity-inclusive campuses, which the University of California has endorsed. Recommendations include establishing Disability Cultural Centers, fostering neurodivergent leadership, integrating disability accommodations into one place, making eligibility requirements less onerous, and establishing programs to facilitate transitions in and out of postsecondary. However, such reforms require commitment from senior leaders, long-term funding, and cultural change across the university population. Waisman (2020) and others (e.g., Dwyer et al., 2023) have also emphasized the advantages of having autistic students leading and informing this work. Unfortunately, neither our survey or interview included an item querying the inclusion of autistic students in the development or delivery of supports. However, some participants noted that services were created, in part, due to autistic student advocacy. As suggested by Waisman and colleagues (2023), incorporating autistic students in the development and adaptation of policies positions them as experts and ensures the relevance of supports created (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017; Waisman et al., 2023).

One important finding in our study is the lack of comprehensive data on the autistic population in higher education in Canada, demonstrated by the lack of knowledge (e.g., frequency of "don't know" responses) and significant variability in reports across the sample. Our findings are consistent with Chown et al. (2018), who - based on Freedom of Information

(FOI) requests from 84 institutions in the UK - received reports ranging from one student to 'approximately 200', with 10 universities having more than 100 autistic students enrolled and another 24 establishments having between 50 and 99 students in that same year. We argue that poor data leads to difficulty in advocating for support, funding (both resource- and research-based funding) and implementing inclusive leadership and policy decisions. We also found that some institutions required a diagnosis to access to supports, which can lead to many autistic students not accessing services, ultimately interfering with success (Anderson et al., 2018; Knott & Taylor, 2015). Again, suggestions for creating universal design learning frameworks where campuses are more neurodiversity-inclusive, and all students could benefit from such supports, are identified as sustainable solutions (Bublitz et al., 2015; Waisman et al., 2023).

Limitations

We note several limitations of the present study. First, given the challenges of obtaining ethical approval from each of the institutional review boards, some institutions were not included in recruitment, thus limiting our potential sample. By focusing recruitment efforts on accessibility and administrator staff, other staff that support autistic students may have been excluded from participating. Also, to maintain participants' privacy, specific information about institutions was not collected, and therefore there may be dependency in the data (i.e., participants from the same institution). We also likely encountered self-selection bias, as evidenced by half of our participants endorsing having autism-specific supports at their institutions, in contrast to our previous environmental scan, in which we identified only 12% of universities with autism-specific supports (Ames et al., 2022).

Conclusion

Our findings demonstrate the desire and potential benefits of supports for autistic students across Canadian university settings, yet there are financial and practical barriers hindering these efforts. Our data identify the significant gaps with respect to robust and consistent reporting on the numbers of autistic students enrolled in institutions and the promotion and systematic evaluation of supports across campuses. We highlight the potential of supports that align with wrap-around services (e.g., transition to university, throughout, and transition to employment) to foster student success both in university and social inclusion in the transition to society. We argue that improving these supports may be dependent on institution needs and could be integrated or standalone but will require change across all levels of the university system (e.g., faculty and staff training, leadership and policy decisions). In order to enhance the promotion and sustainability of efforts long-term, we suggest that these are built on inclusive leadership and policy development informed by autistic advocates.

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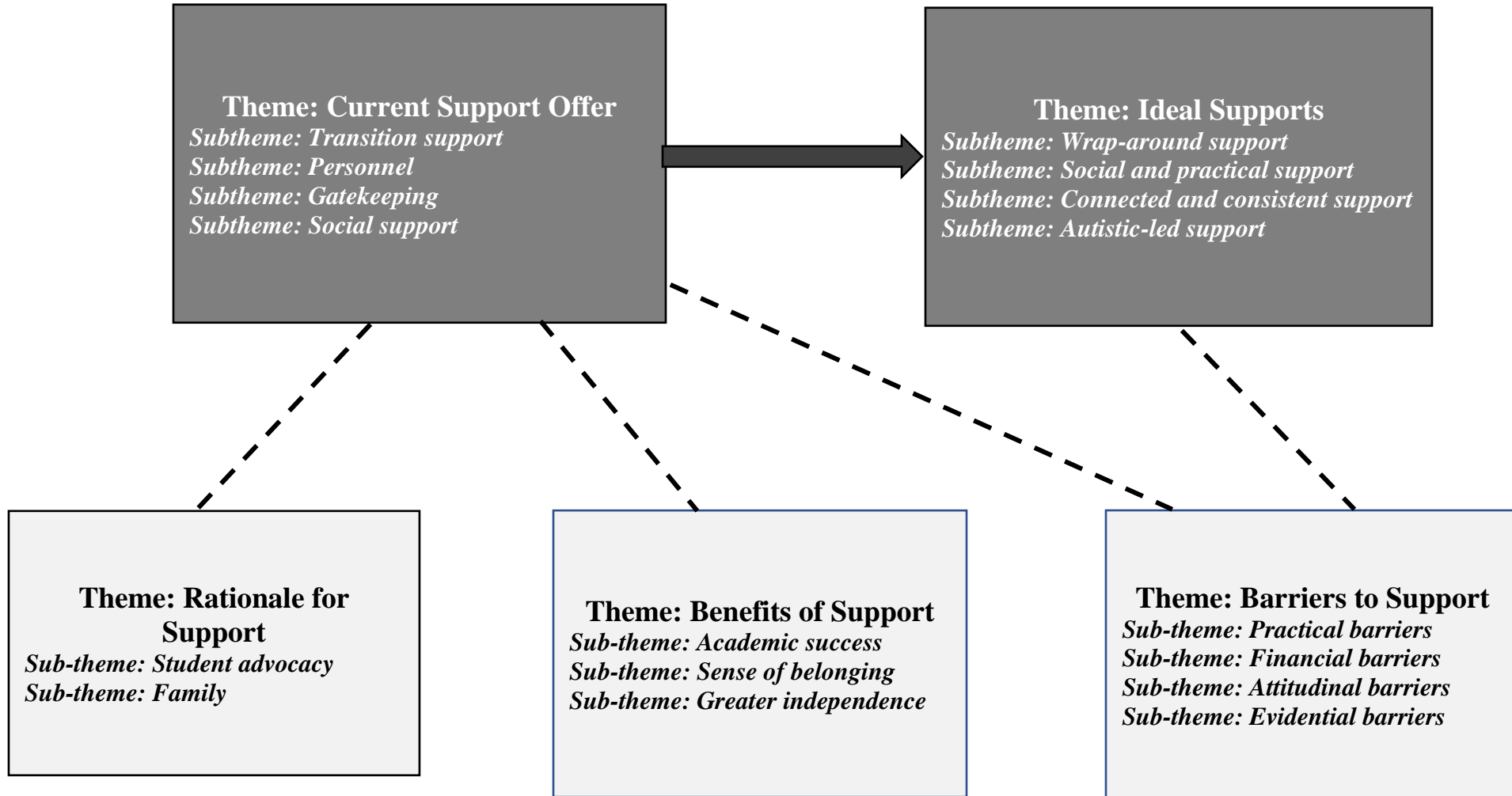
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Figure 1: Thematic map

Theme: Current Support Offer
Subtheme: Transition support
Subtheme: Personnel
Subtheme: Gatekeeping
Subtheme: Social support

Theme: Ideal Supports
Subtheme: Wrap-around support
Subtheme: Social and practical support
Subtheme: Connected and consistent support
Subtheme: Autistic-led support

Theme: Rationale for Support
Sub-theme: Student advocacy
Sub-theme: Family

Theme: Benefits of Support
Sub-theme: Academic success
Sub-theme: Sense of belonging
Sub-theme: Greater independence

Theme: Barriers to Support
Sub-theme: Practical barriers
Sub-theme: Financial barriers
Sub-theme: Attitudinal barriers
Sub-theme: Evidential barriers

Supplemental Table 1

Themes, categories, and indicative codes

Theme	Sub-theme	Indicative codes
Current Supports Offered	*Transition support*	Transition provisions
	Personnel	Case coordinator
		Support assistant
	Gatekeeping	Identification of accommodations
	Social support	Autistic-led and staff-led social groups
Rationale for Support	*Student advocacy*	Academic difficulties
		Living independently
		Making friends
	Family	Anxiety about needs being met
Benefits of Support	*Academic success*	Academic confidence
	Sense of belonging	Understanding from others
		Autistic visibility
		Increases in others' engagement
	Greater independence	Practical independence
Ideal Supports	*Wrap-around support*	Provision at point of need
		Transition support
	Social and practical support	Social groups
		Behavioural support
		Practical assistance
	Connected and consistent support	Consistent coordinator
		Connected services
	Autistic-led support	Autistic-led provision
Barriers to Support	*Practical barriers*	Lack of personnel
		Lack of time
		Lack of authority to make decisions
		Fractured services
		Need for registration
	Financial barriers	Lack of investment
	Attitudinal barriers	Lack institutional understanding
		Stigma / lack of student buy-in
	Evidential barriers	Lack of data to make decisions

Supplemental Materials – Appendix A

<u>Qualitative Interview Questions</u>

Does your institution currently offer autism-specific supports, outside of academic accommodations?

If the institution has supports:
1) Describe your institution's current autism-specific programs
2) What is your specific role with regard to these supports?
3) How are students typically connected to these supports?
4) What are the support(s)' strengths for accommodating autistic students?
5) What are its weaknesses for accommodating autistic students?
6) What are barriers for the progress/evaluation of this provision?

If institution does not have provisions:
1) Describe the need for supports for autistic students at your institution?
2) Who are expressing interest autistic-specific supports? (e.g., students, faculty, staff)
3) Describe the barriers to developing and implementing autistic-specific supports for students.
4) Should no barriers exist, please describe what services you feel may be most helpful for autistic students at your institution?
5) Please describe the possible benefits of having autism-specific supports at your institution.