

The Transition to Post-secondary Studies: Perspective of a student with ASD



“What I would have liked to know!”

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The panic has been growing in you since you found the suspension notice that fell out of your child's knapsack five minutes ago. Suspension? Conduct injurious to...? Then the phone rings. It's the school.

The education world is more and more conscious of the importance of putting in place effective and feasible strategies to help facilitate the transition to post-secondary studies for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Although this transition represents a crucial step in the life of ALL students, it remains a significant challenge for students with ASD, given the range of their needs.

In order to gain a better understanding of the reality of this transition for students, I spoke with a group of students at the University of Ottawa who had already experienced the transition to post-secondary studies. These students are enrolled in administrative studies, biochemistry, biology, economics, ancient studies, medieval studies and the Renaissance, computer engineering, geology, history,

computer technology, mathematics and statistics, music, political science, sociology, translation, etc. In spite of the heterogeneity of their areas of interest and distinct experiences in secondary school, these students share one thing in common...all have received a diagnosis of ASD.

Briefly, whether you are a student, parent, teacher, teaching assistant or professional, here are three important considerations the students ask be respected to make the transition to post-secondary education as smooth as possible.

Consideration # 1: Provide the time necessary for a harmonious and positive transition.

For students with ASD, the transition

should be *prepared gradually throughout secondary school*. This allows the students to not only become familiar with the steps of the transition but also to gain a better understanding of some of the challenges they most likely will face.

“The development of the intrinsic skills necessary for the transition to post-secondary education is the key to individual success!”

Simple and practical strategies to help achieve this goal could be presented during workshops targeting specific skills:

- Post-secondary life and all imaginable details...
 - In order to reduce anxiety related to novel situations, this workshop should, among other things, address the following topics in great detail:
 - Registration process
 - Purchasing school material
 - Loans, grants and scholarships
 - Lodging, etc.
 - Organizational skills
 - As organization skills tend to present a challenge for students with ASD, the following topics should be addressed:
 - Note taking

- Calendars and schedules
- Technology
- Time management, etc.

- Social aspects of post-secondary life
 - Students unanimously stated that social expectations were overwhelming. In addition to social skills often mentioned in the literature, it remains important to examine social rules/norms (implicit and explicit) related to behaviour and expectations:
 - In class
 - With professors
 - With other students
 - In residence, etc.
- Tasks of daily living
 - What new tasks will the student be responsible for and how will these be organised?
 - Organizing mail
 - Laundry
 - Public transportation
 - Groceries
 - Finances, etc.
- Parties, drugs and sexuality
 - Being well informed

remains the best tool for students.

- What to expect?
 - How to react?
 - The concept of “No” (for girls and for boys)
 - Understanding limits related to alcohol, medication, etc.
- Workforce
 - Preparation for the workforce will allow students to gain some knowledge about student jobs.
 - Looking for work
 - Curriculum Vitae
 - Cover letters
 - Interviews, etc.

The previous list is not exhaustive therefore it is important that the workshop facilitator take into account specific needs expressed by participants as they relate to their personal experiences.

Consideration # 2: Guide the student in order to maximize his or her knowledge.

“The more the student is informed and equipped, the more he or she will be able to make appropriate and personally relevant choices.”

It is essential that students inform themselves and be informed about student services available at the post-secondary level. Guided by an adult, friend and/or mentor, students must attempt to find answers to the questions below.

Help the student create a checklist to ensure nothing is missed. Establishing a system to keep all information together is also essential (e.g., charts, grids, notebook, etc.)

Here are a few examples of questions to ask:

- What are my rights as a student with special needs?
- What are the legal obligations of the educational institution I chose to attend?
- What programs and services are offered to students at the school I chose to attend?
- Who is the resource staff I can speak to or meet?
- How do I get help to complete applications for grants, loans, and scholarships?

The primary role of the friend, mentor or adult is to educate the student about the process by helping him or her anticipate the questions that need to be asked.

Consideration # 3: Respect the student's learning style, rhythm and differences.

"How can I ask for help when I don't even know I need help???"

All students mentioned the importance of discussing with them the possibility, importance and positive effects of having a reduced workload at the post-secondary level. It is essential to keep in mind that changes are possible but also that there are always exceptions. It is crucial to be informed!

In closing, I would like to thank the students who so generously shared their experiences and suggestions with me.

- *"It is by listening to you that I learn and from guiding you that I understand."* – Vicki

Here are two additional key comments:

- *"The system is too rigid and there must be a path allowing students to learn to learn."* – Student at the master's level
- *"Many students with Asperger's Syndrome are intelligent enough to develop their own social skills. However, a program targeting independence would promote quicker and more effective learning in this domain."* – Student at the doctorate level

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