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Exploring the experiences of autistic young adults and their transitions into employment

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Background: Adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are underrepresented in the workplace (National Autistic Society, 2016), and previous research has identified barriers which lead to poor employment outcomes for autistic people including: diagnostic characteristics of autism, personal, environmental, and discrimination related issues (Chiang, et al., 2013; Harmuth et al., 2018; Lindsay, et al., 2019). Research has suggested potential solutions and interventions to these barriers and negative outcomes but there has been little research into the personal experiences of autistic people when entering the world of work.

Objectives: This study aimed to explore the experiences of autistic young adults when entering the world of work and identifying if there were differences between those who have had higher education compared with those who have only had secondary school education.

Methods: This study used an interpretive qualitative design comprising of one to one semi structured interviews. Inclusion criteria were that participants must be young adults (under 26 years of age) with a diagnosis of ASD who had experience with employment, or who were looking for employment, at the time of the study. 5 participants (3 males, 2 female) volunteered to take part. One to one semi-structured interviews were conducted in private over the virtual medium of video and/or voice calls due to the COVID 19 global pandemic. These virtual interviews were conducted and recorded using either the software 'Microsoft Teams' or 'Webex'.

Results: Using thematic analysis three themes emerged from the data. These were: Disclosure, Influences of Education, and The Application Process. The first theme, Disclosure, the autistic young adults were found to be selective on whether, and when, they would disclose their diagnosis to an employer. These choices appeared to be based on both past disclosure experiences as well as each participant's perception of the potential consequences of disclosing. The second theme, Influences of Education, it was found that education had a multifaceted role on the experiences of autistic young adults entering employment. Participants in this study had differing views on the extent that education influenced their career paths. Educational qualifications appeared to have differing significance for each participant. The final theme, The Application Process it was found that, regardless of educational level, participants reported experiencing difficulties. Online applications were identified as a particular issue as participants perceived them as a lengthy process, with differences in application websites resulting in each application meaning starting a new process.

Conclusions: The findings of this study have implications for employers in terms of the need to develop autism friendly application and interview processes, how they respond to disclosures of an autism diagnosis, and providing tailored workplace supports. In addition, the need for schools to support autistic young people in preparing for all aspects of the process of securing employment was highlighted. The importance of a combination of qualifications and work experience was identified as essential in leading to positive employment outcomes.