# Advice for autistic people considering a career in academia

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## Abstract

Academia is underpinned by an apprenticeship model, with increasing recognition of the need for a 'cognitive apprenticeship' model in which the methods and strategies of academic success are learnt through participation in a community of inquiry. Autistic people face systemic barriers in academia, as in other professions, and these may be exacerbated by a model based on learning by observing and modelling. This study sought to obtain specific practical advice for autistic people considering a career in academia, from the perspective of those already working within the academy. Thirty-seven autistic academics provided written reflections on the advice they would give a young person considering a career in academia. Five key themes were generated from these reflections: know the role, find the right people, know (and value) yourself, remember well-being and proceed with caution but with passion.

## Lay abstract

One of the recognised strengths of autistic people is their ability to absorb and retain large amounts of information; autistic children and adolescents are often described as 'little professors'. So, is the life of a university researcher or teacher the ideal career for an autistic person? In this study, 37 autistic people working in universities and colleges provide advice to young people considering a future career as an academic. They emphasise the importance of understanding the complexities and requirements of the role, understanding and valuing yourself and your strengths, and finding the right people to work with and learn from. They also discuss the importance of maintaining a balance between work and well-being, and between caution and passion. The life of an academic can be ideally suited to an autistic person, but it can also be very challenging.

## Keywords

academia, apprenticeship, career

## Introduction

An apprenticeship model underpins academia (Golde, 2008); we learn by doing, under the supervision of those who have already proven themselves in the academy, primarily in the context of the doctoral degree. There is increasing recognition that one of the flaws of this model is the reliance on the tacit transference of knowledge and thus movement towards a 'cognitive apprenticeship' model in which the methods and strategies of academic success are learnt through participation in a community of inquiry (Greer et al., 2016). A reliance on learning the hidden curriculum rather than providing explicit guidance on the measures and strategies for success provides a significant barrier for those who do not naturally intuit the thoughts and motivations of others, such as autistic people (Byrne, 2022; Hunter & Hunter, 2022).

Early career academics (ECAs) experience high levels of stress, anxiety and overwhelm (Hollywood et al., 2020; Willson & Given, 2020). There is evidence that these experiences can lead to leaving the profession, that personal characteristics can exacerbate them (Hollywood et al., 2020; Willson & Given, 2020) and that providing appropriate supports can ameliorate them (Crome et al., 2019). Autistic people experience higher rates of stress and anxiety than non-autistic people (Gillott & Standen, 2007; Hwang et al., 2019), and these conditions are exacerbated

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by masking (Hull et al., 2021), making this cohort particularly vulnerable. The limited data on the experiences of autistic academics suggest that they face additional barriers and challenges that may not be understood and addressed by non-autistic colleagues, supervisors and administrators (Dwyer et al., 2021; Martin, 2021).

This report aims to provide advice for autistic people considering a career in academia, from the perspective of autistic people already working in this environment. This is not a solution to the many barriers that need to be addressed, but rather a starting point for a conversation that needs to occur if we are to encourage and support autistic doctoral students to transition to academic careers.

## Method

### Participants and procedure

This study formed part of a larger longitudinal project conducted across 12 months, involving 37 autistic academics who provided monthly written reflections on specific topics (Jones, 2022). Participants were recruited via the promotion of the study on social media (Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter) and through word of mouth. The social media posts directed interested individuals to a website that provided study details, a downloadable consent form and an email address for study enrolment. Participants ranged from 26 to 58 years of age and came from a wide range of disciplines, including psychology, education, health and social sciences; see Table 1 for participant demographics. This article reports on study participants' responses to the question, 'What advice would you have for a young person considering a career in academia?'

### Data analysis

An inductive approach to data analysis was utilised, following Braun and Clarke's approach to reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019), recognising that the researcher's own lived experiences will influence interpretation of the data. Data were anonymised, with participants providing their preferred pseudonym for analysis and reporting. All participants reviewed the results to ensure the interpretation aligned with their reflections and lived experience.

### Researcher positionality and community involvement

This research was conducted entirely by autistic people. The author is a late-diagnosed autistic autism researcher who has worked in academia for more than 20 years. A panel of four autistic researchers not otherwise involved in the study reviewed the data collection tools for clarity, comprehensiveness and inclusive language. All study participants are autistic.

**Table 1.** Participant demographics.

|  | n | % |
|---|---|---|
| Gender identity |  |  |
| Female | 21 | 57 |
| Male | 9 | 24 |
| Nonbinary | 7 | 19 |
| Autism diagnosis |  |  |
| Yes | 32 | 86 |
| In process | 2 | 5 |
| Self-identify | 3 | 8 |
| Country of residence |  |  |
| Australia | 13 | 35 |
| United States | 11 | 30 |
| Canada | 5 | 13 |
| United Kingdom | 5 | 13 |
| Europe | 2 | 5 |
| New Zealand | 1 | 3 |
| Age group |  |  |
| 20–29 | 5 | 13 |
| 30–39 | 13 | 35 |
| 40–49 | 11 | 30 |
| 50–59 | 8 | 22 |
| Doctoral qualification |  |  |
| Yes | 12 | 32 |
| In progress | 13 | 35 |
| No | 12 | 32 |
| Years in academia |  |  |
| <5 | 10 | 27 |
| 5–10 | 11 | 30 |
| 11–15 | 11 | 30 |
| >15 | 3 | 8 |
| Not stated | 2 | 5 |
| Current role |  |  |
| Research only | 7 | 19 |
| Teaching only | 3 | 8 |
| Research and teaching | 19 | 51 |
| Governance/admin | 3 | 8 |
| Other | 5 | 13 |

## Results and discussion

Participants provided a range of suggestions for autistic individuals considering a career in academia. The author generated five themes from the analysis of these reflections: know the role, find the right people, know (and value) yourself, maintain balance, and proceed with caution but with passion.

### Know the role

In considering whether to commence a career in academia, it is important to have a comprehensive understanding of what the role entails. Individuals considering an academic career path should ensure they are aware of the skills required, and the benefits and challenges of this environment, and, if possible, find opportunities to experience the

environment before committing to a career path. While the broad skillset required for academia is challenging for many who enter the profession, it can be particularly difficult for autistic people who often have an uneven cognitive profile with challenges in some areas and great strengths in others (Jones et al., 2009).

Like all workplaces, academia has procedures, norms and unwritten rules. There are practical steps an individual can take to increase their chance of success. This includes developing new skills and honing existing ones, learning more about the structure and processes of the institution, identifying the measures of success in their area of specialisation and learning the hidden curriculum (Hariharan, 2019). An important part of this process is learning when to say yes and when to say no, understanding the priorities of their role and ensuring that the tasks they take on will increase their career success:

> I would encourage people to think carefully about all the different responsibilities they would have in a high-level academic position, and whether they would be comfortable with all those diverse roles or whether they might get stuck at a lower level in their academic career. If the latter, would they be comfortable staying at that lower level for their whole life or would they rather pursue a career outside academia? (Scott)

> Another difficulty is that a lot of people seem to know intuitively that some rules are made to be broken. I have only recently come to understand this; I tend to follow rules, and increasingly I am discovering that nobody else bothers – or at least, they can distinguish between rules that are real and rules that are only for show. (Mia)

> When you've completed a project, or a stage of a project, take some time off to publish it. It's academic currency, plus it's where the actual impact of your research begins. (Ava)

### Find the right people

A common element of many reflections was the importance of surrounding yourself with the right people, which many saw as critical to surviving and thriving in the workplace. Choosing the right thesis advisor (research project supervisor) is crucial for those considering higher degree research studies. They should look for someone who has genuine interest and expertise in their area of research, an understanding of autism (or a willingness to learn), and an openness to autistic ways of thinking and working. For those commencing in academic roles, having the right supervisor can make a huge difference to their employment experience.

Finding a mentor or mentors can significantly support learning and navigating the role. For some, this might be autistic mentors who understand the world from their perspective and can share with them strategies for avoiding

the pitfalls. For others, this might be a non-autistic mentor who can help them make sense of the neurotypical ways of thinking and acting surrounding them.

Many of the reflections emphasised the critical importance of developing a network. This is an intimidating prospect for those who find social interaction challenging and the idea of connecting with a wide group of people confronting. An essential aspect of working with colleagues is understanding each party's communication preferences:

> Find the best way to communicate with your colleagues, and in what circumstances. e.g. email /teams (written) Zoom / phone in person etc. (Jane)

> I think the biggest piece of advice I could give you is network. Make sure you network and do it your way. Because I think in academia, it really seems to be about who you know rather than sometimes what you know. (Charlotte)

> Reach out to other Autistic individuals in academia and build a community that can support your growth and champion your learning. (Kelly)

### Know (and value) yourself

As important as it is to understand the role, people, culture and environment, it is also important for the individual to know themselves. Research suggests autistic people are less able to accurately assess their own social cognitive skills (DeBrabander et al., 2021) and have lower global self-perceptions than non-autistic people (Nguyen et al., 2020). A clear understanding of their strengths and challenges will help them navigate academia, value their skills and develop the skills they need. It will also help them know which opportunities are right for them and which will burn them out. Ideally, others will also recognise and value these strengths; as Chapman (2021) notes, teams with more neurologically diverse membership have a greater range of cognitive resources to draw on, and are thus likely to outperform teams consisting solely of neurotypical members on important tasks such as problem-solving:

> . . . identify your values, your strengths, your weaknesses, what you can change, what you can't change, what works and doesn't work for you, how you can grow, how you can feel good. (Amy)

> Make sure you work on your organisational skills early on, because the autonomy you have in academia can be a positive or a negative, depending on how able you are to put a structure in place for yourself and then stick to it. (Louise)

> I would also advise them to stay humble enough to know that there's always more to learn. (Saskia)

Participants used the word *resilience* frequently in the context of valuing oneself. As noted in many reflections, academia is competitive and judgemental (Lemon, 2018; Macfarlane, 2021; Watermeyer & Tomlinson, 2022). We compete for positions, promotions, grants, publications, office space and resources. As a daily part of the role, we grade students' papers, review colleagues' grant applications and journal articles, and critique each other's work and performance. Thus, academia requires resilience. An academic needs to be able to accept, and bounce back from, rejection – whether it is from journal editors, funders or promotion committees. They need to be able to receive and reflect on criticism – accepting and learning from that which is valid and deflecting that which is incorrect or unfair:

> Failure, rejection, and setbacks are a normal part of life and academia: they are worth learning from but not dwelling on. . . . Criticism is either warranted, in which case you can learn from it and improve; or it is unwarranted, in which case you can ignore it and move on. (Amy)

> Don't assume that you're always wrong. (Marie)

> Be kind and compassionate to yourself and know that the solutions that works for most people may not work for you off the shelf. You will have some failures during the process to find what works until you establish your career and that's okay. (Trevor)

### Maintain balance

It is vital to ensure that in meeting the needs and expectations of others, autistic academics do not overlook the importance of their own needs. Participants reflected on the importance of this across various domains. This included what we typically think of as self-care, such as looking after physical and mental health and maintaining work–life balance as well as the work–work balance that is an increasing challenge given the complex and competing demands of academic roles (Griffin, 2022). It also included adjusting schedules to avoid overload and the physical environment to reduce sensory input.

There was also recognition of the need for self-advocacy to ensure that colleagues and supervisors are aware of, and responsive to, the autistic academic's needs. As with all aspects of society, those in academia have limited knowledge of autism, resulting in a need for autistic people to educate those around them to achieve the required change. While this may not be fair or equitable, it is the current reality. Participants acknowledged that this is particularly complex concerning disclosure; if you do not disclose, it is hard to advocate for your needs, but if you do disclose, you risk experiencing negative reactions due to ignorance and stigma:

> The ability to self-advocate will need to be firmly in place in order for you not to be taken advantage of during your academic career. . . . Be prepared to spend a significant amount of time teaching others about what it means to be Autistic and in particular, what your personal experience of being Autistic is in the constellation of autism. (Kelly)

> I would also advise them to think carefully about questions of disability disclosure. Disclosure could hurt somebody's academic career, but then again, if one discloses, one can at least be somewhat confident that any program that hires them will be fairly accepting and supportive. . . (Scott)

### Proceed with caution but with passion

Many participants expressed the need for caution in pursuing a career in academia. While few made a blanket recommendation not to enter academia, some proposed definite caveats. Many aspects of academia present obstacles, and academics need strong internal motivation to overcome and/or survive these. However, participants clearly noted that academia has some benefits as a career for autistic people, including the ability to focus on, and be valued for, their areas of strength:

> If academia isn't something that gives you joy (after trying it for an amount of time you deem is enough), then leave it. Happiness is an important factor and happiness can simply mean less overall anxiety and stress. (Kelly)

> What I love most about academia is that most in this group care more about your strengths than your weaknesses. If you are really good at one thing, that is the metric by which they judge your value – there's so much weirdness and flaws in the people of academia that they are a rather open-minded and forgiving group compared to many in society. (Dave)

A key point imbued in many of the recommendations was 'do something you are passionate about and be passionate about doing it'. Academia offers something that is uncommon in many other careers but is well-suited to autistic people: the opportunity to make a career from their special interests. Research has shown that autistic people experience higher levels of 'intrinsic interest' and 'engagement and flow' (the sheer joy of immersion) when engaging in their special interests than non-autistic people (Grove et al., 2016), supporting the view that the focused expertise aspect of academic careers may be ideally suited to autistic people. Furthermore, there is evidence that the special isolated skills (talents) which are more prevalent among autistic people are not solely innate but developed through practice and experience (Meilleur et al., 2015), so focusing on special interests potentially contributes to further cognitive growth among autistic academics. However, research also cautions that while engagement in special interests is associated with increased well-being among

autistic people, very high levels of engagement can be associated with reduced well-being (Grove et al., 2018), suggesting that autistic academics should ensure that they do not become hyper-fixated on their areas of specialisation to the exclusion of other aspects of their life. Conversely, there is the risk of commencing with passion and being directed into areas that underutilise or dilute what brought them to the role. Thus, participants identified the significance of finding the area they are passionate about and being selective in accepting opportunities to ensure they are not side-tracked:

> Academia requires commitment, dedication, and a willingness to work really hard and for long hours, sometimes on very boring tasks, so a passion for the topic being studied or taught is utterly essential. Also, passion for the subject you are working with can help to override some of the more unpleasant aspects, such as social exclusion and feeling undervalued. (Psyche)

> . . . choose a topic that they can imagine wanting to read about for the rest of their lives. Teaching something you don't find interesting enough to read about in your leisure time is the dullest, most tedious job imaginable. Researching it is even worse. We have to invest uncounted hours into our fields of interest and know the recent developments in them to have any value in academia. It won't happen if they choose a topic that doesn't have 'special interest' status. (Saskia)

## Limitations

The participant sample for this study was recruited online, in response to notices on social media groups and through word of mouth, and thus is not generalisable to the diverse population of autistic people working in academia. Most notably, it was limited to those who were comfortable completing the written reflections in English, who were present in social media spaces and who self-identified as autistic. The majority (57%) of our participants identified as female, with only 24% identifying as male; thus, our findings may not be generalisable to the broader autistic population. However, it is typical of studies which recruit adult autistic respondents online to have predominantly female samples, particularly in higher education settings (see, for example, Bundy et al., 2022; Pickard et al., 2021). The capacity to report the data by nuances of specific disciplines and geographic regions is limited by the small sample size, and the risks of breaching the promise of confidentiality given the potential identifiability of participants if more specific identifiers were provided.

## Conclusion

Study participants provided a range of advice for autistic people considering a career in academia, emphasising the importance of knowing the requirements of the role as well as their own strengths and challenges. They recommend that finding the right people is crucial, as is self-care and advocacy, and noted that – approached with caution – academia is in many ways an ideal vocation for autistic people. The advice given was remarkably consistent across participants despite differences in their disciplines, countries of residence, and years in the profession. Future generations of (aspiring) autistic academics would benefit from access to the experiences of those who have experienced the challenges and triumphs of academic careers.

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