

**Aimhigher...**

**East of England**

# **Thinking about higher education?**

Tips from students with dyslexia, mental health difficulties and Asperger's Syndrome

**Student voices from an East of England Aimhigher funded project: 'The perceptions of students with hidden disabilities of their experience during transition to HE'**

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## Introduction

This guide has been written using advice from 18 students who took part in a research project funded by Aimhigher East of England in 2007-08. The research asked students with hidden impairments (dyslexia, mental health difficulties and Asperger's Syndrome) about going on to higher education (HE). The exact words of the students have been used so that it is real peer advice.

HE institutions generally work hard to encourage and support disabled learners to go on to HE study. Universities and colleges are also working to make themselves more accessible to disabled learners.



Making the transition to HE, often from a more structured environment such as a Sixth Form or Further Education (FE) College can be daunting for anyone. However for learners with hidden impairments this transition needs to be carefully planned to ensure it is as smooth as possible. We hope the tips in this guide will inspire other disabled learners to consider going on to study in HE.

## About the 18 students

The students who contributed to this guide were studying at 5 different HE institutions in the East of England. They were enrolled on a variety of courses at HND, degree and post graduate level in a wide range of subject including arts, social sciences humanities, engineering, information technology and nursing. There were students who had come directly from school or college at 18 and others who had worked or had families and then returned to studying.

Some of the students knew they had a disability when they applied to HE but several found out only once they started on their course. All of the students enjoy their studies and are very happy they are in HE, although some find studying difficult at times.

## Purpose of this guide

These practical tips from students currently studying in HE will help any disabled learner and their parents or carers plan and prepare for HE.

This guide is not specific to any one subject or university and can be used by any student with hidden impairments who is considering going onto HE study.

If after reading this guide you have any questions it is worth contacting the Disability Office at an HE institution you are thinking of applying to. For further information and advice you can also get in touch with the organisations listed at the back of the guide.

HE level courses can be studied in FE and HE colleges and at universities. In this guide the term university is used to refer to any HE level study.

## Should I go to university?

There are pros and cons about going to university so the following students' advice may help you decide what is best for you. The students felt it was important not to let disability stand in their way. Some chose to go to university to prove to themselves and others that the stereotypical perception of disabled learners was wrong.



**“Don’t let your dyslexia stand in your way. Don’t put it off because you are worried you are not suited to it. Have a go. You have to be committed to going to uni but don’t be afraid of taking the next step.”**

## Should I go to university?

“If you are bipolar you do need to think through all the issues around going to university. For instance uni might make your bipolar worse because you are on your own without the support structures like your family. You also need to be able to sort out personal support like mentoring, doctors or hospital appointments. You may need to go home or be in hospital. This can all take time away from studying.”

“Try university out, it allows you to go places you want to go in the future. It affects your future jobs, and career, the interests you have, your whole life and lifestyle and your life choices. For example you could travel and meet people through work. Earn more money with a job you need a degree for. Meet interesting people. Work on interesting projects. Otherwise you might have to stay at home. This is boring and you cannot afford to do what you want.”

## Should I go to university?

**“Don’t let the label of depression be an excuse for not considering HE. With the right medication and support you can get through a degree.”**

**“Have a trial programme first such as a summer school. Don’t be afraid to ask the tutors at open days what they think about dyslexic students doing the course you want to do. You might be pleasantly surprised with the response. Visit a few unis to check the atmosphere feels right for you, that it’s friendly and welcoming.”**

## What should I think about when choosing a university?



Deciding about where to study can be as important as what you study because you need to feel happy and settled.

“It is important to visit different universities before you decide where you want to go. You have to see if you think you will like being a student there.”

“Don’t choose a uni just on what you read. League tables aren’t everything. Unis are very different in the way they do things and they have different ‘markets’ [they are organised differently and attract different types of students]. Have a look at all aspects of the uni – the whole package eg course, syllabus, campus location (close to town) and size, is it easily accessible with good facilities like sport etc. The whole package has to suit you.”

## What should I think about when choosing a university?

“Think about what type of uni you are going to ie I don’t think I would survive in a large university with large lecture halls where I wouldn’t feel confident to ask questions. Don’t just go to a university with ‘snob value’. Think about if it’s what you really want and if you can hack the constructive criticism that you’ll get by making constant spelling or other mistakes.”

“Think about choosing a university at the right distance away from home. Think about how often you would like to go home and how long it will take you to travel. It is best not to go home too often but you need to be able to get there easily when you do want to go home.”

## What should I think about when choosing a university?

“Research what the university has to offer. Make sure they have support on site and a specific ‘disability team’, more than one person so that they have time to help you. Don’t rush into making a decision. Think it through. Decide if the place or the university will make you happy. You have to feel comfortable in the location and the atmosphere.”

“It is important to learn to survive on your own. Living at home and commuting may mean you lose out on being a ‘real’ student – you miss the social life and don’t make as many friends. It is a good idea to go into halls in the first year as everyone is in the same boat; most people do not know anyone. It makes you go and make friends.”

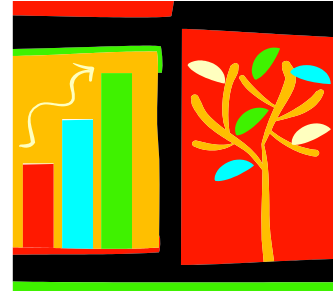
## What should I think about when choosing a university?

“If you have problems using public transport it is really important to take this into account when you are choosing your university or college particularly if you can’t drive or haven’t got a car.”

“A campus uni can be a good choice because it is more of a community and more supportive. It has everything you need in one place, this saves hassle and worry. You also need to be able to go somewhere you feel safe when you get unwell, being somewhere you know like the health centre and being on campus helps.”

## How do I choose the right course?

It's not just your predicted grades at A-level that will influence your choice of course also important are a range of other factors such as liking the subject, knowing about how it is taught and assessed and how self motivated you are expected to be. The students have captured these issues below:



**“When you visit the university or come to interview try to talk to students, particularly if there is a student ambassador doing the course you are interested in. Find out if it is a well taught course, the reality of the amount and standard of coursework and essays, the quality of the library, what sort of students do well etc. You could also look at some coursework to see what kinds of things you will be asked to do and what standard is expected of you.”**

## How do I choose the right course?

“Try to find out as much as you can about your course, what is taught, the modules etc and how it is assessed. Look at the proportion of assessed course work and exams to see what will suit you.”

“Before you go to university talk to people about the problems you think you might have on the course. Talk to the department administrators, tutors and student support. Discuss the modules and options on the course and find out what is entailed. Choose a course which allows you to use your strengths. Ensure you choose the right mix of practical and theory. Choose something that will stretch you but also give some cushion or comfort zone.”

“For me with my bipolar condition, the subject matter is crucial as there is a real sense of the healing power of art and I really enjoy art so it seems easier to understand.”

## How do I choose the right course?

**“Fine Arts degree programmes can have little or no structure or deadlines so you never know what’s expected of you. This can be very difficult if you have obsessive-compulsive disorder or other mental health difficulties which mean you prefer a structure and deadlines. The Fine Arts degree programme is very laid back and if you are used to someone pushing you to do the work, as they did in (FE) college, then you might fall behind as it’s up to you to motivate yourself.”**

**“It’s worth choosing a subject such as I did (psychology) that you can really understand through your own life experiences and difficulties. It makes more sense.”**

## Is it easy to apply?

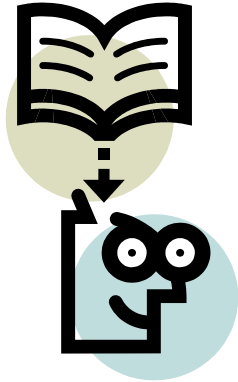
Once you have chosen a university and course the next step is filling in the UCAS application form. This can be more challenging for some students. So it is useful to find people who can give you advice and support.



**“The application process for HE is not as daunting as it looks. It is well structured and if you have a problem and phone the university you will get help. You can phone the course leader at university to make sure what you have already studied is at the right level and that you have the right experience.”**

**“Don’t let the application form put you off. You could need a lot of help to complete it. The print can appear fuzzy and make your eyes tired. It can take a couple of months to complete the on-line application form so make sure you start early on to have the time to do all the associated reading.”**

## Is university study different to school or college?



Yes, there are many differences you need to be aware of including learning more independently, evidencing your ideas and managing daily living alongside study deadlines.

“Uni is different; you have to be prepared to work outside class. It is a big change from college. It is weird having to listen to lots of information in lectures then read about it some more afterwards. In college you get told everything you need to know.”

“HE study does require students to research and evidence their views which can be difficult for some people. However this generally suits dyslexic people. It is better not to have cold hard facts – having a wider base of knowledge and information to draw on is really good as it works with dyslexic people’s strengths.”

## Is university study different to school or college?

“HE is a lot less stressful than FE. There is a wider margin to pass and fail – the answers are not so black and white. The lecturers are more laid back. HE is more creative, there is more scope for developing your own interests and a wider range of ideas and viewpoints. There is not usually a right and wrong answer. There is scope for interpretation as long as you are able to give explanations.”

“You will be surprised at the difference when you get to uni. From being really well supported at school, you have to manage everything for yourself. You have to be a master of everything, finances, support systems, your study timetable, and deadlines.”

“Don’t be afraid to accept help at uni it is not the same as school. It is important to get the help you need and to know you can control it. You can negotiate what you want. You can vary the support you get if you want. Uni support can be loads better than school in the same way that uni study can be better.”

## Is university study different to school or college?

“At university on your course you get to meet lots of people with the same interests. You learn things that otherwise you would not be able to. The structure of university is designed for people who like learning. So uni is a great place to go to focus on what you want to learn. Some uni learning is impossible to do on your own. You would not be able to motivate yourself to do the in-depth analysis needed, you may not have the resources to do it, particularly if you need equipment or software. Some things you can't learn from a book, you need tutor support.”

“At university you can find that you don't have to explain things about your mental health difficulties to staff. People can be more accepting of you and your impairment. This can be a very important confidence builder. Staff at the university help you out but they also encourage you to try to develop coping strategies and get treatment so you can be independent. Not being believed in is really difficult, university is not like this.”

## Should I tell the university I have a disability?

Having dyslexia, Asperger's Syndrome or mental health difficulties is classed as having a disability in HE. Disclosing your disability is helpful as the staff at university can prepare any specialist support you may need. If you are not sure what to do speak to the university disability officer in confidence.



**“If you suspect you have a disability, even if it has not been diagnosed, you can put it down on your UCAS form if you want. It is better to declare than not. Teachers might put you off declaring to the university but it is up to you if you want to tell them or not.”**

## Should I tell the university I have a disability?

“I think it would help to declare that you were dyslexic on your application form. However I would probably not put it down if I was applying for jobs. Declaring helps you get the support you need. If you don't declare it takes longer to set up support and you might need it. If you declare support is offered but you can then choose if you take it up – support is optional.”

“It is very important that you remember you have control over who knows about your dyslexia even if you declare this to the university on your UCAS form. Confidentiality of information is very important because you don't want everyone talking about you.”

“You need to let academic staff and your personal tutor know you are dyslexic. It is very useful to tell the university on your UCAS form. Also think about how you can explain your difficulties or dyslexia. This is quite important if you have to do a work experience.”

## Should I tell the university I have a disability?

“It can be very helpful to tell the academic department about your mental ill health, even though the thought of telling academic staff can be quite scary. It can be useful to stress the positive aspects of your mental health difficulty to academic staff and to explain what this will bring to your studies and to the course. There is no need for many people to know. Even if you only want to tell the disability and counselling services you can still get help. It is important that you choose who knows. Tell only those people who need to know. The mental health worker or the disability team will give you advice.”

“Tell your close friends at uni that you have mental health difficulties and explain a little bit about what that means. For example they may need to take you to hospital when you are unwell because you may not go yourself. This will depend on the extent of your difficulties and how often you are likely to be unwell.”

## What sort of support is there for studying at university?



The service for dyslexic students, students with mental health difficulties and Asperger's Syndrome is often called disabled student support or the disability office. It might not always be obvious that the service is meant for you.

There is a wide range of support available at university so it is really important to talk to or visit the disability office as early as possible to find out about all the services you are entitled to. You can do this before you start at the university. In particular find out about support funded through the Disabled Student Allowance (DSA) related to your studies.

**“Support at uni is good. If it is not then get help to make it good. You can get access to academic mentors who can really help; sometimes they can be lecturers at the university. It helps if they know something about Asperger's Syndrome.”**

## What sort of support is there for studying at university?

“As a dyslexic student you can get different support for exams, universities can arrange some of the following for your exams if you ask: a separate room, extra time, use of a computer to write your answers or to read questions to you. Bear in mind that exam support takes time to arrange so think about it well ahead. Plan and sort it out when you start university even though you might not be thinking about exams at the beginning.”

“For marking assignments some universities have a system which asks the markers to take a student’s dyslexic difficulties into account by making allowances for grammar and spelling.”

“ In university people with dyslexia can be supported through the disability service. This service is not just for people with physical and sensory disabilities.”

## What sort of support is there for studying at university?

**“Anything that will help you is important when you go to study in HE. Take whatever support might help. Don’t think about help as a ‘handout’. Don’t worry about other people thinking you have an unfair advantage. If you need it and it will help then make sure you get whatever support you can.”**

**“Check out the support structures at the university. Do they have a mental health support worker? This will be very important to your ability to succeed at uni.”**

**“An HC2 form offers free prescriptions to all students whether they have health problems or not. This can have an especially big impact on a disabled student who is on a lot of medication.”**

## How do I go about arranging support for university?

It is best to start arranging support while you are still at school, sixth form or FE college as it can take several months to get your support put in place.

**“Find out about the funding support you can get through DSA and get help with filling in the application form. You will have to have an assessment of need for the DSA at an assessment centre. It can make you nervous because it is important as it is about getting funding for your support and you might not find it easy to explain what kind of support you want and give enough justifications. It is difficult but it is worth it to get the support you need.”**



## How do I go about arranging support for university?

“Contact your local authority well before you start and find out who the Student Support Officer is as this is a name that you will need when you get to university and need to sort out things like DSA funding for additional equipment required. Speaking to them will also increase your understanding of what you are entitled to.”

“It takes a lot of effort to get your support funding sorted out. You need evidence of your dyslexia which is sometimes difficult to get from your school or college. The university may be able to help you. They can usually help you get a new assessment of your dyslexia from an educational psychologist.”

## How do I go about arranging support for university?

“It is important for dyslexic people to find out where the support services are at their university. You need to be aware of the potential services available. They are not always well publicised. Learning support services are usually available to all students but they may not be promoted effectively. The library is also a good source of help when it comes to information for example you are likely to be entitled to longer loans on more books than most students.”

“As soon as you get to uni, particularly if you are in a different county, make sure the local psychiatric service knows about your mental health history. Register at the outpatients of the mental health hospital and get your home GP to refer you as a failsafe. Be aware that your NHS notes all get transferred over to your new doctors or mental health service when you register so that they can actually see you and provide treatment. It takes a while to do this.”

## What if I think I can't cope or I lose confidence once I am there?



There are lots of people who can help including the organisations listed at the end of this guide. The students advise:

**“Don't panic about not being able to cope. Just do your best and achieve what you can. If you can't achieve your goal there is nothing you can do, it might just be that your target is too high. Accept your limitations. If you stop panicking you are able to achieve loads more. Panic is debilitating.”**

## What if I think I can't cope or I lose confidence once I am there?

“Remember that everyone at uni is new to it. No one is better than anyone else. It is a fresh start for everyone. There are other students with the same difficulties as you at uni – be aware of this. It is helpful to know, it makes you feel better and you can find out who they are and talk to them.”

“Learn to use your own abilities and strengths and build upon these. Develop your own coping mechanisms; work out how you work and your own learning processes so you can study more effectively.”

“You have to be determined once you start uni. Everything is strange at first and it takes some getting used to. It is stressful to start with and it can be off-putting. Stick with it and persevere.”

## What if I think I can't cope or I lose confidence once I am there?

“Ask for help if you need it – anywhere and everywhere – colleagues, lecturers, personal tutors, student support. Don't be embarrassed or concerned about how people think of you. It is not a sign of failure to ask for help.”

“Unexpected things outside study can throw you, you can and should try to prepare for them. Stress will make your OCD have more impact and be more difficult to deal with. This is not a good idea when you are already stressed.”

“Develop a sense of humour (fast) or use the one you have to full effect, it will keep you going. If you can laugh at things it will make them a lot better. You definitely need a sense of humour and to be yourself.”

## What if I think I can't cope or I lose confidence once I am there?

**“If you survive the first term you will survive and stay on the course. It's like being on a slalom – you get certain things right but every now and then you miss a gate and something goes wrong. However, you don't have to get everything right.”**

**“If you are worried about coping consider having a fall back option like making sure there is an HND course alongside the degree you want to do.”**

## What about friendships at university?

The students' feelings about social life at university varied, however they all thought friendships and the social aspects of university were important. Here are some of their comments on friendships:

**“The social side of university is very important. You won’t get anything like it outside uni, it is unique. There are different cultures, and new experiences. You should make the most of it.”**



## What about friendships at university?

“Fresher’s Week is a good time to get used to people in your class and to make friends. Make an effort to be with people, to get to know them. This stands you in good stead for later. You can also join clubs and societies to help make friends eg sports societies like football.”

“It is much harder for people with Asperger’s Syndrome to develop a social life. It is like climbing Mount Everest, the hardest thing to do. Make sure you go to Fresher’s Fair. Even if you don’t think you can cope do try to go to it as you can find out about all the clubs and societies where you can make friends. Get involved in some sort of activity – don’t rest until you are a member of a society or until getting along well with someone. Don’t let your studying take over before you have had a chance to sort out your social life.”

## What about friendships at university?

“If you have friends who are going to uni with you make sure you stay in touch with them, get their accommodation address and contact details. Try to be put in accommodation near to each other. This will provide some sort of support, it is a pressure release and emotional support to be able to talk to people you know.”

“You need to make sure you have someone to talk to as studying can be very emotionally stressful, particularly if you are doing an intensive course. It is important that these people you talk to understand your issues (your course, the demands it is making, the emotional stresses) and if possible dyslexia too.”

## What about friendships at university?

“It is very important to have friends to talk to. It can help if some of your friends also have MHD as they understand how you feel and can get the balance right about how to be with you – they are more attuned. They understand rather than just being empathetic.”

“It is worth making an effort and being brave about making friends. Sometimes for some subjects you really need a group of friends on your course to discuss things with, particularly if you are interested in it. It helps you learn and give you a different perspective.”

## Is there anything else I should do to prepare for university?

Everyone is different and will need to prepare for university in different ways. Some ideas from the students that may help to think this through include:

**“It is important to make sure you have university accommodation sorted out the first time you go away from home as it is one less thing to think about. Without this there are too many different things to cope with.”**

**“You should think about how you will cope financially. You may or may not have the time to work so financial management is important. On some courses (like nursing), it is like having a full time job so you can’t work and study.”**



## Is there anything else I should do to prepare for university?

“Learn some independence skills before you go to university. Once you are at uni it is more difficult for people with Asperger Syndrome to acquire these skills because you have to cope with everything being new and having to study and meet deadlines all at the same time. You may be going to lectures and getting notes at one point in the day then you have to sort out speech therapy or other therapy later. It feels like having to divert power from one thing to focus on another. It can be a problem finding the time.

Asperger Syndrome students need training in how to balance everything. The National Autistic Society runs a scheme called Prospects. It is an employment and training service. They can provide independence training which can help prepare you for HE.”

## Acknowledgements

This guide has been funded by Aimhigher East of England. We would like to thank the students for their honest and useful insights into the HE transition process. Thanks also to Yvonne Bremer, Educadus, for taking the time to edit the guide.

## Glossary of terms

DSA	Disabled Student's Allowance
FE	Further education
GP	General practitioner (doctor)
HC2	Health certificate, form 2
HE	Higher education
HND	Higher national diploma
LEA	Local education authority
NHS	National Health Service
OCD	Obsessive compulsive disorder
UCAS	University and College Admissions Service

## Sources of information

### Guides

#### **Aim High - You Can Do It**

Aimhigher Essex and Essex, Thurrock and Southend Connexions.

<http://www.aimhighereastofengland.org.uk/clientUpload/resource/907.pdf>

#### **A guide for disabled learners interested in higher education**

Aimhigher West Midlands

[http://www.aimhigherwm.org/uploads/documents/doc\\_437.pdf](http://www.aimhigherwm.org/uploads/documents/doc_437.pdf)

#### **A guide to successful transition to university for students with Asperger Syndrome and Autism**

Aimhigher London North Partnership

**0208 411 2236**

[s.betts@mdx.ac.uk](mailto:s.betts@mdx.ac.uk)

## Organisations

### **Aimhigher**

[www.aimhigher.ac.uk](http://www.aimhigher.ac.uk)

### **Asperger's Syndrome Foundation**

The Kensington Charity Centre  
4<sup>th</sup> Floor Charles House  
375 Kensington High Street  
London  
W14 8QH

[info@aspergerfoundation.org.uk](mailto:info@aspergerfoundation.org.uk)

### **British Dyslexia Association**

98 London Road  
Reading  
RG1 5AU  
0118 966 8271

[www.bdadyslexia.org.uk](http://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk)

### **BBC Ouch!**

[www.bbc.co.uk/ouch](http://www.bbc.co.uk/ouch)

### **Directgov**

Information about the DSA  
[www.direct.gov.uk](http://www.direct.gov.uk)

### **MIND (National Association for Mental Health)**

15-19 Broadway  
London  
E15 4BQ  
020 8519 2122

[www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

**Moving on Up**  
**For young disabled people from**  
**ethnic minority communities in**  
**transition**

[www.movingonup.info](http://www.movingonup.info)

**National Autistic Society**

393 City Road  
Islington  
London

EC1B 1NG

**0207 833 2299**

[www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk)

**The Transition Information**  
**Network (TIN)**

[www.transitioninfonetwork.org.uk](http://www.transitioninfonetwork.org.uk)

**National Union of Students**

2<sup>nd</sup> Floor Centro 3  
19 Mandela Street  
London

NW1 0DU

**0871 221 8221**

[www.nusonline.co.uk](http://www.nusonline.co.uk)

**Skill**

National Bureau for students with  
disabilities

Chapter House  
18 – 20 Crucifix Lane

London

SE1 3JW

**0207 450 0620**

[www.skil.org.uk](http://www.skil.org.uk)



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Aimhigher East of England website**

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<http://www.impact-associates.co.uk/publications.html>

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