

# Personal Accounts of Being a Post Graduate University Student with Asperger's Syndrome

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Coming out of university was very difficult for me. Although I wanted to pursue postgraduate study, I still wasn't sure what course to take or what I wanted to do for a career. I knew what I didn't want to do. Before doing any further studying, I decided to look for work.

I went through much frustration looking for work, as I had difficulty with job interviews. The only jobs I could get were temporary ones through agencies, where I didn't have to go through a formal interview stage. I did a number of temporary jobs, including working in a factory and in a call-centre, but also found work in a library through an agency, which I quite liked. From this job, I found out what postgraduate courses I could do in relation, and applied to pursue my Masters' in Information and Library Management at the University of Northumbria at Newcastle (UNN).

When starting my Masters, I was able to make it known to my tutors from the start that I had Asperger's Syndrome, so the appropriate arrangements could be made, including regular one-to-one support. When starting postgraduate study, I noticed that the environment was more diversified in terms of different academic and occupational backgrounds. When an undergraduate student, the atmosphere was largely insular, in terms of it mainly being young people away from home for the first time going out drinking/clubbing. But I found the postgraduate environment more open and accepting, in terms of more varied conversation topics, including some I could relate to. Also, there wasn't the same sort of drinking culture at this level, and socialising mainly involved going on walks or quiet get-togethers, which I liked as it was much easier for me to make friends in these conditions and I felt more socially confident.

The first person I got to know well at postgraduate level was my course rep Steve Lancaster. Steve had read Donna Williams' first book *Nobody Nowhere*, so he knew and understood Asperger's Syndrome. A keen artist, Steve was very individual in character, as was Sarah Jenkin, who was hilarious in terms of personality, being able to find a humorous anecdote for just about anything! Not many can do this!

A foreign student with whom I got on with was Jue Kao (known as 'Nick') from Taiwan. During the induction week, Nick said that he wanted to feel part of things and encouraged other students to speak to him, as being in what was a foreign environment, he felt lonely at times. Having experienced loneliness, I could relate to this and I found it helpful to speak to him. Nick managed to gain a commendable grasp of English for someone who hadn't previously had much exposure to the language. I could understand how much effort this took

as for me at times trying to understand facial expressions and body language is like learning a foreign language. Another student who helped me fit in was Catherine Warner, who also did her work-study placement with me. I still see Catherine and Steve occasionally.

From my Masters' I learned new skills, including public speaking using Microsoft PowerPoint, which I have since used to give talks about Asperger's Syndrome. I became addicted to Microsoft PowerPoint once I found out about all its features. For me, why it was so good was that it gave me an image to associate with what I was trying to put across. I also learned cataloguing and classifying skills, including Dewey Decimal, AACR2 and MARC, which I liked even if it took some getting used to. Even within subjects that other may have found boring such as Management, I was able to apply relevant anecdotes to it, which made it interesting.

Other skills I learned were research methods, including ethnography and conducting focus groups. This was of great help when undertaking my Masters' dissertation, for which I conducted a survey of Autuniv-1, finding out if internet access had improved the quality of life for people with Asperger's Syndrome. I found out something about myself as much as others from this study, in terms of being part of an online autism culture that has been able to discover itself courtesy of Internet communication.

Postgraduate study not only helped me to re-invent myself in terms of employability, but also helped me make up for 'lost living' I felt that I had experienced a times during my undergraduate years. Looking back, identifying my strengths and weaknesses appropriately once I was diagnosed helped me to make more informed decisions about my life, whereas before I was diagnosed, I felt that many decisions were made for me, by my parents and teachers.

Since my graduation from UNN, it still hasn't been easy for me to secure employment on a long terms basis, as it has since happened to me twice where I have been on temporary contracts, which have come to nothing. However, I am at least more confident when applying for jobs, knowing that I can now get past the interview stage. Hopefully, it won't be too long before I find a permanent post.

Even so, I now at least know where my real friends are. I have met many other people with Asperger's Syndrome, including people who subscribe to Autuniv-I and others who live locally in Sunderland and Newcastle. Wherever my work commitments allow me, I do public speaking about my experiences of having Asperger's Syndrome, which I really like doing. Above all, I like people who come to my talks to enjoy it and it is very rewarding for me to see that I have made a difference.

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