

Institution: London South Bank University		
Unit of Assessment: 20 – Social Work and Social Policy		
Title of case study: Improving autism practice in education and academia		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2014-2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name[s]:	Role[s] [e.g. job title]:	Period[s] employed by submitting HEI:
Professor Nicola Martin	Professor	September 2013 – present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2016-2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>The Critical Autism and Disability Research Group, led by Professor Martin, works with autistic scholars on developing research-informed, inclusive practice across the age range in education and academia. The research has yielded beneficial changes, including: improving teaching practice and staff training for working with autistic students; developing the Sensory Schools concept; founding the Participatory Autism Research Collective; creating guidance for the COVID-19 lock-downs on <i>Learning from Home</i> for parents of autistic children; <i>Studying Remotely</i> for autistic university students; and, contributing to the establishment and work of the Westminster Commission on Autism. Key impacts include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating with the National Association for Disability Practitioners (NADP) a nationally accredited CPD course on working effectively with autistic university students and delivering four courses for NADP to 190 UK university disability practitioners. • Involving five schools in the Sensory Schools Project (2016-18) with c.1860 pupils in any year, supported by c.60 members of staff, all of whom have benefitted: staff have improved their understanding of “<i>the way autistic pupils may experience the sensory environment</i>”, with autistic pupils appearing more motivated and eager to take part in classroom sessions. 		
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Original research conducted by academic staff in the Critical Autism and Disability Research Group at London South Bank University (LSBU) since September 2013 has considered how educational practice can be transformed through new, autistic people-informed understandings of autism as a different way of thinking. It includes: 1) an analysis of the sensory experience of pupils in the school environment [R1]; 2) a two-year study which developed, trialled and evaluated a mentoring scheme co-created with autistic people, families and supporters [R2]; and, 3) a body of work on autistic scholarship and the barriers and enablers to participation in higher education and academia of autistic students and scholars [R3 to R6].</p> <p>A. An analysis of the sensory experience of pupils in the school environment</p> <p>A longitudinal study from Ulster University looking at annual school census data, identified an increase in prevalence rates of autistic pupils from 2010-2019 in the UK. The sensory environment of the school can overwhelm autistic pupils, causing reactions such as becoming withdrawn (shut down), or agitated (meltdown).</p> <p>In 2016, representatives of special and mainstream schools in Merton and Sutton and researchers (including an autistic researcher) led by Professor Martin formed a collaborative community of practice to: 1) understand and improve the sensory school environment for autistic pupils; and, 2) incorporate the findings into school improvement planning [R1, G3]. The collaborators met regularly over 18 months to iterate a process aiming to improve the sensory environment of the schools. Sensory audits were conducted in five schools, along with pupil observations, parent meetings with researchers and two conferences to share findings. The project enhanced understanding of the impact of the physical and visual design of the classroom on sensory distress. It also reframed the idea of ‘challenging behaviour’, leading to a new emphasis on minimising ‘indicators of distress’. Outcomes focussed on creating calm and predictability. Practical outcomes included: utilising pupil special interests positively; removing ambiguity from the lunch menu; developing visual timetables; facilitating quiet playtimes; avoiding over busy displays; and parents talking to an autistic adult about their experiences.</p> <p>B. The Cygnet Mentoring Project</p> <p>The number of Autistic Students in UK Higher Education almost doubled between 2014/15 and 2018/19, according to the Higher Education Statistics Agency. Autistic students report significant</p>		

challenges and higher rates of mental health difficulties than non-autistic students. Evidence-based, autism-informed specialist mentoring schemes for autistic people are rare, with few subjected to stringent evaluation.

The Cygnet Mentoring Project (2014-16) [R2, G1] developed, trialled and evaluated a mentoring scheme co-created with autistic people that involved matched pairs (mentor/mentee) meeting every week for one hour for a six-month period. This was based on the Reliable Empathic Anticipatory and Logical (REAL) Model for service delivery, developed over several years. *Reliability* is required for effective services, so students trust in the level and consistency of support offered to them. *Empathy* requires peers and staff to try to embrace the worldview of autistic individuals. *Anticipatory* relates to an awareness of the diverse needs of the students and plan ahead to mitigate distress or anxiety. *Logical* refers to practice that is clear and has tangible expectations. Autistic and non-autistic mentors received autistic-led training informed by Personal Construct Theory, which privileges the worldview of the mentee and allows them to take control of their goals. Findings highlighted benefits of time-limited, goal-orientated mentoring with trained, formally supervised mentors. Autistic participants said their mentoring experience enabled them to progress towards self-identified goals and reported feeling empowered by the person-centred ethos and participatory methods designed into the project.

C. Analysis of a longitudinal look at the university experience of autistic students

University can be a challenging social environment for autistic students. As aspect of an ongoing longitudinal project started in 2009, drew on the perspectives of autistic Cambridge University students participating in a social group [R3]. Students set the direction of activities, choosing to focus, for example, on addressing their challenges with organisation and prioritising, making sense of non-autistic people, and organising social activities relevant to their in depth interests. Challenges with social interactions could be exacerbated by anxiety-provoking, unclear communication of expectations and recall of prior similar negative experiences. Deviating unexpectedly from reliable, empathic, anticipatory and logical (REAL) arrangements is also likely to cause social stress. Feedback from participants included: *'I often need to take time to calm myself so tasks can take longer.'* *'having to cope on your own with everyday tasks e.g. eating, travelling etc.'*

D. Autistic scholarship and the barriers to participation of autistic scholars in academia

Even Autistic scholars with doctorates, peer-reviewed publications and research skills report difficulties in securing and maintaining UK University employment. A long-standing body of work by Professor Martin has identified key themes within autistic scholarship and barriers to participation of autistic scholars in academia. A thematic analysis of first-hand testimony from autistic doctoral students and academics revealed overarching themes [R4], which point to obstacles to securing employment in higher education at every stage, from financing doctoral study, to recruitment practices, to navigating bureaucracy. Structures that are notionally designed to help can appear somewhat impenetrable. Attitudinal barriers compound practical difficulties, whereas supportive cultures and practices reduce obstacles. Raising the profile of autistic scholarship has been a catalyst for developing autistic-led networks such as the Participatory Autism Research Collective (PARC).

As part of research funded by the Leadership Foundation in Higher Education [R5, G2], with networks and organisations aimed at higher education staff, including the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU), National Association for Disability Practitioners (NADP), the Disability Equality Research Network (DERN) and National Association of Disabled Staff Networks (NADSN), focus groups, interviews and anonymous questionnaires reached around 100 disabled leaders, who responded to open-ended questions on topics such as: impairment effects; societal barriers, values, influences, strengths, leadership style; strategies, resources and advice. Key emerging themes were: discriminatory recruitment and progression practices, ableist attitudes and assumptions, disconnected infrastructure, insufficient administrative support and an absence of role models. Participants valued supportive colleagues and expressed uncertainty about the portability of effective, hard-won support, which limited their career progression.

Reflecting on autistic scholarship, an overarching review [R6] looked at barriers and enablers to participation in academia and identified the importance of grass-roots networks such as the National Association for Disability Practitioners (NADP) and PARC, which have proven their worth as vehicles to promote the inclusion and contribution of autistic scholars in academia.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

Outputs [R1-R4] were subject to a rigorous peer-review process before publication in key journals in the field of autistic research. **[R5-R6]** are peer-reviewed book chapters in highly regarded, research-based books. **[R5]** is submitted as an output for REF2021 in UoA 20.

[R1] Martin, N, Milton, DEM, Krupa, J, Brett, S, Bulman, K, Callow, D, Copeland, F, Cunningham, L, Ellis, W, Harvey, T, Moranska, M, Roach, R and Wilmot, S (2019). [The sensory school: working with teachers, parents and pupils to create good sensory conditions](#). *Advances in Autism*. 5 (2), pp. 131-140.

[R2] Martin, N., Milton, D., Sims, T., Dawkins, G., Baron-Cohen, S., and Mills, R. (2017). Does 'mentoring' offer effective support to autistic adults? A mixed methods pilot study. *Advances in Autism* doi: <https://doi.org/10.1108/AIA-06-2017-0013>

[R3] Hastwell, J., Martin, N., Baron-Cohen, S., and Harding, J. (2017). The Cambridge Project: reflections on a university-based AS social group. *Good Autism Practice*, 18(1), 97-105.

[R4] Nicola Martin (2020): Perspectives on UK university employment from autistic researchers and lecturers, *Disability & Society*, DOI: [10.1080/09687599.2020.1802579](https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2020.1802579)

[R5] Martin, N. (2019). A Practical Response to Ableism in Leadership in UK Higher Education. in: [Ableism in Academia: Theorising experiences of disabilities and chronic illnesses in higher education](#) UCL Press. DOI: [10.14324/111.9781787354975](https://doi.org/10.14324/111.9781787354975)

[R6] Martin, N. (2020). [Practical Scholarship: Optimising Beneficial Research Collaborations Between Autistic Scholars, Professional Services Staff and 'Typical Academics' in UK Universities](#). in: Chown, N. (ed.) *Neurodiversity: A New Critical Paradigm* Routledge.

This body of research was funded through grant funding schemes of charitable trusts, Local Government Authorities and The Merton Special Teaching Alliance, amounting to £98,500.

[G1] Funder: Research Autism – the National Autism Research charity, Grant Title: The Cygnet Mentoring Project, Value: £83,000.00, Dates: 2013-16

[G2] Funder: Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, Grant Title: Disabled Leaders in HE, Value: £2,500.00, Dates: 2014

[G3] Funder: Perseid School, Grant Title: Best Sensory Practice with Autistic Children, Value: £13,000.00, Dates: 2017-2018

[G4] Funder: Surrey Local Education Authority, Grant Title: Autism Project, Value: £130,000.00, Dates 2019-2020

4. Details of the impact [indicative maximum 750 words]

The impact of this research since 2014 has been realised through working with NADP, the Department for Education (DfE), PARC, local authorities and other stakeholders such as Universities, Schools and practitioners involved in autism education. As evidenced below, the impacts include improving: understanding of autism; knowledge and confidence in working with autistic pupils and students; teaching practice, with benefits extending beyond autistic learners.

A. Development of Resources and Training in Higher Education [HE]

Dealing with sensory overload, social challenges and adapting to leaving home can become overwhelming for autistic students without adequate support so all university staff need to understand the challenges autistic students face and how to support them through their degrees. The *Cygnet* Mentoring Project provided the evidence base for a new nationally accredited CPD course: '*Working Effectively with Autistic University Students*'. Professor Martin both produced the content for the course and delivered it in partnership with NADP (the professional association for staff working with disabled university and college students). NADP has around 1500 members, in various professional services, academic and research roles across the UK and internationally. NADP first encountered the *Cygnet* project through journal articles and presentations by Professor Martin at their annual Conferences **[S1]**.

The Department of Education (DfE) regularly consider the most appropriate training for staff supporting Autistic students and judged the *Cygnet* training to be a tangible example of research-informed and evidence-based practice. The training is accredited by the CPD Standards office. Thus, the DfE accepted this course as part of the registration process for both Specialist one-to-one Study Skills and Strategy Support (Autism) and Specialist Autism Mentors **[S1-S2]**. Each mentor taking the *Cygnet* training will support multiple autistic mentees. Professor Martin has delivered four courses for NADP since 2019 to 190 UK university disability

practitioners [S1], including Specific Learning Difficulty (SpLD) Tutors, Study Needs Assessors and Disability Advisors [S2]. 100+ further delegates have signed up for courses in 2021 [S1]. Feedback highlights how the training has improved knowledge and understanding: “A very interactive and engaging workshop that helped me to understand the complexities of autism and how to assist students with SpLDs in Higher Education (HE)” [S2]. A SpLD Tutor noted: “Yes – already used in meeting with ASC/dyslexic student – allowed me to understand and empathise with his issues about time management (impact of irregular sleep patterns and difficulty with transitioning between sleep/wakefulness)” [S3]. Learning from the training has been implemented to support Autistic Students. A UK Higher Education Institution that hosted one of the sessions in October 2019, which made significant recourse to the REAL framework, noted: “The training was timely and invaluable as our service has seen a rise in the number of autistic students accessing SpLD tuition and mentoring. Two practical aspects which we took away were: 1. The use of the REAL framework to help identify best practice in 1-1 sessions, and the experience of the Cambridge project which helped inform our understanding and build confidence to launch an online support group for autistic students. In the first term of the 2020/2021 year, the mentor/disability team trialled this remote group for autistic students. Those who developed the workshop fed back that the REAL model was helpful.” [S3].

B. Development of Resources and Training for Teachers

Understanding autistic sensory challenges is essential in order to support learners. Labelling a behaviour as challenging without getting to the route cause can lead to unhelpful practices [S4]. Together, the five schools involved in the Sensory Schools Project (2017-18) have c.1,860 pupils in any year, supported by c.60 members of staff, who have benefited from this project. It has improved staff understanding of “the way autistic pupils may experience the sensory environment” [S4]. Helping staff to develop a greater awareness of why autistic pupils might be doing certain things is useful because any sort of “intervention, without understanding, is likely to be ineffective.” Following the completion of the project, “The team produced a resource file for school to use, which was in the form of a coffee table book as well as an electronic resource. This was extremely useful.It is used as part of staff induction, as well as for staff to dip into when they feel the need for further guidance.” [S4]

For parents, the project improved understanding and knowledge on how to practically address concerns with their autistic children: “The feedback received from mums and dads was overwhelmingly positive, many commenting that they had not actually spoken to an autistic, articulate, well-informed adult before. The insights arising from such an insider perspective were felt to be extremely useful and illuminating by parents who also commented that they felt able to ask all sorts of questions and receive very honest answers.” [S4]

There have also been direct impacts for the pupils at the Schools. For example, the practical introduction of “brain breaks” at one special School was reported to have “improved the teacher-pupil relationship, where they can take part in “fun” exercise together, and observed that children appeared more motivated and eager to take part in classroom sessions, knowing that there would be a movement break at the end.” [S4]

C. Development of Resources to Support Remote Learning During COVID-19

The COVID-19 crisis, and the sudden requirement for remote learning, has been challenging for autistic learners, educators and families. “Parents struggled to provide professional support that is normally provided in a school/college setting. Autistic children were gripped with fear for a longer period because they could not properly understand the concept of the coronavirus: some parents reported their children were constantly anxious and having behaviour issues because of the shock of the March lockdown. Many parents struggled with lack of resources to support their children at home.” [S8].

Using knowledge gained from a body of autism research [R1-R3], Professor Martin led on developing two sets of guidance. One was as part of an on-going collaboration with Surrey County Council to create an Autism-friendly authority [G4], Professor Martin and collaborators developed some guidance for parents to on ‘Learning from Home’ during COVID-19 [S5, S6]. In April 2020, the guidance was shared by Surrey County Council. This has been positively received, for example from a Steering Committee of parent volunteers in Surrey, “They thought it was ‘brilliant’ and immediately issued it via their connections & newsletter.Many parents were feeling conflicted between knowing what their child and they themselves were capable of doing

and external pressures, as they perceived them. Having such clear, accessible and useable guidance by an expert they found so positive.” [S6].

The guidance has also been shared on the Autism Education Trust website (a not-for-profit programme led by two national autism charities: the National Autistic Society and Ambitious about Autism, established and supported by the Department for Education) [S7]. The guidance was also shared by the charity Autism Voice with over 200 people and 4 different organisations; it: *“helped parents map a way out under incredibly challenging circumstances.” [S8].*

Professor Martin also led on developing the *Studying Remotely* guidance, designed to help Autistic University Students studying from home during COVID-19. This was published by NADP in December 2020 and included in their COVID Resource Hub. Feedback from NADP members highlighted that *“Universities were desperate for advice to support autistic students who have struggled with mental health concerns during the lockdowns and have problems accessing webinars when lecturers use multiple formats.” [S1].*

D. Raising Awareness of the Importance of Inclusive Practice

In 2015, the Westminster Commission on Autism was launched *“in recognition of the need to do more to work in strategic partnerships to improve quality of life for autistic people.”* Professor Martin was targeted *“because of her strong record of inclusive practice, collaboration and high-quality research in this field” [S9].* The Commission published two reports: *A Spectrum of Obstacles – an Inquiry into Access to Healthcare for Autistic People* (2016) and *A Spectrum of Harmful Interventions for Autism* (2018) [S9]. *A Spectrum of Obstacles* has received ministerial praise and influenced policy developments via NHS England [S9]. Professor Martin has been significantly involved with all inquiries conducted by the Commission, *“shaping the terms of reference, emphasising and facilitating engagement with diverse communities and autistic individuals, and bringing in relevant research to inform the reports’ focus” [S9].*

E. Participatory Autism Research Collective [PARC]

Given that autistic scholars face barriers to employment in academia [R4-R6], in 2015 Professor Martin co-founded PARC with an autistic colleague, Dr Damian Milton. The aim of PARC is to facilitate collaborative, autistic-led research and researcher development [R4]. PARC was the first autistic-led venture of its kind in the UK and now operates through regional hubs in several UK universities and attracts international interest including visiting speakers from Australia and USA and invitations to speak in Europe and USA. Almost 500 people are engaged with PARC, who have put on over 30 inclusive events, such as training workshops and conferences, across the UK [S10]. Events provide space for autistic people to actively engage in research. PARC has helped to increase collaboration and communication between autistic people and the research community, as well as leading to publications, dissemination and sharing of research and providing peer support [S11].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact [indicative maximum of 10 references]

[S1] Testimonial from Operations Manager, NADP – PDF

[S2] [Link to the NADP Training Course Website Page](#) and [Department for Education Mandatory Qualifications and professional body membership \(Sept 2019\)](#)

[S3] Testimonial and Training Feedback from a Senior SpLD Practitioner – PDF

[S4] Testimonial from a Head Teacher involved in the Sensory Schools Project and [Report co-authored by the Sensory Schools Project Team](#) – PDF

[S5] [Martin, N. and Peacock, B., 2020. Continuing the education of autistic pupils while focusing on family wellbeing during the Coronavirus Pandemic. Good Autism Practice, 21\(2\), pp.5-10.](#)

[S6] Learning from Home - Testimonial from the former Interim Director of Transformation for SEND – PDF

[S7] [Learning while at Home: Autism Education Trust](#)

[S8] Testimonial from CEO of Autism Voice – PDF

[S9] Westminster Commission on Autism: Testimonials - Chair, Barry Sheerman MP; Associate Consultant & Adviser to the Board AT-Autism; Reports: [‘A Spectrum of Obstacles – an Inquiry into Access to Healthcare for Autistic People’ \(2016\)](#) and [A Spectrum of Harmful Interventions for Autism \(2018\)](#) – PDF

[S10] [Participatory Autism Research Collective \(PARC\) Website](#)

[S11] A critical reflection on the development of the Participatory Autism Research Collective (PARC) – PDF