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# University Success Histories of Autistic Graduates: An Ecological Analysis of Personal and Contextual Factors

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**Annotation.** This article aims to understand the personal and contextual factors contributing to university retention for autistic graduates. In addition, it examines graduates' evaluations of their own trajectories, shaped by their reflexive interpretations of university success. To achieve this, the study employs a biographical narrative approach. The results are presented through five polyphonic life histories holistically reflecting their university journeys.

**Keywords:** *autistic graduates, university success, factors, life histories.*

## Introduction

The percentage of university autistic students[1] has increased considerably in recent years (Anderson et al., 2018). However, despite this increase, the number of those graduating continues to be lower than that of neurotypical students (Ward & Webster,

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[1]  In the article, the first-person identity language 'autistic' is used in response to the demand from the autistic community to claim their rights within the neurodivergent paradigm of 'nothing about us, without us. (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the study by Kenny et al. (2015) confirms that there is heterogeneity among autistic people in the way they identify themselves. Therefore, in the life histories of this article, the term selected by each participant is used, which was either "Asperger" or "ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder)".

2018). Universities still have room for improvement in terms of inclusion to ensure that students do not drop out and successfully complete their studies (Cage & Howes, 2020**).**

Studying at university increases the possibility for autistic students to develop an independent life, enhance their social skills and relationships, expand their social network (Goddard & Cook, 2022; Lizotte, 2018), and obtain a degree that opens doors in the labour market (Vincent et al., 2017). In some cases, the university can provide them with the possibility of reconstructing their identity, which is frequently damaged in previous educational stages (MacLeod et al., 2018). However, studying at university can pose challenges. Every student at university is expected to be more autonomous and proactive than in previous stages. In this sense, autistic students request accommodations from the university to meet their needs, such as accessible teaching methods, practices, and opportunities for social and educational inclusion. (Casement et al., 2017). Ultimately, they want inclusive university environments that facilitate their retention and the completion of their studies.

This study aimed to analyse the university success of autistic graduates. Thus, in their own voice, they narrated their university experiences to reveal the key factors of their success. This study is novel since university success and the factors that promote it from the perspective of university autistic graduates have not been previously addressed. Furthermore, very few studies have focused on graduates with disabilities (Russak & Hellwing, 2019). The methodology of this study is also unique, as it is based on narrative methods, specifically on polyphonic life histories. Lastly, the study not only defines success and the personal and contextual factors that promote it, but the participants also offer recommendations for making the university more inclusive.

### *Autistic Students and University*

Autism, from the neurodiversity paradigm, is not understood as a deficit (as it is in the medical model); instead, it is considered that the person's difficulties and strengths result from the interaction between the ableist environment and individual differences (Accardo et al., 2019). Autistic students have notable strengths, such as good memorisation skills, high proficiency in their areas of interest, high attention to detail, and good analytical skills, among others (Anderson et al., 2018). Nevertheless, they have some difficulties, like in organisation and planning, problems in interpreting social norms, difficulties in social communication (Casement et al., 2017), sensory problems (Anderson et al., 2018; Gurbuz et al., 2019), etc. Moreover, several studies conclude that autistic students face higher rates of depression, anxiety, and feelings of loneliness than the neurotypical population (Gurbuz et al., 2019). Many of these difficulties are explained by what Milton (2012) calls the 'double empathy problem,' which critiques the conception that autistic people are the ones who do not understand the neurotypical world. He explains that the misunderstandings are reciprocal, as neurotypical people fail to grasp the experiences and culture of autistic people. This lack of understanding

and stigma causes autistic people to ultimately mask their autistic characteristics in order to adapt to the environment (Beck et al., 2020).

Precisely because it is an 'invisible' condition (Frost et al., 2019; Zeedyk et al., 2019), these students sometimes choose to forgo the accommodations they are entitled to, opting not to disclose their condition (Edwards et al., 2022; Frost et al., 2019). Therefore, they still face many barriers (Anderson et al., 2018), although other studies show successful university trajectories of autistic students (Accardo et al., 2019).

### *University Success and Factors That Promote it*

University success is widely recognised as a dynamic concept influenced by various factors, though there is no agreement on how to define it (Moriña et al., 2024). For the graduates who participated in the study of Russak and Hellwing (2019), it is a multifaceted, subjective, complex, and dynamic concept. For some, it was a process and a vocation, doing something one loves and is good at, accepting oneself, and obtaining positive feedback from others and the environment. In contrast, others related it to measurable results, such as getting good marks.

These conceptions of success are focused on the academic scope, with the possibility of adding a social dimension. In fact, according to Moriña et al. (2024), university success is not solely defined by completing studies and graduating (Bakker et al., 2023). It also encompasses the university journey, including the academic and social opportunities for learning, participation, and, ultimately, the chance to have an inclusive experience throughout one's studies (Goddard & Cook, 2022).

The university success of autistic students is undoubtedly influenced by both internal or personal factors and external or contextual factors (Ward & Webster, 2018). Autistic students who successfully complete their university studies are characterised by knowing themselves, what they want, and how to achieve their goals. In other words, they are self-determined (MacLeod et al., 2018; Moriña & Martins, 2024). Specifically, in autistic students, self-awareness of their condition is key, which involves knowing both strengths and weaknesses, as well as understanding their own identity (Casement et al., 2017; Goddard & Cook, 2022). Numerous studies agree in identifying both these personal and other external factors that influence trajectories of success at university (Nel et al., 2022).

External factors include family, support services, faculty members (Ranon Nachman, 2022; Raudeliūnaitė & Gudžinskienė, 2023), and peers, among others (Moriña et al., 2024; Russak & Hellwing, 2019). Specifically, social support is especially relevant for autistic students (Fabri et al., 2020). We cannot ignore the fact that retention and success are not the sole responsibility of individual students, since universities must ensure the conditions for students to continue and succeed in their studies (Frost et al., 2019). Thus, universities must assume their responsibility in the transformation

toward a more inclusive conception, which ultimately implies quality education for everyone (Edwards et al., 2022).

## Method

This paper is framed within a larger R&D&I Spanish project titled "University Success Histories of Graduates with Disabilities: An Ecological Analysis of Personal and Contextual Factors" (PID2020-112761RB-I00). This project aimed to analyse, from the perspective of university graduates with disabilities, the personal and contextual factors or keys that helped them to access university, remain at university, and complete their degrees.

This paper is focused on autistic graduates and used a biographical-narrative methodology approach with polyphonic life histories (Moriña, 2020). The narrative, through subjectivity, takes on great value by allowing us to understand the interpretation and meaning that the protagonists themselves attribute to their own lives (Moriña, 2020). Precisely, this methodology seeks to give prominence to groups that have traditionally been excluded from scientific discourses, in this case the autistic community itself. At the same time, polyphonic life histories were constructed with those participants who were available to complement their life histories with other voices.

This paper pursued the attainment of three objectives:
- To analyse what university success is from the perspective of graduates.
- To identify and explain the personal and external factors that favour university success.
- To propose recommendations to the university to contribute to the permanence and success of autistic students.

### Participants

The criteria established for the selection of the sample were: Autistic Graduates, who had graduated in the last 6 academic years (between 2016–17 and 2021–22) in different Spanish universities. To access the sample, we contacted the disability services of two universities and requested their collaboration to send the information from our study to the graduates. Through these services, we obtained four participants. We also made use of the snowball technique (Cohen et al., 2000), and one more graduate decided to participate in the study.

The studies of the five (male) participants were Law, East Asian Studies, Materials Engineering, Classical Philology, and Pedagogy, as well as postgraduate studies in the different disciplines. The average age of the participants was 26 years. We used the following pseudonyms for the participants: Alex, Adrian, Dario, Gogy, and Mario.

**Table 1**

*Participants*

| Pseudonym | Age | Sex | Preferred terminology | Age at diagnosis | Degree | Postgraduate degree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Alex | 23 | Male | Asperger's | 12-13 | Law | Master's degree in Public Law. |
| Adrian | 27 | Male | Asperger's | 13 | East Asian Studies | Master's degree for secondary school teachers. |
| Dario | 23 | Male | Asperger's | 11 | Materials Engineering | Master's degree in New Materials Engineering. |
| Gogy | 31 | Male | Asperger's | 20 | Classical Philology | Master's degree for secondary school teachers. |
| Mario | 26 | Male | ASD | 16 | Pedagogy | No |

### Spanish context

At a social level in Spain, as in the international scope, there is an increasingly organised, autonomous, and vindictive movement of the autistic community itself that demands its rights in the first person.

According to data collected by the Universia Foundation (2021), in the academic year 2020–21, 23,851 people with disabilities were studying in the different Spanish universities, showing a clear upward trend compared to previous years. In Spain, this study reflects that it doesn't exist; an exactly we do not have public data disaggregated according to disability, thus we cannot know the number of autistic students. However, we were able to access data from the two participating universities provided by the disability services. In the academic year 2021–2022, in one of the universities, 798 students (of whom 70 were autistic students) were registered in the disability service, whereas 263 were registered in the disability service of the other university (the number of autistic students is unknown).

Current Spanish legislation, as outlined in the Organic Law of the University System (2023), guarantees various rights for students with disabilities. These include access to necessary accommodations, the establishment of disability support services within universities, the allocation of 5% of available places in official university programmes (typically four years for undergraduate degrees and one year for master's degrees), the requirement that environments be fully accessible, and the right to tuition-free education for individuals with disabilities.

*Data Collection Instruments*

Different instruments were used for data collection. For the five graduates, we conducted two semi-structured interviews and self-reports. For the polyphony of voices (other key informants selected by the participants to complement their university histories), we used a personalised interview script, which the researchers designed and each of the participants.

Both interviews with the five graduates were designed based on the study by Moriña et al. (2024). Experts validated these and piloted them with graduates with disabilities who did not participate in the study. The first interview focused on personal factors contributing to success, and it was organised into four sections: university career, concept and experiences of success, current situation, and assessment of disability. The second interview focused on contextual factors and was structured in five thematic blocks: family, partner, friends, university (institution, faculty, and peers), and recommendations.

The interviews varied in length, each lasting approximately 60–90 minutes. We prioritised the participants' comfort by asking them about the format, place, and time in which they wanted to conduct the interview. Finally, most of the participants chose to conduct the interviews face-to-face, except for one participant, who preferred to conduct them online. In addition, we ensured that the interviews were conducted in a sensory-friendly space. A tape recorder was used to record the information, which allowed for subsequent transcription.

A self-report also complemented these interviews. Each participant wrote a document in the desired format and number of pages, in which they reflected, without the presence of the researchers, on the factors that had contributed to their permanence and the successful completion of their university studies.

The university histories were polyphonic; thus, the five graduates were asked to select three people from three different contexts (family, social, and university) who were key to their university success. Of the five participants, only two participants agreed to participate in this phase. The others chose not to participate in this phase due to a lack of time and to avoid involving third parties. Personalised interview scripts were developed for each person selected by the participants. These scripts were co-designed between the researchers and each of the participants. Specifically, a total of three interviews were conducted with three people from the university, social, and family spheres, respectively, chosen by each participant. Adrian proposed that we interview his sister, a friend, and a classmate, and Dario proposed that we interview his mother, a friend, and a disability service worker. In the latter case, the last interview could not be carried out, as the professional was not available.

*Data Analysis*

An inductive system of categories and codes was employed to analyse the data (Table 1). This facilitates the comprehension and organisation of the data, which allowed us to make sense of the narratives (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

**Table 2**
*Category and Code System*

| Category | Code |
|---|---|
| **1. *Descriptive data*** | 1.1. Interview data |
| | 1.2. Socio-demographic data |
| | 1.3. Descriptive data of the disability |
| **2. *Concept of success*** | 2.1. Concept |
| **3. *Personal success factors*** | 3.2. Disability |
| | 3.3. Self-determination |
| | 3.5. Self-advocacy |
| | 3.6. Resilience |
| **4. *External success factors*** | 4.1. Family |
| | 4.2. Partner |
| | 4.3. Friends |
| | 4.4. University – Disability office |
| | 4.5. University – Student support programmes |
| | 4.6. Administrative staff |
| | 4.7. Faculty members |
| | 4.8. Classmates |
| **5. *Recommendations*** | 5.1. Recommendations to university |

*Ethical Issues*

An ethical committee approved the project. The information collected through the different instruments was treated respecting for the anonymity and confidentiality of the person (pseudonyms were used for those graduates who wished to remain anonymous). In addition, in each life history, we used the term Asperger's or ASD, as identified and decided by the participants. In our study, with the exception of Mario, four students identified themselves as having Asperger's. In addition, the researchers and all participants signed an informed consent form. After transcribing the interviews, they were returned to the participants for review and validation.

*Community Involvement*

The two graduates who agreed to participate in the polyphony of voices by recommending other key informants (family, social, and university context) to complement their university history were actively involved in the construction of the interview script and in the selection of key informants. In fact, it was a co-design work between the researchers and the life history protagonist.

## Findings

### Alex: "I never give up; I always try to be constant"

Alex studied for a Bachelor's degree in Law, which he completed in five years, and he is currently studying for a postgraduate degree in Public Law. He associated success with being able to adapt to university (faculty, subjects, classmates, etc.), passing exams, and making the most of the university experience.

…what university success means to me is knowing how to adapt to the circumstances, to adapt to something new, like university, and to adapt not only to the system that is taught there, but also to classmates, faculty…. And with that, to make the most of the experience and try to go step by step, subject by subject. (Self-report)

One of the key personal factors in his success at university was self-determination, as he had a clear goal from the start: to pass and graduate in order to find good employment. Consequently, he was constant and never gave up: "I don't think I ever give up. I always try to be constant…" (Interview 1)

For him, the autism is a way of seeing or reacting differently from the rest. In this sense, his time at university has meant that he has taken Asperger's more into account when relating to other people, as before going to university he hardly paid any attention to it. In his case, he also considered his memorisation skills to be important in his studies, which was one of the reasons that led him to study. He relates this skill to his condition. During his studies, he chose not to share his diagnosis, except for the faculty, who were informed through the disability service. However, he believes that one of the things he would change to improve his time at university was precisely that: disclosing his condition. Moreover, he considered himself to be resilient, although he did not face a particularly difficult situation. However, in the face of academic difficulties, he was able to cope with them and emerge stronger.

In terms of external factors that contributed to his success, he highlighted his family and the disability service. With regard to his family, he particularly valued the trust his parents placed in him, as well as their financial support. From the disability service, he highlighted the emotional and academic support of one of the professionals. This professional was a reference figure for him at the university, as she was a very involved

and loyal person. She was in charge of contacting the faculty, although Alex hardly required any curricular adaptations (only once, he was given more time for an exam). The influence of the faculty was generally positive, although not decisive. The faculty members who stood out were characterised by their personal and academic concern. With classmates, in the degree, there was a cordial relationship among the group, and although he did establish some closer relationships, these were not significant in his permanence. Only the relationship with a classmate who showed special concern and interest in him stood out.

On the other hand, in the Master's degree, he had a close relationship with his class-mates, as there was a climate of support. Specifically, he pointed out that the support of a peer for him, with loyalty, concern, and understanding, was key. Moreover, he was the only one with whom he shared the fact that he had Asperger's, and this allowed him to relate to him without so many limitations. Finally, Alex recommended that, in order for the university to be more inclusive, there should be specialised support programmes, and professionals to adequately respond to the needs of students with disabilities.

### Adrian: "Asperger's, rather than a difficulty, has been an advantage"

Adrian studied for a degree in East Asian Studies in 5 years and then a Master's degree to become a secondary school teacher in 1 year. In his case, he associated university success with setting goals and trying to achieve them. Fundamentally, these goals were to graduate and get training and experiences from university. Moreover, success was not related to perfection or to the time required to achieve the goals:

The concept of university success implies more than achieving a big milestone or academic perfection. I think of it as achieving whatever achievements you set for yourself. Whether it's getting your degree, gaining some skill or knowledge in your studies, or making new acquaintances, friends, or connections... (Self-report)

The key personal factors in his success included his self-determination, especially his ability to make decisions for himself, as well as his perseverance and persistence in his goals "...I was going to do the degree, I set that as my goal, no matter what I encountered..." (Interview 1). This aptitude was manifested in the determination to choose his studies. One of the elements that was a determining factor in his staying at university was his liking and vocation for his studies. Another key factor was self-efficacy, especially his coping strategies in the face of difficulties, being able to detect and recognise his own mistakes in order to learn from them and look for strategies: "I have failed here, I have to make more effort here, and I have to try to overcome this barrier that I have suddenly encountered." (Interview 1). He also highlighted this factor in reference to his proactivity in asking for support. Thus, from the very beginning, on the recommendation of the disability service, he communicated his needs to faculty members and even to his own classmates.

Another key factor was his condition, as it allowed him to focus on studying and not be so influenced by his environment, always prioritising his own judgement. He considered that the autism gave him strengths, such as a good ability to retain information. Therefore, he also particularly emphasised the positive influence of having role models with Asperger's who motivated him to believe in his own possibilities:

The Asperger's I have felt throughout my university studies, rather than a difficulty, has been more of an advantage, as it has helped me to study better, to isolate myself from the rest of the world, and to focus on what I wanted to do. (Interview 1)

The way in which he saw the autism evolved throughout his university studies. At the beginning, he felt like a strange boy compared to the rest of the class and saw Asperger's as a curse; then, when he entered the university and met new people, he realised that it was not necessarily an impediment for him to relate to others. In fact, the university environment he encountered was close to his interests, which was very positive, since the personal characteristics that had previously labelled him as strange were the norm in that circle: "Asperger's here is simply a way of withdrawing a little from meeting other people, but I have a bridge in common, a nexus." (Interview 1). Consequently, this meant that he conceived his condition as just another characteristic of his life. In fact, his sister stated that it was at university that Adrian really accepted that he had Asperger's and began to communicate it to those around him:

Sister: Here he was honest and said: "This is me, these are my problems, don't do this, I'll try to get along, but this is who I am."; and that helped him a lot to be able to understand that it's not something you have to hide, but it's something you have to live with and deal with normally.

Resilience is not a quality that Adrian particularly highlighted in his studies, although he did claim to have a minimum of resilience in some situations in which he had had to overcome family and academic difficulties.

External factors also played an important role. These included his family, who provided him with academic (in the completion of some work), financial, and emotional support. Although, regarding the latter, Adrian sometimes felt pressure from his family when some work did not go well, his family also helped him to contact the disability service. In terms of emotional support, his partner played an important role, who was the one he turned to for a message of encouragement. His friends outside the university were also important, although not directly in his studies, but precisely as a source of social support and disconnection, as one of his friends stated: "We often spent time together, hung out, and had lots of fun."

In terms of the most significant factors related to the university, it is worth highlighting the disability service, which provided him with some accommodations, such as: a collaborating student and more time in exams. The service also provided him guidance for his studies. The faculty was also important in his trajectory, especially those who were characterised by their closeness, creativity, and passion in transmitting

the subject, as well as for using more innovative methodologies. Similarly, peers were key to his success at university, as he felt included in a group of friends who provided him with great social, personal and academic support.

… I would not have achieved the same results because if I had not had this group, I would have been more alone; I would have been, as they say, a lone fighter, a lone wolf, and I would not have had that kind of help, that kind of warmth in the classroom. (Interview 2)

In fact, one of his friends in class described him as a person who was very open to talking to everyone. He also explained that, for Adrian, having such a group made him feel safe. In conclusion, he recommended to the university the need to raise awareness of Asperger's among the university community, especially the faculty, through referents and trainings.

### Dario: "If I were born again, I would want to be born with Asperger's"

Dario completed a degree in Materials Engineering and a one-year Master's programme in New Materials Engineering. He viewed success at university as attaining outstanding achievements, such as receiving an award for the highest academic performance, earning recognition at university events, securing a PhD contract, and gaining a measure of popularity.

His academic journey was described as flawless by his mother and a friend: ".. impeccable, that is to say, I don't know anyone who could have done better..." (friend)

The key personal factors in his success included self-determination, due to his persistence in achieving his goals, which was also highlighted by a friend who described him as persistent and hard-working, and also due to his ability to make decisions in the face of difficulties, which allowed him to improve and grow personally. Thus, when one of his tutors recommended him to be more autonomous, Dario saw it as an opportunity to improve. In addition, Dario has always worked to overcome his difficulties derived from Asperger's, such as social relations, flexibility, etc.

Dario partly considered his constancy to be a consequence of Asperger's, and, in fact, this ability was key to his permanence. He also linked obsession with certain things and goals to Asperger's, as well as intelligence and poor social skills. He explained that he has progressively accepted his condition and is now proud of it, even though he used to deny it: ''...if I were born again, I would want to be born Asperger's, I would want to be born Asperger's, Asperger's, Asperger's, and Asperger's. I am happy, I would not want to be born neurotypical to prove it, I am proud of what I have." (Interview 1)

Another factor was resilience, thanks to which he managed to overcome hard times (due to anxiety, among others), as well as to improve in areas in which he had difficulties, such as initiative. Thus, he tried to be proactive: he was the one who adapted to the environment and not the other way around.

External factors played an important role in his permanence, including his family, who gave him moral or emotional support (when he felt burdened) and financial

support. In fact, his family also helped him to conceive autism in a natural and normal way, understanding that disability is not in the person but in the way, others look at it:

Mother: I have always raised Dario with this philosophy: "There is no disability, disability and barriers are in people's minds. I am educating and raising you normally, with all freedom and, like all your brothers and sisters."

Another social support factor was his friends outside the university, with whom he could disconnect from his studies to feel more at ease. The disability service was also a relevant support, which he counted on from the first year. He especially valued the support of a professional who was involved throughout his degree. He highlighted her ability to listen. It was also this service that informed the faculty about Dario's needs. The adaptations that Dario received were basically a preferential place to sit, as well as alternative examinations.

In reference to the faculty, he valued their support positively, as he felt understood and accepted, which had a positive impact on his results. In general, as positive characteristics among the faculty, he highlighted empathy, closeness, and the fact that they were fun and experts in their subject.

Classmates were decisive in Dario's university success, as he felt a great deal of moral and academic support (giving him notes from the lectures): "My classmates are the ones who influenced me the most and gave me a lot of things" (self-report). They also supported him in managing and alleviating his anxiety.

To enhance inclusion at the university, he proposed reducing student-to-teacher ratios to support learners better and encouraging faculty to extend their teaching beyond academic content. This approach, particularly for individuals with Asperger's, aims to foster the development of social skills.

### Gogy: "I have been so passionate (about my studies) that I want to understand where it is leading me"

Gogy studied for seven years for a Bachelor's degree in classical philology and then two years for a Master's degree for secondary school teachers. He related university success to a passion for one's studies, setting goals, and persevering in achieving them. In addition, he stated that there must be an intrinsic motivation to go as far as possible.

... to have passion, to have some kind of motivation, that's the word, because... as a person you have selected a goal that is the one you have set for yourself and that, in a persevering way... (Interview 1)

In terms of his personal skills, self-determination stood out, particularly his persistence. In fact, there was one subject that he had to repeat several times, since he found it difficult to understand and despite feeling great despair, he finally managed to pass it. His vocation and curiosity also helped him to remain: "...I have felt so much passion that I want to understand where it is taking me..." (Interview 1)

He certainly linked his choice and continuation in studies to his condition, as it is an area that coincides with his areas of interest, which is important for people with Asperger's. His understanding of autism was ambiguous. On the one hand, he understood autism as a difficulty due to the expectations (which put pressure on) and stigmas associated with people with Asperger's. On the other hand, he considered that Asperger's gave him strengths, such as being analytical. For him, self-awareness of his condition was key to taking control and improving skills such as empathy and communication:

… when a person like me has a disability, it is as though a person had powers; at the beginning, he doesn't know how to control them but with age he understands not only to control it but also what it implies, what the consequences are, what it is, how it influences, what it influences with respect to others, the fact of having... of having something strange that "scares" people. (Interview 1)

However, on the other hand, he conceived autism as a enemy that he had to control through his personality: "It is true that I see it as an enemy and it is something that I cannot control or tame." (Interview 1). Moreover, he considered himself to be resilient, albeit as an automatic thing that he used in his daily life when he faced difficulties.

In terms of external factors, his family stood out. His parents provided him with academic (enrolment process, meetings with faculty, etc.), personal and financial support. He said that, without this support, it would have taken him more years to complete his studies. The disability service was an ally for Gogy. In particular, this service contacted the faculty to ensure that his needs were taken into account. The accommodation he received for some exams was time extension. They also provided guidance on which postgraduate studies to pursue. Regarding faculty, he highlighted those who did understand his situation and took it into account. He valued those faculty members who were flexible, used examples, taught with a playful approach and were empathetic. In terms of peers, he did not see them as a support, although on some occasions he had the help of a peer for some tasks.

In conclusion, Gogy considered that, for the university to be more inclusive, there should be smaller class sizes to provide better attention. In addition, he considered that, in these classrooms, the faculty should communicate the needs of students with disabilities to the rest of the classmates, in order to encourage companionship. Another suggestion was that the university should publicise the disability service from the first year.

### Mario: "The self-demand to finish what I start"

Mario finished his pedagogy degree in four years. He linked success at university to achieving high grades, staying motivated, enjoying and learning from one's activities, and fostering social connections to develop future projects. Among the personal factors influencing his success were self-determination, characterised by high standards, a sense of responsibility, perseverance, goal setting, and a strong desire for personal growth.

"One of them is self-demand, that is, one has to finish what one starts; another one of them is constancy, that is, to be constant in everything..." (self-report). Self-efficacy was a key factor in his university journey. He developed strategies to overcome the obstacles and challenges he faced. For instance, he relied on earplugs or public transportation during less busy times to manage his hypersensitivity to specific auditory stimuli. Additionally, he demonstrated proactivity by expressing his needs to faculty members whenever necessary.

He explained that his condition was an important factor in the decision of choosing Pedagogy, since, in his adolescence, he was in an early childhood care centre, and he saw an inspiration in the work of those professionals. Moreover, for him, autism meant learning to live with something: "Well, that is what having a disability is for me, to live with something, to learn to live with its difficulties, its benefits, with its issues..." (Interview 1).

Specifically, in his experience, the feeling of being misunderstood led to significant mental health problems, or the feeling of being stuck in some areas. However, as a result of his condition, he developed strengths, such as empathy and resilience.

External factors included the financial support received from his family. In addition, his family encouraged him to study at university, and he opted for a nearby university for fear that he would go far away. However, he pointed out that his family has never accepted his condition. As far as the university concerned, he received psychological support as he went through difficult stages of depression and anxiety along the way. It should be noted that he hardly made use of the disability support service. The faculty who positively contributed to his trajectory were characterised by their friendliness, willingness to help, listening skills, sensitivity, and willingness to make accommodations. In particular, he felt poorly included with his classmates, although he did have the support of some who stood out for their sensitivity, empathy, and greater willingness to help him and include him.

Certainly, for him, the presence of students with ASD was a challenge for the university, and greater awareness of coexistence in diversity was required. For this reason, he felt that the university should actively promote coexistence.


## Discussion

Concerning the first objective of this study, success is considered a subjective concept, as it is reflected in the varied conceptions of autistic graduates, who define it differently based on their individual experiences (Russak & Hellwing, 2019). Although they all related it to achieving certain academic goals, they differed in more extracurricular aspects, such as enjoying the university experience, being adaptable, and socialising. In this sense, this reaffirms what Accardo et al. (2019) stated about

university success not being restricted to the academic sphere, but it is rather extrapolated to all contexts, such as the social context. Likewise, for some participants, success was explained through intrinsic aspects (passion for one's studies), and others valued it through extrinsic elements (recognition, awards, etc.).

Regarding personal factors and the second research objective, a key motivation in the retention of all graduates was that their choice of studies coincided with their interests and vocations. This is consistent with the results of the work of Bakker (2023), Casement et al. (2017), and Ward and Webster (2018). Moreover, self-determination, to a greater or lesser extent, plays an important role, especially in terms of persistence, as pointed out by Moriña and Martins et al. (2024) and Fabri et al. (2020). Resilience was also key in these graduates' lives, especially related to self-improvement experiences after overcoming academic difficulties (Fabri et al., 2020). Considering the importance of personal factors, universities could design, develop, and evaluate actions to enable students with disabilities to learn and train these skills, which are crucial for their university success.

According to Frost et al. (2019), autism identity is complex and varies greatly from one person to another. In our study, there are also divergences in the way autism is conceived. Before starting their studies, most participants started from a negative self-perception, partly motivated by bad previous experiences. However, during their university studies, this perception evolved until they considered autism simply as another characteristic, as was pointed out by Casement et al. (2017). Some participants even underlined autism as a very positive aspect and a source of pride (Dario) or support (Adrián), which has also been reported by Russak and Hellwing (2019).

This data highlights how the university can serve as a chance to rebuild identities affected by earlier educational challenges while also providing academic, social, and career opportunities (Nel et al., 2022).

Regarding external factors, different studies show that the family can be an important source of moral, economic, and social support (Moriña & Martins, 2024). This was the case for all participants in this study, to a greater or lesser extent. As for external friendships, the participants pointed out that, although these had not been particularly significant for staying at university, they were valued as an opportunity to disconnect and escape from their studies.

At the university, the disability services, faculty, and peers stood out. Concerning the disability service, all except Mario had this support, which is in contrast with some studies that show the reluctance of students with invisible conditions, such as autism, to disclose their condition (Edwards et al., 2022; Frost et al., 2019). This, as other studies also agree (Casement et al., 2017; Fabri et al., 2020), the important role that accommodations have played during their studies. Remaining invisible would have possibly posed barriers for them, which, in some cases, would have made them drop out of university, as other works have explored (Cage & Howes, 2020).

Autistic students need to develop their self-advocacy skills to be aware of their needs and know the accommodations they require. In any case, this would not be necessary if universities were inclusive and based on universal design for learning (Edwards et al., 2022; Fabri et al., 2020; Ranon Nachman, 2022). In the meantime, we must make do with these actions and learn from faculty who promote inclusion and university success. The most valued characteristics were empathy, closeness, and involvement. Austin and Vallejo Peña (2017) state these affective-emotional qualities are fundamental. Furthermore, when teaching the subject, vocation, knowledge of the subject, the use of examples, and originality stand out.

Therefore, faculty members must not only master a discipline but also know how to teach it, using diverse methodological strategies, and considering the emotional component of learning (Austin & Vallejo Peña, 2017). In this sense, the work of Ranon Nachman (2022), an autistic researcher, demonstrates that teacher training in this area improves attention to autistic students.

In terms of peers, the sense of belonging is key to retention and well-being (Vincent et al., 2017; Ward & Webster, 2018); however, it should be considered that social relationships can be a difficulty for autistic students (Casement et al., 2017). In our study, although most of the participants had negative socialisation experiences earlier in their lives, in contrast, for some, university was a game changer, as they felt a great deal of social support, while for others it was not particularly relevant.

Regarding the last objective of this study, for universities to be more inclusive, the participants recommend raising awareness among the entire university community about autism, promoting coexistence (Goddard & Cook, 2022), reducing ratios, and developing programmes and professionals that respond to their needs. Therefore, universities should adapt to the needs of the students rather than the other way around (Fabri et al., 2020).

## Conclusions

This work answers the keys that have enabled graduates to remain in their studies and complete them. As has already been shown in previous works, it is clear that this is a subjective, multi-causal, and complex process (Russak & Hellwing, 2019), hence the need to approach it from the ecological model and with life histories. The value of this study lies in the fact that it allowed explaining the complex and subjective university trajectory of each participant in their own voice (Moriña, 2020), while at the same time outlining recommendations that will enable more and more autistic students to complete their university studies. Furthermore, these experiences can be extrapolated to support the success of other autistic students and for universities to implement actions to facilitate it.

### Limitations and Further Research

The limitations of this study include the fact that the results could be more representative due to the small sample size. Although valuable, as it presents the university success histories of five graduates, the sample should be expanded in future studies to delve further into the success factors and recommendations for inclusion. It would be very convenient to carry out the polyphonic histories with more key informants whose perspectives complement the success histories of each graduate. Furthermore, comparative analyses could be carried out between the different contexts of the selected informants (family, social and university). Another limitation was the need for more representation of women in the study. This is because, in the selection phase, when disseminating information through associations and disability services, no women replied.

In short, future research should include women's life histories and delve further into the university trajectories of autistic graduates.

### Data Availability Statement

The data supporting this study's findings are available from the authors upon request. However, the data are not publicly available, as they contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

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# Autizmu sergančių universiteto absolventų sėkmės istorijos: asmeninių ir kontekstinių veiksnių ekologinė analizė

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## Santrauka

Šiame straipsnyje nagrinėjamos autizmu sergančių absolventų gyvenimo istorijos. Tyrimu siekiama išsiaiškinti, kokie asmeniniai ir kontekstiniai veiksniai lėmė jų išlikimą universitete ir sėkmingą studijų baigimą. Be to, straipsnyje nagrinėjamas pačių absolventų gyvenimo trajektorijų vertinimas, kurį suformavo jų universitetinės sėkmės istorijos. Remiantis biografinio pasakojimo metodologija, šiame tyrime buvo atliktas pusiau struktūruotas interviu, daromos savianalizės suvestinės ir vykdomi pokalbiai su kitais informantais iš absolventų šeimų, visuomeniniais ir universiteto atstovais. Duomenims analizuoti naudota indukcinė analizė, apimanti kategorizavimo bei kodavimo sistemą. Rezultatai pateikti analizuojant dalyvių gyvenimo istorijas, jų sėkmės sampratą, asmeninius ir kontekstinius sėkmę lemiančius veiksnius. Taip pat pateiktos rekomendacijos universitetams, kad jie taptų įtraukesni. Šiame tyrime daroma išvada, kad sėkmė yra subjektyvi ir daugialypė, todėl rekomenduojama daugiau apie tai kalbėti ir teikti visokeriopą pagalbą visai universiteto bendruomenei.

**Esminiai žodžiai:** *autizmu sergantys absolventai, universiteto sėkmė, veiksniai, gyvenimo istorijos.*