



Newcastle University's success in enabling learners with autism spectrum disorder to enjoy the full higher education experience is recognised in the Outstanding Support for Students category.

Responding to concerns that traditional support structures focus on academic issues and not on social and independent living skills, the institution undertook three initiatives that aim to address students' fear of the unknown. The "transition event" offers early access to accommodation and events, including the freshers' fair, together with workshops to support the development of independent living skills and knowledge of what to expect at university.

A social mentoring scheme allows a student to select an event or club activity and be supported in that by a mentor, who incrementally reduces the assistance provided as the student's confidence and social skills increase. An autism and Asperger's support network gives students access to structured social activities, as well as opportunities to discuss experiences of diagnosis and university life.

The initiatives have received substantial funding from alumni and are already bearing fruit: there has been a 100 per cent retention rate among students who attended the first transition event.

The judges described it as a "fantastic achievement" that showed a "strong understanding of the aim of widening participation" so that all students "can enjoy and access the full university experience". Mentoring "supports the fact that clubs, societies and extracurricular activity have a huge impact on academic success".