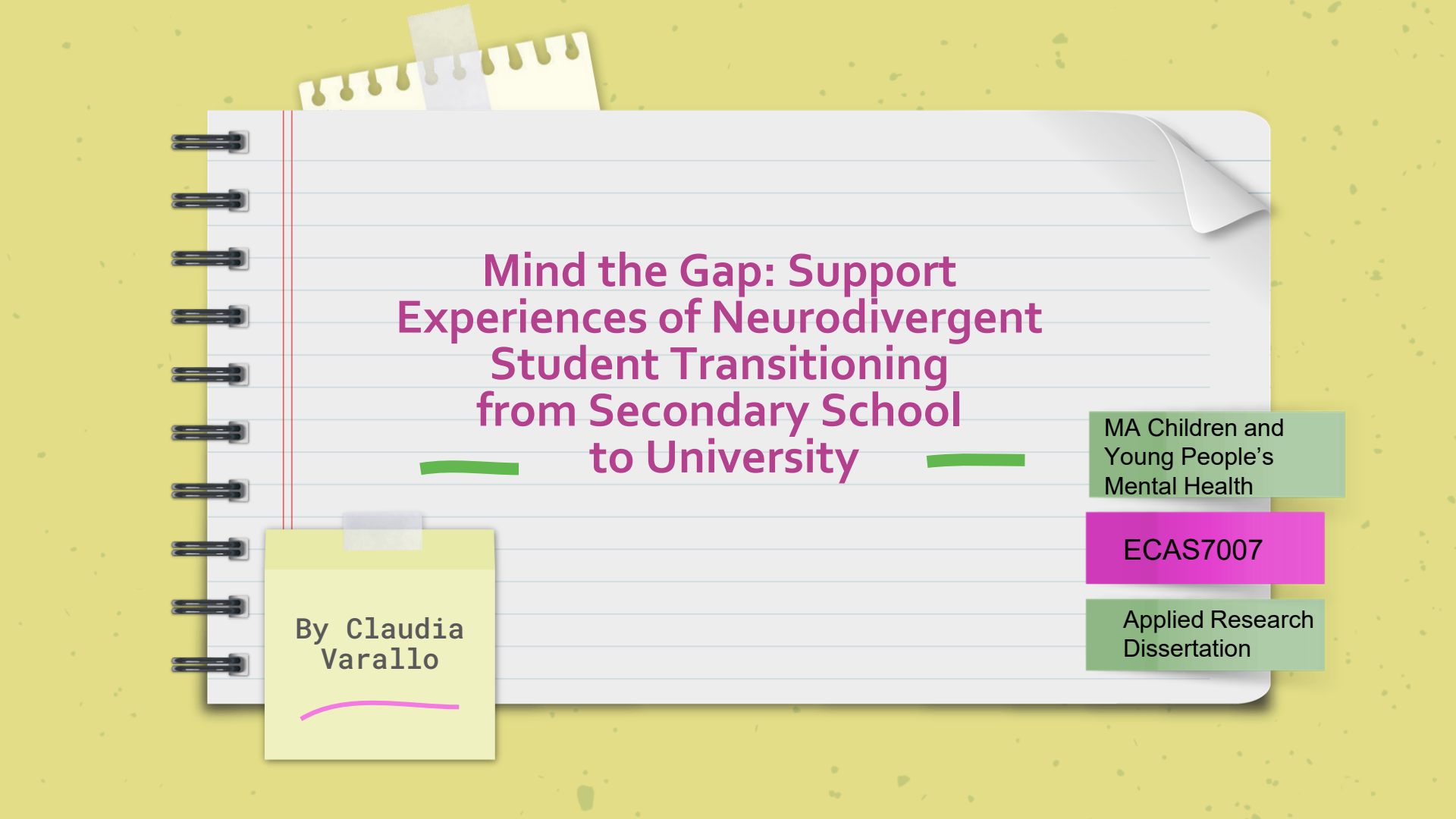




Mind the Gap: Support Experiences of Neurodivergent Student Transitioning from Secondary School to University

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MA Children and
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Applied Research
Dissertation

Presentation Overview



Systematic Literature Review

- Background and conceptual context
- Methods and search strategy
- Key themes from existing research



Empirical Study

- Methodological approach
- Findings and thematic analysis
- Links back to gaps identified in the review

Implications for Support

- What the literature and participants reveal
- How findings can improve support for neurodivergent students

Systematic Literature Review - Background

- Explores what is known about neurodivergent students' support during transition to university
- Tension between university expectations and students' actual needs
- Normative assumptions about independence, self-advocacy & communication
- Do not account for cognitive, sensory, and emotional diversity
(Clouder *et al.*, 2020; McDowall & Kiseleva, 2024)

Systematic Literature Review - Background

- Support systems often inconsistent or unpredictable.
 - Variation in adjustments, staff responses & emotional labour required (Davies & Bagnall, 2024; Widman & Lopez-Reyna, 2020).
- Transition requires belonging, predictability & relational safety.
 - These break down in fragmented university systems (Kim et al., 2021; Aguilera Rodríguez & García-Torres, 2024).
- Ecological perspectives: transition shaped by interactions between students, staff & systems.
 - Lack of research on continuity between school and university (Butcher & Lane, 2025; O'Byrne et al., 2019).



Summary



- Over-focus on autism
- Emotional labour of disclosure overlooked
- Little research on school → university continuity
- Limited links to wellbeing (anxiety, stress, self-esteem, adjustment)
- Need for experience-centred research

SLR: Methods

- ❖ Search across 7 academic databases (2010–2025)
- ❖ Included qualitative, mixed-methods & review studies
- ❖ 16 studies met inclusion criteria
- ❖ Quality appraisal guided by COREQ
- ❖ Synthesised using thematic analysis



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Inclusion & Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria

- ✓ Studies on neurodivergent students in HE
- ✓ Research on transition or support experiences
- ✓ Peer-reviewed qualitative, mixed-methods, or reviews
- ✓ Published 2010–2025

Exclusion Criteria

- Non-HE populations
- Medical/clinical intervention studies
- Non-empirical commentary or opinion papers
- Studies lacking focus on support or transition





SLR - Results: Key Themes

Theme 1: Discontinuity of Support

- ❖ Shift from structured school support → fragmented university systems
- ❖ Loss of routine, predictability, and relational continuity

Theme 2: Disclosure Burden

- ❖ Repeated self-explanation
- ❖ Emotional and cognitive labour
- ❖ Fear of stigma or misunderstanding

Theme 3: Variable Staff Understanding

- ❖ Inconsistent implementation of adjustments
- ❖ Support reliant on individual staff attitudes
- ❖ Impact on confidence and belonging



Summary of Findings

- Support becomes less coordinated across transition
- High emotional labour involved in accessing adjustments
- Inconsistency in staff knowledge and responses
- Belonging, clarity, and relational safety repeatedly identified as central



Discussion:



- Challenges reflect system design, not student deficit
- Loss of relational continuity across school → university (*Butcher & Lane, 2025*)
- Support processes often unclear or inconsistent (*Widman & Lopez-Reyna, 2020*)
- Disclosure brings emotional labour (*Quigley, 2025; Davies & Bagnall, 2024*)
- Emotional safety rarely considered for ND students (*Tong et al., 2007*)
- Limited focus on prior educational experiences or support continuity (*O'Byrne et al., 2019*)



SLR Conclusion

- Transition challenges shaped by systemic + relational factors
- Support often fragmented and inconsistent
- Emotional labour not fully explored
- Limited research on school → university continuity
- Weak links to wellbeing outcomes
- Leads directly to need for lived-experience research

Why the Empirical Study Was Needed

Gaps Identified:

No comparison of support across school → university

Limited understanding of links between support & wellbeing

Emotional labour of navigating systems underexplored

Over-focus on autism; limited ND diversity

Research Aims:

Explore lived experiences of support during transition

Examine how support relates to anxiety, stress, self-esteem & adjustment

Understand continuity and discontinuity across educational stages

Identify barriers and enablers to effective support

Research Questions:

1. How do ND students perceive support in school vs university?
2. How does support relate to wellbeing and adjustment?
3. How is support continuity/discontinuity experienced?
4. What barriers and enablers shape transition?

Empirical Study - Background

- ND students face cognitive, sensory & emotional challenges in transition (*Ecclestone et al., 2010; Anderson et al., 2019*)
- University expectations: independence & self-advocacy (*Kendall, 2016; Tomlinson et al., 2023*)
- School provides structured, relational support → university is more self-managed (*Booth & Bond, 2025; Riddell & Weedon, 2014*)
- Limited research on how students make sense of these changes
- Disclosure & adjustments often unclear or emotionally demanding (*Cameron & Tredgold, 2019; Smith et al., 2025*)
- Need to understand lived experiences across stages



Methods

Design:



- Qualitative survey for accessibility
- Flexible, low sensory/social demand

Participants:



25 neurodivergent students (<25)
UK-based; neurodivergence self-defined

Ethics:



- Informed consent, anonymity, emotional safety
- Right to withdraw; support signposting

Analysis:



- Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2008, 2012)
- Inductive, iterative coding
- Reflexive notes for transparency

Results Overview:

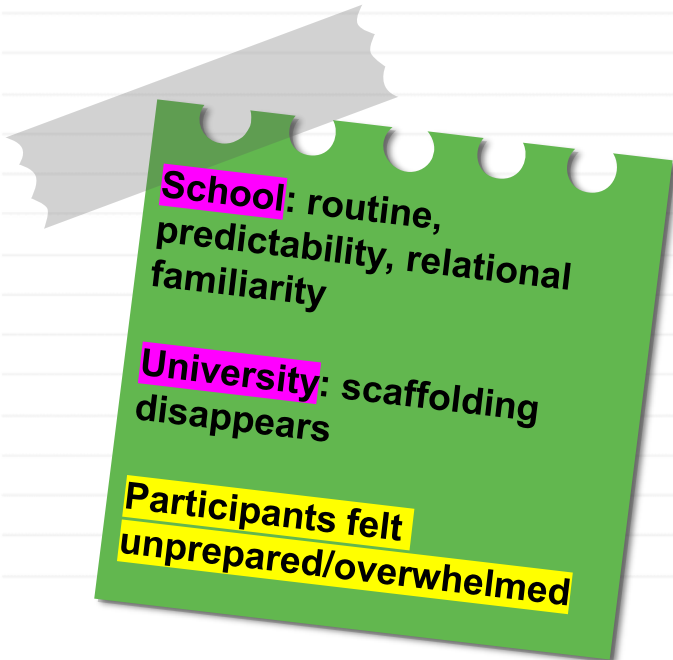
Theme	Subtheme	Example Quotes
Institutionalised Independence and Withdrawal of Care	Loss of embedded scaffolding	“School felt structured... uni just expects you to magically cope.” (P07) “At school teachers knew me... at uni I’m just another person.” (P04)
	Fragmentation and process barriers	“Trying to get support is like chasing shadows.” (P12) “I had to explain myself over and over — exhausting.” (P03)
	Anxiety, exhaustion, and internalised doubt	“The transition made my anxiety skyrocket.” (P05) “Being dismissed knocked my confidence completely.” (P09)
Psychological Negotiation of Competence	Restoring stability through enacted support	“One lecturer actually listened — and that changed everything.” (P14) “Clear communication reduced my stress instantly.” (P02)
	Social positioning and belonging	“I feel like an outsider... everyone else seems to know the rules.” (P08) “ND groups helped me feel like I belong somewhere.” (P10)
Belonging, Exclusion, and Calls for Change	Reforming transition support	“Why isn’t there automatic support when you arrive?” (P01) “If I had one named person, everything would be easier.” (P13)

Theme 1: Institutionalised Independence & Withdrawal of Care

- Shift from personalised school support → procedural university systems
- Students felt safety net was abruptly removed
- Independence expected without a supported transition



Subtheme 1.1: Loss of Embedded Scaffolding



School: routine,
predictability, relational
familiarity

University: scaffolding
disappears

Participants felt
unprepared/overwhelmed

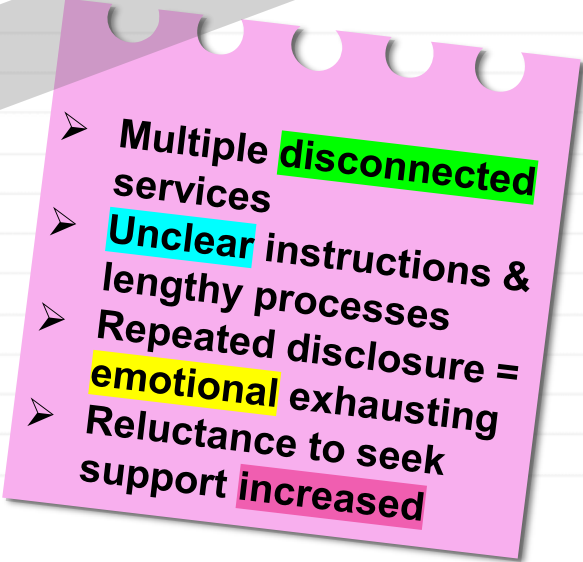


Participant Quotes:

"School felt
structured... uni
just expects you to
magically cope".

"At school
teachers knew
me... at uni I'm
just another
person."

Subtheme 1.2: Fragmentation & Process Barriers

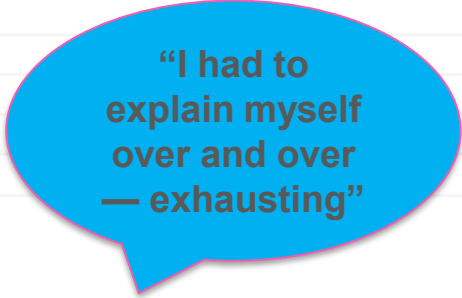
- 
- Multiple **disconnected** services
 - **Unclear** instructions & lengthy processes
 - Repeated disclosure = **emotional** exhausting
 - Reluctance to seek support **increased**



Participant Quotes:



“Trying to get support is like chasing shadows”



“I had to explain myself over and over — exhausting”

Theme 2: Psychological Negotiation of Competence



- Transition affects sense of competence & identity
- Emotional impact of unclear systems or dismissive staff
- Self-blame when systems fail them

Subtheme 2.1: Anxiety, Exhaustion & Internalised Doubt

- Heightened **anxiety triggered** by unclear expectations
- Students internalised system failures as **personal failure**
- **Emotional exhaustion** from constant self-advocacy

“The transition made my anxiety skyrocket”

“Being dismissed knocked my confidence completely.”

2.2: Restoring Stability Through Enacted Support

- Small acts of understanding had big emotional impact
- Clear communication reduced stress
- Relational support helped restore confidence & motivation

“One lecturer actually listened — and that changed everything”

“Clear communication reduced my stress instantly”

Discussion:

- Transition = major shift in **responsibility, predictability & belonging** (Ecclestone et al., 2010; Sundqvist et al., 2024)
- **School support** felt relational, predictable & proactive (Booth & Bond, 2025; Riddell & Weedon, 2014)
- **University support** felt procedural & dependent on self-advocacy (Kendall, 2016; Tomlinson et al., 2023; Richardson, 2015)
- Fragmented systems → **delays, inconsistency, repeated disclosure** (Jacklin et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2025)



Discussion:

- Emotional labour → **anxiety, stress & internalised doubt** (Quigley & Gallagher, 2025)
- **Staff responses** shaped confidence, identity & belonging (Wilcox et al., 2005; Pidgeon et al., 2014; Anderson et al., 2019)
- **Peer communities** supported identity, safety & adjustment (Acker et al., 2018)
- Methodological strengths & limitations (Hughes, 2009; Mortimore & Crozier, 2006)





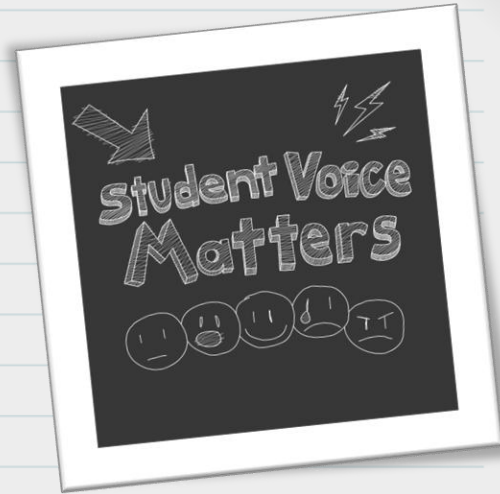
Why This Study Matters

- Clear insight into how ND students compare **school vs university support**
- Shows how support shapes **anxiety, confidence & belonging**
- Includes diverse neurodivergent profiles (not autism-only)
- Highlights the **emotional labour** of disclosure & navigation
- Identifies practical improvements:
 - clearer communication
 - consistent processes
 - reduced disclosure burden
 - relationally responsive support
- Centres **students' lived experiences** of transition



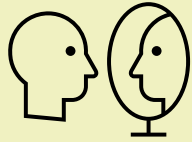
Conclusion of Study

- ✓ Challenges reflect **systems**, not student deficits
- ✓ Abrupt changes & fragmented processes → emotional strain
- ✓ **Small relational actions** strongly support confidence & belonging
- ✓ Need for clearer processes, reduced disclosure burden & consistent support
- ✓ Centres ND students' voices and shows how structures, relationships & emotions interact



Closing Reflection

- A challenging but transformative research journey
- Deepened understanding of ND students' experiences
- Grew in confidence, resilience, and reflexivity
- Reinforced the need for relational, inclusive support



(Gibbs, 1988)

Thank You for Listening!



Any Questions?

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