

1) Outline the project or initiative and what makes it innovative and inspiring (max 300 words).

In partnership with Autism Initiatives, the Guidance Team at Inverness College UHI run a regular open support group where students have the opportunity to chat and work through difficulties and experiences in relation to understanding themselves and their autism. The aim is that they will build support networks which will help them during their time at Inverness College UHI.

This group is open to all students at Inverness College on the Autistic Spectrum, on further and higher education courses. This is the first opportunity that this cohort of students have had to meet their peers on a regular basis, in a dedicated space to discuss issues that are particular to them and their disability.

"It has made a big difference to the additional support team to have something regular, appropriately targeted, and available in-house to offer to students with ASD. They don't have to face accessing a different organisation and building and can attend, or not, as suits how they feel that day. It is bound to be beneficial for students with ASD to hear directly from their peers about how they have coped with being at college; and there will be frequent opportunities for the students to help each other gain more independence, by sharing any coping strategies they have developed."

Karen Mitchell

Additional Support Manager, Access & Progression

Unexpected outcomes

This project was set up as a trial for semester one running just three weeks a month. However, it proved to be so successful that we continued it into semester two and increased it to run on a weekly basis.

It has informed our thinking about how we run group workshops and we are planning to extend this style of support during 16/17 creating groups for students recovering from drug and alcohol addiction as well as those suffering from anxiety or stress.

2) Detail how the project or initiative was delivered, from the planning stage through to its successful conclusion (max 300 words). Include details of timing* and funding.

Autism Initiatives have been bringing prospective students to meet with the Guidance Team for a number of years to help ease transition into College. Many students have continued to be supported through the guidance team and the additional support needs team on a 1-2-1 basis. Through these meetings a pilot was created in summer 2015, to create an ongoing support system for the students with staff both internal and external to the College aiming to raise the retention levels of this cohort of students.

The group is facilitated three weeks a month by Andrew Denovan, a project assistant from Autism Initiatives and once a month by Claire Kilburn-Young the wellbeing officer at Inverness College UHI. The students requested the consistency of having weekly meetings and as Andrew has another commitment once a month the group is facilitated by the wellbeing officer. Although this came out of necessity it has proved beneficial for the students. The students have developed a trusting relationship with the wellbeing officer giving them the chance to talk to a member of College staff about the issues they are having during their time at Inverness College UHI.

The group is run on an open basis so that students can come at any point in the two hours as lunch hours on courses are not consistent. Each session is run with a mixture of information about Autism and how it can affect your learning so that students are learning about themselves and there is always time for discussion and peer support built in. There is no funding required by the College or the external facilitator as it falls within staff remits for both the College and Autism Initiatives.

3) Outline the project or initiative's outcome(s) within the university and beyond with relevant supporting evidence, metrics or testimony where appropriate (max 400 words).

Impact on Staff

"I know it helps the student I work with a lot.

He shared that it's nice to have something regular to go to, which helps him keep a routine and he finds it helpful to talk out his perspectives and listen to others'. He finds there are many similarities in what the students are going through and doesn't feel so alone as a result."

Solveig McCleery, ASN

Impact on Students

As well as helping current students this initiative has also had a positive impact on prospective students with autism through the partnership with Autism Initiatives. Through his work as a project assistant Andrew works closely with the diagnostician for the Highlands, runs an adult diagnosis group and has close links with the local schools. This means Andrew can talk about the College and the support group which can reduce anxiety for those who may wish to join Inverness College UHI. Through working closely with the Guidance Team Andrew's knowledge about the College has grown and his confidence about the support his clients will receive at the transition stage and during the course has increased. Future plans are that prospective students can be invited to sit in with the group.

From the students perspective the students all feel that it is one of many factors that has helped them to stay at College with one student in particular stating that it is the most significant factor. All students agree that they have found the group helpful and they would recommend it to a friend or to others. No student had anything to contribute towards ways they found the group was unhelpful.

(Please see attached evaluation forms)

Moving forward throughout the year we felt the students were raising issues that highlighted a gap in the knowledge and experience University staff about their disability and how staff could improve on their interactions with autistic students. To counteract this we put on two staff training events with Andrew who has the unique perspective of being a past student with UHI, had autism himself and is the main facilitator of the group. *(Please see the attached evaluation forms)*

Unexpected outcomes

Staff found the training both powerful and useful which has promoted requests for training on other issues to do with disability and mental health which the University is taking forward for the next academic term.

*Attached below are a sample evaluation forms completed by students from the group, staff evaluations from the training and a testimonial from Andrew.

Inverness College Spectrum Support Group

By Andrew Denovan – Project Assistant – Autism Initiatives

In my role as Project Assistant with Autism Initiatives it became clear that there was problems being experienced with some of our service users in their time studying at various colleges and schools in the highland area. It was even beginning to affect their confidence and belief in their abilities and raised many questions as to whether it would be possible to achieve a befitting standard of higher education.

Reflecting on my experience and fantastic support I received at my time studying at Inverness College I approached the guidance team and drawing upon our shared experience of education and Autism we developed the idea for the support group.

We identified the main difficulties experienced by most students and developed the group to pre-empt and deal with any issues that the Autistic students would experience.

We also designed and structured the group to be an open discussion group for people to understand themselves in regards to being autistic and to develop their own peer group where they could share experiences and build relationships and skills to help with college life which can be developed and transferred to real life situations.

In the first term some of the students experienced difficulties which we anticipated and through communicating with the students, there lecturers and guidance we managed to work through issues of a number of the students and managed to stop them from leaving college.

Being available at the college, with a regular and predictable time and space we have been approachable for students, as they find coming forward with their problems difficult and often feel they are not understood. Being able to translate and communicate the autistic students' difficulties and issues is crucial to the experience and development academically, intellectually and personally. So we have been able to represent and advocate for students at meetings helping to resolve issues that have arisen.

We have been able, through direct support to enable prospective student, some of whom have been traumatised by past experiences of education to engage with the college and are now planning to engage again with further education. Some of these prospective students are highly intelligent but extremely vulnerable and it is only through the trust and support that we can offer that these individuals are able to start to engage with further education again.

We have also delivered a couple of training sessions for the college staff that was well received and are hoping to develop this as there was a keen interest from the staff to have more regular and frequent training sessions which will ultimately benefit the students.

One of the most aspects to having this space is the peer support that each member of the group gives to each other. The levels of empathy and the direct understanding of each person's experience leads to a unique and valuable level of support that involves greater personal understanding development, confidence and helping build a self-awareness and identity that is vital for the development of each student as they study and interact in their time at college. Some of the students who are in their second year are helping the new students to settle in and helping them understand and develop skills for studying, sharing what works and supporting and empathising when things don't go so well.

The students are now taking ownership of the group and are contributing in a constructive way, taking responsibility. One of our group is now the Disability representative on the student council, another is thinking of using her experience as a Councillor to bring to the group.

Overall having a safe, regular and predictable space where our students can come, relax and interact has been successful in helping them settle in and make the transition to college life.

Spectrum Support Group Evaluation Survey (2015/2016)

It is particularly important to us that the service we are providing meets the needs of our students.

We would appreciate you taking a few minutes to give us feedback on the service you received from us.

We are happy to have both positive and negative feedback so please feel free to give us your honest views.

Key	1 = not at all	2 = to a limited extent	3 = one of many factors	4 = important factor	5 = most significant factor
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- To what extent would you say that the group has helped you to stay at college?(please mark X in appropriate box)
 1 2 3 4 5
- To what extent would you say that the group has helped you do better in your academic work?
 1 2 3 4 5
- To what extent would you say that the group has improved your overall experience of college?
 1 2 3 4 5
- To what extent would you say the group has helped you develop skills that might be useful in obtaining future employment (e.g. self-understanding, understanding of others, managing difficult feelings better, increased confidence, assertiveness,)?
 1 2 3 4 5
- Was the group helpful? Yes / No
- Would you recommend the group to a friend/others? Yes / No
- Please also tell us any ways in which you found the group or any aspects unhelpful:

find the group very helpful.

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5. Was the group helpful? Yes/ No
6. Would you recommend the group to a friend/others? Yes/ No
7. Please also tell us any ways in which you found the group or any aspects unhelpful:

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Training Evaluation – Staff

Please fill out this form, to let us know which parts you enjoyed, and what we could have done better! Circle your answers.

1. Please tell us the title of the workshop guidance attended.
Autism Training
2. Please tell us your expectations of the workshop
I had no previous expectations and was looking forward to learning about autism from a different perspective, through the eyes of someone living with the condition. This immediately interested me and I wanted to attend.
3. Did the workshop meet your expectations?
Yes
4. If you answered 'could have done more' to the above question – please could you elaborate for us?
n/a
5. Was the information relevant to you?
Yes
6. If you answered 'could have been different' to the above question - please could you elaborate for us?
n/a
7. Was there anything else we could have provided that would have helped you?
8. Do you have any recommendations for making this service better?
I would have liked longer to ask questions at the end and have a chat with Andrew to find out more. Perhaps a 2 hour session would have been better.
9. Are there any other subjects you would like us to introduce as workshops?
Perhaps a similar session, ran by students or people who have a learning difficulty or disability. This would give us more understanding into different conditions and how different everyday experiences can be.
10. Any other comments?
I thoroughly enjoyed the Autism Training session.

Andrew was engaging and held my attention throughout the session, I could have sat and listened to him all day! He was passionate, knowledgeable, amusing and enthusiastic which rubbed off on us all.

Many Thanks Guidance Team

I have a new perspective on the condition and I think this was partially due to the session being hosted by someone with Autism. This allowed Andrew to give us a real insight into how he experiences everyday life and could provide examples and stories about his life which I really enjoyed hearing about.

It was really interesting to hear about some of the myths which have been overcome in recent years and much of the information I learned at University a few years ago has already changed. This shows the importance of educating both staff and students about Autism and research which is forever advancing.

I think this training is important and I hope that other staff members have the opportunity to attend and enjoy it as much as I have.

Training Evaluation – Staff

Please fill out this form, to let us know which parts you enjoyed, and what we could have done better! Circle your answers.

11. Please tell us the title of the workshop guidance attended.

Autism Awareness

12. Please tell us your expectations of the workshop

Learning a little about autism and how to recognise and help a student if they were in my class.

13. Did the workshop meet your expectations?

Yes No Could have done more

4. If you answered 'could have done more' to the above question – please could you elaborate for us?

5. Was the information relevant to you?

Yes No Could have been different

6. If you answered 'could have been different' to the above question - please could you elaborate for us?

7. Was there anything else we could have provided that would have helped you?

A sheet on autism

8. Do you have any recommendations for making this service better?

NO

9. Are there any other subjects you would like us to introduce as workshops?

Recognising anxiety, depression and mental health awareness as there seems to be more students with issues.

10. Any other comments?

Training Evaluation – Staff

Please fill out this form, to let us know which parts you enjoyed, and what we could have done better! Circle your answers.

1. Please tell us the title of the workshop guidance attended.
Feeling Great – Feeling Understood (Autism Awareness)
2. Please tell us your expectations of the workshop
Better understanding of Autism and how it affects students learning and behaviour.
3. Did the workshop meet your expectations?
Yes
4. If you answered 'could have done more' to the above question – please could you elaborate for us?
5. Was the information relevant to you?
Yes
6. If you answered 'could have been different' to the above question - please could you elaborate for us?
7. Was there anything else we could have provided that would have helped you?
8. Do you have any recommendations for making this service better?
Run more of these types of session where individuals with first-hand experience of the barriers to learning can describe methods to assist staff in overcoming the barriers.
9. Are there any other subjects you would like us to introduce as workshops?
As above.
10. Any other comments?
Thank-you for an excellent workshop. The message delivered was very powerful and emotive. Fantastic delivery. Certainly gave me a lot to think about and tools to work with.