



Neurodivergence and self-discovery – Joan’s story¹

Joan, a university student in her late 20s, is studying a Master’s degree and has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), an adult diagnosis that she received at age 24. Since being diagnosed, Joan has been on a journey of self-discovery to decipher which aspects of herself and her journey have been impacted by ADHD.

Joan remembers being called a “gifted” child in primary school, achieving strong marks and having friends and great confidence. High school, however, was harder for Joan and she suffered from mental health issues as well as eating and sleeping disorders. Although Joan saw a counsellor weekly, her ADHD was not identified. Joan continued to excel in certain subjects throughout high school; unfortunately, she struggled with friendships and had some difficulties with the police.

The school did its best to help her but did not have the required expertise or staffing. The school did make accommodations for Joan, such as permitting her to learn from home one day per week, which allowed her to complete her senior school certificate.

I can look back on my entire schooling at this school and say, ‘Okay. They tried to help. They definitely tried – they just didn’t know what it was.’ Joan

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is typified by difficulties with attention regulation, impulsivity and hyperactivity.

¹ This story is the experience of one university student interviewed as part of the research project: O’Shea et al. *National Career Development Learning Hub for students with disability*. National Careers Institute Partnership grant (2021–2023). The research involved interviews and surveys with students, parents/carers and stakeholders and analysis of existing data sets.

*At the same time, people with ADHD can also have strengths (e.g. ability to hyperfocus).
Learn more about this [here](#).*

Key Learning: Individualised supports and accommodations given to Joan by her school coupled with high expectations of her resulted in Joan completing her senior school certificate.

After school, Joan moved away from home to study at university but immediately struggled with the organisational skills required.

I had to figure out what time I was supposed to be at university, what I was supposed to bring, and what room it was in, and then I had to find time to do the work myself and as you can imagine, that didn't really go very well. Joan

Joan required additional assistance in planning her studies, prioritising tasks and staying focused – all factors that affect ability to submit assessment tasks on time. Joan claims that she handed in every assignment late and was penalised accordingly. As a result, Joan failed many subjects, which cost her both time and money.

Key Learning: Joan's ADHD meant that she could not meet the requirements of her university enrolment, which had serious implications for her course progression and financial situation.

Joan's ADHD had an impact on her journey in other ways too. People with ADHD are often driven by specific interests, which they become hyperfocused on. They can achieve much with this engagement, but when the interest runs out so can the capacity to focus and complete tasks. This aspect of Joan's neurology has had a strong influence on her educational and career journey. Part way through her degree, with multiple subject failures and withdrawals on her record, Joan's attention turned elsewhere. She left university to follow this new direction overseas, only returning home when that interest wore off. However, having commenced university study again, Joan's interest was again piqued by a different area, and she stopped studying to pursue that. Joan enjoyed success in these new areas but sometimes this could be short-lived; each time, she returned to university to continue her degree. She did complete her studies but then enrolled in a new program – a Master's in health science.

Key Learning: A specific aspect of Joan's ADHD (hyperfocus) had an impact on her educational and career journey as it made her highly successful in whatever she was interested in. It could, however, also lead to quick changes in direction when that interest ran out.

Joan suggests that students with disability would benefit from career development learning (CDL), which seeks to improve students' self-awareness of their strengths and interests.

Compulsory career and job readiness activities included in the curriculum would also have benefited Joan, who felt that she was often unaware of extracurricular opportunities or unable to take on the additional burden of optional activities.

Currently, Joan's main goal is to complete her degree and get into the workforce. Joan's strategy for planning for what comes after university is to focus on completing her subjects and explore employment options as a separate project after graduation.

People with ADHD can be highly valuable to employers. [Here](#) is a list of the unique skills and strengths of people with ADHD.

At the same time, employers can minimise the weaknesses of people with ADHD through strategies such as [these](#).

Implications for CDL in further education

- CDL focused on self-awareness supports students with ADHD in identifying occupations suited to their strengths.
- CDL embedded within the curriculum becomes accessible to students with ADHD who may have difficulty planning and organising for optional activities.
- CDL that is scaffolded and provided consistently throughout the student lifecycle supports students with ADHD to plan, prioritise and focus on graduate employment, rather than leaving it to after graduation.

Implications for employers

- People with ADHD can be highly valuable employees due to their creative, “out-of-the-box” thinking; hyperfocus and efficiency in tasks that interest them; detail-orientation; swiftness to start tasks; and desire to try new ideas, tasks and projects.
- People with ADHD often require adjustments to limit the impacts of their condition. These adjustments are generally inexpensive and easy to provide and can significantly improve productivity. Top tips for employers of people with ADHD include breaking long-term projects into short-term deadlines, allowing flexible working conditions, checking in regularly and providing one-to-one feedback, creating one-page organisers for key tasks, and using technology-based organisational tools.
- A guide to good practice in supporting students with disability in the workplace is available in the [CDL Hub](#) for students with disability.