DARLENE MCLENNAN: Welcome, everybody. Thank you for joining us today. My name is Darlene McLennan. I'm the Manager of the Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training, or ADCET for short. I'm a white woman in my 50s with grey brown hair with glasses and wearing a bright orange shirt today.

This webinar is live captioned. To activate the captions, click on the CC button in the tool bar. It's either located on the top or bottom of your screen. We also have captions available via the browser and we will put the URL into the chat now if you would like to access it there.

I'm on lutruwita, Tasmanian Aboriginal land. In the spirit of reconciliation, ADCET respectfully acknowledges the lutruwita nation and also recognises the Aboriginal history and culture of the land. I pay my respects to Elders past and present and to many Aboriginal people who did not make Elder status. I also acknowledge all of the countries participating in this meeting. And also acknowledge Elders and ancestors and their legacies to us and any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people participating in the webinar. I invite you now to add to the chat on which country you are in.

Today's webinar Autistic Students and the Transition to University, Findings and Recommendations, will be presented by Alison Nuske, PhD ‑‑ Dr Alison, I should say ‑‑ I'm referring to her now ‑‑ PhD research exploring the experience of autistic students during their transition to and first year of university in Australia. Alison will provide recommendations for develop a holistic approach to supporting autistic students during this critical time.

We're very fortunate to have Alison. It's a bit like saying it's hot off the press. Alison only received her PhD last week. I feel very fortunate we have her sharing her findings and providing us with information today. Thank you so much, Alison.

Before we begin, a few more housekeeping details. This webinar is being live captioned by Jason from Bradley Reporting and will be recorded. The recording will be made available on ADCET in the coming days. If you have any technical difficulties, you can email us at admin@adcet.edu.au. Alison will talk for around 50 or so minutes and at the end I will ask some questions. If you could put the questions in the Q&A box, that's where I will get the questions from, but also encourage you to chat throughout the presentation in the chat as people often do.

All right. That's it. I will hand over to you, Alison. I will see everybody back at the end of the presentation. Thank you.

ALISON NUSKE: Thanks Darlene. As Darlene mentioned, I'm here today to present the findings and some recommendations from my PHD research. I did want to take a moment to thank my supervision team Dr Fiona Rillotta, Associate Professor Michelle Bellon, and Dr Jesse Shipman and Professor Amanda Richdale who supported me throughout my candidature over the last 7 years.

I also wanted to take this opportunity to thank ADCET for supporting me during my PhD and assisting me with promoting and recruitment, but also thank the participants who took part and provided their insights into the experience of transition and providing support through transition, without which I wouldn't have been able to complete this research.

Before I begin today, I just want to acknowledge the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which I'm presenting from, which is the Peramangk land. I pay respect to Elders past and present and extend that respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people attending today.

Just a really quick background, just to give a bit of context. I started my PhD when I was working as an Access and Inclusion Adviser at the University of South Australia. I was there for about nine years with a couple of stints teaching in between. But I first started working in the field of autism over 15 years ago when I was working as a developmental educator and a consultant at Autism SA, our state‑based autism support organisation.

I have worked in this area for some time, and working in the higher education setting, recognised a need for some additional knowledge and understanding around supporting autistic students, but particularly in that first year in the transition phase. That's how I came to do this project.

I also wanted to note that as an autistic autism researcher myself, you will notice throughout this presentation I do refer to identity first language, using "autistic" rather than "person with autism". This is a personal preference but it is also something that has been acknowledged in several research articles of late, that is a preference for a lot of autistic people. But I do want to acknowledge it's not necessarily a preference for all autistic people. I do want to emphasise when you are working with colleagues or students who may be autistic it's really important to find out what their preference is and to reflect that language and respect that choice.

The overall plan for today, I just wanted to provide a brief background of how I came to do this research and the setting in which this research took place; a really brief summary of the method undertaken to conduct this research, and then, importantly, I will talk about the findings from this research and the recommendations that I have in terms of supporting transition and supporting first‑year experiences for autistic students at university.

While the study itself was undertaken in Australia and the interviews were conducted with Australian students and their support people, it's really useful to consider how this might apply a bit more broadly as well and definitely has some international application as well. I just want to give that context at the beginning.

So, when I looked at the background for this, the setting particularly in Australia and internationally as well, there has been a really big significant shift towards promoting participation over the last 30‑plus years and a move towards recognising ways to improve the participation rates of students from previously underrepresented groups. This commenced in Australia with the publication of the A Fair Chance For All Report in 1990, and was also underpinned by the introduction of the Disability Discrimination Act in 1992, and then following state and national legislation, including the Disability Standards For Education introduced in 2005.

That's the background of the research that I was conducting. Most of the students I spoke to had commenced their university studies in the past 10‑15 years, so it was within the scope of that acknowledgment of the need to increase participation of students with disabilities as well as students from other previously underrepresented groups.

The reason I chose to look at first year specifically was because of the really critical nature that first year plays for student success. It's one of the most crucial years in terms of retention and if students are likely to drop out, this is often a really significant point in time that that may occur, but it's also a really significant time in terms of not just the students but for universities. It's a critical time in that first year to make sure that we get things right.

Previous research, including a literature review I conducted earlier in my studies, highlighted the difficulties students, particularly autistic students, face in seeking help and finding support. A lot of that research focused on the students as needing to develop help‑seeking skills and from that perspective. So I really wanted to look at whether there were some other factors as well that might be impacting on student success in their first year.

I also noticed a lot of research that was being undertaken in the space supporting autistic students, there was a lot of research looking at what support students need but it wasn't looking at how to get them access to that support. There were a lot of things that, even when I was working as an access and inclusion adviser, we knew we needed to provide, but how do we connect students with support, how do we make sure they're supported early, and often students were accessing that support perhaps a year or two into their studies, which probably isn't the optimal way of providing support. I wanted to specifically focus on how we could make that transition more successful.

Looking at the experiences of autistic students, we know there is an increasing number of autistic students enrolling in universities. We know they have lower completion rates than that of their peers and we also know they have higher rates of un or underemployment than their peers both with and without disability. It's really important for us to explore how we can make these experiences more successful, support students to engage with their studies early on, and hopefully support them to continue and complete their studies.

For the purposes of this research, it's important to recognise that transition is not an easy concept to define. So, the key points I wanted to highlight in relation to transition is that it's not fixed or linear. Often when we talk about the first year of university, I think the first thing we think of is that chronological first 12 months. For all of the students I spoke to, it wasn't necessarily a clear‑cut 12‑month period in which they completed their first year of studies.

I think that's something that is particularly important in this space to keep in mind. It's also not the same for every student. I wanted to make sure when I was talking about transition of first year, that that concept had enough flexibility to cover whatever the student felt was their first year of university, their transition experience of university. So we talked about things that happened in the early stages, things they prepared for before transitioning to university, and that first ‑‑ until they felt they had settled into university as that kind of transition.

What was really important to keep in mind is that ‑‑ a really clear time of adjustment and adaptation, particularly for students coming directly from high school, but also for students who might be coming to study from previous work experience or time off from studies. There is a significant adaptation and adjustment that happens when we transition, particularly transitioning into university, and that includes a change in role, relationships, routines, assumptions. The settings are different, the expectations are different. What we're doing is different. Who we are engaging with is very different from what we may have been doing previously.

Previous research by Gale and Parker has highlighted the need for higher education policy and practice to really embrace the inclusivity and diversity in transition planning and support. That was another point I wanted to make sure was front of mind when looking at transition support, is ensuring that the support we're providing recognises, acknowledges and encourages and embraces that inclusivity and diversity, rather than trying to find a way we can make students who have challenges during transition change to fit the way we want students to transition to university.

So I really like that reflection of the importance of including and recognising inclusivity and diversity during transition.

A lot of the research I looked at in pulling my project together highlighted the importance of that inclusivity and diversity for all students and the benefits that all students will experience as a result. I think that's really important to consider.

Many of you might already be familiar with Alf Lizzio's work. I thank him very much for his support in providing me with some of these resources that I needed during my studies. Lizzio's five senses really provided a bit of a background concept for me to keep in mind working through the experiences of students during transition. I think it's a really helpful model. It's had iterations since but this is the original Five Senses of Successful Transition Model that Lizzio had written about in 2006.

What I found useful was that when we talk about how students transition to university, it's important to recognise the various senses and various experiences that they go through during that transition. What Lizzio's model identified was that students have five key senses/key experiences that they are going through during the transition that we need to be mindful of and that universities can directly support the development of during that transition.

A sense of capability is how well students are prepared to be a student, how they understand that role and the tasks they might be required to undertake. For a lot of students, that expectation, the knowledge of what university looks like can be a real barrier.

In terms of a sense of connectedness, Lizzio talks about the way in which students connect with their peers but also with other university staff, and how that helps them build that sense of belonging as a student.

In terms of resourcefulness, it's knowing who to ask for help, where you can get help from, what sorts of questions to ask, how to manage challenges during their studies, and how to access support when they need it. So, this is particularly important for autistic students, knowing where support is available and how they can access that support.

And then that sense of purpose is the way in which students feel connected to what they're studying and what that will contribute to their occupational outcomes. For students ‑‑ it's really important, as we know, for students to understand how does what they're learning contribute to the degree they're doing as a whole, but also what they plan to be doing with that degree in the future, and understanding the purpose of what they're engaging with.

At the centre of that, Lizzio describes a sense of culture which in later iterations was reframed to be a sense of identity, talking about students' sense initially as their identity as a student, their identity as a pending professional, their identity as a graduate, and the way in which that supports their engagement with their studies and having those clear values and understanding of their role at the university is really important.

I will come back to this framework a little later on because it was really helpful in working out ways in which universities can support transition from the information that I was provided by the participants in this research as well.

I'm not going to go into this model overly much. If anyone has been to any of my previous webinars or you have read my systematic literature review, there is plenty of detail in there about this one.

But what I wanted to highlight was that the purpose of this research was really about understanding the barriers and facilitators to transition for students. And in doing so, I wanted to make sure I wasn't just focusing on what is it that students need to do, what do students need to learn, what do students need to develop. I wanted to make sure I was giving equal consideration to the support that students need, the skills that students can develop, but also what universities can do to support those aspects and what role can universities play in supporting autistic students during the transition?

I wanted to make sure that there was a balance of looking at what the student can do and looking at what the systems can do and what the systemic change is that is needed. This was one of the key contributors to making sure that whenever I looked at the data I had, I was making sure I was looking at where does this fit in in terms of who is responsible for addressing it, and making sure I wasn't just focused on one particular area.

As I have said, I'm not going to talk about the systematic literature review that I undertook because that would be a whole other webinar, and it is. If you want to read about it there is a link in this slide to the publication, and also to a webinar that I presented with ADCET a few years ago.

The main thing that came out of this for me was the lack of research around transition specifically and the lack of research in an Australian context. This sort of filled the project that developed from here in terms of looking at that transition experience for autistic students and looking at that from an Australian perspective and exploring how students were going through that as well.

Briefly, the research that I undertook was conducted with several students. I had 8 students I conducted interviews with. The real focus of that and the reason I used interpretive phonological analysis ‑‑ which is a word I hope I don't have to use again for a while ‑‑ the reason that I did that was that that particular methodology allows you to look at the student's experience really closely and gives that individual's experience a real presence. The purpose of using this was to highlight the students' experience and privilege their experiences so that it's an opportunity for students to share how they felt transition went, what supports they felt they needed, the challenges they faced, the benefits they had, but really give the strength to their voices and give them an opportunity to share that.

There are a lot of research papers that have been conducted when looking at autistic students' experiences, and often family members are used as a proxy or to give a different opinion. I really wanted to avoid that if I could and talk to the students and take their experiences as they presented them. This gave me that opportunity to do that.

The information that was gathered from family members and staff was specifically focused on their experiences of providing support. So there were very few questions asked specifically about the engagement with a student, or a specific student; it was about how did you undertake your role in supporting that student or autistic students generally at university, and what sort of challenges did you face, what sorts of things did you implement, what worked really well? It was more about understanding the support person's role than understanding their perspective of the student's experience. I think that is really important for us to think about moving forward with research in this area.

So, I want to move on to talk about some findings, and hopefully that way there will be an opportunity for some questions as well at the end.

The first set of data I looked at was the students. This was probably one of the biggest undertakings for this project, was looking at the interviews with the students and their experiences. As you can see from this slide, I had 8 students. There was a mix of male and female and one student who preferred not to identify. They ranged from 19 to 36 years of age. They had varied pathways to and through university. A lot of students, as you can see, had previously attempted university. Some had come through from vocational education pathways, some had come through university pathway courses, and a couple of students had transitioned directly from high school. There was a real mix of experiences in terms of how students had come to be in the current year or in the current degree they were in. And several of the students, this was either their second or third degree or attempt at a degree.

What was really important in relation to those students that had previously attempted university was they didn't describe it in terms of failing university, dropping out of university; every student talked about their experiences previously as a previous attempt or "trying university"; "I tried university previously". But the students themselves never talked about it in terms of failing university, dropping out of university. It was interesting to see how students described it as a stepping stone to where they were now. That was something I hadn't thought about before, but it was really interesting to see the consistency across these students of the way in which they perceived these experiences.

For both of the female students that I interviewed, they had both been diagnosed after their initial attempt at university. I think anecdotally, that is probably not surprising for those of us who have worked in access and inclusion, or disability adviser roles in the past. Both students had a fairly recent diagnostic experience and both students had previously attempted university but not been able to complete that particular degree. So it was interesting seeing how their perspectives ‑‑ and I will give an overview of that shortly ‑‑ but how they differed from some of the students who were aware of their diagnosis prior to commencing university.

Overall, when I looked at ‑‑ I will present the themes that came from students and then the themes that came from the interviews with support networks, and then I will briefly touch on the themes that came from support network surveys, which was a little bit less data, but still provided an interesting reflection on the data collected through the interviews as well.

The students that I interviewed very much talked about the importance of understanding themselves and their diagnosis. The importance of knowing about their diagnosis. This was obviously particularly prevalent for students where they had received a late diagnosis or a recent diagnosis, but I also interviewed a student who had been diagnosed in childhood, diagnosis of autism in childhood, but wasn't informed of that diagnosis. When they started university, that was the first time for them they had been aware of their autistic characteristics.

So for that student as well, understanding what was going on and why was really, really important. I think one of the things that I was mindful of talking to students who had a recent diagnosis or rediagnosis was that experience of processing that information and the way in which they were interpreting and understanding their previous experiences at university with a new lens, with a new understanding. It definitely gave them a different way of reflecting on their experiences.

For students who had a diagnosis in childhood and who knew of their autism, their description was very different. They actually talked about the fact that autism was part of who they were, they can't separate out the things they find difficult because they're autistic as compared to the things they just find difficult because they're them. That was interesting to talk through, because it was difficult for those students to tell me what sort of things might have been impacted during their transition because they were autistic.

The students also noted that deciding to disclose was complex, which we all know that for autistic students disclosing to academic staff if they need adjustments and those sorts of things are challenging, but students also talked about disclosing to peers or in general being quite difficult and a complex decision. One of the students stopped at that point and said, "Well, I don't just go up to people and say "Hi, my name is Tim and I'm autistic"; that would be weird, so it gave me that moment to realise it's not just a difficult task but it's a complex consideration, and not just because you don't know what the response is you will receive, but because it's something you don't always find the right time or place or know when the right time or place is to do that. I think that was obvious for a number of students I interviewed.

In relation to that understanding of self, some of the students also, when they had the ability to reflect back on their experiences, they reflected on the challenges they had experienced.

But in doing so, they often referred to the sense of internalised ableism, which is that self‑discrimination. What they would say is "I'm not good at this task. I can't do this task. I can't do this activity. I'm not good at socialising. I can't make friends." That in itself was kind of "Oh, okay, that's a very direct way of putting it", but it also put the responsibility back on the student. So the students then went from, "I can't do this" to, "It's my responsibility to fix this", even for things they could have had adjustments for.

Students were so focused on, "I had all of these difficulties but I just have to try harder and be wetter at this. I have watched every YouTube there is on note‑taking and that's how I will fix the problem", and it very much put the onus on the student which was a different perspective to some students who had a bit more experience of adjustments and support. And so that was an interesting observation because a lot of the previous research, and even, I think, my systematic literature review made the point that a lot of students weren't ‑‑ research was showing students weren't demonstrating self‑awareness in asking for supports, but in actual fact when they do demonstrate it, it runs the risk of leaning into that internalised ableism and the sense of, "I just can't do this" and, "It's my responsibility to fix it", in which case why would they be asking for support?

So I think that's something we need to be mindful of, being proactive with addressing some of those things.

Some of the students did describe mechanisms they used to avoid asking for help but finding the answer in other ways, like listening in to conversations about assignments to get the information they might have missed in class. And so there were some of those descriptions where students were trying to not make it clear they needed support and not make it clear they might have been having difficulties.

The second main theme that I identified through the student interviews was this idea of persistence and resilience. I think this is really, really important, because when we look at the data and we look at previous research, there is a really, really strong narrative of failure and negativity and challenge. It blurs out this persistence and resilience that students are actually demonstrating.

One of the pieces of information I was repeatedly going back to be the data on completion rates and the fact that autistic students' completion rates were really low. What I couldn't identify was how that data took into account students who returned and tried again. From what I could read, those students were represented as an additional non‑completion rather than re‑engagement. So I thought, "Oh, that's kind of not representative of what is happening". I think persistence and resilience really stood out to me.

All the students I spoke to had high anxiety, and significantly that was linked to sensory processing. The students' anxiety ‑‑ often they would talk about their sensory processing and their anxiety as intertwined, as being linked. There was this definite period of adjustment and needing to understand what university was like, but also this very different way of journeying to and through university, particularly through the first year. Many students had withdrawn previous degrees, left university, gone and done a vocational education course and then come back to university. A very varied pathway but all of the students had come back, they had all returned to undertake their studies.

Most of the students I spoke to were a fair way through their degree at this point. This return, for a lot of them, had been quite a positive experience.

And then the third theme that came out of this was accessing and receiving support, the types of supports students received, what they needed. Students all talked about various ways in which family supported them. They talked about the fact they benefitted from peer support and peer connection but didn't always find it. They talked about the support they received from universities.

There were two key areas that really stood out here. One was orientation programs, not surprisingly, and the other was mentoring programs that they participated in. For both of those programs, students' experiences were significantly mixed. For some students, a really well structured, targeted orientation program proved to be the biggest factor. For one student, it was the most significant thing because it connected them to students in their degree, it gave them support networks to ask questions, all of those sorts of things.

But then for a lot of students, accessing orientation was impossible. It was too chaotic, it was unstructured, it was noisy, it was unclear why they were there. They attended sessions that weren't related to their degree. It was just that mixed experience that students talked about.

In terms of mentoring programs, it was similarly mixed. Some students had really positive experiences and some students really didn't recognise the benefit that they had, that they were having if there was one. Often that came back to how the mentoring program was run, who they were engaging with. It really came down to individual ‑‑ one particular mentor might have been good, another mentor might not have been so good.

A particular thing that students talked about is that they would only engage with the mentoring program if they felt the mentor was really well educated and understood autism. A couple of students noted that they didn't feel like it was appropriate to just assume that someone ‑‑ because they're in a psychology or health sciences degree, might be interested or appropriate for that. They felt like there should be this layer of additional support that they needed to be confident in. Some students just chose not to participate. Other students participated in more general mentoring programs that weren't specifically for autistic students. It was definitely a mixed experience for the students.

So the other group that I interviewed was support network members. This was several disability advisers, support worker and a family member, and professional staff member at a university, to learn about their experiences of providing support and what they found to be really important.

One of the things that really was clear was the need for early and ongoing support. And it was quite important, in reflecting on that, that we need to be mindful of the resourcing requirements, that a lot of universities seem to have this expectation that autistic students will transition in 12 months. We give them lots and lots of support in the first six weeks and that they will be fine; we just set them up. If they have had mentoring support, they will be fine after that. You know, that expectation that we can set them up and the rest of their degree will go smoothly. That's not always the way for many students.

I think it was really clear that there needed to be some recognition of how important the first year is and being flexible with what that means. And when we consider the delays in seeking support, it just extends that out even further, and that there is this need for transition to support to be a little bit more than ‑‑ you know, it needs to be before, during and beyond that first chronological year of university.

Definitely from the staff perspective there was the benefits that they saw from mentoring programs and the benefits they saw from facilitated social connections. Students definitely felt that that facilitated social support was useful, structured social support was useful.

Support networks outside of the university was more just about what types of students were accessing. One of the key things I do want to mention there was everyone that I interviewed in terms of staff and family, all recognised that really significant challenge that we're all aware of, which is balancing autonomy and support needs. So how do we teach students to advocate for themselves, access support, how do we teach them how to request assistance but also we're supporting them through that but we know they do need support to develop that. So how do we do that without crossing that line and doing for them. That was definitely recognised by everyone that was interviewed.

And then the staff, in particular, provided a lot of recommendations for what could be done to support autistic students at university and the importance of recognising each student and their individual needs, that every autistic student was different and they all needed a very different way. There is no one set‑up we can say, "Okay, all autistic students funnel into this mentoring program", or "all autistic students need these five accommodations"; all students were distinctly different and had very different needs.

The importance, as well, of understanding autism ‑ genuinely understanding autism from the perspective of autistic students, and the importance of that being a university‑wide requirement rather than maybe a small number of people that were aware of those needs.

And then in addition to that, staff, in particular, and family members, really noted that need for a supportive space on campus. I know this is something I have seen expanding in recent years, the implementation of autistic safe spaces, or I think we prefer to say "safer" spaces on campus, to enable students to engage with other autistic students, which would help to develop that sense of self and identity, but also provide a space that can be a retreat from some of the busyness that we know university campuses can be from time to time as well.

I'm not going to go into too much detail about the data from the surveys, other than to say a lot of it really supported what I heard through the interviews as well. I think one of the strongest points that came out of the parent survey data was the role of parents as advocates, and we asked parents about their role prior to university as well. So a lot of that advocacy was in the high school years for parents who were supporting a post high school student, and that that was one of the biggest things that came out of the survey data, was this need to keep fighting for support and the challenges that they faced in doing that. Because we know there is a big shift from providing that support in high school to moving to university.

Similarly, staff reflected a lot of the themes that had come out from the interviews as well. That need for advocacy was recognised and reflected in staff survey responses as well, and the need for recognising the different types of support that university staff would provide, which it's not necessarily all accommodations but also that emotional and practical support as well as academic support.

Overall, I'm not going to go into too much detail about this, but when we look at the individuals and the systemic requirements for supporting transition, there are several individual things that we can support students to work on so we can help them with developing that sense of identity, students can work on that self‑awareness and knowing what supports they need; we can help to support self‑disclosure and help‑seeking, and we need to recognise that persistence and resilience. But when we look across the systemic things we can address as well, there was quite a significant number of those.

One of the things I'm not talking about today in this webinar, but I do want to acknowledge, is there was definitely a recognition of the need for high school transition support to improve. This wasn't the focus of my research because I know there is plenty of research in this space, but it was definitely highlighted by parents and staff in terms of the inconsistencies really in terms of that support. That's another area that really requires some additional exploration.

So, as a result of the areas that the students have identified and the areas that staff and family members had identified challenges in and facilitated things that worked, the strengths they experienced, I tried to pull together some recommendations. There are a couple of additional recommendations which are focused on that need for high school transition support, so I'm not going to talk about that today.

But as well as that need for preparation support, high school transition and preparation, there were 10 additional recommendations that I want to talk through briefly today. The most important thing I think that came out of this research ‑‑ and I think helped looking at the framework of systemic change and individual change ‑‑ is these recommendations only work if they're implemented together, or at least some of which in combination.

No one of these strategies will support students to successfully transition. We really need to take a holistic approach to how we support autistic students from a university‑wide perspective and from a student perspective and in between.

One of the things that I think is really important is, yes, supporting students to develop skills and help‑seeking and disclosure, and one of the things that I suggested in my thesis was around providing scaffolding for that process. If you can provide a script for students, an email script or a spoken script, that can prepare them for those discussions. If you meet with a student and you are developing an access plan, can you support them with how they then communicate, what that means, what they need from that, how that affects them? That sort of open disclosure, having that scaffolded can really make a difference in how students will approach that. Because otherwise, students are finding that a very vague concept to approach or to know when or how to do that. Supporting that in a more structured way could be very useful as well.

It is important to support students to do that help‑seeking. As an access and inclusion adviser, for example, I know I can't be there at every instance where students need support. So developing some of those skills is really important or supporting some structure around that is really important.

I also think it's really helpful to develop and promote resources that inform family members about the students' rights and responsibilities at university.

The family members I spoke to had very little knowledge or awareness of the Disability Discrimination Act, the Disability Standards for Education, so they didn't feel confident that they knew what the students' rights were. I think that's an area that could be supported to enable parents to provide support, because all of the students that I spoke to ‑‑ I think except one ‑‑ talked about having some support provided by family and how important that was.

I think there are really good examples on the ADCET website, the Parents and Carers Guide. There is a resource on the UniSA website where I used to work. We used to provide a guide for parent, carers and friends. Those sorts of resources that provide support to those people that are providing support to students can be really critical in informing them of the types of things that they can assist with as well.

I think implementing strategies that are responsive to the potentially disruptive transition experience of autistic students is really important. If we're recognising this is a pattern, if we see a lot of students ‑‑ and there are lots of students I spoke to who had withdrawn, taken six months off, come back after a year; various different iterations ‑‑ what was interestingly was that most of them returned to the same university. They obviously felt they had established a connection there.

For some students it was really good because they already had an access plan set up, usually as a result of whatever had caused them to take leave. They had kind of finally got to the point of connecting, but it was too late to set up anything proactively. It was let's take some leave, come back in six months and see how we go. That worked quite well for some students, particularly those who had connections they could re‑engage with when they came back.

I think recognising that is a pathway for a lot of autistic students and having something in place, so a contact person they can engage with, someone who perhaps contacts them before they are due to return, setting up those proactive mechanisms, if we can, would be amazing. I recognize there is a need within all of these to really champion the need for resources and time and support in doing those.

In terms of promoting mechanisms to enable students to engage an advocate, the students I spoke to, most of them actually really appreciated and valued support their parents were providing for them in terms of advocacy. But the parents also recognised there was a need to balance that. So if we can put in place formal mechanisms to support the inclusion of an advocate ‑‑ and one of the people I spoke to talked about an NDIS worker as their advocate ‑‑ setting up a formal plan for that and actually approaching it, I think in my experience we have often been hesitant to do that because of privacy reasons, which is fine, but if we set up a formal arrangement, then it is the students' decision and it's up to their discretion whether they approve that or not.

The formal mechanism of doing that, if we can set up a discrimination or formal approval, we also have an opportunity there to talk to students about how will we implement this and how will we move beyond implementing this? What can we work on so this isn't something you need through your whole degree? That can be an actual formal discussion. It means you have got place and space for that discussion to happen. So you're not doing it without the student's knowledge, it is part of the discussion as to how you'll develop those help‑seeking skills and that autonomy in the process of doing this.

It's also really important to promote strategies that allow students to engage before they commence their university studies. I know at UniSA where I was working previously, we would be open to discussions with prospective students. That can be a real challenge if you don't have the resourcing to manage it. I think it's really important to recognise that could be a critical factor in supporting students to transition, and how do we champion the need for that to be considered within those resourcing requirements as well? And I guess that links in to being available if students do take leave and someone that that student can contact when they return.

It's really important that we, obviously, have adequately funded Equity and Disability Services. And I feel a little bit silly saying that, but we all know that's something we need to be championing, because we need to recognise that transition support for autistic students doesn't end at the end of first year, and trying to limit access to supports or limit the engagement with students will just create more work and challenges in the long run. We really want them to have that successful transition, even if it is 18 months, not 12 months. We want to make sure that support is in place. It's really important to emphasise that, and I acknowledge that as well.

It's really important to consider ways in which we can support students to engage in orientation. Orientation programs are the initial introduction to university for autistic students. I think these are really key for supporting successful ongoing experiences.

From the students that I spoke to, I think the key things are recognising the need for structure around orientation. And in terms of structure, making sure the things that autistic students engage in are meaningful, purposeful, that we support them with developing connections, but recognise the sensory and social challenges that come with that.

So allowing students the opportunity to participate in them, giving them an inclusive way to do that. One way would be creating really clear schedules of orientation activities. Another is having a sensory map of orientation activities. There is a really good example here in South Australia, the South Australian Museum has a sensory map of their exhibits. So you know the time of day that it can get really busy, you know which exhibits are likely to get really busy. It helps people navigate the space and know the expectations.

When it comes to sensory processing for autistic students, some of the ways in which we can address that is providing a bit more predictability around what that will be like. Then students can choose how they want to interact with that as well.

Promoting autism spaces on campus, having space that's available for students to withdraw to or spend time in with other autistic students if they wish to is a really important way of making that orientation more accessible, having that opportunity and potentially having an orientation buddy.

One thing I would say, and students reflected this to me and I probably didn't understand what they were suggesting until recently, but we need to be a little bit proactive with what we do provide in terms of supports and not expect ‑‑ for example, at orientation ‑‑ that students will know what assistance they need, it's a really challenging thing for students to do if they don't know what orientation will look like. So potentially having a list of suggested strategies. I know Darlene is trying to move me along.

DARLENE: We have about 8 minutes to go. We have got a few questions but I don't want to rush you. So let's see how we go.

ALISON: No, that's good. That was probably my key thing. We really need to make orientation more accessible but also make sure we present suggestions. Myself, as an autistic person, I went to graduation last week, and I didn't ask for accommodations, which in hindsight was really silly. But I didn't ask for accommodations because I didn't know exactly what graduation was going to look like on the day and I didn't know what I would need on the day. When I got there, I thought there are some people here who are working at graduations who do know what this looks like and it could have been useful to have a discussion with them.

So thinking about how we can proactively support students to identify those support needs rather than expecting them to come to us with them.

Obviously, the need for an inclusive university campus that celebrates and recognises neurodiversity as part of the campus culture. I'm not even going to go into Universal Design for Learning because there are people, Elizabeth, that present on this quite a bit and can give you the goss on UDL. But it is really important that we make those attempts at making our learning and teaching accessible for all students.

And then I guess the other part of this is looking at that Lizzio's model. I have an example here. Looking at all of the different ways we can make the university transition experience more accommodating, and how we can support students ‑‑ this is probably one of the key things ‑‑ how we can support students to develop that strong sense of self and identity in doing so, and how that helps to support them throughout their studies as well.

I'm going to hand over to Darlene. You might have some questions for me.

DARLENE: We do. Did you want to put up your slide with your contact details.

ALISON: I will.

DARLENE: Alison @alisonnuske.com.au. Alison has a website too, which is alisonnuske.com.au. The links are in the chat as well. Thank you, Kylie. Fabulous. That's great. All I'm thinking about now is updating all our content on ADCET to reflect your PhD and your findings. The recommendations were fabulous, so really concrete things all of us can do to make sure autistic students are more successful at study.

There are probably more questions than we're going to get through, so if you want to upvote, that might help because that will help me prioritise what questions I ask.

ALISON: You can send me questions in an email later, too.

DARLENE: Great. We will capture all that and add that to the website.

One of your recommendations was students who identified as attempting and then going back to the same uni to ask why, for example, knowing something about the uni is better than trying somewhere else or they would know some of the limitations and consider how to work around it rather than having to contact, as not all contacts are positive, or just more detail about the issue ‑‑ sorry, I didn't read that as a question.

Was there anything else taken into consideration why students did return to the same university?

ALISON: I didn't ask. I think most of the students, it was kind of just an assumed that that's what they would do, in a way. It might be that idea of better the devil you know; it's easier to return to somewhere where you have already had some support established.

Most students that talked about withdrawing had withdrawn after some sort of crisis or similar, where they had finally gotten connected to support and then taken a break. I think they returned because they felt they had the support to come back to.

DARLENE: That's good. Did representation of autistic or neurodiverse individuals within university staff come up as a positive factor affecting a sense of belonging for students?

ALISON: It is a really important one. One of the key things that Lizzio's framework now talks about is that sense of identity and how that's built through recognising role models. If you look at the literature around autistic role models and autistic academics, you will see there is a huge amount of ableism and concern around disclosure. I think that's something we really need to work on as a university, making a safe space not just for students but for academic staff and professional staff to disclose, so that autistic students do have representation within the staff cohort as well.

DARLENE: Definitely. How big was the influence of high school experiences have on the success of the transition? For example, those that have been significantly bullied about disclosing their diagnosis or diagnoses? Did any of that come up in the research?

ALISON: No. It didn't. I think what did come up, or what students touched on in that sense was negative social experiences. The students that talked about social experiences all talked about wanting a fresh start. That "high school sucked and I didn't have a lot of friends and this was my opportunity to make friends".

What was really disappointing is all of the students who said they really wanted to make friends and wanted a fresh start, did not have any success, or not really significant success in making those connections. So that was definitely a strong theme, is wanting social connection, not necessarily being able to find the right social connection.

DARLENE: Another question: For those students who did not have an access plan before taking a break from university, or had an access plan for anther need such as mental health, how important is it to develop an access plan before returning to university? Are university departments even open to making access plans for students who are still on a break. Probably a wide question.

ALISON: In my experience, I would have. I would highly recommend doing it early because you really need to be having that discussion before things start rolling, if you can.

Yes, a couple of the students I spoke to did have access plans for different disabilities, and then added the autism to their access plan. Most of them didn't disclose their autism specifically on their access plan, but they did find having some specific needs in there that were related to autism was important. So even students who already had access plans in place, it didn't necessarily address what they needed that was autism specific until they revised it.

DARLENE: Excellent. Looking at the time, we are running out. There are a couple of other questions we will put to Alison and put that on the website. One was in relation to TAFE and the transition, whether it is similar. There would be learnings or recommendations we could embed or put to a TAFE transition as well.

ALISON: Definitely.

DARLENE: The great thing is Victoria are actually putting on transition officers at the moment, as we speak, with all their TAFE, so it will be interesting to see. And we will certainly watch that space and provide this webinar for them to hopefully upskill them in their role.

So thank you, Alison. Look, it's absolutely brilliant. It's fabulous. Your recommendations are so practical and so doable for anybody who wants to look at successful transition for students. So thank you so much for that. And thank you for giving your time so freely to us, right through your PhD, and really commend you on the great work that you've done. It's absolutely brilliant.

Yeah, I think it's going to be a significant game‑changer. We will keep promoting it and, as I said, we're looking at updating our content to reflect your recommendations.

ALISON: Sounds good.

DARLENE: Thank you, everybody. We've had some great comments in the chat, too. Congratulations. Thank you for your leadership in this, it's fabulous. We will send the link out in an email. We will also send out a short survey. We encourage you to fill that in.

We have a couple of events coming up. We have the Disability Officer: A Linchpin on the UD Campus, and the links are going into the chat as I speak. The magical world of that. We also have a UDL symposium coming up on the 12th of June which will be online and in‑person in Melbourne. We're calling for abstracts, so please get your abstracts into us.

The other exciting thing is we're having our awards again this year, Accessibility in Action Awards. Please nominate a person or a team. It will be really exciting to get some great nominations. We already are having great nominations come in.

Thank you, Alison. Thank you, everybody. Thank you, team. Thank you, Jason. And thank you, everybody, for joining us. Have a great day. Bye.

ALISON: Thanks, Darlene. Bye.