Autistic Widening Participation Medical Students within the Application and Transitioning (to Medical School) Processes

A study exploring the experiences of autistic individuals from widening participation backgrounds when applying to, and when starting, the graduate-entry medicine degree at the University of Warwick.

Abstract:

Whilst widening participation into medical school is a well-researched topic, there is little research into the experiences of neurodiverse medical students, and there is no published research combining the two. This study investigated both, with the research question of: What are the experiences of autistic individuals from widening-participation backgrounds when getting into the University of Warwick Medical School? Eleven participants completed an anonymous online survey which included both closed and open questions. The survey platform Qualtrics was used to analyse the quantitative data, and the qualitative data was analysed by taking heed of Braun & Clark's (2006) thematic analysis methodology criteria.

One of the main findings within this study was the difficulty in researching finances for medical school. Another finding was that most prospective students lack support when applying and transitioning to study medicine, although between one and three students cited support from medical professionals during different parts of the application process. Lastly, two thirds of participants reported feeling 'overwhelmed' as well as 'excited' on their first day of medical school.

This study can be deemed a pilot study given the small sample size and time constraints. This study only included individuals who were successful in gaining entry to the degree, and it was also limited to graduate-entry students at one university. Recommendations from this study include: medical schools should create a widening participation and disability group which reaches out to, and supports, prospective applicants and successful offer holders, and, medical schools should review their online content in relation to their medical degrees, and ensure that the content is comprehensive, clear, and easy to navigate.

Introduction:

Research and guidance have found that medical students and doctors from a variety of backgrounds and/or with a variety of characteristics are in a better position to serve a diverse population (MSC, 2021. GMC, 2019). It is therefore important that medical schools enable and support a diverse range of students to apply to, enrol onto, and complete, medical school.

Overall, the available research was found to focus on widening participation in medical schools, regardless of other individual characteristics. There was research based in various countries across the world (Suzuki *et al.,* 2014, Gore *et al.,* 2017), suggesting that the lack of widening participation within medical education and workforce is not limited to the United Kingdom (UK). Research from the UK looked into similar topics to the current study, including the journeys of widening participation individuals into and through medical school (Basset *et al.*, 2018), for which results suggested that the support received was a mixed experience. In another study by McHarg *et al.* (2007), support for the application to medical school process was explored alongside the social and environmental influences on an individual's decision on whether or not to apply. Interestingly, the study also included mature students and mentions that some students decided against applying immediately after school as a result of their school's views on their academic ability and/or widening participation status.

Remarkably, there was little research found in relation to autistic medical students. Only one letter correspondence was found through the initial search, titled *"Challenging the exclusion of autistic medicals students"* (Shaw *et al.,* 2022) which shed autism in a positive light, and suggests that more needs to be done to tackle the stigma surrounding being autistic and a medical student and/or qualified doctor. From this correspondence, another article by two of the same authors explored the experiences of autistic medical students and found that there was a lack of understanding of autism shown by both the medical schools and the student's peers (Shaw *et al,* 2023). Furthermore, this paper states that there were no other studies prior to this, which explored the experiences of autistic medical students.   Yet the paper also states that *"Autism is increasingly recognised to be common among healthcare professionals"* (Shaw *et al,* 2023: 972)*.*

A review of publications from various organisations related to the medical profession and medical schools was undertaken. Within the *"Active Inclusion"* publication by the Medical Schools Council (MSC, 2021), it is acknowledged that students with protected characteristics are still facing challenges within medical academia. The publication goes on to state that there has been research conducted which shows *"that students trained in an inclusive environment become better doctors that are more able to serve a diverse set of patients"* (MSC, 2021:9). Such training would be beneficial in addressing various inequalities within the NHS (MSC, 2021). The "*Welcomed and valued"* publication by the General Medical Council (GMC, 2019) also states that diversity in the medical workforce better serves a diverse population. The document also states that reasonable adjustments must be made for people with disabilities, in order to remove the barriers that they face.

The MSC's (2021) publication provides recommendations for challenging exclusions such as increasing accountability, looking at recruitment and selection, and addressing exclusions within the medical school itself, amongst other topics. The MSC (2021:21) acknowledge that the guidance is *"high-level"* and they state they are undertaking work to provide more in-depth guidance. However, a survey completed by the British Medical Association (BMA, 2020) found that a disability champion or support network was found to be beneficial. Reassuringly, the survey

also found that despite these challenges, disabled doctors and medical students were able to thrive in all areas of medicine.

There are various definitions of autism, The National Autistic Society[1] (2024: paragraph 1) provide the following: *"Autism is a lifelong developmental disability which affects how people communicate and interact with the world. More than one in 100 people are on the autism spectrum and there are around 700,000 autistic adults and children in the UK."* This is a broad definition which not only allows for the inference that autism can present in various ways in different people, but it also suggests that autism is fairly prevalent.

"In the past, it was assumed that autistic people were overwhelmingly men and boys, and only very rarely women and girls. This is wrong. There are many women, girls and non-binary people on the autism spectrum.

Although we now know much more about the experiences of autistic women and girls, society's understanding of autism has been limited by outdated stereotypes and incorrect assumptions. Although autism research and professional practice are slowly catching up to the realities of life for autistic women and girls, many barriers to diagnosis and support remain." (National Autistic Society[2], 2024: paragraphs 2 and 3)

As mentioned, females often receive an autism assessment or diagnoses later in life compared to their male counterparts. Hence why within this study, the option to identify as self-diagnosed and working diagnosis were included. It is well documented that those of the female or non-binary sexes are diagnosed as autistic at a later stage in life in comparison to the male sex (Lai *et al.,* 2023). The paper by Lai *et al.* (2023:899) explains that such a delay can lead to multiple negative outcomes, including, but not limited to: *"persistent feelings of isolation in institutional environments, poorer educational outcomes, delayed access to appropriate support".*

Currently in the UK, post-graduate degrees are generally not fully, if at all, funded by Student Finance England (SFE) (Crown Copyright, undated). However, in the case of Graduate-entry medicine, SFE partially fund the first year's tuition fees, and provide a full maintenance loan, to those who are eligible for full funding i.e. independent students (SFS, UoW, 2024). From second year onwards, SFE partially fund tuition fees and provide a significantly reduced maintenance loan (SFS, UoW, 2024). The remainder of tuition fees is covered by the NHS bursary, who also provide a small amount of finance for maintenance (SFS, UoW, 2024).

This study was both completed through, and funded by, the University of Warwick's Social Mobility Student Research Hub (SMSRH). It should be noted that this study was time limited, as per the SMSRH's project timeline.

Aims:

In this study, the research question was: What are the experiences of autistic individuals from widening-participation backgrounds when getting into the University of Warwick Medical School? From this question, three sub-questions were developed:

- What support is available to autistic individuals from widening-participation backgrounds from applying to starting to study medicine?
- What are the barriers, challenges and/or major concerns of these students from applying to starting to study medicine?
- What are the recommendations for universities to improve the experiences of these individuals?

Within this study, three different autism diagnosis options were included: formally diagnosed, working diagnosis (a referral for autism assessment had been accepted by an assessment service), and self-diagnosed. These three categories were included to acknowledge that 1) there is a lengthy wait time for autism assessments at present, and 2) autism is often not diagnosed until later in life for many individuals, particularly females.

The aim of this study was to collect experiences from the participants in order to understand how the recruitment, selection and transitioning process is for prospective medical students within this population. From this, ideas for improvement could be constructed and recommendations made. Additionally, this study aimed to address a significant gap within current literature.

For this literature review, two formal database searches were conducted via 'PubMed', as shown in Table 1 below.

Search	Terms	Articles Used
1	(Autism) OR (Autistic) OR (Autistic Spectrum) OR (Autistic Spectrum Disorder) OR (Neurodiversity) OR (Neurodiverse) AND (Medicine Degree) OR (Medical School) OR (University) OR (Medicine) AND (Application) OR (Transition) AND (Widening participation)	7
2	(Autism) OR (Autistic Spectrum) OR (Autistic Spectrum Disorder) OR (Neurodiversity) OR (Neurodiverse)) AND (Medical School) OR (Medical Degree) OR (University)	1

Table 1: Search Terms

Similar informal searches were conducted in 'Scopus', 'Medline', and the 'Cochrane Library' using the terms: *Autism OR autistic OR "autistic spectrum" OR neurodivers* AND "Medical School*" OR "medical degree" OR "medical students" AND Application OR Admission OR entry OR "widening participation" OR "widening*

access". However, the same papers were found within Medline, but no relevant papers were found within the remaining databases.

Methodology:

The opportunity to conduct this research arose in February 2024 when the researcher applied to the University of Warwick's Social Mobility Student Research Hub's annual research project. Initially the research question was only going to include individuals of the female anatomical sex, however the question was altered in order to allow for comparison between sexes.

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- What are the recommendations for universities to improve the experiences of these individuals?

The first page of the online survey asked participants to confirm that they had read the participant information leaflet and consent form. This page also asked participants to identify their sex assigned at birth, their autism diagnosis type, and whether or not they identified as being from a widening participation background. All questions had the option to not disclose the information. Table 2 below shows the questions included within the main part of the survey and their response methods.

Question	Response type
Describe how you found researching into: • the types of medical degrees? • funding for medical degrees? • entry exams (UCAT, BMAT, GAMSAT)?	5-point Likert scale (one response per question): very difficult, difficult, neutral, easy, very easy.
Describe how you found: • studying for entry exams? • submitting your UCAS application?	5-point Likert scale (one response per question): very difficult, difficult, neutral, easy, very easy.
How were you supported: • with your application for the medicine degree? • through your journey while applying for the medicine degree?	Multiple choice response options (one response per question): School/academic institute, family/friends/partner, paid courses/help (e.g. Medify), other, no external support.

After submitting your application, describe how you found: • Preparing for interview(s)? • Enrolling onto the degree? • Transitioning to university (welcome week)?	5-point Likert scale (one response per question): very difficult, difficult, neutral, easy, very easy.
How were you supported: • in preparing for interview(s)? • With enrolling onto the course? • With transitioning to university?	Multiple choice response options (one response per question): School/academic institute, family/friends/partner, paid courses/help (e.g. Medify), other, no external support.
Please describe, in three words, how you felt on your first day of Medical School.	Open text box.
Please describe: • the main challenges and/or barriers you faced when applying to study medicine? • the support you received when applying? • your recommendations for the university to adequately support students in applying to study medicine? • the challenges and/or barriers you faced when transitioning to study medicine? • the support you received from the university when transitioning to study medicine? • your recommendations for the university to adequately support students in transitioning to study medicine?	Separate open textboxes for each question.

Table 2: Survey Questions

The survey was conducted via Qualtrics (an online survey platform with integrated data analysis software) and the invitation to complete the survey, including participant information and consent form, was advertised on the University of Warwick Medical School's 'all student announcements' page on Moodle (an online learning platform). The information was also posted within the medical school's newsletter. The online survey was open for responses for just over one month, from late May to end of June 2024. All responses were anonymous, and this information was communicated to the participants within the information leaflet. After closing the survey, qualitative responses were analysed by taking heed of Braun & Clark's (2006) thematic analysis methodology criteria. Themes were identified then

discussed and compared in relation to current research. The flow chart in figure 1 shows the timeline of this study.
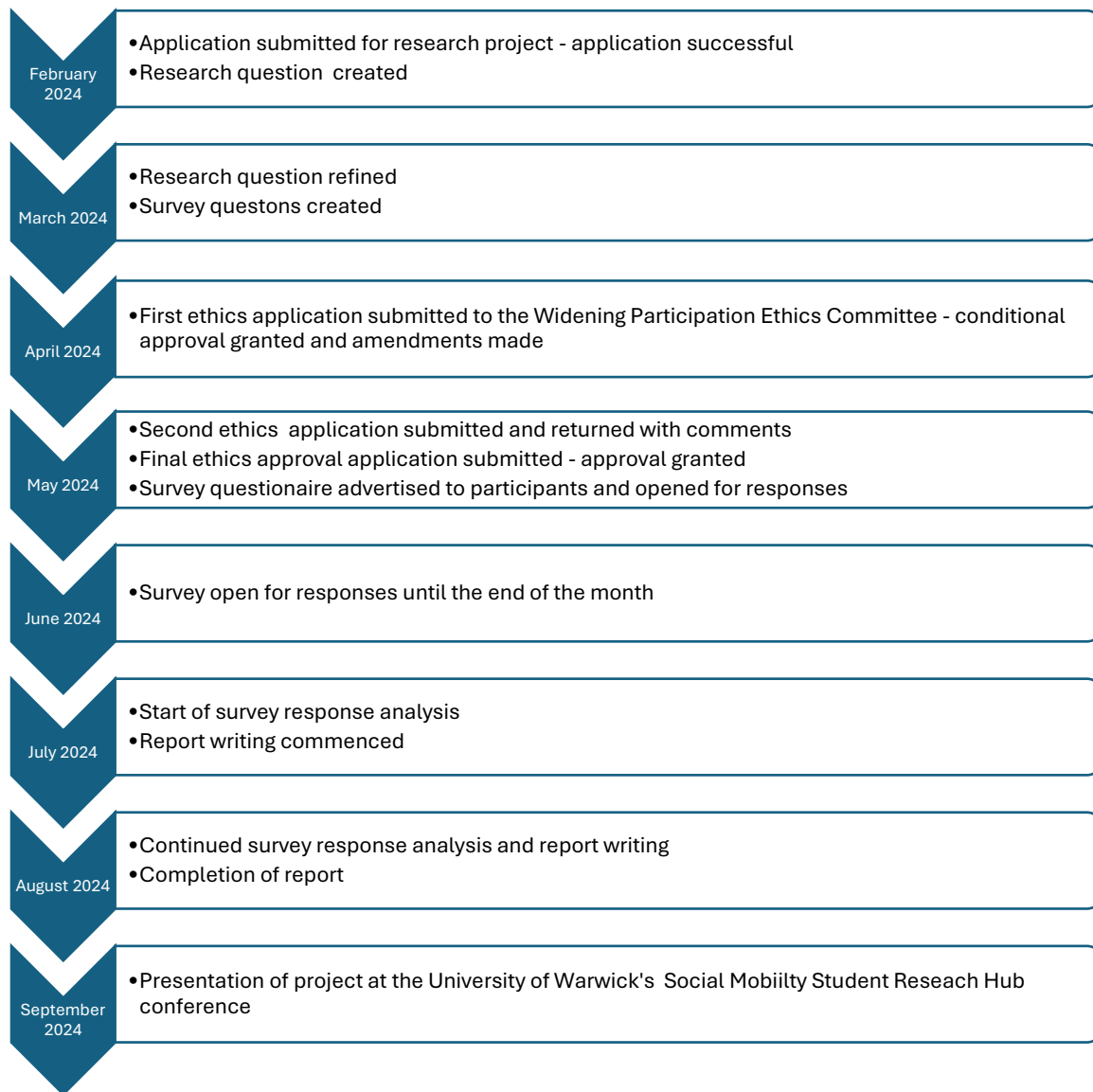
| February 2024 | •Application submitted for research project - application successful
•Research question created |
March 2024	•Research question refined •Survey questons created
April 2024	•First ethics application submitted to the Widening Participation Ethics Committee - conditional approval granted and amendments made
May 2024	•Second ethics application submitted and returned with comments •Final ethics approval application submitted - approval granted •Survey questionaire advertised to participants and opened for responses
June 2024	•Survey open for responses until the end of the month
July 2024	•Start of survey response analysis •Report writing commenced
August 2024	•Continued survey response analysis and report writing •Completion of report
September 2024	•Presentation of project at the University of Warwick's Social Mobiilty Student Reseach Hub conference

Figure 1: Research Timeline

Findings:

A total of 14 responses were received, however two were discarded as the participants had only completed the first page of questions which requested the participants consent, their autism diagnosis type, and whether or not they were from a widening participation background. A further response was discarded as the individual did not identify as a widening participation student, therefore not meeting

the criteria for this study. Ultimately, a total of 11 responses were included in the study. Of these participants, 10 were assigned the female anatomical sex at birth, and 1 was third gender/non-binary/other. In relation to diagnosis type: 4 had a formal diagnosis of autism, 3 had a working diagnosis, 2 were self-diagnosed, and 2 answered 'none of the above/do not wish to disclose'. The latter diagnosis type option has still been included within the following results.

The findings from the closed questions are shown below, with the results produced by Qualtrics in figures 2 to 9 on the left and the researcher's interpretation on the right.

Results	Summary of Findings

Please describe how you found researching into:
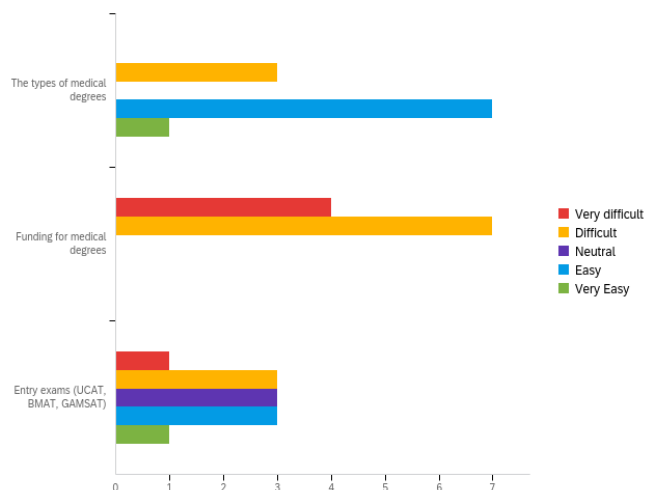
The majority of participants (n=8) found researching into the types of medical degrees either easy or very easy.

All of the participants found researching into funding for medical degrees to be of varying levels of difficulty with most (n=7) finding it difficult and the remaining (n=4) finding it very difficult.

There was a mixed picture in relation to researching into entry exams, with most participants sitting within the middle three grades of the Likert scale.

Figure 2: Answers to Researching Questions

Describe how you found:
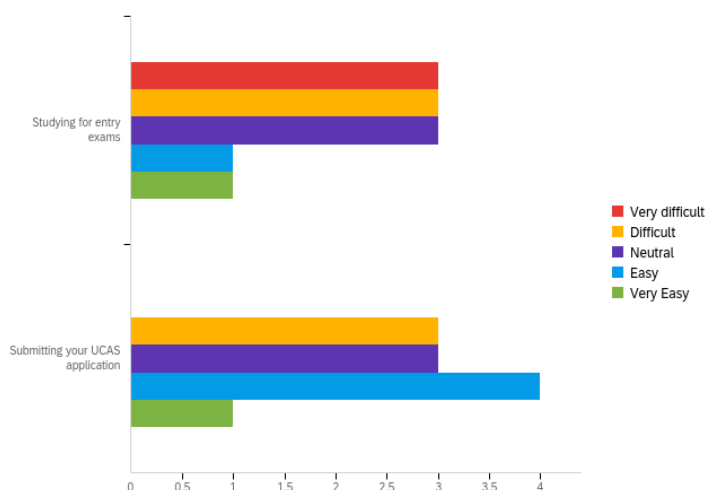
More participants (n=6) found studying for entry exams to be dificult or very difficult compared to those who found it neutral (n=3), easy (n=1), or very easy (n=1).

More participants (n=8) found submitting the UCAS application to be neutral or easier. A minority (n=3) found it to be difficult.

Figure 3: Answers to Entry Exams and Submitting Application

How were you supported with your application for the medicine degree?
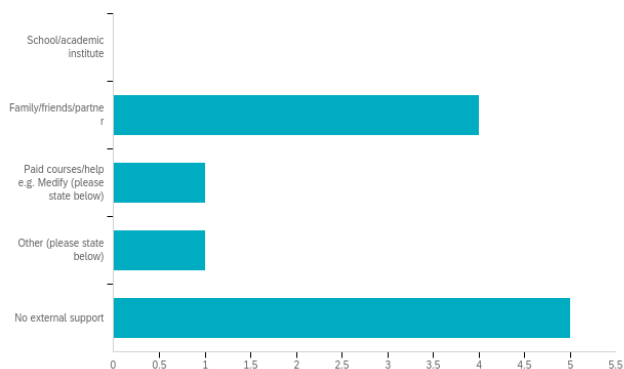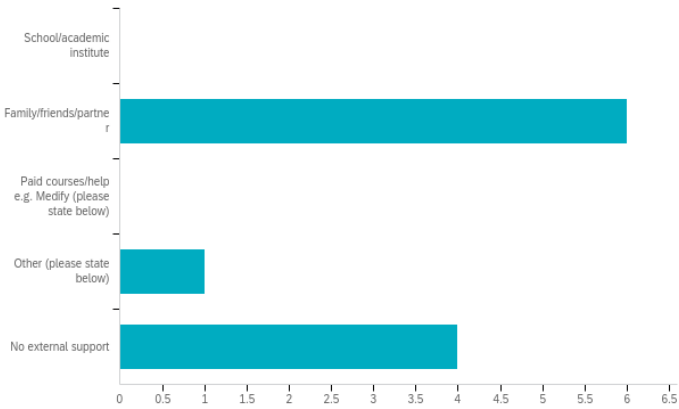

More participants (n=5) had no external support when completing their medicine degree application. With one less participant (n=4) having support from family/friends/partner. One participant used Medify - an online platform enabling individuals to practice for entry exams and interviews, among other functions. Another participant cited support from work colleagues within the medical and nursing fields.

Figure 4: Answers to Support when Applying

Paid courses/help: "Medify"

Other: "Nurses and doctors at work"

How were you supported through your journey while applying for the medicine degree?

More participants (n=6) received support from their family/friends/partner when applying to medicine. However just two less participants had no external support. One individual received support from medical professionals.

Figure 5: Answers to Support Through Medicine Journey

Other: *"Other doctors"*

After submitting your application, describe how you found:
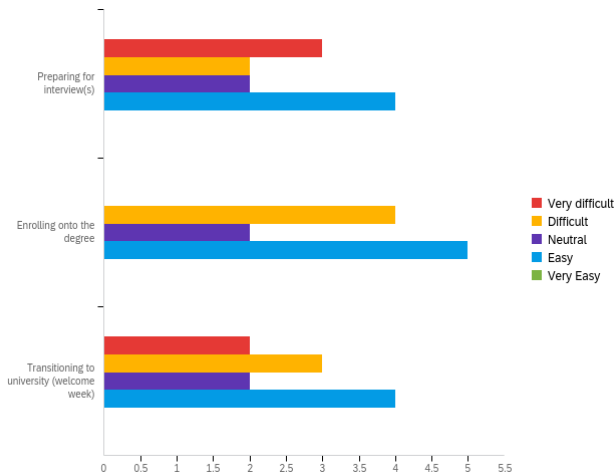
There was a closer split between participants experiences of preparing for interviews, with 6 finding it to be neutral or easy, and 5 finding it to be difficult or very difficult.

Enrolling onto the degree was a mixed experince, with 4 participants finding it difficult, 2 neutral, and 5 finding it easy.

Transitioning to university was also a mixed experienced, with both the difficult and very difficult ratings totalling 5, the easy rating totalling 4, and 2 neutral experiences.

Figure 6: Answers Regarding Experiences after Submitting Application

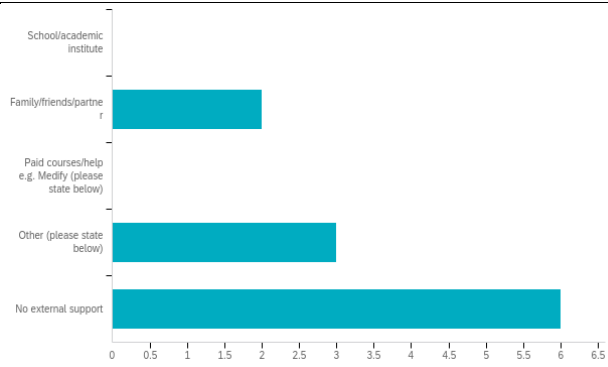| How were you supported in preparing for interview(s)? | Most participants (n=6) had no external support when preparing for interviews with 2 having family/friend/partner support and 3 having 'other' support. The latter option involved medical professionals in all three cases. |

Figure 7: Answers Regarding Support for Interviews

Other: *"free session with doctor offering interview practice on instagram"*

"Nurses and doctors at work"

"retired consultant (singular 30min session)"

How were you supported with enrolling onto the course?
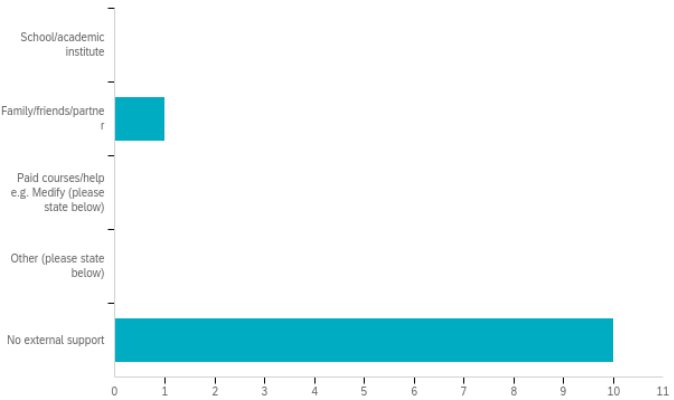
The majority of participants (n=10) had no external support when enrolling onto the degree with only one participant having family/friend/partner support.

Figure 8: Answers to Support when Enrolling onto the Degree

How were you supported with transitioning to university?

When transitioning onto the degree, more participants had no external support compared to those who were supported by their family/friends/partner.
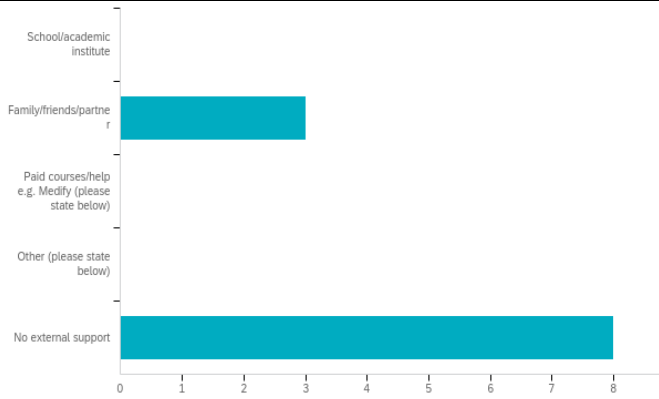
Figure 9: Answers to support when Transitioning onto the Degree

This word cloud in figure 2 depicts the responses to the question: *"Please describe, in three words, how you felt on your first day of Medical School."*

Figure 10: Word Cloud Depicting Words used to Describe Day 1 of Medical School

Some of the responses from the open questions are included in table 3 below.

Findings related to:	Qualitative Data
Challenges	*"Finances"* *"Couldn't apply for courses to do better as I didn't have the income for it"* *"lots of changes (e.g. moving house, meeting new people, uncertain timetable)"*

	"A completely different place, people and so many unknowns made it very difficult." *"…so I felt that was a challenge to overcome as I felt very out of place…."*
Support	*"minimal; used own research"* *"My partner was by far my biggest support…"*
Recommendations	*"have a WMS-specific group for autistic or neurodivergent individuals starting the university"* *"Offer support courses"* *"I would have really appreciated some kind of online forum or event where people who didn't know the process/came from a non-science or widening participation background to get information about the application process"*

Table 3: Selection of Quotes from Open Questions

Discussion:

Findings related to:	Quantitative data	Qualitative data	Literature
Challenges	All participants found researching into finances to be a level of difficult, with 64% identifying it as 'difficult' and the remaining 36% as 'very difficult'	*"Finances"* *"Couldn't apply for courses to do better as I didn't have the income for it"*	The study by Sartania *et al.* (2021) also found that medical students are concerned about finances for university.
	Responses to the questions involving researching and studying for entrance exams, preparing for interviews, and enrolling and transitioning onto the degree were mixed. Some of the questions had even splits between different levels of difficulty/ease.	When transitioning to the medical degree, all five participants who answered the question cited challenges which are closely relate to the diagnosis of autism. *"lots of changes (e.g. moving house, meeting new people, uncertain timetable)"* *"A completely different place, people and so many unknowns made it very difficult."* *"…so I felt that was a challenge to overcome as I felt very out of place…."*	This correlates with information from the National Autistic Society[3] (2024) states that individuals with autism can have different types and levels of support needs. It could also be inferred that there is a potential wellbeing issue which may be impacted by the participant's autism diagnosis type. Those who are self-diagnosed or have a working diagnosis might not be eligible for support. The paper by Lai *et al.* (2023:899) explains that a delay in autism diagnosis can lead to multiple negative outcomes, including, but not limited to: *"persistent feelings of isolation in institutional environments, poorer educational outcomes, delayed access to appropriate support".*

Table 4: Comparison and Contrast of Qualitative and Quantitative Data: Challenges

A few challenges, concerns, and barriers experienced by autistic individuals from widening participation backgrounds, applying to study and transitioning to study medicine, were identified within this study. Many of these are similar to that found in a study by Sartania *et al.* (2021). For example, both studies show that the prospective medical students have concerns about finances. The only unanimous difficulty within this study was researching into the funding for medical degrees as a post-graduate student. It is acknowledged that this information can now be found on the University of Warwick Medical School's website, however it is unclear how long it has been available for. Therefore, if not available in one place in previous years, this information would be complicated to otherwise gather.

As depicted by the word cloud used within the findings above, many of the individuals (67%) found the transitioning process to be 'overwhelming' and 44% stated they were nervous. Reasons for this included the various changes such as starting the new degree, being in a new environment, meeting new people and a change of routines. Going back into academia or a course that has a different pace to other courses was also mentioned. This correlates with the information from the National Autistic Society[1] (2024:*"Extreme anxiety"* tab) which states that many individuals with autism often experience anxiety, *"particularly in social situations or when facing change"*. However, conversely, 67% of participants also stated that they felt excited.

Findings related to:	Quantitative data	Qualitative data	Literature
Support	No external support or support from family and friends was received when applying for medicine for 82% of participants, throughout the journey for 92%, and when preparing for interviews for 73%.	*"minimal; used own research"* *"My partner was by far my biggest support…"*	The study by Sartania *et al.* (2021: Page 12 of 15) mentioned that 'privileged knowledge' (i.e. knowing doctors and/or the process for applying to medicine) was mostly absent among their participants. The study by Sartania *et al.* (2021) had similar findings in relation to the types of support received, which their paper relates to social capital.
	91% of participants had no external support when enrolling onto the degree and 72% of participants had no support when transitioning onto the degree.	As shown within the word cloud, the words 'overwhelm', 'anxious', and 'nervous' were the key words used to describe how participants felt on their first day of medical school.	This correlates with the information from the National Autistic Society[1] (2024:*"Extreme anxiety"* tab) which states that many individuals with autism often experience anxiety, *"particularly in social situations or when facing change"*. It also interrelates with the information from the National Autistic Society[3] (2024), which states that individuals with autism can have different types and levels of support needs.

Table 5: Comparison and Contrast of Qualitative and Quantitative Data: Support

Another difficulty identified within the application process was understanding and navigating the process. Two responses mentioned not knowing any doctors or family members who had been through the process. Again, the study by Sartania *et al.* (2021: Page 12 of 15) also mentioned that this 'privileged knowledge' was mostly absent among their participants. Alongside this, many participants in this study either had no external support when applying, or they relied on their family/friends. The study by Sartania *et al.* (2021) had similar findings in relation to the type of support received, which they relate to social capital. Although, in this study there was one participant who reported knowing doctors at work who were able to assist with the application process, and three participants obtained support from doctors when preparing for interviews.

When enrolling onto the degree, 91% of participants had no support and 72% of participants had no support when transitioning onto the degree. Two participants state that there was 'a lot' of support from the university but it is unclear what this involved. Another student cites the 'transition to university' group provided by the main university, but as stated in their response, this is mainly aimed at new undergraduate students. Once again, the National Autistic Society[3] (2024) states that individuals with autism can have different types and levels of support needs. None of the participants appear to have utilised support from the Wellbeing Services within the university.

Findings related to:	Quantitative data	Qualitative data	Literature
Recommendations	N/A	*"have a WMS-specific group for autistic or neurodivergent individuals starting the university"* *"Offer support courses"* *"I would have really appreciated some kind of online forum or event where people who didn't know the process/came from a non-science or widening participation background to get information about the application process"*	The survey undertaken by the British Medical Association (BMA, 2020) found that a disability champion or support network was found to be beneficial.

Table 6: Comparison and Contrast of Qualitative and Quantitative Data: Recommendations

It should be acknowledged that there were various areas in which the participants had mixed experiences. For example, when researching and studying for medical admissions tests, participants' responses ranged from very difficult to very easy. Also, when preparing for interviews, enrolling onto the degree, and transitioning to medical school, participants' experiences ranged from very difficult to easy. Therefore, recommendations to support these individuals should be tailored to them, and any support services should have knowledge of all the potential areas of difficulty.

Participants identified various areas for improvement and suggested some solutions for these. With regards to applying to study medicine, three participants requested that the information is made clear and available in one place. One suggested interview preparation assistance and another suggested an event or online forum which allows applicants to ask questions. In relation to the process of transitioning to study at medical school, a support-group for neurodivergent individuals at WMS was mentioned, as were support courses. This suggestion correlates with the survey undertaken by the British Medical Association (BMA, 2020) which found that a disability champion or support network was found to be beneficial.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, there are difficulties and challenges for autistic individuals from widening participation backgrounds when applying to and transitioning to study medicine. Most challenges relate to both clarity and ease of finding the relevant information for the application process as well as funding the degree. Additionally, it is noted that the participants had differing levels and types of support. The majority of participants had no external support throughout the application process, nor did they have support when enrolling and transitioning onto the degree. This study, coupled with other research and guidance, suggests that establishing a neurodivergent/widening participation support network and communication channels would be beneficial for this population.

There are various limitations to this study. The study is limited to the sub-group of individuals who were successful in applying to medicine. Therefore, reaching out to those who have not yet been successful would also be beneficial. Additionally, this study only includes graduate-entry students at one university, and so research at other universities is warranted. The sample size from this study was small, with the number of responses to the qualitative questions being even smaller, as not all participants completed them. The primary researcher was a first/second year medical student on the same course at the time of this project, and so this relationship could potentially have impacted participant's views on completing the questionnaire. Lastly, due to time-constraints on the project, the researcher was

unable to analyse individual responses separately and compare individual journeys and/or the experiences between groups of participants with different autism diagnosis types. As a result, all 11 responses were analysed in their entirety. It should also be acknowledged that two of the respondents did not disclose their autism diagnosis type.

Despite these limitations, there are enough ideas to initiate a positive change. The main recommendation from this study is that medical schools consider founding a group, to include both staff and students, which supports applicants with disabilities and/or widening participation status who are applying to medicine. Additionally, the group should support successful applicants when transitioning onto the degree. As mentioned within the research, females and non-binary individuals often receive a diagnosis of autism later in life compared to males. Therefore, the newly founded university groups should be aware of this issue.   Another recommendation is that medical schools review their online content in relation to their medical degrees, and ensure that the content is comprehensive, clear, and easy to navigate.

Further research is essential in order to fully explore the needs of this group of individuals and also to guide further improvements required for the application and transitioning processes. Finally, this study contributes to research surrounding experiences of, and challenges faced by, autistic females and non-binary individuals.

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