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Autistic voices in geoscience: towards greater inclusion of neurological diversity

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Autism is a complex disability, characterised by conditions including communication difficulties, repetitive behaviour, and reduced social skills. Autistic individuals are each unique, and many autistic traits are conducive to success in academia. Despite this, autism frequently remains under-represented and un-disclosed, despite it having no impact on intelligence [1]. In fact, many autistic traits such as problem-solving skills and thinking 'outside the box' are conducive to success in academia [2,3].

The field of Geoscience is currently facing scrutiny for a lack of diversity, relating primarily to areas such as ethnicity and gender [4,5,6,7]. By contrast, the diversity of learning environments and approaches in geoscience is considerable; geoscience-based programmes in higher education (HE) are individually diverse in their themes, nomenclatures, activities, expectations, and teaching styles/environments (e.g. lectures, practical classes, seminars, laboratories, fieldwork), creating a dynamic learning journey from which autistic students may withdraw, thereby limiting their potential to progress and develop their career.

Rather than applying deficit models, this project seeks to understand ways in which autistic students may experience learning positively. This project, led by an autistic individual, aims to gather the lived experiences of autistic individuals within the context of geoscience-based HE, recognising that the disadvantages experienced by autistic individuals may be the product of an inaccessible HE system, rather than a result of autism itself. Through this dataset, we will identify key areas of success and difficulty, as perceived by autistic individuals, and contribute to the creation of guidance and resources to support geoscience educators and researchers in the consideration and mitigation of challenges for autistic individuals in geoscience and beyond.

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