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Designing Out Navigation Anxiety: A Neuroaffirming, Anticipatory Approach to Campus Wayfinding in Higher Education

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Abstract

Navigating an unfamiliar university campus places significant cognitive and emotional demands on students, and those demands fall hardest on people for whom the built environment is least legible. For autistic students in particular, difficulty with new situations and unexpected change is a consistently reported source of stress during the transition into higher education (Van Hees, et al. 2015), and campus spaces are frequently experienced as inaccessible or overwhelming (Madriaga, 2010; Mostafa, 2008; Nolan et al 2023). Rather than treating this anxiety as an individual deficit to be managed, this presentation begins from a neuroaffirming premise: that exclusion is produced by environmental and informational barriers, not by students themselves (Milton, 2012).

This presentation reports on a multimodal wayfinding intervention developed over the past 24 months, originating in the MA Autism programme at Sheffield Hallam University. Although first designed with autistic students in mind, the approach was deliberately anticipatory and universal from the outset to be usable by all students; it assumes that any person may feel anxious about any aspect of arriving at and orienting within the campus. Students and visitors receive a navigation pack combining annotated photographs, step-by-step written directions, and first-person walkthrough videos. These routes lead not only to teaching rooms from the railway station, car parks and help desks but also to the everyday destinations that quietly shape comfort and belonging: toilets, water fountains, cash machines, shops and security points alongside guidance on what to do if something goes wrong.

What began as an autism-specific adjustment has since proved valuable across the student lifecycle, from undergraduate and postgraduate taught students to doctoral researchers and to staff and visiting guests. This is the curb-cut effect in practice (Blackwell, 2017); provision designed for those at the sharpest edge of exclusion raises the baseline for everyone, a principle that sits at the heart of Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2018). Feedback from this wide and varied group reports increased confidence, reduced anxiety, and improved engagement and accessibility factors closely associated with retention and a sense of belonging in higher education (Thomas, 2012). The presentation argues that relatively simple, low-cost changes that prioritise clarity, predictability and information-rich design across physical and digital spaces offer a scalable, replicable model for building more equitable campuses, and it offers practical guidance for embedding such practice into everyday institutional provision.

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Keywords

wayfinding, campus navigation, belonging, Universal Design for Learning, neuroaffirming practice, student anxiety

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