

# Studying on the Spectrum- A Guide to Chichester University for Autistic Applicants, Written by Autistic Students.

Going to university is a nerve-wracking experience for everyone. There is the knowledge you are often parting ways with old friends, familiar towns, your home and even your family. Aside from this, there is the worry of making *new* friends, of wondering if you will find your people- the most well-meaning comment of, 'you meet your lifelong friends at uni' can often feel more pressuring than comforting. There is also the fear of academic standards- what if you can't do it? What if it's too hard? And I don't even want to mention the anxiety of knowing most will be in a significant amount of debt after completing your course. People with ASD will be dealing with all of these fears- and more. What if no one likes me? What if I'm lonely for the next three years? Especially if high school/college/employment haven't always been the best experiences for autistic folk- it can make university seem even more terrifying.

So, why go?

Because there is so much to see. So much to learn. And even for all the cynics, there are some amazing people who are going to be so excited to meet you. You'll get more freedom and more space to immerse yourself in the subjects you love, and you won't have to do it alone. Family, and friends- they're only a phone call/zoom call/text away, and Chichester has some amazing support services for anyone who struggles. More than that- come because you can. Because you are just as deserving and just as capable of a place here, you won't be the first autistic student, and you definitely won't be the last. That's what this guide is for; hopefully, it'll provide a few hints as you acclimate, shared knowledge from other autistic students who had to find quiet spaces through trial and error- but this guide is proof. Proof people with ASD can and do thrive at university, and there is no reason you can't join the elite group of those who study on the spectrum.

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## Induction Week

The first week of university is induction week, sometimes also known as ‘freshers’ and will often be one of your first experiences at the uni. Before this, however, there is an ASD-specific induction day; where all applicants who have disclosed an Autism diagnosis are invited to come to the uni.

Usually, there won’t be many other students on campus, so it won’t be especially busy- and I would heartily recommend you go. I was nervous, and I wasn’t sure I would benefit at all from a single day- but I was wrong. As a result of the ASD induction, I met other autistic students who were going to be on my course, I heard from second and third years about their experiences and got to meet those who ran many of the support services at Chichester. The tours were definitely helpful, and it felt nice to know the next time I’d be returning to the campus- it wouldn’t be new anymore. Mainly it was just a relief to see other students who might be in a similar situation, especially if you’ll be on the same course!

After the ASD-specific day, perhaps a few weeks after, there is fresher’s week. On the face of it, it can sound like a nightmare. A week centred on socialising, awkwardly trying to make friends- and a good first impression- new lecturers giving out endless ice-breaker activities and trying to get to grips with everything else. From moving into accommodation to figuring out the bus timetable, or if you’re a commuting student- trying to find the best train times/walking route. It’s a lot happening at once.

To start positively- a lot of students really enjoyed freshers, it gave them a chance to start learning their way around and start making some good connections. There aren’t lectures during this week, so there isn’t any academic pressure either. Instead, the focus is on settling in, getting familiar with lecturers and coursemates, and the fresher’s fair. This is an event which will run during this week where you will get the chance to meet different societies and even grab a lot of freebies. It runs the whole day, and in 2023 there was a quiet hour- an allocated slot for those who would be uncomfortable in the crowds but still wanted to get involved.

However, for me and for a few other ASD students, it wasn’t so enjoyable.

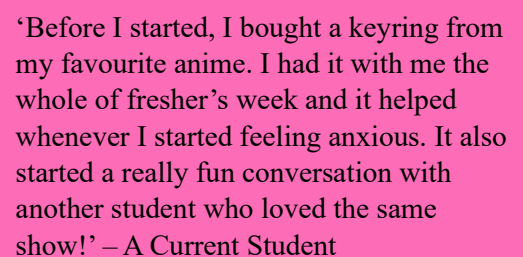
Personally, I found it incredibly stressful and overwhelming, there were so many new faces and new rooms and things to learn- but please know this is not representative of the uni experience. It does become a lot calmer when lectures begin, and everyone seems to relax a little. You can always step out of an activity or room if you're feeling overwhelmed and remember that the lecturers know everyone is going to be nervous. If at the end of the week, you haven't made many new friends- don't panic. You might find it a lot easier to find those connections when you can start conversations on the course/the reading etc. Similarly, I know a lot of autistic students who made friends with flatmates, and through the societies they joined. There is no rush to instantly find a best friend in the first week, especially when it's already stressful. Take it one day at a time and you will start feeling more at ease.

By the end of my first month, it felt like I'd been there for years. Things felt familiar, I knew the way to campus and to my classes, I knew where the Costas café was and the quiet spots to hide in for when you need a break. You will find your footing, but please don't get discouraged if you're ready to pack it in halfway through induction week- it gets better.

## List of Essentials

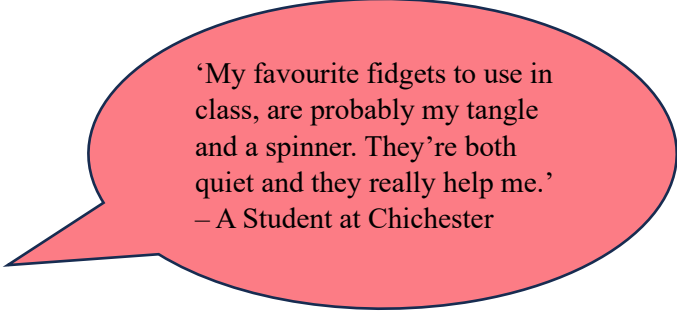
There are a million lists out there for what to bring if you're moving out, from bedsheets to saucepans, but what about for when you're just trying to get through the day? Here's a list from both myself and other autistic students on what to bring with you! I'm sure you've already found some good strategies which help you personally, but perhaps there will be something on this list which will help!

- Earplugs- popular brands include 'Vibes' or 'Loop' and they are amazing. Whether you're walking to class and all you can hear is disjointed, loud snippets from the conversation of nearby strangers, or if you're in the library and someone a few cubicles down is typing loud enough to be heard from space- earplugs are your friend. (Links can be found further on in the guide!)
- Headphones/Earbuds- The more musical cousin to earplugs, these are ideal if you find drowning out the world with music to be helpful. Again, speaking personally, my headphones are never far from me, whether I'm commuting or walking between lectures, there is a certain comfort in knowing I can put them on and get swept up in a song for a few minutes.
- Comforting Object- University is frightening. It's new and big and filled with people. Neurotypicals are often scared too, and I know many who carry something comforting around with them. This can be a little plushie you keep in your bag, a necklace or another piece of jewellery, comfortable socks, or a keyring from a beloved TV series/ film. Whatever brings you a sense of security, a rock of familiarity in a new river of 'Newness' is a good thing to keep close.



'Before I started, I bought a keyring from my favourite anime. I had it with me the whole of fresher's week and it helped whenever I started feeling anxious. It also started a really fun conversation with another student who loved the same show!' – A Current Student

- Fidget- There are at least a thousand different types, from spinners to cubes to slimes and even puzzle balls. If they help you focus, then it might be a fun project to find the right one for you. However, if you want to use it in class, maybe choose a quiet fidget so as not to disturb anyone!



‘My favourite fidgets to use in class, are probably my tangle and a spinner. They’re both quiet and they really help me.’  
– A Student at Chichester

- A Snack and A Drink- This one might either sound incredibly obvious or ridiculous- but bear with me. Especially in my first few weeks, I did not feel comfortable going into the canteen. I hated the noise and the smells, I had no idea how it worked and honestly, I was already too overwhelmed to want to attempt getting a handle on it. I am also the type to become completely immersed by an interest- only to eventually look up hours after starting and realise I haven’t eaten or drank anything in hours. It can really help to bring a water bottle with you (there are places to refill it all over campus), and also something small to nibble on during the day. Sometimes it can feel hard to eat or have much of an appetite if you’re anxious, but it's so important to give yourself some energy. Even just bringing a couple of cereal bars with you can be good. It’s nice to have a quiet moment, sit somewhere alone and have a snack and a drink- just take a minute to relax before moving on.

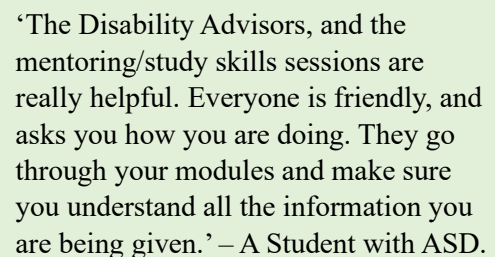
## Services Offered by the University

**Disability Advisors:** Many trained advisors will be able to offer advice and guidance to anyone diagnosed with a disability- whether it is physical or mental. Everything offered will be personalised and due to the smaller size of the student population, they can provide specific help, as well as act as signposts if they felt someone would benefit from accessing a another support service.

**Mentoring:** Mentors will be there to help you with the social aspect of university. They will also advocate for you. One mentor told me, ‘I will be your person’. If you are struggling with the social element- perhaps you’re struggling with a coursemate, or are caught in a misunderstanding with a lecturer, your mentor will help you navigate to the other side.

**Study skills:** Study Skills Advisors will help you with the work element of the university. Whether reading through and providing feedback on essays, to helping you organise time most effectively. Meetings with study skill advisors can be arranged face-to-face, or remotely to allow for greater comfort and flexibility.

**Wellbeing:** If you are struggling with mental health problems, the wellbeing team are in place to help and support you.



‘The Disability Advisors, and the mentoring/study skills sessions are really helpful. Everyone is friendly, and asks you how you are doing. They go through your modules and make sure you understand all the information you are being given.’ – A Student with ASD.

**University Nurses:** They will be able to help if you start feeling physically unwell – especially in dealing with the legendary ‘freshers flu’ (a common occurrence where a nasty cold circulates during the first month of university. Not lethal, but very unpleasant.)

The links to the different services will be further on in the guide so you can read through everything that is offered in your own time. The takeaway is this- whatever you are dealing with, there is always someone you can talk to if you are struggling. You are not alone.

## Map of Quiet Areas and Intense Areas- Bishop Otter Campus



Loud or Crowded Places:

**Red-**

- 1) The Student Union & Zee Bar – *A really fun place to socialise and the location of a lot of uni events, but as a result can be very busy and loud.*
- 2) Learning Resource Centre – *The Ground floor has a Costa café and can be a little loud. However, the top floor is for silent study, a really peaceful place to read or work.*
- 3) Otter’s Restaurant – *The main canteen, is where most go for their meals and like any cafeteria, can be extremely overwhelming. It helps to try and avoid the lunch rush if you can, even by 1 pm-2 pm it’s a lot more manageable.*
- 4) Corridor within University House- *There is a specific corridor which can get very packed, if you find your classroom is within this space, might be worth arriving a little early.*



## Quiet Places:

### Blue-

- A) Cloister's Lawn – *When the weather is nice, it really is a lovely place to get away from the crowds. There are benches, but not a whole lot of shelter, so probably best for dry conditions.*
- B) Secret Garden – *Similarly to the little getaway above, there is a little pathway which sprouts off from the Cloister's Lawn, follow it and you'll find a little garden. It's very peaceful, but best when it's not raining.*
- C) The Chapel – *Regardless of any religious beliefs, the chapel can be a very good place to get away. In the middle of campus, it's near to almost everything, so it's good if you really need some quiet. You won't be hassled or asked to join anything. It's just a place where hopefully you will start to feel more grounded.*



Left: A photo from a part of the gardens, including a magnificent redwood tree.

Below Right: A photo of a part of the library on campus.



## Map of Quiet Areas and Intense Areas- Bognor Campus



Loud or Crowded Places:

**Red-**

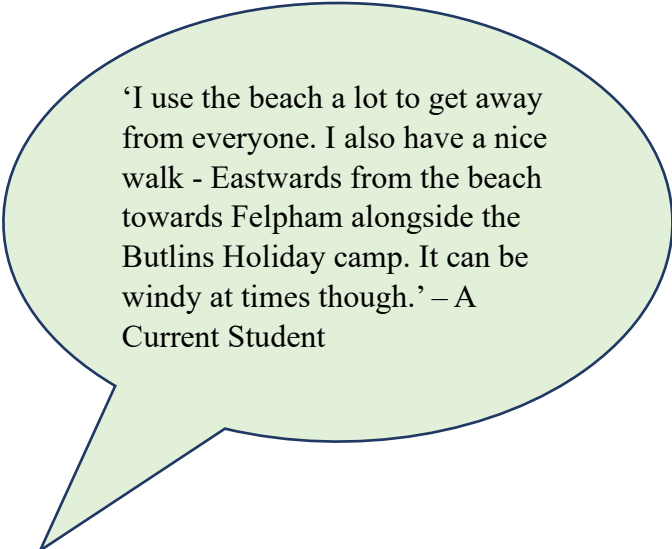
- 1) Canteen / Restaurant- *Many students have reported that the canteen can be busy. It only seems to be intense at specific times. The period between 12 pm and 2 pm can be crowded due to the lunch rush. Similarly, it can grow busy again around 5 pm when resident students have their meals, However, students report outside of those times, it is relatively peaceful.*

## Quiet Places:

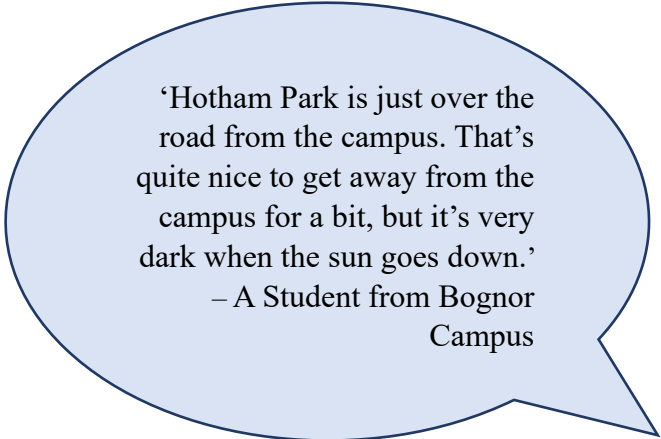
### Blue-

- A) Tech Park Building- *Often is noticeably quieter than the Costa Coffee found in the LRC, and the top floor is a favourite for being a peaceful place to get away.*
- B) Student's Union (The Hub) – *The upstairs area is often far quieter than the main bar, especially if there is an event running which means the bar will be busier than normal.*
- C) LRC- *The upper floors of the LRC (Learning Resource Centre) are good places if you need some quiet space, whether you're studying or just having a breather. There are also sofas in the LRC annex which are said to be extremely comfortable.*
- D) St Michael's House- *A fine art building which is a favourite for some as its rarely busy or crowded.*
- E) The Dome- *The garden in front of The Dome is very quiet, and is a beautiful place to sit, especially in the warmer months. If the weather isn't as kind, there are sofas on both the ground and the first floor which are nice places to get away from the rush.*

Off-Campus: Here is what a few students who attend the Bognor Campus had to say about the areas away from the university buildings-



'I use the beach a lot to get away from everyone. I also have a nice walk - Eastwards from the beach towards Felpham alongside the Butlins Holiday camp. It can be windy at times though.' – A Current Student



'Hotham Park is just over the road from the campus. That's quite nice to get away from the campus for a bit, but it's very dark when the sun goes down.'  
– A Student from Bognor Campus

## Disclosing Autism

Whether or not you feel comfortable in sharing your ASD diagnosis, is a personal choice and decision unique to everyone on the spectrum. There are a lot of things to consider, whether you're disclosing to a friend or whether you're disclosing a condition to the university.

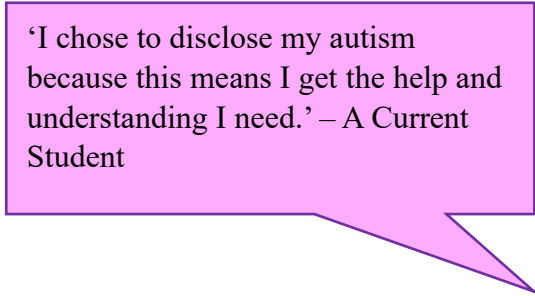
Regarding the issue of disclosing in your personal life, I know some people who are more than happy to be open about it - disclosing right away to anyone who may be a part of their life. This does have many advantages, for one, it allows the people in your life to better understand and hopefully support you. It might also feel a bit like relief- you've told them, so there is less pressure to mask- it could make social interaction feel a little easier if everyone knows. On the other hand, I've known many people with ASD who are not so comfortable being open from the beginning. This can be for many reasons, and none of them are bad. Speaking personally, I only ever disclose once I get the sense someone will be in my life for a while. Partly this is to (hopefully) avoid any of the possible pitfalls of disclosure such as ignorant comments or too many questions, and partly because I just don't feel comfortable sharing it straight away. However, this comes with its own problems, if people don't know I'm autistic, they will expect me to perform impossible feats such as understanding hints and the elusive skill of 'reading between the lines.' I've found a few relaxed, often humorous ways to express my 'quirkiness' without ever needing to disclose before I am ready.

- 'Oh, please be as blunt as possible- I am the absolute worst at hints! It'll save us both a lot of pain if you tell me what part of this project I need to complete.'
- 'I am actually not a huggy person.'
- 'If I ever go too far in teasing/joking, please tell me straight away. I am not always the best at seeing if I go too far.'
- 'Can we get there early/a bit later? I'd like to avoid the crowds.'
- 'I am just a picky eater!'
- 'Sorry, I am such a fidget, would you like me to move?'

The above are just a few, casual examples of things you can say which will hopefully help you out, without needing to be open about ASD. At this point, you've probably found your own ways to communicate what you need, but hopefully the examples above might come in

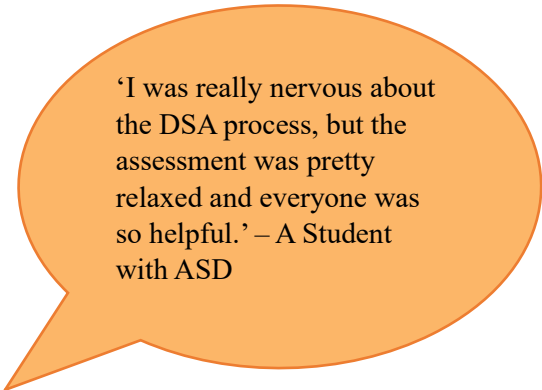
handy someday! I was surprised about how much I could say, and how often people would attribute it to being a little eccentric- if they thought about it at all! University is a big deal for everyone, and most of the time, they'll be thinking more about their next assignment, than wondering about their new friend's habits.

So how about disclosing to the university? Again, it is completely up to you. One of the benefits of being open about any condition you have is that it allows the university to put measures in place to help you. Lecturers can be made aware of any needs you might have, from being able to step out of the room for a moment, or if you (like me) ask a thousand questions to make sure you've understood the assignment.



'I chose to disclose my autism because this means I get the help and understanding I need.' – A Current Student

Disclosing won't mean you are treated differently within your lectures; it just means you have access to support if you need it.



'I was really nervous about the DSA process, but the assessment was pretty relaxed and everyone was so helpful.' – A Student with ASD

Another consideration when it comes to deciding whether to disclose formally is the opportunity to apply for Disabled Student Allowance (DSA). An independent service (so you don't have to inform the university if you'd rather not, but still access DSA) which you can access through Student Loan Company, if you are eligible, you could be given anything from new electronic equipment to mentoring and study skills sessions (paid for by DSA). The range of

services offered by Chichester University is covered in another section, and speaking from personal experience, it is always better to be in a position where you can turn down help - than to desperately need it.

## Self-Care

Attending university will definitely be an experience. There will be ups and downs (hopefully more ups!) and adjusting to a whole new routine, with so many changes is a *process*.

Speaking personally, it took a couple of months to really feel at ease with wandering around campus without checking a map every few steps! I am sure as you're reading this, you will already have plenty of self-care techniques you've developed- whether it's knowing what show to watch that always provides some comfort, or knowing there is little that can't be improved with a hot shower. However, in times when a lot feels like it's changing, self-care can fall further and further down the list of priorities. I am extremely guilty of doing this myself- which often results in faster burnout and a whole host of other issues. I have found it usually when I decide there is no time for self-care, which is when I normally need it the most.

It can help to have a system, just to make sure you are taking care of yourself. This could be a habit tracker, an app, setting reminders or even post-it notes around your space. Possible things could include-

- Taking care of your physical health- moisturiser, showers/baths, joining a local GP (if you're moving away from home), remembering to eat, drinking plenty of water – and if you are a fan of pampering sessions- schedule one every now and again!  
Assignments/exams/work is important at university, but to perform well, you **need** to be taking care of yourself.
- Keep an eye on screen time- I found I was socialising a lot more since I started uni, and while I've met some lovely friends, I also need a LOT of alone time. The 'do not disturb' settings on my phone really came in handy, as seeing notifications 24/7 was just too overwhelming. Make sure you are recharging, and don't feel pressured to be active every day.
- Enjoy whatever brings you comfort, and remember that while things can feel very strange and unfamiliar, the same things which help you now, can still help you at uni. Beloved films, TV shows, books- all of them are staying the same and might help if you're feeling a little adrift.

## Useful Apps and Links

University Focussed-

[Student Support Services](#)

[Map of Chichester Campus](#)

Essentials –

[Loop Earplugs](#)

[Vibes Earplugs](#)

I bought myself a set of Vibes earplugs and now I wouldn't be without them! I tend to use them when its crowded, or in the periods between lectures. Definitely would recommend! – A Current Student

Self-Care Apps –

- ❖ Finch – A really cute app that helps encourage feelings of positivity and self-care as you look after yourself, and a little virtual bird.
- ❖ Habit Tracker- A clean and simple daily planner and goal tracker.
- ❖ Notion- A notetaking/organisational tool which can be customised and curated for individual needs. Includes premade templates for habit trackers, to-do lists and goals.
- ❖ Headspace- An app which can help develop mindfulness, as well as techniques to help manage stress and anxiety. There are also features which can be used to promote healthier sleep.
- ❖ Tangerine – Another self-care app which includes a mood journal, as well as a habit tracker.

Staying organised really helps with my anxiety, so starting a digital planner was ideal as I could manage it from my phone. – A Current Student

## In Summary- You Can Do This!

By now you've read through the whole guide (or maybe you skipped to the end, no judgement) so you've glimpsed at the support Chichester can offer you. Maybe you've also started thinking about your own list of essentials, or whether you are going to disclose your autism.

I hope, regardless of all of that, the words of current students have helped. It can feel isolating to know you are different, and frustrating to face more challenges than others- but at least now you know other autistic students have found their feet. Going to university can feel so overwhelming, but what really helped me, was knowing things are only new once. The campus will become familiar, and you will find your own favourite quiet spots. Strangers become coursemates, and some will even become friends.

The beginning of anything is a leap of faith, but hopefully now you know that others have made that leap and have landed safely. Also, if you do find yourself struggling- there are so many services at Chichester which will be waiting. The student population is smaller compared to other universities, and this means you won't just be a name on a list- the nurses, mentors and study skill advisors will get to know YOU.

Whatever you decide, I hope this guide has helped in some way and, from everyone at Chichester, we are all wishing you the very best.