

Young people, ADHD and employment

2021



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Executive summary

This report explores young people's experiences with ADHD and their transition from education to employment.

The target audience for this document includes employers, education professionals and authorities, job centres, charities, politicians and trade unions.

We found that while in education, females struggled to get a diagnosis. This resulted in them not getting the support they needed later on in life. Once participants had a diagnosis, they felt a sense of validation for their work style and behaviour.

None of our participants reported receiving support directly tailored to ADHD and accessing employment. There was a strong desire for employers to do more to encourage people with ADHD to disclose their diagnosis – such as highlighting being ADHD-friendly and the adjustments they are willing to make.

Due to persistent negative stereotypes, many participants were reluctant to disclose their ADHD to employers.

"By learning to celebrate our unique thinking, we can feel empowered and motivated to change the narrative"

- Interview participant



When participants did disclose their ADHD to employers, there was a mixed result in terms of understanding and support offered. Many participants emphasised the need to educate employers on ADHD. Another suggestion was to provide a more flexible working environment.

There was a general frustration regarding stereotypes around ADHD, such as it being seen as a label for young and misbehaving boys.

Many stated they believed ADHD brought them strengths which should be highlighted and celebrated, such as the ability to hyperfocus.



"I believe ADHD is the foundation for so many of the traits that I love in myself: my creativity, how open-minded I am, my adaptability, my spontaneity, my passions and interests, my empathy"

- Interview participant

Participants reported struggles with the administrative work required in seeking employment and within the workplace.

Simple changes, such as shadowing other employees and providing a certain time and space to get tasks done, were found helpful.

Introduction

The transition from education to employment is a huge step. Many people aged 18 to 25 navigate finding a career path at this stage. This report explores that transition through the eyes of young people with ADHD - exploring the struggles they face and highlighting the need for additional support.



This research project involved interviews with seven individuals diagnosed or self-identifying with ADHD who are transitioning or have transitioned from education into employment.

Six out of seven participants identified as female and shared a common experience: their symptoms were 'too subtle' to be recognised as ADHD. This often led to getting a diagnosis later in life.



Most participants received their ADHD diagnosis after leaving secondary school. This made it difficult to find support for managing their ADHD while transitioning from education to employment.

This project was designed, carried out and co-produced by the Kickstart peer researchers at The Young Foundation and the Young Commissioners from the Youth Futures Foundation's Future Voices Group.



Background

The Young Foundation is a UKRI-accredited research organisation and charity that aims to understand, involve and innovate with communities. The Young Foundation's research is not-for-profit and it is carried out in innovative and interactive ways.

The research for this project was carried out by seven peer researchers who joined The Young Foundation through the government's Kickstart scheme. As part of this placement, the Young Foundation is training young people from around the UK to become fully competent social researchers who study topics that matter to their peers and other young people. Through lived experiences, peer research can dive deep into intersectional topics and give other young people's voices a platform to be heard.

The Youth Futures Foundation is an independent charity that aims to improve employment outcomes for young people from marginalised backgrounds.

The Future Voices Group is a network of young people who are using their voices and lived experiences of barriers in employment to shape and strengthen the Youth Futures Foundation's mission.

The Young Commissioners from the Future Voices Group identified the general topic of neurodiversity and employment as an area with much scope for further research.

Background

After reflective discussions and co-production sessions, the peer researchers conducted a literature review revealing further gaps in the research. The commissioners and peer researchers then narrowed down the topic and designed a study to investigate the barriers that young adults with ADHD face in employment. During the co-production sessions, research design, data analysis and output creation were discussed.

The main research question was:

What are the challenges experienced by young people with ADHD in accessing employment?



Evidence gaps

A comprehensive literature review was produced to establish the background and context for the project. The evidence gaps outlined on this page were used to inform the research objective and questions for this project. One of the main literature gaps was young people with ADHD and employment, which this study aims to address.

Intersectionality

There is little evidence discussing how factors such as gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic background and ethnicity impact individuals' experiences with ADHD and employment. No participatory studies in the UK seem to examine ADHD from an intersectional perspective. Similarly, comorbidities are not always addressed in research, meaning some observations in studies may be falsely attributed to ADHD.

Peer-led research

Most past studies rely on quantitative data. Clinical diagnostic criteria are used to establish participants and assess their performance in the workplace against numerical indicators. The peer researchers creating this report found very few qualitative and participatory studies conducted in the UK, where participants discuss their unique lived experiences.

What ADHD brings to the workplace

Research in the past has mainly focused on the negative consequences of ADHD in the context of education and employment. In recent studies a shift towards the positive aspects, such as resilience and creativity, can be observed.



Literature review

There is a vast amount of research on the experiences of individuals with ADHD in the workforce and its effect on accessing employment. This chapter reviews existing literature on this topic, along with workplace difficulties, productivity, relationships and different types of jobs.

What is ADHD?

Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterised by a deficit in attention regulation, management of behaviour and hyperactivity (Barkley, 2020). It affects approximately 5% of children and 2.5% of adults worldwide (Ronald et al., 2020). Literature suggests that ADHD is more commonly diagnosed in males (Rucklidge, 2010), which is attributed to downplaying and masking of ADHD symptoms in females (Oakes, 2019). The onset of symptoms typically occurs between the ages of 7 to 12, and it is easier to diagnose ADHD in children than it is in adults (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This could be due to environmental factors influencing the manifestation of ADHD behaviours. Adults are more likely to select a more suitable environment (Lasky, 2016) making it easier to mask their ADHD.

ADHD affects individuals in all areas of life, including education, employment and relationships. ADHD is often co-morbid with another learning difficulty such as autism or dyslexia (Unision, 2018; The ADHD Clinic, 2019).



Literature review

Workplace difficulties

A study by Fuermaier et al. (2021) found that individuals with ADHD reported work-related problems in not meeting their own standards or perceived potential. More than 80% of participants with ADHD had at least one work-related problem compared to the non-ADHD participants.



Productivity and relationships

Further examples of struggles in employment can be seen in Halbesleben et al (2014): people with ADHD are said to have worse employment opportunities and lower average incomes. In addition, they can suffer a productivity loss of 22 days a year (Teel, 2016). This loss of productivity is thought to be one of the main reasons why people with ADHD have trouble staying in long-term employment.



These reports conclude that improved awareness of the condition and funding for simple adaptations could go a long way in creating a workplace environment better suited to ADHD individuals' needs.

Literature review

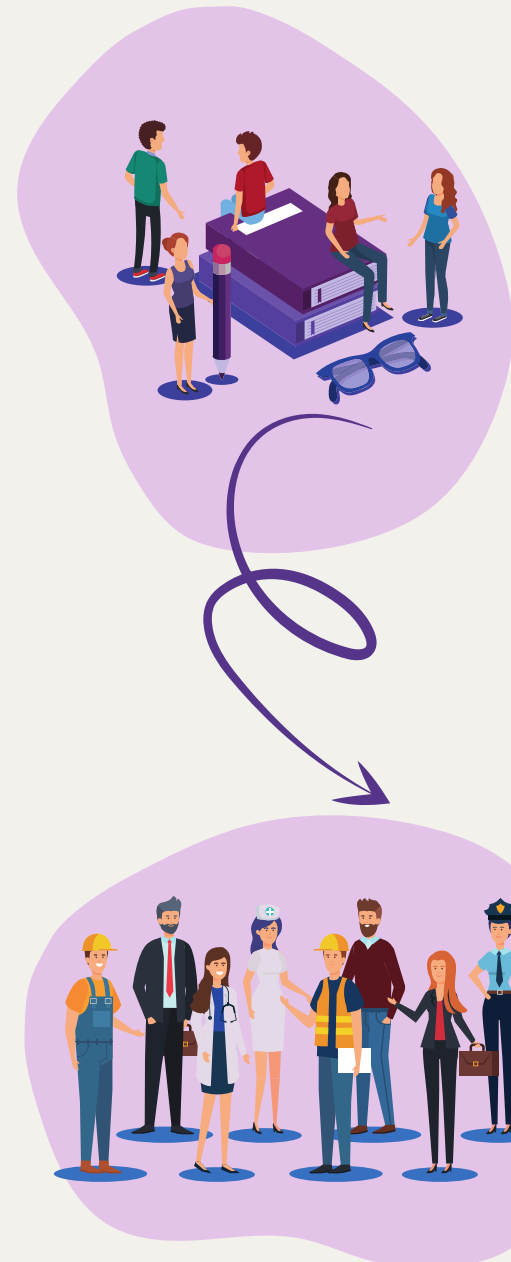
From education to employment

A study into the association of ADHD, developmental patterns and functioning of young people found that those with ADHD were at higher risk of falling into the NEET demographic (Not in Education, Employment or Training) and facing criminal convictions. By extension, this can further complicate the transition from education to employment (Agnew-Blais et al., 2018).

Many findings in the literature relate to the challenges in obtaining long-term employment after leaving education.

One report (O'Regan et al., 2017) examines disparities in care for those with ADHD and discusses how having regular, high-quality interventions as a child and young person can positively shape the individual's future. This, alongside Kuriyan et al (2013) shows the importance of support through education to employment.

Both reports highlight the difficulty in staying in employment for those with ADHD, and show that they are more likely to have lower-status jobs. Furthermore, people with ADHD have a higher rate of being laid off. This, coupled with struggles to build relationships in the workplace, can ultimately have a serious knock-on effect on their mental health.



Literature review

Types of jobs

Despite its negative connotation in the literature, ADHD can bring significant strengths to the workplace. With the right support and diagnosis, individuals with ADHD thrive in a number of professions (Vibert, 2018). However, an analysis into educational and vocational outcomes for young adults with ADHD proposed that compared to a control group, adults with ADHD are four times more likely to be in unskilled rather than clerical professions (Kuriyan et al., 2013).

There is some research into the association between ADHD and self-employment. A study examining samples from Sweden and the Netherlands suggests a positive relationship between self-employment and the general and hyperactivity symptoms of ADHD (Verheul et al., 2016). For attention-deficit symptoms, no link was found. Similarly, it is suggested that entrepreneurial passion and strong performance go hand in hand in individuals with ADHD (Hatak et al., 2020).



A study by Fuiermauer et al. (2021) shows that ADHD individuals are more likely to be suited for creative and active jobs, where they experience a higher rate of achievement.

Accommodation adjustments and special incentives in the workplace have proven to increase the productivity of ADHD individuals. Providing a variety of tasks enables them to remain engaged while experiencing constant stimulation (Adamou et al., 2013).



Methods

Recruitment and sampling

Social media platforms including Facebook peer support groups, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn and Reddit were used to recruit young adults aged 18 to 25, either self-identifying or diagnosed with ADHD. Extremely vulnerable individuals and those unable to give informed consent were excluded from the sample.



Data collection

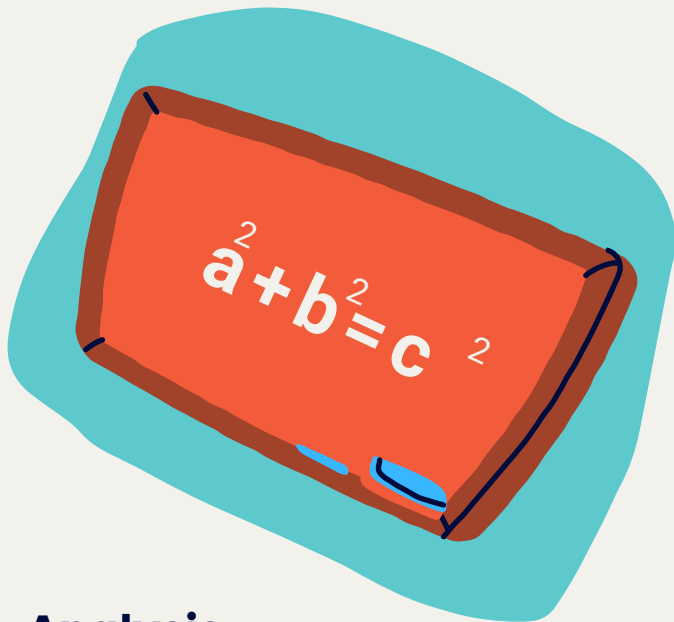
The interviews in this qualitative study covered four main themes: the transition from education to employment; support in accessing employment; intersectionality; and disclosure of diagnosis. For each theme, three questions were asked. Additional prompts were used accordingly. In total, seven interviews were conducted online and audio recorded.

Reasoning

Semi-structured interviews were used because they provide a deep understanding of a topic and allow further probing to capture participants' personal experiences.



Methods



Analysis

Thematic analysis methods involving qualitative coding were used to examine the interview data.

For each interview question, the most relevant parts of the transcript were selected, and observations were grouped into 'codes'. These were later shaped into wider themes.

For a limited sample size, manual analysis of transcripts is a valid method of processing data. The risk of human error and misinterpretation were mitigated by multiple people collaboratively going through the data.

Limitations

Despite receiving in-depth qualitative results, this study could have benefited from a larger sample size.

Possible limitations of interviews as a data collection method include the possibility of participants misinterpreting questions or trying to respond in a way that is socially or politically correct, rather than expressing their genuine thoughts.

The highly specific inclusion criteria for this study posed a further restraint; finding participants within a short turnaround period was more challenging than expected.



- 1** Diagnosis
- 2** Awareness
- 3** Job-hunting
- 4** Strengths and
difficulties
- 5** Workplace adjustments



Findings



1

Diagnosis

Our general findings support the evidence that women are often not diagnosed until later in life. Most of our sample were diagnosed either during or after university.

"I wasn't diagnosed until I was almost 23 ... I went through my entire uni experience thinking there was something wrong with me - when really I had something else I could have gotten support for a lot sooner"



"I feel like the fact I went through my entire education without a diagnosis shows the education system isn't actually able to identify ADHD in young people"



Education professionals not being able to pick up on ADHD symptoms earlier often delayed receiving a diagnosis, which meant people were unable to get the support that they needed.

Prior to being diagnosed, participants reported perceiving themselves negatively. They found that receiving a diagnosis validated their experiences and working styles, and helped them feel more confident in asking employers for support.

"Getting a diagnosis has been really validating - it also means that I feel more confident in asking for help"

2

Awareness

There were mentions of feeling responsible to improve awareness and understanding of ADHD.

"I feel like I have a responsibility to tell people ... it's not about a deficit of attention but more ... like so much attention"



"Many people with ADHD are successful and brilliant at what they do - but I think because there is such a stigma, lots of people don't really talk about it"

There was frustration over negative stereotypes and the advantages of the condition being overlooked, especially by employers.

Another recurring theme was support, and the fact that the currently available resources and services are not devised with ADHD in mind.

"Everything was so tailored towards people who don't have ADHD, right from when you have careers advisors or job fairs - it's not ADHD-friendly at all"



"I do worry what might happen when I move on from my current job"

Participants who had disclosed their ADHD to their current employers reported anxiety about future employment, and the possibility of misunderstanding and discrimination.

3

Job-hunting

Overall, participants were reluctant to disclose their ADHD in job interviews due to the stigma surrounding it.

"It would be better if they hired you and ... said: now is your chance to disclose any conditions - and the reason we're asking you this is so that we know what special arrangements would help you - and we want to help you"



Many struggled with the administrative work when applying for jobs, as it requires long periods of focus.

"I consciously say 'no' because I feel like it probably is looked at negatively, because it's seen as naughty attention-seeking, not being able to focus"



There was a strong desire for employers to do more to welcome employees with ADHD, and to make this known from the beginning.

"I think one of the main difficulties is ... creating a CV and applying for jobs."

4


Strengths and difficulties

Many employed participants stated that they believed their ADHD had been a strength in their job role by giving them, for example, the ability to hyperfocus.

"I didn't know how to do a budget. I didn't know how to pay my council tax. I could kind of cook, but I would forget to do it, or forget to buy the right ingredients"



Participants faced struggles when applying for jobs and during the interview process.

An illustration of a hand in a black suit sleeve holding a blue pen and writing on a white clipboard with a silver clip. The clipboard has several lines of text with red checkmarks. The hand is positioned in the upper right corner of the page, above a large blue speech bubble.

"I know that I am brilliant at my job because I know that I can hyperfocus and do something for so long"

Difficulties with administration and organisation in life outside the workplace can affect performance and experiences in employment.

"One struggle I had was creating a really good CV"

"I know I go blank when I am put on the spot ... The interview went so bad, but it wouldn't have had to ... if you were ... able to have a few extra things"

5

Workplace adjustments

Results were mixed in terms of support provided at work. One participant thought HR was ignoring their condition and did not make any suitable adjustments for them.

Other participants mentioned that their employers were more than willing to make reasonable adjustments for them.

"I think, when you're applying for jobs ... they have this equalities thing ... and sometimes I feel like ... they just shove it away in a cupboard or something and they don't really look at it and think, 'okay, well, what do we need to do?'"



"If there was an approach by employers and managers to be able to explicitly say that 'we can support you if you have a learning difficulty', it would take the pressure off me, or people like me, having to make the first step to ask for help"

Participants reported they were hesitant in making the first move to ask for help or adjustments. Some mentioned it would be easier if employers had outlined potential support earlier on, so they could be aware of what is available.

The consensus was that there is a need for 'ADHD-friendly' employers and specialised support.

Recommendations

Our research brought to light aspects of individuals' ADHD experiences in relation to employment that could be improved. These can be categorised into four areas: training, inclusivity, work-style, and the job application process. Each section includes a few suggestions ranked in the order of ease of implementation.

Training



Completing ADHD awareness courses.

Create an official document on ADHD support and how to access for diagnosis.



Regular workshops on how to support ADHD individuals.

Inclusivity

Display success stories of former/current neurodivergent employees.



Outline available adjustments/support in job advertisements.



'ADHD-friendly' badge displayed on websites and buildings to create a welcoming environment.

Recommendations

Work-style

Set a specific time limit to complete each assigned task.

Provide written instructions for every task.



Implement a buddy system to ensure tasks are completed.



Job application process

Provide more time for candidates to complete job applications.



Allow candidates to see application/interview questions prior to assessment days.

Tailored support for job applications and administrative work from job centres and HR departments.



Create a safe space where candidates can disclose their diagnosis.



Reflection and further research

Overall, the findings of this study were consistent with the literature.

Our research addressed a gap in the literature by studying a predominantly female sample and focussing on the experiences of young people transitioning from education to employment.

The study would have benefited from a larger sample size, which could have been achieved through alternative recruitment strategies such as in-person advertising instead of relying on social media.

Additionally, using other qualitative research methods alongside interviews may have encouraged more participants to come forward, and thus yielded further insights.

Having access to a random sample of young adults with ADHD would have provided data that is more reflective of the ADHD population as a whole. We recognise that participants of our study were volunteers, which means that naturally less verbal and digitally literate participants were excluded.

More peer-led qualitative studies are needed to fully understand the effects of ADHD on employment and other aspects of the day-to-day lives of young people with ADHD.

There is scope for further research on the role of receiving support for ADHD whilst in education versus being undiagnosed.

More research is needed to explore the experiences of individuals with ADHD in alternative education provision.



Conclusion

This qualitative report aimed to address challenges faced by young people with ADHD when accessing employment. The rich data brought to light the lack of awareness and support throughout education, academia and during the job application process. It is clear that more needs to be done to create a welcoming and supportive workplace culture for individuals with ADHD.

Theme 1: Lack of awareness

More needs to be done in order to understand of the complexity of ADHD and how it manifests differently in each individual.

Better education on ADHD would also help in steering away from the negative stereotypes associated with ADHD, which are still a barrier for young people when trying to access employment and support.



Conclusion

Theme 2: Accessing employment

This research indicates that many individuals with ADHD receive no direct support in accessing employment after education.

The job application process can pose many challenges for ADHD individuals if there are no tailored adjustments in place for them.

The difficulty completing administrative work serves as an additional obstacle.

Establishments need to take a more proactive approach in providing tailored support for individuals with ADHD.



Theme 3: Diagnosis

Previous literature has tended to focus on male participants. This study was able to share the experiences of female participants. Women are often not diagnosed until later in life due to difficulties recognising symptoms of ADHD early in education. This is another barrier to getting the support they need.



Acknowledgements

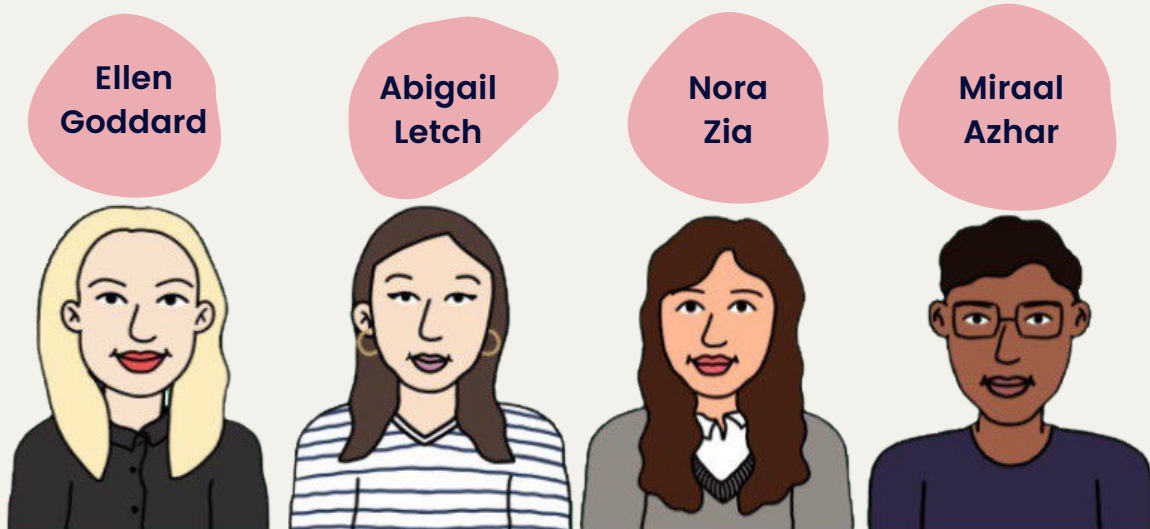
We would like to give special thanks to:

Those who gave up their time to be interviewed about their experiences with ADHD.

The Youth Futures Foundation: The Young Commissioners Joel England, Lauren Aird and Annie Boccock, as well as Catherine Fitzgerald and Shivonne Gates for making this project happen.

The Young Foundation research team and Chelsea McDonagh for constant support throughout the process.

And all the peer researchers who carried out this project from start to finish:



Jack
Palmer-
Pinfold

Disha
Das

Jonah
Celestin



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