When There's no Name for What Happens to Me: The Impact of an Autism Diagnosis at University

Lucía Van der Mel

University Of Seville, Spain

Abstract

There is a growing number of autistic students entering university, but not all of them end up graduating due to the various barriers they encounter. Additionally, not all university students have a diagnosis because of the high rates of late diagnosis and under-diagnosis affecting this group. Therefore, the aim is to analyze the impact of receiving a late diagnosis of autism, as well as the influence of having or not having a diagnosis during university studies from the perspective of autistic university graduates. To this end, 23 autistic graduates from different Spanish universities were interviewed, 16 with a pre-university diagnosis and 7 with a post-university diagnosis. Subsequently, the interviews were complemented with self-reports. The analysis was developed using an inductive category-code system. The results revealed that receiving a diagnosis helped participants understand themselves better, develop strategies to improve their well-being, reduce feelings of guilt, and foster a sense of belonging. During university, participants without a diagnosis experienced difficulties without knowing the causes and without access to specific support, which impacted their self-concept and well-being. In contrast, students with a diagnosis, despite having difficulties, were able to access support such as autism associations, disability services, or tuition waivers. Consequently, diagnosis can be considered a success factor in university. This reality implies that universities should support students based on detected needs and not solely on whether or not they have a diagnosis, thereby promoting true inclusion and Universal Design for Learning.

Keywords: Autism; graduates; higher education; diagnosis; academic success