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Basic Psychological Needs and the University Experience of Neurodiverse Students: A Qualitative Study in the Italian Context

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Abstract

Background: Neurodiverse students face significant challenges in higher education, where institutional structures often reflect predominantly neurotypical norms. Based on Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Minority Stress Theory (MST), this study aimed to explore how neurodiverse students experience and negotiate their basic psychological needs in an Italian university context, identifying barriers, resources, and protective factors.

Methodology: Eight neurodiverse students (six with autism spectrum disorder and two with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder) enrolled in an Italian university participated in semi-structured interviews. Data was analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, guided by SDT and MST as interpretive frameworks.

Results: Four main themes emerged: (1) Negotiated autonomy, reflecting how students co-construct agency within institutional and relational constraints; (2) Competence in tension, highlighting how efficacy depends on recognition and dialogical feedback rather than individual ability alone; (3) Relatedness between invisibility and recognition, describing the oscillation between concealment, exclusion, and authentic connection; and (4) Health and adverse pathways, illustrating how relational misattunement generates distress, while self-acceptance and advocacy foster resilience. Across themes, participants emphasized that both structural barriers and interpersonal dynamics shape their experience of inclusion.

Discussion: Findings suggest that well-being and distress among neurodiverse students are shaped by the relational negotiation between individual agency and institutional environments. Unmet needs and minority stress appear to intersect in generating emotional strain, while recognition, pride, and advocacy may support processes of resilience. The findings point to the potential value of a more systemic approach in higher education, moving beyond accommodation-based models toward universal design practices that may support autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the concept of neurodiversity has gained increasing attention in higher education discourse, challenging traditional deficit-based models of disability and promoting a paradigm shift toward valuing neurological differences as part of human diversity. Coined by Judy Singer in the late 1990s, the term *neurodiversity* refers to the idea that conditions such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and other cognitive variations are not inherently pathological but reflect natural variations of the human brain (Armstrong, 2011; Sewell, 2022; Singer, 2017). This framework contrasts with the medical model of disability and instead aligns with the social model, which emphasizes the role of environmental barriers and societal attitudes in creating disabling experiences (Baron-Cohen, 2017; Hamilton & Petty, 2023; Lerner et al., 2023; Miranda-Ojeda et al., 2025; Walker, 2021; Wright et al., 2024).

This evolving paradigm has important implications for universities, which are increasingly called to address the needs of neurodiverse students, a heterogeneous population often underserved in higher education (Accardo et al., 2024; Aguilera Rodríguez et al., 2024; Clouder et al., 2020; Evans et al., 2023; Schwichtenberg et al., 2025; Wilson & Dallman, 2025). The literature consistently highlights that these students face multiple academic, social, psychological, and institutional barriers. These include executive functioning difficulties, sensory sensitivities, lack of accommodations, stigma and stereotyping, limited peer relationships, and feelings of isolation and marginalization (Butcher & Lane, 2025; Duerksen et al., 2021; McKenney et al., 2024; Moshirian Farahi et al., 2022; Quintero-López et al., 2023; Sarchet, 2024).

Recent data confirm the growing presence of neurodiverse students in higher education (Accardo & Cormier, 2025; Dobson Waters & Torgerson, 2021; Eddy et al., 2025; Kuder & Accardo, 2018; Nachman, 2023; Robertson & Ne'eman, 2008; Zeng et al., 2018). Estimates suggest that up to 2% of university students meet the diagnostic criteria for ASD (Anderson et al., 2019; Davis et al., 2021; Widman & Lopez-Reyna, 2020), while between 2% and 8% may have ADHD (Ahmann et al., 2018; Emmers et al., 2017). A recent UK-based survey of over 2,000 incoming students revealed that 14.2% self-identified as autistic and/or having ADHD (Shaw & Selman, 2023).

Despite institutional efforts, many neurodiverse students report unmet needs and limited access to meaningful support (Bolourian et al., 2018; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017; McDowall & Kiseleva, 2024). There remains a significant gap between policy-driven commitments to inclusion and the lived realities of academic life (Scheerer et al., 2020; Van Hees et al., 2015). As Accardo et al. (2024) observe, neurodiverse students often advocate for greater recognition,

flexibility, and empathy from university staff, alongside more accessible mentorship and peer support. Satisfaction with social connectedness, perceived competence, and acceptance have been shown to be crucial predictors of well-being and persistence in higher education (Casagrande et al., 2020; McKenney et al., 2024).

Universities have responded through inclusive pedagogical practices, disability services, peer mentoring, and training in self-advocacy (Locke et al., 2024; Morris et al., 2024; Ogunlana & Peter-Anyebe, 2024; Wong et al., 2023). Some institutions have gone further, adopting neurodiversity-informed frameworks aimed at transforming campus culture (Brandsen et al., 2025; Dwyer et al., 2023). However, such initiatives remain uneven and often anchored in accommodation-based models rather than systemic approaches that recognize the full subjectivity and psychological needs of neurodiverse individuals (Spaeth & Pearson, 2023).

In Italy, where this study was conducted, support for neurodiverse students is institutionally organized within the broader framework of disability and inclusion services. Law 104/1992 established the foundation for educational inclusion of persons with disabilities, and Law 17/1999 extended these provisions to higher education, mandating the establishment of a rector's delegate for disability and the provision of tutoring and technical aids in every university. Law 170/2010 formally recognized Specific Learning Disorders (SLDs), ensuring access to compensatory tools and pedagogical flexibility at all educational levels. Although ADHD is not explicitly included in this law and is not legally recognized as a disability, it is categorized under the broader framework of *Special Educational Needs (Bisogni Educativi Speciali, BES)*. This classification allows students with ADHD to access individualized academic accommodations, such as Personalized Learning Plans, and support from university Disability and SLD Services. Moreover, in many Italian universities, including the University of Naples Federico II (i.e., the specific context of the current study), students with a certified disability of at least 66% are entitled to full exemption from university tuition fees, according to institutional regulations rather than a national legal mandate. Despite these formal advances, structural and cultural barriers continue to hinder full participation in academic and social life (Biggeri et al., 2020). According to ANVUR (2021), 36,816 students with disabilities were enrolled in Italian universities in 2019/2020 (approximately 2% of the student population) yet only half of them accessed university disability services. While legal provisions have improved access, inclusive practices remain inconsistent, and further research is needed to identify the contextual factors that enable or hinder the success of neurodiverse students and students with disabilities in Italian higher education (Moriña et al., 2024).

To better conceptualize these needs, psychological theory offers useful tools. One particularly relevant framework is *Self-Determination Theory* (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2000), which posits that optimal functioning and well-being are supported when three basic psychological needs are satisfied: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. *Autonomy* refers to acting according to one's own values and choices and is associated with a sense of coherence and authenticity; its frustration may result in feelings of constraint or inner conflict. *Competence* concerns the experience of being capable and effective in one's activities and is fostered through opportunities to apply and develop one's skills; when frustrated, it may result in doubt, failure, or powerlessness. *Relatedness* involves the sense of being meaningfully connected to others and emerges from relationships characterized by care and mutual significance; its frustration can evoke isolation or disconnection. These needs are considered universal, yet their fulfillment is highly dependent on environmental and contextual factors. Research has shown that neurodiverse students often struggle to meet these needs in academic settings, especially in environments that lack flexibility, clarity, or social inclusion (Accardo et al., 2024; Hamilton & Petty, 2023). While SDT has been widely applied in educational research, including studies on student motivation, academic performance, and teacher-student relationships, its application to the experiences of neurodiverse students remains limited. This gap is particularly salient given that many of the reported difficulties of neurodiverse students – such as lack of agency in navigating academic demands, struggles with feelings of incompetence, or social exclusion – can be understood as forms of need frustration. Moreover, SDT's emphasis on the role of the social environment in supporting or undermining need satisfaction makes it particularly suitable for examining how university structures, pedagogical practices, and social dynamics shape the well-being of neurodiverse learners. Applying SDT to this population allows for a shift from a focus on behavior or performance to a deeper understanding of students' motivational experiences, their efforts to self-regulate and adapt, and the relational contexts that either support or hinder their engagement.

Importantly, the experience of neurodiverse students cannot be fully understood without considering the broader social and cultural forces that contribute to their marginalization. The *Minority Stress Theory* (MST; Meyer, 2003), originally developed to account for the mental health disparities observed in stigmatized groups, has been increasingly applied to the neurodiversity context (Botha & Frost, 2020). According to this model, individuals who belong to socially devalued groups experience chronic stress arising from external prejudice, internalized stigma, and the pressure to conceal or mask their identity (Frost & Meyer, 2023; Hoy-Ellis, 2023; Mezza et al., 2024; Picariello et al., 2019).

In the case of neurodiverse students, this may manifest in subtle or overt forms of ableism, pressure to “pass” as neurotypical, experiences of microaggressions, or lack of representation within academic spaces (Miller et al., 2021; Quigley & Gallagher, 2026; Radulski, 2022). These stressors can accumulate over time, leading to psychological distress and diminished well-being. Bringing together SDT and MST offers a promising integrative framework for understanding the lived experiences of neurodiverse students. SDT foregrounds the intrapersonal mechanisms through which environments support or frustrate human motivation, while MST highlights the socio-structural conditions of marginalization. For example, the compulsion to mask autistic traits may undermine the need for authenticity and autonomy; inaccessible learning environments may erode competence; and ongoing social exclusion may compromise relatedness. Conversely, environments that affirm identity and provide meaningful connection can mitigate minority stress and promote psychological resilience. In this way, SDT and MST are not only compatible but mutually enriching: one emphasizing universal psychological needs, the other drawing attention to how systems of power and stigma affect their satisfaction.

As Butcher and Lane (2025) emphasize, effective support must address not only students’ internal sense of agency but also the external systems that enable or constrain access, participation, and validation. This integrated perspective calls for a fundamental shift in how universities conceptualize and respond to neurodivergence, moving beyond a focus on individual accommodations to a recognition of neurodiverse students as full subjects whose psychological needs and rights to inclusion, autonomy, and recognition must be proactively supported. By attending to both the universal foundations of human motivation and the distinct challenges posed by marginalization, educators and policymakers can work toward creating academic environments that genuinely promote belonging, engagement, and the flourishing of all students.

This study aims to contribute to this emerging field by qualitatively exploring the basic psychological needs of neurodiverse university students within an Italian university context. Rather than testing predefined hypotheses, the study was guided by SDT and MST as sensitizing theoretical frameworks for exploring how participants experience and negotiate autonomy, competence, and relatedness within academic and relational domains. Through thematic analysis of interview data, we seek to illuminate the dynamic interplay between personal agency, recognition, and contextual support. Given its exploratory nature and the small number of participants, this research should be regarded as a preliminary study. Its goal is not to produce generalizable conclusions but to offer a first, empirically grounded understanding of neurodiverse students’ experiences within an Italian university context, providing a conceptual and methodological foundation for future, larger-scale investigations.

2. Methods

2.1 Procedures and Participants

Participants were recruited through the Disability and SLD Service of the Center SInAPSi Center (Services for the Active and Participatory Inclusion of Students) at the University of Naples Federico II, the lead institution of this study. The SInAPSi Center supports students with officially recognized disabilities and students with certified SLDs, in line with Italian inclusion policies. It also addresses a broader range of neurodiverse profiles, including autistic students and students with ADHD. Specifically, the Service provides individualized support in accordance with Italian legislation, adopting a bio-psycho-social model inspired by the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health. Services include academic mediation, tutoring, personalized exam accommodations, and extended psychological counseling. Students can access these services by presenting official certification of disability or SLD, as required by national regulations.

All participants in the study were university students receiving support from the Disability and SLD Service in relation to their certified conditions, which included ASD and ADHD. These conditions are not legally defined as disabilities but are included under the broader framework of neurodiversity in this study.

A recruitment message was sent by psychologists affiliated with the SInAPSi Center via institutional email to 32 students who met the inclusion criteria. The message described the aim of the study (i.e., to explore the psychological needs of neurodiverse students in higher education in order to improve support services) and outlined the procedures, data management, and conditions for voluntary participation. Out of the 32 students contacted, 8 expressed their willingness to participate.

The inclusion criteria were: (1) having an officially recognized disability or SLD certification under Italian law; (2) current active support from the Disability and SLD Service of the SInAPSi Center; (3) self-identification as neurodiverse, understood as presenting neurocognitive profiles such as ASD, ADHD, or related conditions that differ from neurotypical functioning; (4) enrollment in an undergraduate or graduate program at the time of the study; and (5) sufficient fluency in Italian to participate in a semi-structured interview. Exclusion criteria included: (1) lack of contact with the SInAPSi Center at the time of recruitment; (2) absence of valid certification of disability or SLD; (3) clinical conditions interfering with participation (e.g., acute psychiatric symptoms); and (4) refusal to provide informed consent.

The 8 students included in the study (2 female, 6 male), aged between 19 and 24 years, were individually interviewed in person by two licensed psychologists external to the SInAPSi Center and unknown to the participants. The interviewers were contracted within the project

PROBEN-APP, an initiative funded with the contribution of the Italian Ministry of University and Research. The choice to involve external professionals was made to reduce potential bias and ensure a protected and neutral relational space. Each student signed a written informed consent form authorizing audio recording and the use of anonymized and aggregated data for research purposes. At the end of the interview, participants were debriefed about the aims of the study and had the opportunity to ask questions or request further information.

The interviews were conducted in accordance with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (Regulation 2016/679), Italian privacy law (Law 196/2003), and the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Furthermore, the study was approved by the Ethical Committee of Psychological Research of the University of Naples Federico II of Naples, Italy (protocol number: 18/2024). The final sample included students with the following primary diagnoses: six with ASD (five with high-functioning profiles and one with mild intellectual disability) and two with ADHD.

2.2 Interview

The semi-structured interviews were designed to explore the experiences and psychological needs of neurodiverse students within the university context, with a particular focus on the three basic psychological needs described by SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The interview protocol was developed through a theory-driven approach and involved a continuous reflexive dialogue among the authors, many of whom have longstanding professional experience working with neurodiverse students in university settings as psychologists. The team met regularly to reflect on which questions to include, how to formulate them, and how to ensure sensitivity to participants' experiences. Each interview was conducted face-to-face, audio-recorded with the participant's consent, and guided by an interview grid organized by thematic domains. The interviews, which lasted between 30 and 40 minutes, were fully transcribed for subsequent analysis.

To explore *autonomy*, students were asked to reflect on their sense of self-direction in their academic journey (e.g., "To what extent do you feel like the main actor in your university path?" or "Are there situations in which you do not feel like a protagonist of your academic experience?"). The dimension of *competence* was investigated through questions concerning their perceived academic efficacy and capacity to carry out university-related tasks (e.g., "In what academic areas do you feel capable? And in which ones less so?"). Questions addressing *relatedness* focused on social experiences within the university, such as support from peers and faculty (e.g., "Have you ever developed a positive relationship with someone at university? What made it positive?" and "Have you ever felt misunderstood by others in the university environment?").

Beyond the core dimensions of SDT, additional sections of the interview explored students' learning strategies and study organization (e.g., "What helps you follow lectures effectively?"), access to university support services (e.g., "What would you like to improve in the support services for neurodiverse students?"), and contextual adaptation needs (e.g., "What could professors or administrative offices do to improve your experience?"). Finally, a section was devoted to identity-related experiences and minority stress associated with neurodiversity (e.g., "Do you identify as a neurodiverse person?" and "Have you ever experienced discrimination at university because of your neurodiverse identity?"). The interview concluded with an open-ended question inviting students to add anything they considered important about their university life experience. The structure allowed for in-depth exploration while offering participants flexibility in how they articulated their experiences.

2.3 Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Interview data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, following the six-phase model proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), with the support of MAXQDA24 software (VERBI Software, 2021), which aided in organizing transcripts, managing codes, visualizing patterns, and coordinating collaborative interpretation among researchers. The analysis was guided by a deductive theory-driven approach, drawing on SDT and MST to identify core thematic domains. Within each domain, however, we employed an inductive lens to explore how these themes unfolded in terms of resources and barriers as experienced by neurodiverse students in higher education. The first author and the second author conducted the analysis collaboratively, while the last author served as an adjudicator in cases of disagreement. All authors were involved in the broader reflexive process, contributing to the interpretive refinement and conceptual validation of the themes. Importantly, none of the researchers involved in data analysis had any clinical or support role within the SInAPSi Center, and thus no direct relationship with the participants, ensuring analytic distance and reducing potential bias.

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps. In the first phase (*familiarization*), the first and second author immersed themselves in the transcripts through repeated readings and note-taking, focusing on meaningful linguistic, emotional, and contextual elements. In the second phase (*generating initial codes*), they independently developed codes that captured both semantic and latent meanings across the interviews. The third phase (*constructing themes*) involved clustering similar codes into candidate themes and subthemes, through joint coding sessions and conceptual mapping. In the fourth phase (*reviewing themes*), themes were compared against the full dataset to ensure coherence, representativeness, and empirical adequacy. The fifth phase (*defining and naming themes*) entailed refining thematic labels and writing theme definitions,

supported by illustrative quotes. Finally, in the sixth phase (*producing the report*), the authors constructed a cohesive analytic narrative highlighting convergences and divergences in students' experiences.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis, the research team implemented several strategies to strengthen transparency, accountability, and analytical rigor (Morrow, 2005; Nowell et al., 2017). In line with qualitative research standards, these procedures aimed to enhance credibility, reflexivity, and methodological rigor rather than statistical reliability and validity. All themes and subthemes were explicitly defined and operationalized. Coding was conducted independently by two researchers, and discrepancies were discussed and resolved through collaborative deliberation. Representative quotations were selected not only to illustrate thematic saturation but also to reflect both shared and divergent patterns across interviews. Throughout the process, the authors engaged in reflexive documentation of their assumptions, insights, and positionalities, sharing and discussing these reflections to mitigate potential biases and enhance interpretive credibility (Morrow, 2007). The alignment between data collection, thematic structure, participant meaning-making, and reporting was critically reviewed by the full research team. Regular analytic meetings were held to monitor coherence across stages and ensure that the final structure accurately captured the complexity of participants' lived experiences (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

3. Results

The thematic analysis of the interviews allowed for an in-depth exploration of the experiences of neurodiverse students in higher education. However, given the composition of the sample, the findings are more directly grounded in the accounts of autistic participants, and only partially reflect other neurodivergent profiles (e.g., ADHD), which are represented to a more limited extent. Through systematic coding of the data, four main themes emerged, each of which comprised several subthemes that capture the relational tensions, adaptive strategies, and contextual resources reported by participants. The identified main themes include: (1) *Negotiated autonomy*; (2) *Competence in tension*; (3) *Relationality between invisibility and recognition*; and (4) *Health and adverse trajectories*. These themes represent recurring patterns emerging from the data and are supported by significant excerpts from the interviews, providing a direct and authentic illustration of participants' personal experiences. To provide a clear overview of the key findings, Table 1 presents a summary of the main themes and sub-themes, along with the prevalence of each.

Table 1.*Main themes and subthemes identified through Reflexive Thematic Analysis*

Theme	Subtheme	Key Findings	Prevalence of each subtheme	Total prevalence of each theme
1. Negotiated autonomy	1.1. Institutional barriers	Students experience institutional barriers not only as structural or bureaucratic limits, but as relational disconnections where their needs remain unseen. Autonomy is perceived as fragile and must be continually defended within systems that rarely move toward the student.	46.3%	32.5%
	1.2. Supporting actors	Tutors, pedagogical services, and family members act as relational mediators, sustaining students' capacity to act within the institution. Their attuned and non-intrusive support allows autonomy to emerge through care rather than substitution.	40.7%	
	1.3. Strategies to strengthen student autonomy	Students envision autonomy as a shared responsibility, not an individual struggle. They propose clearer structures, blended learning as a norm, smaller and more frequent exams, and awareness initiatives co-designed with neurodiverse students.	13%	
2. Competence in tension	2.1. Learning accessibility	Accessibility is experienced as a relational process. When professors provide feedback, use visual supports, or structure learning clearly, students feel recognized as competent. When teaching remains abstract or impersonal, competence becomes difficult to sustain.	27%	22.3%
	2.2. Agency strategies	Students actively negotiate competence through relational and strategic behaviors, communicating with professors, collaborating with peers, and adapting study methods. These efforts reveal both agency and the emotional labor required to remain engaged in a misattuned environment.	48.6%	
	2.3. Strategies to strengthen student competence	Students call for a shared understanding of diverse learning styles and for structured, transparent teaching practices. Awareness and feedback are valued as forms of relational validation that allow competence to be co-constructed rather than individually fought for.	24.3%	

3. Relatedness of invisibility and recognition	3.1. Invisibility, rejection, and concealment	Students often conceal their neurodivergence to preserve connection in relationships where recognition feels uncertain. Masking serves as relational self-protection but drains energy and deepens disconnection when others fail to move toward understanding.	53.7%	
	3.2. Relatedness and inclusion	Positive relatedness emerges when collaboration, empathy, or shared experience make differences visible and valued. Connections with other neurodiverse peers provide a mirror space where authenticity replaces concealment.	24.4%	24.7%
	3.3. Strategies to strengthen student relatedness	Students ask for everyday spaces of encounter – smaller groups, shared activities, listening services – and for awareness initiatives that foster mutual reflexivity and recognition across the whole university community.	22%	
4. Health and adverse pathways	4.1. Distress and anxiety	Distress arises when students no longer feel the university moving toward them. Anxiety reflects the emotional cost of sustaining connection in an environment that recognizes performance but not difference.	52.9%	
	4.2. Positive and protective factors	Health is supported by self-acceptance, pride, and the reframing of neurodivergence as meaningfully different rather than deficient. Advocacy and collective recognition transform vulnerability into connection and growth.	47.1%	20.5%

Frequencies and relative percentages are reported to indicate the relative prevalence of themes and subthemes within participants' accounts. These values provide an overview of the main areas of emphasis in the dataset. More specifically, these percentages refer to the relative distribution of coded references across themes and subthemes within the dataset, rather than to the proportion of participants endorsing each theme. In line with reflexive thematic analysis, these values are reported for descriptive purposes only and should be interpreted as indicative of the relative density of the coded material, rather than as quantitative measures of prevalence beyond this sample.

The most prevalent theme was *Negotiated Autonomy*, with institutional barriers emerging as the most prevalent sub-theme. *Relatedness of invisibility and recognition* followed, with about half of the accounts coded under the sub-theme of *Rejection, invisibility, and concealment*. *Competence in tension*

was the third theme; however, its most prevalent sub-theme concerned *Agency strategies*, highlighting students' resources. Lastly, *Health and adverse pathways* showed an almost even recurrence of distressing and protective factors.

Theme 1: Negotiated Autonomy

In the context of higher education, autonomy is the freedom for individuals to shape their academic experience and to pursue their educational goals according to their own needs and judgment. For participants, however, autonomy was often described by participants as a fragile and ongoing relational process rather than a stable condition: it appeared to be continuously co-constructed, constrained, or reshaped through interactions with the university and the people who inhabit it. The experience of autonomy thus suggests not only how institutions enable or limit choice, but also how students navigate the tension between dependence and self-direction, recognition and invisibility, within a system that was not designed with their modes of functioning in mind.

Sub-Theme 1.1.: Institutional Barriers

Students' narratives describe a university experience shaped by an ongoing struggle to make themselves understood within systems and relationships that are rarely attuned to their ways of functioning. What they recount is not only the presence of institutional barriers, but the difficulty of establishing a relationship with the Institution that truly responds to their needs.

Structural and physical limits – for instance, a broken elevator, overcrowded classrooms, or technological tools designed with neurotypical users in mind – were described by participants as forming the concrete background against which relational tensions unfolded. Far from being merely objective inconveniences, such conditions took on different meanings and degrees of emotional salience depending on how participants experienced and negotiated them. One student, for instance, recalled how the excessive number of classmates made the simple act of attending lectures a daily negotiation: arriving very early, finding space, trying to stay focused despite noise and overstimulation. In his words “There aren't enough large rooms for the number of students enrolled [...] anyone who doesn't arrive an hour early to get a seat ends up sitting on the floor, which is something I can't do” (20 years old, female, ADHD). Beyond the description of a crowded classroom, participants' accounts suggest an effort to remain engaged with a space experienced as insufficiently responsive to their needs.

These dynamics extend beyond the material sphere. Several participants described the emotional fatigue of having to explain or justify their needs, especially when the request for accommodations was met with bureaucracy or skepticism. One of them reflected on the

frustration of being dismissed by a professor after asking for help, noting that such moments left him feeling both exposed and invisible. As he recounted, “I was told, even in a very rude way, ‘what are you asking me? I can’t treat students differently; you are the same as everyone else’” (20 years old, male, ASD). Here, the barrier is no longer a physical one but a relational one: the failure of the encounter between two perspectives, where the student’s attempt to be recognized meets the professor’s need to preserve uniformity.

Yet, within these tensions, traces of reciprocity also appear. Some students recalled instances in which a tutor took time to listen, a professor adjusted explanations, or a peer offered practical help. These gestures, though small, carried symbolic weight: they reintroduced warmth and mutual responsiveness into a relationship often dominated by procedures. Through these moments, the students rediscovered a temporary sense of belonging, fragile but sufficient to show that connection becomes possible when self-expression meets recognition.

Overall, these accounts suggest a relational experience described by participants as constantly oscillating between misunderstanding and repair, between invisibility and moments of recognition. The difficulty seems to lie not only in the absence of resources, but in the uncertainty of a relational bond that students may need to rebuild each time they enter a classroom, ask for support, or simply try to participate.

Sub-Theme 1.2.: Supporting Actors

For participants, autonomy often develops within relationships that sustain and accompany it. Rather than opposing dependence, these relationships provide the scaffolding through which students can navigate the complexities of university life and remain engaged despite institutional gaps.

Parents, particularly mothers, frequently emerged as key figures in this process. Their presence was not limited to emotional reassurance but extended to mediating the bureaucratic and organizational aspects of academic life. One student described how administrative procedures could easily become overwhelming, explaining: “The bureaucratic aspect is another thing that sends me into a complete meltdown, and luckily, my mom assists me with it” (20 years old, female, ADHD). In these moments, parental involvement appeared to act as a form of support that helped students maintain engagement with the academic context, particularly when institutional processes felt overwhelming.

Tutors and pedagogists also appeared as significant supporting actors, helping participants structure study schedules, communicate with professors, and prepare for exams. Their guidance was often described as practical but also emotionally steadying. As one student explained: “The

tutors specifically helped me with managing my time and studies, they helped me contact professors, and they guided me when I needed certain things” (24 years old, male, ASD).

Through such encounters, support can be understood as a shared process through which participants’ agency is sustained: students act, but their actions are sustained by others who recognize their needs without overstepping. When help is attuned and non-intrusive, it does not replace autonomy but makes it possible. Some professors embodied this same dynamic by offering personalized feedback and creating moments of genuine dialogue, small relational spaces that temporarily suspended bureaucratic rigidity and allowed autonomy to unfold.

Sub-Theme 1.3.: Strategies to Strengthen Student Autonomy

Participants reflected extensively on how university life could better support their autonomy, focusing on both structural and relational dimensions. Their suggestions were not simply complaints about what was missing, but expressions of a desire for a more responsive and inclusive university environment.

A recurring theme concerned the need for greater awareness and sensitivity among professors. Participants imagined an environment where teaching practices were attuned to diversity, reducing the need for external mediation and allowing students to advocate for themselves. They emphasized that awareness training should be co-designed with neurodiverse students, since such collaboration represents not only a practical improvement, but also a symbolic act of recognition, and a way for students to regain agency by contributing to the structures that shape their autonomy.

Requests for flexibility, such as blended learning or more distributed assessments, accompanied these reflections, not as literal reform proposals, but as expressions of the wish for a more accessible and attuned institutional relationship. One participant captured this sentiment: “The mixed modality should already be set up automatically, without anyone having to go and ask for it” (20 years old, male, ASD). Another added that revising the exam system could help distribute effort more evenly: “We could also have them more often, I mean more exams, but smaller ones” (20 years old, male, ADHD). These voices reveal not so much a literal demand for hybrid or individualized structures, but rather a symbolic request for reciprocity, a wish for an institutional relationship that acknowledges different ways of exercising autonomy and participation.

Finally, several students discussed the challenge of obtaining timely diagnoses, which often delayed access to accommodations and increased reliance on family members. This recurrent obstacle underscores the circular movement of autonomy in their accounts: repeatedly

postponed by institutional requirements, yet continuously reclaimed through students' creative attempts to redefine their space for action within the university.

Theme 2: Competence in Tension

Competence represents the sense of being able to learn and participate effectively in academic life. The narratives of neurodiverse students in this study reveal that competence was described not as a stable possession but as a dynamic process that unfolds in tension between fragility and support, confidence and doubt. It is continuously negotiated with professors, peers, and institutional systems, tested, rebuilt, and sustained within relationships that can either foster or unsettle it. When the environment fails to recognize their potential, participants describe not only practical obstacles but also a relational misalignment, where the effort to learn becomes a struggle to be perceived as capable.

Sub-Theme 2.1.: Learning Accessibility

Participants' accounts show that accessibility is not only a technical issue but a relational one. Methods such as using visual supports, recording lectures, or studying in smaller and quieter groups were valued because they created conditions in which attention and understanding could flow more easily. Exams were experienced as crucial moments where relational sensitivity, through feedback, flexibility, or adaptive tools, could either affirm or threaten competence. One participant, for example, emphasized how regular midterms provided structure and motivation: "Having midterms, especially for how I'm wired, is perfect, because my problem is motivation. When they break down the topic and you know the test is coming soon, it stimulates you to study and distributes your workload" (19 years old, male, ASD).

Similarly, personalized feedback from professors was recalled as a decisive moment of recognition: "I went to my programming professor's office hours, and he gave me exercises. Then, I hand them in the next week, and he tells me if I did well, or if I should do this, or not" (20 years old, male, ASD).

Through these interactions, competence appears to emerge through interactions characterized by feedback and responsiveness. When professors respond specifically and dialogically, they restore students' confidence in their own learning capacity; when teaching remains distant or abstract, this confidence falters. Accessibility thus becomes a relational exchange where understanding is co-constructed rather than delivered.

Sub-Theme 2.2.: Agency Strategies

In contexts where learning feels uncertain, participants of the current study describe multiple ways of reclaiming agency. They reorganize study materials, create summaries and concept

maps, record lectures, or use digital tools like audiobooks and text-to-speech software. They also reshape classroom participation by sitting in the front, setting study rhythms, or reaching out to professors and peers.

As one student explained, direct communication with professors was part of preparing for exams: “I explain what my difficulties are, what I need, and I also personally ask questions about the exam preparation and what the goals are” (24 years old, male, ASD).

Another student highlighted how collaboration with peers became a strategy to practice and consolidate exam preparation: “The important part, the testing, arrives. I take the files of frequently asked questions from the exam, I send them to a friend who asks me the questions, and I practice” (19 years old, male, ASD).

These efforts show how competence is continually renegotiated through relationships. Students’ creativity and perseverance reflect both resilience and the emotional labor required to maintain a sense of adequacy within systems that are designed for neurotypical students. Competence here can be understood as a relational achievement that exists between the student and those who acknowledge their effort.

Sub-Theme 2.3.: Strategies to Strengthen Student Competence

When participants imagine a more inclusive university, their proposals focus on making learning relationships more responsive. They call for teaching methods that are practical, visually supported, and paced through continuous assessment, as well as for greater awareness among professors and peers about different learning styles. One student summarized this need clearly: “One thing I would like is to raise awareness to help people understand that [...] learning happens, just in a different way” (24 years old, male, ASD). Such reflections express not only the wish for pedagogical reform but also the deeper desire to be recognized as legitimate learners. Competence is affirmed when difference is seen as variation, not deviation.

Participants also highlighted the importance of training for tutors and faculty, the creation of specialized offices, and clearer support structures. They linked these changes to the possibility of staying in university, recalling peers who withdrew because recognition never arrived. As one participant noted about assessment: “The exam management, the concept of testing as a key element, was very nice, and I think it's truly one of the best study methods” (19 years old, male, ASD).

Across these narratives, competence seems to emerge as a field of relationship rather than an individual trait. Participants build it through mutual exchanges that make their efforts visible,

while institutions can strengthen it by creating contexts of shared responsibility, where efficacy and belonging develop together.

Theme 3: Relatedness of Invisibility and Recognition

Relatedness is a basic psychological need, yet also a complex and multifaceted one. It involves both personal encounters and a broader sense of belonging within the university community. For participants, relationships with professors, staff, and peers often unfold under the awareness of appearing or behaving differently from what is expected. Participants' accounts suggest that their relational experiences are shaped by a constant movement between the wish to be seen and the fear of being misrecognized. Concealment becomes a way to protect dignity and sustain participation in environments that offer few signals of safety. In this sense, relatedness is not simply about being included or excluded, but about how one can stay connected to others without losing coherence and authenticity.

When students of the current study choose to disclose their neurodivergence – or when concealment fails – relationships can move between invisibility, rejection, and genuine recognition. Across these experiences, belonging appears as a delicate negotiation between visibility and safety, echoing the deeper question of how difference can find a place within the shared symbolic space of the university.

Sub-Theme 3.1.: Invisibility, Rejection, and Concealment

Building and maintaining relationships with peers was often described as a difficult and emotionally demanding process. Many students recalled experiences of rejection, misunderstanding, or social isolation. For some, the awareness of being different led to feelings of ridicule or envy toward others who could more easily enjoy social life; others connected these experiences to past discrimination and the resulting pressure to appear “typical.” Even when not overtly excluded, several participants described being unnoticed or misread by others, which often led them to hide their neurodivergence.

In these accounts, concealment does not appear as deception but as a relational strategy for self-protection, a way to stay in contact with others while minimizing the risk of exposure. Interactions with professors were described as especially charged, since participants often felt compelled to perform according to neurotypical expectations. One student shared how, during exams, his effort shifted from thinking to masking: “In the exams, I was trying to win over the professor, I ended up putting much more effort into appearing neurotypical and direct than into the answers” (20 years old, female, ADHD).

Here, masking serves as an attempt to maintain reciprocity in an asymmetrical relationship, yet it deepens the sense of distance. The energy spent in maintaining a socially acceptable façade replaces the energy of authentic engagement, creating a loneliness that persists even in shared spaces. As another participant observed, difficulties related to neurodiverse functioning were often misinterpreted as personal flaws: “Some colleagues may notice difficulties in class or during group work. There’s a risk that these difficulties could be mistaken for rudeness, or lack of motivation” (20 years old, female, ADHD). These misinterpretations seem to show that the core issue does not lie in the individual’s traits or deficits, but in the relational encounter itself and, specifically, in the meanings that others attribute to difference. In this sense, invisibility may be viewed not as a lack within the person, but as a relational failure that emerges when recognition fails to occur.

Sub-Theme 3.2: Relatedness and Inclusion

Alongside these experiences of distance, participants also described moments in which connection and mutual understanding became possible. Some relationships were built gradually through collaboration and shared academic work, while others emerged from spontaneous acts of help or empathy. One student, for instance, described friendships grounded in the exchange of knowledge and support: “I made friends with these classmates and they had a lot to say, so we can exchange knowledge and share what we know” (20 years old, male, ASD).

In such encounters, relatedness becomes an active process of co-construction. Recognition arises when difference is integrated into a shared task, transforming diversity into complementarity. Several participants noted that even those who preferred solitude or struggled socially could still form meaningful connections. For many, the most significant form of inclusion came from meeting other neurodiverse peers, with whom they could speak openly and without fear of misunderstanding. As one participant reflected: “The university friends I made are also neurodivergent people, with whom I can talk openly about this, about the various ways in which we don't feel respected and included in university life” (20 years old, female, ADHD). Peer relationships offered a mirror space where the tension between concealment and visibility could ease. Within these exchanges, difference became a shared experience rather than a deviation, allowing students to feel genuinely seen. Recognition here is reciprocal and dialogical: it restores the vitality of connection and helps counter the isolating effects of stigma.

Sub-Theme 3.3.: Strategies to Strengthen Student Relatedness

Participants’ reflections on how to enhance connection within the university point toward both practical and symbolic dimensions. While individualized accommodations remain important,

they emphasized the need for a broader cultural shift that promotes everyday awareness and mutual respect.

Some suggested practical ways to nurture belonging, such as establishing listening and reporting services for exclusionary incidents, ensuring more staff availability, or organizing smaller class groups that make interaction easier. Others valued informal spaces where relationships could grow naturally. One participant imagined the positive impact of shared activities: “At another university located in my city, they sometimes organized tournaments with neurodivergent people. I don’t know if they can do that here or if it already exists, I don’t know. Like a university pastime; that would be good, too” (20 years old, male, ASD).

Beyond activities, participants called for consistent awareness-building throughout the university. As one student noted, this effort should involve everyone, even those already engaged in advocacy: “It would be good to maybe spread this awareness, even among people who, like me, follow this path of raising awareness, to prevent the risk of misunderstandings or mistakes that can be made, even just humanly” (24 years old, male, ASD).

Through these reflections, awareness can be understood as more than an institutional campaign, it is a relational practice of mutual reflexivity, an invitation to acknowledge that everyone contributes to the quality of connection within the academic community. Relatedness, therefore, may be viewed not as a fixed condition but as a continuous negotiation between visibility and respect, individuality and belonging. In this light, participants’ requests for inclusive spaces may express a broader effort to co-create the conditions that make authentic connection possible.

Theme 4: Health and Adverse Pathways

Participants’ accounts suggest that being a neurodiverse student may affect multiple dimensions of university life. Participants described experiences of distress and anxiety that could hinder learning, social participation, and academic achievements. Yet, participants’ accounts also indicate that health and distress may not be fully reducible to individual vulnerability or resilience but appear to emerge from a continuous relational negotiation with the academic environment. Participants’ narratives suggest that, when students are recognized and can integrate their difference into a coherent sense of self, their psychological balance may be supported by meaning and belonging. Conversely, when this recognition is lacking, distress may take the form of disconnection from others, from competence, and from one’s own sense of efficacy. In this sense, health may be understood as the ability to preserve vitality and agency within a system that appears to alternate between validation and invalidation.

Sub-Theme 4.1.: Distress and Anxiety

A recurring theme was the intense distress linked to academic performance, especially during oral exams, and the fear of being misunderstood or unrecognized in one's neurodivergence. Anxiety often arose in situations where participants felt unsupported or exposed, such as when professors were unprepared to accommodate their needs or when they felt forced to choose between self-protection and visibility. One student described how simply facing a professor could provoke anxiety: "The very fact of being in front of a professor makes me anxious, because they don't know how my mind works" (20 years old, female, ADHD).

In these moments, anxiety seemed to originate less from evaluation itself than from the uncertainty of the relational encounter – the sense that the other cannot fully read or validate one's way of thinking and feeling. Participants also linked distress to structural rigidities: unprepared faculty, bureaucratic procedures, and limited accommodations created a sense of abandonment and fatigue. As another student explained: "I'm afraid of being misunderstood or maybe not being able to fully participate in the proposed activities" (24 years old, male, ASD). These accounts suggest that distress may be experienced as a form of relational dysregulation. Participants' narratives indicate that students may feel compelled to constantly monitor the environment, anticipate misunderstanding, and suppress spontaneous ways of being. Health may become more fragile when the effort to "translate oneself" into institutional codes appears to consume all available energy. Anxiety, therefore, may be understood not simply as individual fragility but rather as the emotional cost of sustaining connection within a context that may recognize competence but not difference.

Sub-Theme 4.2.: Positive and Protective Factors

Alongside distress, participants also described important protective dimensions that supported their well-being. Many spoke about a gradual shift from seeing neurodivergence as a burden to recognizing it as a source of understanding and empowerment. This transformation often began with diagnosis and self-reflection, leading to a new sense of coherence and acceptance. One participant captured this movement from alienation to integration when reflecting on how identity and diagnosis intersect: "I think sometimes you have to make the mistake of saying 'I... it's correct that your person matches the diagnosis, but it's more correct for the person to match the diagnosis, because in the end, it's always you'" (19 years old, male, ASD).

Such reflections mark a turning point: difference becomes inhabitable, something that can be spoken, shared, and owned. Pride and self-acceptance emerged as crucial buffers against stigma, allowing students to transform what once provoked shame into a source of meaning and even

activism. Through advocacy and openness, they reclaimed their narratives and found connection in shared experiences.

Some participants grounded this acceptance in broader philosophical or political perspectives, emphasizing the social value of diversity. One student described a sense of calm and self-assurance that came from reframing difference: “Lately, I don’t feel that different from others. Because I’ve learned that we are all different in one way or another... being neurodivergent doesn’t necessarily have to be a disadvantage, and no one should discriminate against you for it. I just walk into class without shame” (20 years old, male, ASD).

These testimonies point to a resilient and relational form of health, based not on the absence of difficulty but on the capacity to give meaning to difference. Pride and acceptance do not erase distress but transform it, turning suffering into insight and shared strength. Within this transformation, the relationship with the university can become a site of growth rather than threat, a space where well-being depends on mutual recognition more than conformity.

4. Discussion

This preliminary study offers initial and context-bound exploratory insight into neurodiverse students’ perspectives and experiences, revealing the entanglement of diversity, institutional design, relational practice, and individual agency. By using SDT and MST as an interpretive lens, we were able to identify key references to students’ basic needs within the interview data and place their perception into a theoretically coherent framework (Botha & Frost, 2020; Meyer, 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2000). This facilitated a deeper reflection on their lived academic experiences and provided a critical background for examining the university as a complex institution of spaces, actors, and relationships, where well-being and distress are continuously co-constructed in everyday exchanges between students and the academic environment. This understanding is crucial for creating a truly neurodiversity-friendly environment. Across all themes, what emerges from participants’ accounts is less a catalogue of unmet needs than a picture of ongoing negotiation: neurodiverse students continuously rework their autonomy, competence, and relatedness in the face of environments that alternately enable and threaten them. Their narratives suggest that distress may be understood not merely as the outcome of lack or failure, but as a signal of relational misattunement, a mismatch between the student’s modes of functioning and the university’s implicit norms of participation. These insights should be interpreted in light of the sample composition, characterized by the predominance of autistic participants and the recruitment context, as all participants were engaged with institutional support services. Accordingly, the findings are more directly grounded in the experiences of

predominantly autistic students with access to support, offering only preliminary and context-specific indications that are not intended to be generalized beyond similar settings.

Negotiated autonomy emerged as a central theme within this sample. According to previous literature (e.g., Aguilera Rodríguez et al., 2024; Anderson et al., 2019; Biggeri et al., 2020; Davis et al., 2021; Dolmage, 2017; Mousa et al., 2024), institutional barriers reported by participants are not just inconveniences, but obstacles that frustrate basic needs and perpetrate stigma, often leading students to conceal their identity at the cost of an intense emotional load. Indeed, universities continue to operate on a predominantly neurotypical model, inadvertently creating chronic stress, hindering the accessibility of learning, and ultimately provoking dropout (Baczewski et al., 2022; McLeod et al., 2019; Phan, 2025). While support services, helpful professors, and existing accessibility measures have been acknowledged by participants, these were described as partial remedies. However, rather than interpreting autonomy as something that students either possess or lack, our findings suggest that it takes shape within relationships, through ongoing negotiations between self-protection and dependence, agency and vulnerability, recognition and invisibility. Supporting actors, such as tutors or professors, become crucial when they are able to sustain this balance: autonomy appears to emerge when support does not replace the student's agency but amplifies it.

Despite these obstacles, participants demonstrated resilience, agency, and creativity. Findings highlighted their ability to ask for support from services or significant figures while maintaining autonomy as a key resource. In fact, when supporting actors do not act as mere substitutes, they are able to amplify neurodiverse students' ability to act independently within the institution (Moriña et al., 2024; Wong et al., 2023). Other agency strategies, such as adjusting study methods, employing digital tools, or creating studying practices, reflected students' drive to optimize their learning and foster their competence, despite environmental barriers. These individual strategies may be understood not only as compensatory mechanisms but as forms of relational agency, creative attempts to sustain participation and connection within a system that often fails to provide attuned responses. However, these strategies are double-edged. While they demonstrate students' autonomy and competence, the need for such individualized efforts also signals institutional failure, with the burden of inclusion shifting onto students instead of universities (Shaw & Selman, 2023; Spaeth & Pearson, 2023). The good practices praised by students and their requests for change revolved around institutional and systematic changes that would reduce their need for negotiation, disclosure, and bureaucratic dependence on formal diagnoses to obtain accommodations. This suggests that what students seek is not only practical accessibility but a transformation in the relational dynamics through which inclusion is achieved.

Moving from the current “accommodation on request” model to a universal design by default, which would support autonomy and competence across a broader population while reducing minority stressors for neurodiverse students (Harrison et al., 2024).

The theme of *competence in tension* further illustrated this issue: although participants often expressed confidence in their abilities, their sense of competence was undermined by rigid limited flexibility in learning methods and negative judgments from professors or peers, exposing them to the assumption of laziness or disinterest. In participants’ accounts, competence appears not as a stable trait but as a relational experience, strengthened when recognition occurs and weakened when effort is met with misinterpretation or indifference. Conversely, when professors offered feedback, practical exercises, or mid-term evaluations, students reported a stronger sense of efficacy, reinforcing the assumption that competence must be actively nurtured within social and institutional contexts (Dobson Waters & Torgerson, 2021; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

Both autonomy and competence were deeply entangled with the broader domain of *relatedness*, which was experienced in a continuum between invisibility and recognition. University life is fundamentally relational: students’ well-being depended on interactions with professors, peers, and staff (Accardo et al., 2024; Freda et al., 2023; McKenney et al., 2024; Scandurra et al., 2024, 2025). When students encountered impatience, moralizing judgments about laziness, or invalidation, not only were their relatedness needs unmet, but they also found it more difficult to express themselves in ways that would support autonomy and competence. These dynamics suggest that distress may arise when relational attunement fails, when students no longer feel that the university is moving toward them, recognizing and responding to their specific ways of learning and being. Such experiences mirror what the MST framework has described in terms of stigma and microaggressions, where relational invalidation becomes a daily stressor (Botha & Frost, 2020; Cardona et al., 2022; Ilagan et al., 2026; Maroney et al., 2025). Conversely, when others respond with curiosity, kindness, and practical help, they fostered a positive environment in which neurodiverse students could disclose their identity and fully exercise their agency in co-designing inclusive university environments. Recognition, therefore, functions as both a protective and generative process: it restores the student’s ability to participate authentically and transforms the relationship itself.

Finally, the theme of *health and adverse trajectories* showed how unmet basic needs intersect with stress processes. Students’ accounts revealed anxiety, distress, and the pressure to mask or “perform normality,” which redirected energy away from learning and toward self-protection: here, SDT and MST converge, with unmet needs and stigma producing situational stressors that

impair motivation and performance, therefore contributing to adverse pathways and leading to demotivation and disengagement. However, distress can also be understood as a relational signal, an indicator of the high emotional cost required to maintain belonging in an environment that does not fully recognize difference. While avoidance and concealment strategies can temporarily shield students from discrimination and exclusion, they ultimately limit the opportunity for accommodation and social support, reinforcing distress (Botha & Frost, 2020). In contrast, reframing neurodiversity as a source of pride enabled authentic self-expression and engagement, becoming a protective factor (Bhandari & Khanal, 2016; Cascio, 2012; Pellicano & den Houting, 2022; Singer, 2017; Wright et al., 2024). Through pride, activism, and mutual recognition, students re-signify their difference and re-establish continuity between identity and environment, transforming vulnerability into agency. While distressing experiences and protective factors were not mutually exclusive, with students often alternating between concealment for short-term protection and openness for long-term growth, being able to accept and embrace neurodiversity is crucial. By embracing their identity, neurodiverse students were able to reduce internalized stigma, communicate their needs, and experience authentic interactions; moreover, if they engaged in pride and activism, they could build social networks that provide both instrumental support and symbolic validation (Ai et al., 2024; Cage et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2023; Shaw & Selman, 2023; Wong et al., 2023).

In summary, these results move the focus from what universities fail to provide to how students and institutions continually negotiate the terms of participation and recognition. Within this sample, well-being seemed to emerge when these negotiations are dialogical rather than defensive, when autonomy, competence, and relatedness can be exercised within relationships that acknowledge difference as a legitimate mode of being, not a deficit to be compensated.

5. Limitations

This research represents a preliminary qualitative exploration of neurodiverse students' experiences in higher education. This study presents at least two significant limitations that should be acknowledged.

The first limitation lies in the theory-driven nature of our interviews, which were shaped by the interpretive lens of SDT and MST. This approach ensured theoretical strength and depth, but it may have constrained the scope of the data and potentially led us to neglect other important areas that did not fit within these frameworks. Similarly, the semi-structured design, while flexible, still relied on predefined prompts that may have limited participants' ability to introduce unexpected themes. The second limitation concerns the nature of the sample. It was small and

drawn from a specific institutional and cultural context, which may limit the transferability of findings to other universities or countries. In addition, the sample showed an uneven representation of neurodivergent profiles, with autistic students representing the majority of participants and students with ADHD being only marginally represented. Participants were also all recruited through, and already engaged with, university support services, which may have influenced both their access to resources and the ways in which they experienced and articulated inclusion within the academic environment. Although the study was framed within the broader concept of neurodiversity, the findings are therefore more directly informative of the experiences of a small group of predominantly autistic students with access to institutional support within one Italian university context. Moreover, participants were self-selected, meaning that those who volunteered may have been particularly motivated to share their experiences, potentially amplifying certain perspectives. Future research should aim to include more diverse and less service-connected populations of neurodivergent students, in order to capture a broader range of experiences, including those shaped by greater marginalization, invisibility, or barriers to access. Larger and multi-site studies, as well as longitudinal and comparative designs, would further strengthen the evidence base in this field. Future research could also build on these findings through quantitative or mixed-method designs, in order to examine the extent to which the patterns identified in this study are observable across larger and more diverse populations.

Despite these limitations, the study provides an important first step in mapping the intersection of autonomy, competence, and relatedness within neurodiverse students' academic experiences. As such, it offers a conceptual groundwork for subsequent research aiming to validate and expand these findings across broader contexts.

6. Implications for Inclusive University Practices

Although based on a small exploratory sample, these implications may offer some useful directions for institutional reflection and practice.

Flexibility in teaching and exam methods was frequently highlighted by participants, who suggested blended learning as a standard option, smaller and more frequent exams, and clearer organization of course materials. These adjustments could be relatively low-cost and may help distribute study efforts more evenly and benefitting not only neurodiverse students, but also other students within the academic community. However, beyond their pragmatic value, such practices may reflect a relational stance: they may signal that the institution is willing to adapt, to listen, and to co-construct learning conditions that acknowledge students' diverse ways of functioning.

To improve learning accessibility, suggestions included the use of visual supports, step-by-step explanations, the possibility to record lectures, and the use of conceptual maps during exams. Such measures may help respond to commonly reported neurodiverse learning needs and may reduce the risk that competence is undermined by rigid formats. More deeply, they can be interpreted as forms of relational attunement: when professors adopt accessible methods, they may not only facilitate comprehension, but also convey recognition, suggesting that difference can coexist with academic excellence. Beyond teaching methods, bureaucratic procedures could also be reconsidered, simplifying their process and potentially reducing reliance on formal diagnosis for access to support. Reducing these procedural asymmetries may contribute to shifting the experience of help-seeking from one of dependency to one of mutual responsibility. To address relational issues and increase opportunities for informal peer interaction, some initiatives could include organizing community events, such as tournaments and shared activities; while these may be difficult to implement, simpler solutions also exist, such as preferring smaller study groups and encouraging group work. These initiatives may be understood not merely as social add-ons, but as opportunities to reshape everyday relational spaces, potentially transforming inclusion from a compensatory act into a shared cultural practice.

Adequate training on neurodiversity, ideally co-designed with neurodiverse students themselves, was identified by participants as potentially important to challenge stereotypes and reduce negative attitudes. Awareness initiatives could be directed not only at professors and staff, but to the university community as a whole. Co-design may play a symbolic and practical role here: it may help redistribute power, allowing neurodiverse students to become active contributors rather than passive beneficiaries of inclusion policies.

Overall, these suggestions may point toward the potential value of a more systemic change that is more than just practical; they suggest the relevance of a shift from individualized accommodations to a universal design for learning model, in which inclusive practices might be implemented more proactively rather than negotiated case by case. This shift could be understood as moving from an “institution that adjusts” to an “institution that listens and relates,” where inclusion may be enacted through everyday interactions rather than exceptional measures. Such an approach may contribute to improving the academic experience of neurodiverse students, but also potentially supporting autonomy, competence, and relatedness across the wider student population.

7. Conclusions

This preliminary study centered the lived academic experiences of neurodiverse students, offering initial insights that are often missing from institutional decision-making, in line with the principle of “*nothing about us without us*” affirming that policies and practices for inclusion must be grounded in the perspectives of those most directly affected. Through theory-driven, semi-structured interviews, this research explored how neurodiverse students navigate higher education, situating their voices within the frameworks of SDT and MST.

Our findings suggest that, within this small sample, students’ basic needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are often in conflict with institutional structures, both structural and relational; these unmet basic needs can create adverse outcomes for students. However, rather than viewing these needs as static entities to be satisfied, our results suggest that they are continuously negotiated within relationships (between students and professors, between individuals and systems, between difference and belonging). Through their experiences and perceptions, we investigated what is currently working, what needs improvement, and the impact of these factors on student experiences.

Findings also revealed that well-being and distress coexist along a continuum of relational negotiations: autonomy grows through recognition, competence through dialogical feedback, and relatedness through mutual visibility. The role of identity reframing and advocacy emerged as key protective processes that allow students to transform vulnerability into participation and meaning.

Ultimately, this study emphasized the need for a paradigmatic shift toward universities in which inclusion lies not in compensating individual deficits but in transforming relational and institutional practices. Listening to and engaging with the lived experience of neurodiverse students is not only an ethical imperative but a methodological one: it offers a way for universities to understand themselves as relational ecosystems, where diversity becomes a condition for collective growth rather than a challenge to be managed.

While preliminary in nature, this study establishes a foundation for developing larger, multi-institutional research programs that further investigate how inclusive academic environments can support the well-being and participation of neurodiverse students.

Ethical approval

The study was approved by the Ethical Committee for Psychological Research of the University of Naples Federico II, Naples, Italy (protocol no. 18/2024).

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the present article are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

Authors' Contribution

CS, EDA, ALA, TL, and MFF designed the study. VM, MCM, LN, CN, AS, and PV contributed to the acquisition of data. CS and EDA analyzed the data. All authors interpreted the data. CS and EDA drafted the manuscript. ALA, TL, VM, MCM, LN, CN, AS, PV, and MFF critically revised the manuscript. CS, EDA, and MFF had full access to all the data in the study and take responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the data analyses. All authors have read the manuscript and have agreed with its submission.

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