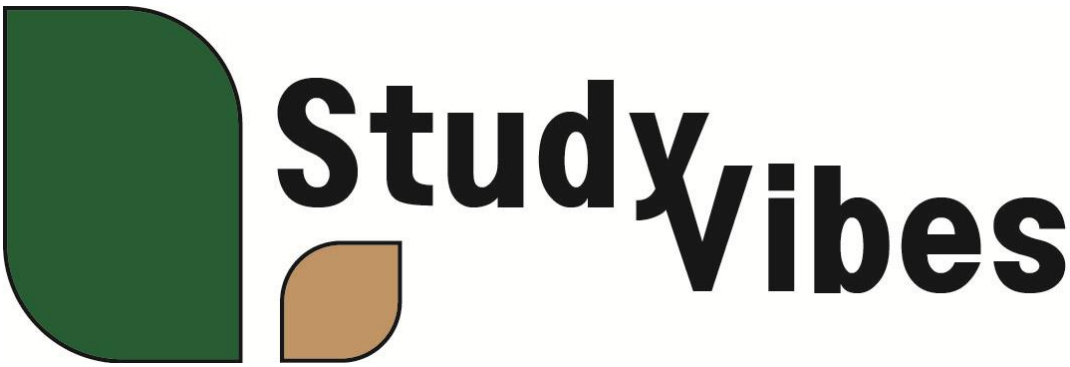
Research Report

Experiences of Tertiary Education for People with ADHD



Nadia Shaw | DNB311

Executive Summary

This research report will focus on the project 'Experiences of Tertiary Education for people with ADHD', for the Industrial Design Capstone. Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder affects a significant number of people, and an increasing amount of students in tertiary education. During the project, both primary and secondary research was conducted. The methodology and methods of this research will be explored in this report, as well as the key findings.

Design implications were identified, which will be used to inform the future of the overall project.

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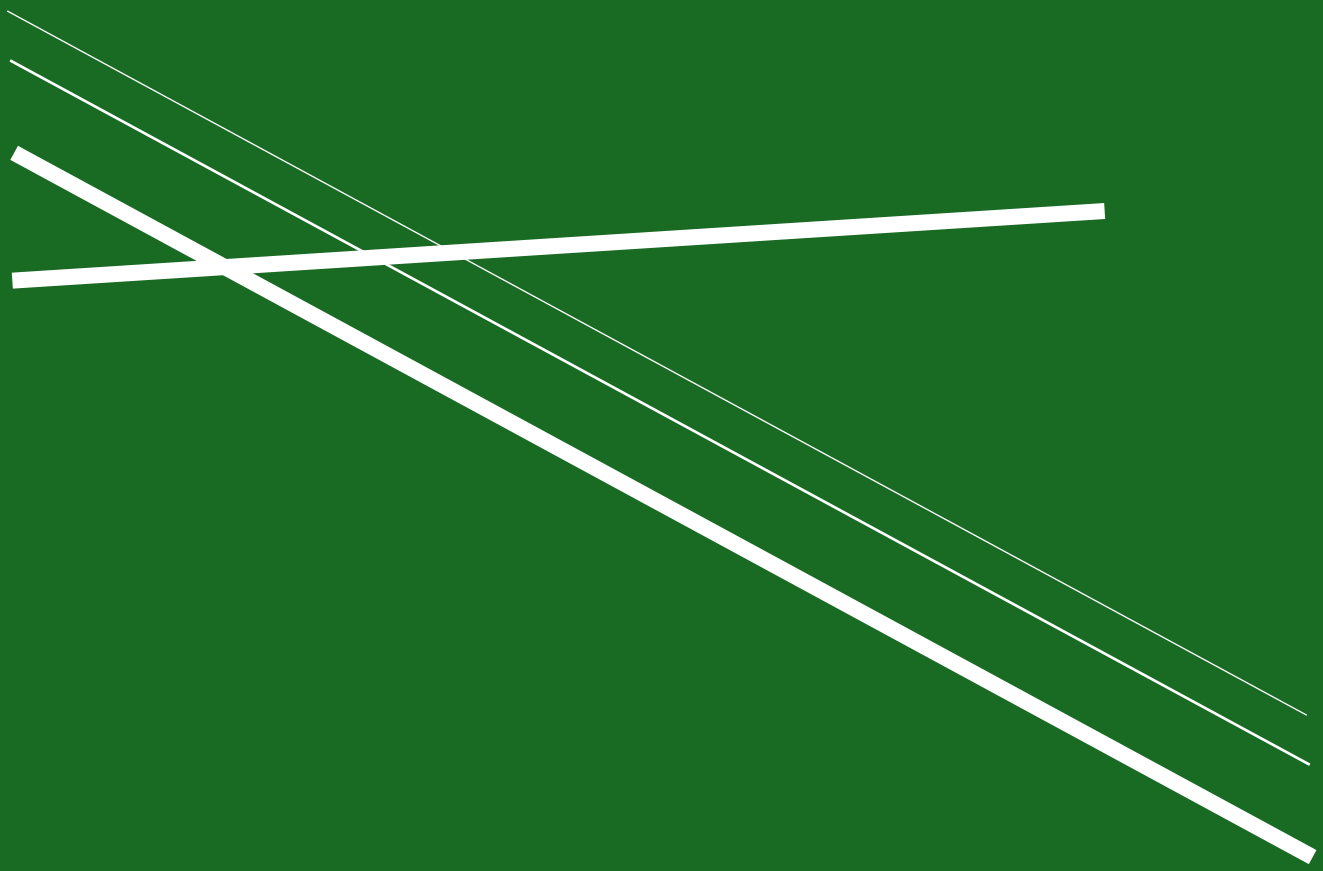
Section One:

THE TOPIC



Introduction

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder which affects approximately 11% of the adult population. The disorder impacts the way that people interact with the world around them, with the symptoms of hyperactivity, impulsivity, trouble focusing, and emotional dysregulation being the most prevalent (Banaschewski et al., 2023). Whilst ADHD does not directly impact the intellectual capabilities of suffers, the affect of common ADHD symptoms often hinder people's ability to engage in learning and education, especially in tertiary education.

Therefore, it has a significant impact on the ability of these people to learn in formal educational settings, including tertiary education.

In Australia, it is the expectation in many industries that employees hold a minimum education standard of a bachelor's degree. Research suggests that by obtaining a bachelor's degree or higher, one's earning potential is significantly greater, particularly in industries such education, healthcare, or business (Hurley et al., 2024). For people with ADHD, obtaining a bachelor's degree can be much more challenging in comparison to neurotypical people. As a result, these people often fall through the cracks, unable to follow conventional pathways to success.

This project will explore the experiences of tertiary education that people with ADHD have, with the aim of designing a physical product solution which makes tertiary education more inclusive and accessible for people with ADHD.

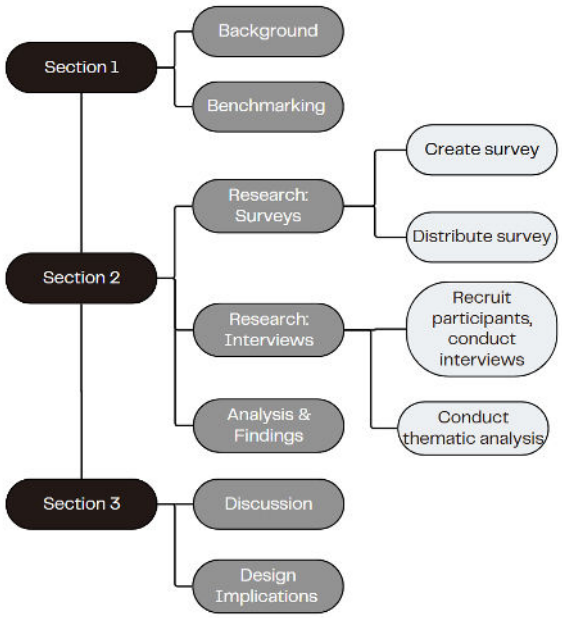


Figure 1: Project progression.

Background

In order to understand the rationale for the project, it is important to understand what is known about attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), how it presents, and how one's experience of tertiary education is affected by ADHD. ADHD is a neurodevelopmental disorder, presenting in three main persistent characteristics: impulsivity, hyperactivity, and inattention (Banaschewski et al., 2023). These characteristics lead to a number of challenges for those with the disorder, which impact daily life.

Demands and challenges of tertiary education for people with ADHD

For many Australians, completing tertiary education is a necessary step entering the workforce (Hurley et al., 2024). Most university courses include some practical components, however for people with ADHD, course readings and theoretical classes can pose significant challenges due to the inherent characteristics of the disorder (Adamou et al., 2022).

Research suggests that for people with ADHD, the most significant challenge associated with the condition is the lack of executive functioning (Kripalani, 2023). Unfortunately, for university students, high levels of executive function is necessary for success, as planning, scheduling and consistency is required in order to achieve course requirements. In addition to this, people with ADHD often struggle to accurately perceive time, effectively prioritise tasks, and have trouble focussing on tasks they do not consider urgent. This conflicts with the demands of tertiary education, and can be detrimental to academic performance (Mellor et al., 2024). Consequently, students with ADHD are more likely to feel inadequate, and display lower self-efficacy. Therefore, people with ADHD are at a disadvantage in this context.

Sensory challenges

Whilst the most prevalent symptoms of ADHD include challenges with focus, people with the condition often experience hypersensitivity, and can

struggle with sensory overwhelm (Begel et al., 2024). As a result, environmental conditions such as lighting, sound, furnishings and other people can increase the likelihood of sensory overwhelm, as well as exacerbating other symptoms of ADHD (Dwyer et al., 2023).

Mental health

It is well-known that people with ADHD often display symptoms of other mental health conditions, such as anxiety and depression (Mellor et al. 2024). Research suggests that amongst students with an ADHD diagnosis, there is a greater risk of course withdrawal. Ultimately, for university students, this can be due to low self-efficacy, caused by student's internalised feelings of inadequacy as a result of their ADHD presentation. Adverse mental health can lead to unhealthy coping strategies such as alcohol and drug use, further impacting one's mental health (Grawe et al., 2021).

Common ADHD management and treatment options

Currently, the most common form of management for ADHD is stimulant medication, which is used to improve executive function, reduce impulsivity, and increase attentiveness through increasing dopamine levels (Cleveland Clinic, 2025). Whilst this treatment is somewhat effective, it does not help with all aspects of the disorder, and is unavailable for those without a formal diagnosis. Other management options include academic counselling, group study, and scheduling, aimed at improving executive function and reducing procrastination (Alverez-Godos et al., 2023).

Benchmarking

In this subsection, existing products which have either been designed for people with ADHD or adopted by those with ADHD to improve executive functioning, reduce procrastination or manage sensory needs will be examined through benchmarking. The benchmarking process allows designers to identify the strengths and weaknesses of existing products, and opportunities for innovation.

Currently, there are few products on the market aimed at those with ADHD which assist people with executive functioning, reducing procrastination, or managing sensory needs. As a result, some people with ADHD have adopted products which pacify fidgeting and hyperactivity, as well as app-based notification and motivation solutions. In table x, the benefits and attributes of these products have been identified.

Existing products

Product A: Fidget Spinner

(Big W, 2025)

Product B: Sit-stand desk

(Charman, 2025)

Product C: Wobble cushion

(Caws, 2015)

Product D: Digital Pomodoro Timer

(MINDSKSTP, 2025)

Product E: Remember the Milk

(Remember the Milk, 2025)

Product F: Focusmate

(FiveTaco, 2025)

Figure 2: Six products used for benchmarking.

Criteria	Product A	Product B	Product C	Product D	Product E	Product F
	Fidget spinner	Sit-stand desk	Wobble cushion	Pomodoro technique digital timer	Remember the Milk	Focusmate
Price	Low	High	Low	Low	Moderate	Moderate
Product form	Physical	Physical	Physical	Physical	App	App
Features	Small spinning triangular object with four points of movement	Work desk which can be height adjusted for sitting and standing	Round, air-filled rubber cushion	Digital timer with double screen. 25 min work timer, 5 min break timer	App collates notifications from multiple apps and distributes notifications to all devices at the same time, allows the user to share lists with others	Users can select task length and type of task, and choose favourite people to work with
Material	Plastic, metal	Wood, metal	Rubber	Plastic	Nil	Nil
Benefit	Small toys allow users to exert physical energy , whilst seated and completing tasks. Not specifically designed for people with ADHD, however have been adopted to assist with hyperactivity and sensory needs.	Allow users to complete work in multiple positions in the same space. They have not been designed for people with ADHD specifically, but suit ADHDers because of the physical variety they offer.	Wobble cushions are sensory devices which provide users with the benefit of motion. Designed for people with autism, ADHD and other neurodivergent people, they are considered somewhat effective in meeting sensory needs.	Gives users two preset timer settings: 25 min and 5 min. No need for phone timer. Designed for those who struggle with time management procrastination, incl. those with ADHD.	Having access to all notifications in one central location means that people with ADHD are less likely to lose track of tasks, staying on track and removing the need for them to actively remember tasks	Body-doubling is helpful for people with ADHD as it is a process whereby people gain motivation to complete tasks by actively copying other people doing work.
Does it help with...						
Sensory needs	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Executive function	Somewhat	No	No	Somewhat	Yes	Somewhat
Time management	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

Table 1: Attributes of existing products adopted by people with ADHD.

Taking table 1 into consideration, table y has been used to rate each product's performance based on a number of criteria, with a rating of 10 being best performance. This is shown in table 2, on the following page.

	Product A	Product B	Product C	Product D	Product E	Product F
Organisation	1	2	1	5	9	5
Time management	2	2	1	7	7	8
Improve focus	4	7	2	6	7	9
Accountability	2	1	2	6	8	10
Motivation	3	4	2	5	7	9
Novelty	6	7	5	2	5	7
Accessibility	5	10	5	2	9	6
Noticeability	2	5	3	4	10	6
Physical form	6	8	4	4	1	1
Audio output	5	10	5	7	6	9
Sensory stimulation	8	7	6	2	5	6
Total (110)	44	63	36	57	74	76

Table 2: Benchmarking scorecard table for existing products adopted by people with ADHD.

Opportunities

Through the benchmarking process, it has become clear that there is a lack of products, both physical and digital, designed to assist people with ADHD in their daily lives. As a result, none of the physical products used in this process were designed for people with ADHD, however, all have been adopted by them. This alone demonstrates the need for innovation in this area.

Despite this, some physical products do not meet the needs of people with ADHD. Whilst Product A, B and C showed above average performance in terms of meeting sensory stimulatory needs of people with ADHD, none of these products offer any organisation or time management benefits. Of the physical products, Product B achieved the performance highest score. This was because of the significant benefit the product provides in terms of positional adjustment and variation, allowing users to move whilst working.

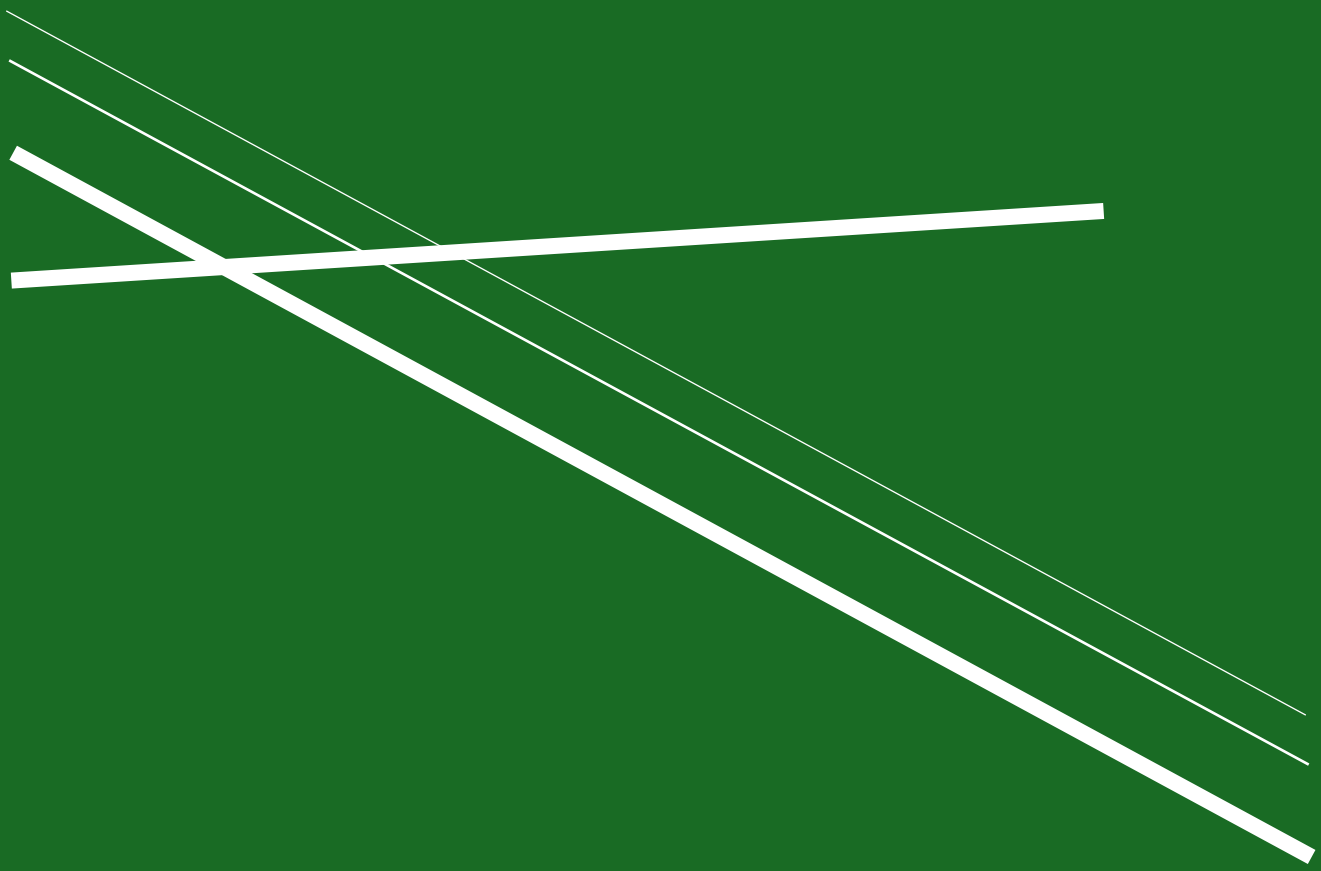
Product D was the only physical product which provided users with significant benefit in terms of time management, organisation, focus and accountability. The product's simple timer function is easy to use, and does not require phone use for operation. Whilst there are clear benefits to this product, it lacks visual interest and a sense of novelty, which could make the product less attractive to those with ADHD.

Product E and F showed the highest performance against the criteria,

particularly in regards to improving focus, accountability and motivation. Interestingly, both of these products are apps. The interactive and personal nature of these apps gives users an increased sense of accountability and ownership, likely encouraging personal motivation. For people with ADHD, this is very appealing. Whilst there is merit in both apps, it is important to note that they lack the ability to satisfy the sensory needs of people with ADHD. Additionally, for those who struggle with phone usage, the app format may hinder productivity, exacerbating the adverse symptoms of ADHD.

Section Two:

THE RESEARCH



Research

Overview

In order to gain a deeper understanding into the experiences people with ADHD have of tertiary education, primary research was conducted. Here, the research methodology used to gather data will be explored.

Methodology

To ensure rigour, it is critical to triangulate primary research, hence two methods of primary research were conducted: survey, and semi-structured interviews (Nanthagopan et al., 2023). Through these methods, a combination of qualitative and quantitative data was collected, providing a great depth of perspective into the experiences of tertiary education for people with ADHD across a number of relevant topics.

Recruitment

Whilst two research methods were conducted, recruitment was a single process. To be eligible to participate, the participant had to be over 18 years old, and be someone who has ADHD, or suspects that they have ADHD. In order to reach participants, a flyer containing a Google Forms link was distributed across a number of Facebook Groups, including the QUT Stalkerspace group, ADHD Adults Australia, Life Uncut Discussion Group, and the ADHD Women in Australia group. It was also distributed on LinkedIn, where it was likely to have attracted a more academic cohort of respondents. The Google Form led potential participants to the project information and consent forms, as well as the survey participation link. It gave potential participants the opportunity to express interest in participating in the semi-structured interview. Participation data generated through Qualtrics indicates that most survey participants completed the survey within one day of Facebook distribution, therefore it can be assumed that this method of distribution was the most successful.

SURVEYS

As the research for this project was targeted towards individuals with ADHD and their experiences of tertiary education, conducting research through an online survey was appropriate. For

this project, one 20-question survey was used, which required participants to answer ordinal, interval and sentence-response questions. The survey was created using the Qualtrics survey builder, as the capabilities of the software are highly sophisticated.

To ensure only quality, relevant data was collected, three response pathways were included: one for people with diagnosed ADHD, one for people with undiagnosed ADHD, and one for people without ADHD. Those without ADHD were removed from the survey, and were unable to complete the remaining questions.

When the survey was initially distributed, only people aged 18-24 were able to participate, however it was decided to amend the criteria to allow people over the age of 25 to participate on the second day of data collection. This was decided as the knowledge and experience of mature-aged students with ADHD is also valuable to this project. By limiting participants to those aged 18-24, only data from current students – mostly those who have only taken one course – would have been accounted for, hence, this amendment also increased the amount of survey respondents, strengthening the data set. Overall, 78 respondents submitted the survey.

It was designed to gather information related to the following:

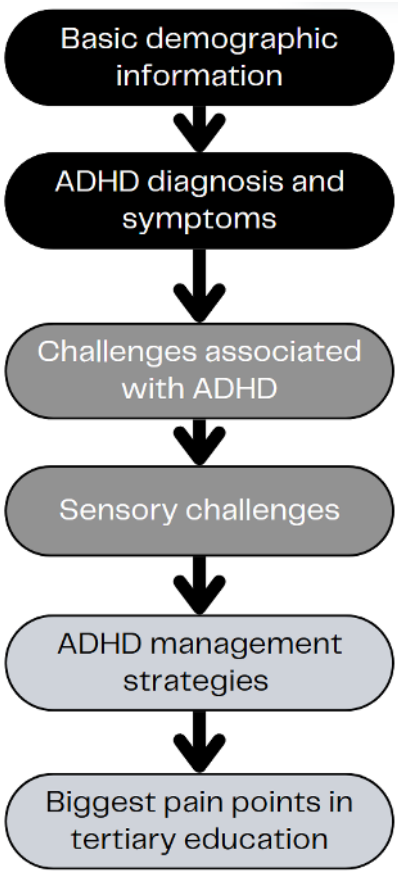


Figure 3: Key information categories form surveys.

Method: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

Although rich data can be found through surveys, it is widely accepted that the interview process allows researchers the opportunity to gain deeper insights into one's experience (Jamshed, 2014). For this project, semi-structured interviews were conducted with both

current and past tertiary education students who have either ADHD or suspected ADHD. Ten people indicated their interest in participating in the project, however only five were selected as they were able to present a wide range of information. The semi-structured interviews took place over Zoom, and were audio recorded. These recordings were subsequently transcribed using 'TurboScribe', an AI transcription service. Table X provides a summary of the five interview participants.

Category	ADHD diagnosis	Course movement	Participant course type	P. No.	Duration	Recording method
Current Student	Undiagnosed Not medicated	Changed course	Arts student	1	27 mins	Zoom
	Diagnosed Medicated	Changed course	Science student	2	35 mins	Zoom
	Diagnosed Medicated	Changed course	Science student	3	51 mins	Zoom
	Diagnosed Not medicated	Deferred course. Changed course.	Engineering diploma student	4	32 mins	Zoom
Past student	Diagnosed Medicated	Did not change course	Law/arts student	5	35 mins	Zoom

Table 3: Interview participant summary.

Summary

Through the use of surveys and semi-structured interviews, a significant amount of both qualitative and quantitative data was gathered. This will allow for effective data analysis, and findings highly reflective of the experiences of tertiary education for people with ADHD, and the challenges they face.

Analysis & findings

To draw meaning from primary research, it is critical to analyse and interpret the findings. Here, the findings of both the surveys and the semi-structured interviews will be discussed.

Surveys

The survey had an overwhelming 78 responses, however after the process of data cleansing, only 68 valid responses were accounted for. From basic demographic data, it was found that 82% of respondents identify as female. It was also found that 73% of total respondents are currently enrolled in a university course, 18% have completed a course, and 9% of respondents have withdrawn from a course. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that the data is skewed towards the experience of females with ADHD.

For respondents with a formal ADHD diagnosis, it was found that 94% reported having trouble staying focussed on tasks, and 90% experience procrastination and poor time management. Approximately 74% of the same cohort experience impulsivity, whilst 60% recognise either their hyperactivity or need to physically move.

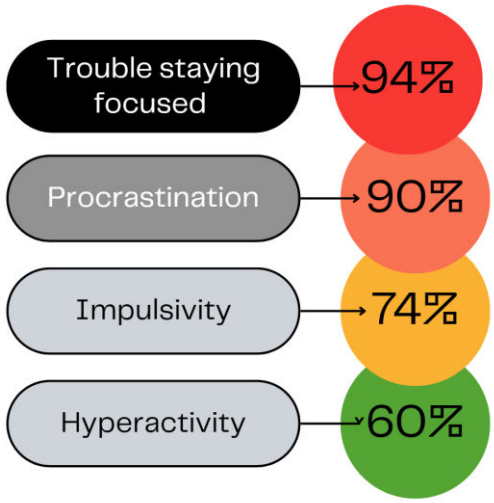


Figure 4: Key survey statistics - symptoms.

For those who suspect ADHD, 100% report significant challenges associated with time management, and 71% struggle with overthinking tasks and organisational difficulties. Other symptoms this cohort commonly reported include inability to focus on tasks, fidgeting, memory challenges, and adverse mental health outcomes.

Of the survey respondents, 77% indicated that they experience heightened sensory experiences compared to neurotypical people, and from those people, 71% reported that sound is the sense they are most sensitive to. The survey also requested

respondents to elaborate on their sensory experience. After conducting a thematic analysis of the question, it was found that excessive noise in public spaces, as well as harsh lighting were the most prominent factors contributing to sensory overwhelm and discomfort.

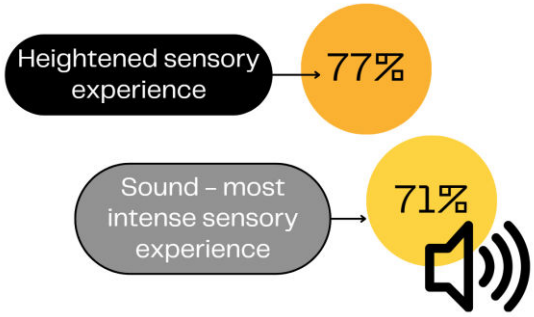


Figure 5: Sensory statistics - survey.

Survey respondents were also asked about the current strategies they use to manage their ADHD symptoms in relation to university work. It was found that 43% rely on calendars and planners, 32% rely on physical note keeping and 25% of people use physical fidget toys, whilst only 20% of people reported using apps such as Focusmate or Finch.

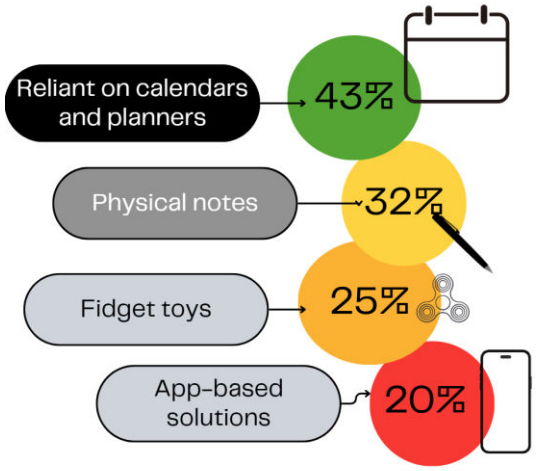


Figure 6: Management strategies.

When asked about their perceptions of app-based products compared to physical products by using a Likert scale, it was evident that the respondents appreciated the functionality of apps, however many acknowledged that they have many apps they don't use, and that app-based solutions can be frustrating. It was found that whist apps can be useful, many respondents benefited from physical solutions, proving the relevance of this project.

Limitations:

Whilst there was an overwhelming response to the data, it was skewed towards a female demographic. This could be due to the distribution channels used. It would have been beneficial to receive more gender diversity in the responses.

Interviews

As previously mentioned, each interview was transcribed using the 'TurboScript' AI software. From there, a thematic analysis was manually conducted for each transcription. It was found that similar themes emerged across each interview, therefore only one thematic code was used. As seen in figure 7, five main themes were present: support, motivation, learning delivery mode, mental health, and symptoms of ADHD. Due to the semi-structured interview format, this was expected. Whilst similar themes were present across all interviews, the individual experiences of the interview participants varied greatly. Therefore, the findings of each interview will be individually explored.

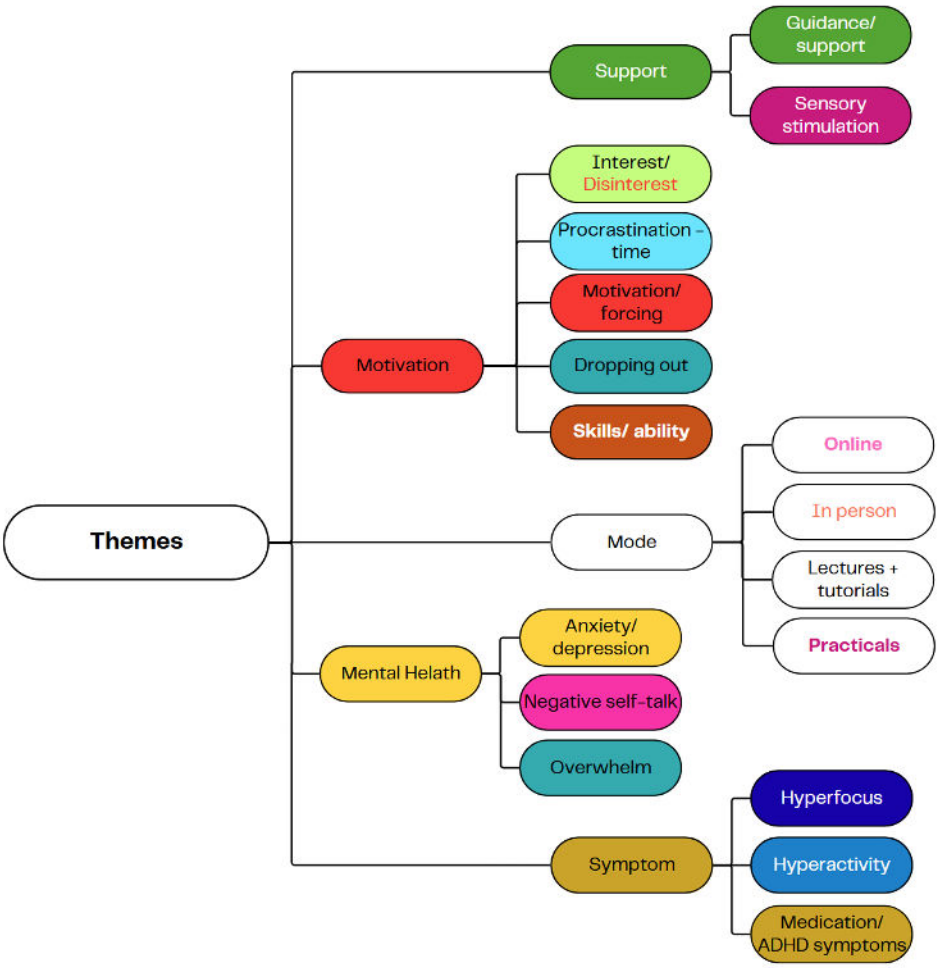


Figure 7: Semi-structured interview thematic analysis code.

Participant 1:

This interview was conducted with an arts student, who suspects they have undiagnosed ADHD, paired with autism. As the first interview, some errors were made in the interview process, meaning that the information was not as deep as subsequent interviews. For this participant, their main challenges which present are procrastination and poor time management. The participant mentioned that strict scheduling was imperative to ensuring success, and that in order to get tasks done, they had to schedule completion times ahead of schedule.

In terms of sensory needs, this participant did not display any significant sensory challenges. They reported that they used to use fidget toys, however did not find the need to use them anymore.

Participant 2:

A chemistry student with diagnosed ADHD, who has previously been removed from a computer science course due to low academic achievement. This participant reported motivation and time management as her greatest challenge. She indicated that whilst the practical nature of her current course has been better for her as someone with ADHD, she still struggles with executive functioning and brain hyperactivity. When asked about her use of apps, she mentioned that she believes some are useful, however she is unmotivated to use them.

Participant 3:

A medical laboratory student with a formal ADHD diagnosis, who has changed university course twice. For him, the direct job outcomes, as well as the practical and engaging nature of his current pursuit are much more attractive, making it easier to engage with the course.

His greatest challenges associated with his ADHD diagnosis are hyperactivity and a tendency to become distracted, and poor time management. He has experienced university both before and after the COVID-19 pandemic, and in his experience, the strict scheduling of lectures pre-COVID was much better for him, as it reduced the potential for procrastination. He mentioned that nowadays, online learning has made it more challenging for him to stay accountable, and he often falls behind,

which has a direct impact on his mental health, specifically anxiety.

Participant 4:

An engineering diploma student with a formal ADHD diagnosis, this participant has previously withdrawn from a science degree. She mentioned that her perfectionism and negative self-perception were key contributors to her withdrawal. Her main challenges associated with her ADHD are motivation, need for novelty, and procrastination. For her, the use of planners and calendars is essential for success. She also mentions that negative self-talk and the risk of failure is the biggest motivator for task completion, and she recognised that external motivators such as study groups are also helpful.

Currently, she is not medicated, however she has been medicated in the past. She acknowledged that medication is very helpful in achieving a 'state of flow'. When she is not medicated, she has a tendency to spend more time *organising* and *decorating* work than doing work, to give herself a sense of accomplishment.

She is particularly sensitive to bright lighting, mentioning that it makes focus more challenging. She is also sensitive to noise, indicating that she finds it incredibly difficult to study when there is not enough audio stimulation.

Participant 5:

A past law and arts student, who has a formal ADHD diagnosis. The biggest challenge associated with university for this participant was getting through course readings associated with her law degree. For her, she attributed her lack of interest in the readings, as well as the overwhelming volume of readings. She believes that her ADHD symptoms of inattentiveness and lack of focus made the readings more challenging. She also found the lack of accountability at university challenging to manage. As a result, she often skipped classes due to anxiety, which led to lower grades.

Conversely, she mentioned that she had a tendency to become hyper-focused in classes which she was interested in. As someone who now works in the law profession, she now finds law cases easier to digest, and she believes this is because there is now a practical application for the material.

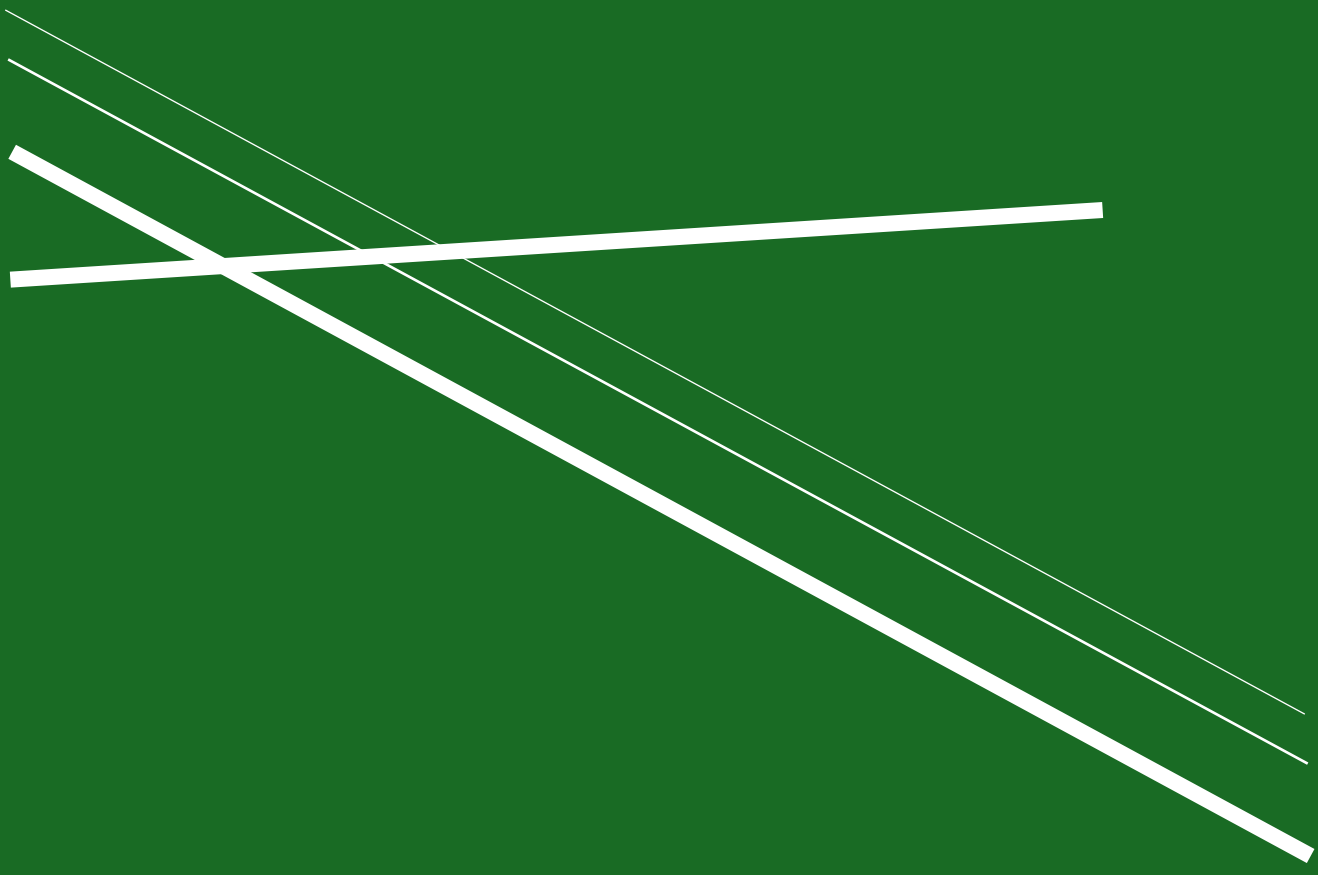
When asked about sensory needs, she mentioned that she finds external noise overstimulating, and feels the need to wear noise-cancelling headphones in public, however, she also requires audio stimuli such as podcasts in order to focus on tasks. In terms of hyperactivity, she mentioned that she is someone who uses fidget toys, and finds staying in one position for prolonged periods of time uncomfortable.

Summary

The findings of the primary research show common themes between both the survey and the interviews. A wide range of information was gathered regarding the adverse effects of ADHD on the tertiary education experience, and the significant challenges people with the disorder face.

Section Three:

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS



Discussion

Overview

This section will discuss the findings of the research, linking it to prior knowledge in order to create meaning.

Discussion

Key findings identified in both primary and secondary research indicate that for people with ADHD, the key symptoms of the disorder – inattentiveness, hyperactivity and lack of executive function – cause the greatest challenges for them in tertiary education. It was found that the lack of executive function experienced by people with the disorder leads to poor time management, often causing people to fall behind on coursework, procrastinate assignment deadlines, and ultimately skip tutorials and lectures. Unfortunately, this can cause people to suffer from lower self-efficacy, corroborating the information in the background.

In terms of ADHD management strategies, mixed responses indicated that there are a lack of effective management aids available to people with ADHD. The most common management strategy was scheduling and planning. Despite this, many respondents still reported struggling with time management and procrastination. It is possible that this could be due to the fact that there was no obvious advantage for people to compete tasks. For those who indicated that they use app-based solutions, the most common use was planning and scheduling, however it was evident that most of the apps included a level of interaction and novelty, key motivating factors for people with ADHD.

Across all levels of research, it was clear that sensory needs posed unique challenges for people with ADHD, and through the primary research, it became evident that these sensory needs varied between people. The heightened sensory experience often increased the symptoms of ADHD, leading to sensory overwhelm and further distraction. Whilst research on this experience was gathered through primary research, limited academic sources were found, indicating that further research into the

sensory needs of people with ADHD should be conducted in the future.

Meeting the research gap

Taking all information into consideration, it is clear that the primary research conducted has contributed to the lacking research on the experience tertiary education for people with ADHD. It has explored the strategies that current and past students use to manage their symptoms of ADHD, and it has achieved a deeper understanding of their deepest challenges, especially around executive function.

Design Implications

Overview

Here, the design implications of the project informed by the experiences of people with ADHD in tertiary education will be explored. It is hoped that these opportunities will lead to an effective design solution to improve the experience of tertiary education for those with ADHD.

Executive function

Lack of executive function is the cause of many of the challenges and behaviours associated with ADHD. As this symptom is caused by a neurological disorder, it will not be possible to 'solve' executive dysfunction through design solutions. Rather, this challenge should be considered in the design process. The research showed that many people rely on the use of calendars and planners to assist with executive function. Therefore, by incorporating elements of planning systems which are engaging and easy to understand, it could be possible to reach an outcome which targets executive function.

Time management and procrastination

Whilst poor time management and procrastination are behavioural pattens, there is opportunity to design solutions which aid people to manage this challenge. Physical solutions may be beneficial for users, eliminating the presence of mobile phones, a key contributor to the issue. This is important, as it is counterproductive to design solutions which inadvertently encourage procrastination.

Sensory needs

As many people with ADHD are highly sensitive to sound and light, there is potential to address sensory needs, making the experience of education and study more accessible. By acknowledging the need for sound (or other sensory input) to be 'just right', people with the disorder would benefit from being able to tailor their sensory environment to their needs. It is important to acknowledge that the sensory needs of each individual change drastically, so incorporating

elements of customisation may be advantageous.

Hyperactivity

Hyperactivity, typically presenting in the form of fidgeting and physical movement, can be debilitating for people with ADHD. Whilst it was identified that there is a need to facilitate movement, there is opportunity to design solutions which provide users with discreet management options. This is important, especially as many people do not want to draw more attention to their behaviours through the use of loud or obvious items.

Novelty and interest

A key motivating factor for people with ADHD is interest and novelty. As a result, it can be very challenging for them to persist with coursework which they perceive to be boring. Therefore, incorporating interest and novelty into the design outcome is essential to ensure engagement.

Summary

These design implications have been drawn from the research findings, and are intended to be a guide the final project design solution.

Conclusion

This research report explored the experiences of tertiary education for people with ADHD. Through the process of benchmarking, and primary research – surveys and semi-structured interviews – it was found that there is significant opportunity for design interventions which improve this experience. The research conducted was rich in nature, and provides a strong foundation for the project.

Moving forward, it is anticipated that a physical solution will be designed, which focuses on addressing challenges around executive function, time management, and the sensory needs of people with ADHD. If this is achieved, it is likely that the experience of tertiary education will become more manageable for those with ADHD. This will have significant benefits for them, especially when it comes to entering the workforce, and achieving high results.

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