

OU academic awarded for research in the autism field

Contributors in clip: Ilona Roth

Clip transcript:

Ilona Roth:

I'm Ilona Roth, I'm a Senior Lecturer in Psychology in the School of Life, Health & Chemical Sciences. My research has been nominated for the category 'Outstanding Impact of Research on Teaching & Learning, Curriculum and Students'. The reason I've been nominated in this category starts with The Open University. The Open University has global reach, a very large and diverse student body and quite a number – a relatively large number of students with mental health conditions and / or neurodiverse learning styles. So I as an autism researcher, also with some interests in dementia, am especially well-placed to provide curriculum and teaching which is of interest to a wide group of students, and is also of specific benefit to a large number of students who have personal or professional interest in this field.

Each of the aspects of autism research that I'm involved in has a relevance, both for The Open University and for the outside world. One of the areas that I've been involved in is in looking at creative work by people on the autism spectrum. Now that feeds into a growing recognition that autism's not just a matter of deficits – things that people with autism can't do – it's also increasingly recognised that people with autism have skills, and in some cases outstanding talents. So one area of research that I have been involved in involves analysing poetry by people on the autism spectrum. Now it's very surprising to most people to learn that anyone with autism can write poetry, let alone – as I discovered – that it's not just any old poetry, it has imagination, it has creativity. And this challenges a whole picture of what the thinking style in autism is like.

Another area of research I'm involved in is special interests that people with autism often tend to have, these are interests which are very focused and often pursued very vigorously, with a commitment sometimes bordering on obsession. Now there's a received view, especially from parents, that these special interests are detrimental to other kinds of learning, and to socialisation with other people – but actually, they can be harnessed. Now my own work was on adults with special interests, and I did a survey which showed that for adults, special interests are highly fulfilling and motivating, and also may contribute to well-being. And I think that's something that could be fed into our work with our undergraduates on the autism spectrum.

Finally, I've had the good fortune to be involved in autism in a cross-cultural world-wide arena. Autism is a global problem. It's world-wide, but whereas the research and the facilities for autism tend to be focused on affluent Western societies, in lower-income, less developed parts of the world there is low awareness of autism, certainly low provision and support. So I was involved in a project in Ethiopia exploring awareness of autism, the level of stigma, and in writing training materials on both autism and other mental health conditions, which we have since developed further into an OpenLearn Create course for community mental health work world-wide.