

# NHS Lothian Researcher Profile

Izy Utley, Speech and Language Therapist, Community Learning Disability Team



## What type of doctoral student are you?

I am a Clinical Doctorate Student at University of Stirling and started my studies in September 2021, with joint fees funding from NHS Lothian and the university. By background is that I did a degree in psychology at Bangor University, North Wales in 2003 and then went on to become a Speech and Language Therapist, undertaking a post-graduate diploma at City University, London and qualifying in 2009. I worked across various children's and young people's teams in London with a focus on learning disability and autism. I've been working in NHS Lothian since 2016 and in

2016-2017 I led a project in Edinburgh and Addiewell prisons to increase awareness of learning disability in the prison service.

My study leave is supported by my service and I've had some focused weeks of study leave before assignments have been due. The format of study leave is likely to change as the doctorate progresses and there will be different time demands at different time. My manager has been responsive to this need and there is flexibility within our service.

## What is the focus of your research?

My study isn't finalised yet but will be something like 'what does autism mean to autistic adults who have a co-occurring learning disability?' I plan to explore the views and experiences of autistic adults with a learning disability around their autism diagnosis.

## Why is this research study important?

Clinically people often ask what is the point of an autism diagnosis for someone who has a learning disability? The research clearly shows that autistic adults find a diagnosis useful for understanding themselves and helping to develop strategies. However, people with a learning disability are not included in this research and so we do not know if they feel the same way and if the diagnosis is something which they value. Autistic adults with a learning disability are often left out of the wider

adult autism research. Often this is because they cannot access the methodology (e.g. online questionnaires, focus groups).

## What kind of research study do you plan to do?

This study will most likely be qualitative. I want to find out the views and experiences of autistic people with a learning disability. This is likely to take a bit of time and I would like the methodology to be accessible. This means that people who use other means of communication such as alternative and augmentative communication (AAC) can be included. It might involve individual interviews, however, I am also interested in investigating approaches such as Talking Mats and Photo Voice. I am keen to take an approach where I can be led by the participants. I'm also really keen to involve autistic adults with or without a learning disability

in the design and analysis of the research if possible. I am aware that they have skills that I will be missing in this research.

**Why was this group of people important to you?**

The study participants will be autistic adults with a learning disability. This is a group of people who often experience health inequalities and face stigma. Getting their views is key to creating good services and appropriate support to improve quality of life.

**Why did you want to do doctoral studies?**

I've been interested in doctoral level studies for a while. I enjoy learning and reading and am passionate about contributing to the evidence base. For me having a clinical focus to the research is really important and helps make things relevant for practicing clinicians. My application for the doctorate coincided with having the clinical question about the value of autism diagnosis for adults with a learning disability and realising there was a gap in the literature.

**What are you enjoying the most about being a doctoral student?**

I'm loving being a doctoral student. I'm really enjoying having the time and focus to think about things differently and to delve into relevant philosophy and psychology about how we see the world. It's changed my clinical thinking already, I particularly enjoyed reading about behaviour change and feel this is so integral to everything we do clinically but something we learn very little about.

**What have been the main challenges for you being a doctoral student?**

The main challenge has definitely been time. There is so much that I find to read and it is difficult to stay on task and not go down rabbit

holes of information. Adding family and work to this can make it difficult to find time to complete work.

**How have you been supported to do this work?**

I have tried to link in with my clinical team and keep them updated with what I am doing and any learning. I've attended sessions run by the Speech and Language Clinical Academic Clinical Excellence Network (CEN) which runs across the UK.

I've found the NHS Lothian NMAHP doctoral group really useful and I have been able to track my learning by how much I now understand when someone presents! I've also been lucky to have a very supportive group from NHS Lothian on the doctorate course. We've got quite a big class in the clinical doctorate but everyone has been supportive and it is really useful having people from different clinical backgrounds.

Since starting the clinical doctorate I have started working 1 day a week for the National Autism Implementation Team (NAIT) at Queen Margaret University as a research fellow. Being involved in literature review, collecting data and analysis in real life has helped me to see my doctorate modules come to life.

**What do you hope to do in the future? How will having a doctorate help you achieve this?**

In the future I would love to be able to combine clinical and academic work. I feel that there is a lot of scope for post-doctoral work in my area of interest and I hope that I can combine this with leading in a clinical capacity.

I think speech and language therapists have a key role in supporting all research in learning disability to be accessible to as many participants as possible.

**Any other thoughts?**

I would encourage anyone thinking of doctorate level study to pursue this, particularly those from an AHP professions where clinical academic roles may not be as common.

**For more information please contact:**

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