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“The autism sector in India is moving in a positive direction but requires stronger systems”

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With an aim to strengthen India’s ecosystem for autism support through structured knowledge exchange and capacity building, UK-based Ruskin Mill Trust has recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the India Autism Center (IAC) and has come on board as IAC’s official Knowledge Partner. As we approach the World Autism Day on 2 April, BioSpectrum took this opportunity to speak with Aonghus Gordon & Oliver Cheney on how to improve employability outcomes for neurodiverse individuals in India.



What is the current scenario of the autism sector in India?

Aonghus Gordon: The autism sector in India is at a critical stage of growth and transition. Awareness around Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) has increased significantly in recent years, particularly in urban centres, leading to improved early identification and parental engagement. However, access to quality services remains uneven, with rural and semi-urban areas facing substantial gaps.

A major challenge is the shortage of trained professionals and the limited availability of integrated, lifespan-based support. While early intervention services are gradually expanding, structured pathways for adolescents and adults, especially in vocational training, independent living, and community inclusion remain underdeveloped.

Overall, the sector is moving in a positive direction but requires stronger systems, workforce capacity, and integrated models to ensure sustainable, lifelong support for individuals with autism and their families with residential care models. Residential initiatives by the India Autism Center represent a shift from fragmented service delivery to integrated, long term care systematic approach.

What are the challenges that you aim to address through the partnership with India Autism Center?

Aonghus Gordon: This collaboration aims to support the development of a world-leading ecosystem for autism education, care, and lifelong learning in India. Drawing on 35 years of experience in highly regulated education, therapeutic, and social care environments, Ruskin Mill Trust will act as a strategic advisor and critical friend to help strengthen policies, procedures, metrics, training frameworks, and programme delivery methodologies.

At the heart of both organisations is a shared belief that every individual is unique, with distinct skills and abilities. The Practical Skills Therapeutic Education approach focuses on enabling potential rather than modifying behaviour, with an emphasis on ability rather than disability.

How is this partnership structured to ensure measurable knowledge transfer in areas such as curriculum design, governance frameworks, and workforce training?

Oliver Cheney: The partnership is structured through a programme of onsite visits, inspections, workforce development workshops, presentations, and strategic meetings. These engagements foster a strong culture of knowledge transfer and institutional strengthening.

By supporting curriculum enhancement, governance framework development, operational metrics, and workforce capability building, the collaboration ensures that improvements are measurable, sustainable, and embedded within the organisation's systems.

From a systems-building perspective, how can such international knowledge partnerships contribute to policy advocacy, ecosystem development, and private-sector participation?

Oliver Cheney: Our collaboration is grounded in a shared commitment to building sustainable, research-informed systems. By establishing robust operational models and strengthening institutional frameworks, the partnership contributes to improved standards and policy advocacy at a national level.

Such international partnerships also help cultivate a wider ecosystem by empowering families, professionals, and communities, while encouraging greater collaboration between public institutions and private-sector stakeholders.

What opportunities does this collaboration create for cross-border research, training exchanges, or professional development between the UK and India?

Oliver Cheney: The collaboration opens opportunities for reciprocal learning, innovation, and professional development between the UK and India. With strong cultural alignment and shared values, both organisations stand to benefit from knowledge exchange, research-informed practices, and cross-border training initiatives.

This marks the beginning of a long-term partnership focused on mutual growth, innovation, and the strengthening of autism education and care ecosystems in both contexts.