



Neurodivergent Learners: Inclusive and Accessible Practices in Higher Education

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Abstract

An increasing number of students in higher education are neurodivergent, shaping and challenging the practices of how staff teach in higher education. This chapter seeks to outline why higher education staff should meet the needs of neurodivergent students, and how this can be done. This chapter begins by outlining the relationship between biodiversity and neurodiversity, and definitions are provided for neurodiversity and related terms. Second, barriers neurodivergent students may face are explored. Finally, universal design for learning is presented as a vehicle for inclusive and accessible practice, with clear examples of how this relates to neurodivergent learners. The chapter thematically reports the needs of neurodivergent learners based on both the knowledge and experience of the authors, as well as from other neurodivergent students. The themes are considered communication, technological assistance, being predictable and meeting expectations, normalising everyone's needs (or rather, normalise neurodivergence).

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Introduction

An increasing number of students in Higher Education are neurodivergent, shaping and challenging the practices of how staff teach in Higher Education. This chapter provides a review of the literature to date on inclusive and accessible practices in Higher Education for neurodivergent students, and explains the importance of such practices through linking them to reflexive teaching practice (see Brookfield, 1993) and Universal Design for Learning. In this chapter, information is provided on creating an accessible and inclusive learning environment. First, the relationship between biodiversity and neurodiversity is outlined and definitions are provided for neurodiversity and related terms. Second, the chapter will explore the barriers neurodivergent students may face. Finally, the focus turns to Universal Design for Learning as a vehicle for inclusive and accessible practice, with clear examples of how this relates to neurodivergent learners.

The approach to this chapter

The chapter presents a review of the literature to date, with findings from the review from other neurodivergent students, and a survey was used as a verification strategy. The data collection gained a favourable ethical opinion from the University of Sunderland in August 2023. The names provided are pseudonyms that were selected by the participants sharing their experiences. 8 respondents completed a Qualtrics survey asking about their time at University. All participants were based in UK universities, including across the principalities of Wales, Scotland and England. In collecting data, only the respondents' neurodivergent identity/ies, a pseudonym of their choice, and their experiences were asked. Participants were welcome to participate with a diagnosis, or who self-identify as neurodivergent. In the survey, the inquiry focused on what had worked, what has not worked and what they would like Higher Education staff to know in three areas: curriculum design, assessments and the learning environment. There was also space at the end of the survey for other thoughts and experiences participants wanted to share. The chapter uses these insights to support the findings from the literature review. Quotes from the individuals who filled out the survey are provided.

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