

## What is Neurodiversity?

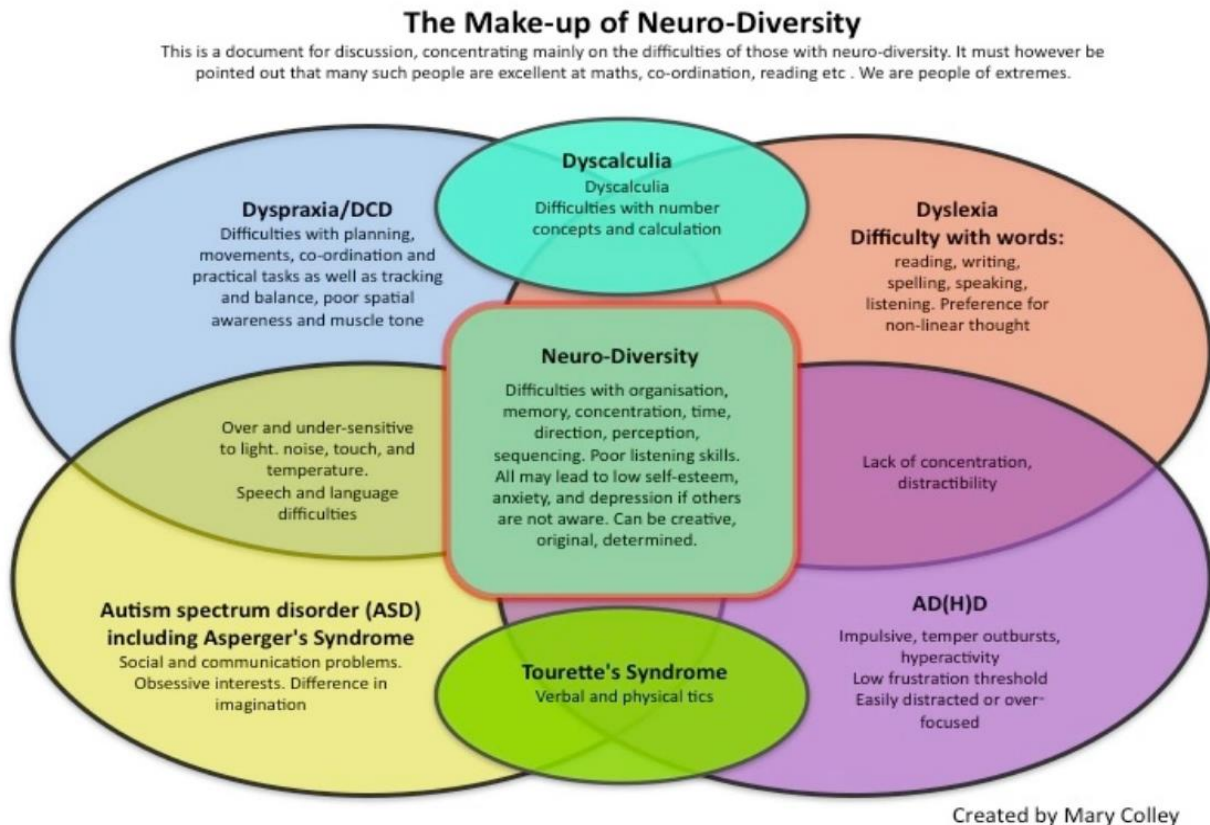


Diagram source A: <https://aegyokawaiisneurodiversityblog.wordpress.com/2015/01/31/wired-differently/>

## NEURODIVERSITY IN THE WORKPLACE

### Introduction:

“Neurodiversity refers to the natural range of difference in human brain function, but in a workplace (and educational) context, it's an area of diversity and inclusion that refers to alternative thinking (and learning styles) for dyslexia, autism, ADHD and dyspraxia etc.” (1). Organisations are harnessing these differences as their neurodivergent employees are capable of coming up with more creative solutions to problems as they are addressing them from different angles.

This guidance aims to ensure the benefits of having a 'neurodiverse' workforce are fully realised, to increase awareness of neurodiversity among staff and provide managers with advice how best to support individuals including those people who are neurodivergent in the workplace. For employees that are neurodivergent we encourage them to advocate their strengths and abilities, so others can benefit from these, and understand how their capabilities can be maximised.

It is now widely recognised that neurodiversity is the result of natural human variation in neurocognition and there is no one 'typical' brain type.

**Terminology:** to follow this guidance some terms have been outlined:

**Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)**...is classified as a brain-based disorder characterised by a persistent pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity and impulsivity. (*NICE 2008*)

**Autism**... spectrum disorders are characterised in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders as forms of a developmental disability characterised by rigid thinking, restrictive and repetitive behaviours and social communication challenges. Most people on this spectrum also experience some form of sensory sensitivity due to functional hyper-connectivity across multiple brain regions, which, when experienced may make the individual prone to feeling overwhelmed and anxious.

**Dyslexia**...is defined by the British Dyslexia Association (BDA) as a lifelong specific learning difficulty that mainly affects the development of literacy and language related skills, characterised by difficulties with phonological processing, rapid

naming, working memory, processing speed and the automatic development of skills that may not match up to an individual's other cognitive abilities.

**Dyspraxia...**The Dyspraxia Foundation Guide describes dyspraxia as an impairment or immaturity of the organisation of movement. It is a brain-based condition and may have associated problems with language, perception and thought. (*Perception includes vision, hearing and proprioception, or the awareness of where your limbs are in space- Dyspraxia UK.*)

In considering the integration and inclusion of neurodivergent people with for example: Attention Deficit Disorder, Autism, Dyslexia and Dyspraxia, the charity Scope explains "The Social Model of disability says that disability is caused by the way society is organised, rather than by a person's impairment or difference. It looks at ways of removing barriers that restrict life choices for disabled people. When barriers are removed, disabled people can be independent and equal in society, with choice and control over their own lives" (2.) it is essential to provide with the necessary support and adjustments to enable individuals to thrive in the mainstream workplace and advance the organisation's business with their specific knowledge and skill sets. It is important to note that an individual's neurodivergence is on a spectrum with a range of associated characteristics and present in varying degree and/or combinations. Consequently, the characteristics displayed in one individual with one or more neurodivergent conditions will not necessarily match another person with the same condition(s). In addition, an individual's handling of challenging characteristics associated with their circumstances will differ at points in time.

## **Neurodivergence- Employee Journey FAQ's**

### **1. What are Reasonable Adjustments (or access requirements)?**

**Answer:** These are changes to the work environment to enable individuals with a disability to work safely and effectively. The Equality Act 2010 stipulates that employers have a 'duty' to make 'reasonable adjustments' to support them in the workplace. Free or inexpensive examples include adjustments to office lighting, noise levels, equipment e.g. monitor screen brightness/sound, provisions to aid desk organisation, through to reshaping roles, reduction in workload

### **2. Many neurodivergent individuals experience sensory hypersensitivity, what is this?**

**Answer:** Often neurodivergent employees are hypersensitive to light, noise or both. In an open-plan office for example may make them feel uncomfortable. This could make them reluctant to attend work, lead to increased absence and potentially result in absence management procedures and sanctions.

Another area of sensory sensitivity may include personal protective clothing. Frequently, new work uniform needs to be washed prior to being worn for the first time.

### 3. What might a support and inclusive environment look like?

**Answer:** Universities need to actively promote and meaningfully engage with an inclusivity approach and welcome to all. Our recruitment practices including advertising the role, following interview, induction, training and broader policies/procedures/systems relating to performance management and development should not disadvantage neurodivergent employees, but encourage a supportive environment, in which neurodivergent employees feel more able to disclose a diagnosis and confirm what works for them so they can enable and receive the reasonable adjustments to work more effectively.

Assistive technologies to support individuals; is something that Access to Work highly recommend to workplaces as reasonable adjustments.

**Note:** Formal diagnostic assessment does not currently form part of the University's contractual arrangements with our Occupational Health supplier (Duradiamond Health). However, it is possible source formal diagnostic assessments if requested via the normal management referral form. This can be achieved on a one-off basis, with Duradiamond requesting a quote from an appropriate supplier, provide the University with a quote and invoice the employee's given faculty or directorate management for payment.

Employers and recruiting managers should thoroughly review the candidate journey to ensure a positive experience, which does not disadvantage individuals who are neurodivergent.

For example:

- Recruitment practices: e.g. **AVOID** using unclear, jargon, stereotypical job descriptions that exclude neurodivergent talent by requiring a generalist (broad based, competent in several different fields or activities) when perhaps specialist (concentrates primarily on a particular subject or activities, highly skilled in a specific or restricted field) skills could meet the hiring need.  
  
(Use and Include an equality and inclusion statement, neurodiversity within employer branding and potential examples where neurodivergent employees have been supported and success within the organisation).
- Selection: e.g. **AVOID** unconscious bias, overly tough critique of spelling resulting in screening out talented people with dyslexia.  
  
**ENSURE** to review previous work examples within selection process as an indication of a candidate's capabilities.
- Interview: e.g. **AVOID** unprepared interview panels penalising lack of eye contact, unconventional body language; creating confusion and stress due to rushed additional assessments/tests. Instead **PROVIDE** work trials, practical assessments (either in person/or remotely), mini apprenticeships. **DISCUSS** any potential need for reasonable adjustments/access requirements (it is against the law to ask if a candidate has a disability directly in all but a very few exceptional

circumstances); **PROVIDE** clear, concise and paced questions in the same sequence (beneficial for dyslexic and other neurodivergent individuals); with time to absorb the question and respond.

Opportunities for disclosure within interview and subsequent hiring processes (if successful). **AVOID** asking further questions about the disclosure, panel member being influenced by the disclosure in their selection.

**Note:** there is no general duty to disclose, however if their condition poses a risk to themselves or others the candidate should raise this.

- Following interview: e.g. **ENSURE** to provide a further opportunity to discuss adjustments to achieve their role productively after being offered the position and instigate the completion a DSE work-station assessment.
- Induction: e.g. **AVOID** over emphasis on social interaction/ice breakers as this could potentially increase levels of stress, particularly those who have social communication challenges; induction information overload, instead provide comprehensive information in advance in various formats including diagrams, pictures etc. **ENSURE** to cover typical working hours, breaks, communication channels, DSE assessments to consider workspace preferences considering light, noise alongside the other standard requirements. Consider additional

internal support from the Health & Safety Unit and external support from Access to Work for larger adjustments.

- Training: e.g. **PROVIDE** Neurodivergence awareness training across the organisation as this will develop awareness, understanding and appreciation among colleagues. **PROMOTE** 'a comfortable space' to talk about neurodivergence within the workforce/team, as this will put neurodivergent employees at their ease and encourage managers and colleagues to approach issues without the fear of 'getting it wrong'. This will help to alleviate potential perceptions of colleagues that neurodivergent individuals are not capable of their role, lazy and result in them regretting disclosure due to negative repercussions (preventing others from disclosing). A potential consequence of this in some extreme cases, could be complaints or bullying about an individual's work or behaviour in the workplace. **ENCOURAGE** and train colleagues to respond sensitively to someone disclosing their neurodivergence and how to manage projects in an inclusive manner to achieve maximum inclusion and productivity.

#### **4. Managers, Performance Management and Appraisal FAQ's**

Many of the person-centered processes to manage neurodivergence in the workplace can benefit the whole team. Managers need to, for example: focus on their clarity of communications, acquire a full appreciation of an



individual's strengths/challenges and how these can be tailored and developed within their career progression.

**1. What 'unwritten' information is important when neurodivergent people start their role?**

**Answer:** Clear communication is essential, so 'unwritten' rules/conventions can be challenging, if time is not taken by the manager to discuss time at work, breaks, dress code etc.

**2. What does clear task communication look like?**

**Answer:** Taking **time** is important in task communication, **AVOID** rushing to alleviate confusion, stress and anxiety.

People who are neurodivergent also value information in several formats to gain understanding, so using a variation of verbal, written, pictures, images, 1:1, structured communication methods will support effective working. Afford time for individuals with dyslexia and dyspraxia to consider using mnemonics (a system such as a pattern of letters, ideas or associations, which assists in remembering something) and mind maps to help in prioritising workload and meeting deadlines.

### **3. What is a 'strengths based' management approach?**

**Answer:** Often managers rely on rigid performance management and development frameworks, which disadvantage people who are neurodivergent, focusing on perceived areas of weakness instead of the specific areas of talent/skill they excel at. Reports suggest that an 'appreciative model of enquiry' instead of a deficit model has the advantage of creating a positive foundation for improvement, by investing in the areas an individual is good at and applying these to wider aspects of their role (3). This encourages a more focused approach to core skills and competencies, where an individual may be highly specialised in preference to a broader, minimal skill base across a wider range of a performance framework.

### **4. What are the benefits of being flexible?**

**Answer:** One example may be working time. Individual employees often have preferences as to their working pattern and frequency of social interaction, so a flexible and understanding managerial approach can enhance productivity and well-being. Another example could be role flexibility. A dyspraxic employee finding certain aspects of their role difficult e.g. construct/read/manage a spreadsheet, managers should consider a role adjustment to use their strengths; adjust the amount of time to complete the task or provide assistive technology to support them.

## 5. When and what should positive feedback look like?

**Answer:** Regular informal and formal, scheduled constructive feedback are essential to the performance management of neurodivergent people. Opportunities for the employee to feedback to their manager and managers to review their progress/ascertain where they can further assist an employee, will develop confidence and capabilities - improving productivity. Ongoing praise and expressing gratitude, will benefit all employees but particularly those who may have low self-esteem due to negative experiences in previous workplaces.

## 6. How should you introduce change?

**Answer: Sensitively.** Neurodivergent people, particularly those who are autistic, benefit and thrive within formal routines. However, change either small or large can be significantly disruptive and stressful. Take **time**, in **advance** to **inform** of change in a timely manner, explaining in concise and meaningful terms the reasons behind it. This will allow time for a gentler adjustment; opportunity for questions and clarification with a potential 'added benefit' of gaining positive ownership of the change, over time by those directly affected.

## **7. How important are support and pastoral care?**

**Answer:** Managers are crucial in over-seeing staff engagement and well-being in the workplace. Managers should provide regular opportunities for informal/formal supervision. Human Resources (HR) and the University Wellbeing Hub can support managers to be aware of relevant internal provisions, for example: simple, localised reasonable adjustments for different neuro-minorities, signposting to various support (e.g. Staff Disability Network, Health & Safety Unit). In addition, external support mechanisms (e.g. Employee Assistance Programme; Occupational Health) can enhance the employee experience and make individuals feel considered and valued.

## **8. What can be done to support career progression?**

### **- (support and mentoring strategies)**

**Answer:** Encouraging, recognising and progressing the benefits and values of a neurodivergent workforce can be led by the University Senior Leadership. Championing, speaking and sponsoring neurodiversity through an organisation's work programme; its internal communications and other social media platforms e.g. blogs Twitter etc., and the visibility of neurodivergent role model employees who have succeed within the business can all support inclusivity.

Neurodivergent employees can often be overlooked for progression due to a lack of self-confidence and self-esteem. Allied to an employee's line manager having open conversations about individual's career aspirations and opportunities available, additional support could be sought from HR, a job coach, internal/external mentors and other vocational assistance such as 'buddy-systems' and staff networks.

- **Human Resource Managers** -working with line managers to support neurodivergent employees with for example: appraisals, academic framework requirements.
- **Job coach** – 1:1 provision of opportunities to have additional support and training to fill potential skill gaps and to consider a wider holistic perspective, including an individual's well-being and mental health.
- **Mentors**- regularly spaced, 1:1 support as an independent advisor and 'sounding board' around an organisation's expectations and unwritten conventions, which may be causing stress and anxiety. For example: how to prepare for a perceived challenging topic with their line manager, in a constructive manner that achieves a positive outcome.
- **Buddies**- a colleague within the employee's own team or from another part of the organisation, who can provide regular support with practical tasks/work activities they are newly learning or having difficulty with.

- **Staff Networks-** support and advocacy of the benefits of a neurodivergent workforce; promoting and signposting internal, operational resources within the business including job vacancies can engage and reassure individuals that they are welcome and an asset.

### **\*Appendix 1: Glossary**

**Neurodiversity:** the biological reality of infinite variation in human neurocognitive functioning and behaviour, akin to 'biodiversity' in the natural world. The term 'neurodiversity' is now also being used to describe the fast- emerging sub-category of work diversity and inclusion which focuses on including people who are neurodivergent.

**The Neurodiversity Paradigm:** a perspective on neurodiversity that suggests neurodiversity is a result of natural human variation, and that there is no one 'typical' brain type. Stands in contrast to the highly medicalised perspective (until recently, the dominant perspective globally) that views autism, ADHD and others as 'disorders' to be treated.

**Neurodivergent:** having cognitive functioning different from what is seen as 'typical'-while the term appears to reflect the 'medical model' above, it is a term that most neurodivergent people are comfortable with. Neurodivergence is largely or entirely genetic or innate-such as dyslexia-other forms of neuro divergence can be acquired, such as via an incidence of brain trauma (including dyslexia).

**Neurodivergence:** the state of being neurodivergent. It is worth noting that a common misuse of language is to talk of '*an individual's neurodiversity*' better would be '**an individual's neurodivergence**'.

**Neurodiverse:** this term is often used instead of 'neurodivergent', yet it is potentially problematic (akin, perhaps, to referring to an African-Caribbean person as 'racially diverse'). A group can be neurodiverse, an individual is likely better described as neurodivergent.

**Neurotypical:** given the biological fact that there is no such thing as a 'typical' brain, neurotypical is best thought of as not 'neurodivergent'-that is, within parameters of neurocognitive style that have not been either medically defined as 'disorders' or culturally defined as 'neurodivergent'. It is important not to draw simple lines in the sand between 'neurotypicals' and neurodivergent people-human diversity is a highly complex spectrum, in which everyone sits.

**Neurominority:** a group such as autistic people, or dyslexic people, defined by sharing a similar form of neurodivergence. There is invariably great variety within each neurominority demographic. (*CIPD Neurodiversity at Work Guide, February 2018*).

## References

A/ The Makeup of Neurodiversity (diagram). Mary Colley (2006) Living with Dyspraxia: A guide for Adults with Developmental Dyspraxia. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

1. [www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/fundamentals/relations/diversity/neurodiversity-work](http://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/fundamentals/relations/diversity/neurodiversity-work)

2. [www.scope.org.uk/about-us/ourbrand/social-model-of-disability](http://www.scope.org.uk/about-us/ourbrand/social-model-of-disability)

3. *Strengths-based performance conversations: an organisational field trial.*

[www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/fundamentals/people/performance/strengths-based-conversations](http://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/fundamentals/people/performance/strengths-based-conversations)

\* <http://neurocosmpolitanism.com/neurodiversity-some-basic-terms-definition>