

Thinking about Neurodiversity and Neuroinclusion: A Resource for all Staff

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Understanding Neurodiversity and Neurodifferences

1. Introduction

Embracing neurodiversity can bring real value to Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU), helping to increase creativity and innovation, bring new approaches to problem solving, increase employee engagement, and ensure that we understand and reflect the student community that we serve. However, too often neurodivergent individuals can face barriers in the workplace which prevent them from fulfilling their potential.

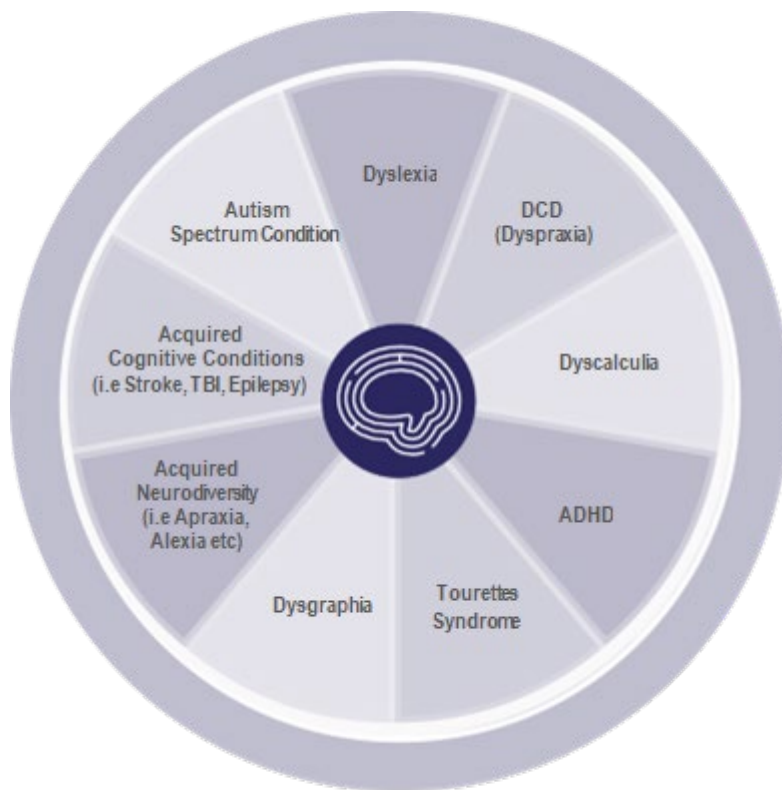
This guide is designed to help all staff at LJMU to understand more about neurodiversity and its value, about how to create a neuro-inclusive culture where they work and how to be a good ally to neurodivergent colleagues. It also provides useful information on how to access support for any staff who are neurodivergent themselves. Finally, it provides practical advice on neuro-inclusive teaching, empowering neurodivergent students to perform at their best.

2. What is Neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity refers to the different ways people's brains process information. It is important that we value diversity in neuro development as we would value diversity in other natural human variations such as gender, race or sexual orientation.

15-20% of the global population is thought to be neurodivergent¹. Neurodivergent is a term used to describe individuals whose way of processing information differs significantly from the 'neurotypical' majority. Neurodivergent individuals may have one or more

neurodivergence, including dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, ADHD, Autism Spectrum Condition, as well as some less common neurodivergences.



Whilst neurodivergent individuals are likely to meet the legal definition of disability, many do not identify as disabled. They are likely to have unique cognitive profiles, characterised by significant disparities between their cognitive strengths and challengesⁱⁱ. Whilst everyone is different, some of the traits, strengths and challenges that are commonly associated with particular neurodivergences are explained in section 3.

Are mental health conditions neurodivergences?

Some people also consider mental health conditions such as Anxiety, Bipolar Disorder and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, to be neurodivergences. Whilst this guidance takes a more focused approach, it acknowledges that neurodivergences often co-occur with mental health

conditions (see section 4). It is important to treat each person as an individual and to address any challenges in the round, rather than compartmentalising them. Some of the practical suggestions in this guidance will also be relevant to inclusion and support for people with a mental health condition at work. Further advice can be found at <https://www.ljmu.ac.uk/staff/wellbeing>.

Neuro-inclusive language

In this toolkit we use the term 'neurodivergent' to refer to an individual with a neurodifference. However, you may also hear people refer to themselves as 'neurodiverse' or 'neurominority'. Additionally, some individuals prefer person-first language (e.g. person with dyslexia) whereas others prefer identity-first language (e.g. dyslexic person). To use neuro-inclusive language is to understand and adopt the language someone identifies with, and if you're not sure, it is fine to ask them. Don't let worrying about making a mistake stop you from talking about neurodiversity!

3. Common Neurodifferences

Dyslexia

Dyslexia impacts short-term memory, as well as the abilities needed for reading and spelling accurately and fluently. It affects around 10% of the populationⁱⁱⁱ.

Common Strengths: Visual thinking, seeing the big picture, creativity, problem solving and verbal articulation.

Common Workplace Challenges: Note taking, written communication (e.g. reports or emails), reading, absorbing lots of information at once, learning processes, organisation, focus and visual stress.

Case Study:

“I didn’t tell anyone at work I had dyslexia for years. I was able to do many parts of my job easily and well, but I spent a lot of long evenings going over documents and feeling frustrated with the quality of my notes. I found some practical strategies really helped, such as formatting documents so they were easier for me to process and switching to dictation software.”

Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD) / Dyspraxia

Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD), otherwise known as dyspraxia, affects movement, coordination and organisation in up to 6% of the population^{iv}.

Common Strengths: Original ideas, creativity, problem solving and determination.

Common Workplace Challenges: Time management, planning, following directions, moving through the workplace (e.g. bumping into things), typing and handwriting.

Case Study:

“For me, managing my time was an issue. I found it hard to plan my time and I often left tasks unfinished, which made me more stressed and more likely to make mistakes. I found that using mind maps helped me to prioritise my workload better, so I wasn’t panicking at the end of the day.”

Dyscalculia

Dyscalculia affects the acquisition and use of every day mathematical skills in 3-6% of the population^v.

Common Strengths: Good strategic thinking, problem solving and vocabulary.

Common Workplace Challenges: Interpreting and using financial and numerical data (e.g. managing and reporting on budgets or performance metrics), mistakes in calculations and recording of numerical information.

Case Study:

“My job involves working with customers, which I love, but occasionally I have to create invoices and I would often make mistakes. Now, I use templates that make the process a lot simpler, and I have a speaking calculator so I don’t have to worry about mixing up symbols like I used to.”

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

ADHD is associated with one or more of the common overarching traits: hyperactivity (physical and/or mental), impulsivity and challenges sustaining attention. It affects around 5% of the population^{vi}.

Common Strengths: Stamina, enthusiasm, creativity, problem solving, adaptability, hyperfocus, leadership skills.

Common Workplace Challenges: Organisation, concentration, prioritisation, time management, processing instructions, getting going on or completing a task and emotional regulation (e.g. being particularly sensitive to criticism or rejection).

Case Study:

“I find it hard to concentrate for long periods of time. Working with a coach has really helped me to put structure to my day. I avoid arranging meetings close together, and now use a timer which helps me to break up my day, take regular short breaks and keep focused. I also use noise-cancelling headphones to minimise distractions in the office. I’ve started using mindfulness techniques to help me recognise some of the triggers for my distraction and to concentrate on the job in hand.”

Autism Spectrum Condition

ASC (commonly referred to as autism) affects how a person relates to and communicates with other people, and how they interact with the world around them. It affects 1-2% of the population^{vii}.

Common Strengths: Logical thinking, analytical skills, direct communication, attention to detail, good memory and pattern recognition, in-depth knowledge and reliability.

Common Workplace Challenges: managing change, particularly if it is unplanned or unexplained, interpreting ambiguous communications and tasks, interpreting others’ behaviour and intentions, heightened sensory sensitivity (e.g. to noise, artificial light, smells and materials), maintaining eye contact.

Case Study:

“The first few weeks in my new job were overwhelming. I don’t like surrounding myself with too many people, and there were a lot of rules to get used to – some of them unwritten! But then I got a workplace mentor who explained some of the rules about using the

work kitchen, and they helped me to draw up a timetable of my working day, so everything was in small chunks of time. I was given a fixed desk in a quiet area, which was less overwhelming for me.

4. Co-occurrence and Intersectionality

It is common for individuals to have more than one neurodifference and traits can often overlap, for example individuals with ADHD may also experience heightened sensory sensitivity (e.g. to noise, artificial light, smells and materials). Every individual will have a different experience of their neurodifference, and this may be impacted by other intersectional characteristics, such as their gender, race, sexual orientation or social class.

Neurodivergent individuals, on average, also have lower wellbeing levels than the overall population^{viii}, and can be at higher risk of mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression. Mental health challenges may be exacerbated by experiences of not fitting in, discrimination, low confidence, hiding neurodivergent traits, fatigue or sensory overload.

Neurodivergent traits are also sometimes misdiagnosed as symptoms of a mental health condition, particularly amongst girls and women.

Neurodifferences can also co-occur with physical health conditions, such as joint hypermobility and pain.

You can find more information on specific neurodifferences on [Lexxic's website](#).

5. Creating a Neuro-inclusive Culture

Many neurodivergent individuals do not feel comfortable to be themselves at work, or to share information about their neurodifference with their employer. Research has found that 32% of neurodivergent employees

haven't told their employer about their neurodifference^{ix}. In other research 65% of neurodivergent employees said they were worried about stigma and discrimination when asked about barriers to disclosing their neurodifference and/or requesting support^x.

It is important to create a neuro-inclusive culture where people feel safe to be themselves, and to share information about their neurodifference if they wish to do so. This can help individuals to access the support they need with benefits for wellbeing, engagement and performance.

You can help to create a neuro-inclusive culture in your team by:

- Raising awareness of neurodiversity amongst your team and changing the narrative from deficit to valued difference.
- Listening to and sharing the stories and experiences of neurodivergent colleagues where they are willing to share them, helping to challenge misconceptions and stereotypes.
- Challenging any misconceptions or bias that you witness.
- Encouraging different opinions and being flexible about ways of working.
- Talking about your own ways of working and communication preferences, and asking your colleagues about theirs.
- Providing plenty of positive feedback, so that your colleagues know that they are valued and feel safer about asking for support.

It is not your responsibility to suggest to someone that they are neurodivergent. However, if a colleague does share that they are, or may be, neurodivergent, you can help by:

- Remembering that everyone is different, actively listening to the individual and avoiding assumptions about how they are affected or what support they may need.
- Sharing information about sources of support at LJMU.

- Taking time to learn about the neurodifference, e.g. through reviewing training resources.

Support that may benefit neurodivergent colleagues

6. Reasonable Adjustments

Whilst neurodivergent individuals often bring significant strengths to their teams, they can also benefit from practical support to address some of the challenges they may experience in the workplace.

Under the Equality Act (2010) UK employers are required to make 'reasonable' adjustments to reduce or remove a disadvantage that an individual faces at work connected with their disability. Whilst neurodivergent individuals may not choose to identify as disabled, they are likely to meet legal definitions of disability.

Workplace adjustments can include changes to the physical environment, working arrangements, policies, equipment, or support.

7. Principles of Effective Adjustments and Support

There are a number of key principles that underpin effective adjustments and support:

Tailored to individual needs and role

Adjustments should be tailored to the specific challenges that an individual experiences in their role. The challenges will vary depending on an individual's particular characteristics and experience, and the nature of the role.

Proactive and prompt

Adjustments should be put in place proactively and should be implemented promptly once agreed.

Agreed in collaboration

Adjustments should be considered and agreed in collaboration between the individual and their manager. The individual may have suggestions for what they think will help, based on past experience or knowledge.

No requirement for diagnosis

Although an individual may be asked to provide evidence of the disadvantage they are experiencing as a result of their neurodifference, they are not required to have a diagnosis in order to be entitled to reasonable adjustments.

Recorded and regularly reviewed

Adjustments should be recorded and reviewed regularly (e.g. as part of regular development conversations) to check how they are working in practice. If they aren't working well, the reasons for this should be explored, and alternatives considered.

Consider 'designing in' to standard ways of working

Many adjustments that benefit neurodivergent individuals also benefit the rest of the workforce. Where feasible, it may make sense to design them into your standard ways of working. This will also benefit those who don't know that they are neurodivergent, or do not feel comfortable to share their neurodifference at work.

8. LJMU's Adjustments Process

The process for accessing adjustments is individually tailored to each case, and it can be started either through a recommendation from Occupational Health (OH) or through direct discussion with the employee and line manager.

If the employee would benefit from an assessment of the adjustments that might be useful for them, they should contact their HR Business Partner for a referral to Occupational Health.

In some circumstances it may be appropriate to make an application to the Government's [Access to Work programme](#), which provides funding for practical support to help disabled individuals who need an aid, adaptation, or financial or human support to do their job.

The University's [IBuy Process](#) facilitates the purchase of necessary equipment for approved applications. In certain cases, specialised training and counselling may be required as part of the Access to Work provisions.

9. Examples of Adjustments and Support

Although everyone is different, here are some examples of adjustments and support that neurodivergent individuals experiencing the following challenges may find useful:

Managing sensory sensitivities or distractions

- Working from home, at least some of the time.
- Working flexible or part time hours, so the individual can work or travel at quieter times, or when they are most productive.

- A fixed desk in a quiet, naturally- lit and well-ventilated environment.
- Private or quiet rooms where an individual can go to work or take breaks.
- Building in extra breaks during the working day to aid concentration.
- Turning off message notifications to support focus and blocking out 'do not disturb' time in the diary.

Managing change

- Minimising disruptions to routine and tasks where possible, and building in contingency time to deal with unexpected tasks that do arise.
- Providing advance notice of changes, explain the rationale and provide the opportunity to ask questions or be involved in decision making if possible.

Challenges with structure, planning and memory

- Clear roles, objectives and task specifications, followed up with an email.
- Breaking down large tasks into smaller parts with clear milestones and deadlines.
- 'Accountability' support (some neurodivergent individuals find it useful for others to hold them to account for work, e.g. via check-in meetings, to help them stay on track).
- Mind mapping software (e.g. Mind View) to help plan and structure ideas and thoughts.
- Using a calendar and reminders to block out time for different activities, including breaks.
- Avoiding back to back meetings to give time for decompression.

Challenges with reading and writing

- Assistive technology to help with reading, writing, spelling and communication. [Free tools](#) are available within Microsoft Word and Outlook such as Editor (which helps with spelling and grammar), Read Aloud (which converts text to speech) and Dictate (which converts speech to text). More specialist software such as [Read and Write](#) and [Dragon](#) may also be helpful.
- Coloured screen overlays.

10. Neuro-inclusive Communications and Meetings

Communication is essential to our everyday working lives, but can present a range of challenges for neurodivergent individuals. You can help make your communications more neuro-inclusive by:

- Asking about communication preferences and accommodating these where feasible. Seeking regular feedback on your communication style to build honest and open communications and avoid misunderstandings.
- Keeping language clear, concise and unambiguous, and avoiding jargon or metaphors, which may be interpreted literally by some autistic individuals.
- Not interpreting direct communication styles, lack of eye contact or fidgeting as rudeness.
- Providing instructions one at a time, highlighting specific actions and deadlines.
- Using neuro-inclusive formatting, e.g.
 - bullet points

- left-aligned text
- 1.5 line spacing
- sans serif fonts in dark grey or navy on off-white backgrounds
- bold headings, avoiding underlining and italics.

You can support neurodivergent colleagues to contribute effectively and feel comfortable during meetings by:

- Providing agendas and papers in advance to allow time to plan contributions.
- Building short breaks into long meetings, and enabling people to use fidget tools, move around or turn off cameras (if relevant) to aid concentration.
- Recording meetings if other participants are willing, so people can refer back to it later.
- Offering different ways to contribute (e.g. raising virtual hands to speak, using comments) and also accept contributions after the meeting, once someone has had more time to process the discussion).
- Following up meetings with written action points.

11. Neuro-inclusive Feedback

Neurodivergent individuals can sometimes have low confidence because of past negative experiences at work and some may also be particularly sensitive to criticism, due to challenges with emotional regulation. Your feedback as a colleague can be really valuable in supporting growth and confidence, if delivered sensitively. You can help by:

- Asking how the individual prefers to receive feedback.
- Providing plenty of positive feedback on things they do well.
- Ensuring that any feedback on a development point is sensitive,

specific, evidence based and action-oriented.

- Being mindful of unconscious bias when considering your feedback, for example:
 - Interpreting someone's lack of eye contact or direct communication style as rudeness.
 - Making assumptions about wider competence based on specific challenges with reading or writing.
 - Concluding that someone isn't a team player because they aren't keen to socialise.

12. Wellbeing and Emotional Support

As mentioned above, some neurodivergent individuals may experience wellbeing challenges such as fatigue, stress, mental health issues including anxiety or depression, or feelings of overwhelm.

- Keep an eye out for your colleague and be ready to listen.
- Make sure they are taking breaks and aren't working excessive hours, and encourage them to practice self-care in whatever way works for them (e.g. mindfulness, sleep, exercise).
- Make a conscious effort to ensure your colleague is (and feels) included in team activities.
- If the individual feels overwhelmed, help them find somewhere quiet they can go to take time out.
- If needed, signpost on to university or external mental health services.

Practical Advice on Neuro-inclusive Teaching

Support and adjustments for neurodivergent students are implemented by the University, working alongside the Student Advice and Wellbeing Team, teaching staff, Schools Disability Coordinators, and the students themselves. A number of suggestions for making your teaching practices more neuroinclusive are outlined below:

13. Learning Preferences

- Asking people about their different learning styles and preferences, e.g. a lot of neurodivergent people learn much better through hands-on activities, rather than reading information.
- Providing a range of different types of learning activities to suit different preferences (e.g. workshops as well as lectures, videos, practical exercises, work experience opportunities).

14. Learning materials and delivery

- Using plenty of visuals and infographics to illustrate key points, not just text.
- Making sure that any reading and writing tasks, and any powerpoint presentations that you use, are compatible with assistive technology including screen readers.
- Using clear and straightforward language, avoiding metaphors and sarcasm, and being concise.

15. Support with planning, structure and staying on track

- Providing clear task specifications and breaking down large tasks into smaller parts with clear milestones and deadlines.
- Offering additional check-in meetings for those who need support to stay on track.

- Providing the opportunity for students to chat through their ideas with a peer or teacher to help structure thoughts and think through implementation of their ideas.
- Providing advance notice and an explanation of any changes needed to the schedule or tasks.

16. Learning environment

- Providing the opportunity for students to attend classes face to face or virtually, depending on their particular needs and what is practicable. Students should be encouraged to discuss any particular requirements with the teaching staff.
- Making sure that classroom environments are quiet, well ventilated and have a natural light source if possible.

17. Assessments

- Providing plenty of information about assessments in advance to reduce anxiety and enable individuals to plan their work.
- Making sure that assessments are compatible with assistive technology, and providing extra time for those who process information more slowly.
- Avoiding assessments that rely on social imagination (e.g. situational judgement tests or role play)

Internal Sources of Advice and Support

- Neurodivergent employees can access advice and support from the

[Staff Disability Network.](#)

- Visit the [Diversity and Inclusion webpages](#) for external resources and training
- For HR advice relating to employees, you may wish to contact [HR Business Partner or the Diversity and Inclusion Team](#)
- For advice relating to students, you may wish to contact the [Student Advice and Wellbeing Team.](#)
- Peer support for neurodivergent students is available from the [Disabled and Neurodiverse Students' Community.](#)
- The student Union, [JMSU](#) can also provide support.

External Sources of Advice

- [Lexxic](#) provides a wide range of free resources and regular events related to neurodiversity in the workplace. Resources include the [Lexxic Neurodiversity Smart Employer Guide.](#)
- [Neurodiversity Celebration Week](#) is a global celebration of neurodiversity which takes place every March, but their excellent resource hub is available all year round.
- Advice on the Government's [Access to Work programme](#), which provides funding for practical support to help disabled individuals who need an aid, adaptation, or financial or human support to do their job.

- British Dyslexia Association provides a range of useful resources related to dyslexia, dyspraxia and dyscalculia.
- ADHD Foundation provides a range of useful resources related to ADHD.
- The National Autistic Society provides a range of useful resources related to autism.
- Chartered Institute of Personnel Development's 2024 report on Neurodiversity in the Workplace

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