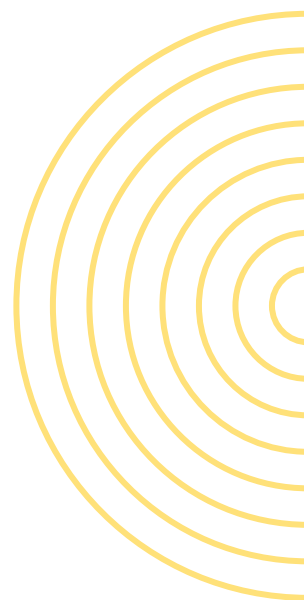# Neurodivergent Education for Students, Teaching & Learning (NESTL) Toolkit

Project Team

Co-PIs: Xin Xu, Laura Seymour

Co-Is: Cressida Ryan, Siân Grønlie

Doctoral Research Fellow: Georgia Lin

Research Intern: Hanrui Li

NESTL Toolkit & Project Webpage

https://www.education.ox.ac.uk/project/neurodivergent-education-for-students-teaching-learning-nestl/

NESTL Toolkit Canvas

https://canvas.ox.ac.uk/courses/293823

2024 - 2025

Table of Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Executive Summary

Project Aim

The NESTL (Neurodivergent Education for Students, Teaching & Learning) project aims to support neurodivergence-inclusive learning and teaching in higher education, with a particular focus on the University of Oxford.

Methods

Drawing on workshops, interviews, and reviews of the existing literature and resources, we collaborated with neurodivergent students and staff to develop and co-create this toolkit. It provides suggestions, case studies, resources, and directions for further resources to support neurodivergence-inclusive teaching and learning.

Who is this toolkit for?

This toolkit is mainly designed for staff with teaching responsibilities in any capacity, and neurodivergent students. Administrators and course conveners and library staff may find some of the contents relevant to their work too.

While this project largely draws on the experiences and opinions of students and staff at the University of Oxford, reflections and suggestions could be of interest and relevance to other higher education teaching and learning contexts.

Content of the Toolkit

The toolkit begins by introductions to the importance of neurodivergence-inclusive teaching and learning, definitions of neurodivergence and neurodiversity, issues around diagnosis, and current landscape of support available. It then explains who this toolkit is for and how to use it.

The toolkit then presents a framework for neurodivergent-inclusive teaching and learning, which comprises four areas of action:

- Awareness and Understanding

- Teaching Practice, Space, and Materials

- Assessment and Feedback

- Adjustment and Support

Each area requires four forces of change to drive progress, including:

- Individual Initiatives

- Communal Efforts

- Institutional Changes

- Sector-wide Transformations

The main body of the toolkit provides ideas for practice for each of the area and each force, on how to make teaching and learning more neurodivergence-inclusive.

We then present six case studies, myth busting, glossary, and a curated list of further resources on fostering neurodivergence-inclusive teaching and learning in higher education.

This toolkit document ends with a summary of research method and reflections on researching ethically with the neurodivergent communities, and positionality statements by the team members.

Format of the NESTL Toolkit

The NESTL Toolkit comprises the following components:

- This main document, available in PDF and Word formats
- An accompanying NESTL Canvas page, where users can interact with the content in a 'course' structure and explore multimedia resources at their own pace
- A summary of the key contents of the Main Toolkit document, available in PDF and Word formats
- Key resources and case studies, available in PDF and Word formats
- A one-page PowerPoint slide about this toolkit and the framework, which can be re-used for training and teaching.

The font used in the main document's main texts is Arial 14pt, 1.5 spacing. We followed the University of Oxford's accessibility guidelines in the toolkit design.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the Social Sciences Division's Teaching Development and Enhancement Project Award and the Department of Education, University of Oxford, for funding this project from 2024-2025.

We are deeply indebted to our participants and contributors — both staff and students — who generously shared their lived experiences, expertise, and suggestions to help us develop and improve this toolkit. Some contributors prefer to remain anonymous, while others agreed to be acknowledged. We are grateful to everyone, including but not limited to (alphabetically ordered by first names):

- Amelia Farber (Oxford)
- Angie Alderman (Project therapist)
- Anna Wright (Oxford)
- Anne Ploin (Oxford)
- Debbie Aitken (Oxford)
- Elizabeth Eva Leach (Oxford)
- Helen Swift (Oxford)
- Isaac F. Mear (Oxford)
- Jordan Maly-Preuss (Oxford)
- Kirsti Bohata (Swansea)
- Liana Warren (Oxford)
- Nick Denyer (Cambridge)
- Shelby Holmes (Oxford)
- Sonya Freeman Loftis (Morehouse)
- Zaiba Patel (Oxford)

We also sincerely thank all members of our advisory board, who have provided valuable insights and guidance for our work. They are (alphabetically ordered by first names):

- Dr Anna Stenning, University of Southampton
- Dr Catherine Walter, Linacre College, University of Oxford
- Dr Cora Beth Fraser, The Open University
- Dr Di Wang
- Emily Rudgard, Disability Advisory Service, University of Oxford
- Dr Jo Billington, University of Reading
- Dr Louise Creechan, Durham University
- Dr Richard Lawes, Faculty of English, University of Oxford
- Dr Sahana Rajan, O.P. Jindal Global University

Thank you also to the Oxford Disability Advisory Service, the Oxford Social Sciences Division EDI Panel, the Swansea University Anti-Ableism Research Group, and the CUNY Neurodiversity Conference 2025, where we presented earlier versions of this toolkit.

1.Introduction

Why is neurodivergence-inclusive teaching and learning important?

Neurodivergence-inclusive teaching can enable neurodivergent students to achieve their full potential in a safe environment, and contribute to nurturing more inclusive, ethical, equal, and diverse learning and teaching environments, which can further[1]:

- Ensure an inclusive, ethical and more vibrant learning environment, where each student is respected and brings unique perspectives and experiences.
- Empower all students to develop and thrive academically and personally, and to continue to thrive beyond their time at university.
- Enhance institutional cultures that value and celebrate both diversity and individuality.
- Elevate educational equality and justice.

The University of Oxford is committed to equality, diversity, and inclusion, where discrimination of any kind is prohibited – including discrimination based on disability and neurodivergence (IncludED, 2025). The University is also bound by the Equality Act under the Public Sector Equality Duty objectives to promote equality and abide by its anti-discrimination legislation (Equality & Diversity Unit, 2025). In the University's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Plan (2024-2027), 'enhance disability support and accessibility provision' is one of the eight priorities to strengthen a culture of belonging, and 'neurodivergence' is explicitly noted as one aspect of diversity.

---

[1] In this toolkit, bullet points are presented for clarity, not in order of importance or priority.

What do 'neurodivergence' and 'neurodiversity' mean?

Simple Summary

🔍 Neurodiversity describes the natural variation in the ways that people think, sense, feel, and behave.

🔍 Neurodivergent people's ways of thinking, sensing, feeling, and behaving are different to what is considered 'normal' or 'neurotypical'. Ideas of what is 'normal' are socially constructed: the 'norm' changes over time and across cultures.

⭐ Our project welcomes anyone who self-identifies as 'neurodivergent'!

Key Terms

The concept of **neurodiversity** was developed collectively by neurodivergent people (see Botha et al., 2024). It means that human beings' ways of thinking and behaviour are naturally different from each other. It is like biodiversity in that it is a natural difference.

Neurodivergence is one way that this difference manifests. **Neurotypical** people are people whose way of thinking and behaving aligns with current norms. They are also part of **neurodiversity**.

We can define neurodivergent people as people who think and behave differently from the 'norm': they diverge from this 'norm'. An estimated 15% of the UK population and 15-20% of people worldwide are neurodivergent (Skillcast, 2025).

However, this does not imply that the 'norm' is natural or innate; rather, it is socially constructed, and can change from culture to culture, from time period to time period.

For example, in the UK making direct eye contact with someone we are speaking with is often taken to be a sign that we are honest, and attentive towards the other person. Thus, autistic people in the UK who do not make eye contact with their interlocutors are often read as shifty, disrespectful, inattentive towards others, and untrustworthy. Often, an autistic person has to explain, 'I'm autistic' to dispel this negative impression. In many other cultures, however, not making eye contact is a sign of attention and respect towards the other person, and deference towards Elders. In these cultures, an autistic person's averted gaze may not be such a negative issue.

Another example: in the UK, it is acceptable to go through our whole working life without ever touching any of our work colleagues physically, which can mean that a neurodivergent colleague's high sensitivity to touch is not a noticeable issue at work. In other cultures, for example in Latin America, it is often more normal for work colleagues to embrace during the working day (especially in celebration of an achievement) and to kiss each other on the cheek in greeting and parting.

Sometimes, people define neurodivergence according to a set of 'conditions', like autism, ADHD, and dyslexia. However, as we will elaborate in the following section, formal medical diagnoses can outline but not fully define neurodivergence.

🔍 Did you know?

- The infinity symbol, often depicted in rainbow colours, is widely accepted as the symbol of Neurodiversity, representing the idea of infinite diversity, possibilities and acceptance.
- The image below shows one version of the Neurodiversity Symbol. Its author is MissLunaRose12 on Wikimedia Commons, and it is made available under the Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication.

Figure 1 Neurodiversity Symbol, a rainbow infinity sign

Our Approach to 'Neurodivergence'

Our project approaches 'neurodivergence' from a broader perspective: we welcome anyone who self-identifies as neurodivergent. That means that people who live with addictions that affect their thinking and behaviour, for example, or who hear voices, were welcome to join our project. In our project, we wholeheartedly affirm the experiences of neurodivergent communities and celebrate divergences and convergences of expressing and being valued by disability justice and neuro-inclusive movements**.**

Neurodivergent students have limitless strengths and talents. For readers who teach – we encourage you to foster their potential by

reflecting and enhancing your teaching practices to be accessible and inclusive, however you can. For readers who are neurodivergent learners, we see you, hear you, and appreciate learning from you. If you can, we encourage you to share about how to better support your learning and development.

Further Reading

📖 University of Leeds Easy Read: ‘What does ‘neurodiversity’ mean?’ by Anna Stenning

Why is it important to discuss issues around diagnoses?

Simple Summary

🔍 Some neurodivergent people have been diagnosed in a formal way with a neurodivergent condition.

🔍 Diagnosis gives a person a particular label: for example, autism, or dyslexia. Not all neurodivergent people have been formally diagnosed, but they are still neurodivergent.

🔍 There are many reasons why a person might not have been diagnosed. For instance, it could be through their personal choice, because of marginalised personal background, or it could relate to the society they live in. They may be awaiting assessment, or unable to get an assessment.

⭐ Our project welcomes all neurodivergent people, regardless of whether they have been formally diagnosed.

Benefits and Challenges of Formal Diagnosis

Some neurodivergent people have been 'officially' diagnosed with a neurodivergent condition, such as dyspraxia or ADHD. The formal diagnosis can be helpful for people's self-understanding and self-identification, further decision-making, connections to relevant communities, and access to further support, particularly institutional support that often requires a formal diagnosis. A formal diagnosis can

also enable neurodivergent people to access medication that they need, such as ADHD meds.

However, there are significant barriers to gaining the correct formal diagnosis, or any diagnosis at all, such as for people of colour and people whose finances do not permit them to access, travel to, and (where relevant) pay for the diagnosis. LGBTQ+ status, race, social class, citizenship status, culture, and gender all impact the access to diagnosis for neurodivergent people, the diagnosis criteria being used, and the biases they may experience during a diagnosis. We discuss some of the biases later in the toolkit (for example, in the later Myth Busting section).

For instance, several of our participants highlighted the gender differences in the way that different neurodivergent conditions present. Cisgender **women and female-identifying individuals are often underdiagnosed or misdiagnosed**, compared to a large amount of cisgender men and young boys in particular who are more commonly diagnosed in childhood (Riches & North, 2024). Gender stereotypes and biases can also lead to late-in-life diagnoses, wherein a diagnosis is not known or confirmed by the time a student enters university and therefore is ineligible to receive disability accommodations. Women with ADHD are frequently underdiagnosed, misdiagnosed, or not diagnosed until adulthood, largely because their symptoms differ from male-centred diagnostic norms (Biederman et al., 2023). As Lori Wischnewsky (2024) explains in her study of late-diagnosed ADHDer women, the impact of being diagnosed later in life should not be underestimated. There can be a huge difference between a person who has grown up with a label like 'ADHD' and had concomitant support and medication for this, and a

person who made most of their way through graduate school with undiagnosed ADHD, unaware of precisely why they are different to those around them, and who has had to rely on their own self-created coping strategies to survive academia.

Long waiting lists (which can be more than a year) can mean that many students spend most of their time at university waiting for a diagnosis and complete their studies whilst they are still on a waiting list in Oxford, having to start the whole process again when they move to a new area. In fact, from 5th February 2024, the Oxfordshire NHS has had to pause all adult ADHD assessments, 'due to the unprecedented number of referrals received by the Oxfordshire Adult ADHD Service which far outstrips its current capacity' (Oxfordshire Adult ADHD Service, 2024).

Some neurodivergent people have already self-diagnosed, or to use non-diagnostic language, **self-identified**, before they have their diagnosis confirmed or challenged by a health professional. For example, many autistic people deduced that they were autistic for several years before they received an 'official' diagnosis. Some neurodivergent people choose not to engage with the diagnostic process at all, for a variety of reasons: because they feel they don't need it to validate their neurodivergent identity, or because of previous traumatic or scary experiences with healthcare professionals, or because they want to avoid having certain diagnostic labels on their official records to avoid stigma. Repeatedly being mis-diagnosed can lead some neurodivergent people to mistrust the diagnostic process and psy-professionals in general.

Problems with the Diagnostic Process and Criteria

The diagnostic process and diagnostic criteria also face critiques.
The current diagnostic criteria for autism, for example, describe autistic people in distress, and describe autistic people from the outside looking in. They focus on autistic people's self-soothing behaviours when distressed and on autistic traits (like lack of eye contact) that are noticeable to other people. They do not describe what a calm and joyful autistic person looks like, and they can ignore autistic traits (like the joy at pursuing a special interest or the pain of intrusive thoughts) that are less visible to others but may impact the autistic person's life much more. Diagnostic criteria and cultural understandings of neurodivergence change, often dramatically, over time. Therefore, a person diagnosed with a particular condition yesterday could have received different information from a person diagnosed with the 'same' condition forty years ago.

The zine *You Don't Need a Psychiatrist to Tell You You're Autistic* (Anon, 2023), which can be read in the Wellcome archives in London, lays out the argument that the psychiatric profession is in itself oppressive to neurodivergent people, and recognises that while for this reason many neurodivergent people would prefer not to engage with psychiatrists and diagnosis, the ability to choose whether or not to engage is a privilege that not everyone has. The author comments that they prefer the language of 'self-identifying' rather than 'self-diagnosing' because it avoids engaging with psychiatric frameworks, adding, 'I didn't self-diagnose myself as queer or trans after all'.

Our Project's Approach

In our project, we did not require neurodivergent people to have a diagnosis to participate in our project, and we were also interested in what our participants had to say about diagnosis.

Guided by scholars such as Keon West, Dan Goodley, Robert Chapman, Margaret Price and Sarah Carr, we are aware of how institutions can use the empty rhetoric of neurodiversity inclusivity to boost their public image without actually helping neurodivergent people. Indeed, the more abundant this empty rhetoric, the more active *harm* may be being done to neurodivergent people. Neurodivergent people's voices and perspectives can, in these contexts, be tokenistically included in research write-ups to give academic papers a veneer of inclusivity. Neurodivergent research participants' lived experiences are all too often extracted and used for researchers' and universities' own aims, even when these do not involve helping neurodivergent people to flourish. Needless to say, we wanted to avoid replicating this kind of extractive scholarship. Throughout, we strove to collaborate meaningfully with our neurodivergent colleagues and students so that this toolkit is a product of carefully listening to our project's participants. More in the final section of this toolkit – **Methods & About Us**.

What is the current landscape and support for neurodivergent students at the University of Oxford?

Simple Summary

🔍 It is difficult to get accurate data on disability at Oxford. **Official statistics do not give the whole story.**

🔍 However, the number of people known to be neurodivergent at Oxford is **growing**.

🔍 Some neurodivergent people may not feel comfortable disclosing that they are neurodivergent.

Data on disability can be difficult to collect and assess, and the data available for this toolkit depends on a number of different agencies. Direct comparison between some categories, therefore, is not always possible. Trends can still be observed, however, leading to a clear picture of why this toolkit is needed.

Increasing Needs for Support

The Disability Advisory Service (DAS) annual report 2023/24 noted a huge increase in disabled student registrations, and a change in how student support was organised. The average number of students per disability advisor had risen from 548 in 2018/19 to 835 in 2022/23;

overall registration numbers continue to grow. In DAS categorisations, neurodivergent conditions will fall under "social / communication impairment" or "specific learning difficulty" (SpLD).

Both categories roughly doubled over this time period (141 in 2017/18 to 325 in 2023/24 for social / communication impairment, and 1091-1955 for SpLD). This is partly as a result of more students seeking and receiving diagnoses and then support and partly due to the increasing diversification of the student body. There is also increasing societal awareness about neurodiversity and diagnostic criteria that lead people to access DAS resources and support.

Many disabled students were not disclosing their disabilities at application, and both DAS and outreach schemes have worked hard to support students in feeling comfortable in making a disclosure. The 2022/23 annual report demonstrates that Oxford's on-course disclosure levels are much higher than the HESA (Higher Education Student Statistics) average (c.18% in 2020/21), and that the gap is growing; we are now at a position where 23.3% of on-course students (which includes postgraduates, and so is not directly comparable with HESA data) are registered with DAS.

Progress in Supporting Disabled Students

Progress has been made, but along with the closure of the Office for Fair Access and its agreements, the University has changed its access and participation plan targets to consider the whole student lifecycle, especially progress on course. The current target for 2028/29 is for 94% of disabled students to achieve a good degree, which is classified as a

2:1 or a 1ˢᵗ class degree. If this is going to be achieved, then supporting neurodivergent students to flourish is essential; in Oxford terms, this also means supporting postgraduate students, who then go on to be postdocs, research, and teaching staff. The whole academic lifecycle needs to be considered, not just the student lifecycle.

Reflections on the collegial system

Our student participants reported that the support available to neurodivergent students can vary across the University, particularly at the undergraduate level, due to the collegiate structure and the autonomous governance of individual colleges. These divergences may relate to differences in welfare provision, the presence or absence of embedded academic support staff (such as study skills tutors), and the level of advocacy from student common rooms – Junior Common Room (JRC), Middle Common Room (MCR), Graduate Common Room (GCR) – for disabled and neurodivergent peers. Additionally, as colleges independently organise teaching and formative assessment, students studying the same course may have different academic experiences across colleges.

This toolkit has been designed for university-wide use, with tailored suggestions for different teaching contexts, including tutorials, seminars, lecturers, supervisions, and labs. We recognise that the devolved nature of the University means that not all staff have access to the same training and resources, depending on their employment context. Nonetheless, we hope this toolkit can serve as a shared starting point — supporting all colleges and departments to strengthen their provision for

neurodivergent students within their local contexts, while fostering greater consistency and inclusivity across the University as a whole.

Further Resources

- Sample DAS Student Support Plans (University of Oxford's Single Sign-On (SSO) required to access)

    1. SpLD (Specific Learning Difficulties), Taught sciences degree

    2. SpLD(Specific Learning Difculties), Research degree

    3. Social & communication impairment, Research degree

    4. Social & communication impairment, Taught degree

Who is this toolkit for?

This toolkit is for **everyone** who is interested in learning more about how to support neurodivergent students in higher education, and/or embrace neurodivergence-inclusive teaching, as we believe some of the practices can be transferred or meaningfully adapted across contexts. However, given its institutional context and focus, we hope that this toolkit will be of particular interest to the following communities:

- ## Staff with Teaching Responsibilities in Higher Education

If you have teaching responsibilities in a higher education context, and want to embrace neurodivergence-inclusive teaching in your tutorial, seminar, lecture, lab session, and supervision, this toolkit can be a starting point. If you are an educator who self-identifies as neurodivergent, this toolkit also includes relevant suggestions for you.

- ## Neurodivergent Students

This toolkit has been developed largely drawing on lived experiences and insights shared by neurodivergent students. We hope that neurodivergent students find reading this toolkit helpful and empowering. We encourage neurodivergent students to share the toolkit or relevant sections with their tutors, lecturer, supervisors, and peers when needed, as a way to start a conversation about their needs, to teach and inform their instructors the appropriate and helpful ways to better support them,

to challenge inappropriate teaching practices and ideas, and to raise awareness about neurodivergence education.

• Administrators & Course Conveners

Departmental and college administrators are often the first point of contact students have in the Oxford teaching system. Shared understandings and and acknowledgement of the available tools, and knowing how to utilise them effectively to support students, can enhance the overall teaching environment at the University.

• Bodleian Library Staff

Librarians are critical in the university ecosystem, especially when it comes to supporting neurodivergent students in dedicated study spaces. This toolkit is particularly useful for designated Disability Librarians, but all Oxford librarians can adopt these practices.

How do I use this toolkit?

At Your Own Pace

This toolkit provides concepts to reflect on and exercises that you can use in your own teaching. The toolkit has section headings so you can skip to the heading you need. Or, you can read the whole thing through. On the NESTL Canvas site, you can navigate the contents and activities via the subheadings. On that site, you can also find recorded demonstrations of how to engage with Canvas activities. We have also created standalone "tools" by distilling key sections, to support practical use.

We recognise that teaching staff who occupy different levels of privilege and oppression in regard to employment precarity, social class, racialisation, gender, immigration status, and so on, may find some of the guidance in this toolkit difficult to implement in conjunction with other personal and professional obligations.

If you resonate with this feeling, we encourage you to *just do one thing* **from this toolkit in your next class or your teaching preparation, as a starting point**. Work through the toolkit at your own pace. Please know that doing something as simple as telling students that you are in the process of learning about neurodivergence can make a difference.

Share Widely

We encourage you to disseminate the toolkit far and wide, as it has recommendations relevant for anyone working in higher education, from academic and administrative staff to training facilitators in learning and teaching. We also hope that current and former Oxford students read this toolkit and share its insights with friends, colleagues, and instructors to improve the experiences of future neurodivergent students.

2. Ideas for Practice

Framework for Neurodivergent-Inclusive Teaching and Learning

Simple Summary

🔍 The Framework for Neurodivergent-Inclusive Teaching and Learning outlines four key areas of action: Awareness and Understanding, Teaching Practices, Assessment, and Adjustment and Support.

🔍 These areas can be driven by four forces of change—Individual, Communal, Institutional, and Sectoral—that should work together to create meaningful and sustainable transformation.

This section introduces a Framework for Neurodivergent-Inclusive Teaching and Learning, developed from this NESTL project. At the core of the framework are the **four areas of action**, which are vital to fostering neurodivergent-inclusive teaching and learning. They include:

- Awareness and Understanding

- Teaching Practice, Space, and Materials

- Assessment and Feedback

- Adjustment and Support

Each area requires **four forces of change** to drive progress, including:

- Individual Initiatives

- Communal Efforts

- Institutional Changes

- Sector-wide Transformations

For each area, you can find ideas, suggestions, examples, and experiences and opinions shared by neurodivergent students and teaching staff. These are drawn from workshops and interviews, and are further informed by contributions from our advisory board members and colleagues, as well as research on neurodivergence.

The next section presents a set of Case Studies. While some insights in this section are drawn from those cases, we also include them separately to provide a clearer narrative and to honour each contributor's experience. You can read these case studies first if you would like some grounded examples.

The following figure illustrates the Framework for Neurodivergent-Inclusive Teaching and Learning, showing the four areas of actions (centre) supported by four forces of change (outer ring).
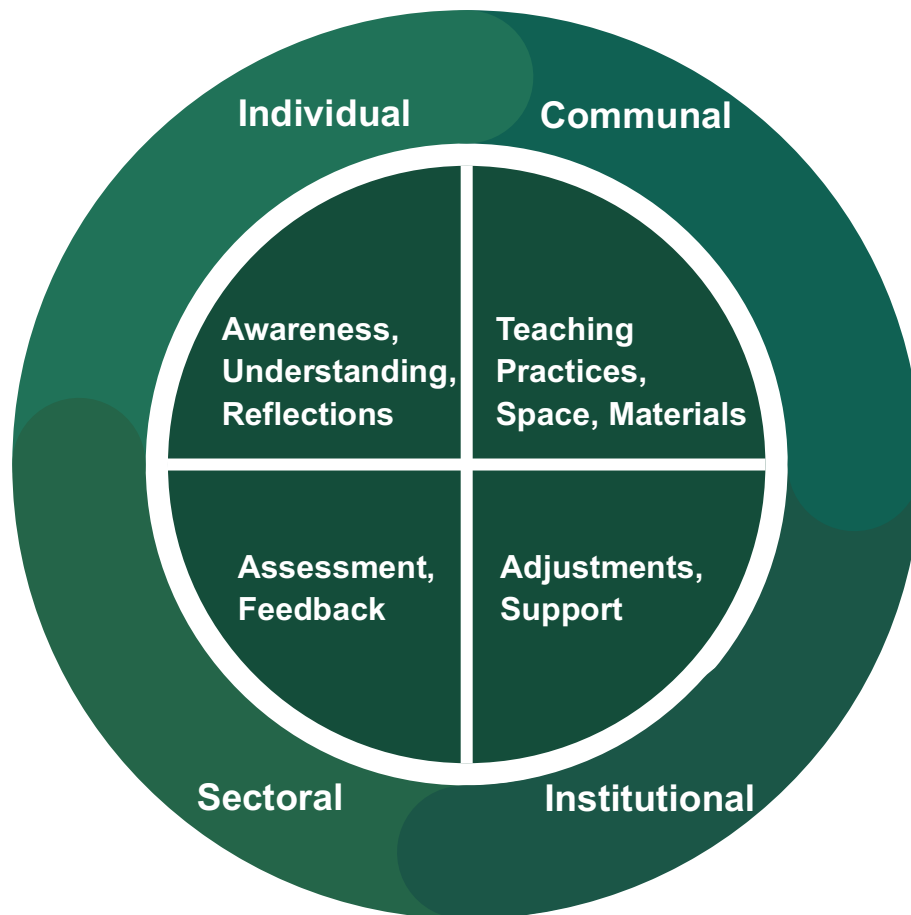
Figure 2 Framework for Neurodivergent-Inclusive Teaching and Learning

Four Areas of Actions

Creating a truly neurodivergent-inclusive learning environment involves a shift across multiple dimensions of teaching practices, space, culture, and system. This toolkit focuses on four key areas of actions, including:

- **Awareness and Understanding:** enhancing awareness of neurodivergent-inclusive teaching and learning, cultivating shared knowledge, developing a better understanding of neurodivergent students' needs, and demystifying neurodivergence and relevant stigma.

- **Teaching Practice, Space, and Materials:** designing teaching approaches, spaces (including physical, social, and psychological teaching spaces), and materials and resources that are inclusive by default.
- **Assessment and Feedback:** redefining how we measure learning and what we recognise as success in learning.
- **Adjustment and Support:** providing ongoing and responsive adjustment, and universally accessible and inclusive support that meets individual needs.

Four Forces of Change

This toolkit aims to support neurodivergent-inclusive teaching through practical and actionable changes. However, we acknowledge that within the four areas of change, initiatives can take different forms and need to occur at different levels. Some can be achieved by individual educators, while others require systematic and institutional changes. We thus apply a nature-inspired metaphoric framework to describe **four forces of change** that intersect with each other, and with the four areas of actions. They include:

- **Individual Initiatives (Sparks 🔥):** individually-led, everyday teaching practices that can make a big difference;
- **Communal Efforts (Currents 🌊):** collaborative, college-, department-, college- or division-level efforts that create flow and consistency;
- **Institutional Changes (Winds 🌬):** institutional policies and cultural shifts that (re)shape the teaching climate;

- **Sector-wide Transformations (Bedrocks 🌐):** fundamental, systemic and sector-wide transformations that reshape what education means and values.

The following illustrations and explanatory texts are created by Hanrui Li.

- **Individual Initiatives (Sparks 🔥):** individually-led, everyday teaching practices that can make a big difference.

Figure 3 3Sparks as a metaphor for Individual Initiatives; Illustration by Hanrui Li

Even the tiniest change made by one person can light up a corner of the world. As more and more people choose to act inclusively, these individual sparks accumulate and will gradually brighten the whole environment, just like stars lighting up the night.

- **Communal Efforts (Currents 🌊):** collaborative, college-, department-, college- or division-level efforts that create flow and consistency.

Figure 44 Currents as a metaphor for Communal Efforts; Illustration by Hanrui Li

Each group, department, college, faculty, unit, or school, can be seen as a branch current, and when these branch currents come together, they form a wider and more powerful stream that can drive meaningful change across the university.

- **Institutional Changes (Winds 🌬):** institutional policies and cultural shifts that (re)shape the teaching climate.

Figure 55 Winds as a metaphor for Institutional Changes; illustration by Hanrui Li

Wind has many forms: from powerful hurricanes to gentle breezes. A strong wind can bring visible, large-scale impact, while a soft breeze can gradually shift entrenched norms. As shown in the illustration, even a gentle wind can carry away rigid, outdated "leaves," clearing space for new, more inclusive growth.

- **Sector-wide Transformations (Bedrocks 🌐)**: fundamental, systemic and sector-wide transformations that reshape what education means and values.
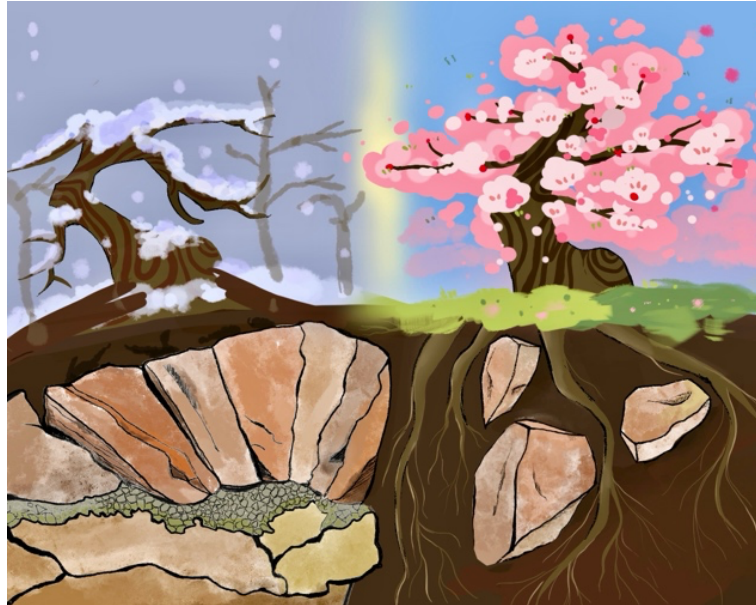
Figure 66 Bedrock as a metaphor for sector-wide transformations; illustration by Hanrui Li

Bedrock is typically solid and difficult to shift, but it lays the foundation of the world. Once it moves, it can trigger profound and lasting change across the entire ecosystem. This mirrors what happens when transformation begins at the sector level, reshaping the foundational values and structures of education.

In the illustration, the tree's roots on the right are able to stretch and grow freely only because the bedrock has shifted. This represents how meaningful change in education becomes possible only when deep-rooted systemic barriers begin to loosen. Just as roots need space to grow, transformation requires a shift in what lies beneath the surface.

When change begins and the bedrock starts to shift, winter will eventually turn into spring.

Given the focus of our project, this toolkit primarily centres on **Individual Initiatives** and **Communal Efforts**, the changes that can happen relatively quickly and are within the scope of our main intended audience of the toolkit – the individual educators. Where possible, it also touches on **Institutional Changes** and **Sector-wide Transformations**, which are essential for fostering a more neurodivergent-inclusive climate. We look forward to seeing more future work that advances collective understanding and practice, particularly at the institutional and sector-wide levels.

(1) Awareness, Understanding, and Reflections

<u>Simple Summary</u>

🔍 Self-paced learning and reflections can be helpful to enhance individuals' awareness and understanding about neurodivergence-inclusive teaching.

🔍 The best way to understand neurodivergent students' needs is by **asking them.**

🔍 **Not all students will know they are neurodivergent yet.** Not all neurodivergent students know exactly what they need. Some neurodivergent students can be masking. Therefore, making classes **accessible from the start** will help these students. Giving students opportunities to try different options out will help them to work out what meets their needs.

🔍 There are lots of practical things you can do to make teaching more inclusive: you could pick **one or two** from our list to try as a start.

🔍 It's a good idea to challenge our own assumptions and stereotypes about what an 'intelligent' or 'engaged' student looks like.

⭐ More training, awareness-raising sessions, and support are needed to enhance neurodivergence-inclusive teaching at the institutional and sectoral levels.

🔥Individual Initiatives

• Self-learning

First of all, thank you for taking the steps to read this toolkit, it is already a huge step to have and develop this awareness, willingness, and commitment. If you want to learn more about supporting neurodivergent students in teaching and learning, in the later section on Further Resources, you can find a range of curated resources on this topic.

Reflections can help us identify what we need to learn more about and what we should unlearn. When engaging with teaching, we encourage you to be reflexive in an open, critical, but also self-caring way. When reading the following sections, we invite you to reflect on various considerations and actions that you have taken or can take in teaching. In general, **active, meaningful, and consistent reflection on the part of educators can make a world of difference to students.**

📺 **Resources**: If you're new to the concept of neurodiversity, the following short videos and website can help you get started:

- What is neurodiversity?
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xsfml3yVh1g
- What is ADHD?
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1t9UHQgtDfU
- What ADHD Feels Like - An Animation
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ifKJurQO7M0
- Why Autism is a Difference, not a Deficit
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=We2fJz866NU

- What Does it Feel Like to Have Autism?
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1CNY6BbtgS8
- What visual dyslexia feels like looks & feels like. Experience it now (Scotopic sensitivity)
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VWQV-_Kh3rE
- This **website** simulates one way of experiencing reading with dyslexia (particularly scotopic sensitivity, aka Irlen's syndrome).
  https://geon.github.io/programming/2016/03/03/dsxyliea

• Ownership and responsibility

Individual educators are often the first point of contact for students. While policies and guidelines exist, individual educators are responsible for ethically implementing them. **We encourage all educators to take ownership of their learning journeys regarding neurodivergent students**, understanding that everyone's workload is often already overwhelming. By telling yourself and your students that your knowledge of neurodivergence and disability is a process and being honest about what stage of learning you are at, we can work towards incremental change.

Staff in more senior roles, especially those who are securely employed or who serve on committees with the power to enact change, are in a better position to improve the experiences of marginalised students, and take initiatives to foster positive changes. **If possible, please be the kind of leader you would have wanted, if and when you were a marginalised student.**

Neurodivergent Staff's Experiences and Opinions

If a student approaches you and shares that they would like your teaching to be more neurodivergent-friendly, reflect on this quote from one of our teaching staff participants:

> "One of the great things about being neurodivergent is – feeling different from other people makes you aware of the way that your assumptions are, not necessarily the ones that other people share. So, I'm very alert to other people feeling differently about everything, and so I'm always curious about students' sense of their own identity, not just in gender terms, but in various other terms as well."

We recognise, though, that 'committee work' and other forms of institutional bureaucracy can be draining and are often gendered work that places the burden upon women academics (Ahmed, 2012). **If you do not currently have the bandwidth, recognise your limits and signpost students to other resources or colleagues who can.** For example, direct students to Neuroinfinity, Oxford's Neurodiversity Student Society (@neuroinfinityoxford) where they can meet other neurodivergent students in a social community that does not require a formal diagnosis.

Neurodivergent Staff's Experiences and Opinions

One staff member highlighted how much time and energy it can take to make a large number of adjustments for students, especially when the educator making the adjustment is disabled and/or neurodivergent themselves or dealing with other pressures at work.

The participant suggested that **each educator should commit to doing at least one effective thing when it comes to accessibility and considers themselves part of a team.** If every member of the department is doing one, different, effective accessible thing for their students (for example, one staff member being responsible for monitoring a Canvas discussion board, another responsible for helping to connect students with other university or external resources), this will cumulatively provide students with a menu of adjustments enabling them to take at least one course or topic that fits well with their preferred way of being.

• Learning from Students

How to understand neurodivergent students' needs? The simplest and most effective approach, is asking them. But to ask them in a thoughtful and meaningful manner, you need to make sure that they feel safe and comfortable giving you an honest reply.

For instance, a well-meaning educator asking in front of the whole class, 'Does anyone have an anxiety diagnosis and what can I do to help you?' is unlikely to get a totally honest response — or any response at all — from their anxious students. Indeed, this question itself may produce a spike in the anxiety levels of a number of people in the room!

Alternatively, you can provide different communication options. For instance:

- Include an accessibility statement in your syllabus (please read Laura Seymour's statement below).
- Write a general email to all students as the term starts, 'Is there anything that I should know to better support your learning, if you are comfortable sharing with me?', which could encourage students to follow up separately via email.
- Set up an anonymous Google/Word document where all students can write down their access needs.
- Offer in-person or virtual office hours where students can come to you one-on-one and communicate in person.

It is also important to **inform students in advance how you will treat the information they share with you**: usually, you should treat such information as strictly confidential, but will need to break out the confidentiality rule if there is a risk of them harming themselves or other people – in which case you should also let them know.

Students' needs can change and evolve, so it is important to check in with students regularly and to let them know that they can ask you to update or change the disability adjustments that you make for them at any time. It can be helpful to ask students, 'What might get in the way of

you telling me what needs you have?' and be prepared to take their answer on board.

📖 Example Syllabus Accessibility Statement | Dr Laura Seymour

Senior Lecturer in English & Wellcome Trust Career Development Fellow, Swansea University

The following accessibility statement can be adapted for your own use:

Example Syllabus Accessibility Statement

"Ensuring accessibility for disabled and neurodivergent students, whether or not they have a diagnosis, is an essential part of my job. I have taken the following steps to make my classes more accessible *[insert them here: e.g. I provide lecture recordings and welcome contributions from students according to their preferred communication style]*. I encourage students to get in touch with me in confidence by *[insert a variety of communication methods here, including one anonymous method]* to let me know about any additional adjustments you need. I understand that your access needs may change throughout our time together, and encourage you to let me know about these changes."

📖 **Further Resource:** <u>The Classical Association: Accessibility Statement</u> *By Dr Cora Beth Fraser*

Meanwhile, it is important to understand that some neurodivergent students may engage in masking. There is oftentimes an assumption that all University of Oxford students are high achievers, able to excel in university as they supposedly did during their school years, with the proof being that they have been accepted to Oxford.

However, neurodivergent and autistic individuals in particular may engage in masking – 'masking' one's neurodivergent traits to appear neurotypical in social or professional settings – that could make it seem like they are doing 'fine' at school or university when the reality is much more nuanced.

Reassuring students that the transition from school to university is hard, and it's OK to feel overwhelmed or find it hard to get started with new tasks, can encourage students who are masking to open up more about managing this transition.

<u>Neurodivergent Students' Experiences and Opinions</u>

One participant noted the need for instructors to be flexible because students may be masking and not comfortable with divulging their concerns:

"You're talking about masking, and of course it's hard to expect that lecturers here are going to become experts in recognizing masked neurodivergents. But I think it would be helpful just if people would be told about, there will be people you're supervising, people in your courses who have difficulties in various ways, engaging in the way you're presenting things that you might not be aware of, and that doesn't mean that you can make a diagnosis if you don't know what the problem is. But it could help with that little bit of flexibility. 'Cause I think there's probably a lot of people at Oxford who are high masking and it still is not really in the public eye."

• Self-reflection

Could you be neurodivergent? If you suspect that you could be neurodivergent, reading some of the memoirs on our bibliography

could also help you to explore it further. For example, the exercises in Hannah Belcher's *Taking off the Mask* and Devon Price's *Unmasking Autism* can help people to explore their authentic neurodivergent self.

Neurodivergent Staff's Experiences and Opinions
One staff member we interviewed suggested reading memoirs by neurodivergent people, as these can help people to reflect on their own neurodivergence or neurotypicality.

Even if the word 'neurodivergent' doesn't appeal to you, perhaps you felt an affinity towards some of the issues we discussed when we talked about neurodivergence in this toolkit.

So, here is a **reflection exercise** for you:

1. What are the qualities that, according to 'widely accepted' norms, make a good scholar?
2. What are *your* natural qualities as a scholar?
3. What are the similarities and differences between your answers to question 1 and 2?

Even if you are not neurodivergent, this exercise can highlight similar or different ways people can understand the 'norm', some of the ways that you may differ from the 'norm', and the extent to which 'norms' could be challenged and changed.

Neurodivergent teaching staff also often shoulder more emotional and other forms of labour supporting neurodivergent students. If you identify as a neurotypical member of staff and notice your colleagues struggling, regardless of whether they have disclosed any diagnosis to you, think about how to best support the neurodivergent

students you interact with so that the emotional labour is divided more evenly. This can create a more nurturing, inclusive teaching environment that benefits all students and staff.

Neurodivergent Staff's Experiences and Opinions

One staff member, whilst explaining the various effective strategies they had developed for doing their research and teaching in their own neurodivergent way, commented: "The biggest difference comes from permission. After the diagnosis, I permit myself to be different".

Educators openly talking about their neurodivergence can help inspire neurodivergent students. But not all educators would feel safe or ready to openly discuss their neurodivergence. We recognise that 'coming out' as neurodivergent, naming one's disability, or owning an identity that is perceived to be a 'deficit' can have both emotional and material harms (for example, implicit bias in employment or facing ableism in academia). This is especially pertinent for precariously employed scholars. Therefore, we want to emphasise that the **learning and reflection portion is the key – not the disclosure**. At the University of Oxford, there are staff-specific resources available, such as the Neurodivergent Staff Network and the TORCH Neurodiversity Network, which you do not need a diagnosis to join.

🌊 Communal Efforts

Several of the neurodivergent teaching staff noted **the importance of support from their departments, faculties or colleges, or challenges they face when such support is not fully in place**. Many of those participants received their formal diagnosis during their adulthood, and a few in very recent years. In the face of the diagnosis, some received more support from their immediate working communities, while some were (still) hesitant about revealing their neurodivergent identity widely, due to a general lack of awareness and understanding about neurodiversity.

Neurodivergent Staff's Experiences and Opinions

One staff member we interviewed criticised the lack of 'openly talking about neurodiversity' in their department/faculty, with neurodivergent staff members hiding their neurodivergent status from each other and from students.

This participant emphasised that openly talking about and acknowledging neurodiversity in general, and staff members' own neurodiversity, in front of other staff members and students 'from the first class' can have a positive effect. Especially when working under such a climate of a lack of open talk about neurodiversity, many neurodivergent people at Oxford may have found it hard to openly consider whether they are neurodivergent or not.

A participant also commented on how seeing openly neurodivergent colleagues thriving, particularly in leadership positions, felt inspiring and encouraging, giving them confidence that they might be able to achieve the same. Mentorship from senior colleagues who are neurodivergent was also seen as tremendously helpful.

Neurodivergent staff participants also raised that the institutions could **better understand and acknowledge the various forms of labour, including emotional labour, involved for them to support neurodivergent students**.

Neurodivergent Staff's Experiences and Opinions

One neurodivergent staff member spoke about the labour required to both navigate their teaching responsibilities as a neurodivergent person and support their neurodivergent students:

"**It would also be helpful for Departments to be encouraged to recognise how much time and energy supervisors need to spend on supporting students with difficulties.** As a neurodivergent person myself, I probably need to be better at putting boundaries in place, but I often find that I need to give a lot more time to neurodivergent students (or students with difficulties in general) but because this isn't accounted for in my workload, the extra work ends up adding to my stress levels, and when I'm really under pressure with work, I end up resenting the extra time and energy that I need to put into these students, which doesn't create psychological safety for anyone!"

It is also important to ensure that **neurodivergent students' voices are heard and taken into consideration for decision-making** at colleges, departments, faculties, through a wide range of engagement approaches: student representatives, JCR, MCR, GCR, feedback forms, open forums, and dedicated support groups.

🌪 Institutional Changes

We recognise the need for widespread institutional change in order to address the effects of ableism and other intersecting oppressions that impact students in all areas of higher education. A few of the neurodivergent student participants asked why training about neurodiversity is not compulsory, alongside other university-wide trainings, such as information security training. The highly decentralised context of the University of Oxford also means that students from different subjects and colleges face quite different environments and can receive different ranges of support.

Neurodivergent Students' Experiences and Opinions

One neurodivergent student said that they wished that educators were better trained in spotting neurodivergent students who were masking their neurodivergence, which is more common in women, in order to fit in. If educators had this training, they might be better equipped to make adjustments for all neurodivergent students, not just those who look obviously neurodivergent to them.

This toolkit is not meant to be a treatise dictating the *only* things that must change; instead, we offer our reflections and the input of neurodivergent students and staff as a starting point to understand the deeper issues at work in the Oxford environment. In general, there

needs to be more training and support, and a widespread embrace of neurodivergence and a willingness to learn from one another, both neurotypical and neurodivergent, on how to improve our teaching and learning practices and work towards universal accessibility.

Neurodivergent Students' Experiences and Opinions

One student spoke about her difficulties with masking and the judgment she has faced, as a result of people's lack of 'basic understanding':

"I just think it would be nice if people just have a basic understanding of how different people present and difficulties. Because, as someone who's not very good at masking, I get some weird comments about facial expressions, tone and that kind of stuff from tutors. **And I'm like just like, just, like, people could know that, even if they haven't read a student's support plan, that's just not something that's acceptable to comment on.** And just like they're trying to read whether I'm listening or not from my facial expressions – and it's just not a good indication."

In addition, many neurodivergent students have a very different experience at school, where their schedules and routines are assigned and managed for them, compared to the independence of university.

Oxford can be a high-stakes environment from Week 0 of Michaelmas. Students' essays from their very first week can influence their end-of-term report, and the first impressions and connections they make with others can impact their personal and social lives for months to come. Neurodivergent freshers are performing the additional work of navigating the unfamiliar, distracting, stressful, and overwhelming aspects of university life.

Therefore, familiarising school students early on with university life can help. For example, letting sixth-formers stay overnight in university accommodation and attend a lecture or class enables them to get to know what Oxford is like in a low-stakes way.

🌐 Sector-wide Transformations

Below are some good examples across the UK higher education sector. If you know more good examples, please feel free to share with us!

- Neurodivergent Humanities Network | Dr Louise Creechan
- University of Reading Centre for Autism Wellbeing Hub
- Birkbeck University Centre for Neurodiversity at Work
- Northern Network for Medical Humanities
- York St John University Research in Neurodiversity, Environment & Wellbeing (ReNEW)
- University of Bristol Autism Research Group
- University of Cambridge Autism Research Centre
- University of Warwick Neurodiversity and the Student Experience

✅ Individual Checklist on Awareness, Understanding, and Reflection

This checklist is based on the contents in the section on Individual Initiatives. It is not intended to be prescriptive, and you don't need to tick all of them, or all at once. Use it as a guide to reflect on your practice, identify areas for growth, and take incremental steps towards more inclusive teaching.

Self-Learning and Reflection

Actively seek out resources to learn about neurodiversity, including resources in this toolkit and on the NESTL Canvas site.

Reflect critically on your own assumptions about learning, ability, and academic success.

Reflect on your own identity – could you be neurodivergent, or benefit from practices designed with neurodivergence in mind?

Ownership and Responsibility

Take responsibility for inclusive teaching as part of your everyday role, not only when prompted by policy.

Be honest with yourself and your students about your current understanding of neurodivergence; view it as an ongoing learning journey.

Commit to doing at least one thing consistently to support accessibility and inclusion in your teaching.

If you are in a secure or senior role and if you can, use your influence to advocate for systemic improvements.

Learning from Students

Ask students about their needs in a respectful and non-intrusive way.

Ensure students understand how their shared information will be treated and under what circumstances confidentiality might be broken.

Include an accessibility statement in your syllabus, outlining your commitment and ways to communicate access needs.

Check in with students periodically and invite them to revise or update their access needs as things evolve.

Understanding Masking and Hidden Needs

Educate yourself about masking, particularly in autistic and ADHD students, and avoid assuming that silence means no difficulty.

Recognise that many students may appear high-achieving while struggling privately. Build in flexibility by default.

Community and Shared Labour

Consider how you can contribute to inclusive practice within your team or department.

Coordinate with colleagues to offer a range of accessible practices rather than relying on one person.

If you are neurotypical, be mindful of the emotional labour often carried by neurodivergent colleagues and offer support where possible.

Safety and Disclosure for Neurodivergent Staff

If you are neurodivergent, consider connecting with supportive communities, such as peer networks or affinity groups, that affirm your identity and can offer solidarity, inspiration, and resources, whether or not you choose to disclose.

Understand that disclosing neurodivergence may not be safe or desirable for everyone, especially those in precarious roles.

Focus on inclusive actions over disclosure—educators do not need to "come out" to make meaningful change.

(2) Teaching Practices, Space, and Materials[2]

Accessibility Tip: One Thing at a Time

🔍 These suggestions can be implemented as needed and depending on students' access requirements at a given time.

🔍 You don't need to do all of them all at once, but try and be prepared to address any of the situations in this section and **listen to students' changing needs.**

The inclusive classroom is a co-facilitated, collaborative space. Students and staff alike are responsible for respecting and considering each other's needs.

⭐ Some of these recommendations may be unfamiliar or even daunting, but **even small, incremental changes can make a significant difference for neurodivergent students**.

---

[2] Contents of this section draw on findings from our workshops and interviews, as well as recommendations shared in the case studies, including Dr Laura Seymour's suggestions from her book, *Shakespeare and Neurodiversity* (Cambridge University Press, 2025).

🔥Individual Initiatives

Allow (a little bit more of) Flexibility in Time

Neurodivergent students can experience time differently from neurotypical students. Lateness is not necessarily a sign of lack of commitment from neurodivergent students, particularly students with ADHD, who may struggle with time management and executive function, which are a set of cognitive skills that help regulate daily tasks. We thus propose the following suggestions for different teaching contexts.

- **For lectures and seminars:**
  - Provide an outline of the **lesson plan** at the beginning of the academic term, with timings per section, if possible, to help students make plans. Provide as much content information for each teaching session as you can (e.g. handouts, slides) and **well in advance**, to allow students time to read and prepare for the class.
  - **Embrace the fact that students have different working and reading speeds.** Rather than stipulating that a certain task 'should' take a certain amount of time, work out whether students need you to accommodate their working speeds better, or help them to work out how much they can get done in a particular time. Neurodivergent students can have a high aptitude for their work without being able to read a whole book in a day – the concentration and time it takes to absorb information are simply different.
- **Extend a welcome to any student arriving late** – try to be warm but not too overtly diverting all attention to the student. You can also reiterate to everyone at the interval or end of the class, that everyone is welcome whenever they arrive.

Neurodivergent Students' Experiences and Opinions

Several of our undergraduate participants noted how off-putting it was to have lecturers tell them off for arriving 5-10 minutes late or making them wait outside until there was a break in the lecture. As one student noted: 'it just makes you not want to go at all [to the lectures]'.

- **Leave time for individual students to think and process information** before launching discussions. Try using a 'think, pair, share' format amongst students before asking for overall thoughts.
- Schedule **breaks** for sessions that are over 60 minutes.
    - Make sure there is at least one substantial break, as neurodivergent students can have trouble switching from 'resting mode' back to 'work mode', if not enough time is provided in between.
    - The break should come between distinct sections of content – what is spoken about before and after the break should be different to help students categorise what each chunk of time is about.
    - Note that for some neurodivergent students, breaks can be unhelpful. For example, ADHD-ers who have finally found their focus can be unhelpfully distracted when a break is suddenly announced, and can lose their focus and forget the thoughts and ideas that they had been developing. Autistic students may want to focus for longer periods of time, until they have finished a task. Not all students will finish a classroom task at the same

time: some students may still be working on a task whilst others have finished. Consider all students' needs when designing breaks in your classes, and consider whether you might provide an option for students who want to continue working without distraction, whilst others have a break.

- Consider what a 'break' actually means. A break with an unstructured social element to it (students start noisily chattering for 10 minutes) will not be relaxing at all for many neurodivergent students. Students might need to use the break in various ways: for example, to move around, use the bathroom, enjoy some total silence in a quiet room, or energise themselves by chatting to others. Provide options that meet all students' needs.

o **Implement asynchronous elements for classes**, like online discussion boards (e.g. on Canvas, Slido, Vevox, Padlet), to accommodate different paces and preferred ways of engagement with the class material.

Neurodivergent Students' Experiences and Opinions

One undergraduate participant said they preferred lectures that had 'low key' moments built in 'to just let the brain chill': these enabled the student's mind to rest and wander a little before regaining their focus for the more high-stakes parts of the lecture. They preferred this to the stilted jolt of an official, announced break.

> "It's useful in lectures when they kind of add things in that make it easier for you to take a break and pace yourself when it is getting tiring without kind of bringing attention to it. I kind of find it harder when someone goes, 'you're going to have 5 minutes for a break' because then you have the whole shift in focus and you chat with someone next to you and there's the whole thing of , do they want to talk to me, when I just need to take a second?"

- **For tutorials and supervisions**
  o Schedule the meeting times as far in advance as possible. You can use a collaborative scheduling tool, such as sending out a Doodle poll or a when2meet poll, that allows respondents to change their availability up to a certain date. At the beginning of your tutorials and supervision meetings, clarify the expected timeframe for students to submit materials to you, whether it is fine to bring them on the

meeting day, or whether you prefer receiving them a few working days in advance.

o **If a neurodivergent student takes a leave of absence or a suspension for any reason, support from their tutors, master's or DPhil (PhD) supervisors upon their return is essential.** The DPhil (PhD) journey, in particular, can be long and lonely, and students would need compassion and understanding from their supervisors, who would **prioritise their welfare over the demand to finish a DPhil 'on time'** – many doctoral students do not have the capacity to complete their thesis in three years or face other funding constraints.

The Physical and Online Teaching Space

- **Keep all information about the course in a central, streamlined online place** (as opposed to an email thread) such as a regularly updated Canvas course.

- **Provide a hybrid option** also makes your teaching accessible for neurodivergent students. Students know their own abilities and limitations. Those who prefer a hybrid or virtual format are equally capable of absorbing your teaching when given the option.

- Before a session, **disseminate information and photographs** (if available, with written descriptions) of the space where the class will happen, the route to the class, and contact information if people need support. You can also refer to the University of Oxford Access Guide, which includes relevant photos and information for most of the University's buildings, departments, colleges, etc. Look for students

who are happy to be a buddy to others, and work to and from class with them if they need it.

- If you can, provide **a 'quiet room'** nearby where students can decompress (a 'vacant/engaged' sign made from a piece of paper stops somebody from bursting in on somebody else).

- Explicitly encourage students to move in and out of the room as they like, wear headphones, stim and tic whenever they want.

- **Acknowledge students' sensory needs** – i.e. sensitivity to scents, perfumes, boiler noises, clocks ticking, lights flickering, noises made when eating, slamming doors – and make adjustments as needed, or allow students to make the adjustments they need (for instance by wearing sunglass, headphones, or putting the hood up on their hoody). Over or under sensitivity to light, sound, touch, and smell affects many neurodivergent students' experiences of an environment. Ensuring any sensory concerns are addressed (for example, providing a hybrid option for learning where students can be in control over their environment) is key for accessibility so students can engage with the material being taught.

- **Fix 'access clashes'** (where one student's access needs seem to clash with another's) **in a compassionate way that avoids asking students to mask**. Try to set communal guidelines that account for students' sensory needs. For example, if a student needs to rap on the table to stim but it distracts another student, do not insist anyone stops stimming or magically controls their distraction levels. Instead, try giving the stimming student a mouse pad or something soft to rap on that muffles the noise and enable students to sit where they like so those who are distracted by the rapping can sit out of eye and earshot

of it. Trust that students will often be able to suggest their own solutions to these issues without having to go through you: students can draw on their knowledge of how they usually manage these kinds of clashes and on their relationships with each other to find a solution. All changes to the physical environment are in some sense accommodations – the problem is not 'Why am I being asked to make adjustments to a 'normal' environment for only one or a few people?', but rather **'How can I make this space as accessible as possible for everyone in attendance to facilitate the most optimal learning environment?'** *(For information on what stimming and masking look like, see the myth-busting section.)*

- If you have the resources, offer items to fidget with (stress balls, pipe cleaners, string), put elastic exercise bands on chair legs for students to bounce their legs against. **Be accepting of these items if students bring them to class** – if a student knits in class, it doesn't mean they are disengaged. If anything, it allows them to be more comfortable sharing their opinions because they are performing a comfortable action. Go further and encourage students to bring their own favoured fidget toys, ones that they feel good stimming with.

> ### <u>Neurodivergent Students' Experiences and Opinions</u>
>
> **Neurodivergent students want to be able to stim freely in teaching environments, without being judged for this by their peers or by educators.** Many undergraduate participants noted how 'tiring' and 'taxing' learning at Oxford can be, given the intensity of the eight-week terms.
>
> One staff member noted how hard it was to 'keep track' and maintain focus when they switched between text and images when conducting art history research: their solution was to 'have someone read to me' and/or to use a live transcription tool and audio notes for visual anchors.

- **Be creative with space**. Classes and meetings do not always need to happen sitting at a desk. For example, conducting a peripatetic (walking) supervision around the University Parks in the first meeting could help students experience the induction in a more relaxed way.

📺 **Interactive Activity on [NESTL Canvas](#): Teaching space - things to watch for**

You can find photos of different commonly encountered teaching space, reflect on accessibility issues there, and 'test' yourself to think through your own approach to space, using interactive activities on Canvas.

Creating an Inclusive Social and Psychological Space

- At the start of a class or course of study, **ask students to tell each other their preferred communication styles so that they can adapt to each other** (e.g. 'I prefer verbal communication to written communication; unbroken blocks of text aren't accessible to me'). This can help you to prepare ahead when it comes to accommodating potentially 'competing' needs (like the need for drumming and the need for silence used as an example elsewhere in this section).

Practical Tip

You can offer a traffic light system of stickers, which people can stick on their clothes or laptop, to aid communication in class: green sticker means 'feel free to chat with me'; amber means 'let me start the conversation when I'm comfortable'; red means 'I'm just here to listen, not chat'. Prepare for many students to select red by considering how you will feel comfortable with students' silence.

- **Demonstrate practical activities**, and how to navigate resources, step by step, before the students complete the activity or use the resource themselves. Do not assume that all students understand how the activities work in the first place.
- **Encourage class contributions in both verbal and written formats**. Inform students about this, so that they can bring pens,

papers, and laptops when needed. Provide pieces of paper and pens and/or allow students to type for those who communicate best in writing.

Reflection Questions

What stereotypes do you have in your mind about silent students? That they aren't engaged, perhaps? Are they thinking hard? That they dislike the class, or don't understand it?

How do you respond when students are silent? Do you try and draw them out, for example? Cold-call them? Fill the silence by answering the questions you have asked yourself? Worry privately that your class is not going well?

Interrogate where those stereotypes, responses and assumptions come from. Saying calmly, 'it's alright, we can sit in silence' can sometimes be enough.

- In the conclusion of any teaching session, spend a few minutes recapping the content and reiterating key priorities for students over the coming week or term.
- Always ensure there are spaces and opportunities for students to provide feedback when needed, such as via email and office hours.
- **For supervisions**, if the student has two supervisors, which is the case in some departments, it could be helpful to check in with students earlier on to understand what feels most supportive and less stressful – 1:1 supervision (one supervisor at one time) or 2:1

supervisions; and if 2:1 supervision is necessary, consider the frequency of the supervisions, clarify the role of each supervision to minimise complexity, and consider alternating 1:1 meetings.

Teaching materials

- On slides and handouts, **use sans-serif fonts** such as Arial, Calibri, or Open Sans, sized at 12 - 14pt, to create a high contrast between the text and the background (for instance, dark black text against a lime green background). Try not to put more than 4-5 lines of text on a single slide or section of a handout.
- When there are texts on the slides that are important, **read them out aloud for students**, do not assume that everyone can read and comprehend them at the same speed.
- Use **content warnings** for students for subjects that can cause distress, including sexual violence, violence, racism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism.
- **Provide visual summaries and/or simple written or verbal summaries of key ideas and set reading**. This can be at the beginning of the class and/or towards the end of the class. It can also be done via a collective Padlet/whiteboard, where students can write down, post, and share the key take-away ideas.

Record all lectures and upload them to Canvas as soon as possible after the lecture finishes, ensuring that captions and transcripts are available in the recording. This is often a required accommodation on students' SSPs – see Oxford's guidance on how to make the most of recorded lectures, and policy on recording lectures.

Fourth-year undergraduate sciences participants in integrated master's programmes noted that **the transition to full-time lab or research work was made more accessible when their lab PI or lab manager provided them with a full onboarding and a document that outlined all the key contacts in the lab.**

An extensive contacts page with names, titles, and emails can address basic requests, such as who to ask if a student requires access to certain rooms, with whom they should liaise with if they want to submit a piece of academic work. Offering these resources at the start of a student's time in a laboratory environment saves time and email back-and-forths that can often be draining for neurodivergent students to complete.

Explaining the 'hidden curriculum' in this way will benefit many other students, for example those coming to Oxford from different institutions or different countries.

🌊 Communal Efforts

- **College and administrative staff are key supports for neurodivergent students.** In any introductory email to students, emphasise the range of academic and welfare supports available to neurodivergent and disabled students and provide clear directions on how to access these resources. It is especially helpful if Senior Tutors

and organising tutors of each subject disseminate pedagogical resources and neurodivergent teaching supports to all tutors who have contact hours with students. Participants noted that certain courses still required them to sign up via individual Excel sheets that can get lost in email threads and can easily be missed.

- If you are a course administrator who coordinates teaching times, use a free platform that is accessible and allows students to change their availability or preference up until a specific period, such as Doodle or when2meet.

- Departments, faculties, and colleges could think further about resources that could be allocated for providing 'quiet space'.

- **For any social events, reflect upon the fact that not all students are comfortable socialising in a 'traditional' networking setting.** This can be because of noise levels, the unpredictability of the situation, debilitating fear of getting things 'right' in 'high stakes' professional networking events which often seem to offer a one-off opportunity to present oneself well and 'correctly' make connections that will help in one's career, and the general awkwardness that can come from talking about topics such as jobs, salaries, and hiring qualifications.

- Academic and administrative staff can aim to provide alternative networking opportunities for neurodivergent students that are accessible (for example, online networking events), more relaxed, low-stakes, and consistent (rather than high pressure one-off events), and offer the same type and quality of information as those given in 'typical' networking situations. The Oxford Careers Service offers careers support for neurodivergent students that departments can

liaise with to both promote and collaborate on networking events and general career advice.

🌪️ Institutional Changes

- More training and support on **time management** could be helpful.

Neurodivergent Students' Experiences and Opinions

Several undergraduate participants mentioned struggles with knowing what to prioritise and best practices for time management, especially amid all the non-academic factors that impact their work. For example, juggling social engagements and relationships in other cities, knowing where the cheap cafes are near the lecture halls, or having access to their own kitchen to cook nutritious food so they have enough energy to learn.

One undergraduate participant suggested that Oxford provide a time management course that explains how to manage their time when writing essays and other coursework, and how to prioritise which tasks are essential (especially when they are given a large amount of information about events, for example, in weekly Faculty or college newsletters).

- **Librarians are integral to enhancing the student experience**, especially for neurodivergent students who may feel like the sheer amount of information available on a depository like SOLO is overwhelming. Ensure that if libraries provide study aids such as

earplugs, they are consistently restocked and well-advertised to students. Consider designating a collaborative study room or other enclosed space as a keyboard-free area – neurodivergent learners can be particularly sensitive to sounds such as typing and clicking, and having a device-free space can encourage them to use the libraries with comfort. **Advertise to all students** – regardless of whether they are registered with DAS – **about the disability supports available at the libraries**; for example, the [SensusAccess](#) automated tool that converts files into alternative formats (i.e. audiobook, eBook, Braille).

- **For university-wide events, rethink the 'ice-breaking' and social activities**, as also discussed in the previous section.
- Consult the university's [Access Guide](#) for images and descriptions of most university-owned buildings (colleges, departments, libraries) and provide links on how to access teaching room arrangements in advance.

🌐 Sector-wide Transformations

We encourage a shift away from viewing individuals as needing to be 'fixed', and towards transforming educational environments to genuinely support diverse ways of learning and being. This means broadening what we value as *knowledge*, how we understand *time* and *space* in education, including the social and psychological spaces. We also call for a sense of openness to challenge 'classic' pedagogical models, and for collective efforts to build more inclusive, responsive, and equitable approaches to teaching and learning.

✅ Individual Checklist on Teaching Practices, Space, and Materials

This checklist is based on the contents in the section on Individual Initiatives. It is not intended to be prescriptive, and you don't need to implement all of the suggestions, or all at once. Use it to reflect on your teaching habits and consider incremental changes that can make your teaching more accessible.

Lectures and Seminars

Provide lesson plans with timings and preparatory materials in advance.

Avoid setting fixed expectations around how long a task 'should' take; acknowledge different working and reading speeds.

Welcome late arrivals in a warm but non-disruptive way. Avoid practices that shame or isolate students for lateness.

Use formats such as 'think, pair, share' to give students time to process before responding.

Include at least one substantial break for sessions longer than 60 minutes, ideally between content sections.

Design breaks inclusively—consider offering options for quiet, movement, socialising, or continued focus.

Tutorials and Supervision

Schedule meetings well in advance using collaborative scheduling tools.

Clarify expectations for submitting materials (e.g. on the day vs. a few days in advance).

Provide sustained and compassionate support for students returning from suspension or leave.

If students have two supervisors, check in early about what supervision format feels most supportive (e.g. 1:1 vs. 2:1).

Teaching Environments for All Contexts

Keep all course information in a central, accessible place (e.g. Canvas).

Offer hybrid or online learning options where feasible.

Share logistical information in advance (photos, directions, contact details, etc.).

Where possible, provide access to quiet rooms or decompression spaces.

Be mindful of students' sensory needs, such as sensitivity to light, sound, scent, or touch, and allow or offer adjustments that help them regulate their environment and stay engaged.

Encourage movement, stimming, use of headphones, and other sensory adjustments. Provide fidget-friendly items or encourage students to bring their own.

Set guidelines for managing potential 'access clashes' in a compassionate, collaborative way.

Creating a Supportive Social and Psychological Environment

Invite students to share their preferred communication styles at the start of term.

Use tools like traffic-light stickers to support communication boundaries.

Demonstrate activities step-by-step and don't assume shared understanding.

Encourage written contributions alongside verbal ones.

Normalise silence and avoid negative assumptions associated with silent students and their engagement.

Conclude sessions with a short summary and reiterate priorities.

Provide regular opportunities for feedback (e.g. email, office hours).

Teaching Materials and Delivery

Use accessible fonts (sans serif), clear contrast, and limited text per slide or section.

Read out important text on slides to support comprehension.

Provide content warnings for potentially distressing material, including references to ableism, so students can prepare themselves emotionally and engage at their own pace.

Offer summaries of key concepts via visual, written, or interactive tools (e.g. Padlet).

Record lectures and upload them with captions and transcripts as soon as possible.

Supporting Transitions and the Hidden Curriculum

Offer onboarding documents with names, contacts, and procedures in lab/research environments.

Explain the 'hidden curriculum' to students, including norms and expectations that may not be familiar to all students.

Check out Relevant Resources on NESTL Canvas

Interactive teaching space accessibility checks

Interactive scenarios of how to handle challenging situations

(3) Assessment and Feedback

<u>Simple Summary</u>

🔍 Interrogate **assumptions about intelligence** and the purposes of assessment.

🔍 Make assessment as inclusive as possible, via allowing a grace period for submissions, let formative assignments serve formative purposes, and check the assessment criteria and language used.

🔍 Provide constructive and clear feedback about the assignment, rather than a critique of students' inherent ability. Offer various feedback options if you can.

🔥Individual Initiatives

Re-reflection on your assumptions about intelligence and the purpose of assessment

- **Interrogate assumptions about intelligence** (e.g. that spontaneous dialogue, remembering large chunks of text, and fluent reading of a chunk of text equal intelligence, whereas silence means a student is not engaged) and **avoid basing students' grades or evaluations on these assumptions.** Educators do not need to judge how intelligent their students are, but to facilitate their learning and engagement with course material (see works by Price; Goodey, and Dolmage for disability studies scholarship on 'intelligence').

<u>Reflection Questions</u>

Think about your stereotype of the 'Oxford student' - someone who is able to churn out an essay a week, read a book per day, or always achieve a high grade in their collections, prelims, summative assignments, or exams?

Question where these assumptions come from and how neurodivergent students who are equally brilliant – by virtue of them having gained admission to Oxford – may not fit into these stereotypes once they enter an unstructured life at university that they're not used to from school.

Make the assessment more inclusive

- **On inclusive assessment options**: Within the constraints of the Oxford system, there is often little room to enact truly inclusive assessments. Ideally, students could choose how they are assessed, giving each option equal weight, with options including a traditional essay-based exam, an audio or video file, a poster, or a Q&A with the examiner. Traditional timed-essay-based exams can disadvantage students with conditions such as dyslexia and ADHD, whilst supporting students to select their preferred assessment option enables them to show their strengths in the best possible light. However, given the existing exam regulations, **educators can *advocate* for a diversification of assessment methods and plurality of modes when designing and modifying courses.**

- **Give a grace period when it comes to extensions, particularly for non-summative assignments, even if students do not have extensions built into a Student Support Plan.** For undergraduates, the pressure to be a 'perfect' Oxford student, one that hands in polished essays every week, is often an insurmountable task; if a student hands in an assignment late once or twice a term, do not jump to penalise them. Understand that they have personal lives and are dedicated to their studies regardless of whether they hand in something 'on time'. If it is a recurring issue, it is worth discussing alternative assessment strategies with them or referring them to an academic skills advisor if possible. Instead of assuming they are slacking, take into context the pressurised Oxford environment and how that may be affecting their ability to meet strict deadlines.

- **Allow students' formative work to be just that – a rough, formative draft**. One participant recommended Hubrig & Barritt's chapter titled "Cripping Writing Processes: Composing (Neuro)divergently" (2024) to transform your thinking about what 'good' or 'polished' writing looks like. Take advantage of the flexibility offered at the formative level, experiment with creative methods, and help guide the student to craft a traditional academic essay eventually. Unpolished work is generally best for meaningful formative work – it allows you to work alongside the student to support them in their writing practice using diverse formats.

- **Check your biases when it comes to assessment – even seemingly neutral language in assessment criteria can be ableist.** For example, some assessment criteria ask students to write a 'well-organised' essay with a single through-line of argument. This can exclude students with ADHD or dyslexia whose minds naturally

make new and unexpected connections rather than sticking to a single topic. Provide exemplar essays and essay templates as part of the assignments that can help students who may struggle with coherent organisation of ideas, and offer essay-writing workshops or writing sessions for personalised support if possible.

Neurodivergent Students' Experiences

Humanities students are often required to write with 'clarity' or even 'elegance': How might neurotypical biases affect the way educators apply these criteria? One way to reflect on these kinds of biases is to present students with the assessment criteria and ask them to critique them from an accessibility angle.

As one of the STEM neurodivergent student participants in our project noted, their exam structure was difficult for them as a neurodivergent person because it required them to answer 30 questions on 30 different topics, switching topics dozens of times in three hours. Design the exam using themes or specific weeks of learning so that neurodivergent students are better able to find a throughline and better concentrate in the exam.

- **Exam questions** that require students to read and analyse a large chunk of text without any explanatory visual aid or audio recording of the text in order to know what the question is asking can make life harder for dyslexic students. Break down the text, if possible, use large, accessible fonts and highlight or bold key questions they must answer. **Design the exam using themes or specific weeks of**

learning so that neurodivergent students are better able to find a throughline and better concentrate in the exam.

Providing Neurodivergence-Inclusive Feedback

- **Tell students what your feedback usually looks like and explain why.** Do you comment on grammar, or just the content and structure? Are you using tracked changes that will alert them with an email every time a comment is made? Do you write a paragraph at the end summarising your thoughts?

- **Ask students what makes feedback more straightforward and more helpful for them.** Educators might realise they need to adopt a warmer tone and more phatic style of feedback, whilst still fairly applying the assessment criteria, for a student with ADHD who deals with rejection sensitivity, for example. An autistic student might ask just for a bulleted list of what was good and a bulleted list of what needs to improve and how to improve it. Students are individuals, though: two students with the same condition may have different needs and wishes when it comes to receiving feedback, so it is crucial to ask students individually. Just being aware of the potentially different ways in which students may receive and understand feedback is likely to be helpful.

- **Provide a range of feedback options and allow students to select the one that works best for them**: written feedback, a voice recording, or a 1:1 dialogue with students about their feedback. At the end of each teaching session, ask students to fill out a feedback form – even if it's not required by your department or faculty – to improve your teaching and feedback approaches.

- **If you are providing verbal feedback to students in a tutorial or seminar setting** (ranging from 1:1 tutorials to small seminar groups), **ensure that it is constructive criticism and not a critique of students' inherent ability**. Students have different preferred modes of learning, ranging from written, verbal, kinetic, sensory, and others. Oxford students often must write multiple essays per week in the time constraints of the eight-week terms, and for those for whom writing is not their ideal form of communication, doing so can be a struggle. Providing criticism that passes judgment on acquired skills, such as time management and citation practices, which students may not have learned or honed at school, is most likely not helpful to the student's growth and could hurt their confidence and academic growth.

- Instead, **try signposting them to different resources available to improve their academic abilities** – numerous colleges have embedded study skills advisors on offer for all students; subject libraries and IT services host citation workshops, and other welfare supports such as counselling can help a student's overall wellbeing that can then feed into their academic growth. One staff participant emphasised the value of always starting from a position of strength and positivity in their teaching, which can allow students to feel more comfortable with sharing their accessibility needs.

📺 **Resource and video on [NESTL Canvas](): A Mock Tutorial Session with a Neurodivergent Student**

The video gives a sense of what it might feel like to be a neurodivergent student trying to manage being asked to read out work and receiving

feedback. The video was created by Dr Cressida Ryan and Mr Nicholas Denyer.

📚 **Further Resource**

Neurodivergent Specific Feedback. Warwick University Neurodiversity Toolkit and Student Experience:
https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/academy/activities/learningcircles/neurodiversity/toolkit/learningteachingneuro/learningteachingneurora/

🌊 Communal Efforts

- One important note is that once a neurodivergent **Student's Support Plan (SSP)** is in place, it should be clearly communicated and well understood by all relevant teaching and administrative staff. This helps ensure consistency in the support provided and avoids placing the burden on the student to repeatedly explain their needs, particularly regarding assessment. Clear communication also promotes a more coordinated approach to student support.

- It is important to ensure that **clear structures are in place for students to raise questions about their feedback**. This supports transparency and learning, and helps students who may find it difficult to interpret implicit messages to better understand expectations and improve their work. Providing clear guidance on how and when to seek clarification, and who to contact, can make feedback more meaningful and reduce unnecessary stress or confusion.

- **Clear communication from course administrators** is crucial for creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment. When

information about assessments, deadlines, and extensions is communicated in a timely and transparent way, it helps reduce anxiety and allows all students, especially neurodivergent students, to plan and manage their workload more effectively. Ambiguity or last-minute changes can be particularly challenging for students who rely on routines or need additional processing time. Providing clear points of contact and setting out procedures for requesting extensions or accommodations also ensures that students feel safe and empowered to seek support when needed.

🌪 Institutional Changes

- Despite the decentralised collegial system and diverse assessment approaches across the university, greater flexibility and variety could be considered at the institutional level. Encouraging departments and colleges to **offer a broader range of assessment formats**, such as take-home papers, oral presentations, or creative projects, enables students to demonstrate their learning in ways that better reflect their strengths. Embedding flexibility as part of standard practice, rather than relying solely on individual adjustments, helps promote consistency, fairness, and inclusion.
- **Consistent guidelines** around the timing, format, and tone of feedback help students better understand what is expected and how to improve.

- It is important to ensure that students have accessible routes to ask questions or seek clarification, and that staff feel supported in delivering constructive, specific feedback.

🌐 Sector-wide Transformations

- At the sector level, there is a growing need to **reflect our assumptions about intelligence and rethink the purpose of assessment**, particularly in the age of generative AI. Rather than focusing solely on testing memorisation or individual written output, assessment can be reimagined to emphasise important areas like critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and the application of knowledge in real-world contexts.
- **Embracing diverse assessment approaches**, including group projects, open-book tasks, oral assessments, and iterative feedback processes, can create more meaningful and inclusive ways for students to demonstrate their learning. These changes not only respond to the challenges posed by AI tools but also offer opportunities to design assessments that are more authentic, equitable, neurodivergent-inclusive, and aligned with the complex skills students need beyond higher education.

✅ Individual Checklist on Assessment and Feedback

This checklist is based on the contents in the section on Individual Initiatives. It is not intended to be prescriptive, and you don't need to implement all of the suggestions, or all at once. Use it to reflect on your approaches to assessments and feedback, consider incremental changes that can make them more accessible.

Rethinking Assumptions and Practices

Reflect on your assumptions about intelligence and how they influence your assessment expectations.

Consider whether your ideas of a 'high-performing student' may exclude neurodivergent ways of learning and demonstrating knowledge.

Focus on facilitating learning rather than judging innate ability.

Inclusive Assessment Design

Where possible, offer flexibility in assessment formats that allow students to demonstrate their strengths.

Allow a grace period for late submissions, especially for non-summative assignments.

Accept and encourage unpolished drafts in formative assessments to support writing development.

Review your assessment criteria for potential bias and consider how some descriptors may disadvantage neurodivergent students.

Constructive and Accessible Feedback

Be clear with students about what your feedback will look like and how it will be delivered.

Ask students what feedback format is most helpful for them (e.g. written summary, bullet points, audio, or 1:1 conversation).

Where possible, provide different feedback options and let students choose what works best for them.

Focus feedback on specific skills and strategies for improvement, not on inherent ability.

Use clear, strengths-based language and avoid ambiguous or overly critical phrasing.

Signpost relevant support services that can help students build academic confidence and skills.

(4) Adjustment and Support

<table>
<tr><td>

<u>Simple Summary</u>

🔍 Rethinking the language of 'reasonable adjustments' can help move away from deficit-based assumptions toward a principle of universal access approach that treats diversity as the norm and benefits the entire academic community.

🔍 Be discreet with adjustments to avoid singling out students who prefer not to be identified or seen as 'special', and receiving unwanted attention.

🔍 Understand that students' needs vary and may change over time, and can differ among students with the same diagnosis.

🔍 Student Support Plans and agreed accommodations must be implemented consistently, with clear systems for follow-up when adjustments are not provided.

</td></tr>
</table>

🔥Individual Initiatives

Making changes to how we teach neurodivergent students is often described as making 'accommodations' or 'reasonable adjustments'. Sometimes, colleagues enter into discussions about which adjustments are 'reasonable' to make. The phrase 'reasonable adjustments' can give us pause for thought.

Start by asking yourself:

- Who decides what and who is 'reasonable'?
- How might ideas of being irrational or lacking in reason be wielded against our neurodivergent students?
- How does the demand that a neurodivergent student only requests what is 'reasonable' relate to the history in many cultures of presenting women, queer people, people of colour, and disabled people as irrational and straight white abled, and neurotypical men as the bastions of rationality? As Lavonna L Lovern writes in *The Routledge Handbook of Indigenous Disability Studies*, white Global North ways of thinking tend to posit a binary between abled/disabled and rational/irrational, whereas Indigenous approaches appreciate the 'difference wisdom' that comes from people's different experiences and talents. In this way of thinking, people are expected to be different from each other, with different wisdoms to share; people are not boxed into just one of two categories: rational or irrational.

Many of the adjustments for neurodivergent people involve practical things, like changing a font or dimming a light. Another important adjustment for educators is changing the way that they see their students and the teaching environment. Participants noted several adjustments that they required, which highlighted how typical frameworks of 'good behaviour' in class fail to include neurodivergent people.

- **Aim to operate from a principle of universal access or universal design** – by creating a teaching environment and resources that are

the most disability and neurodivergent-inclusive as possible, you are thereby creating an inherently accessible, open learning space where everyone can thrive. For example, think about the pedestrian ramps built into some streets. They were primarily designed for wheelchair users to be able to access a raised pavement, but have added benefits for other people who are pushing prams, carts, or heavy luggage to access the pavement with ease. An accessibility modification that was intended to reduce barriers for disabled people resulted in greater accessibility overall.

Neurodivergent Students' Experiences and Opinions

One participant offered a common analogy to help frame the need for universal adaptability:

"This in particular is something a lot of people with more consistent day-to-day experiences of their bodies and environments can struggle to understand: it can feel like you're in a bind communicating your access needs, like you have to commit to always or never having a particular accommodation.

Everyone will have times where, for instance, their energy levels are higher or lower; the need for accommodations can be similar. Do try to provide any requested accommodations consistently, but if you observe a student seeming to engage comfortably on a particular occasion without a usual accommodation, this is not grounds to assume that the accommodation is no longer needed, or was not generally important."

<u>Neurodivergent Students' and Staffs' Experiences and Opinions</u>

One student noted that their tutors would attempt to gauge whether they were paying attention based on their **facial expressions**, but for many neurodivergent people (autistic people being a prime example), their facial expressions are not necessarily a reliable indicator of what they are thinking or feeling.

Several of our participants emphasised **the importance of not requiring a diagnosis from our students before making adjustments for them**: NHS waiting lists for diagnoses can be very long, and students may not receive a diagnosis before the end of their degree. Simply asking students how you can support them is a good way to start.

- Understand that some neurodivergent students do not want to feel singled out by adjustments and prefer any adjustments that staff members make to seem natural and built into the teaching.

> **Neurodivergent Students' Experiences and Opinions**
>
> One undergraduate participant concurred that it can be 'isolating' when a tutor is 'trying to be too attentive to neurodivergent students': it singles them out and breaks up the flow of learning.
>
> It can be tricky to navigate the balance of both signalling to students that you are supportive of their neurodivergence whilst also not making them feel uncomfortable – make sure that you indicate at the start of the course that you are available to meet with them about specific concerns, and you can adjust your teaching accordingly for any subsequent sections. See more in the previous section on learning from students' needs, and the example syllabus inclusivity statements (Case Study 1).

- Finally, students' needs may vary day to day, and instructors should be prepared to be flexible. Take students' intersecting identities into account when interacting with them and strive to broaden your understanding of access. Students with the same diagnosis may also have different preferences, strengths, and support needs, so individual communication and adaptability are key.

🌊 Communal Efforts

- Adjustments are needed not only for neurodivergent students but also for neurodivergent teaching staff. Some staff participants shared how

their department or college supported their access needs through counselling services, flexible working arrangements, and understanding from line managers and colleagues. However, we recognise that the level of support varies between individuals, departments, and colleges.

- Student participants also called for **greater accountability** and more robust systems to ensure that when required accommodations are not in place, there are clear mechanisms for addressing the gap and preventing recurrence.

Neurodivergent Students' Experiences and Opinions

One undergraduate participant called for greater accountability for staff members when it comes to adjustments: the right to report a professor, for example, who is not making the required accommodations.

🌀 Institutional Changes

- The university's Student Support Plan (SSP) system plays an important role in formalising adjustments for neurodivergent students. However, **more coordinated efforts are needed** to ensure these plans are implemented consistently and effectively across departments and colleges. Clearer accountability structures could help prevent situations where agreed adjustments are not followed through, and provide mechanisms for resolution when issues arise.

- Adjustments for neurodivergent staff also require more visibility, commitment, and support, including equitable access to workplace accommodations and a culture that recognises neurodivergence as a form of diversity. Embedding inclusive practices more broadly, such as flexibility in 'soft' deadlines, clear communication protocols, and more accessible learning and working environments, can collectively make the university a more supportive space for all.

🌐 Sector-wide Transformations

- At the sector level, **there is a need to critically rethink how we frame 'reasonable adjustments'**. The term often implies an exception to a norm, positioning neurodivergent students and staff as deviations that require accommodation. This framing can reinforce deficit-based narratives and place the burden on individuals to prove their needs.
- Instead, the sector could move towards a more proactive and inclusive model, where learning and working environments are designed with considerations of a diversity of bodies and minds from the outset. Shifting towards a universally-inclusive design approach reduces the need for case-by-case adjustments and reframes inclusion not as a concession, but as a standard of good practice that benefits the whole higher education sector.

✅ Individual Checklist on Adjustment and Support

This checklist is based on the contents in the section on Individual Initiatives. It is not intended to be prescriptive, and you don't need to implement all of the suggestions, or all at once. Use it to reflect on your practice and understandings, and consider incremental changes that can make your teaching more accessible.

Rethinking 'Reasonable Adjustments'

Reflect on who decides what counts as 'reasonable' in your teaching context.

Recognise that many adjustments are low-cost but can have a wide-reaching impact.

Adopting Universal Design Principles

Aim to design teaching environments and materials that are accessible to all students by default.

Consider the wider benefits of inclusive design, such as the curb-cut effect (e.g. ramps help many, not just wheelchair users).

Engaging with Student Needs

Do not solely rely on formal diagnoses before offering adjustments or support.

Make it clear from the start that you are open to conversations about learning needs.

Be discreet with adjustments to avoid singling out students who prefer not to be identified or seen as 'special', and receiving unwanted attention. Integrating inclusive teaching practices can benefit all students without putting individuals on spot.

Practising Flexibility and Care

Acknowledge that students' needs may change from day to day or week to week.

Remember that students with the same diagnosis may have very different experiences and preferences.

Consider how intersecting identities (e.g. race, gender, disability) shape students' access needs and experiences.

Be consistent with accommodations while allowing for fluctuating circumstances.

3. Case Studies

This section provides case studies, generously shared by Dr Laura Seymour, Dr Cressida Ryan, Professor Helen Swift, Dr Cora Beth Fraser, and Professor Sonya Freeman Loftis. We invite you to explore neurodivergence-inclusive teaching from various perspectives and to reflect on the examples you can apply in your own teaching.

📖 Case Study 1: Syllabus Accessibility Statement | Dr Laura Seymour

Senior Lecturer in English, Swansea University

The following statement is provided by Dr Seymour, also shared in the earlier section. Please feel free to adapt and develop your own syllabus accessibility statement.

'Ensuring accessibility for disabled and neurodivergent students, whether or not they have a diagnosis, is an essential part of my job. I have taken the following steps to make my classes more accessible [insert them here: e.g. I provide lecture recordings and welcome contributions from students according to their preferred communication style]. I encourage students to get in touch with me in confidence by [insert a variety of communication methods here, including one anonymous method] to let me know about any additional adjustments you need. I understand that your access needs may change throughout our time together, and encourage you to let me know about these changes.'

📖 Case Study 2: How to Make the Classroom Neurodivergent-Inclusive | Dr Laura Seymour

Senior Lecturer in English, Swansea University

The following recommendations are from Dr Laura Seymour's book [Shakespeare and Neurodiversity](Cambridge University Press, 2025). We have also incorporated some of these suggestions in the earlier sections.

Make your classroom relaxed: explicitly encourage students to move in and out of the room as they like, wear headphones, stim and tic whenever they want. Offer items to fidget with (stress balls, pipe cleaners, string), put elastic exercise bands on chair legs for students to bounce their legs against. Take agreed breaks at various points.

Embrace the fact that students have different working and reading speeds. Rather than stipulating that a certain task 'should' take a certain amount of time, work out whether students need you to accommodate their working speeds better, or help them to work out how much they can get done in a particular time.

Offer a traffic light system of stickers, which people can stick on their clothes or laptop, to aid communication in class: green sticker means 'feel free to approach me and chat'; amber means 'don't approach me first, let me approach you'; red means 'I'm just here to listen, not chat'.

Prepare for many students to select red by considering how you will feel comfortable with students' silence.

What stereotypes do you have in your mind about silent students (that they aren't engaged, perhaps? That they're thinking hard? That they dislike the class, or don't understand it?) and interrogate where those stereotypes and assumptions come from. Saying calmly, 'it's alright, we can sit in silence' can sometimes be enough.

Interrogate assumptions about intelligence (e.g. that spontaneous dialogue, remembering large chunks of text, and fluent reading of a chunk of text equal intelligence, whereas silence means a student is not engaged) and avoid basing students' grades or evaluations on these assumptions. Educators do not need to judge how intelligent their students are, but to facilitate their learning and engagement with course material (see works by Price; Goodey, and Dolmage for disability studies scholarship on 'intelligence').

At the start of a class or course of study, ask students to tell each other their preferred communication styles so that they can adapt to each other (e.g. 'I prefer verbal communication to written communication; unbroken blocks of text aren't accessible to me'). This can help you to prepare ahead when it comes to accommodating potentially 'competing' needs (like the need for drumming and the need for silence used as an example elsewhere in this section).

Fix 'access clashes' (where one student's access needs seem to clash with another's) in a compassionate way that avoids asking students to

mask. For example, if a student needs to rap on the table to stim but it distracts another student, do not insist anyone stops stimming or magically controls their distraction levels. Instead try giving the stimming student a mouse pad or something soft to rap on that muffles the noise and enable students to sit where they like so those who are distracted by the rapping can sit out of eye and earshot of it.

📖 Case Study 3: Opening Disability Conversations | Dr Cressida Ryan

Disability Advisory Service, University of Oxford

GENERAL - If it was obvious, and / or my antennae were wiggling:

1) I'd ask a student to have a word with me. I might ask whether anyone at school had ever suggested an SpLD, or whether any of their siblings had SpLDs. I always start by finding something to praise in the work. I rarely acted on my first instinct, but left it a few classes / homework until I could say –

> "I've seen you're strong on x but I'm beginning to notice a pattern of y, which reminds me of other students who have e.g. dyslexia and I wondered whether this had ever been suggested to you?"

> "Moving to university involves working in new ways, and I was wondering how you were finding that affected your work, as I've noticed xyz, which might not have been picked up on before".

> "I'm new to teaching you, so am looking at your work with fresh eyes, and was wondering whether you'd ever been screened for…"

> "I've noticed a couple of patterns / features in your work and was wondering if you knew why these things happened in your work."

2) This is good if you don't want to suggest SpLD because you don't think the student will handle it well, but opens up a conversation

about what might make work better. It's a difficult balance though. I might give feedback saying "please could you look at how you manage spelling / grammar / structure etc." and then support the student in receiving that feedback ("do come and talk to me about specifics" etc.) to try to get them to admit they found that hard.

3) Running generic skills sessions "how to read / write / notetake for academic purposes" so baseline support was built into universal design, and there's space to experiment and explore everyone's strengths and weaknesses, which leads to a generic discussion of when an SpLD assessment might be helpful, and therefore might bring students forward.

4) It can help to have an external example, e.g. "here's an example of the kind of issue dyslexic students have had with this assignment. I noticed a similar issue with your work, and wondered what you thought of the situation?"

Responses were usually:

1) Oh yes, I just haven't told anyone. How do I handle that now?

2) Oh yes, here's my previous support plan.

3) Oh really? Nobody ever said that but I always found x hard at school and my sister has dyslexia so I suppose that makes sense. What do I do now?

4) Oh really? That isn't something I've ever thought about but thank you for pointing out how I could improve, and if you think it is worth talking to someone, how do I go about it?

So, I think teacher education, clear routes to disability advisor support, a range of questioning approaches which take into consideration how the student is presenting, and some transitional pedagogy and universal design helps.

📖 Case Study 4: Undergraduate Lesson Plan | Professor Helen Swift

Faculty of Medieval and Modern Languages, St. Hilda's College, University of Oxford

Tutorial plan for second-year set texts paper

Pre-term

- Provide one one-stop-shop email of information (consider FAQ format, student-centred language), and keep linking back to it in subsequent communications;
- Provide tutorial plan for the full term (so students can complete work according to the schedule that best works for them);
- Explain rationale for choices (e.g. why do I request work to be handed in before tutes – what's the benefit for them; why do I ask them to give, at the end of the essay, one thing they're pleased with and one thing they're not satisfied with (offer examples thereof), and how will I use that info)

Pre-first-tute

- Invite students to let me know of any challenges they might be facing this term or any additional needs to make the tutorials most comfortable for them (i.e. in addition to/separate from any SSP info shared with me by their College) – list a few examples from previous terms so they know what sort of thing they might consider in those regards.

First tute

- Give students a bit of time to settle into the space – point out practical info (nearest bathroom, nearest socket to seats) and check they have what they need (e.g. if they need to borrow a spare copy of the text because they've forgotten theirs).
- Explain plan for tutorial and relationship between tutorial and the preparation I asked them to do for it (rough notes on a commentary passage for discussion).
- In initial general discussion of their responses to the text, be clear in signalling when you're asking a question that you want them to think about and answer as opposed to general tossing about of thoughts (I tend to say 'Question:….').
- Normalise space for thought and model different possible behaviours (e.g. a not fully articulated thought; the need to jot down notes whilst thinking; silence whilst pondering; different body movements) to help make students feel comfortable inhabiting the space physically and cognitively in ways that feel natural to them.
- Engage with big issues ambitiously and manageably, e.g. 'So this is getting us into the core issue of didacticism and what sort of messages we see an audience being encouraged to draw out, but let's take it step by step: who are we imagining to have been the audiences of this work?'

📖 Case Study 5: Neurodivergence and Class | Dr Cora Beth Fraser

Associate Lecturer in Classics, The Open University

Neurodivergence is an intersectional issue, and one of its intersections is with social class. A lot of the barriers encountered by neurodivergent people in education or employment are similar to those faced by working-class students or employees; so when a neurodivergent person also comes from a working-class background, those problems are compounded.

One particular problem is disclosure. Working-class students who come to university sometimes encounter hostility, and they can feel that they have to prove both that they 'fit' and that they are capable of high achievement. In that situation it does not always feel safe to disclose a neurodivergence, whether diagnosed or undiagnosed. It certainly doesn't feel safe to ask for extra help or even reasonable adjustments.

As a teacher of Classics - and as a working-class autistic person myself - I focus on one key principle in my teaching practice: **inclusion by design**.

If a student needs help but does not feel able to ask for it, or even to disclose that they might require an adjustment, the best approach is to design a learning environment which provides that help to everyone as standard (or as an acceptable option), without anybody having to request it.

In developing my own approach to inclusion by design, I've concentrated on two main areas: reducing anxiety, and promoting a sense of belonging.

Reducing anxiety

Anxiety is a significant barrier to neurodivergent learning for students from all backgrounds, but particularly for working-class students. So anything that we can do, as teachers, to reduce student anxiety will benefit multiply marginalised groups. Adjustments that I have made include:

Sensory adjustments to the teaching environment to make it a calm space for everyone. This is important even online, which is why I developed 'relaxed tutorials' at The Open University.

Advance notice of activities, particularly group work, with clear expectations set out early enough to leave time for preparation, and with an alternative activity offered for anyone who won't be able (or willing) to take part.

Careful **explanation of regulations** and official procedures - particularly those which require interaction with other departments or offices.

No expectation that every student should speak in front of the group. They may speak if they want to, and their contributions are welcomed and appreciated; but my teaching is never designed around the assumption that they will.

Discussion of all assignment questions, rephrasing them in several ways. The wording of questions can be a particular area of concern for

autistic and dyslexic students, as well as working-class students who may be encountering a specific assignment type for the first time. Clear **explanation of the standard pronunciation** of key terms and names, using resources like [Emily Wilson's Pronunciation Guide](#), for students who may only ever have seen them written down. This is a disproportionate source of anxiety for many working-class students, neurotypical as well as neurodivergent, because while it isn't important on an academic level, it is often perceived as a class marker and can contribute to social exclusion.

Regular and advance reminders of **policies on requesting extensions**, including the explanation that I respect people who ask for extra time when they need it, and who use the extra time to produce their best work. My aim is to destigmatise the process, so that neurodivergent and working-class students don't see asking for help as an admission of weakness.

Promoting a sense of belonging

Belonging is an acute problem in Classics, because class inequality is a significant factor in access to Classics and retention of students and staff; and it is an even more acute problem for neurodivergent students who might struggle to find neurodivergent role models among successful classicists.

These are a few of the approaches I have implemented to tackle the problem of belonging:

Unpicking the 'hidden curriculum', following the [QAA Guide for Educators](#), because understanding the terminology and cultural

assumptions of the discipline is a particular area of difficulty for both autistic and working class students.

Making time to showcase **the importance of different perspectives** in research, including feminist approaches, queer theory and disability studies, and to emphasise the value of lived experience.

Talking explicitly about money; particularly student bursaries, hardship funds, small grants funds and other sources of help for buying books or attending events. Money is a major concern for working class students; but it can also be a worry to neurodivergent students (especially autistic students) from other social classes, because autistic people of all backgrounds tend to be underemployed and have a higher cost of living.

Running weekly, optional **online drop-ins**, more like a casual group-chat than a formal lesson, to build a sense of belonging, and to ensure that students who are worried about something can ask questions in an informal setting. This works particularly well for ADHD students, who tend to appreciate short, regular contact opportunities.

Discussing **appropriate and inclusive disability terminology** to be used in student writing and in class, referring to the invaluable Guide by Alexandra Morris and Debby Sneed. Discipline-specific terminology guides are helpful in challenging inappropriate or outdated wording in class discussion on the basis of academic rigour rather than political correctness or tone policing.

Engaging with the initiatives of **groups which represent class** within the subject area (in Classics, this includes the Working Classicists group and the Network for Working-Class Classicists), with a focus on their awareness of intersectionality (e.g. in the recent Working Classicists book, 49% of the 117 contributors identified as neurodivergent).

The EDI Elephant

In my subject area - and in many others too - socio-economic status is the elephant in the room. It is underestimated as a problem, and rarely spoken of; but its presence is deeply felt among groups who face a compounding disadvantage from disability or non-disabling neurodivergence. Importantly, we should not rely on EDI initiatives and policies to tackle the issue for us; because so far they have not. In 2024 the Network for Working-Class Classicists released their hard-hitting 'Class in Classics Report', based on more than a thousand survey responses. Their conclusion specifically addressed what they present as the comprehensive failure of EDI initiatives to help the people who most need them:

> '…the problem of class intersects with other axes of exclusion such as gender identity, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, and disability. These issues intersect and often overlap with class to such an extent that it is (or should be) impossible to talk of equality, diversity and inclusion without talking about class. EDI policies that ignore class are thus doomed to fail. And yet EDI policies have consistently neglected class. In doing so, they have not only let down working-class classicists; they have let down all

but the privileged few among the very groups they aim to help.'
(Canevaro et al 2024 p.74)

Ultimately the responsibility rests with each of us, as individuals, to create an environment where everybody feels welcome, and where differences are understood, accepted and celebrated.

📖 Case Study 6: Teaching Improvisationally | Professor Sonya Freeman Loftis

[M. Mitchell Chair & Professor of English](#), *Morehouse College*

Nothing on my syllabus is fixed—not the readings, not the grading scale, not the daily classroom activities. I regard teaching as an improvisational art. This is in part because for me, it must be so: the sensory issues that are caused by my autism vary in severity from day to day, and what is possible one day may not be possible the next. If my sensory pain is too severe on any given day, I may need to change my lesson plan on the spot—a lecture might transform into small group work, or large group work might need to be online work, or I might dream up a writing exercise as I walk into the classroom. As a tenured professor of English, I am afforded the luxury of teaching improvisationally, but institutions rarely allow that kind of flexibility for neurodivergent students and graduate assistants. Some of our neurodivergent students deal with variable pain and are living life in improvisational ways. We can support the improvisation of our neurodivergent students by remaining flexible, being open to compromise, and practicing radical compassion.

There are ways that we can accommodate neurodiverse improvisation in both physical space and academic work. The "classroom etiquette" section of my syllabi contains the statement "The rules of neurotypical decorum do not apply in this classroom." I often have to explain to students what this means on the first day of class. It means that it is okay to engage in stimming during class; it is okay to stand in the back of the classroom during class; it is okay to pace in the back of the classroom during class; it is okay to eat and drink during class. This

flexibility around the use of classroom space requires compromise and understanding from the instructor but also from other students. Sometimes stimming can be distracting—to peers and to this highly distractable professor, as well. Conflicting access needs require communication and compromise. The academic portion of my syllabus is equally flexible. At midterm, I allow students to vote on collective changes to the syllabus. They often change the grading scale: opting for reading journals instead of quizzes, lowering the weight of exams, or bargaining for a participation grade. I am also open to working flexibly with individual students if they have particular requests or needs. That kind of flexibility is not possible with every subject matter or curriculum, but when it comes to English literature, I have found that a high level of individual variation is possible. Be open to having conversations with students about access needs that may vary from day to day, that may change the look and feeling of your classroom space, or that might even change the structure of your syllabus.

By emphasizing flexible and individualized inclusion, by prioritizing compromise and compassion, we can help to include students with varying levels of pain and challenge and support their disabled ingenuity in a world designed for the able-bodied and neurotypical. In my experience, it can lead to some wonderfully improvised classroom adventures.

4. Myth Busting

Myth – Too many people are being diagnosed with neurodivergent conditions. There weren't so many neurodivergent people around in the past. 'Neurodiversity' is just a modern fad.

In fact – Neurodivergent people have always existed. Awareness of neurodivergence has been growing in recent years, often through social media. The fact that more people are recognising their neurodivergence, and being diagnosed with neurodivergent conditions, does not mean that there is a greater percentage of neurodivergent people in the population nowadays compared to 10-20 years ago. Diagnostic criteria for some neurodivergent conditions have also changed over the years. More expansive diagnostic criteria for autism, for example, mean that more people nowadays meet the diagnostic criteria for autism than they did in 1911 when the term was first coined.

For an evidence-based and nuanced discussion of the rise in autism diagnoses in particular, see the 2025 BBC podcast series "The Autism Curve".

Myth – I can tell who in my class is neurodivergent and who is not just by looking at them.

In fact – It is not always possible to tell whether or not someone is neurodivergent just by looking at them. Many students are deploying the survival strategy of masking (hiding their neurodivergence) in class to appear neurotypical. Students might force themselves to make eye-contact or to sit still in order to fit in with their neurotypical peers; autistic students may simply not come to class on days when they do not have

verbal abilities at their disposal and so we may never see them when they are non- or partially-verbal. Dyslexic students may spend many additional hours preparing for class so that in the classroom they can pretend to decode tutors' instructions spontaneously and with ease. Students with OCD may have got up three hours early so that they can complete their rituals before class begins.

Our biases about what particular neurodivergent conditions look like (e.g. ADHD is associated in many people's minds with young, white, hyperactive boys) can also shape what we can and can't see. Anand Prahlad writes that as a Black autistic man, his autism is an 'invisible disability' because few people are willing to 'see' autism in a Black person. Lexi (Giizhigokwe) Nahwegiizhic, writing on 'Neurodiversity from an Indigenous perspective' in *The Routledge Handbook of Indigenous Disability Studies* describes a spiritual aspect to masking: for Nahwegiizhic, unmasking involved 'reconnect[ing] with my spirit and culture'.

Myth – I know of people who have very severe autism. The students in my class who say they are autistic have a mild form of autism because they are able to study for a degree. They are not as autistic as the severely autistic people I have seen in society or on TV.

In fact – Autistic people are generally opposed to the notion that there are such things as 'high functioning' and 'low functioning', or 'mild' and 'severe' autism. Autism is not an illness that you have in a 'mild' or 'severe' form and all autistic people are part of the autism spectrum. A different set of terms that can be used are 'high support needs' and 'low support needs', referring to how much help an autistic person requires to

go about their life. Often, allistic (non-autistic) people believe an autistic person's autism to be 'mild' because it affects *them* (the allistic person) mildly. However, we do not always see the pain and effort that an autistic person is suffering in order to make sure that other people around them feel comfortable and unthreatened, and we do not always see the burnout that they suffer from after even short periods of classroom interaction. Many challenges autistic people deal with (for example, debilitating intrusive thoughts) can be completely invisible to other people. Being able to study for a degree doesn't make someone less autistic than an autistic person whose high support needs made it more difficult to enter our current education system.

Myth – Providing accommodations to neurodivergent students is unfair to neurotypical students.

In fact – Accommodations are about equity, not equality. They address systemic barriers that neurodivergent individuals face, allowing them to access the same opportunities and demonstrate their abilities on an equal footing. Imagine asking someone in a wheelchair to climb stairs; providing a ramp isn't an unfair advantage, it's a necessary adjustment for access. These supports help level the playing field, ultimately benefiting everyone by making the learning environment more flexible and inclusive.

Myth - Bart Simpson does not have ADHD.

In Fact: This is a myth. Bart Simpson does in fact have ADHD (see *The Simpsons* Season 11 Episode 2).

Myth – Students claim they are neurodivergent in order to get extra time on exams, and other benefits, including ADHD medication.

In fact – Many students are anxious about requesting support, because they do not want to be marked out as different. Self-diagnosis may be valid for self-understanding and development, but it will not provide access to reasonable adjustments in this way. This requires some diagnostic evidence, with professional validation. Medication will only have the desired effect if the person genuinely has ADHD. Stimulants will relax someone with ADHD's brain, but do the opposite for someone without it. They are highly controlled, and titration is carefully managed.

Myth - Dyslexia (and other forms of neurodivergence) mainly affects boys.

In fact – Much of the diagnostic frameworks for neurodivergent conditions has focussed on the experiences of white, well-off boys. This has led to it being easier to identify neurodivergence in that cohort, perpetuating a cycle in which it seems as though they are a key group. We are now seeing greater numbers of female and non-binary people receiving diagnoses, as criteria are reinterpreted to incorporate their experiences. It is likely that neurodivergence is relatively evenly spread across genders.

Myth - Autistic people all have "superpower" brains, like in films such as "Rain Man".

In fact – Initially, autism was to some extent equated with learning disabilities; autistic people were not expected also to be intelligent. The "high functioning" label associated with what was initially termed "Asperger's Disorder / Syndrome" accounted for people who had exceptional intellectual talents such as phenomenal memories or mathematical skill and processing power. It is not, however, true that autistic people will conform to either of these stereotypes, or have any kind of "savant" power.

Myth – Everyone is a bit "on the spectrum".

In fact – Neurodivergent traits are human traits. It is therefore by definition true that these traits are likely to show up in many, if not all people. That does not mean that everyone is neurodivergent; it means that we are all human. To be diagnosed as neurodivergent, such traits need to be pervasive across all (most) areas of life, and have a non-trivial impact on people's ability to function and flourish. Someone with ADHD, for example, will process dopamine differently to someone without it; one doesn't just respond in varyingly graded ways to dopamine. While individual characteristics and traits may be universal, therefore, the intensity and patterns of such traits, and potentially various biological markers for them are not.

See Dr Aimee Grant's 2025 article on this topic: Everyone isn't 'a little bit autistic' – here's why this notion is harmful

Myth - Autistic people have no empathy or social skills

In fact - Autistic people can struggle with accessing their feelings and feeling empathy. They can also, however, be hyperempathic and feel things very deeply. There is also what is called the "double empathy" problem, formulated by Dr Damien Milton. Neurotypical people often complain that neurodivergent people lack empathy, however neurotypical people often struggle to empathise—or show empathy—towards neurodivergent people.

Neurotypical people expect neurodivergent people to respond to things the same way that neurotypical people do. It can be like most of the world speaks French but autistic people speak Spanish, so they half understand, but it isn't the same language, and has a different culture and nuance. You wouldn't tell a Spanish person that they were "lacking in communication and empathy skills" for not understanding French. Spanish people can understand Spanish people, and French people can understand French people. It is awkward, therefore, for neurotypical people to assume that the so-called problem lies with neurodivergent people not being able to understand them. Neither group is understanding the other effectively, and it is a joint responsibility to tackle this. Neurodivergent individuals experience and express empathy, and engage socially, in diverse ways that may differ from neurotypical norms. Many have deep empathy but might express it differently, or process social cues in ways that are not always immediately apparent to others.

Judging social "skill" based solely on neurotypical interaction styles misses the rich and varied ways neurodivergent people connect, communicate, and care. As the Autistic Rabbi, Rabbi Ruti Regan writes,

real social skills include being negative sometimes, being a killjoy, speaking one's mind, and being authentic, which are all things that many neurodivergent people excel at because of their neurodivergence. See Real Social Skills

Myth – People are born neurodivergent or neurotypical, and nothing changes that.

In fact – Acquired neurodivergence is increasingly well-recognised. There are at least two major factors here. The first concerns how we classify neurodivergence in terms of impact on someone's life. Some conditions have overlapping impact, and it can be useful to classify them in the same group in order to ensure people receive appropriate support and accommodations. The second is related to changes in people themselves; events such as traumatic brain injuries, or the impact of trauma in precipitating PTSD, for example, can lead to people developing the kinds of functional and neurological symptoms associated with neurodivergence.

5. Glossary

Access intimacy | Access intimacy, coined by disability justice activist [Mia Mingus](), is the feeling of intimacy and connection that occurs when we communicate our access needs to someone (or several people), and the other person or people listen to what we have to say and meet our needs. Understand that not everyone will want to share their access needs at first, or at all, in the process of teaching and learning.

Accommodations / adjustments | Changes we make for other people, so that they can participate in an activity.

Burnout | Being physically and emotionally drained, often as a result of overwork, not enough rest, not enough time to be one's authentic self, and too much masking or social time around other people.

[Disability Advisory Service](https://...) (DAS) | DAS is a University of Oxford service that 'provides information and advice on disability issues and facilitates support' for disabled students at Oxford. Students must register with DAS in order to receive a Student Support Plan (SSP), which then grants them accommodations such as extensions, extra time during exams, and other accessibility resources such as equipment or software. DAS has a staff of advisors who are assigned to each college. You can refer to [this page]() about the evidence needed to register with DAS.

Disability drift | Treating a disabled person as if they have another disability which they do not in fact have. For example, talking slowly and loudly to a person in a wheelchair as if that person is d/Deaf when in fact they are hearing, or treating a person who stammers as if they also have

an intellectual disability when in fact they don't. In situations where 'disability drift' occurs, one type of disability drifts and blurs into another. This concept was articulated by Jay Dolmage.

Fidget toys | Items that people use to fidget: to help focus, regulate emotions, and to play. They may be manufactured for this purpose (e.g. fidget spinners) or ad-hoc (e.g. a pebble someone keeps in their pocket to fiddle with).

Stimming/Tics | Words and movements that punctuate a person's speech and behaviour. Often repeated or repetitive. Stims and tics are often described as 'involuntary', but as Remi Yergeau has shown we should be wary of neatly mapping the voluntary/involuntary dichotomy onto the neurotypical/neurodivergent binary. Neurotypical people make all kinds of involuntary movements and utterances every day, and many neurodivergent people can play around with, decide to unleash, and (albeit often with pain and suffering) deliberately repress their stims and tics.

Student Support Plan (SSP) | The SSP sets out the 'reasonable adjustments recommended for a student' in order to ensure their learning is accessible and is shared with relevant staff members (i.e. librarians, course conveners, educators). A student may also share their SSP with you directly. Regardless of whether a student has an SSP, they may have access needs and require accommodations that are not formally recorded, but are equally as valid.

6. Further Resources

A note on ableism, transphobia, and underrepresented voices

🏳️‍⚧️ Before you peruse the following list of resources, we want to affirm our solidarity with the trans community and assert the trans-inclusive politics of our team. Transphobia is rife within the academy, particularly in the UK, and it is our responsibility as critical scholars to identify and reject attacks against the trans community. Ableism and transphobia are interlinked oppressions that must be challenged and dismantled, especially as the academic known for popularising the term 'neurodiversity' has openly expressed transphobic views. Recent research has posited that the concept of neurodiversity was developed collectively (see Botha et al., 2024). Instead, we invite you to read trans and non-binary disabled scholars and activists cited below, including works by Walker, Chapman, Botha, Tan, Devon Price, Prahlad, Yergeau, Sins Invalid, and Smilges. We encourage you to critically examine these intersections as we continue to grow and work towards transformative justice for all.

📚 We acknowledge that, despite our conscious efforts to invite and learn from as wide a range of perspectives as possible, the diverse composition of our team, advisory board, and workshop and interview participants, there are still gaps in our knowledge. This sits against the broader context in the academic fields of neurodiversity studies and disability studies, where racialised, queer, and trans voices have historically been unheard, marginalised, or ignored.

We have cited scholars, creatives, and activists of colour, many of whom work specifically on queer-of-colour and crip-of-colour theories in our references, and we encourage you to consult their scholarship in your

learning. These scholars include Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, Sami Schalk, Anand Prahlad, Kala Allen Omeiza, Shayda Kafai, the members of Sins Invalid, and Kai Syng Tan.

Book Recommendations Format: Author, Title, Year, Publisher

Further Readings

📖 Teaching & Pedagogy

- Ada Hubrig & Anna Barritt. (2024). "Cripping Writing Processes: Composing (Neuro)divergently." In A. Cicchino & T. Hicks (Eds.), *Better Practices: Exploring the Teaching of Writing in Online and Hybrid Spaces.* The WAC Clearinghouse, University Press of Colorado.
- Ai Binh T. Ho, Stephanie L. Kerschbaum, Rebecca Sanchez, and Remi Yergeau. Cripping Neutrality: Student Resistance, Pedagogical Audiences, and Teachers' Accommodations. In *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture*. 2020, 20(1), 127-139.
- Dan Goodley. Depathologising the University. In *Pedagogy, Culture & Society.* 2024, 1-18.
- Jay T. Dolmage. *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education.* 2017, University of Michigan Press.

- Laura Seymour, *Shakespeare and Neurodiversity.* 2024, Cambridge University Press (Elements in Shakespeare and Pedagogy).

- Margaret Price, *Crip Spacetime: Access, Failure, and Accountability in Academic Life.* 2024. Duke University Press.

- Margaret Price, *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life.* 2011. University of Michigan Press.

- Nicole Brown, Jennifer Leigh (Eds). *Ableism in Academia*. 2020, UCL Press.

- Nicole Brown. *Lived Experiences of Ableism in Academia: Strategies for Inclusion in Higher Education.* 2021, Bristol University Press.

- Sophie Philips, *The Autistic Postgraduate Woman: Navigating the Neurotypical University*. 2024. Pavilion Press.

- Lori Wischnewsky, 'Reframing the Narrative: Stories From Adult-Diagnosed Autistic and ADHD Women in Postsecondary Education' (PhD Thesis, Texas State University, 2024) Reframing the Narrative: Stories from Adult-Diagnosed Autistic and ADHD Women in Postsecondary Education

- Lori Wischnewsky et al, 'What Every Educator Needs to Know About Neurodivergence', *NOSS Practitioner to Practitioner* 2023, pp. 9-13.

📖 ADHD

- ADHD Babes, a support group for Black women & Black non-binary people of colour of African-Caribbean descent with ADHD

- ADHD women, Intersectional Agency, Phenomenological Conversations, ADHD Pedagogy Dr Dyi Dieuwertje Huijg

- Charlotte Mia and Jess Joy. *How Not to Fit In: An Unapologetic Guide to Navigating Autism and ADHD.* 2024, HarperCollins.
- [Co-constructing ADHD Pedagogy | Dr Dyi Dieuwertje Huijg](#)
- Laura Basten, The Codex Is Always On Crip Time: ADHD(Ness) and Reading, *Reception* 15 (2023), pp. 89-99
- René Brooks, Black Girl Lost Keys blog [Black Girl, Lost Keys - Living as a Black Woman with ADHD](#)

📖 Autism

- Anand Prahlad, *The Secret Life of a Black Aspie: A Memoir*. 2017. Alaska University Press.
- Anna Stenning, *Narrating the Many Autisms: Identity, Agency, Matterin*g. 2024, Routledge.
- Anna Stenning, The Creativity of Autistic Students in the Arts and Humanities, [The Creativity of Autistic Students in the Arts and Humanities – the polyphony](#)
- Anna Stenning. [*Remembering what really matters: Nature, culture, and autism*](#). 2021, University of Leeds.
- Barb Cook and Michelle Garnett (Eds). *Spectrum Women: Walking to the Beat of Autism.* Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Catherine Tan. *Spaces on the Spectrum: How Autism Movements Resists Experts and Create Knowledge.* 2024, Columbia University Press.
- Devon Price. *Unmasking Autism: The Power of Embracing Our Hidden Neurodiversity.* 2022, Monoray.

- Devon Price. *Unmasking for Life: A Guide to Embracing your Autism in a Neurotypical World.* 2025, Octopus Publishing Group.

- Hannah Belcher, *Taking Off the Mask.* 2022. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

- Helen Jeffries. *[Autistic Civil Servant: Being an autistic professional in the civil service](#)*. 2025, Wordpress Blog.

- Joanne Limburg. *Letters to My Weird Sisters: On Autism, Feminism and Motherhood.* 2022, Atlantic Books.

- Julia Miele Rodas and Diana Rebekkah Paulin. 2021. 'Black Autism', In *CLA Journal*, Vol. 64, No. 1, *SPECIAL ISSUE: Blackness and Disability: This. Is. The. Remix. or I Thought I Told You That We Won't Stop.*

- Kala Allen Omeiza. *Autistic and Black.* 2024, Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

- Laura Kate Dale. *Uncomfortable Labels: My Life as a Gay Autistic Trans Woman.* 2019, Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

- Lizzie Huxley-Jones. *Stim: An Autistic Anthology*. 2020, Unbound.

- Monique Botha. 2022. Community psychology as reparations for violence in the construction of autism knowledge. In D. Milton, & S. Ryan (Eds.), *The Routledge International Handbook of Critical Autism Studies.* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003056577-8

- Monique Botha and Kristen Gillespie-Lynch. 2022. Come as You Are: Examining Autistic Identity Development and the Neurodiversity Movement through an Intersectional Lens. *Human Development,* 66(2): 93–112. https://doi.org/10.1159/000524123

- M. Remi Yergeau. *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness.* 2017, Duke University Press.

- Pete Wharmby. *What I Want to Talk About*. 2023, Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Sonya Freeman Loftis. *Imagining Autism: Fiction and Stereotypes on the Spectrum.* 2015, Indiana University Press.

📖 Dyspraxia

- Rosemary Richings. *Stumbling Through Space Time: Living with Dyspraxia.* 2022, Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

📖 Dyslexia

- Becks Turner's *Melonade* theatrical gameshow
- Bodleian Libraries Accessible Resources Unit (ARACU)
- British Dyslexia Association
- Dyslexia at Oxford. https://torch.ox.ac.uk/dyslexia-at-oxford
- Dyslexia-friendly style guide
- Kelly Sandman-Hurley. *The Adult Side of Dyslexia.* 2021, Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Petronilla Whitfield, *Teaching Strategies for Neurodiversity and Dyslexia in Actor Training*. 2020, Routledge.
- Teaching for Neurodiversity

📖 OCD

- Lily Bailey. *Because We Are Bad*. 2016. Canbury Press.
- Melissa Boyle. *Geek Magnifique: Finding the Logic in My OCD*. 2018. Trigger Press.
- Reid Wilson. *Stopping the Noise in Your Head*. 2016. Ebury.
- Sally Winston and Martin Seif. *Needing to Know For Sure: A CBT Based Guide to Overcoming Compulsive Checking and Reassurance Seeking*. 2019. New Harbinger.
- Beyondocd.org
- The OCD Stories Podcast   home - The OCD Stories

📖 General Neurodiversity & Disability – Academic Literature

- Alison Kafer. *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. 2013, Indiana University Press.
- C. F. Goodey. *A History of Intelligence and 'Intellectual Disability': The Shaping of Psychology in Early Modern Europe.* 2014, Routledge.
- Tomoya Hirota, Keun-Ah Cheon, and Meng-Chuan Lai. 2024. Neurodiversity Paradigms and their Development Across Cultures: Some Reflections in East Asian Contexts. *Autism* 28(11), pp. 2685-2689.
- Gemma Williams. *Understanding Others in a Neurodiverse World: A Radical Perspective on Communication and Shared Meaning.* 2024, Pavillion.

- Hannah Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, Nick Chown, Anna Stenning (Eds). *Neurodiversity Studies: A New Critical Paradigm.* 2020, Routledge.
- J. Logan Smilges. *Crip Negativity.* 2023, University of Minnesota Press.
- J. Logan Smilges. *Queer Silence: On Disability and Rhetorical Absence. 2022,* University of Minnesota Press.
- J Logan Smilges and Slava Greenberg, eds. 2025. *Towards a Trans[]Crip Theory*, special issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 12(2).
- Jenny Bergenmar, Louise Creechan, Anna Stenning (Eds). *Critical Neurodiversity Studies: Divergent Textualities in Literature and Culture.* 2025, Bloomsbury.
- John T. Ward (Eds). *Indigenous Disability Studies.* 2025, Routledge.
- Kai Syng Tan. *Neuro-Futurism and Re-Imagining Leadership.* 2024, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Katie Ellis, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Mike Kent, Rachel Robertson (Eds). *Manifestos for the Future of Critical Disability Studies, Volume 1.* 2018, Routledge.
- Matthew J. Wolf-Meyer, *Unraveling: Remaking Personhood in a Neurodiverse Age.* 2020, University of Minnesota Press.
- Monique Botha, Robert Chapman, Morénike Giwa Onaiwu, Steven K. Kapp, Abs Stannard Ashley and Nick Walker. (2024). The neurodiversity concept was developed collectively: An overdue correction on the origins of neurodiversity theory. *Autism, 28*(6), 1591-1594. https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613241237871

- Nick Walker, *Neuroqueer Heresies: Notes on the Neurodiversity Paradigm, Autistic Empowerment, and Postnormal Possibilities.* 2021, Autonomous Press.
- Sami Schalk. *Black Disability Politics.* 2022, Duke University Press. [Open Access]
- Vishnu KK Nair, Warda Farah, and Mildred Boveda. 2024. Is neurodiversity a Global Northern White paradigm? *Autism, 0*(0). https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613241280835
- V. Jo Hsu. 2022. Irreducible Damage: The Affective Drift of Race, Gender, and Disability in Anti-Trans Rhetorics. *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, *52*(1), 62–77. https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2021.1990381

📖 General Neurodiversity & Disability – Non-Academic Publications

- Abs Stannard Ashley. 12 April 2024. "The Cass Review's final report: The implications at the intersection of trans and neurodivergence." *Neurodiverse Connection.* https://ndconnection.co.uk/blog/cass-report
- Chloé Hayden. *Different, Not Less: A neurodivergent's guide to embracing your true self and finding your happily ever after.* 2023, Murdoch Books.
- Ellie Middleton. *Unmasked: The Ultimate Guide to ADHD, Autism, and Neurodivergence.* 2023, Penguin Life.
- Hannah Gadsby. *Ten Steps to Nanette: A Memoir Situation.* 2022, Allen & Unwin.

- Jenara Nerenberg. *Divergent Mind: Thriving in a World That Wasn't Designed for You.* 2021, HarperCollins.

- Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha. *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice.* 2018, Arsenal Pulp Press.

- Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha. *The Future is Disabled: Prophecies, Love Notes and Mourning Songs.* 2022, Arsenal Pulp Press.

- Mia Mingus. *Leaving Evidence* blog.

- Neurodiversity at Oxford. 2022. *Sunglasses on Bright Days: Stories from Oxford University's Neurodiverse Community.*

- Neurodiversity Connection Journal. https://ndconnection.co.uk/blog

- Robert Chapman. *Empire of Normality: Neurodiversity and Capitalism.* 2023, Pluto Press.

- Sins Invalid. *Skin, Tooth, and Bone: The Basis of Movement is Our People – A Disability Justice Primer.* 2019.

- Shayda Kafai. *Crip Kinship: The Disability Justice & Art Activism of Sins Invalid.* 2022, Arsenal Pulp Press.

📖 Zines

- Anon, 'You Don't Need a Psychiatrist To Tell You You're Autistic' (2023)

- Jas Osborne (Batmoons) 'Burnt Out: How To Cope With Autistic Burnout' (2018)

- Jesbian, 'Goldpanning for Brain Matter', issues 1-2 and accompanying mini zines (2015)

- Lex Kartanë, 'Random Thoughts About Stimming' (2019)
- Mad Zines project: <u>Mad Zine Research – Crafting Contention about Mental Health</u>

📖 Creative Projects on Neurodivergence

- **NESTL Youtube <u>Playlist</u>** of neurodivergence-inspiring songs, compiled by Dr Cressida Ryan
- Dolly Sen <u>Dolly Sen – spanking reality arse since 2000</u>
- Hamja Ahsan <u>Hamja Ahsan</u>
- Jess Thom, Touretteshero <u>About Touretteshero | Touretteshero</u>
- Kai Syng Tan <u>HI I'M KAI – ARTFUL AGITATION</u>
- Mahlia Amatina <u>Mahlia Amatina | Neurodivergent Artist</u>
- *<u>Make Melonade</u>* Podcast by Becks Turner
- <u>Sins Invalid</u> disability justice movement & performance art project
- Syrus Marcus Ware <u>Performance. Disability. Art.: Public Celebrations of Love, Creativity, and Disability</u>
- <u>The Neurodivergent Birth Podcast</u> exploring neurodivergent experiences of pregnancy, birth, and the postnatal period
- <u>The Late Discovered Club Podcast</u> sharing the stories of late discovered/diagnosed autistic women and marginalised groups

📖 Resources for Neurodivergent Educators

- [Asterion: Celebrating Neurodiversity in Classics](#) - Dr Cora Beth Fraser
- Bristol Institute for Learning and Teaching: Case Studies and Blog Posts on Inclusivity – e.g. [Case study: Neuroinclusive teaching, learning and assessment – Bristol Institute for Learning and Teaching Blog](#)
- DAS [Assistive Technology for libraries and shared study spaces](#)
- [Easy Read Training UK](#)
- [Neurodiversifying the Academy](#) (Wellcome Fund Early Career Award Project) led by Dr Louise Creechan
- Oxford Academic & Student Support - [Accessible communication](#)
- Oxford Centre for Teaching and Learning – [Accessible teaching and learning resources](#)
- Oxford [MPLS Neuro-inclusive Guidance](#)
- TORCH Oxford [Neurodiversity Research Network](#)
- UCL – [Supporting neurodiversity in education](#)
- [WAARC: A Wellcome Trust Institutional Funding for Research Culture Award | iHuman | The University of Sheffield](#)
- [Warwick University Neurodiversity Toolkit and Student Experience](#)

📖 Work in Progress

- Laura Seymour, AMEND (Wellcome Trust, 2025-2030): theatre project, bibliotherapy and dramatherapy workshops, and neurodiversity app, Swansea University (in progress)

7. METHODS & ABOUT US

Researching ethically with neurodivergent participants

To research ethically with neurodivergent and disabled communities, we adopted an anti-extractive, anti-oppressive methodology when interacting with our participants. We recognise that the academy has historically and continues to perpetuate ableism (Brown & Leigh, 2020; Brown, 2021), and we are careful not to reproduce or reinforce systemic ableism in our work. All the research was conducted under the premise of the disability justice call for 'nothing about us without us' (see Sins Invalid, 2019).

The lived experiences of neurodivergent learners and educators are the foundation of this toolkit. In total, we received more than 50 contributions, input, and feedback via workshops, individual interviews, and both written and verbal feedback.

To learn from their insights and gather their contributions, we hosted three workshops in Michaelmas term 2024, one each with undergraduate students, postgraduate students, and educators. All staff and student participants self-identified as neurodivergent, and we did not require them to have a formal diagnosis to contribute. We offered participants the option of attending in-person or online workshops or attend a 1:1 interview with a member of our research team, depending on their preference. In the sign-up form, we asked if anyone had any accessibility needs and we did our best to meet their access needs, such as providing noise-cancellation ear mufflers and covering any travel expenses to and from the workshop. At the in-person workshops, we ensured there was a quiet room available with fidget toys and

provided various fidget items in the main room. We emphasised and encouraged fidgeting, stimming, and any other sensory activities participants wanted to engage in throughout the session. A simple but impactful adjustment we made in the physical room was to turn off the fluorescent lights because the effect was too harsh. All participants were offered a free and confidential therapy session with a neurodiversity-affirming therapist.

Three students attended the undergraduate workshop, and four students attended the postgraduate workshop. Students came from a range of humanities, social sciences, and sciences disciplines, covering all of Oxford's academic divisions except for medical sciences. Georgia Lin (see team introduction in the next section) facilitated the student workshops as a DPhil researcher who frequently works with her Oxford student peers, in order to avoid the power imbalance that would occur were a staff member to run the discussion. Each workshop lasted around one hour, and participants were given a £10 voucher for their time. In addition, Georgia also conducted a 1:1 interview with a postgraduate student via Teams. Other members of the NESTL research team were present at the workshop and took notes.

The teaching staff workshop was held via Teams and had seven participants, including one DPhil student who signed up for the teaching staff session because they had significant teaching duties. The workshop lasted for around one hour and was facilitated by Dr Cressida Ryan, a member of the research team and a disability advisor at the University of Oxford's Disability Advisory Service. Participants were given a £10 voucher for their time. We also conducted individual interviews with members of our advisory board team and workshop

participants throughout Michaelmas 2024 and Hilary 2025 terms to gather further insights.

In the final phases of the project, we conducted three online feedback workshops on the completed toolkit draft: one session with neurodivergent students, one session with neurodivergent staff, and one session with neurotypical and neurodivergent staff. We want to ensure that this toolkit reaches a wide range of audiences, including those who do not have an extensive knowledge of disability and neurodiversity, and thus we chose to include both neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals in this stage of feedback to understand how we can make the toolkit the most approachable it can be. However, it was an intentional decision to host separate sessions to prioritise the safety of neurodivergent participants, where they could offer their thoughts, stim, and fidget without fear of repercussions or judgements from non-neurodivergent participants. Collecting feedback from the neurodivergent community throughout the research process underscores our participatory research principles and allows the main output of NESTL, this toolkit, to reflect the value and validity of lived experiences of neurodivergence. We also received written and verbal feedback from various experts and colleagues who was not able to join the workshops, but offered to review the toolkit draft. Each participant and contributor received a £10 voucher for their time. All neurodivergent participants were again offered a free and confidential therapy session with a neurodiversity-affirming therapist.

We appreciate the importance of keeping the anonymity of participants, while also appreciating their contributions. Therefore, we asked

participants' preference regarding acknowledgements, and have followed their wishes accordingly.

The project has been reviewed by the Departmental Research Ethics Committee at the Department of Education, University of Oxford, and received approval (CUREC reference EDUC_C1A_24_162).

Who we are

The NESTL research team comprise current and former researchers from across the University of Oxford, who each bring their knowledge and expertise to this toolkit as both learners and teaching staffs. We acknowledge the importance of producing research on disability and neurodivergence *by* disabled and neurodivergent people ([Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020](#)) and introduce ourselves further in this section with this goal in mind. Certain members of the team have chosen to disclose different facets of their identities for personal and professional reasons – this does not necessarily mean that members do *not* identify with a specific identity, but the comfort levels of individuals differ. Our diverse knowledge production emerges from both implicit and explicit recognitions of marginalisations and privileges that have impacted our experiences at Oxford and elsewhere. We invite you to reflect on our methodological praxis and think about the fluctuating nature of identities and its complexities as you digest this toolkit.

Dr Laura Seymour

Laura Seymour is a Senior Lecturer in English at Swansea University, holding a 6-year Wellcome-Trust Career Development Award (Wellcome's mid-career award). This provides her with the space, time, and financial and material resources to conduct research into neurodivergence until the end of 2030. She brings to this project experience of working at five different universities in the UK. Her four-year experience at Oxford was of working in the more precarious and lower-paid contracts that are very common in Oxford colleges—fixed-

term, part-time, teaching-only jobs where research is conducted unpaid in one's 'spare' time—and this continues to motivate her to amplify the voices of precariously-employed colleagues (including those academics on sharper ends of the wedge, like hourly-paid tutors) as part of this project. She is a white, mostly verbal, cisgender person with a doctorate. Though she is from a working-class family, she now considers herself middle class due to her salary, and work and education at Oxbridge. She is a UK citizen. She has found that all these characteristics made it easier to be safely open about her identity as a neurodivergent person in UK academia, whilst also drawing on queer and working class experiences, and learning from anti-racist theory and practice, to approach Oxford's 'business as usual' way of working with anger and suspicion particularly due to its racism, classism, and ableism. At the same time, her visibility in the field has contributed to the over-prominence of white scholars, and of verbal autistic people, in neurodiversity studies. As a queer/lesbian person, her approach to the NESTL project has been attuned to what is shared between LGBTQ+ and neurodivergent communities at Oxford. She practices as a psychotherapeutic counsellor and is on a constant learning curve to appreciate how both the education and therapy professions harm and harmed neurodivergent people in the past and present.

Dr Xin Xu

Xin Xu (许心) is a Departmental Lecturer in Higher/Tertiary Education at the Department of Education, University of Oxford. Xin has been doing research and teaching at this institution since January 2019, following her DPhil in Education from the same institution. Xin is a Chinese

woman born, raised and educated in China, with a BA degree from Tsinghua University and an MA degree from Peking University. She values many Chinese philosophical ideas, which guide her professional and personal lives, such as 和而不同 (*he er bu tong*, English translation could be: *harmony in diversity*; *unity in diversity*; *harmony without conformity*) and 有教无类 (*you jiao wu lei*, English translation could be: *education for all, regardless of background*). Xin constantly navigates through various 'worlds' that highlight certain aspects of her identity, as well as relevant privileges and marginalisations. Such experiences challenge but enrich her way of being, thinking, reflecting, and interacting with the worlds. Through her research, teaching and other responsibilities, Xin is committed to promoting equity and diversity in knowledge and practices, particularly for under-represented, marginalised and disadvantaged communities. She currently serves on the Equality and Diversity Panel of the University of Oxford, and the Equity, Diversity and Belonging Committee at the Department of Education. She is grateful to have been working with this team and on this project, and appreciates all the support, learning, and unlearning the process has involved.

Dr Cressida Ryan

Cressida is a disability advisor who has previously been a New Testament Greek lecturer, librarian, Classics tutor, outreach officer, and boarding school teacher, all of which inform how she now approaches her work. As both a schoolteacher and university employee, she has dealt with precarity as a major employment issue affecting the ability to settle down and start a family, for example. She is now permanently

employed, and better able to use this stable base to support less secure colleagues. She is visually impaired as well as being neurodivergent. Late-diagnosed neurodivergence has changed the way she views both neurodivergence and the intersectionality of neurodivergence with other aspects of her identity, especially her Christian faith. As a white, middle-class, Cambridge-educated Classicist, she appreciates that she has many levels of privilege which enable her to work proactively to support others. Having self-funded all of her graduate study, however, she is also well-aware of the impact of financial precarity on education. She has lived abroad, and speaks several languages; this cross-cultural experience also informs her interest in a form of universal design which remains respectful of cultural differences.

Professor Siân Grønlie

Siân is Associate Professor of Old Norse and Kate Elmore Fellow in English at St Anne's College, Oxford. She received a diagnosis of autism in mid-life and has experience of living with family members with dyslexia, dyspraxia, and ADHD. She has taught many neurodivergent students and is committed to developing more inclusive and accessible ways of teaching which anticipate rather than react to students' needs. She is convinced that inclusive teaching benefits everyone. As a neurodivergent staff member, she is very aware of the ways in which academic 'norms' can exclude and marginalise neurodivergent students and staff. She is still learning about many of the approaches described in this toolkit.

Georgia Lin

Georgia is a DPhil candidate in the Department of Education researching student activism by women of colour students at the University of Oxford. She holds an MSt in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies with Distinction from Oxford, where she conducted an autoethnography on the affect of naming and its intersections with whiteness. She identifies as a first-generation, diasporic Taiwanese immigrant from a working-class background. She holds complicated feelings about the institution and the privileges it affords her as well as the inherent limitations of change possible in a colonial environment. She has studied disability studies and queerness in various interdisciplinary academic disciplines and identifies with both communities. It is in the margins – where subjects like gender, women of colour feminisms, disability justice, and queer of colour theory are often relegated – that she has found joy in academia. Georgia also teaches students in these areas at Oxford and is passionate about mentoring and supporting women of colour students as they navigate through university spaces. She is grateful to have worked on this project and learned from her colleagues and research participants.

Hanrui Li

Hanrui Li (李晗瑞) is a master's student in the Department of Education at the University of Oxford, where she is pursuing an MSc in Education (Research Design and Methodology). She previously earned her bachelor's degree in the same field at University College London. As a first-generation international student who grew up in China and continued her studies in the UK, she has developed a deep awareness

of the diverse needs of learners from different cultural backgrounds. This has led her to focus on the unique challenges international students face when conducting research within Western higher education contexts. Through these experiences, she developed a strong sense of mission to help create more inclusive educational environments. During her undergraduate years, Hanrui volunteered with an NGO that supported children with autism and learning disabilities. This experience broadened her understanding of inclusive education and deepened her appreciation for the importance of providing appropriate support and flexible learning methods tailored to each student. She firmly believes that every learner, regardless of background, should have the opportunity to access knowledge in ways that suit them best. Motivated by this belief, Hanrui joined the NESTL project team as an intern, hoping to learn from her amazing colleagues.

Thank you for reading this toolkit, and good luck in your neurodivergent-inclusive journeys!

We would be delighted to hear how you find using the toolkit.

Contact information

- About the NESTL project and the Toolkit: Dr Xin Xu (xin.xu@education.ox.ac.uk) & Dr Laura Seymour (laura.seymour@swansea.ac.uk)
- About the NESTL Canvas: Dr Cressida Ryan (cressida.ryan@admin.ox.ac.uk)