Developing neurodiversity awareness in Management Schools: Building supportive and inclusive Higher Education Institutions for students and academics

Developing neurodiversity awareness in Management Schools: Building supportive and inclusive Higher Education Institutions for students and educators

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Neurodiversity is an umbrella term, including dyspraxia, dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, dyscalculia, autistic spectrum, and Tourette syndrome. The increasing number of students and academics with learning difficulties associated with neurodiversity entering or working in Higher Education (HE) poses a shared and growing challenge internationally for educators, HR managers, and institutional leaders. Despite increased research on inequalities in HE, few studies report on neurodiverse students and academics' experiences in HE. This multiple case study explored 14 neurodiverse academics and 34 neurodiverse students' experiences in HE in Europe to unravel the challenges for these people using lengthy semi-structured interviews, an online survey, and opportunity and snowball sampling. Perfectly aligned with the ableism theory, the current study has unravelled that neurodiverse students and academics face incredible challenges in HE despite the support provided so far. Drawing on the critical disability theory, the current study challenges able-bodied supremacy and the oppression that arises from restricting economic and social benefits to persons with disabilities. The study offers recommendations for HR managers, educators, and senior leadership teams in HEIs to provide additional support for these people fostering Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) in HE. It emphasizes the need to strive for holistic and inclusive change in HE policy and practice.

Keywords: neurodiversity, academics, students, well-being, experiences, Higher Education, inequalities, Social Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

Word Count: 4.155 words

Introduction

Academia has long been viewed as a prestigious and intellectually stimulating environment. However, behind this perception lies a reality that is often characterized by structural, social, and institutional challenges. Increasingly, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are becoming sites of intense pressure and bureaucratic control, where academic labour is subjected to managerialism, performativity, and neoliberal metrics of value (Acardo et al., 2024; Dwyer et al., 2023; Mellifont, 2023). Mechanisms such as excellence frameworks (Watermeyer, 2015), the commodification of education driven by the consumerisation of UK higher education, and long-term austerity policies (Balzer, 2020) have fundamentally reshaped the landscape. These forces contribute to the deterioration of working conditions and have led to an increase in precarious and fixed-term academic contracts (Ardey, 2022; Bone, 2021), intensifying professional insecurity and diminishing the potential for inclusive and sustainable academic careers.

Within this increasingly corporatized academic environment, disabled, neurodivergent, or chronically ill academics face distinct and heightened disadvantages. Despite broader institutional claims to diversity and inclusion, HEIs often operate within normative assumptions of what constitutes a productive, capable, and 'standard' academic. These assumptions tend to overlook, or even exclude, alternative ways of working and thinking. The academic job market has grown ever more competitive, with many highly qualified candidates vying for fewer permanent positions—often leading to concerns of being overqualified, while paradoxically being deemed "unfit" due to invisible differences (Allen, 2022). As a result, many neurodivergent academics choose to conceal their conditions, aware that disclosure could risk professional rejection. Although government data indicates that 16% of the adult population lives with a disability (GOV, 2014), only a small fraction—less than 4%—of academics in the UK formally declare a disability, chronic illness, or neurodivergent identity (HESA, 2017). The low rate of disclosure suggests not a lack of neurodivergent individuals in academia, but rather a pervasive culture of fear, stigma, and professional risk that discourages visibility (Brewer, 2022).

Parallel dynamics are observed among the student population. Advances in medical understanding, educational accessibility, and increased awareness have enabled more neurodiverse students to access higher education than in previous decades (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2020). Despite this progress, neurodivergent students, including those with autism spectrum conditions and ADHD, remain significantly underserved by institutional structures. In the United States, studies estimate that between 0.3% and 1.9% of university students are autistic, while around 5% have ADHD, with many more likely going undiagnosed or undisclosed. Nonetheless, these students continue to experience disproportionate academic and social barriers in HE environments (Borsoti et al., 2024), despite evidence of their potential strengths,

such as deep focus, creative problem-solving, and pattern recognition (Gurbuz et al., 2019). Alarmingly, research suggests that autistic and ADHD students have lower graduation rates than their neurotypical peers, pointing to systemic failings rather than individual limitations (Baczewski et al., 2022).

Neurodiverse individuals—both students and staff—are often placed at a disadvantage not merely due to their functional differences, but because of a broader culture of exclusion, rooted in stigmatization and a lack of institutional understanding (Dwyer et al., 2022). These challenges are compounded when neurodiversity intersects with other marginalized identities, such as race or socio-economic status. For example, BAME neurodivergent students frequently report experiences of alienation, being misunderstood, or being perceived as 'other' within predominantly white and neurotypical academic settings (Mallipeddi and VanDaalen, 2022). These experiences suggest that exclusion in HE is not only about disability or neurodivergence in isolation, but about how multiple systems of inequality operate together.

Despite the growing visibility of neurodivergence in HE, institutional responses remain inadequate. While some HEIs have developed inclusive practices and fostered supportive communities for neurodivergent individuals, many continue to view neurodiversity through deficit-oriented, legalistic, and medicalized frameworks (Mitchell, 2024). These perspectives reduce neurodivergence to a set of problems to be fixed or managed, rather than recognizing it as a form of cognitive diversity with potential contributions to academic life. This is echoed in student attitudes: a significant proportion of students reportedly maintain stigmatized views about neurodivergent behaviours and diagnoses, particularly autism and ADHD (Butcher and Lane, 2024). Furthermore, while earlier research in this field has focused predominantly on undergraduate students—particularly those who struggle to persist or graduate—less attention has been paid to the experiences of graduate students and neurodivergent academics, who continue to encounter structural barriers across the academic lifecycle (Clouder et al., 2020).

To understand and challenge these systemic inequalities, this study draws upon ableism theory and critical disability theory. Ableism, which originates from the interdisciplinary field of critical disability studies, offers a conceptual framework for understanding how normative assumptions about ability shape social and institutional practices (Goodley, 2020). Defined as a system of beliefs, processes, and practices that value certain bodies and minds over others (Campbell, 2020; Wolbring et al., 2023), ableism is deeply embedded in the neoliberal logic of productivity, compliance, and individual responsibility (Goodley et al., 2019). These logics prioritize an ideal academic subject: capable, productive, competitive, and endlessly adaptable. As such, individuals who deviate from this normative standard are marginalized—not because of any inherent inability, but because institutions are designed to exclude them. In this context, neurodiverse students and academics are rendered invisible or burdensome, despite the richness and diversity of thought they bring to higher education.

This study aims to contribute to a growing body of literature that addresses these gaps and centers the experiences of neurodivergent individuals within HE. By focusing on both student and academic perspectives, the research seeks to illuminate the distinct and overlapping challenges neurodivergent people face across different stages of academic life. Specifically, it explores two key research questions:

- What are the challenges that neurodiverse academics face in HEIs?
- What are the challenges that neurodiverse students face in HEIs?

Research Methods

This study explored the lived experiences of neurodiverse students and academics in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), with the goal of generating meaningful recommendations on how these institutions can more effectively support individuals with a variety of neurodevelopmental conditions. Although various support services, reasonable adjustments, and technological tools exist to cater to specific needs, research highlights a persistent and significant disconnection between institutional offerings and individual experiences (Clouder et al., 2020). Many academics continue to report feelings of disadvantage and marginalisation within the system. This gap is further exacerbated by the fear of stigma and negative labelling, which often discourages individuals from disclosing their diagnoses or seeking accommodations, thereby reinforcing systemic inequities in access, opportunity, and well-being (Alexander, 2024; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2020).

A mixed methods approach was employed to gather both quantitative and qualitative data, facilitating a deeper understanding of participants' experiences. This methodological choice was informed by the need to combine the generalizability of survey data with the contextual richness of in-depth narratives. The qualitative component involved semi-structured, in-depth interviews, designed to elicit personal insights, emotional responses, and individual coping strategies. These were complemented by an online survey that gathered broader trends and patterns in the experiences of neurodivergent individuals across multiple academic contexts.

Participants were recruited through a combination of opportunity sampling and snowball sampling methods. This approach was chosen primarily due to the limited funding available for the study, as well as restrictions in accessing comprehensive databases of neurodiverse individuals in academic environments—an issue common in underfunded qualitative research (Mujere, 2016). Recruitment began by reaching out to known neurodivergent academics and student support networks, who were then invited to share the call for participation within their professional and personal networks. Despite these limitations, the study achieved a meaningful sample size: 14 neurodiverse academics and 36 neurodiverse students agreed to participate in the interview component.

All participants were required to sign an informed consent form prior to data collection, which explicitly guaranteed their anonymity and the confidential handling of any disclosed information. Ethical approval was secured through the host institution's research ethics committee. Interviews were conducted online using Microsoft Teams, a platform that allowed for flexible scheduling and remote accessibility—key considerations given the sensory and logistical needs often associated with neurodivergent individuals. Interview durations ranged from 45 to 75 minutes and were recorded (with consent) for transcription and subsequent analysis.

Quantitative data were collected using a custom-designed online survey, which was distributed via university mailing lists, neurodiversity advocacy networks, and relevant online forums. The survey collected demographic information, disclosure practices, perceived institutional support, social experiences, and academic or professional progression. Questions included both closed and Likert-scale items to allow for both standardization and nuanced responses.

For data analysis, qualitative responses from the interviews were examined using thematic analysis, following the six-phase model proposed by Castleberry and Nolen (2018). This method enabled the researchers to identify, code, and interpret recurring themes, paying particular attention to the emotional and institutional dimensions of the participants' experiences. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS to calculate frequencies and correlations between disclosure, access to support services, and perceptions of inclusion.

The integration of qualitative and quantitative methods provided a robust framework for triangulation, allowing for a more holistic understanding of neurodiverse individuals' experiences in HEIs. The mixed methods design was especially valuable in capturing the contrast between institutional policies and the lived realities of those they are intended to support.

By combining empirical evidence with critical theoretical insights, this methodological approach enabled the study to examine not only individual experiences but also the structural barriers underpinning them—particularly those aligned with the logics of ableism in academia.

Preliminary Findings (Expanded)

The preliminary findings of this study provide a striking illustration of the significant barriers that neurodiverse individuals encounter within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), confirming existing research on systemic ableism and exclusion in academic environments (Clouder et al., 2020; Alexander, 2024; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2020). These findings reflect patterns of institutional neglect, communication breakdowns, and cultural stigmas that together

limit both the academic success of neurodiverse students and the professional development of neurodiverse academics.

Among the neurodiverse student participants, a substantial proportion—**58%**—reported difficulties in forming social connections, stating that they struggled to make friends or integrate into any university clubs, societies, or community activities. This social exclusion often had cascading effects on their academic engagement, with several participants describing feelings of isolation and emotional exhaustion. Many expressed that university environments remained heavily designed for extroverted, neurotypical modes of interaction, often overlooking alternative social needs and communication preferences (Clouder et al., 2020).

An even higher proportion—**85%**—had chosen not to disclose their neurodivergence to lecturers, personal tutors, or school administrators. The reasons provided included fear of discrimination, concerns about being perceived as less capable, and a general lack of trust in the university's ability to respond appropriately or sensitively. Students described previous experiences in which disclosure had led to awkward or dismissive responses, or where accommodations were promised but inconsistently delivered. This aligns with Gillespie-Lynch et al.'s (2020) findings, which note that fear of stigma and non-inclusive institutional cultures play a major role in discouraging neurodivergent individuals from seeking the support they are entitled to.

Additionally, **65%** of students had not accessed any formal support services provided by their institution. Many cited a lack of knowledge about how to access these services, suggesting a communication gap between universities and neurodiverse students. Others explained that the processes for registering for support felt overly bureaucratic, requiring documentation or evaluations that were either unavailable or too costly. This reflects a broader issue identified by Clouder et al. (2020)—a disconnect between the availability of support and its accessibility in practice.

The challenges of disclosure extended to academic staff as well. **87%** of all participants—both students and academics—reported that they frequently struggled to complete key academic or professional tasks because they were unable to request adjustments related to their neurodivergent needs. These included teaching workload allocations, assessment deadlines, and administrative expectations, which often did not accommodate alternative working styles or cognitive rhythms.

When it came to career development, **90%** of participating academics reported feeling that they had fewer opportunities compared to their neurotypical peers. They frequently mentioned being passed over for promotions, excluded from collaborative projects, or overlooked in leadership appointments—often because their needs were viewed as burdensome or incompatible with the

high-intensity demands of the academic workplace (Alexander, 2024). Several interviewees described adopting masking behaviours to appear neurotypical, which, while helping them remain in their roles, came at the cost of severe burnout and deteriorating mental health.

Finally, **59%** of academics stated they felt consistently discouraged by a prevailing workplace culture shaped by neurotypical norms and hegemonic assumptions about productivity, communication, and collegiality. Many described their departments as performance-driven, rigid, and largely intolerant of cognitive or behavioural difference. This perception was compounded by a lack of senior neurodivergent role models, and an absence of inclusive practices in leadership and decision-making processes—highlighting an entrenched culture of ableism (Clouder et al., 2020).

Together, these findings strongly support ableist theory, offering real-world evidence of how dominant academic systems marginalize individuals who do not fit standardized notions of ability, interaction, and academic output. They demonstrate that despite surface-level commitments to diversity and inclusion, HEIs continue to operate within frameworks that systematically disadvantage neurodivergent people, whether through structural inflexibility, social exclusion, or implicit bias. The findings also suggest that unless disclosure is made safe, meaningful, and rewarded with genuine accommodation, the gap between policy and practice will continue to undermine both educational equity and institutional integrity.

Impact, Contribution and Pathways to Change

This study makes a significant and timely contribution to the evolving discourse on inclusive education by illuminating the often-overlooked experiences of neurodiverse students and staff in Higher Education. In an academic landscape increasingly shaped by metrics, marketisation, and standardised expectations (Alexander, 2024; Clouder et al., 2020), the voices and needs of neurodivergent individuals remain underrepresented in both policy and research. Unlike much of the existing literature, which predominantly focuses on undergraduates or singular conditions such as autism or ADHD in isolation, this study adopts a holistic, cross-level approach. It addresses the lived experiences of both students and academics, attending to their intersecting identities and shared structural barriers. This intersectional perspective is critical in capturing the full spectrum of institutional exclusion and cognitive marginalisation that exists across the academic lifecycle.

By drawing on the theoretical foundations of ableism and critical disability theory (Clouder et al., 2020; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2020), this paper reframes neurodiversity not as a problem to be managed, but as a social and institutional justice issue. The study illustrates how HEIs are still largely built around neurotypical norms of communication, productivity, and success— norms that are internalised and reproduced through governance, policy, and cultural practices. In doing so, it sheds light on persistent exclusionary mechanisms: rigid administrative
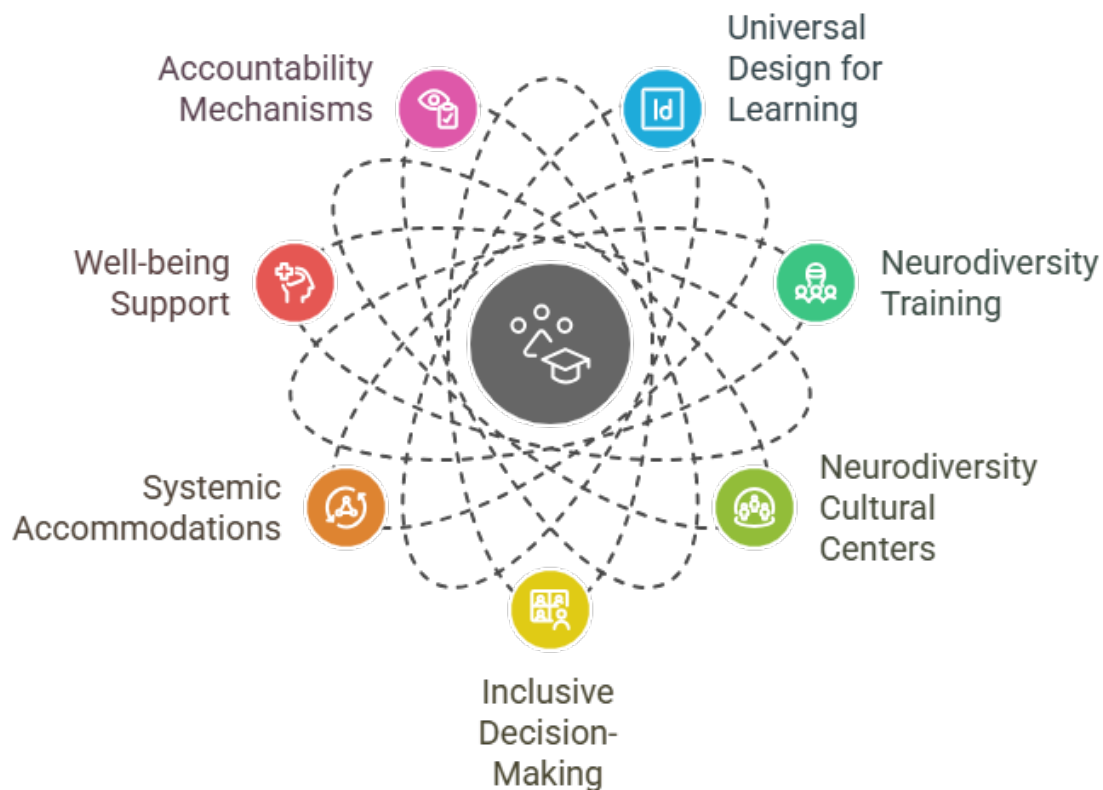
processes, underutilised support systems, inadequate disclosure frameworks, and the absence of neurodivergent leadership representation. Rather than framing these issues as isolated incidents, the study exposes them as symptoms of a wider ableist infrastructure that requires urgent reform.

However, this research does not stop at identifying these systemic deficiencies. It moves beyond problem-identification to propose evidence-informed, practical, and scalable pathways for inclusive transformation. In particular, it provides Higher Education Institutions with a conceptual and actionable roadmap for embedding meaningful cultural change (Figure 1). This roadmap is grounded in the lived experiences of neurodiverse individuals and supported by scholarly evidence and institutional critiques (Alexander, 2024; Clouder et al., 2020), and it outlines a multifaceted strategy for inclusion that operates at policy, pedagogical, and cultural levels. It recommends the integration of:

- **Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles** into all curricular and co-curricular activities, ensuring that teaching methods, assessment practices, and learning environments are flexible and accessible from the outset;
- **Institution-wide neurodiversity training programs** for academic and professional services staff, to improve awareness, reduce stigma, and support the development of inclusive practices;
- **Creation of Neurodiversity Cultural Centers**—dedicated, safe, and empowering spaces for neurodiverse individuals to connect, advocate, and access tailored support;
- **Inclusion of neurodivergent individuals in decision-making processes**, particularly in areas such as curriculum development, accommodation policy, and institutional governance;
- **Systemic accommodations to address sensory distress and cognitive diversity**, such as flexible workspaces, quiet zones, alternative assessment formats, and variable scheduling;
- **Well-being and mental health support specifically designed** for neurodiverse populations, including sensory-friendly counselling services and staff with neurodiversity-specific training;
- **Accountability mechanisms**—including reporting tools, audits, and feedback systems—to ensure equitable access to accommodations and hold institutions responsible for sustained inclusion.

Pathways to Inclusive Higher Education

- Accountability Mechanisms
- Universal Design for Learning
- Well-being Support
- Neurodiversity Training
- Systemic Accommodations
- Neurodiversity Cultural Centers
- Inclusive Decision-Making

Through these proposed interventions, the study advances a model of **transformative inclusion**—one that acknowledges neurodiversity as a legitimate and valuable form of human variation, not a deviation to be corrected or concealed. It challenges the traditional deficit-based frameworks that have dominated educational support discourse and replaces them with a strength-based, justice-oriented model. This work thus makes a unique contribution to Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) practices in Higher Education by demonstrating how institutions can move beyond minimal compliance and toward the cultivation of genuinely inclusive, participatory, and empowering environments.

Ultimately, the study argues that only through **collaborative, evidence-informed, and intersectional strategies** can HEIs become spaces where neurodiverse individuals are not merely accommodated, but fully included as co-creators of knowledge and community. It makes clear that survival is not enough—flourishing must become the benchmark of inclusion. In filling a significant gap in the academic literature, this paper equips educators, human resources professionals, student services staff, and institutional leaders with practical tools and

conceptual frameworks that can support long-term, systemic change. By foregrounding the voices and realities of neurodiverse people, it helps reimagine Higher Education as a space of justice, innovation, and belonging for all.

Conclusion

Neurodivergent individuals are an invaluable and often under-recognised part of the academic community. They contribute a wealth of creativity, innovation, alternative perspectives, and deep intellectual engagement that enrich all aspects of university life—from teaching and learning to research, collaboration, and leadership. However, these contributions are frequently overshadowed by systemic barriers, ableist assumptions, and rigid institutional norms. By centring the voices of neurodivergent individuals and embedding their lived experiences into institutional thinking, this study offers Higher Education Institutions a transformative lens through which to reimagine inclusion. It moves beyond tokenistic diversity efforts, instead presenting a foundation for building universities that are authentically inclusive, equitable, and socially just.

The true impact of this work lies in its capacity to influence and reshape the structural contours of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) strategies across the sector. It challenges HEIs to treat EDI not as an ancillary obligation or compliance mechanism, but as an integral and central element of their academic mission and institutional culture. When neurodiversity is no longer treated as a marginal concern but rather as a core consideration in policy, pedagogy, and leadership, the entire academic community benefits. Embedding inclusion at the systemic level allows for the flourishing of diverse ways of thinking, being, and contributing—essential qualities for tackling complex global challenges and fostering interdisciplinary knowledge.

Only by fully embracing the richness and brilliance of neurodiversity can universities unlock their highest potential as inclusive, dynamic, and forward-thinking spaces for learning, teaching, and working. Inclusion must not be conditional, reactive, or temporary; it must be proactive, structural, and sustained. In recognising neurodivergent individuals not as exceptions to be managed, but as essential agents in shaping the future of higher education, institutions take a critical step toward realising the transformative promise of academia itself.

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