

FBMH NEWS OCTOBER 2024 NEURODIVERGENCE

Page.2

Mara-Elena
Ciuntu

Page.3

Matthew Harrison

Page.4

Leah Quinlivan

Page.5

Kathy Bradley

Page.6

Natalie Gardiner
and Emma
Curson

Page.7

Autism@
Manchester

Page.8

Let's Talk
Neurodiversity

MANCHESTER
1824

The University of Manchester

WE ARE CONTINUALLY SEEKING TO BECOME AN EVER-MORE WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT

This newsletter uses the wide definition of neurodivergence which includes Autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia and more. It employs the concept of neurodiversity, which embraces the natural variation in brain function that exists across the whole population thus including both the neurodivergent and neurotypical populations. We present a range of perspectives from colleagues across the Faculty and wider University to raise awareness and introduce ideas that may be unfamiliar for some colleagues. It is impossible to encompass all aspects of neurodivergence in a newsletter and thus the purpose is simply to encourage conversation and discovery.

We are dedicated to the recognition, support and celebration of all our staff, students and partners.

This newsletter seeks to foreground the experiences of some neurodivergent colleagues, promote current and past research on the topic of neurodivergence done within FBMH, and improve general knowledge on the topic among all. We are continually seeking to become an ever-more welcoming environment; being well-informed about neurodivergence is crucial because it helps break down harmful stereotypes and prevent workplace discrimination.

Creating an inclusive, diverse workplace is desirable for both our institution and neurodivergent individuals, who often bring sought-after strengths such as creative thinking, attention to detail, analytical skills and innovative problem solving. That being said, neurodivergent people can also face unique challenges such as communication differences, sensory overstimulation and time management issues.

We seek to empower and support our neurodivergent staff by offering accommodations such as flexible schedules, quieter workplaces, alternative communication options, assistive software, a neurodivergent staff network and more. Increasing accessibility and inclusion improvement is a constantly evolving process, and feedback from staff and students is critical. My hope is that this newsletter will generate such constructive discussion among colleagues.

Ongoing research into neurodivergence is necessary for improving our understanding of the support that neurodivergent individuals need in all aspects of life. Remaining informed, proactive and open to ongoing research will allow us to empower neurodivergent individuals to live their lives to the fullest and reach their potential. As well as personal perspectives and reflections, this newsletter will highlight some recent work done by FBMH researchers and promote Autism@Manchester, which proudly brings academics and clinicians together with members of the autistic community.

“UNDERSTANDING AND EMBRACING NEURODIVERSITY WILL HELP US BUILD STRONGER AND MORE INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES BOTH ON AND OFF CAMPUS.”

Guest Editor: Mara-Elena Ciuntu, Communications Assistant, Faculty of Biology, Medicine and Health

EXPLORING NEURODIVERSITY: NHS

Neurodiversity describes the population as a whole and recognises the diversity of different brains.

Neurotypical describes most of the population the majority group that expresses themselves in ways that are seen as the societal “norm”.

Neurodivergent describes the minority group that diverts neurologically from said “norm”. This is estimated to be 1 in 7 people, although with an increase in awareness and late diagnosis this is likely to be higher.

Neurodivergent conditions include Autism/Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC)/Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)/ Variable Attention Stimulus Trait (VAST), Dyspraxia, Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, Dyscalculia and Tourette’s Syndrome (TS) as well as many other conditions.

Neurodivergence is classed as a disability, although some neurodivergent people do not identify as disabled.

The language around neurodiversity is evolving and sometimes people may use different terms to those above, or use them in a slightly different way.

Helpful links:

<https://nhs.uk/nhsdorsset.nhs.uk/neurodiversity/explore/>

<https://www.hee.nhs.uk/our-work/pharmacy/transforming/initial/foundation/resources/edi/neurodiversity>

IT IS DIFFICULT FOR MOST PEOPLE TO UNDERSTAND THE CHALLENGES THAT COME WITH BEING NEURODIVERGENT

This section will focus mainly on autism due to the author's experience and the availability of statistics. However, the points raised will also apply to people with other neurodivergent conditions.

Let's begin with two key facts about autistic people and employment:

1. The Department for Work and Pensions statistics suggest that only 30% of autistic people are employed. Many more are underemployed.
2. The Buckland review states that 43% of autistic people have lost their jobs for reasons connected to their autism. This is a result of poor adjustments and shows a huge waste of talent.

We appreciate that it is difficult for most people to understand the challenges that come with being neurodivergent. Our challenges are complex, individualised and are often hard to identify even for ourselves. I am what used to be known as 'high-functioning': I have mostly been able to cope with the challenges associated with my condition and most of the time, no one would suspect that I have a lifelong neurological condition. This is partly because, like many autistic people, I 'mask' heavily.

Masking is when autistic people alter their behaviour in order to be accepted by others and is a response to trauma. As Pete Wharmby puts it: being **"invisibly but considerably different to the 'norm' leads to trauma from being treated differently"**.

For many people, myself included, we have spent so much of our lives trying to act like everyone else that we find it very difficult to accept that or even identify why we are struggling. And if you don't even know you are different, you assume that everyone else feels the same but is carrying on regardless.

Masking might help us to get by in everyday life, but it is extremely hard work as it involves us trying to cope with overwhelming sensory input (in my case, bright lights, heat, sudden noises, constant background noises, smells etc) without taking steps to help ourselves. At the same time, we might be suppressing our need to stim (making certain movements or sounds that help us to manage our sensory environment) and forcing ourselves to interact with others in ways we find uncomfortable. Masking can be useful by bringing more positive interactions with others, but doing it is detrimental to our wellbeing.

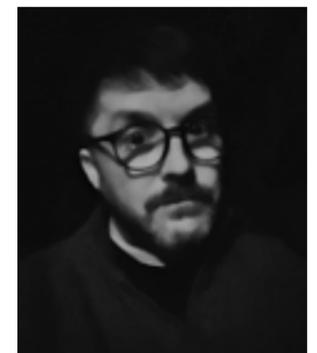
Being denied the accommodations we need negatively impacts us because it increases the need for masking. This is clearly bad for the neurodivergent person, but also for the employer, as it can result in extended sickness absence and poor retention (which of course means more time spent on recruitment and training).

Societally, we are developing a greater understanding of neurodivergence and the support that neurodivergent people need. Employers are improving in terms of the provision of accommodations,

yet there is still a great deal of inconsistency, even within the same organisation. Individual line managers are often solely responsible for decisions around accommodations and there are many cases where rigid processes that could quite easily be changed obstruct the implementation of accommodations that people really need.

Many of the accommodations we need (working from home and/or improved physical spaces, clear and unambiguous instructions, guidance and feedback etc.) would benefit all employees, or at least would not negatively impact anyone. Where roles don't allow for particular accommodations, employers should consider their staffing and support redeployment or re-alignment of duties (I'm sure there are people who would like to delegate tasks that I'm happy to do and vice versa). This is particularly achievable in large organisations with many thousands of employees.

By **Matthew Harrison** is a Research Development Officer in the Faculty of Science and Engineering. Matthew set up the Neurodivergent Staff Network and is currently one of the network co-chairs.



NEURODIVERGENT STAFF NETWORK

The Neurodivergent Staff Network is a network where neurodivergent staff (including PGR students) can meet and share experiences and discuss issues they are facing. The network welcomes neurotypical advocates but also has a neurodivergent-only 'safe space' for discussion.

The network is co-chaired by Matthew Harrison, Kai Prince and Milo Theobald and they can be contacted at ndnetwork@manchester.ac.uk

TOWARDS A NEURODIVERGENT FRIENDLY WORKPLACE, WHERE EVERYONE IS ENABLED TO THRIVE

In academia, everyone should have the opportunity to thrive, but we know that's often not the case. Colleagues experiencing physical, psychological, and sensory issues often get left behind. Multiple and overlapping forms of inequality or disadvantage (e.g. neurodivergence, class, disability, ethnicity, age, gender, health conditions), can further entrench inequalities.

We're all responsible for facilitating inclusive practices at work, but sometimes we need a pathway to truly push forward change at an organisational level.

That's why we're completing the Neurodiversity Employers Index with Autistica. The Neurodiversity Employers Index (NDEI), is a gold standard evidence-based framework that can help facilitate greater inclusion for neurodivergent people at the University of Manchester. As part of our work with Autistica, we will receive a NDEI scored report and personalised roadmap for change.

Neurodivergent & employment

Only 3 in 10 working aged autistic individuals are in employment. Autistic people receive a third less pay than non-disabled people, and only 36% of autistic graduates find work in the subsequent 15 months from graduation.¹ Multiple barriers exist throughout the employment pathway, from recruitment practices, through to retention and promotions. For example, unclear processes, expectations/misunderstandings over communication, travel, lack of reasonable adjustments, and stereotypical views of autistic people.

Neuroinclusive environments, work better for everyone

Only 35% of autistic people disclose their diagnosis at work, and 1 in 10 never disclose.¹ Reasons are likely to vary, but may include fear of discrimination and misunderstanding. Whilst some people may receive adjustments, others will struggle and often do so alone. Developing a neuroinclusive workplace

enables all people, irrespective of disclosure or having to consistently self-advocate, to thrive, work comfortably, and progress through academia.

The NDEI survey

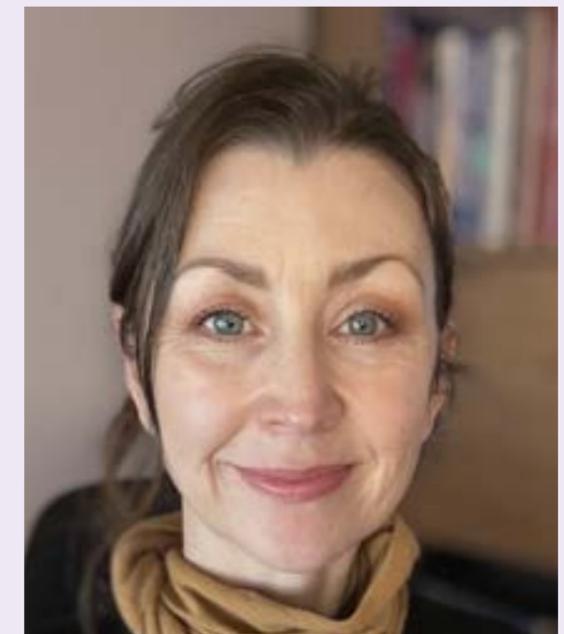
Academia is a world where neurodivergent people can thrive, and focus on delivering high quality, robust research, and education. However, we know equalities exist and people are often struggling with the lack of understanding and reasonable adjustments. The NDEI survey is a baseline step. We can document experiences, share results, and focus on implementing (and evaluating) change. Thanks to everyone who completed the survey, which is now closed for this year.

Further information: Autistica: <https://www.autistica.org.uk/>

SHS: Champions network information: <https://sites.manchester.ac.uk/bmh-athena-swan/about-shs-social-responsibility-team/>

Reference:

1. Department for Work & Pensions (2024). The Buckland Review of Autism Employment: report and recommendations <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-buckland-review-of-autism-employment-report-and-recommendations/the-buckland-review-of-autism-employment-report-and-recommendations>



Dr Leah Quinlivan is a Research Fellow and Chartered Psychologist. She leads self-harm research in the NIHR GM PSRC and the patient involvement work at the Centre for Mental Health and Safety. Dr Quinlivan is also the School of Health Sciences Lead for Disabilities, long-term conditions, and neurodivergence Champions Network, and a member of the PCIE Champions Network.

CELEBRATING NEURODIVERSITY: STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

How many times have you sat in a meeting with someone who isn't making eye contact or always has their camera off or is fidgeting, and it has annoyed you?

Do you have a colleague who always asks for the papers for meetings earlier than anyone else? Is there a colleague who will always tell you their life story or appears to have no filter?

It's possible, but not always the case, that they may be one of the estimated 15% of people in the UK who are neurodivergent. So what is neurodiversity and what does neurodivergence mean? What does it mean to be neurodivergent at The University of Manchester?

Neurodiversity refers to the natural diversity in human brains. Neurodivergence is the term for when a person's brain processes, learns or behaves in a different way to that which is considered by most to be typical. Some neurodivergent conditions include Autism, ADHD, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia and Dyscalculia. Many of these conditions overlap or co-occur as shown in Kirby and Cleaton's diagram.

It's important to realise that neurodivergence is diverse, meaning that no two people who are neurodivergent will be alike. What is defined as neurodiversity is constantly evolving and can be subjective. For example, mental illness, cultural diversity or giftedness are sometimes considered as belonging under the Neurodiversity umbrella. It is difficult to gather data on neurodivergence.

At The University of Manchester we don't specifically gather this data, as you can see from the table (Figure 8). Many people don't want to share and this can be attributed to many reasons including stigma and fear of discrimination, yet anecdotally we know that we are seeing an increase in the number of staff who are willing to share.

Being neurodivergent should not be considered a negative. In fact, there are many strengths associated with being neurodivergent. Neurodivergent individuals often possess many strengths that can be incredibly valuable in various settings. Here are some common strengths associated with neurodivergence:

1. Creativity: Many neurodivergent people have a unique way of thinking that can lead to innovative ideas and creative problem-solving.

- 2. Attention to Detail:** Individuals with conditions like Autism or ADHD often notice details that others might overlook, which can be crucial in tasks requiring precision.
- 3. Hyperfocus:** Some neurodivergent individuals can intensely focus on tasks they are passionate about, leading to high levels of productivity and expertise.
- 4. Pattern Recognition:** People with Dyslexia or Autism often excel at recognizing patterns, which can be beneficial in fields like mathematics, coding, and data analysis.
- 5. Resilience:** Navigating a world not always designed for neurodivergent individuals can foster resilience and adaptability.
- 6. Empathy and Compassion:** Many neurodivergent people have a deep sense of empathy and understanding, which can enhance teamwork and interpersonal relationships.
- 7. Innovative Thinking:** Neurodivergent individuals often approach problems from different angles, leading to unique and effective solutions.
- 8. Organisation:** Some neurodivergent people thrive with routine and have very strong levels of personal organisation.

These strengths highlight the importance of embracing neurodiversity and creating environments where everyone can thrive. The University of Manchester works with the social model of disability meaning that the environment around a person is what can disable them, rather than the condition that the person lives with. At UOM, DASS can assist with any adjustments that a neurodivergent person may need. Managers can also take our Disability Equity course to help them with the knowledge and skills they need to look after their disabled and neurodivergent staff.

It is important to remember that not all people who consider themselves to be neurodivergent may have a diagnosis, there are currently long waiting lists for diagnosis. Many also do not consider themselves to be disabled although they are considered disabled under the Equality Act (2010).

Staff who are neurodivergent, or who would like to be an ally to our neurodivergent community, can join our Neurodivergent staff network where they can access peer support and information. Neurodivergence is celebrated during Neurodiversity Celebration Week in March and Disability History Month in November.

Our Students Union provides a neurodivergent friendly guide to welcome week and a guide to accessing support as a Neurodivergent student.

By Kathy Bradley

Kathy Bradley is an EDI Partner in the Central EDI Directorate, partnering with Humanities and four PS directorates. She also specialises in disability and was nominated for the Shaw Trust Power 100 in 2024. As part of her EDI role she supports the Disabled and Neurodivergent staff networks.

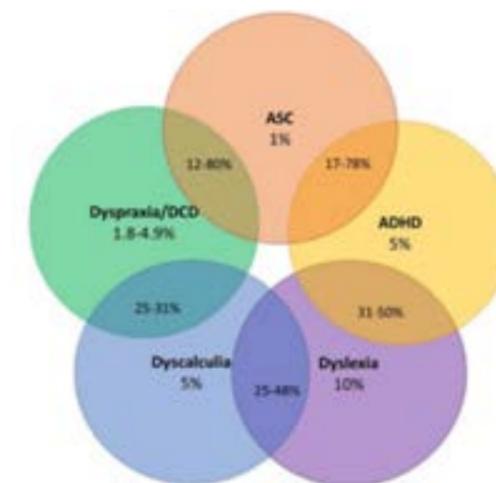
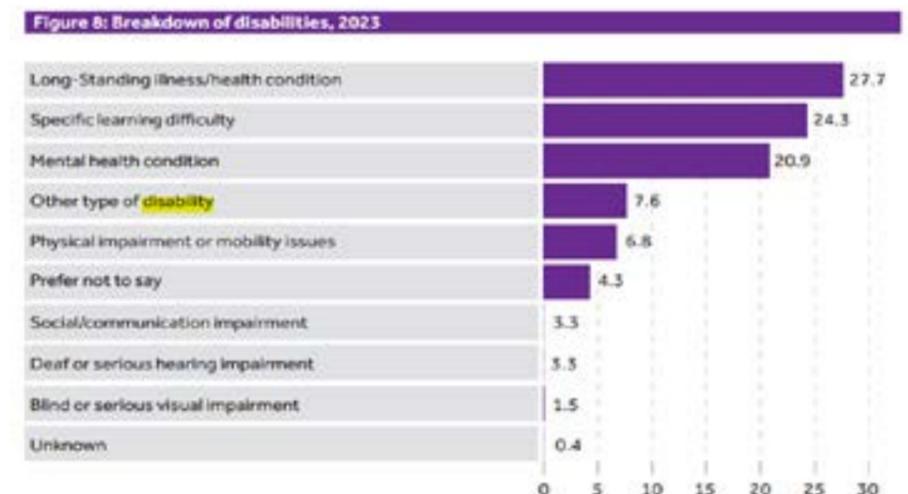


Diagram 1: Co-occurrences of Neurodiversity, general population, (Kirby and Cleaton 2019)



ATTRACTING AND RECRUITING THE BEST IN A DIVERSE WORLD

It is estimated that more than 15% of people in the UK (around 1 in 7 people) are neurodivergent.

Providing a working environment that attracts and embraces individual difference, recognises strengths and values, nurtures talent within our workforce, and supports individual's preferences and needs, provides us with a strategic advantage. We all want to be part of a University and Faculty where all people have a strong sense of belonging, feel valued and supported, and are proud to be part of.

We are embracing inclusive recruitment

Our EDI, P&OD, and 'Our Future' UoM strategies all highlight the importance of inclusive recruitment as a strategic objective. We are working to ensure our job adverts are accessible and inclusive, shortlisting, interviewing and appointment panel processes are unbiased, and panels reach fair recruitment decisions. In short, we need to ensure we are not disadvantaging anyone during the recruitment process or missing out on recruiting talented individuals.

A University wide inclusive recruitment working group brought together results from a series of pilots across the University (including within FBMH) to create recommendations for a process that best supports recruitment of a diverse workforce, along with workshops and consultations that identified the key issues and priorities for action.

For example – whilst colleagues who lead and take part in recruitment processes are expected to complete the mandatory EDI online training courses: Unconscious Bias, and Diversity in the Workplace, which cover some aspects of inclusive recruitment, there is the opportunity for more. Manager guidance on Inclusive Recruitment is in development.

In FBMH we are developing an Inclusive Recruitment Ambassador scheme to launch early 2025, which will complement the findings from the University wide pilots and inform the working group. Our Faculty P&OD, L&OD and EDI partners are working with us to create a training package – which will help recruiting managers throughout the recruitment cycle. More information will follow soon about the Scheme. By implementing positive change, we can embed more inclusive recruitment processes within FBMH.

Next time you are looking to recruit a new colleague, either from within or external to the University, consider how inclusive your recruitment practices might be for neurodivergent candidates:

- **Is your advert clear and concise?**
- **Have you checked digital accessibility of the advert and role description?**
- **Are the essential skills listed really all essential?**
- **Does the advert provide information about the recruitment process, and timelines?**
- **Do you provide information to candidates ahead of interview on where it will be held, what the format is, who will be there, and what their role is?**
- **Have you considered sharing interview questions ahead of the interview?**
- **Have you provided opportunity for all candidates to request any reasonable adjustments for interview?**

If you have any questions on how you can ensure that the recruitment process you are undertaking is inclusive and accessible to neurodivergent people, please contact your local EDI representative or the Talent Acquisition team via People.Talent@manchester.ac.uk

By Dr Natalie Gardiner, FBMH Vice Dean for Social Responsibility. Natalie began working as at post doc here in 2002 and following on from roles as Director for Social Responsibility in the School of Medical Sciences (2016-2022) and Associate Dean for FBMH (2022-2024) became Vice Dean for Social Responsibility. Natalie is passionate about schools outreach activities, PPIE, and increasing access to, and equity within HE

By Emma Curson, FBMH Director of People. Emma leads the provision of a strategic and advisory People service. Emma started her career as a solicitor at Eversheds before moving into Employee Relations, acting as the People Lead on a number of large scale transformational projects. Previously at Leeds Beckett University, Emma joined the University in February 2023



ABOUT AUTISM @ MANCHESTER

Autism@Manchester is a network of academics, clinicians, practitioners, autistic individuals and their family members who work together to enable researchers to produce quality research with real meaning for autistic people. It is chaired by Dr Emma Gowen who created the network in 2014 in response to concerns of the autistic community that researchers were not working on issues important to them.

A big focus of our work is co-production of research with autistic people achieved with several initiatives. For example, there is an [Expert by Experience Group](#), consisting of autistic people and family members who advise on research and we have co-produced several [resources](#) and publications. With School of Health Science funding we have introduced a novel Co-production Officer role to embed autistic input into both our research and strategy. We have regular [events](#) for staff and the general public and also integrate co-production into our teaching. Read about the benefits of getting involved [here](#). To find out more and stay informed [read our newsletter and blog](#).

Dr Emma Gowen and Professor Ellen Poliakoff: Motor coordination differences in autistic adults

Motor coordination differences such as difficulties with fine motor control (e.g. fastening buttons), eye-hand coordination and unstable balance and are a lesser-known feature of autism, but are commonly experienced.

'I am here in a physical sense, but don't feel I have fine control of the vessel I inhabit. It glitches very often by dropping things, getting confused, bumping into things, etc'

Little was known about the impact of motor coordination differences on autistic lives until our study using focus groups to ask autistic adults about their experiences. Motor differences had a significant impact daily life activities such as getting dressed, handwriting, sports, carrying things and eating. They also hindered social relationships and negatively impacted emotions.

'You can start to hate yourself. I actually shut myself away from the world for ten years because of this [motor coordination difficulties] and other issues to do with autism, ten years I'll never get back'

Despite this severe impact on the lives of some autistic people, our participants had not received support for their motor coordination differences. We are now addressing this through an NIHR funded project with autistic people and Occupational Therapists to put in place assessment and support for motor coordination differences in autistic adults.

Gowen, E., Earley, L., Waheed, A., & Poliakoff, E. (2023). From "one big clumsy mess" to "a fundamental part of my character." Autistic adults' experiences of motor coordination. *PLoS one*, 18(6), e0286753. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0286753>

Dr Erin Beeston: Speaking about lived experience and research on health inequalities for autistic people

I'm a researcher and Autism@Manchester co-production officer. I'm working on a project considering health inequalities for autistic people, who experience all the population-wide inequalities based on social and economic factors – but multiplied by barriers to healthcare services. There are significant difficulties, from a lack of understanding of how autistic people experience healthcare spaces, to social communication differences, and widespread misconceptions about the associated health conditions that affect many autistic individuals.

I currently face barriers to healthcare with my neurodivergent children. I often reflect that I have an academic education and I'm (mostly) articulate, yet even with this privilege, I still experience problems. As a family, we've also had positive experiences, especially within the services we need – like occupational therapy (OT); I think the most significant barrier is getting through gatekeepers at a primary care level and managing the awful waiting times.

My son has been waiting for an autism assessment for two years; barriers I've witnessed include a GP doing a basic Beighton scoring assessment for hypermobility on him. I stated that he needed clear instructions and time to respond; yet the test was rushed without my son fully understanding what to do. The GP refused to refer him upwards for a more detailed assessment. One year later, we saw OT through a school referral, who immediately noticed the extra flexibility in his finger joints in a fine motor assessment. My son had been crying weekly, often saying his hands hurt writing at school; the OT confirmed this. If the GP listened to my advocacy, my son could have had his needs met – with school implementing access to a tablet – and have saved a lot of physical and emotional pain. This is just one example of the multitude of inequalities to healthcare autistic people, diagnosed and undiagnosed, face every day.

Dr Cinzia Greco: The relationships between autism and contemporary social transformations

Cinzia Greco is a medical anthropologist interested in the relationships between autism and contemporary social transformations. In her work, she explores how recent shifts in personal and professional relationships are influencing the understanding of autism in the medical field and society at large. Greco is further interested in the interplay between neurodiversity and gender. She is writing a book, provisionally titled "Divergent Feminism", exploring the historical stance of the feminist movement on mental health differences and neurodiversity. She argues for the importance of broadening feminist theory to encompass the experiences of neurodiverse women and those with mental health conditions.

TALKING ABOUT NEURODIVERSITY

LET'S TALK

PODCAST

Let's Talk is a series of in conversation pieces that encourages members of our diverse University community to have an open and honest discussion about topics right across equality, diversity and inclusion.

In the series' first episode, which also focused on neurodiversity, **PJ Hemmaway** (Chief Information Officer) and **Julia Zieba** (Graduate Intern) explored both the difficulties and the strengths of navigating a world built for neurotypical people.

Episode 5 featured a conversation about being neurodivergent and disabled members of staff. The speakers reflected on the impact of neurodivergence and disability on research and promotions for academic staff. Taking part were **Professor Jackie Carter** (EDI Academic Lead for Disability), **Professor Allan Pacey** (Interim Vice-President and Interim Dean of FBMH) and **Dr Katherine Twomey** (Lecturer in Language & Communicative Development and Co-Chair of the University of Manchester Neurodivergent Staff Network).

