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Institute of Teaching and Learning

**JANINE DIXON
WIDENING
PARTICIPATION
FOR
NEURODIVERGENT
STUDENTS**

ITL FELLOWSHIP 2022-24

**PROJECT
REPORT**

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ITL Fellow 2022-24

JANINE DIXON



Janine Dixon SFHEA is a Senior Lecturer (Teaching and Scholarship) in the Department of Materials, within the Faculty of Science and Engineering (FSE). Janine is dedicated to promoting active and inclusive scholarship practices both at the University and beyond. Her work focuses on widening participation for neurodivergent students in Higher Education, aiming to understand better the specific challenges they face while celebrating their strengths. Janine's passion lies in creating environments that support diverse learning experiences, fostering equitable access and success for all students.

Fellowship Student Partner Interns

FFION NEAL
RUBY PRIOR
NGHI LAM

WIDENING PARTICIPATION FOR NEURODIVERGENT STUDENTS

Context of the Fellowship project

Approximately 15-20% of the UK population are neurodivergent (Doyle, 2020), yet fewer than 50% of individuals with neurodivergent profiles are aware of it (Sargent, 2019). Neurodivergence encompasses a broad spectrum of conditions, including ADHD and autism, as well as learning differences such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia.

Historical figures such as Alan Turing, Albert Einstein, and Henry Ford exemplify how neurodivergent individuals can excel as innovative problem solvers. However, many neurodivergent students today face barriers that impede their academic progress.

Research shows that these students are more likely to achieve outcomes below their potential and are less likely to complete university courses (North East Autism Society, n.d.). This is partly due to a higher education (HE) system that has historically prioritised neurotypical teaching, learning, and assessment methods.

Around 10% of the population are dyslexic (British Dyslexia Association, n.d.), 5% have ADHD (NHS, 2024), and 1-2% are autistic (Autistica, n.d.). While these conditions are often associated with strengths such as creativity, analytical thinking, and hyper-focus, they can also present significant challenges, particularly in the context of Higher Education. Neurodivergent students may require additional time to process information, struggle to connect with learning materials, and experience sensory fatigue from environmental factors such as crowds, noise, and bright lights, all of which can further impact their educational experience.

Objectives of the Fellowship project

As a neurodivergent academic, I have personally experienced the challenges faced by neurodivergent students throughout my own educational journey. My motivation for this project stems from the need for a deeper understanding of neurodivergent students' needs and strengths, aligning with the University's Inclusive Education and Educational Leadership strategic themes, as well as the Office for Students' (OfS) target to equalise outcomes between disabled and non-disabled students. Through this project, I aim to promote inclusive learning environments that support a spectrum of diverse students, ensuring that neurodivergent individuals can reach their full potential.

From the outset, there was tremendous interest from colleagues across the University—including those in academic, programme support, and leadership roles—eager to learn more about the traits and experiences of neurodivergent individuals. This became a central focus of the project, followed by an exploration into how teaching, learning, and assessment can be made more inclusive for neurodivergent students.

This project sought to:

- Raise awareness of the needs of neurodivergent students.
- Identify best practices for ND-inclusive teaching, learning and assessment.
- Minimise the impact of environmental barriers for neurodivergent learners.
- Contribute towards the neurodivergent students and staff community.

Activities

There were three key stages to the project - firstly to develop a holistic understanding of the lived experience of the neurodivergent community. Secondly, to examine how these traits and experiences translate into typical teaching, learning and assessment practices, and finally to develop resources disseminating the knowledge gained from the first two stages to conclude the project with the formation of an academic training workshop which highlights the key information to impact not only my own academic practices but also Higher Education colleagues at the University and beyond.

Below is a highlighted (but not exhaustive) list of the activities explored in relation to understanding the lived experience of the neurodivergent community:

- National Autistic Society SPELL Autism training - a two-day event exploring the SPELL framework for understanding and responding to the needs of autistic children and adults (September 2024).
- British Educational Research Association (BERA) Conference – Participated in a workshop exploring the academic advising needs of students who had received SENCo support in their previous educational institutes (September 2024).
- Attended the THESIS Inclusive T&L Conference – included a keynote presentation discussing how to best support students with ADHD (June 2024).
- LGBT+ Neurodivergent – A workshop delivered by Dr. Alice Siberry from Creased Puddle which explored the crossovers between the LGBT+ and neurodivergent communities and how best to support neurodivergent people who also identify as LGBT+ (September 2022).
- Attended the ITL Autism Awareness Week talks, which included talks from ADHD students, Autistic academics and staff support for Autistic students (April 2022).
- Engaged with resources from multiple neurodivergent organisations and charities including Genius Within, Attitude, Ambitious about Autism and the British Dyslexic Association.

I spoke with Dyslexic, Autistic and ADHD Academics, Autistic and ADHD PGRs and staff supporting Autistic and ADHD students who shared their thoughts on how the project could and should be developed to improve the neurodivergent student experience effectively.

This holistic understanding was then aligned to the pedagogic knowledge I developed within my PG Diploma in Higher Education to identify appropriate teaching, learning and assessment practices in Higher Education for neurodivergent students to culminate into workshop resources for HE academics and professionals to engage with.

Student Partnership

I had the honour of working with three highly professional student partners throughout the project. Ffion Neal contributed significantly by conducting a thorough literature review, which examined the HE landscape for neurodivergent students, and provided constructive feedback on the development of the workshop. After Ffion's graduation, I began collaborating with Nghi Lam and Ruby Prior. Both played a pivotal role in reflecting on the project's progress and shaping the future 2024/25 qualitative research project.

Nghi and Ruby were exceptional in developing the script for the qualitative student survey, ensuring it helped put participants at ease. They also carefully crafted the survey questions to capture a holistic view of neurodivergent students' experiences with teaching, learning, and assessment. Ruby also met with the DASS manager and the Student Union's inclusion officer candidate to discuss the existing support for neurodivergent students and the Student Union's plans to enhance accessibility for these students.

The student partnership concluded with a co-created and co-delivered paper, presented with Ruby at the [ITL Teaching and Learning Conference 2024](#), which explored the fellowship project and reflected on our collaborative experience of working on a staff-student project.

Collaborative work

The success of this project is largely due to the high level of collaboration from colleagues at the University of Manchester and beyond. I believe every member of the ITL has contributed to the project in some way, either directly or indirectly. Notably, Judy Williams played a key role at the start by introducing me to important contacts across the University, and Lisa McDonagh regularly met with

me to discuss the project's progress, offering solutions to any challenges I encountered.

Additionally, James Brooks, University Theme Lead for Teaching Excellence and Quality, served as my "Critical Friend," sharing valuable insights from his own fellowship experience. Within my department, my line manager, Stephen Doyle, was instrumental in helping me shape my early project ideas into a clear and focused proposal. Stephen has such an uplifting and unwavering approach to supporting colleagues and advocating for minority groups which is both admirable and infectious. Rachel Parker-Strak and Rachel Studd also provided consistent support, generously sharing their scholarship research knowledge and experience to benefit the project. Much of my success at the University—beyond just this fellowship—is due to the continued guidance and mentorship I've received from Stephen Doyle, Rachel Parker-Strak, and Rachel Studd.

Colleagues from all three faculties at Manchester have had a significant impact on shaping the project and contributing to the content of the final workshop resources. This includes Jenny Silverthorne, Kai Prince, Katie Twomey, and Amber Ruigrok, all of whom lead neurodivergence-focused projects and working groups at the University.

Outputs

To date, I have delivered six workshops, each adapted to a specific audience or theme:

- ITL workshop - Empowering Neurodiversity: Challenges and Triumphs in Higher Education. The workshop capsulated an overview of everything explored within the Fellowship project and was attended by academics, and professional services staff from across the University. The workshop focused on raising awareness of the needs and strengths of neurodivergent students, challenging stereotypes and identifying best practices for inclusive teaching, learning and assessment (October 2024).

- British Academy of Management (BAM) Conference at Nottingham Trent University (NTU) – I delivered a Professional Development Workshop to academics from across the UK interested in developing more inclusive practices for neurodivergent students at their institutions (NTU, September 2024).
- Psychology Academics Round Table Talks - I was invited by the deputy programme director within the Division of Psychology and Mental Health at the University of Manchester, to hold a round table talk with their academic team (June 2024).
- Moss Hey Primary School – I was invited by the school SENCo to deliver a training session for the key stage 1 and 2 teachers focused on age-appropriate inclusive teaching practices and participation expectations for neurodivergent children in the classroom (January 2024).
- Maths Education Seminar – I was invited to deliver a hybrid seminar to academics within the Maths departments at the University of Manchester and the University of Liverpool exploring teaching, learning and assessment for neurodivergent students (March 2024).
- The Advance HE Teaching and Learning Conference at Keele University – I delivered a workshop within the stream of ‘Shaping the future of HE’, providing a safe space for academics and student mentors from across the UK to learn about neurodivergent challenges and strengths, as well as share their own experiences of supporting neurodivergent students (July 2023).

Impact

Whilst the initial focus of the workshops’ discussions were neurodivergent learners, we also examined how these inclusive methods can provide necessary accommodations for other disadvantaged student groups and the wider learning community including working students, care givers, and international students through a Universal Design for Learning.

By taking an anticipatory approach to curriculum design and a commitment to accessibility and inclusion for all, we can create an inclusive teaching and assessment strategy that acknowledges the diverse needs and strengths of all students.

I have been humbled by the resoundingly positive feedback following each workshop from participants who expressed how they can relate it to their own experiences either as a neurodivergent individual, as a professional supporting neurodivergent students or colleagues, or as a parent of a neurodivergent child. The workshops have equipped participants with the knowledge and skills to support neurodivergent students and colleagues further and provided an additional supporting voice for the increased development and application of active, flexible and flipped learning pedagogies in Higher Education.

The projects findings have been shared with the Disability/Neurodivergent Coordinator for the School of Natural Sciences in support of their ongoing work in this area.

I have been invited to join the University's Assessment for the Future Strategy Group (AFFSG) to utilise my knowledge of inclusive assessment design.

I have been invited to join the University's working group which is in the process of developing EDIA training focused on improving neurodivergent inclusive work practices at Manchester.

Following the workshops I delivered at the Advance HE and British Academy for Management conferences, Academic attendees from Bath University and the University of East London have expressed an interest in working with me on future cross-institute projects to support neurodivergent students across the UK.

In October 2024, the fellowship project was Highly Commended for Educational leadership and Inclusive Education at the University of Manchester's Teaching Excellence Awards.

Reflection

As a neurodivergent academic, I have firsthand experience with the challenges often encountered while studying and working in neurotypical environments, as well as supporting neurodivergent students throughout their learning journeys.

Sharing knowledge, resources, and fostering community has been at the heart of this project. Thanks to the contributions from staff at the University of Manchester and beyond, as well as the high level of engagement within the workshop discussions, I believe the project has significantly contributed to the University's strategies on Inclusive Education and Educational Leadership, and emphasized the importance of promoting diversity and inclusivity within Higher Education.

The fellowship has highlighted opportunities to engage more deeply with our neurodivergent students, and I eagerly anticipate hearing about their experiences with teaching, learning, and assessment in the upcoming research project.

I hope that this project and its workshops will spark further discussions on inclusive practices for both neurodivergent students and colleagues. I also hope it will inspire future projects related to neurodivergence, such as transitioning to Higher Education, academic advising, and peer and staff mentoring, led by other scholarship-focused researchers at the University.

Next steps

I have received ethical approval to conduct qualitative research with neurodivergent students at the University of Manchester to examine their experiences of teaching, learning, and assessment.

This research aims to inform the next stage of pedagogical reflection and academic training. I am grateful to Dr. Amber Ruigrok, who has agreed to join the project as a co-investigator.

During the National Autistic Society's two-day training event, both the facilitator and several attendees expressed interest in reading the findings of this fellowship project. As a result, I plan to develop a handbook adaptation of the workshop to ensure the topics covered can be disseminated further.

Looking ahead, I am also interested in exploring the potential to create a neurodiverse mentoring program at the University of Manchester.

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