



A Wicked Problem Set...

Making Advising Work for All: Exploring Boundaries and Inclusion for Neurodivergent Students

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Workshop Structure



- What is neurodiversity?
- Understanding the neurodivergent student experience
- Workshop discussion activity 1:
 - How do boundaries and barriers shape neurodivergent students' academic advising experience and staff practice at your institutions?
- Navigating Academic Advising and Pastoral Support
- Workshop discussion activity 2:
 - What strategies and/or changes could most effectively reduce barriers for both students and staff?



Refers to the natural cognitive differences between people

The term was coined by the neurodivergent community

What is Neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity advocates argue that diversity in human cognition is normal



What neurodivergent identities
are you aware of?

Neurodivergent Identities



Autism

Autism describes the way some people communicate and experience the world around them.

Learning Disability

Affects cognitive function as well as adaptive and independent coping skills.

ADHD

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: Characterised by difficulties with attention, impulsivity, and hyperactivity.

Tourette Syndrome

A condition that causes a person to make involuntary sounds and movements called tics.

Dyspraxia

A condition affecting motor coordination, movement, and spatial awareness.

Specific Learning Differences

Dyslexia

Affects reading, spelling and written language processing, often linked to differences in phonological processing, working memory and processing speed.

Dysgraphia

Affects written expression, including handwriting, spelling and organising ideas in writing.

Dyscalculia

Affects numerical understanding and mathematical processing, including number sense, calculation and sequencing.

Neurodivergent Data



- 15-20% of the population are considered neurodivergent (Doyle, 2020) but fewer than 50% know it (Sargent, 2019)
- 5-10% of the population are dyslexic (WHO, 2022)
- 5% of the population have ADHD (APA, 2013; Polanczyk et al., 2015)
- 1-2% of the population are autistic (WHO, 2022; CDC, 2023)



Co-occurring Neurodivergence



- Pre-2022 the International Classification of Diseases (ICD), restricted dual diagnosis of ADHD and autism (ICD-11; World Health Organisation, 2021)
- People diagnosed as autistic or ADHD have a 40% likelihood of having both. (Rong et al., 2021). This is sometimes referred to as AuDHD in the ND community.
- Approx. 1 in 2 people with ADHD are dyslexic (ADHD Aware, n.d.).

Neurodivergent Community



- **Diagnosed**
- **Identify**
- **Disclosed**
- **Unaware**

Diagnosed and disclosed

Diagnosed but not disclosed

Identify and disclosed

Internally identify, but
do not disclose

Not diagnosed and unaware

Life as a Neurodivergent HE student



- Neurodivergent students are likely to achieve outcomes below their potential
- Less likely to complete university courses (North-East Autism Society, n.d.)

Difficulty connecting with
learning materials

Sensory fatigue

Common difficulties which ND
students face at University

Feelings of anxiety in
neurotypical (NT) social situations

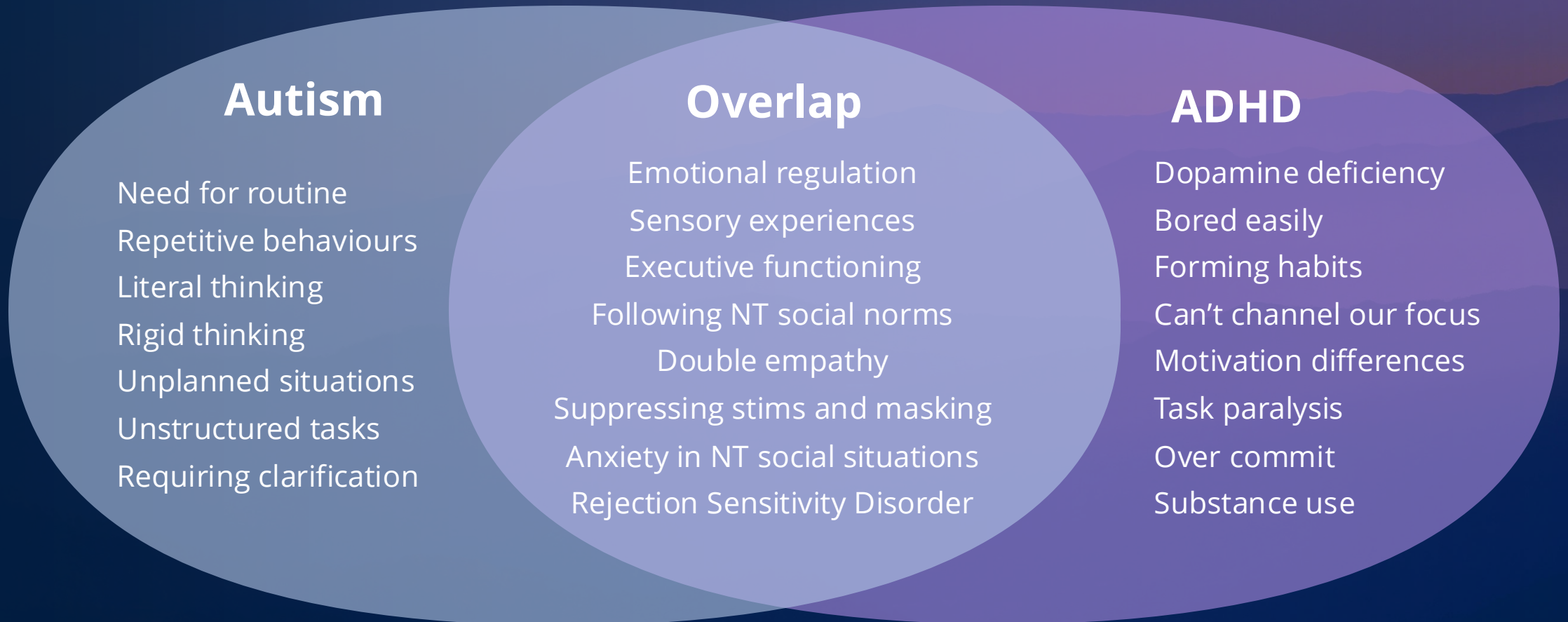
The need for additional time to
process information

Executive function challenges can impact on
time management and organisation

ND Barriers at University



These are a few of the challenges commonly associated with being autistic/ADHD. However, not all autistic/ADHD people experience all these traits, or to the same degree.





Boundaries & Barriers: Academic advising

- Boundaries between academic advising and teaching are often ambiguous for students leaving students uncertain about when and how to seek help (Butcher and Lane, 2024)
- Belonging is critical to student wellbeing, and advising relationships can underpin psychological security (Rubinstein, 2025; Accardo et al., 2025).
- Challenges are compounded by delays or inconsistencies in the creation and dissemination of student disability support plans (McDowall and Kiseleva, 2024).
- Rigid routines and impractical meeting times can reduce confidence and impede engagement, while literal interpretations of institutional or advisor communication may inadvertently deter students from making contact when they would benefit from it (Pigato, 2024).

Academic Advising Model





Wicked Problem Set:

How do boundaries and barriers shape neurodivergent students' academic advising experience and staff practice in your department?



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Inclusive Advising Strategies

Considerations when navigating academic advising and pastoral support for neurodivergent students in higher education...



- Student motivations
- Executive functioning
- Double empathy problem
- Recommendations from the literature

Student Motivations



These are some of the motivations commonly associated with being Neurotypical, autistic and having ADHD. However, each person is unique, and these motivations should be considered as holistic examples.

Neurotypical

- Social belonging
- Importance / obligation
- Achievement & recognition
- Future planning
- Avoiding negative outcomes

Autism

- Predictability & routine
- Accuracy & truth
- Special interests
- Meaning / purpose
- Fairness & justice

ADHD

- Urgency
- Interest / novelty
- Challenge
- Passion / hyperfocus
- Immediate reward



Executive Functioning Barriers



- Initiating/completing a task
- Planning and prioritising
- Time blindness
- Processing information
- Organising (physically and mentally)
- Sustaining attention
- Working memory

Double Empathy Problem



Neurotypical–neurodivergent communication differences



- NT/ND communication styles differ
- Misunderstandings are mutual (double empathy)
- Literal vs. contextual interpretation of language
- Directness, detail focus, and unique perspectives are common strengths in ND



Wicked Problem Set:

What strategies and/or changes could most effectively reduce barriers for both students and staff?



Recommendations from the Literature

- Pragmatic opportunities include streamlining communication and support pathways to ensure the timely sharing of essential information (McDowall and Kiseleva, 2024).
- Establishing mentoring or peer support schemes can add continuity and relational depth to advising interactions (Accardo et al., 2025),
- Privileging relationship building over transactional meetings helps foster belonging and mattering (Cook Sather et al., 2014).
- Embedding reflective practice and inter institutional sharing solutions can sustain inclusive approaches at scale (Pigato, 2024).





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Thank you

Barriers and Boundaries:

Navigating Academic Advising and Pastoral Support for
Neurodivergent Students in Higher Education

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