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Project INC:
**Inclusive
Neurodiverse
Campuses**

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Executive summary

Background

Project INC (Inclusive Neurodiverse Campuses) is a participatory action research project that aims to understand what works for neurodivergent inclusion and belonging on university campuses and drive positive action. The number of neurodivergent students accessing higher education has risen steadily in the UK and internationally in recent years. Retention and wellbeing outcomes are known to be poorer for this group of students in comparison with peers. Challenges of access and inclusion for neurodivergent employees in workplace settings, including universities, are well documented.

Method

Working with a participatory advisory group of neurodivergent students and alumni, we designed a two-phase study at York St John University. Phase 1 involved flexible, anonymous data collection across a digital and physical campus installation, resulting in 152 contributions from students and staff across the university. In Phase 2, we conducted in-depth accessible interviews with 6 neurodivergent students and 7 neurodivergent members of staff.

Findings

Content analysis of the Phase 1 data identified aspects of respondents' experiences that are important determinants of belonging at university. 'Meaningful inclusive practice' captured the importance of: flexibility and choice when learning, inclusion happening by default rather than luck, validation and being believed. 'Representation as a shared responsibility' described how identity spaces and visible acceptance of difference on campus foster inclusion and belonging. 'Navigating space, time, and transition' acknowledged the interdependency between physical and sensory spaces and university experience, as well as the additional cognitive load involved in planning how to navigate transition between spaces and activities.

Using these Phase 1 themes as a framework for thematic analysis of the Phase 2 interview data, we present a Model of INClusive belonging, which articulates the dynamic, situational, and relational nature of belonging at university for neurodivergent students and staff members as a set of five questions: Can I see it? Can I receive it? Can we talk? Can I exist here? Can I thrive here?

Actions

The actions arising from Project INC so far include: blended neurodiversity training for staff based on the co-produced findings from INC and the wider evidence base; a new sensory room on campus; executive-level commitment to neurodiversity-informed estates design; the inclusion of neurodiversity as a key dimension of diversity in university EDI strategy; and a move towards more compassionate university communications. Action towards neurodiversity-affirming practice at York St John will continue in response to ongoing dialogue with our neurodivergent student and staff communities.



Introduction and context

Project INC is a collaboration between Spectrum First Education Ltd. and researchers in Psychology at York St John University. INC is a **participatory action research project**, which aims to understand what works for neurodivergent inclusion and belonging on university campuses and to drive positive action. The project is funded by a Community Partnership Research Grant awarded by the Institute for Social Justice.

Understanding of neurodevelopmental differences has shifted dramatically over recent decades [1]. The **neurodiversity** framework conceptualises clinically defined profiles, such as autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, and developmental language disorder (DLD), as naturally occurring cognitive variation, analogous to biodiversity in the natural environment [2]. Around 15-20% of the population are estimated to be **neurodivergent** [3]. Variation in the ways that people think and experience the world is not best understood solely in terms of 'deficits': neurodiversity brings meaningful differences and advantages at the group level, even as neurodivergence can present significant challenges for individuals [4]. One important implication is that interventions should aim to create environments where neurodivergent people can benefit with equity, harness strengths and maximise their potential, as well as support the development of skills that are meaningful to them.

Schools and universities aim to provide learning experiences that are accessible to all. However, in the UK neurodivergent pupils are more likely than their peers to be excluded from school, experience school distress, and under-achieve in relation to academic ability [5, 6]. At the same time, more neurodivergent young people than ever are accessing university [7]. It is difficult to assess outcomes for this sizeable minority of students. Many choose not to disclose neurodivergence; others may not be identified as neurodivergent before reaching university due to long waitlists and other barriers to clinical assessment. The available research evidence suggests that neurodivergent students are at elevated risk of leaving university before completing their studies [8] and of experiencing poor mental health while at university [9]. Most concerningly, a recent Department for Education report revealed that neurodivergent young people are over-represented in student suicides [10]. Beyond university, autistic and other neurodivergent people are among the most under-employed [11].

Nonetheless, universities are uniquely placed to make a positive difference in neurodivergent people's life trajectories [12]. Academic curricula often allow flexibility for strength-based pedagogical approaches to be embedded. University programmes of study allow students to follow their passions and focus on interests in depth. Forming social connections around shared interests can be facilitated in the relative safety of a university environment. Support for mental health and wellbeing is often available to a greater extent than in earlier stages of education.



In the York St John University context, 29.2% of undergraduate students and 35.1% of postgraduate research students identify as having a disability (compared with a sector average of 16%) [13]. Many of these students have reported a neurodivergent 'condition'. There are likely to be other neurodivergent students who are not captured in disability data. There are existing areas of good practice in relation to neurodiversity, including the Early Start transition programme, disabled and neurodivergent student and staff networks, the Inclusive Education Framework, and needs-led support in Disability Services. However, there remains further work to be done in supporting positive outcomes for these students, by adopting a co-ordinated, whole-university approach designed with and for neurodivergent members of the university community.

Project INC aims to work collaboratively with neurodivergent students and staff across the university community to map out what neurodiversity-affirming practice looks like in our context. We avoided segregating participation by diagnostic group or role (student/ academic/ professional services staff) in acknowledgement of the complex reality of neurodivergent identity and experiences on campus. A good deal is already known about the barriers to access and inclusion for neurodivergent people in education and employment settings. In this project, we were particularly interested in learning where, how, why, and for whom things work well, and in harnessing this co-created knowledge to advocate for neurodiversity-affirming change across university systems.

Language use and key terms

Following the majority preference of neurodivergent people [14], we use **identity-first language** (e.g., 'autistic student') rather than person-first language (e.g., 'student with autism') where possible. We also adopt neutral terminology (e.g., 'characteristic') over medicalised terminology (e.g., 'symptom') throughout. However, we acknowledge the diversity in language preferences within neurodivergent communities and recognise that this terminology will not be right for everyone.

Neurodiversity describes variation in brain function, cognition, communication, and behaviour across the whole human species. We all differ from each other in how we think, learn, and experience the world.

Neurodivergent describes a person with a neurocognitive profile that differs from societal norms. Often this term is used to refer to developmental differences such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, DLD, dyscalculia, dyspraxia-DKD, and Tourette's syndrome, although it can be applied more widely [15].

Participatory action research is a collaborative research approach in which people affected by a given issue work with researchers to co-create knowledge and drive community-led action.

Participatory advisory group (PAG) is a group of people representing key stakeholder groups who input into the design and implementation of project, ensuring that diverse, first-hand perspectives are embedded throughout the research.

Conventional content analysis is an inductive method for identifying categories and themes from a set of data without drawing on pre-existing theory. It is useful for identifying recurring concepts and keywords across a large textual dataset.

Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) is a method for identifying underlying patterns of meaning within in-depth qualitative data, such as interviews. The role of the researcher(s) in shaping the analysis is important in RTA, and it can be applied across different theoretical frameworks.

Participatory research design

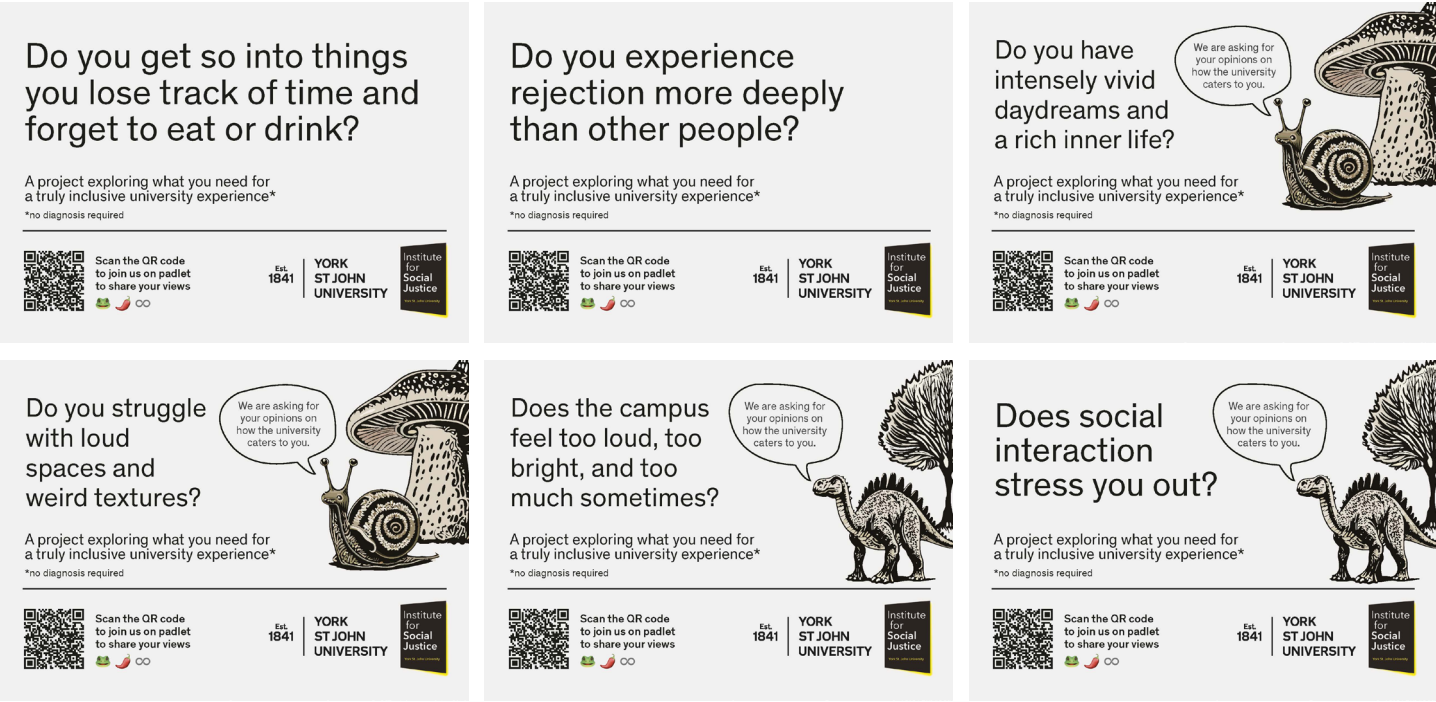
The core research team includes people with experience of inhabiting university spaces as a neurodivergent student and/or member of staff. We used neurodiversity-affirming hiring practices to recruit a research associate to the team [16].

At the start of the project, we assembled a **participatory advisory group (PAG)**, comprising neurodivergent students and alumni of York St John and another university. The PAG group met eight times during the course of the project and were paid for their time and expertise. Their input shaped the design of the project from recruitment through to dissemination.

An important insight from the PAG was that we should avoid using diagnostic terms in participant recruitment materials, because neurodivergent people often feel marked out by their differences and under scrutiny within educational communities. Instead, the recruitment materials referenced

common transdiagnostic experiences (for example: Do you get so into things that you lose track of time and forget to eat and drink? Do you struggle with loud spaces and weird textures?). The Project INC logo included the word ‘neurodiverse’, but it stated in the recruitment campaign that no diagnosis was required to take part. Many neurodivergent people do not have formal clinical diagnoses, and we wanted to hear from anybody for whom these experiences resonated. The PAG developed the imagery and design of the recruitment materials.

We set up a campus-wide installation for three months in 2024. Posters, postcards, and electronic screens around campus displayed Project INC materials, which invited people to scan a QR code to find out about the aims of the project and the different ways of getting involved.



Data collection

We collected data in two waves, offering choice and flexibility in how, when, and where people shared their experiences and insights. The data collection methods were informed by principles of Universal Design with the aim of allowing people with diverse communication and learning profiles to contribute in ways that felt comfortable and appropriate for them [17]. They were also intended to capture ‘live’ experiences of people as they went about their usual daily routines.

Phase 1: open, flexible, anonymous posts. Students and staff could contribute by adding posts to an online Padlet board. The board was structured with a series of open prompt questions (for example: When do you feel most supported and understood? How do you learn best?). Posts were anonymous and moderated by a member of the research team before being made public in order to remove personal or potentially offensive details. People could respond to each other’s posts and could post as many comments as they liked at a time or place of their choosing. Additionally, six post-boxes were placed in locations around campus, in which people could post notes, drawings, or other modes of expression in physical

form. Locations included the designated quiet floor of the library, the main canteen, and the entrance to the Students’ Union. In all, we received 152 contributions via the Padlet and post-boxes. We analysed these data using **conventional content analysis**.

Phase 2: in-depth interviews. Via the QR code, people could also express interest in taking part in an interview or focus group. Interviews were structured around the topics that arose in the Phase 1 data. Interviews could take place in person, online via video call, or asynchronously via text chat. Participants had the option of a pre-interview consultation to discuss their communication preferences and support needs. Questions were sent in advance to allow thinking time. Postcards displaying phrases and pictures that summarised the issues raised in Phase 1 were available during the interviews, so that participants could choose specific topics that they wanted to talk about.

We conducted 13 interviews (6 with students; 7 with members of staff). Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour 30 minutes. We analysed the interview data using **reflexive thematic analysis**.



Findings

Phase 1: What matters for neurodivergent inclusion on campus?

Content analysis of the combined Padlet and post-box data resulted in seven categories, which we organised into three overarching themes. These themes represent aspects of respondents' university experiences that have clear implications for inclusion and belonging: (1) Meaningful inclusive practice; (2) Neurodivergent representation as a shared responsibility; (3) Navigating time, space, and transition. See Table 1.

Table 1: Summary content analysis of Phase 1 data

THEME	CONTRIBUTING CATGORIES	EXAMPLE DATA EXTRACT(S)
Meaningful inclusive practice	Flexibility and choice in learning preferences Inclusion by default Validation and being believed	<i>I have had a couple of members of teaching staff that have made me belong and feel valid and that has changed everything. They are the ones that have been a key reason I didn't drop out on multiple occasions. They gave so much support and understanding. They have also provided individual support in a way that works for me, for example meeting online. They also always check in and [re-emphasise] my needs need to be met and to be honest if they are not.</i> <i>Having flexible deadlines is very helpful as sometimes I have unpredictable overwhelm and fatigue, leading to difficulties in focus and executive function</i>
Neurodivergent representation as a shared responsibility	Identity spaces Visible acceptance of difference	<i>I feel like I truly belong in ND [neurodivergent] spaces. There, I can stim freely and not be judged, despite the fact that my stim isn't typical... I don't think there's any other space on campus that I would feel safe and accepted enough to stim as freely as I do at [peer support group].</i> <i>I love seeing the posters for ND study groups and would love if there was a similar group for ND staff.</i>
Navigating space, time, and transition	Interdependency between space and experience Cost/benefit decision making	<i>There is limited space for neurodivergent students to work on campus that can be guaranteed to be quiet or available. As a result, students are having to work from home, which is often in small bedrooms with limited study space. This is compounded by frequent building work on student accommodation causing noise, uncertainty, and stress, with limited advance notice given for this.</i> <i>I have found a route around campus where I can avoid the crowds which is good, but it means I don't pass any bathrooms or food places, normally meaning I have to detour which I have to account for.</i>

Meaningful inclusive practice

This theme captures the benefits for learning, social experiences, and wellbeing when neurodiversity-affirming adjustments are proactively implemented. In the academic domain, *flexibility and choice in learning preferences* highlights the benefits for students in having access to multiple means to access the curriculum and demonstrate their learning, aligned with principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Embedding optionality in curriculum design affords a sense of autonomy and competence, which could mitigate past experiences of failure in education. Allowing some flexibility with deadlines helped students to manage unpredictable variations in health and wellbeing.

Inclusion by default would mean anticipating and planning for neurodiversity in educational and workplace settings. In practice, adjustments were more often made after a problem had been encountered. Supportive actions by individual members of staff were often noted, appreciated and even identified as a deciding factor in preventing more than one student from leaving university. However, respondents were often uncertain about how revealing their differences and difficulties would be received within the university community more widely.

The importance of *validation and being believed* by others in the university environment was clear: respondents expressed a need to feel accepted for their differences and to have necessary adjustments understood, without feeling like “a burden” or having their competence questioned. The self-advocacy and administrative demands of disability could take a toll on capacity to engage with other important tasks. Participants called for adjustments being available without a requirement of diagnostic proof and the introduction of staff training to promote awareness and acceptance of neurodivergence.

Neurodivergent representation as a shared responsibility

This theme captured the benefits of seeing positive representations of neurodivergence and having access to neurodiversity-affirming spaces on campus. Many respondents explicitly valued community-led *identity spaces*, including peer study support groups and staff networks. These physical and digital contexts facilitated socialising, regulating, and co-working; respondents could communicate authentically, share interests, and stim without fear of judgement.

Respondents also highlighted the importance of *visible acceptance of difference* on campus. Seeing other neurodivergent people succeed, while openly using tools such as noise-cancelling headphones or stim toys, alternative means of communication, or taking movement breaks was encouraging and facilitated a sense of belonging. Respondents also stressed the importance of the university sharing responsibility by avoiding deficit-focused or stereotypical portrayal of neurodivergence in curricula and support services. Efforts by staff members to share the burden of advocacy were noticed and welcomed.

Navigating space, time, and transition

This theme conveys the reality that study and/or work time at university is impacted by the physical and sensory environment, by transitions between spaces, and by often challenging experiences in other parts of respondents’ lives. *Interdependency between space and experience* encapsulates respondents’ need for comfortable and predictable environments for teaching, studying, socialising, and engaging in community activities. If campus spaces had modifiable lighting, seating, and temperature control, the burden of self-advocacy was meaningfully reduced. Similarly, where quiet spaces could be reliably bookable, respondents had valuable decompression time between classes or meetings. However, the ability to focus in a comfortable classroom environment could still be compromised by having to get there through noisy, busy routes.

Awareness of the impact of the many small transitions across spaces and contexts (for example, accommodation to lecture theatre; supervision to paid employment) contributed to a continual cycle of *cost/benefit decision making*. Respondents spent considerable time and energy working out how to navigate each day at university while minimising the risks of overwhelm and burnout. This additional cognitive load sometimes detracted from capacity to engage with other study or work tasks.

Phase 2: A dynamic model of neurodivergent belonging

We analysed the interview data using the Phase 1 themes as a framework. First, we looked at the student and staff interviews separately and then identified common underlying themes across all interviews. We present this analysis as **a Model of INclusive Belonging** (Figure 1). This model represents the ways in which neurodivergent students and staff negotiate a sense of belonging in our university community, framed as a series of questions. Belonging on campus is situational, dynamic, and relational, and is strongly influenced by people’s perceptions of how neurodivergence is understood, accepted, and proactively considered in university practices, systems, and processes.

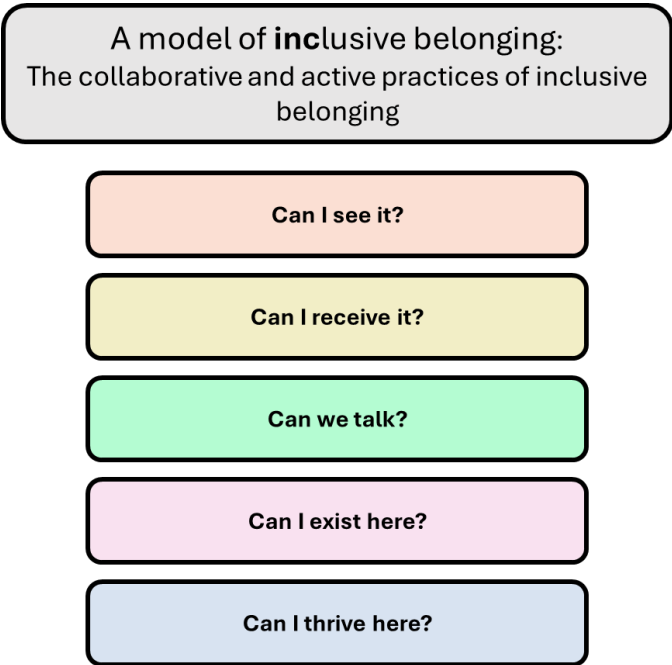


Figure 1: Negotiating neurodivergent belonging on campus: A dynamic model of INclusive belonging

Can I see it?

The visibility and authentic representation of neurodivergent people matters for belonging on campus. Equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) initiatives that were perceived as performative or ‘tick-box’ were not helpful. Meaningful inclusion meant creating a culture in which neurodivergent people feel able – should they wish – to unmask and disclose neurodivergence without fear of stereotyping or negative judgement. Both students and staff expressed a wish to connect with each other; it was particularly useful for students to see neurodivergent academic and professional services staff well supported and succeeding in their roles. The visibility of proactive, neurodiversity-informed support was also important, for example: quiet spaces on campus; tutors and support services reaching out to students; and recruitment practices for hiring and promotion processes that are inclusive by design.

I think the lecturer themselves is also neurodivergent, which is probably why it was more accessible, maybe more of an awareness. Or that's my perception of it anyway. (Student)

Reaching out, not making it the autistic person's responsibility, is huge. (Student)

It almost seems as if there's the tick-box awareness of neurodiversity, like posters up that say... It's easy to say we're an inclusive campus. (Student)

For staff and students to feel more comfortable wearing noise cancelling headphones, ear defenders, using fidget toys and sensory stimming toys. I just think the more people do it, then the more people feel like, 'Oh, I could do that as well'. That's why I do it on campus. It's a big reason. (Staff member)

We talk about people having issues with time management, when the most central thing to neurodivergent people is that we experience time differently. So instead of talking about needing to improve time management, why don't we have open conversations for staff and students? (Staff member)

Can I receive it?

Neurodivergent students and staff reported that continuous self-advocacy was burdensome, and often they carried memories of their needs not being met in previous educational or employment settings. This could mean that self-advocacy conversations became adversarial and people were highly aware of the likelihood of being perceived as a ‘problem’. Often challenges in other parts of life, such as health and sleep issues, relationship or financial difficulties, impacted how people could express what they needed for study or work at a given moment and how they were able to receive offers of support. For educational and workplace support to be effective, it needed to be personalised, compassionate, and flexible, in recognition of people’s wider life circumstances and the fact that support needs change over time.

On bad days for anxiety and overwhelm, it's really hard to leave the house, so I work at my desk at home, going through the Powerpoint and later the recordings. I'm able to control most of my environment this way, but the catch is my attendance is affected because I can't attend in person, even if I'm doing the work at the same time the lecture takes place. (Student)

I went through hell in college where my competency was questioned. Why we might be so defensive and why we might be like, 'No, I'm having control here,' is because actually we've had so little control and that's caused so many issues for us. There needs to be that understanding of why we're coming very apprehensive and ready to fight because we've had to fight for so long. It's instinct almost at this point. (Student)

It's absolutely exhausting. And I've kind of got to the point now where I'm sick of actually talking about my needs and I just need to have break from being autistic (laughs). (Staff member)

And it's recognising the extra challenge that can be faced with anxiety, stress management, management of daily tasks... I think masking among staff is maybe higher. I don't know whether [...] they feel that they [can't unmask] to maintain the sort of base of professionalism. (Staff member)

Can we talk?

Relatedly, participants shared that, while having to explain and re-explain their circumstances and needs to different people across the university could be draining, the positive impact of a compassionate, mutually respectful conversation can be substantial. Often communication breakdown occurs because of people’s different dispositions, expectations and experiences in the world – an example of the ‘double empathy problem’ [18]. People felt safe to share their experiences, differences and needs for adjustment when trust was established. This happened when the burden of successful communication was shared, and when peers and colleagues were able to listen actively and sensitively without pretending to fully understand the experience, but with motivation to help and respond through proactive adjustment.

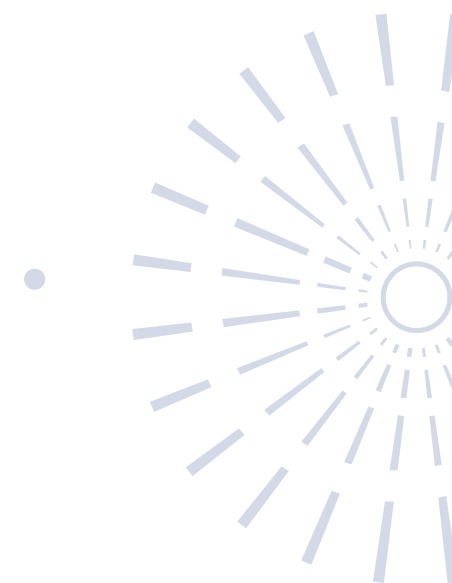
[If I could say] 'Hi, I'm so and so, you know, I've got these conditions. This means these elements of my life can be really tricky. And this is the support I may require from you, but please feel free to have a conversation with me'. I feel like that would be a lot easier. (Student)

I think that whenever you need help or you're struggling with something, you have to go back to square one and explain to someone all over again, everything. And that takes a huge mental load as well. (Student)

I think that for me, it's not necessarily about suggesting the right things, it's more about that kind of feeling like you have someone to relate to and someone who understands what you're going through. (Student)

First of all, it would be starting with just – say if someone discloses their diagnosis or their self-diagnosis and just approaching it from the position of saying, 'Congratulations, that's really great. Thank you for sharing that with me. What can I do to help?' I think that's just the building blocks of it, because the best thing someone said to me was 'congratulations'. (Staff member)

This work trying to figure out how to communicate well with whoever you're trying to communicate with is something where the work should be equitable and shared among all people. I actually think it's one of the most generous things autistic and other neurodivergent people do, and it's not something we should stop doing in an ideal world. I just wish other people would do that back. (Staff member)



Can I exist here?

Students and staff talked of the physical and sensory experiences of work, study, and socialising in environments which may cause discomfort and sensory pain to them. Physical spaces with modifiable features made a huge difference to people's comfort and regulation. This could include adjustable lighting and temperature controls, and seating that offered a choice of texture and position. Modifiability of the environment acknowledges that people's sensory needs are dynamic. Attitudinal factors are equally important to neurodivergent people's sense of belonging. In teaching contexts, are regulation aids such as sensory toys and movement breaks encouraged? Are people explicitly made aware that they can move or leave the room for a short period if needed? For people to feel accommodated and welcome, adjustability and flexibility are key.

I wish there was a place on campus that was 'stim safe', where I didn't have to worry about what others thought of my stimming when I'm studying. (Student)

I think getting to know the campus helps a little bit, because you start to know where the loud and the quiet sections are and you can kind of avoid things a little bit better.' (Student)

I think if an area is hostile to you in a sensory sense, it's difficult for it not to feel hostile in sort of a community sense as well. So having a space that accommodates you I think is quite key to feeling like you are allowed to be there. (Student)

There are only 14 staff members who I am sort of regularly interacting with. They all know I'm autistic. They're all very welcoming of that – when I told them. That wasn't necessarily always actually the case. So I really actually felt very alienated before I had my diagnosis while working in this job. (Staff member)

If campus had options of those more neuro-friendly spaces with the low-level lighting and the bookable quiet spaces then it would definitely encourage me on campus more. (Staff member)

Can I thrive here?

This theme moves beyond 'existing' in university environments to those factors that enable neurodivergent people to harness their strengths and maximise their potential. Inclusive pedagogical practices such as Universal Design for Learning and competence-based assessment were referenced and welcomed, allowing students to work to the best of their ability in a way that suited them. For staff, flexibility and choice in the ways they accessed important information and working patterns were recognised as optimising performance. Connection with, and mentorship from, other disabled and neurodivergent colleagues could also be transformative in the working environment.

I didn't want to miss any of the lectures because I knew I'd really get a lot out of them, whereas some of the other modules it felt like, 'Well it won't matter if I miss one, because I'm not focused anyway'. Yeah definitely more interested, more motivated, more excited about learning I suppose. And I surprised myself because I wanted to do the work and I did it. I think that person being who they were and making it accessible made me want to learn from them in particular, yeah. (Student)

You're able to perform your own opinion and I like that. I like the idea that we can actually think critically rather than just, 'Here's what you need to know. Put it on an assessment'. (Student)

When I'm seeing students, I'm saying like, 'Oh you know, find a way that works for you'. But you can't work in a way that works for you if you're being told to work in completely the opposite way. So I think it's that you don't have to work in the same way, but you can come to some shared understanding of accepting that that's how someone else works. (Postgraduate research student)

I think I've been incredibly lucky to have been mentored and championed by other disabled academics. And I think, obviously there's huge range of impairments, not everyone gets it, but having mentorship from autistic senior colleagues has been life-changing for me. (Staff member)

Actions

We continue the 'action' phase of our action research project. We are working with people and teams across the York St John community to implement changes for improved neurodivergent inclusion and belonging on campus, informed by insights from Project INC. Here is a summary of actions in progress so far:

- **Neurodiversity training** for all staff will be rolled out in the 2025-26 academic year, developed by the INC team and Spectrum First Education Ltd. and informed by the findings of Project INC. The training comprises a set of brief online modules, supplemented by in-person workshops to apply learning to different contexts and departments across the university. This work has been commissioned and supported by the Learning and Organisational Development team.
- **A sensory room on campus** is in development, which will be open to students and staff who choose a space to decompress amidst the busyness of the university day. This initiative is being led by Disability Services, in consultation with the Project INC team.
- **Neurodiversity-informed design.** The Disabled Students Network and INC team inputted into plans for the new Student Hub from the design stage, to ensure that diverse sensory and communication needs were considered. This consultation was facilitated by the University Secretary's office. We are working with the Estates team to ensure that future building projects on campus are designed with neurodiversity in mind.

- **EDI strategy.** Insights from Project INC have informed the development of the new University Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion strategy, ensuring that neurodiversity is included as an important dimension of difference within our university community and that neurodivergent needs are considered at a strategic level. This work is facilitated by the University Secretary and the Projects and Planning team.
- **Clear and compassionate communications.** The INC team is consulting on student-facing information and communications from the University to ensure that language is inclusive, unambiguous, and avoids inducing anxiety unnecessarily. This work has been facilitated by the University Registry and Casework team. One example is the information webpages on student concerns and complaints.

We envisage that the actions arising from Project INC will be ongoing, as we continue to learn from our neurodivergent students and staff and work towards a university environment that supports belonging and thriving for all.



Reflections from the Participatory Advisory Group

“When the Project INC team invited the Disabled Students Network co-chairs to join their PAG, it brought about a shift in tone for many neurodivergent students at YSJ. Many were excited by the prospect of giving their thoughts on what education could ideally look like for them, as they felt they’d never been able to openly ask for those things before, and had felt disempowered by previous experiences of their needs and requests being dismissed. Having visible and explicit neurodivergent representation around campus, alongside being sincerely consulted on their experiences, seemed almost too good to be true. The sense of being included in an open discussion was empowering.

At each point of my involvement with the PAG, I consulted as many other neurodivergent students as I could on what was occurring and what they’d like to see, which led to valuable reflexivity for us all. For example, when thinking about what should be put on the posters to attract neurodivergent attention, it gave many of us an opportunity to reflect on what we considered symbols of neurodivergence and how we would convey this to others. Students suggested dinosaurs, trains, frogs, snails and all sorts of other symbols. How to represent neurodivergence visually was a personal question, which many of the students delighted

in answering. The novelty of discussing their neurodivergence in a personal, positive light made some giddy with excitement.

As data collection progressed and first findings were disseminated, there was a clear sense within the community that our voices were valued and uplifted, and that accurate, respectful representation was central to the research process. There was an overwhelmingly positive response to the announcement of the new training being developed for YSJ staff members, and students expressed that their feelings that ‘nothing ever happens’ were alleviated, as they could see the positive changes occurring in real time, as it was ‘home-grown’ and in their immediate space.

Continual, effective relating of information between community and research team maximised the positive change possible through this process, as stakeholders always felt they were participating in the progress achieved. As this collaboration with Project INC occurred so soon after the foundation of the Disabled Students Network, it showed our neurodivergent members that, through collaboration with wider groups and systems, we could benefit and support the ND community in meaningful ways.”



Conclusions

There is no one-size-fits-all solution for inclusive, neurodiversity-affirming practice in universities. An important first step is to acknowledge that a sizeable minority of students and staff members are neurodivergent, even if not identified or disclosed, and to plan teaching, work operations, and campus spaces accordingly. People with the same diagnosis will have different profiles and needs; many people will have co-occurring neurodivergent, mental health, and/or physical health conditions that impact their experiences at university. An individual’s support needs will fluctuate over time and in relation to stressors in other parts of their lives.

The key principles that we recommend universities adopt as they work with neurodivergent students and colleagues are:

- Universal design: campus spaces, teaching practices, and digital platforms that are constructed to be accessible to the widest range of people, including neurodivergent people.
- Anticipation of need: every group, setting, and network can be expected to be neurodiverse. Planning accordingly would help to reduce

sensory, social, and communication barriers to access and engagement and reduce the need for retro-fitted solutions.

- Flexibility and choice: people’s sense of belonging on campus can be supported by promoting agency in how they engage with their study, work, and wider university journeys wherever possible.
- Compassion: an intentional commitment to recognise and change institutional practices that disadvantage neurodivergent students and staff, without making judgments.
- Co-production: working with neurodivergent communities to share responsibility for inclusion and facilitate collaborative decision making.
- Value-neutral communication: ensuring that outdated, stigmatising language in relation to neurodiversity is edited from curricula and support services. Considering how university communications are likely to be received and interpreted by people with diverse communication profiles.

About the authors

Professor Lorna Hamilton is Professor of Developmental Psychology and Inclusive Education at York St John University. Her research involves working with neurodivergent children and young people to co-create more inclusive educational experiences in schools and universities.

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Dr Stephanie Petty is Associate Professor of Psychology and a chartered Clinical Psychologist. Her research aims to reframe mental health experiences of autistic and neurodivergent adults through a non-pathologising lens and inform neurodiversity-affirming healthcare and therapeutic practice.



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