Designing institutional systems that support neurodivergent educators

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Abstract

In higher education (HE) institutions, neurodivergence is currently under-represented (Mellifont, 2021). This opinion piece explores the role of institutional systems in supporting neurodivergent educators who bring unique strengths and perspectives to the classroom. The paper suggests that designing inclusive hiring processes and providing professional development opportunities, mentorship programmes and accommodations in the classroom are ways to support neurodivergent educators. The paper also highlights the benefits of remote or blended work arrangements and discusses the challenges associated with designing institutional systems that support neurodivergent educators. The paper concludes that creating a welcoming and inclusive workplace culture and prioritising essential accommodations are necessary in order to foster a more inclusive and effective learning environment for all students and educators.

Keywords: neurodiversity, inclusion, higher education, accommodation.

Introduction

The diversity and inclusion of educators in the institutional system is essential for building an equitable and effective learning environment. A neurodivergent (ND) person may be defined as someone 'whose neurological structure and development are atypical' (Medical Education Directorate, 2023, p.1). ND educators are individuals who have atypical neurological development, which includes conditions such as autism, dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyspraxia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia and Tourette Syndrome. Neurodivergence can also encompass some long-term mental health conditions, such as depression and borderline personality disorder (BPD) (Medical Education Directorate, 2023, p.1). In higher education (HE) institutions, neurodivergence is currently under-represented (Mellifont, 2021). Supporting ND educators is critical because they bring unique strengths and perspectives to the classroom. With a specific focus on autism and ADHD, this paper explores the institutional system's role in designing systems that support ND educators.

ND educators' particular aptitudes and outlooks are of significant value to the classroom. A study into autistic workers by Cope and Remington (2022, p.22) revealed such cognitive advantages as *"superior creativity, focus, and memory; increased efficiency and personal qualities such as honesty and dedication; and the ability to offer a unique autism-specific perspective."* Sedgwick *et al.* (2019, p.241) highlight that key strengths of many people with ADHD include "*cognitive dynamism, courage, energy, humanity, resilience and transcendence*". As well as bringing these key skills and qualities to education, ND staff are role models to whom students can relate.

Ableist institutions?

'Ableism' is a complex issue across all educational institutions (Brown, Thompson and Leigh, 2018). Too often, institutions focus chiefly on the needs of learners (Mellifont, 2021), which, while essential, should not be in lieu of the needs of those who educate them; there should be understanding of and support for the needs both of students and the educators who teach them. A scoping review of the literature finds issues relating to disclosure of neurodivergence within HE, associated with the still stigmatised views of 'disability' and the ambiguous understandings of what it means to be 'neurodivergent', with the consequence that many staff, through fear, may not wish to be labelled as ND (Pionke, 2019). To remedy this, HE institutions could facilitate safe conversations about neurodiversity, thus challenging negative views, and academics might then feel happier about disclosing their diagnoses, safe from offensive labels like 'disorder'. As Mellifont (2021) highlights, HE institutions should aim to accept, include and value neurodivergence if staff are to be fully supported and valued.

According to O'Dwyer (2022), neurodivergent educators face challenges related to self-disclosure, anxiety, and concerns over professional competency, which may hamper their ability to carry out their role effectively. To address these challenges, O'Dwyer suggests that workplace accommodations may include: regular opportunities for disclosure; flexible working arrangements; and policies that are well promoted throughout the organisation. Additionally, a culture that respects and values neurodiversity can go a long way to ensuring that ND educators feel supported and empowered in their roles.

Institutional systems play a crucial role in supporting ND educators and designing hiring processes that are inclusive and welcoming to ND individuals is a key strategy. Research has shown that traditional hiring processes can be biased against ND applicants, leading to their exclusion from the workforce (Scott *et al.*, 2019). Institutional systems can create more inclusive hiring processes by eliminating unnecessary requirements and providing accommodations during the interview process (Scott *et al., op.cit.*).

Continuing professional development

Once neurodivergent educators are hired, institutional systems can support them by providing professional development opportunities that cater to their needs. For instance, since some ND

individuals have difficulty with social communication, making it challenging to collaborate with others, institutions can offer training sessions that teach ND educators how to communicate effectively with their colleagues and students. Additionally, institutions can provide accommodations such as quiet workspaces or flexible schedules to support ND educators' work styles (Scott *et al., op.cit.*). A recommendation would be that line managers should undertake professional development on neurodiversity in the workplace (*e.g.,* https://righttracklearning.com/prog/neurodiversity-training/), both to improve their support for ND individuals within their teams and to ensure their progress.

That said, such support could be achieved by creating mentorship programmes that pair them with experienced educators sharing similar ND traits. Such programmes can: 1) help ND educators navigate the workplace environment and provide emotional support; 2) be a valuable source of networking opportunities that may improve career advancement within HE. It is particularly valuable, when ND academics see many creative opportunities around them, to have a mentor who will keep them on track and guide them to accept only the most relevant or purposeful projects, so protecting them from being overwhelmed or suffering cognitive overload and burnout.

Tailoring the classroom for ND academics

Institutional systems can also support ND educators by providing accommodations in the classroom. For those who have difficulty processing auditory information – which can, during presentations or group discussions within staff meetings and training sessions, cause cognitive overload – thoughtful institutional provision of such support as captioning or note-taking services will significantly enhance their involvement and experience. Additionally, institutions can offer assistive technologies such as text-to-speech software or specialised keyboards to support learning.

Furthermore, working in remote or blended ways can also benefit ND educators: remote work certainly allows for more flexibility and control over work environments (Kruse *et al.,* 2022); working remotely or in a blended manner reduces the sensory overload and stress that some may suffer in crowded and noisy in-person settings (Kruse *et al., op.cit.*).

Moreover, remote work does not necessarily mean that the quality of work or teaching is compromised. With the advancement of technology, online platforms and virtual tools have become more accessible and user-friendly, making it possible to deliver high-quality teaching and work in remote or blended settings, as has been evident since the COVID-19 pandemic (Wang *et al.* 2021). Remote work can also allow ND educators to access a broader range of job opportunities and collaborations that geographical barriers may previously have prevented them from accessing (Wang *et al., op.cit.*).

It is important to note that, depending on an individual's specific requirements, remote learning could present challenges, such as time management, concentration or difficulty with online interactions. It is recommended that such challenges are discussed with applicants during the

hiring process or are clarified by an assessment done by an occupational therapist or fit-to-work consultant, so that appropriate recommendations for support are instituted.

Despite the benefits, it is hard to design institutional systems that support ND educators, especially when some applicants choose not to disclose their ND status during the hiring process (Scott *et al.,* 2019). Creating a welcoming and inclusive workplace culture that encourages individuals to open up without fear of discrimination (Scott *et al., op.cit.*) may go some way to overcoming this problem.

Another challenge is the cost of providing accommodations, which can vary depending on the type of accommodation needed. Institutions can address this by prioritising accommodations essential to the neurodivergent educators' work and learning environment and by utilising available resources, such as government funding (Gov.uk, 2023) and/or non-profit organisations. As shown in the Equality Act 2010 – and more specifically, Autism Act of 2009 – the duty to make reasonable adjustments in education is 'anticipatory'.

As the emphasis in the workforce shifts towards analytical and innovative thinking, critical thinking, complex problem-solving, active learning and creativity, researchers predict a decline in the importance of rote memory and time management skills. This trend is particularly advantageous for those with ND traits, as it is suggested that non-neurotypical individuals have strengths in creativity, computer coding, scientific thinking and novel thinking. As remote work is becoming a permanent feature of the modern workforce, ND individuals could be well suited to meet a growing emphasis on the skills required for the workforce of the future (LeFevre-Levy *et al.,* 2023).

Conclusion

This opinion piece has considered how institutions may support ND staff. Part of the issue, clearly, is on creating a safe space where the individuals feel able to disclose their neurodivergence in the first place. Staff must feel that the same measures as are applied to the student body are applied to them: namely, with support and accommodations achieved by tailoring teaching activities, considering timetable design and appropriate workspaces. The key role a mentor can play in supporting ND academics is significant: just as all staff should have a mentor, those who are ND particularly benefit from the experienced and measured guidance from objective and independent mentoring, so avoiding burnout and gaining a firm sense of wellbeing (so, for the institution, improving their retention). By creating a welcoming and inclusive workplace culture and prioritising essential accommodations, institutions may support ND educators and foster a more inclusive and effective learning environment for all, students and educators alike.

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