Neurodiversity study circle – Executive summary

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Literature suggests assessment rarely meets the needs of marginalised students' diversity, particularly disabled students.[1,2] King's students reporting a non-learning-based disability have the lowest rates of satisfaction with their course, strikingly low rates of agreement with statements about clear marking criteria and helpful feedback. They are the least likely to feel part of a community.

The Office for National Statistics data further shows that 18% of people with a mental illness and 20% of autistic people hold a degree as their highest qualification, compared with an overall average of 25% across all disabled people, and 43% of non-disabled people.[3] The motivation here is therefore working to increase inclusive assessment processes to reduce the disadvantages imposed by the current system on these groups in this aspect of pedagogy, within a wider context of oppressive pedagogic design.

Methodology

A unique element of this project was the opportunity for authentic conversations with student participants. This was supported by coproduction with neurodivergent (abbreviated as ND) students throughout the project as research partners.[4,5] Students as partners co-created questions for, and then facilitated, focus groups and interviews. Student facilitators could share their own lived experiences and build rapport with participants. Neurodivergence may bring additional strengths to qualitative research.[4] Here, the facilitators' awareness of their position, and how they could be influenced by their lived experience, sets the context for the interpretations and theories presented here.

The intentional selection of one undergraduate and one postgraduate research student as interviewers and focus group facilitators supported communication and rapport with students of a broad range of ages and experience. Students were deliberately selected across a range of faculties and departments, which allowed the project to consider multi-disciplinary challenges and reduced risk of overemphasising or overrepresenting particular experiences. Priority to intersectional diversity across gender and ethnicity was given within the recruitment process for focus group and interview participants.

Interviews and focus groups sought to model universal design principles to maximise accessibility within resource constraints: breaks were integrated into focus group and interview timings, captions were made available, participants were provided with

information sheets in advance of the online event, so they knew what to expect. Participants were also invited to detail any additional access requirements that they had if unmet by the prior arrangements.

Findings

Assessment

Participants were overwhelmingly in favour of online assessments. Some acknowledged that online assessments can be a 'double-edged sword' in the sense that they benefit some and disadvantage others. Participants also said that expectations (I.e., the subjective difference between a good versus excellent understanding) aren't always clear. Some also remarked that the timing of assessments can be improved. Participants also expressed reservations about using memory-based assessments for neurodivergent students.

Questions about groupwork also elicited varied responses – some participants mentioned that it was a good way to meet people, but noted unique struggles for neurodivergent students exist in the context of groupwork, e.g., that neurodivergent students often would rather bear extra stress than self-disclose.

Feedback

Participants reported instances of both unhelpful and useful feedback. Unhelpful feedback was typically vague with minimal signposting as to ways to improve. The common theme under useful feedback was perceived care; example behaviours described as indicating this were thorough feedback, and acknowledgement of a students' coversheet.

Specific challenges for ND students

Participants reported a range of problems associated with memory-based assessments that are specific to neurodivergence. Participants were observed to show signs (facial expressions) of distress when discussing memory-based assessments (I.e., closed book examinations) and stated that memory-based assessments present disproportionate challenges due to memory impairments. Participants shared anxiety around being perceived as an 'inconvenience' and around changes to routine. Many talked about the impact of anxiety: attending office hours resulting in rest of the day being ruined. Ambiguous expectations evoked anxiety in participants. Participants also spoke about the lack of disability understanding and acknowledged that being able to talk to others about disability and neurodivergence requires or is in itself a privilege. Attendance marks were noted as making certain modules intrinsically inaccessible.

Structure

Participants mentioned inconsistent teaching (?) and feedback across departments and organisational problems across departments and modules. These include the layout of the KEATS (King's E-learning And Teaching Service) page and lack of communication between module leads and students.

Support

Participants generally said that having a PAA (Personalised Assessment Arrangements) or KIP (King's Inclusion Plan) made accessing support easier, and that the MCF (Mitigating Circumstances Form) process was 'easy'. However, some said that smooth receipt and acknowledgement of the KIPs sent to teaching staff by the Disability Team is missing – the Disability Team may forget to send it, the lecturers may not check systems for it, ultimately reasonable adjustments are not provided (e.g., sending students the class materials in advance).

Participants described adjustments that they view as valuable, but which are commonly recognised as important aspects of good quality teaching for all students by most HEIs already. These include common examples of 'best practice' in universal design (design which helps all students, not just some) like recording lectures, providing exemplar essays (and explanations for why they were exemplar), easy to navigate virtual learning environments (e.g. clear KEATS page layouts), formative essays, and the presence of the Widening Participation team. Participants reported that these universal measures – which benefit all students whilst simultaneously reducing significant disadvantages facing some individuals - are not in place. Participants described receiving separate support that is specific to them but stated that support was dependent on the relationships students have with staff and they felt reliant on the 'kindness of individuals'. For example, participants mentioned receiving inclusive teaching because they were 'lucky' with 'receptive staff'.

Some of our participants expressly noted that staff face ever-increasing pressures in university, e.g., recognising that staff are overworked and underpaid.

Self-advocacy privileges

Some of the participants identified that being able to openly talk about neurodivergence is a privilege. One participant, diagnosed during their undergraduate studies, said "I could barely even tell you the dictionary definition of what I was being assessed for, let alone how it impacts me, and therefore let alone the kind of support I would need".

Recommendations

1. Better signposting – both by module leads and the Disability Team (and university Societies) on what constitutes good MCF evidence.
2. Staggered deadlines (assessment calendar)
3. No attendance grades,
4. Essay workshops and exemplars.
5. Multiple choice questions (MCQs) should have feedback on where students answer incorrectly rather than a grade alone.
6. Disability awareness training for staff and students.
7. Hiring a neurodivergent advisor for each department to facilitate reasonable adjustments such as neurodivergent students' need for routine (I.e., seating plans).

Next steps

Creating an asynchronous, online course for staff and students which aims to improve understanding of assessment and feedback accessibility requirements for ND students studying in HE. This is a collaborative project with King's College London, the University of Warwick and the University of York. ND students from each university will work with staff to co-create content for the course.

Full report

For details of the full report, please see here: [Neurodiversity study circle - full report](#)

References

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