DEANERY DIGEST

The Oxford Education Deanery

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Deanery Digests are short, plain language summaries of the Department of Education's research outputs. This Deanery Digest is based on the following project: *Neurodivergent Education for Students, Teaching & Learning (NESTL)* https://www.education.ox.ac.uk/project/neurodivergent-education-for-students-teaching-learning-nestl/

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How to support neurodivergent-inclusive teaching and learning?

What is this research about and why is it important?

The NESTL (Neurodivergent Education for Students, Teaching & Learning) project aims to support neurodivergent-inclusive learning and teaching. While it began in higher education, most of its findings and suggestions apply to all classrooms.

Neurodivergent-inclusive teaching is important, as it enables neurodivergent students to reach their full potential within a safe environment. By fostering a culture that celebrates diversity, educational institutions can ensure a more vibrant and ethical learning environment for all students.

The NESTL toolkit, co-developed with neurodivergent students and educators, provides suggestions, case studies, and resources to support this inclusive journey.

What did we do?

This project prioritises the lived experiences of neurodivergent learners and educators. We developed a toolkit for supporting neurodivergent students in teaching and learning, co-created through workshops and individual interviews with learners and educators, who self-identify as neurodivergent. We also received written and verbal feedback on earlier versions of the toolkit, resulting in over 50 contributions in total. In addition, the toolkit draws on a review of existing literature and resources.

What did we find?

The NESTL toolkit includes practical tips, examples, and resources to make teaching and learning more neurodivergent-inclusive. Drawing on our research, we have developed a framework for neurodivergent-inclusive teaching and learning, comprising four areas of action:

- Awareness and Understanding: Enhancing knowledge and understanding of neurodiversity and demystifying stigma.
- Teaching Practice, Space, and Materials: Designing inclusive approaches and sensory-friendly physical, social, and digital learning environments.
- Assessment and Feedback: Redefining the meaning of 'academic success' and how we measure learning and 'academic success'.
- Adjustment and Support: Providing responsive, universally accessible support.

Each area requires four ‘forces of change’ to drive progress:

- Individual Initiatives: Everyday practices led by individual educators.
- Communal Efforts: Collaborative efforts at the department or college level.
- Institutional Changes: Policies and cultural shifts that reshape the teaching climate.
- Sector-wide Transformations: Systemic changes to embed and support neurodiversity in education.

Practical suggestions for educators include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Understanding ‘masking’ by some neurodivergent students who hide their traits to appear neurotypical.
- Including an accessibility statement in the syllabus to signal a safe opening for conversations about needs, which is especially important as many students may lack a formal diagnosis due to long waiting lists or systemic biases.
- Within the classroom, educators can provide or allow students to use fidget items like stress balls.
- For class activities, consider using a ‘think, pair, share’ format. It means encouraging students to think on their own, then share their ideas with another student or within a small group, and finally with the whole class. It will give students the physical and cognitive space to process information without the pressure of an immediate verbal response.
- Acknowledge and adjust to sensory needs in classrooms, such as sensitivity to harsh lighting or background noise, and offer hybrid learning options where students can better control their own environment.
- Offer diverse assessment and feedback formats, and provide grace periods for extensions on formative work to ensure assessment remains accessible for everyone.

What does it all mean anyway?

These findings represent a fundamental shift away from viewing neurodivergence as a ‘deficit’ to be fixed, moving instead towards respecting and honouring neurodivergence, and transforming the educational environment itself.

We also argue for adopting ‘universal design’ principles, which means that adjustments intended to help neurodivergent students, such as clear step-by-step instructions or flexible deadlines, would ultimately benefit the entire academic community.

How could this work for you? We understand that educators are already carrying significant demands, particularly those who themselves are neurodivergent. Rather than taking on everything at once, you might try starting with just ‘one thing’, either from the list above or from the NESTL toolkit, to enhance accessibility in your teaching.

Meanwhile, meaningful changes cannot rest solely on individual effort. We emphasise the need for institutional support, culture change, and system-level transformation. Further suggestions and strategies for these are also outlined in the toolkit.

Material, data, open access article:

More tips, examples, and resources are available in the NESTL toolkit, which is free to access here: https://www.education.ox.ac.uk/project/neurodivergent-education-for-students-teaching-learning-nestl/

The NESTL toolkit also includes an openly available interactive learning space, for people to explore at their own pace: https://canvas.ox.ac.uk/courses/293823