



## **Neurodivergent Education for Students, Teaching & Learning (NESTL) Toolkit – Overview**

This document provide brief summaries of each part of the [NESTL Toolkit](#), to help readers navigate the full resources and locate relevant guidance more easily.

For more detailed guidance, explanations, examples, case studies, references, and interactive activities, please refer to the [full toolkit documents](#) and the [NESTL Canvas site](#).

You can also scan the QR codes to access the toolkit and the canvas site.



*NESTL Toolkit*



*NESTL Canvas Site*

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# **Executive Summary**

## **Project Aim**

The NESTL (Neurodivergent Education for Students, Teaching & Learning) project aims to support neurodivergence-inclusive learning and teaching in higher education, with a particular focus on the University of Oxford.

## **Methods**

Drawing on workshops, interviews, and reviews of the existing literature and resources, we collaborated with neurodivergent students and staff to develop and co-create this toolkit. It provides suggestions, case studies, resources, and directions for further resources to support neurodivergence-inclusive teaching and learning.

## **Who is this toolkit for?**

This toolkit is mainly designed for staff with teaching responsibilities in any capacity, and neurodivergent students. Administrators and course conveners and library staff may find some of the contents relevant to their work too.

While this project largely draws on the experiences and opinions of students and staff at the University of Oxford, reflections and suggestions could be of interest and relevance to other higher education teaching and learning contexts.

## **Content of the Toolkit**

The toolkit begins by introductions to the importance of neurodivergence-inclusive teaching and learning, definitions of neurodivergence and neurodiversity, issues around diagnosis, and current landscape of support available. It then explains who this toolkit is for and how to use it.

The toolkit then presents a framework for neurodivergent-inclusive teaching and learning, which comprises four areas of action:

- Awareness and Understanding
- Teaching Practice, Space, and Materials
- Assessment and Feedback
- Adjustment and Support

Each area requires four forces of change to drive progress, including:

- Individual Initiatives
- Communal Efforts
- Institutional Changes
- Sector-wide Transformations

The main body of the toolkit provides ideas for practice for each of the area and each force, on how to make teaching and learning more neurodivergence-inclusive.

We then present six case studies, myth busting, glossary, and a curated list of further resources on fostering neurodivergence-inclusive teaching and learning in higher education.

This toolkit document ends with a summary of research method and reflections on researching ethically with the neurodivergent communities, and positionality statements by the team members.

## **Format of the NESTL Toolkit**

The NESTL Toolkit comprises the following components:

- This main document, available in PDF and Word formats
- An accompanying NESTL Canvas page, where users can interact with the content in a 'course' structure and explore multimedia resources at their own pace
- A summary of the key contents of the Main Toolkit document, available in PDF and Word formats
- Key resources, available in PDF and Word formats
- A one-page PowerPoint slide about this toolkit and the framework, which can be re-used for training and teaching.

The font used in the main document's main texts is Arial 14pt, 1.5 spacing. We followed the University of Oxford's accessibility guidelines in the toolkit design.

# 1. Introduction

## Why is neurodivergence-inclusive teaching important?

Neurodivergence-informed teaching is important on statutory, pedagogical, and pastoral grounds. The Equality Act requires us to make adjustments, and these adjustments are intended to ensure students are better able to thrive at Oxford.

## What do ‘neurodivergence’ and ‘neurodiversity’ mean?

Neurodiversity is a term which acknowledges that people have different ways of understanding and engaging with the world which are grounded in how their brains are neurologically wired.

Neurodivergence, in a UK context, refers to the being part of a group whose neurological wiring is different from that of the majority of people. The majority may be called “neurotypical”, and we talk of different “neurotypes”.

A rainbow infinity sign is often used as a symbol for neurodiversity, demonstrating that while the term “spectrum” may refer to a broad variety, it’s also non-linear and extensive.

## Our Approach to ‘Neurodivergence’

The project has incorporated under “neurodivergent” anyone who understands themselves as such.

We do not view neurodivergence as a deficit, but as a difference which incorporates and informs many skills and talents, but also requires specific kinds of support.

### **Why is it important to discuss issues around diagnoses?**

Diagnosis can be difficult to access, especially given current UK waiting lists, and different approaches and attitudes in other countries. It may be difficult to access support without diagnosis, however.

Diagnosis can be difficult to accept, especially if it comes as an adult. People may need support reframing their experiences and building management strategies for the future. People may be concerned about stigma and discrimination associated with formal diagnoses.

Self-diagnosis is valid, and may help people manage both of these issues.

People may choose to disclose traits and management strategies, rather than diagnoses.

This project did not require neurodivergent participants to have formal diagnoses, aware of the limitations this might have imposed. It also seeks to offer collaborate, reflective engagement with neurodivergent people's experiences of education, rather than (merely) to extract issues from reports of lived experience.

## **What is the current support at Oxford?**

Support at Oxford comes initially through the Disability Advisory Service. In the first instance, it is the disability inclusion statement, which lists key adjustments amounting to general inclusive practice. There is also a neurodivergent-specific student support plan which offers more specific inclusive practice recommendations.

The number of students registering as neurodivergent has roughly doubled since 2017. This reflects the changing demographic at Oxford, as well as changes in diagnosis rates and patterns.

## **Who is this toolkit for?**

The toolkit is designed to be useful to and used by a broad range of people. Its primary focus is supporting staff with teaching responsibilities, for their students' sakes and their own. It is also, however, relevant to a range of others in HE, including librarians, administrators, and students themselves.

## **How do I use this toolkit?**

The intention is for people to have multiple and flexible ways to use the toolkit. This includes dipping in and out of the document, and working with / through the more dynamic version on the Oxford Canvas.



## 2. Ideas for Practice

### Framework for Neurodivergent-Inclusive Teaching and Learning

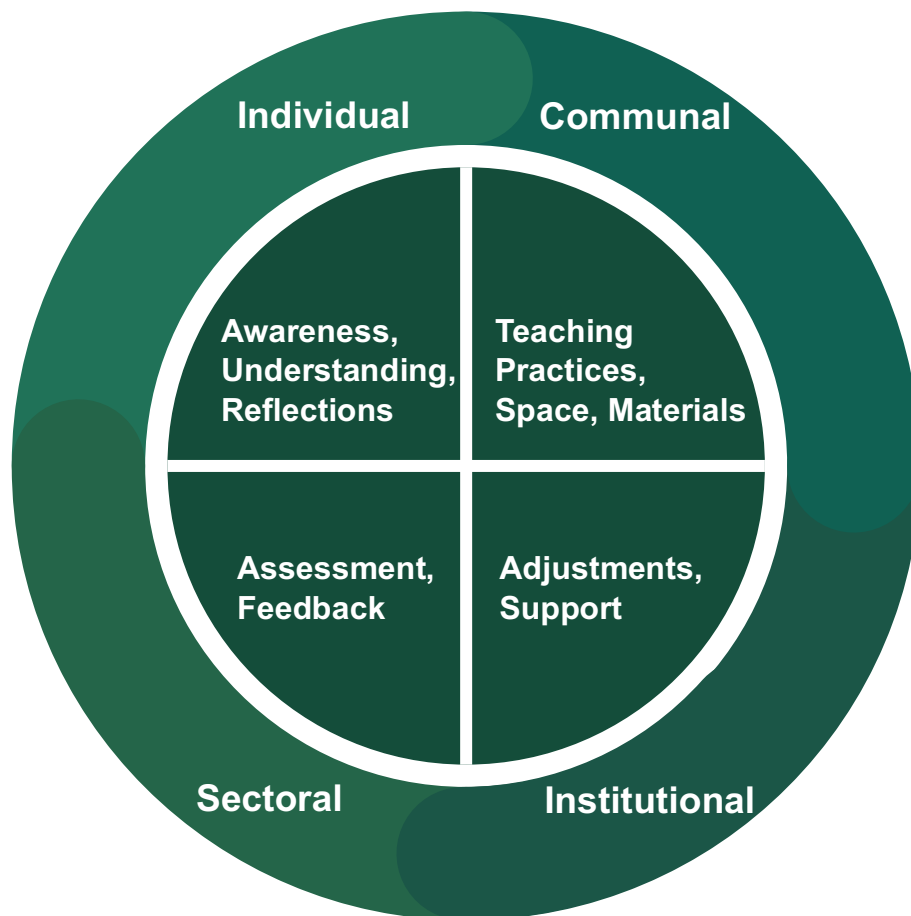
The toolkit introduces a Framework for Neurodivergent-Inclusive Teaching and Learning, developed from this NESTL project. At the core of the framework are the four areas of action, which are vital to fostering neurodivergent-inclusive teaching and learning. They include:

- Awareness and Understanding
- Teaching Practice, Space, and Materials
- Assessment and Feedback
- Adjustment and Support

Each area requires four forces of change to drive progress, including:

- Individual Initiatives (**Sparks** 🔥)
- Communal Efforts (**Currents** 🌊)
- Institutional Changes (**Winds** 🌬️)
- Sector-wide Transformations (**Bedrocks** 🌐)

For each area, you can find ideas, suggestions, examples, and experiences and opinions shared by neurodivergent students and teaching staff. These are drawn from workshops and interviews, and are further informed by contributions from our advisory board members and colleagues, as well as research on neurodivergence.



*Figure 1 Framework for Neurodivergent-Inclusive Teaching and Learning*

### **Awareness and understanding**

Being willing to reflect is a good start. Asking students about their needs is important, but needs careful thought about how, in what format, when etc. Ideas might include accessibility statements, anonymous feedback options, and easily accessible office hours.

Student needs can change, so this will always be an ongoing dialogue.

Be aware of how much students might be masking.

You may want to consider whether you yourself are neurodivergent. Many adults have previously been unrecognised, and being able to see traits in yourself can help with supporting teaching and learning.

It's important for all educators to be involved. At the same time, we acknowledge that the effort taken to make changes often falls disproportionately to some groups, and that not all educators are in a position to take on the kind of work needed. This is practical and emotional labour, which can fall disproportionately to neurodivergent people to engage in. Consider how you best engage, and can best look after yourself.

For instance, some neurodivergent educators are well-placed to offer support and act as role models. Others, particularly precarious academics and those in marginalised groups, may be less able to do so. Diagnosis will sit differently with people depend on their own background and the circumstances of their diagnosis. Self-reflection remains key for all, but need not lead to disclosure.

Institutional support is important. Consider what kinds of support and adjustments, or training would be most useful for you, your colleagues, and any students with who you work.

## **Teaching Practices, Space, and Materials**

- a. Allow more flexibility with time, including understanding for students who are late, pacing activities carefully, building in

thinking time, scheduling in breaks, make us of asynchronous tools.

- b. Provide outlines of teaching sessions.
- c. Schedule things like tutorials well in advance where possible.
- d. Ensure support during any period of suspension.
- e. Keep course information in a central, streamlined, online place.
- f. Provide hybrid teaching options.
- g. Offer information about teaching space, such as photographs, in advance.
- h. Where possible, provide a quiet room / space for students to use.
- i. Encourage students to move around as needed.
- j. Acknowledge sensory needs.
- k. Be alert to “access clashes” and consider compassionate ways of deconflicting these.
- l. Potentially provide fidget support.
- m. Ask students about their preferred communication styles.
- n. Demonstrate practical activities.
- o. Encourage class contributions in a variety of formats.
- p. Give clear conclusions and recaps of sessions.
- q. Offer a means for anonymous feedback.
- r. Ensure teaching materials are accessibly formatted.
- s. Read out key materials.
- t. Use content warnings as appropriate.
- u. Provide summaries.
- v. Disseminate materials as soon as possible.
- w. Coordinate, consolidate, and signpost support resources.
- x. Consider what means and platforms you use for scheduling.
- y. When organising social or networking activities, consider how best to work with those who find traditional socialising difficult.

- z. Libraries may want to stock study aids, and where possible, protect quiet space (which needs to be well-advertised).

## **Assessment and Feedback**

- a. Reflect on your assumptions about what intelligence looks like.
- b. Consider what diversification of assessment methods can be incorporated even within Oxford's relatively rigid structures.
- c. Be flexible with extensions and deadlines wherever possible.
- d. Allow formative work not to need to be too polished; this might include e.g. essay plans instead of essays.
- e. Feedback:
  - a. Explain what your feedback is going to be like and why.
  - b. Ask students what makes feedback most useful to them.
  - c. Provide a range of feedback options (and let students choose between them).
  - d. Frame feedback, particularly "hot" verbal feedback, in the most constructive and forward-looking ways possible.

## **Adjustment and Support**

- a. Reflect on what you mean or understand by "reasonable adjustment".
- b. Consider both the practical nature of making adjustments, and how you look at these or view your students in the first place.
- c. Start from a position of inclusive and universal design.
- d. Take intersecting identities into consideration in your design.

- e. Remember people's needs may fluctuate, during and between days.

### **3. Case Studies**

This section provides six case studies, generously shared by Dr Laura Seymour, Dr Cressida Ryan, Professor Helen Swift, Dr Cora Beth Fraser, and Professor Sonya Freeman Loftis. We invite you to explore neurodivergence-inclusive teaching from various perspectives and to reflect on the examples you can apply in your own teaching.

The case studies include:

Case Study 1: Syllabus Accessibility Statement | Dr Laura Seymour

Case Study 2: How to Make the Classroom Neurodivergent-Inclusive | Dr Laura Seymour

Case Study 3: Opening Disability Conversations | Dr Cressida Ryan

Case Study 4: Undergraduate Lesson Plan | Professor Helen Swift

Case Study 5: Neurodivergence and Class | Dr Cora Beth Fraser

Case Study 6: Teaching Improvisationally | Professor Sonya Freeman Loftis

### **4. Myth Busting**

This section lists some common myths about neurodivergence, and challenges them with facts and explanations.

## **5. Glossary**

This section provides some of the key terms about neurodivergence, some of which are also used in this toolkit.

## **6. Further resources**

You can find more readings (including both academic and non-academic publications), zines, creative projects on neurodivergence, and further resources for neurodivergent educators

## **7. Methods & About Us**

To research ethically with neurodivergent and disabled communities, we adopted an anti-extractive, anti-oppressive methodology when interacting with our participants. The lived experiences of neurodivergent learners and educators are the foundation of this toolkit. In total, we received more than 50 contributions, input, and feedback via workshops, individual interviews, and both written and verbal feedback.

You can find more about the project's methods and the NESTL team members' information in this section.