

Increasing neurodiversity awareness through a community of practice

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Presentation abstract

During this wildcard session, we will present the journey of the ALDinHE Neurodiversity/Inclusivity Community of Practice (CoP) up to the present time and invite new members to join. This will include why the CoP was set up, what we have achieved during our two years of meetings, and the exciting future work of the group in relation to increasing awareness of neurodiversity through a resource bank to be hosted on the ALDinHE website. Participants will also have the opportunity to reflect on their knowledge of neurodiversity, their institution's training on neurodiversity and how they might benefit from access to additional training and/or resources.

An awareness of neurodiversity is important for all educators as there has been an increase in the number of neurodivergent students accessing Higher Education (HE) in recent years (HESA, 2022). One of the main reasons behind this increase is the Widening Participation (WP) initiatives of institutions (Office for Students, 2022). Additionally, under the Equality Act 2010, institutions are legally obligated to create inclusive learning environments for their students from the outset (Equality Challenge Unit, 2010), and this emphasis has increased since Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) funding for certain individual reasonable adjustments was removed (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2014).

Communities of Practice are 'socially configured spaces that necessarily involve learning as an aspect of membership' (Tummons, 2018, p.4). Through provocation, discussions and the analysis of lived experience, the Neurodiversity/Inclusivity CoP

members have gained valuable insights and enhanced their knowledge leading to a more developed practice; we invite you to do the same during this session.

Keywords: neurodiversity, neurodivergence, resource bank, community of practice, resource, resources

Community Response

This session introduced and provided an update of the Neurodiversity / Inclusivity CoP that was set up two years ago. It drew on the University of Edinburgh’s definition of neurodiversity, beginning with strengths-based descriptions of common neurodivergencies (dyspraxia, dyslexia, autism and ADHD), see figure 1.

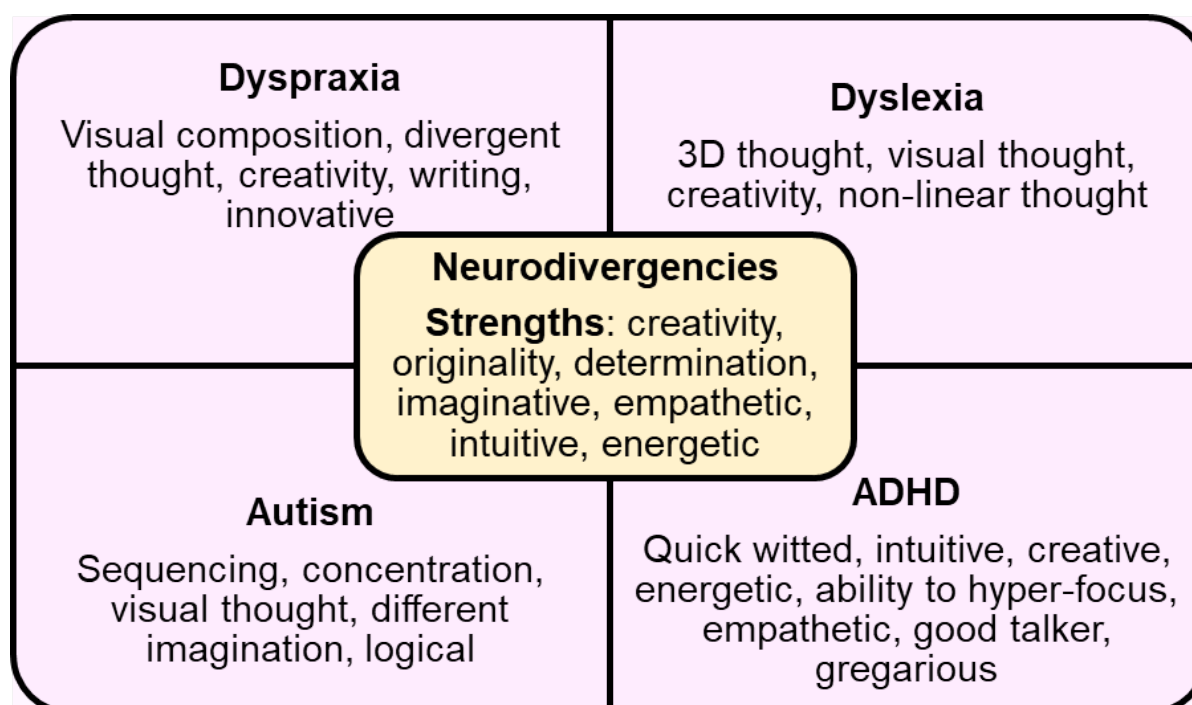


Figure 1: Strengths of different neurodiverse conditions

There was an overview of the ALDinHE neurodiversity CoP and a report on the survey exploring plans to establish a neurodivergence resource bank. The survey had a strong response (n-229) demonstrating the high level of interest in exploring and finding out more about neurodiversity in relation to learning development and other facets of higher education.

Colleagues were also surveyed at the outset of the session and asked how knowledgeable they were about neurodiversity, asked to describe in one word what neurodiversity meant to them, and asked whether their institutions offered training in neurodiversity. Responses were shared live and are included in figures 2 and 3 below.

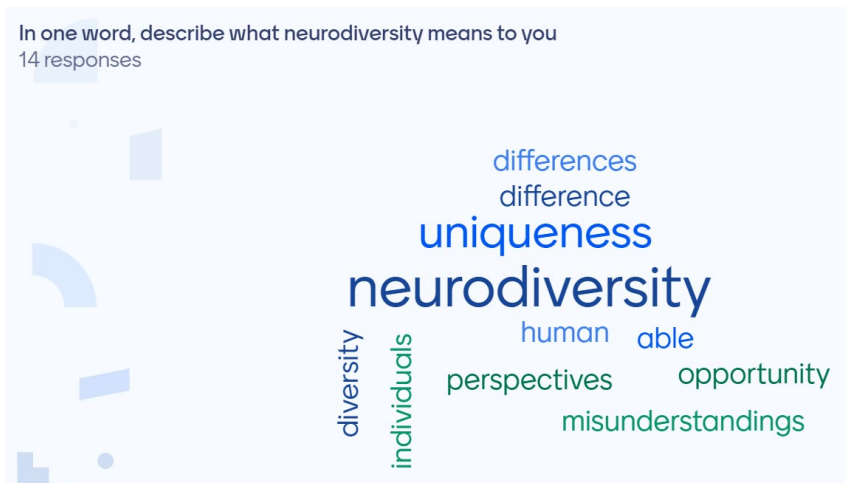


Figure 2: Attendees were asked to describe what neurodiversity meant to them

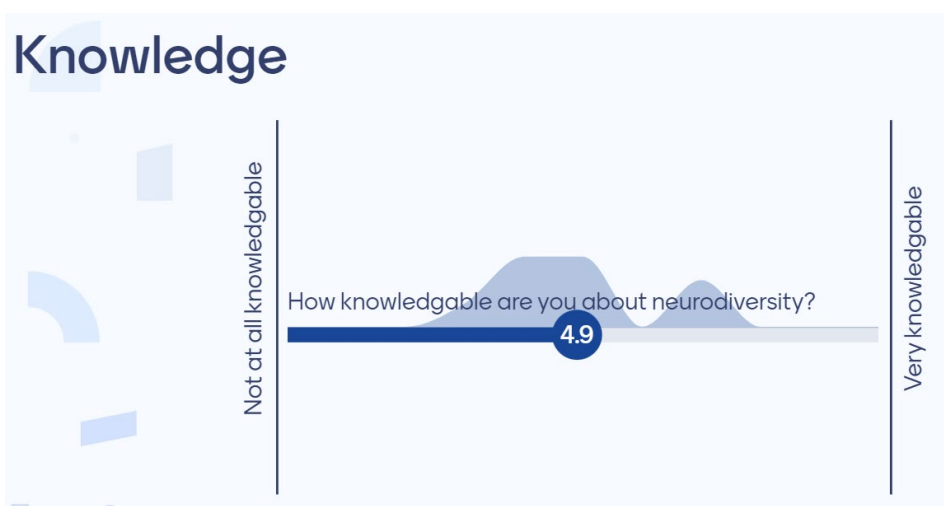


Figure 3: Slides surveying participants regarding their knowledge of neurodiversity

A third of the participants indicated that their institution offered neurodiversity training, a third stated that theirs did not, and a third were unsure.

While the final activity creating haikus was challenging for many, it also opened up insights and more personal reflections. One participant’s reflection on the final activity was: it encouraged us ‘to think creatively about the topic and [it]

demonstrated some personal connections from participants and the centrality of the student experience in our minds.’

My understanding / experience of neurodiversity
Reflections using Haiku poetry

| | |
|---|--|
| Hidden persona Behind a mask: a blank smile None know the real her | Terminology Scared of using the wrong word But trying matters |
| Lack of caring sees From Powerpoint to testing Consider with us | Neurodivergent It’s my life. It’s my journey. To my wonder brain |
| Colour Splashing the colours From my own rainbow palette Across the canvas | Does it change me now? Dyslexia, my power. Mine forever more |
| Needing to be “fixed”? Or learning to embrace you Your mind your whole self | |

Attendees agreed that the CoP and the session were useful ‘as there is definitely a need for a go to place for ND resources.’ The session was well received ‘enjoyable’ and ‘engaging’ and attendees appreciated taking the time to reflect on personal experiences and understanding of neurodiversity.

‘Having worked with neurodiversity students in a number of roles, I was keen to find out about the Community of Practice Jennie and Karen had developed within the ALDinHE community. While I came to the session with established knowledge, the

session was accessible to people with a range of knowledge on the topic of neurodiversity and it was a collaborative and supportive environment throughout.' There was interest in hearing about the progress of the community of practice and resource development project that is underway. There was an invitation to contribute to the resource bank, which made one participant reflect on 'the resources I used as well as what opportunities there were to create more using my experience and knowledge.'

Colleagues stated that 'The development of a resource bank is something keenly anticipated'.

Questions

As well as considering what the community would most like to see in the resource bank, is it possible/ necessary to balance this against comparison of most prevalent neurodiverse conditions? And signposts to established sources of reliable advice and support?

How can we find out more about the resource bank and how to contribute and where it will sit?

Authors' Reflection

Although the session had a relatively small number of participants, it was clear from the outset that they were passionate about ensuring an equitable learning experience for all students. A few participants disclosed that they were neurodivergent and / or their immediate family (children in particular), which initiated a mutually beneficial dialogue. Their lived experiences contributed to their understanding of neurodivergence, however, it did not appear that they regarded this as transferable knowledge when thinking about neurodivergence in higher education, which was evident from the survey results of 4.9 out of 10.

With no lived experience of neurodivergence ourselves, we had not previously contemplated the reality of how neurodivergence is supported in compulsory education, but through discussion with participants it became clear that their neurodivergent children were experiencing challenges due to lack of staff education

and / or funding. To address this, whilst we anticipate the users of the neurodivergence resource bank will primarily be higher education staff, specific areas could be useful for all staff working at any level of education. To ensure a wider reach we would need to consider how this is presented and promoted. The topic of disclosure was a contentious one. One participant who had disclosed their dyslexia diagnosis was asked to complete 'reasonable adjustment' paperwork each time they transferred to a new team within the same institution, rather than their new line manager accepting the information already provided. This lack of continuity was particularly frustrating and showed a lack of understanding within the institution. This was further evidenced when colleagues were asked if their institution provided training on neurodivergence, with two-thirds stating no or don't know. A couple of participants were not keen to disclose their neurodivergent diagnosis due to perceived stigmatisation by their colleagues / institution, which led to a discussion of student non-disclosure and how this impacts teaching and learning. To ensure an equitable learning experience for all students, it is important that non-disclosure and non-diagnosis is catered for through 'anticipatory reasonable adjustments', which are a legal requirement for higher education institutions. This will be an area of focus within the resource bank.

From both lived experience and working within the higher education sector, discussions showed that the strengths associated with neurodivergence were not often foregrounded, instead the challenges and how to 'fix' these were predominantly focused upon. Despite this, the audience captured more positive descriptions of neurodiversity, including, 'individuals', 'uniqueness' and 'opportunity'. Writing haikus was a creative way for participants to share their own unique voice;

Neurodivergent

It's my life. It's my journey.

To my wonder brain

In answer to the questions posed by the participants (as shown above), the ALDinHE Neurodiversity/Inclusivity CoP have met twice since the conference, and upon further discussion will not be solely focusing on the individual neurodivergence requested by

the survey participants (n-229) at the outset. This is due to there often being co-occurrences and not wanting to limit submitters to fitting their resource into one neurodivergent box. Therefore, we anticipate that the resource bank will evolve to offer a wide range of resources for each neurodivergence with many cross-overs. Submissions to the resource bank will be requested via a number of different networks including, LDHEN, CoP members institutions, ADSHE and BALEAP. The ALDinHE website will host the resource bank, and it is anticipated that this will be live in Spring 24. If you wish to submit a resource, please do so via [this link](#) by Thursday 30th November 2023. We would appreciate it if you could spread the message far and wide throughout your networks, institutions, and to your colleagues, in the hope that we can create a rich and diverse resource bank which will be beneficial to many.

Acknowledgments

The authors did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

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Author details

Karen Welton is a Learning Development Advisor at Arts University Plymouth. She is passionate about ensuring neurodivergent students have an equitable learning experience in higher education. Her MA in Education was centred around dyslexia, using poetry as a creative response to students' learning experiences. She is the Co-chair of the Neurodiversity/Inclusivity Community of Practice.

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