

Incorporating Universal Design into the viva process to facilitate an equitable viva experience.

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Context

Small-scale project began unwittingly mid 2021 - preparation for viva beyond University guidance

Viva de-brief discussion resulted in writing an article¹ and presenting at 5th ICDDDET²

Growing awareness of variability in HE academics' understanding of neurodiversity led to a scoping review³

Creation of staff/student resource 'Understanding Neurodivergence and Neurodiversity'⁴

Initial presentation of findings (15.09.23)⁵: Neurodiversity in Higher Education, University of Bristol

Impact of intersecting neurodivergent conditions - necessitating personalised consideration of implications for the viva

Challenging a deficit-based support system by co-constructing one derived from Universal Design – a graduated response

Proposed systemic changes to University doctoral processes

15% PGR students
disclosed disabilities at UoB
in 21/22

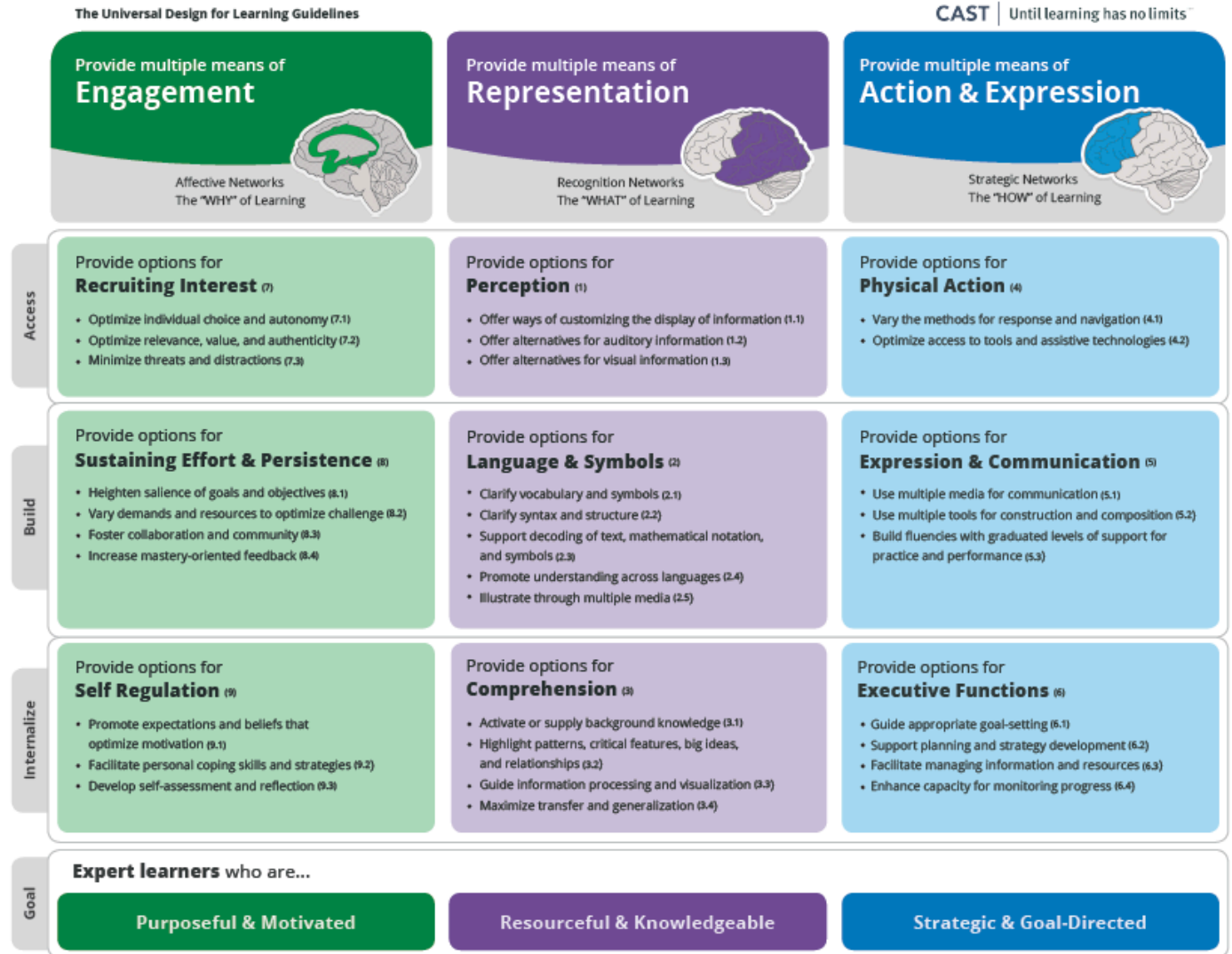
How many didn't disclose?

PRINCIPLES

Start from the specific and look for commonality

Collaborate with different stakeholders (staff and students, disabled and non)

Develop a graduated response



Start from the specific and look for commonality

		Dyslexia	Autism	ADHD	TS	DLD	DCD	dyscalculia	
executive functioning: Organisation	Maintaining Attention								
	Organisation								
	Processing Verbal Information								
	Short term memory								
	Working memory								
	Retrieval								
	Processing Speed								
	Self-determination (problem solving, decision making)								
	Time Management								
	Cognitive flexibility (predictability and routine)								
	Unspecified executive functioning								
	executive Functioning: Regulation	Higher Anxiety							
Lower self-esteem									
Coping with unexpected situations									
Managing stressful situations									
perfectionism									
Sensory sensitivities									
Managing emotions (expressed through behaviours)									
Self-stimulatory/soothing behaviour									
Impulsivity									
forgetfulness									
Language		Less elaborate vocabulary							
		Ability to convey knowledge through verbal language							
	Need for unambiguous questions								
Maths	High levels of mathematics anxiety								
	Difficulties finding new locations								
	Time Concepts								
Social Interaction	Theory of mind								
	Non-verbal communication								
	Social communication								
	social anxiety								
Physical	Hyperactivity/Restlessness								
	Acceptance of involuntary nature of tics								
	Fatigue								
	Positioning of staff to avoid implications of a powerful tic action								

Explore RAPs – How many times does the same reasonable adjustment get recommended?

Collaborate with different stakeholders (staff and students, disabled and non)

Semi structured interviews with 5 neurodivergent students (3 post viva, 2 pre-viva)

Semi structured interviews with 2 current staff with PhD supervisor experience

Online Survey, 142 staff responded across all 5 colleges:

College of Art and Law 21%

College of Medical and Dental Sciences 16%

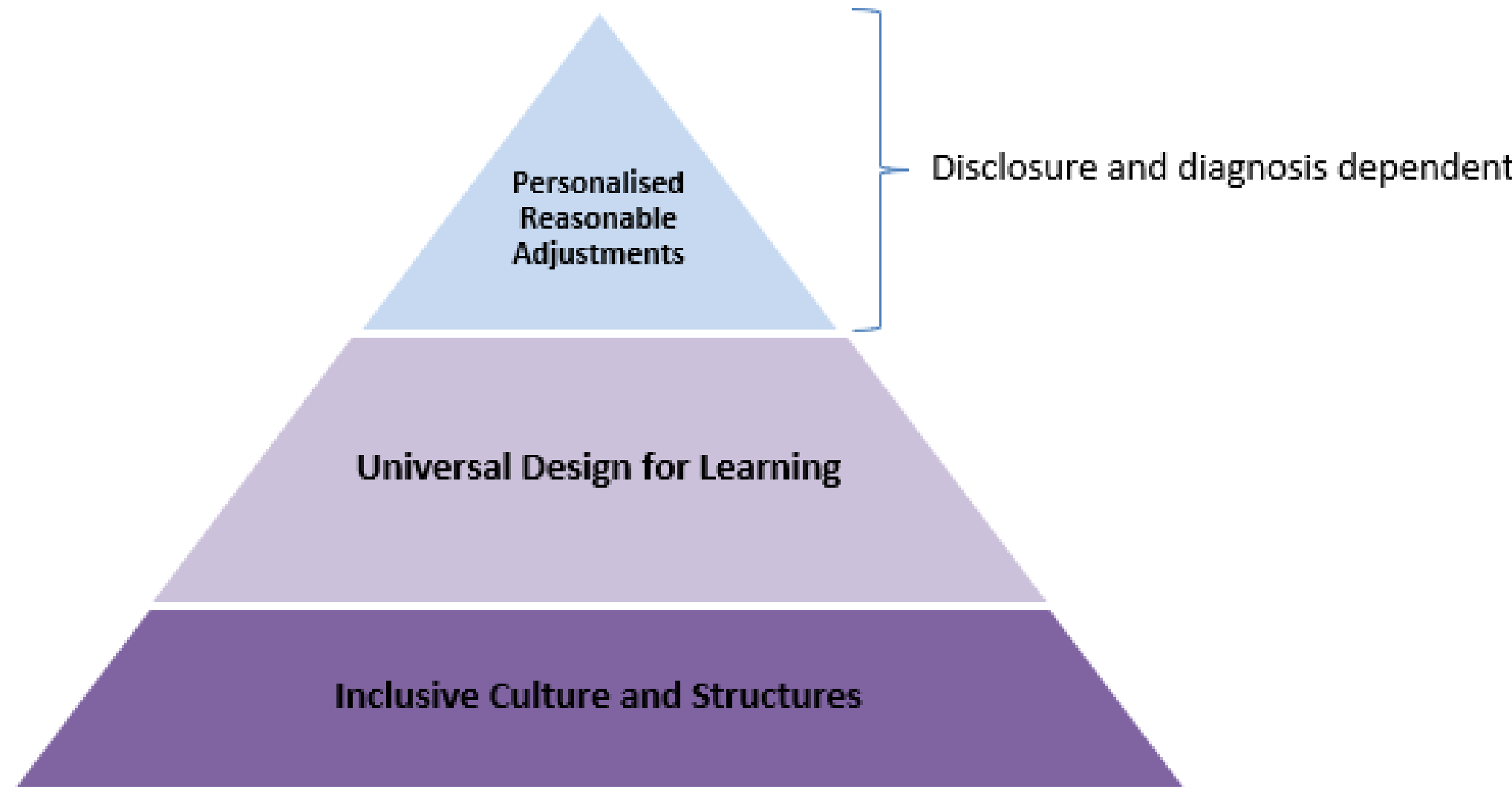
College of Life and Environmental Sciences 16%

College of Social Sciences 13%

College of Engineering and Physical Sciences 34%



Graduated Response



Sandland, MacLeod and Hall (2023) Graduated Response Triangle

Inclusive Culture – Agreed definition of Neurodivergence

Neurodivergence is a noun, it identifies a cognitive functioning that is considered different to the predominant neurotype. For a person to be classified as neurodivergent (adjective that describes people that have a neurodivergence) they must have a recognisable neurological difference, that is typically present from birth (although they may become aware of it at any stage of their life) and remains for the entirety of their lifespan. In a small number of cases neurodivergence can be acquired through trauma or injury, acquired neurodivergence would not be present from birth but remains life-long. By using the term neurodivergence, we recognise the principles of the Neurodiversity movement, that state neurological differences are a natural variant of humanity and while they are likely to require accommodations and support, they should not be viewed as a deficit to individual attainment.

The language surrounding neurodivergence is socially constructed, therefore our understanding of the term and the conditions that may fit within the definition will change in relation to culture, time, and space. The use of neurodivergence therefore, requires continued awareness that growing understanding and social developments may facilitate the inclusion of new conditions in the future. Based on this and our current understanding, the university categorises the following conditions as neurodivergent:

ADHD, Auditory Processing Disorder, Autism, Developmental Language Disorder (DLD), Dyscalculia, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia / Developmental Co-Ordination Disorder (DCD), Speech Differences, Tic Conditions



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Inclusive Culture – Student letter

Dear Independent Chair and Examiners,

My name is [Click or tap here to enter text.](#) and I am neurodivergent. I would like to share some information with you about me, and how my neurodivergence may present in the viva.

The information shared here is **Confidential** and should only be seen by the student, their supervisors, the examiners, and the independent chair.

Section 1: Awareness and Acceptance

You may notice the following attributes about me when we meet. I would like you to be aware and accepting of them. There are no other actions I need you to take.

[Click or tap here to enter text.](#)

Section 2: Requires Action

I would like to highlight the following as signals that I would like you to act upon.

PLEASE BE MINDFUL OF:

[Click or tap here to enter text.](#)

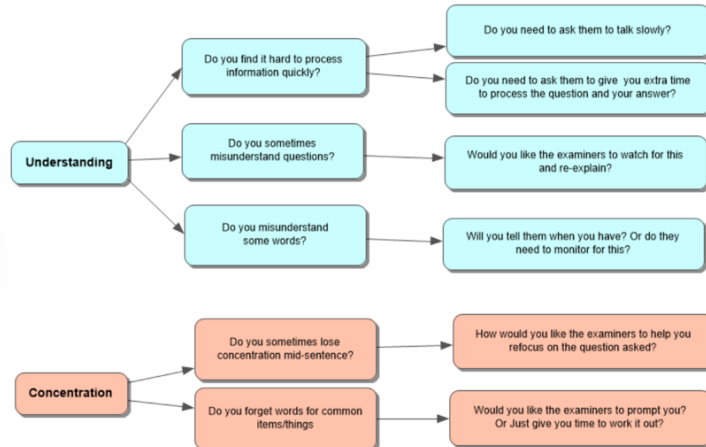
PLEASE RESPOND IN THIS WAY:

[Click or tap here to enter text.](#)

Thank you for taking the time to read this information. I look forward to discussing my research with you soon.

SECTION 2 - This is Me: Action

This section is to outline anything you want your examination team to know about your neurodivergence, that they will not only need to be aware of but will need to act upon. It is therefore important to outline the action you wish them to take. The following are given as examples to aid your planning, the list is not exhaustive, add anything that is relevant for you.

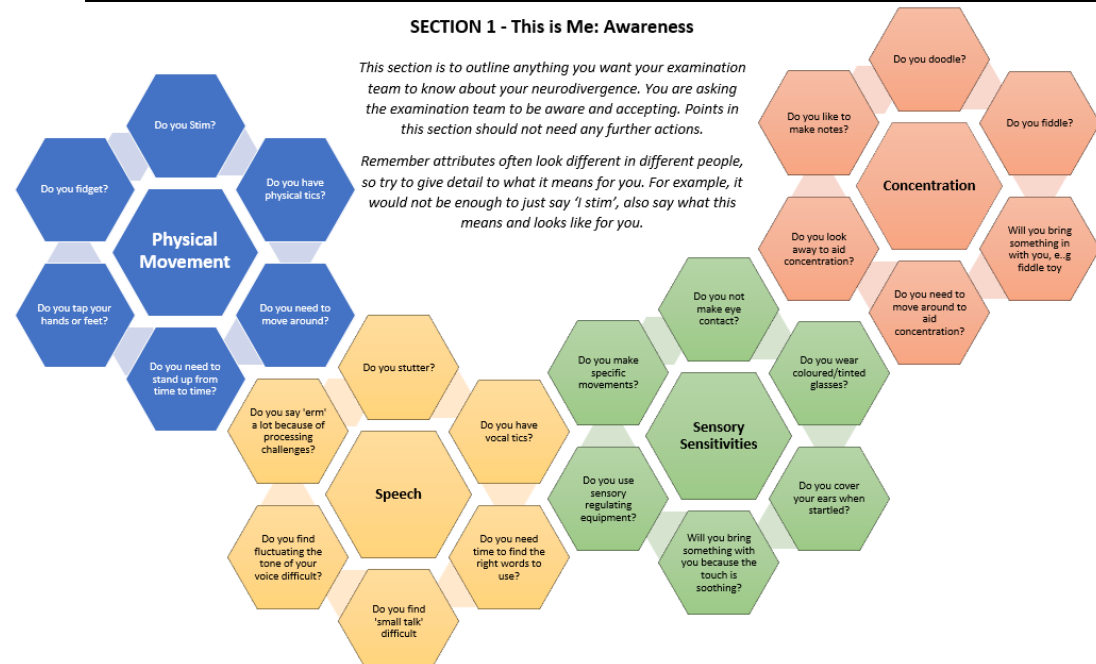


Our next research project is to work collaboratively with students to develop this letter and make it accessible to all. If you would be interested in being involved please email b.sandland@bham.ac.uk for more information.

SECTION 1 - This is Me: Awareness

This section is to outline anything you want your examination team to know about your neurodivergence. You are asking the examination team to be aware and accepting. Points in this section should not need any further actions.

Remember attributes often look different in different people, so try to give detail to what it means for you. For example, it would not be enough to just say 'i stim', also say what this means and looks like for you.



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Universal Design – Suggested adjustments to our viva policy

Prior to viva	During viva	After viva
Nomination of examiners form will record any specialist provision for the candidate	Students are permitted to bring a copy of their thesis into the viva and any notes they deem appropriate. They should also be free to make notes during the viva should they wish to.	Supervisors should make notes on the student's behalf on all provisional feedback. To remove any ambiguity, guidance given to the candidate on required corrections should be explicit and in the form of a detailed list.
Examining team and the PGR to be notified, in writing, with at least two weeks' notice, of the date, time, venue, reasonable adjustments, and names of those attending	Examiners should present one question at a time and be prepared to rephrase questions, or repeat them, if the student appears to have misunderstood.	Supervisors to go through the feedback with the student and ensure they understand what is being asked and what the processes are that follows.
Supervisors are encouraged to meet the student immediately prior to the viva to help 'bridge the gap' between free time and the viva itself.	Examiners to refrain from using ambiguous language and colloquialisms	
Provide the option for the student to choose the location of their viva.	Students are permitted to bring small items into the viva that may help manage anxiety e.g. fiddle toys, religious items	
Allow the student access to the room beforehand so that they can familiarise themselves with the physical environment; and make any adjustments to the sensory environment as needed (e.g. lighting/sounds)	Be aware that processing time for all students will vary, allow them sufficient time to compose their answers (this may be much longer than you anticipate).	
	Allow rest breaks, the chair or examiners may need to encourage this if they see the student becoming increasingly anxious, or particularly struggling.	

Personalised Reasonable Adjustments

By removing many of the common reasonable adjustments we are left with personalised, specific RAPs.

To facilitate their inclusion, the identification and implementation of RAPs has been proposed to be written into every stage of the PGR's journey:

- Development Needs Analysis
- Annual Progress Checks
- Intention to Submit Form
- Nomination of Examiners' Form
- Examiners' Report
- Viva policy
- Duties of the Internal Examiner Guidelines
- Chairperson's Guidelines
- CoP Reasonable Adjustments

Remaining areas for Development:

- Quality Assurance
- International Students
 - Staff training



References

Sandland, B., MacLeod, A., Hall, N. and Chown, N. (2023) Accommodation through personalisation: ensuring the autistic student has an equal opportunity for success in the PhD viva voce. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*. 47(10), 1404-1419

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