

Supporting a neurodiverse postgraduate research community

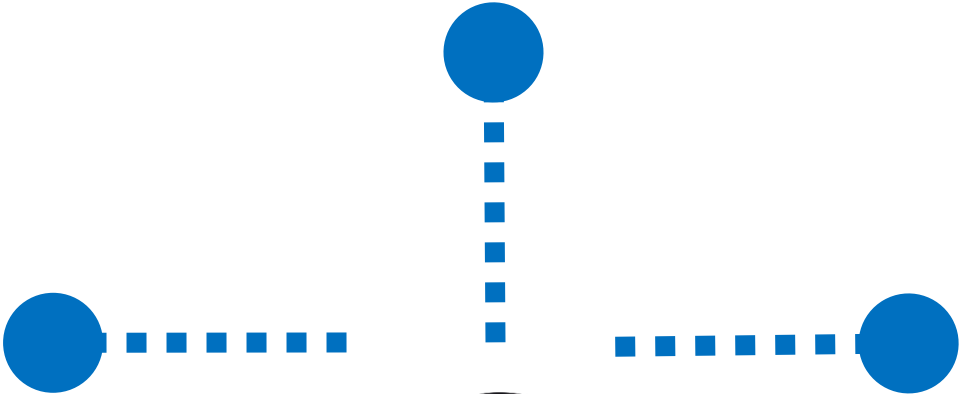
Director of the Centre for
Neurodiversity & Development

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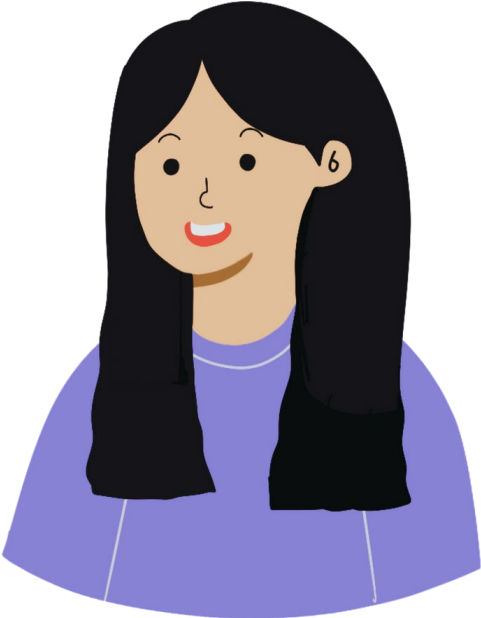
Positionality

Non-autistic autism and neurodiversity researcher
Director of the Centre for Neurodiversity & Development
No lived experience



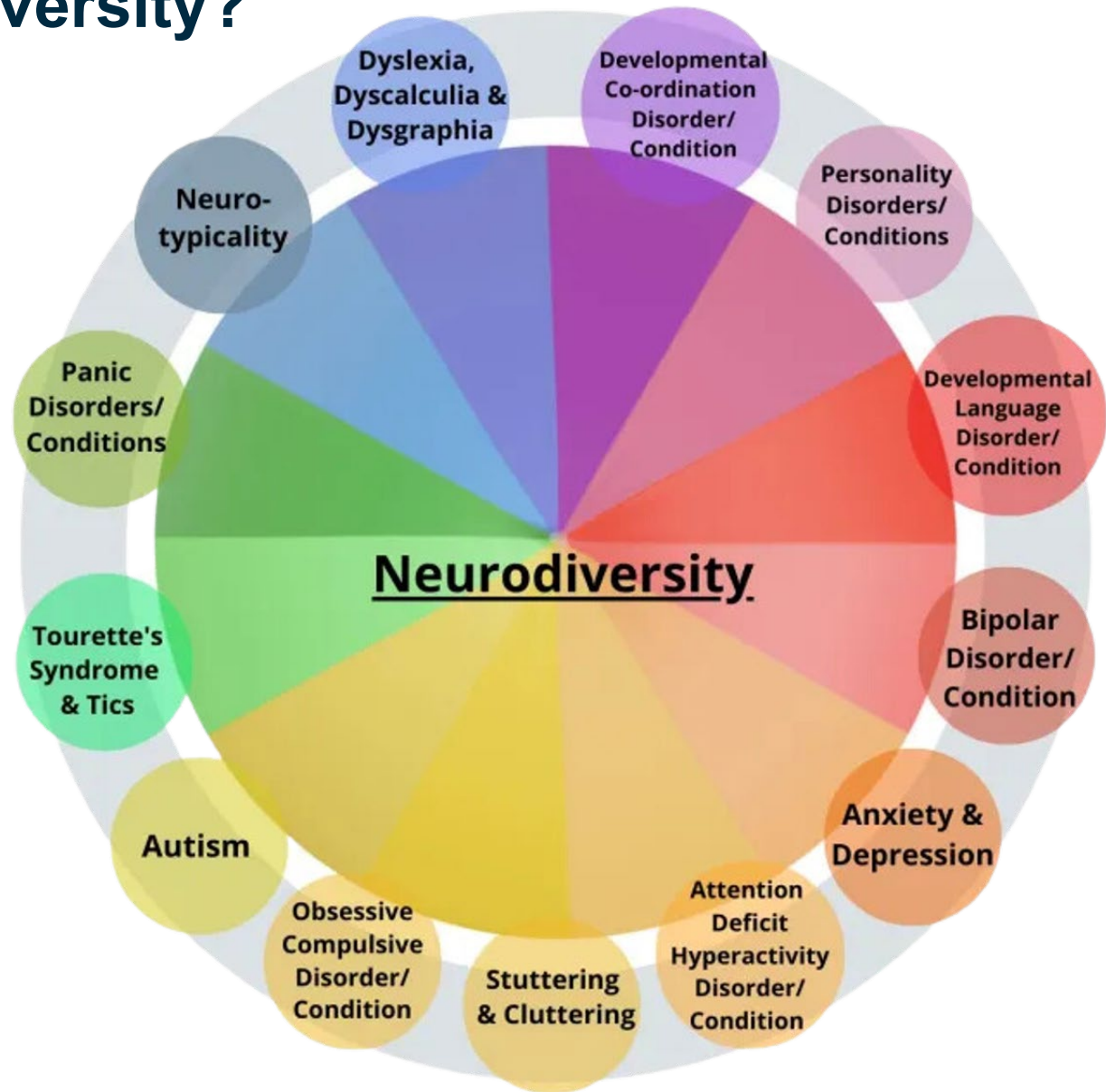
Neurodiversity perspective
Differences rather than deficits
(strengths and challenges)

Associate PVC for
Postgraduate Research
students



What is neurodiversity?

- A term that is becoming more common but is often misunderstood
- Civil and disability rights origins
- **Differences** not deficits



NEURODIVERGENT v NEURODIVERSE

What is neurodiversity?

- From a medical perspective, people are diagnosed as having symptoms of conditions:
 - e.g. Autism
- From a neurodiversity perspective, society is neurodiverse and people are neurotypical or neurodivergent
 - Differences (strengths and challenges) aligning with autism - neurodivergence from the societal neuro'typical'



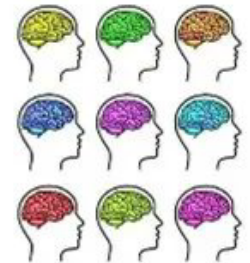
Each of these people is **NEURODIVERGENT**
(There are lots of ways to be neurodivergent)



This person is **NEUROTYPICAL**



These people are **NEURODIVERGENT**
but the group itself is **NOT NEURODIVERSE**



This is a **NEURODIVERSE GROUP**



This person is **MULTIPLY NEURODIVERGENT**
They are **NOT NEURODIVERSE**

Only a group can be **NEURODIVERSE**

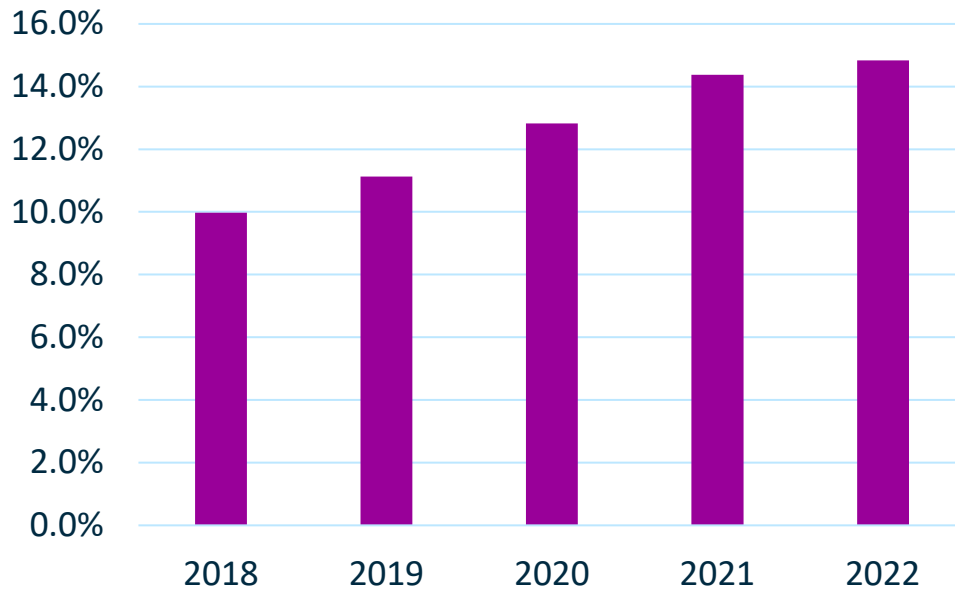
An individual can not.

Why do we need to be better prepared...

- Quality of provision and increased need (quantity)
- **GROWTH** - 2019/20, 14,360 university students disclosed that they were autistic (compared to 6,845 in 2014/15; HESA, 2021)
 - 2023 report on UK university applicants in the UK revealed as many as 14% were autistic or had ADHD. Furthermore, 52% of these autistic and ADHD applicants had also experienced depression recently, and 63% had experienced anxiety in the last two years (Unite Students report, 2023)
- Increased university drop-out rates among autistic university students
 - Disabled Students UK and North East Autism Society report in 2023 – drop out rate since 2017 averages 30% (non-autistic HESA ~5%)
 - Lack of institutional support cited as a reason for drop out (e.g. Anderson et al., 2017)
- Some suggestion that universities are more prepared to support physical disability than neurodiversity (e.g. Madriaga, 2010)

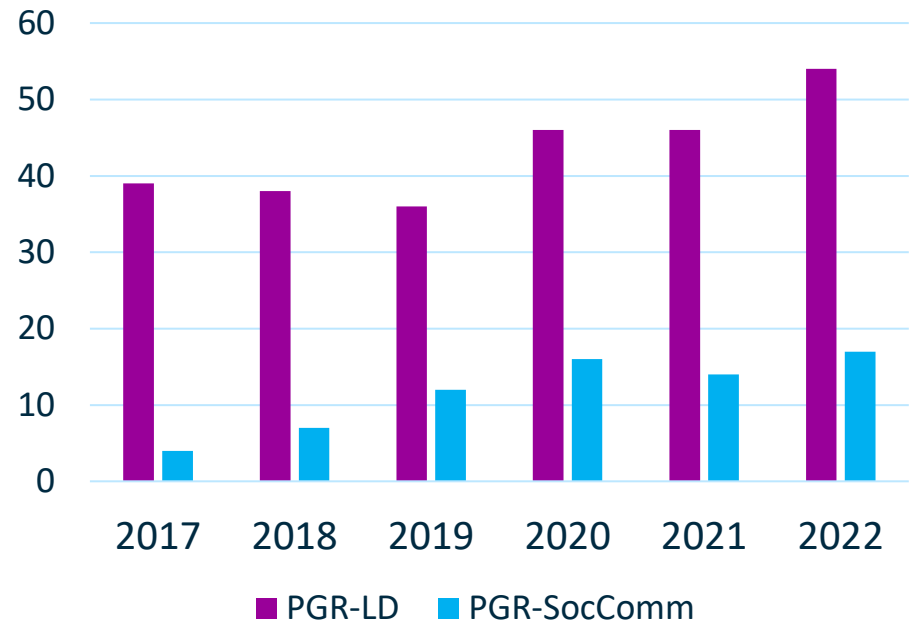
HE is designed for the majority and thus for a neurotypical experiences

Durham data – PGRs only



Gradual increase in % of PGR population reporting a disability over a 5-year period (via Student Registry)

The number of PGR students reporting in two specific categories over a 5-year period (via Student Registry)
Learning Difference
Social and Communication Difference



Why do we need to be better prepared...

- Beyond disability services approach – inclusive provision (diagnosis, stigma)
 - Neuro-affirmative practices
- Students may self-silence and mask their neurodiversity to survive
Impact on well-being (and **intersectionality** with mental health challenges)
- Allow students to capitalise on their neurodivergent strengths
 - Importance of a strengths-based approach
- By PhD level, students have ‘survived’ UG and likely PGT study
 - The challenges might be different

“I didn’t disclose my autism diagnosis to my supervisor Stigma surrounding autism and a lack of public understanding of the diversity of the autistic experience had a huge part to play”

What do neurodivergent students cite as key differences at postgraduate research level?

Most important thing is the supervisor

I really don't know what to expect for the viva

There is just so much more uncertainty / less structure

It is great I can really use my critical skills in a PhD and focus on a topic I am passionate about

Before I knew it I was burning out

ADHD impacts my motivation, task prioritization, sustained attention, time management

I struggle to juggle too many tasks

Extensions / mitigations aren't like UG level



Supervision

Student voice – what works best for the individual?

A checklist of some potential considerations:

- A start of the supervision relationship – expectations of both student and supervisor (allow an honest conversation)
- Clear structure to meetings, planning ahead (minutes / actions)
- Structured objectives (for meetings and for tasks) – **uncertainty**
- Ordering of tasks / spreading deadlines (one task at a time)
- Allow space for creativity and individuality
- Delivery of information (visual, written, oral)
- Regular ‘checking in’
- Capitalise of strengths when planning work
- Academic presentations / networking / conferences & impact of participation
- Mindful of supervisor dynamics and power dynamics

Viva (reasonable adjustments)

Student voice – what works best for
the individual?

A checklist of some potential considerations:

- What is a concern for the student – what will allow them to achieve their full potential in the viva?
- Environment for the viva (familiarity / uncertainty) – sensory environment
- Independent chair (monitor breaks etc)
- Bring a support colleague to the viva?
- Ensuring the examiners are aware of candidates' needs (if they wish them to be made aware)
- Order of questions in order of the thesis? Clear, concise questions.
- Broad areas for discussion if possible? With a practice viva.
- Breaks / pauses

Ensure the viva is:

“examining intellectual prowess, not social difference”
(Chown, Beardon, Martin, & Ellisa, 2016)

Summary



- Supporting neurodivergent students and the breadth of a neurodiverse PhD community
- Two priority areas: Supervision, Viva
- Growing awareness and growing need
- **Remember that intersectional impacts for students who experience more than one factor of systemic disadvantage, discrimination, or differential need, are even more acute and complex**