Line Managers' Neurodiversity Toolkit

Understanding Neurodiversity and Neurodifferences

Neurodiversity can bring real value to Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU), and line managers have a critical role to play in unlocking this potential. However, research suggests that 50% of line managers would feel uncomfortable employing or managing someone with a

neurodifference[i]. This guide is designed to give line managers at LJMU the practical information they need to create a neuro-inclusive culture in their teams and to support and empower neurodivergent team members to thrive.

It also provides practical advice on neuro-inclusive teaching, empowering neurodivergent students to perform at their best.

1. What is Neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity refers to the different ways people's brains process information. It is important that we value diversity in neuro development as we would value diversity in other natural human variations such as gender, race or sexual orientation.

15-20% of the global population is thought to be neurodivergent[ii]. Neurodivergent is a term used to describe individuals whose way of processing information differs from the 'neurotypical' majority. Neurodivergent individuals may have one or more neurodifference, including dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, ADHD, Autism Spectrum Condition, as well as some less common neurodifferences.
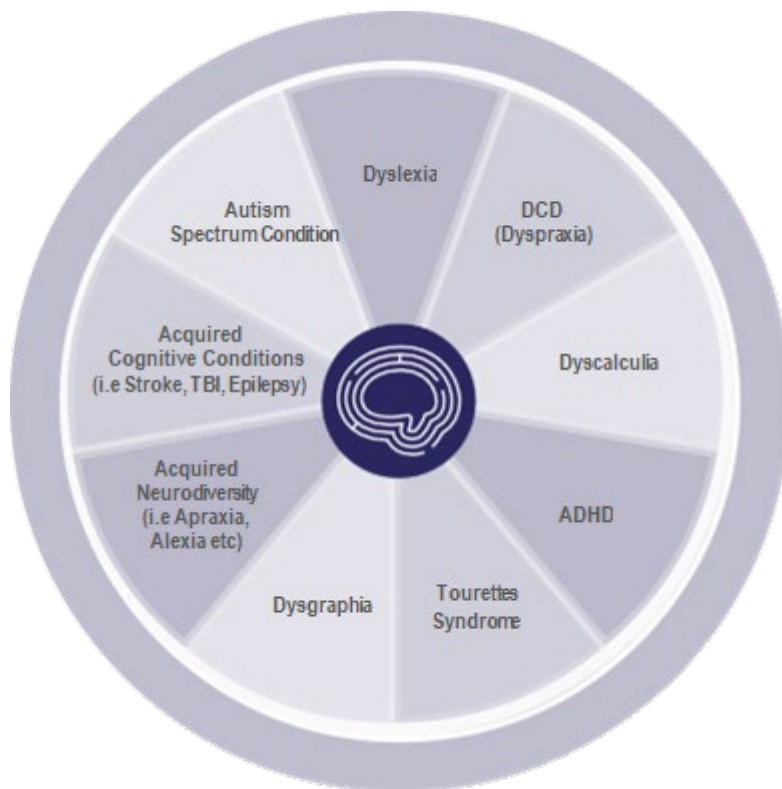
Whilst neurodivergent individuals are likely to meet the legal definition of disability, many do not identify as disabled. They are likely to have unique cognitive profiles, characterised by significant disparities between their cognitive strengths and challenges. Whilst everyone is different, some of the traits, strengths and challenges that are commonly associated with particular neurodifferences are explained in section 3.

Are mental health conditions neurodifferences?

Some people also consider mental health conditions such as Anxiety, Bipolar Disorder and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, to be neurodifferences. Whilst this guidance takes a more focused approach, it acknowledges that neurodifferences often co-occur with mental health conditions (see section 4). It is important to treat each person as an individual and to address any challenges in the round, rather than compartmentalising them. Some of the practical suggestions in this

guidance will also be relevant to inclusion and support for people with a mental health condition at work. Further advice can be found at https://www.ljmu.ac.uk/staff/wellbeing.

Neuro-inclusive language

In this toolkit we use the term 'neurodivergent' to refer to an individual with a neurodifference. However, you may also hear people refer to themselves as 'neurodiverse' or 'neurominority'. Additionally, some individuals prefer person-first language (e.g. person with dyslexia) whereas others prefer identity-first language (e.g. dyslexic person). To use neuro-inclusive language is to understand and adopt the language someone identifies with, and if you're not sure, it is fine to ask them. Don't let worrying about making a mistake stop you from talking about neurodiversity!

2. Common Neurodifferences

Dyslexia

Dyslexia impacts short-term memory, as well as the abilities needed for reading and spelling accurately and fluently. It affects around 10% of the population[iii].

Common Strengths: Visual thinking, seeing the big picture, creativity, problem solving and verbal articulation.

Common Workplace Challenges: Note taking, written communication (e.g. reports or emails), reading, absorbing lots of information at once, learning processes, organisation, focus and visual stress.

Case Study:

> "I didn't tell anyone at work I had dyslexia for years. I was able to do many parts of my job easily and well, but I spent a lot of long evenings going over documents and feeling frustrated with the quality of my notes. I found some practical strategies really helped, such as formatting documents so they were easier for me to process and switching to dictation software."

Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD) / Dyspraxia

Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD), otherwise known as dyspraxia, affects movement, coordination and organisation in up to 6% of the population[iv].

Common Strengths: Original ideas, creativity, problem solving and determination.

Common Workplace Challenges: Time management, planning, following directions, moving through the workplace (e.g. bumping into things), typing and handwriting.

Case Study:

> "For me, managing my time was an issue. I found it hard to plan my time and I often left tasks unfinished, which made me more stressed and more likely to make mistakes. I found that using mind maps helped me to prioritise my workload better, so I wasn't panicking at the end of the day."

Dyscalculia

Dyscalculia affects the acquisition and use of every day mathematical skills in 3-6% of the population[v].

Common Strengths: Good strategic thinking, problem solving and vocabulary.

Common Workplace Challenges: Interpreting and using financial and numerical data (e.g. managing and reporting on budgets or performance metrics), mistakes in calculations and recording of numerical information.

Case Study:

> "My job involves working with customers, which I love, but occasionally I have to create invoices and I would often make mistakes. Now, I use templates that make the process a lot simpler, and I have a speaking calculator so I don't have to worry about mixing up symbols like I used to."

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

ADHD is associated with one or more of the common overarching traits: hyperactivity (physical and/or mental), impulsivity and challenges sustaining attention. It affects around 5% of the population[vi].

Common Strengths: Stamina, enthusiasm, creativity, problem solving, adaptability, hyperfocus, leadership skills.

Common Workplace Challenges: Organisation, concentration, prioritisation, time management, processing instructions, getting going on or completing a task and emotional regulation (e.g. being particularly sensitive to criticism or rejection).

Case Study:

> "I find it hard to concentrate for long periods of time. Working with a coach has really helped me to put structure to my day. I avoid arranging meetings close together, and now use a timer which helps me to break up my day, take regular short breaks and keep focused. I also use noise-cancelling headphones to minimise distractions in the office. I've started using mindfulness techniques to help me recognise some of the triggers for my distraction and to concentrate on the job in hand."

Autism Spectrum Condition

ASC (commonly referred to as autism) affects how a person relates to and communicates with other people, and how they interact with the world around them. It affects 1-2% of the population[vii].

Common Strengths: Logical thinking, analytical skills, direct communication, attention to detail, good memory and pattern recognition, in-depth knowledge and reliability.

Common Workplace Challenges: managing change, particularly if it is unplanned or unexplained, interpreting ambiguous communications and tasks, interpreting others' behaviour and intentions, heightened sensory sensitivity (e.g. to noise, artificial light, smells and materials), maintaining eye contact.

Case Study:

> "The first few weeks in my new job were overwhelming. I don't like surrounding myself with too many people, and there were a lot of rules to get used to – some of them unwritten! But then I got a workplace mentor who explained some of the rules about using the

work kitchen, and they helped me to draw up a timetable of my working day, so everything was in small chunks of time. I was given a fixed desk in a quiet area, which was less overwhelming for me.

3. Co-occurrence and Intersectionality

It is common for individuals to have more than one neurodifference and traits can often overlap, for example individuals with ADHD may also experience heightened sensory sensitivity (e.g. to noise, artificial light, smells and materials) . Every individual will have a different experience of their neurodifference, and this may be impacted by other intersectional characteristics, such as their gender, race, sexual orientation or social class.

Neurodivergent individuals, on average, also have lower wellbeing levels than the overall population[viii], and can be at higher risk of mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression. Mental health challenges may be exacerbated by experiences of not fitting in, discrimination, low confidence, hiding neurodivergent traits, fatigue or sensory overload. Neurodivergent traits are also sometimes misdiagnosed as symptoms of a mental health condition, particularly amongst girls and women. Neurodifferences can also co-occur with physical health conditions, such as joint hypermobility and pain.

You can find more information on specific neurodifferences on Lexxic's website.

4. Creating a Neuro-inclusive Culture

Many neurodivergent individuals do not feel comfortable to be themselves at work, or to share information about their neurodifference with their employer. Research has found that 32% of neurodivergent employees

haven't told their employer about their neurodifference[ix]. In other research 65% of neurodivergent employees said they were worried about stigma and discrimination when asked about barriers to disclosing their neurodifference and/or requesting support[x].

It is important to create a neuro-inclusive culture where people feel safe to be themselves, and to share information about their neurodifference if they wish to do so. This can help individuals to access the support they need with benefits for wellbeing, engagement and performance.

You can help to create a neuro-inclusive culture in your team by:
- Raising awareness of neurodiversity amongst your team and changing the narrative from deficit to valued difference.
- Creating the opportunity for neurodivergent employees to share stories of lived experience if they wish to do so (e.g. in team meetings), challenging misconceptions and stereotypes.
- Asking neurodivergent employees in your team what is working well at LJMU, and any barriers that they have experienced.
- Challenging misconceptions or bias that you witness.
- Encouraging different opinions and being flexible about ways of working.

Workplace Adjustments and Support

5. Having sensitive conversations about support

Everyone will have their own ways of working preferences and support needs, whether they are neurodivergent or not. In addition, not all neurodivergent individuals will know about, or feel comfortable sharing, their neurodifference. For both these reasons, it is recommended that you ask all those you manage:

- ➢ 'How you can I support you to work at your best?'
- ➢ 'What are your ways of working preferences?'

This provides an opportunity to tailor your management style to meet individual needs, but also gives an individual the opportunity to talk about any specific support needs they may have associated with a neurodifference.

Make sure these conversations take place somewhere private where the individual feels comfortable. This may be virtual or face to face, depending on preferences.

It is not your responsibility to suggest to someone that they are neurodivergent. However, if an individual does share that they are, or may be, neurodivergent, you can help by:

- Remembering that everyone is different, actively listening to the individual and avoiding assumptions about how they are affected or what support they may need.
- Providing plenty of reassurance that you value the individual and their contribution, and are here to listen and help. The individual may feel anxious about the discussion due to past experiences of sharing information about their neurodifference.

- Giving the individual time to reflect and arranging a follow up conversation later once they've had time to process the discussion.
- Sharing information about sources of support at LJMU.
- Suggesting practical next steps and sending a reminder of these in an email, so that the individual can refer back to it later.
- Taking time to learn about the neurodifference, e.g. through reviewing training resources, and discussing any questions with the Diversity and Inclusion Team.

6. Legal Responsibilities

Neurodivergent individuals may benefit from workplace adjustments. Workplace adjustments are changes made by an employer to remove or reduce a disadvantage that an individual faces at work connected with their disability. In the UK, employers are required to make 'reasonable' adjustments for disabled employees as well as candidates in recruitment processes, under the Equality Act (2010)[xi]. Whilst neurodivergent individuals may not choose to identify as disabled, they are likely to meet legal definitions of disability.

Workplace adjustments can include changes to the physical environment, working arrangements, policies, equipment, or support. Whether an adjustment is considered reasonable can depend on whether it:
- will remove or reduce the disadvantage;
- is practical to make;
- is affordable; and
- could harm the health and safety of others

7. Principles of Effective Adjustments and Support

There are a number of key principles that underpin effective adjustments:

Tailored to individual needs and role

Adjustments should be tailored to the specific challenges that an individual experiences in their specific role. The challenges will vary depending on an individual's particular characteristics and experience, and the nature of the role. It is important not to make assumptions about what they will need, based on what has worked for other individuals with the same neurodifference.

Proactive and prompt

Adjustments should be put in place proactively if they will reduce or remove a disadvantage facing the individual. You should not wait until performance concerns have arisen, before considering what adjustments might be useful. Adjustments should be implemented promptly once agreed.

Agreed in collaboration

Adjustments should be considered and agreed in collaboration between the individual and you as their manager. You can also get advice from the Diversity and Inclusion Team and the Business Partner for your faculty, department, school or professional services area if needed. They should not be imposed on the individual. Listen to the individual's suggestions for what they think will help, based on their past experience or knowledge. If it is not possible to implement a particular adjustment that is requested (e.g. due to the nature of the role or excessive cost), then consideration should be given to other workable alternatives to address the disadvantage an individual faces.

No requirement for diagnosis

Although an individual may be asked to provide evidence of the disadvantage they are experiencing as a result of their neurodifference, they are not required to have a diagnosis in order to be entitled to reasonable adjustments. This is important because individuals may not have a diagnosis for a range of reasons, including a lack of access to diagnostic assessment and lack of awareness amongst health professionals.

Recorded and regularly reviewed

Adjustments should be recorded and reviewed regularly (e.g. as part of regular development conversations) to check how they are working in practice. If they aren't working well, the reasons for this should be explored, and alternatives considered.

Consider 'designing in' to standard ways of working

Many adjustments that benefit neurodivergent individuals also benefit the rest of the workforce. Where feasible, it may make sense to design them into your standard ways of working. This will also benefit those who don't know that they are neurodivergent, or do not feel comfortable to share their neurodifference at work.

8. LJMU's Adjustments Process

The process for accessing reasonable adjustments is individually tailored to each case, and it can be started either through a recommendation from Occupational Health (OH) or through direct discussion with the employee

and line manager.

If the employee would benefit from an assessment of the adjustments that might be useful for them, they should contact their HR Business Partner for a referral to Occupational Health.

Managers play a crucial role in working with employees to identify and implement the right reasonable adjustments, and should treat any discussions about adjustments in confidence.

In some circumstances it may be appropriate to make an application to Access to Work (see below). This is normally initiated by the employee, although sometimes Occupational Health (OH) may also make a recommendation to the employee to make an application.

The University's [IBuy Process](#) facilitates the purchase of necessary equipment for approved applications. In certain cases, specialised training and counselling may be required as part of the Access to Work provisions.

9. Access to Work

If the employee needs support or adaptations beyond those adjustments that it would be considered reasonable for an employer to make, it may be appropriate for them to apply for funding through the Government's Access to Work programme. Access to Work can pay for practical support to help disabled individuals who need an aid, adaptation, or financial or human support to do their job. This could include:

- equipment in your workplace
- money towards any extra travel to work costs if someone can't use public transport
- other practical help at work, such as a job coach or support

worker
- support to work from more than one location
- support for working at home for all or part of your time
- disability awareness training for your colleagues
- someone to help at a job interview

The size of an Access to Work grant depends on the specific case and is not dependent on how much someone earns. LJMU may be required to pay a proportion of the costs for equipment that is purchased or adapted for the employee, if the employee has worked at LMJU for more than 6 weeks. They need to pay 100% of the cost for equipment that costs less than £1000, and 20% where it costs more than £1000 but less than £10,000. Any balance above £10,000 will normally be met by Access to Work. Access to Work will consider meeting 100% of other costs such as travel or support workers.

Applications for Access to Work can be made online or by phone by the employee. They will need to provide information about how their disability / neurodifference affects their work and what support they think they need. They will also need to provide details of a workplace contact who can confirm the employee works at your organisation. The workplace contact should be the line manager.

After your employee makes an application for Access to Work, a case manager will contact the workplace contact and employee to discuss what help might be available. Your employee may need a workplace assessment (by phone or video call) to assess their needs. An Access to Work case manager will discuss the award with the workplace contact and employee to develop a tailored package of support.

Once an award is made, employees must submit their claim within a maximum of 9 months. If the employee's support needs change, they

should ask for their award to be reviewed. They will also be contacted 12 weeks before their support is due to end and invited to apply to renew it.

Further information for individuals on applying for Access to Work can be found [here](#). Further information for employers on Access to Work can be found [here](#):

10.   Examples of Adjustments

Although everyone is different, here are some examples of adjustments and support that neurodivergent individuals experiencing the following challenges may find useful:

Managing sensory sensitivities or distractions
- Working from home, at least some of the time.
- Working flexible or part time hours, so the individual can work or travel at quieter times, or when they are most productive.
- A fixed desk in a quiet, naturally- lit and well-ventilated environment.
- Private or quiet rooms where an individual can go to work or take breaks.
- Building in extra breaks during the working day to aid concentration.
- Turning off message notifications to support focus and blocking out 'do not disturb' time in the diary.

Managing Change

- Minimising disruptions to routine and tasks where possible, and building in contingency time to deal with unexpected tasks that do arise.

- Providing advance notice of changes, explain the rationale and provide the opportunity to ask questions or be involved in decision making if possible.

Structure, planning and memory

- Clear roles, objectives and task specifications, followed up with an email.
- Breaking down large tasks into smaller parts with clear milestones and deadlines.
- Providing 'accountability' support (some neurodivergent individuals find it useful for others to hold them to account for work, e.g. via check-in meetings, to help them stay on track).
- Mind mapping software (e.g. Mind View) to help plan and structure ideas and thoughts.
- Using a calendar and reminders to block out time for different activities, including breaks.
- Avoiding back to back meetings to give time for decompression.

Challenges with Reading and Writing

- Neuro-inclusive formatting, e.g.
    o bullet points
    o left-aligned text
    o 1.5 line spacing
    o sans serif fonts in dark grey or navy on off-white backgrounds
    o bold headings, avoiding underlining and italics.
- Assistive technology to help with reading, writing, spelling and communication. Free tools are available within Microsoft Word and Outlook such as Editor (which helps with spelling and grammar),

Read Aloud (which converts text to speech) and Dictate (which converts speech to text). More specialist software such as [Read and Write](#) and [Dragon](#) may also be helpful.

- Coloured screen overlays.

Different Communication Preferences and Styles

- Asking about communication preferences and accommodating these where feasible. Seeking regular feedback on your communication style to build honest and open communications and avoid misunderstandings.
- Keeping language clear, concise and unambiguous. Avoid jargon or metaphors, which may be interpreted literally by some autistic individuals.
- Not interpreting direct communication styles, lack of eye contact or fidgeting as rudeness.
- Providing instructions one at a time, highlighting specific actions and deadlines.

Neuro-inclusive meetings

Meetings are a central part of working life. You can support neurodivergent colleagues to contribute effectively and feel comfortable in the following ways:

- Providing agendas and papers in advance to allow time to plan contributions.
- Building short breaks into long meetings, and enabling people to use fidget tools, move around or turn off cameras (if relevant) to aid concentration.
- Recording meetings if other participants are willing, so people can

refer back to it later.

- Offering different ways to contribute (e.g. raising virtual hands to speak, using comments) and also accept contributions after the meeting, once someone has had more time to process the discussion).
- Following up meetings with written action points.

11. Talent management and wellbeing

It is vital that neurodivergent individuals have the opportunity to develop their skills, to thrive and to progress, and do not face disadvantage compared to their colleagues. A strengths-based approach can support improvements in development, performance and employee commitment. It is particularly important for neurodivergent individuals who may lack confidence and be more used to managers focusing on the things they find difficult.

Personal development and feedback

- Work with the individual to understand their strengths, gathering feedback and examples from colleagues to support this.
- Focus on how these strengths can be maximised in the individual's role, and if necessary/feasible, adjust their role so that it plays to their strengths.
- Undertake regular personal development and career conversations identifying development and career goals and any additional support required to meet them.
- Provide regular feedback on what has gone well. Positive feedback can be particularly beneficial given neurodivergent individuals often have low confidence.

- Ensure that feedback on any areas for development is sensitive, specific, evidence based and action-oriented. Remember that some individuals may be particularly sensitive to criticism so sensitivity is important.
- Involve the individual in developing solutions to address any areas for development.
- Encourage a growth mindset where challenges and mistakes are viewed as an opportunity to learn and grow, and blame is avoided.

Performance Evaluation

- Focus on the outcomes an individual achieves and where possible, be flexible about how they are delivered.
- Handle the situation sensitively if the way that an individual has delivered their outcomes causes genuine challenges for other members of the team, e.g. where individuals have very different communication styles. Take time to understand both perspectives and any underlying causes of the issue.
- Be mindful of unconscious bias when evaluating performance, for example, interpreting an autistic individual's lack of eye contact as disinterest or marking an individual down for not being a team player because they don't engage in networking opportunities or they express themselves in different ways.
- Be aware of the potential implications of neurodifferences on performance, taking supportive and sensitive action when required. Only enact formal performance or attendance plans if concerns persist once adjustments and other support have been provided.
- Keep good records of discussions to ensure transparency and show that you have taken an appropriate approach to evaluating performance.

Wellbeing and Emotional Support

- Be aware of the potential impact of being neurodivergent on wellbeing, fatigue and mental health.
- Make sure that the individual isn't working excessive hours, and encourage them to practice self-care in whatever way works for them (e.g. mindfulness, sleep, exercise).
- Make a conscious effort to ensure the individual is (and feels) included in team activities.
- If the individual finds it challenging to regulate their emotions, make sure that they have outlets they can access if they feel overwhelmed, such as a buddy/mentor or a private space to take time out.   Work with the individual to understand the situations or events that tend to trigger strong emotional responses at work. This can help them to prepare and develop coping strategies to use in future.

12.   Recruitment and Onboarding

Recruitment

Recruitment practices often present a barrier to neurodivergent individuals applying for, or being successful, in recruitment exercises. You can help attract neurodivergent candidates and maximise the opportunity for them to showcase their skills.

- Ensure job descriptions are unambiguous and accurately reflect the skills required for the role, rather than generic behaviours.
- Encourage applications from candidates with diverse perspectives and unique ways of thinking and signpost how to access adjustments in the selection process.

- Be ready to talk through the process, role and expectations with neurodivergent candidates.
- Ensure the assessments you are using test the skills actually required for the role.
- If using interviews, provide questions in advance, avoid hypothetical or vague questions and focus on content of answers rather than social skills or working memory.
- Assess for 'cultural add' rather than 'cultural fit'. There is value in thinking differently, rather than just fitting in with how things are usually done in your organisation.

Onboarding

Effective onboarding is essential in setting the individual up for success:

- Reach out before the individual joins to provide information about the role and what will be expected on the first day (e.g. timings, where to go, who to ask for).
- If the individual is already aware of adjustments they require, arrange for these to be put in place from the outset.
- Provide a thorough induction, including conversations about how the individual likes to work, sources of support and introductions to colleagues.
- Put regular check-ins in the diary to provide support and feedback.
- Identify a colleague who can act as a buddy and support the individual to navigate any ways of working and practices specific to you organisation.

13.   Practical Advice on Neuro-inclusive Teaching

In collaboration, adjustments for students will be implemented by the University, working alongside the Student Advice and Wellbeing Team, teaching staff, Schools Disability Coordinators, and the students themselves. While some of the principles and examples of effective adjustments outlined earlier in the toolkit for employees may also be applicable to students, the process for accessing adjustments for students is addressed by the University Students Advice and Wellbeing Department in collaboration with the Faculty Associate Deans for Diversity and Inclusion and the School Disability Coordinators.

To make your teaching practices more neuro-inclusive, you may wish to consider the following suggestions:

Learning Preferences

- Asking people about their different learning styles and preferences, e.g. a lot of neurodivergent people learn much better through hands-on activities, rather than reading information.
- Providing a range of different types of learning activities to suit different preferences (e.g. workshops as well as lectures, videos, practical exercises, work experience opportunities).

Learning materials and delivery

- Using plenty of visuals and infographics to illustrate key points, not just text.
- Making sure that any reading and writing tasks, and any powerpoint presentations that you use, are compatible with assistive technology

including screen readers.
- Using clear and straightforward language, avoiding metaphors and sarcasm, and being concise.

Support with planning, structure and staying on track

- Providing clear task specifications and breaking down large tasks into smaller parts with clear milestones and deadlines.
- Offering additional check-in meetings for those who need support to stay on track.
- Providing the opportunity for students to chat through their ideas with a peer or teacher to help structure thoughts and think through implementation of their ideas.
- Providing advance notice and an explanation of any changes needed to the schedule or tasks.

Learning environment

- Providing the opportunity for students to attend classes face to face or virtually, depending on their particular needs and what is practicable. Students should be encouraged to discuss any particular requirements with the teaching staff.
- Making sure that classroom environments are quiet, well ventilated and have a natural light source if possible.

Assessments

- Providing plenty of information about assessments in advance to reduce anxiety and enable individuals to plan their work.
- Making sure that assessments are compatible with assistive technology, and providing extra time for those who process

information more slowly.

- Avoiding assessments that rely on social imagination (e.g. situational judgement tests or role play)

## 14.	Sources of Advice and Support

- Neurodivergent employees can access advice and support from the [Staff Disability Network](#).

- Visit the [Diversity and Inclusion webpages](#) for external resources and training

- For HR advice relating to employees, you may wish to contact [HR Business Partner or the Diversity and Inclusion Team](#)

- For advice relating to students, you may wish to contact the [Student Advice and Wellbeing Team](#).

- Peer support for neurodivergent students is available from the [Disabled and Neurodiverse Students' Community](#).

- The student Union, [JMSU](#) can also provide support.

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