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NEUROINCLUSIVE ASSESSMENT

WHY?

- Our student populations are changing
- Increasing identification of neurodivergent learners
- Traditional assessment is not accessible for all
- Inclusion is essential, not a 'nice to have'

NEURODIVERSE / NEURODIVERGENT?

- Social interactions
- Communication
- Learning
- Sensory processing

Autism, Hyperlexia, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)/Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Dyspraxia, Dyslexia, Dyscalculia, Dysgraphia, Synesthesia, Tourette Syndrome and Tic Disorders, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Epilepsy and Seizure Disorders, Intellectual Disabilities, Developmental Language Disorders, Developmental Coordination Disorders, Anxiety, Bipolar Disorders, Depression, Trauma, Downs Syndrome, Personality Disorder, Sensory Processing Disorder, Auditory Processing Disorder, and others....

CHALLENGES FOR NEURODIVERGENT STUDENTS

- Social interaction and communication challenges
- Barriers to learning
- Repetitive and restrictive behaviour
- Over or under sensitivity to light, sound, taste, or touch
- Highly focused interests or hobbies
- Extreme anxiety
- Meltdowns or shutdowns

THE PROBLEM WITH TRADITIONAL ASSESSMENT

One size fits-all approach

Heavy reliance on:

- Timed exams
- Written tasks
- Verbal responses

Can measure stress, not ability

UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING (UDL)

A framework to make learning accessible for everyone

3 Core Principles:

- Multiple means of **Engagement**
- Multiple means of **Representation**
- Multiple means of **Action and Expression**

UDL AND ASSESSMENT

Assessment should allow students to:

- Show what they know in different ways
- Work at a manageable pace
- Reduce unnecessary barriers

Focus on **what is being assessed**, not how

NEUROINCLUSIVE ASSESSMENT PRINCIPLES

- Clarity
- Predictability
- Flexibility
- Reduced cognitive overload
- Support for regulation

WHAT DOES INCLUSIVE ASSESSMENT LOOK LIKE?

Instead of essays being the sole form of assessment:

- Presentations (live or recorded)
- Visual projects
- Practical demonstrations
- Portfolios
- Video submissions

SMALL CHANGES - BIG IMPACT

- Provide **assessment briefs in multiple formats**
- Use **checklists and step-by-step guidance**
- Allow **processing time**
- Reduce reliance on strict timed conditions

STRESS AND ASSESMENT

Neurodiverse learners may:

- Experience shutdown or overwhelm
- Struggle to communicate under pressure
- Perform differently in high-stress environments

Assessment should not penalise regulation differences

CASE STUDIES

Emma is a 20-year-old university student studying English Literature. She has a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and ADHD. She is highly intelligent, detail-oriented, and passionate about literature, but she finds social interactions, transitions, and unstructured tasks challenging.

Learning Challenges:

- Difficulty with group discussions and seminar participation due to social anxiety.
- Struggles to focus during long lectures or when multiple topics are covered quickly.
- Finds unstructured reading and essay planning overwhelming.

Assessment Challenges:

- Essays and written assignments are particularly difficult because of executive function challenges (planning, organising, and starting tasks).
- Exams with time constraints and long essay questions create anxiety and affect her performance.
- Participation grades in seminars are challenging due to difficulties with verbal communication.

Jordan is 19 years old and studying barbering at college. He has dyslexia, which affects reading, spelling, and processing written information. Jordan is extremely practical and creative but finds theory-based learning and assessments stressful.

Learning Challenges:

- Difficulty reading and understanding written instructions quickly.
- Struggles with note-taking and remembering complex procedures from written guides.
- Finds written theory lessons repetitive and frustrating.

Assessment Challenges:

- Written exams or assignments in barbering theory (like health and safety, client consultation paperwork) can be particularly stressful.
- Needs additional time to read questions and process written instructions.
- Practical assessments are less stressful but sometimes include verbal questioning, which can make him anxious under pressure.

Mia is a 21-year-old studying Media Production. She has ADHD and generalised anxiety disorder. She is creative and excels in hands-on projects, but deadlines and structured assignments can be overwhelming.

Learning Challenges:

- Difficulty maintaining focus during lectures and workshops, particularly when instructions are verbal or fast-paced.
- Easily distracted by social interactions or online content during independent work.
- Anxiety spikes when deadlines are approaching, affecting concentration and confidence.

Assessment Challenges:

- Written assignments, such as media analysis essays, are challenging because she struggles to start and sustain writing tasks.
- Deadlines for multiple projects in the same week create stress and affect quality.
- Practical assessments (like filming or editing projects) are manageable, but anxiety can interfere with timed submissions or group work.

RETHINKING “FAIRNESS”

Traditional view:

- Everyone does the same task

Inclusive view:

- Everyone has an equitable opportunity to succeed

BENEFITS OF NEUROINCLUSIVE ASSESSMENT

- Better student engagement
- More accurate measure of ability
- Increased retention and success
- Supports **all** learners not just neurodivergent students

CHALLENGES

- Institutional constraints
- Standardisation pressures
- Staff confidence and training
- Balancing flexibility with standards

MOVING FORWARD

- Start small
- Review one assessment at a time
- Use student feedback
- Share good practice

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FINAL THOUGHT

Assessment should not be a barrier to learning - it should be a bridge to demonstrating it.