

Best Practice in Supporting Neurodivergent Students' Access to Module Materials

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Introduction

This document explains what good practice looks like when tutors and the University design, release, communicate, and support access to module materials for neurodivergent students at the OU. While individual reasonable adjustments are still important, the focus here is on using inclusive design from the start. This reduces the need for students to repeatedly disclose, explain, or justify their needs.

When inclusion is built in as standard, the OU not only supports neurodivergent students, but also improves clarity, usability, and accessibility for every student.

This guidance also supports the OU's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion commitments by addressing structural barriers that disproportionately affect neurodivergent students, and by promoting fairness, belonging, and equal access to learning.

Context and rationale

The number of neurodivergent students in higher education has increased in recent years, this includes students who are formally diagnosed, self-diagnosed, or waiting for assessment. Although participation has grown, many universities have not adapted quickly enough to support neurodivergent student's needs.

This gap is often caused by traditional learning assumptions, inconsistent staff training, and systems designed around neurotypical learning patterns and these systems can unintentionally disadvantage neurodivergent students.

Within an EDI framework, neurodivergence is understood as part of normal human cognitive diversity. The barriers neurodivergent students face are therefore not individual failings, but the result of environments and practices built around neurotypical expectations.

Open SU research, including surveys, focus groups, and wider sector evidence, shows that accessing module materials is one of the most persistent challenges faced by neurodivergent students. These difficulties rarely relate to academic ability. Instead, they stem from inaccessible design, unclear communication, inconsistent tutor practices, and systems that rely heavily on students advocating for themselves in situations that may already feel overwhelming.

Neurodivergent students often say they need more processing time, clearer structure, and predictable organisation to engage equally with their peers. This highlights that accessibility is primarily a design issue.

Research also shows that neurodivergent students experience higher levels of anxiety, isolation, and disengagement, and are more likely to suspend or withdraw from their studies. For example, autistic students are statistically more likely to drop out of higher education, this demonstrates the urgency of addressing barriers at a structural level.

Improving access to module materials is therefore not only an accessibility matter, but also a key factor in student retention and progression, wellbeing, and educational equity. Tackling these issues early can also reduce demand on crisis level support services, allowing for a more preventative approach.

Furthermore, these outcomes raise significant EDI concerns, as they reflect unequal experiences linked to disability and neurodivergence and challenge the university's commitments to equity, inclusion, and student wellbeing.

Evidence base and student insight

Consistent with EDI principles, this guidance centres student voice and lived experience, recognising neurodivergent students as experts in identifying the barriers they encounter within the learning environment.

This best practice guidance is informed by a substantial and multi-source evidence base, including:

- Sector research demonstrating poorer outcomes and higher withdrawal rates for neurodivergent students
- Open SU neurodivergent student focus groups, highlighting lived experiences of accessing OU materials
- An Open SU run student survey with 241 responses, including diagnosed and self-diagnosed neurodivergent students
- Feedback gathered from the Neurodivergent Student Facebook Group
- Testimonies relating to executive dysfunction, rejection sensitive dysphoria, mental health strain, and accessibility
- Contributions from the Student Leadership Team and EDI and Belonging Team

Please see the Neurodivergent Student Support Policy and Report for more information.

Across these sources, students consistently identified issues relating to:

- Unclear or overwhelming material
- Inconsistent tutor practices
- Lack of flexibility in access and timing

- Limited awareness of neurodivergent needs among staff
- Emotional barriers to asking for help

The consistency of student feedback across platforms and formats demonstrates that these barriers are not isolated incidents but represent structural patterns within the learning environment at the OU.

Defining access to module materials for Neurodivergent Students

For neurodivergent students, access to module materials must be understood as a cognitive, emotional, and practical accessibility, not simply availability on a platform. Uploading materials alone does not constitute access; true accessibility requires design that supports diverse processing styles, attention patterns, and sensory needs.

Effective access includes:

Predictability and structure

Materials are organised in a consistent and logical way, reducing anxiety and cognitive load. Predictability enables students to prepare mentally, manage executive functioning challenges, and build stable study routines.

Clarity of language and purpose

Instructions, learning outcomes, and expectations are explicit, concrete, and free from unnecessary ambiguity. Clear language reduces interpretation demands, allowing students to focus on content rather than deciphering meaning.

Flexible engagement

Students can engage with materials in ways that align with their processing styles, energy levels, as well as any accessibility needs. This flexibility is particularly important for students who work in bursts of focus or who need to revisit materials multiple times for understanding.

Timely availability

Materials are released early enough to allow for planning, use of assistive technology, and self-paced learning. Early access also supports periods of fluctuating wellbeing, allowing students to study during times of stability.

Inclusive assumptions

Materials are designed with neurodivergent students in mind by default, rather than relying on disclosure or delayed adjustments. This proactive approach minimises the emotional burden of self-advocacy and reduces fear of judgement or dismissal.

Best practice principles in action

The following practices demonstrate how EDI and best practice principles can be embedded into everyday teaching, ensuring fairness, equity, consistency, and transparency in students access to module materials.

1) Tutor engagement and communication about materials

Clear guidance and expectation-setting

Accessing inclusive module materials remains one of the most persistent and impactful barriers faced by neurodivergent students. These barriers are rarely due to academic ability, survey and focus group data show that many neurodivergent students struggle when expectations around module materials are implied rather than explicit. This can lead to missed tasks, increased anxiety, or disengagement, particularly for students with ADHD or autism. A lack of clarity often forces students to interpret tutor intentions or decode ambiguous instructions, which significantly heightens cognitive load.

Best practice recommendations:

- Tutors should clearly explain how module materials are structured and how students are expected to use them.
- Weekly or block-level overviews should outline:
 - What needs to be completed
 - What is essential versus optional
 - How materials link to assessments
- Information should be presented in clear, concise language, avoiding unnecessary complexity.

Example of poor practice: Telling students to “engage with the readings for this week” without specifying which ones are essential.

Example of good practice: Providing a bullet-point list with direct links and brief explanations of purpose.

Encouraging clarification and reducing fear of asking

Students with rejection sensitive dysphoria reported avoiding asking questions due to fear of judgement or negative perceptions, which results in misunderstandings going unaddressed and higher risk of student isolation.

Best practice recommendations:

- Tutors should explicitly state that questions and requests for clarification are welcome and expected.
- Communication should normalise confusion as part of learning.
- Tutors should proactively address common misunderstandings in group communications.
- Tutors should also model transparency by acknowledging when multiple interpretations of a task are possible, reducing the pressure on students to “guess correctly”.
- Encouraging clarification and reducing fear of asking and help to foster psychologically safe learning environments, particularly for students who may have experienced marginalisation, misunderstanding, or exclusion in previous educational settings.

2) Structure, organisation and cognitive load

Consistency across materials

Neurodivergent students reported that inconsistent layouts across weeks or modules require repeated adjustment and significantly increased cognitive effort and overwhelm. Consistency allows students to form mental maps of the course, reducing daily decision fatigue.

Best practice recommendations:

- Use a consistent structure for weekly materials across the module.
- Clearly label sections using predictable headings (e.g. ‘This week’s tasks’, ‘Key readings’, ‘Assessment links’) that help students clearly define and absorb what is required and when.
- Avoid unnecessary changes to layout or navigation.

Reducing overwhelm

Students frequently described materials as overwhelming due to dense text and excessive links. Information overload is a recurring theme in neurodivergent student feedback and is known to significantly impact concentration, memory, and motivation.

Best practice recommendations:

- Break content into smaller, clearly defined sections.
- Use bullet points, summaries, and visual cues.
- Provide 'at a glance' summaries highlighting key actions and deadlines.

Where possible, avoid presenting multiple tasks; prioritisation cues help students manage workload more effectively.

Reducing unnecessary cognitive load supports equitable participation by ensuring that success is determined by learning and understanding, rather than by a student's capacity to navigate avoidable complexity or inconsistency.

3) Accessibility, format, and design

Multiple learning formats

Survey findings showed a strong preference for flexible learning formats, including a continued demand for hard-copy materials which are not printed in exclusive contrast colours. Students consistently reported that having more than one format increases autonomy, supports sensory needs, and helps manage concentration fluctuations. Providing materials in accessible and flexible formats reflects a commitment to inclusive practice, ensuring that learning environments are designed to be usable by the widest possible range of students.

Best practice recommendations:

- Provide materials in multiple formats wherever possible (text, audio, video, printable).
- Ensure compatibility with screen readers, note-taking software, and other assistive technologies.
- Offer neurodivergent-friendly versions of key documents.

Visual and linguistic accessibility

Students highlighted the importance of clear presentation to reduce fatigue and frustration. Poor visual layout can create unnecessary sensory strain, which accumulates over time and contributes to disengagement.

Best practice recommendations:

- Use readable fonts, sufficient font size, sufficient spacing, and high-contrast design.
- Avoid overly complex sentence structures.
- Explain technical terms and avoid unexplained jargon.

Where specialised vocabulary is required, a glossary or brief definitions list can significantly support comprehension.

4) Timing, early access and flexibility

Early release of materials

Students shared that executive dysfunction can often make last-minute access particularly challenging.

Best practice recommendations:

- Release materials as early as possible to allow students to work ahead.
- Clearly communicate release schedules and notify students of changes promptly.

Flexible engagement expectations

Students reported that rigid assumptions about linear engagement disadvantage those who need to work in bursts or revisit materials multiple times. Neurodivergent learning often involves cyclical engagement rather than a straight path through weekly content, and flexibility supports this natural variation.

Best practice recommendations:

- Allow flexibility in how students engage with materials, where learning outcomes permit.
- Avoid penalising non-linear study patterns.

5) Assessment-related materials

Clarity of assessment instructions

Unclear or ambiguously worded assessment tasks were repeatedly identified as a major barrier. Ambiguity disproportionately affects students who rely on precision and explicit expectations to begin or sustain task engagement.

Best practice recommendations:

- Assessment briefs should use clear, direct language.
- Provide examples, checklists, or task breakdowns.
- Ensure consistency in guidance across tutors within the same module.

Work examples demonstrating both strong and adequate submissions can significantly reduce anxiety and confusion.

Supportive preparation resources

Students stated that they value assessment-focused materials that reduce uncertainty.

Best practice recommendations:

- Explicitly link module materials to assessment requirements.
- Provide revision summaries or worked examples where appropriate.

Where possible, offer short videos or diagrams to support visual and auditory learners.

6) Tutor training and institutional responsibility

Neurodivergent-informed training

Students reported significant variability in tutor understanding and confidence when supporting neurodivergent learners. Most tutors express willingness to support neurodivergent students, but often feel underprepared or unsure of best practice, highlighting a need for consistent training. Responsibility for inclusive access rests at an institutional level and should not be dependent on individual tutor awareness, student disclosure, or informal negotiation.

Best practice recommendations:

- All teaching and module design staff should receive mandatory, regularly updated training on neurodivergent inclusive teaching and material design.
- Training should be informed by lived experience and current research.
- Tutors should also be supported to further support students, through access to relevant guidance and resources.

Training should also emphasise the importance of consistency across faculties, minimising the inconsistency where access varies depending on the tutor or discipline.

7) Reducing reliance on disclosure

Long diagnostic waiting times mean many students cannot access formal adjustments yet still experience significant barriers. It is important to note that at Open SU there is no requirement for students to be diagnosed to access adjustments necessary for their learning and engagement.

Best practice recommendations:

- Tutors should refer to the document 'Understanding Me as a Learner' when provided by a student and follow the university's formal process for accessing student support information, so that students do not have to repeatedly disclose their needs.
- Inclusive design should reduce the need for individual disclosure.
- Both diagnosed and self-diagnosed students should benefit from accessible materials as standard.

By minimising reliance on disclosure, the OU can reduce stigma and ensure that students who are undiagnosed, in assessment, or unsure whether to disclose, are not disadvantaged particularly in contexts of stigma or long diagnostic waiting times.

Case study example: unmet reasonable adjustment – printed module materials

This below case study illustrates how structural decision-making, insufficient early communication, and reliance on self-management can undermine reasonable adjustments. It highlights the risks of separating module design decisions from disability support processes and reinforces the need for inclusive design that reduces dependence on individual negotiation.

A student raised a complaint after discovering that they would not receive the printed materials that form part of their reasonable adjustment. The need for printed materials was clearly identified in the student's DSA needs assessment as essential for their ability to study. The student explained that their slow processing dyslexia meant they relied heavily on printed materials, larger font sizes, colour-coded notes, and mind maps.

The adjustment offered by the university was Print at Home. The student had already experienced challenges with this form of support. Firstly, the provided printed materials were poorly formatted, giving the student more work to ensure they format them correctly for their use. Secondly, the cost of printing the materials was high.

The university response stated that the decision to exclude printed materials for this module was made jointly by the faculty and Student Experience and Learning Adjustment, based on the view that module outcomes couldn't be achieved through print alone. They pointed to wording on the module information page stating that printed versions would not be available. The university acknowledged that the

information could be more prominent on the webpage and they requested that the team that oversee the module websites investigate if it is possible to make this information more prominent.

The university acknowledged the student's difficult experience, including the discrepancies around font size and margins, and apologised. They clarified that colleagues in the Disability Support Team and Student Support Team should make contact early on with students who have additional requirements or specific requests regarding materials for their studies. They apologised that this contact did not happen prior to registration for the student, because it would have been confirmed that the module materials would not be provided as a printed pack.

It is important to acknowledge that the student felt disadvantaged due to the lack of accessible formats, combined with the expectation to self-manage printing, created a barrier to learning and raised concerns that other disabled students could be facing similar issues.

Conclusion

The evidence from Open SU's neurodivergent student report is clear in that neurodivergent students face systemic barriers in accessing module materials, and these barriers have tangible impacts on wellbeing, retention, and academic success. Addressing these issues requires a shift away from reactive, individualised fixes towards consistent, inclusive design embedded across the university at every level. This cultural shift depends on coordinated action between tutors, curriculum designers, support teams, and importantly leadership to ensure a shared, university-wide standard of accessibility for all students.

As illustrated in the case study example in Section 4.7, when inclusive practice and adjustment processes are not aligned, students can experience additional labour, financial burden, and emotional strain simply to access learning on equitable terms. The case study demonstrates how gaps in communication, curriculum decision-making, and proactive support can compound disadvantage, even where needs have already been formally identified.

By implementing the recommendations outlined in this document, the OU can create learning environments that support neurodivergent students to thrive, while improving clarity, accessibility, and engagement for the entire student population. Inclusive access to module materials is not a specialist provision, it is a marker of high-quality education and should be taken with importance when supporting all



students regardless of diagnosis. Ultimately, inclusive and equitable design benefits everyone and ensures that no student's success is dependent on their ability to navigate avoidable barriers.