

Best Practice in Academic Student Experience: Neurodivergent Students

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Introduction

This best practice document is to be considered in conjunction with the [Best Practice in Academic Student Experience](#). Our research and student feedback has highlighted that Neurodivergent Students (formally diagnosed or self-diagnosed) experience significant challenges in their learning. These challenges are worsened by the inconsistent delivery of support through Student Support Services and Tutor support.

The areas addressed in this report include:

- Tutor training
- Assessment formats and feedback practices
- Accessibility of learning resources

Supporting evidence

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 Inclusion Policy for more information.

Defining Academic Student Experience

The Academic Student Experience encompasses every aspect of a student's journey that helps them successfully complete their studies. This includes:

1. Learning Environment: The ability to effectively and efficiently interact with peers, academics, support services, and materials in a manner that provides a consistent experience for all.
2. Quality of Teaching: Access to stimulating materials and tutoring that broadens knowledge and allows students to apply information beyond their studies.
3. Fair, but Challenging Assessment: Assessments should thoroughly test students' understanding of materials, delivered in a way that meets their needs without compromising the quality assurance required for higher education.
5. Academic Conduct: Encouraging students to maintain academic integrity with clear policies and procedures, ensuring consistency and balancing support with deterrents for future instances.
6. Feedback: Students are offered the opportunity to provide regular feedback on their academic experience that is acted upon in a timely manner.

Pastoral support has not been included in this document, due to this being within the scope of the Student Support Priority Project.

Identified areas

1) Tutor training

Many students reported inconsistent support across tutors and faculties. A lack of understanding of conditions such as ADHD, autism, and dyslexia often leads to unintentionally exclusionary teaching methods. Ensuring all staff are trained in inclusive approaches will help remove systemic barriers.

If tutors are supported to ensure they have a foundational understanding of neurodivergent conditions and inclusive practice, this will have a positive impact on students, as they will feel more confident about approaching tutors and seeking academic support. The learning environment becomes more predictable, accessible, and supportive across all faculties. This can also reduce inconsistent teaching practices and mitigates unconscious exclusion in module delivery. Applying these recommendations also has institutional benefits as it builds confidence and competence in inclusive education.

Best practice recommendations:

- Co-develop mandatory neurodiversity and inclusive teaching training with neurodivergent students to ensure relevance and authenticity.
- Integrate real-life case studies and lived experience narratives to provide meaningful context.
- Deliver content using interactive, reflective methods such as scenario-based learning, quizzes, and discussion prompts.
- Schedule annual refresher sessions to maintain consistency and up-to-date knowledge across staff.
- Monitor engagement and impact through completion rates, feedback evaluations, and longitudinal learning analytics.

Consistency across tutors

While students appreciate that tutors bring individual styles and experiences to their teaching, they also expect a consistent standard of support across the institution. Inconsistencies can lead to unequal experiences and confusion, especially for students studying across multiple disciplines.

Best practice recommendations:

- Provide tutors with time and resources to share best practices and collaborate across faculties.

- Monitor and address discrepancies in tutor support to ensure a uniform student experience.
- Ensure tutors receive regular training to stay aligned with current OU policies and procedures.

2) Assessment formats and feedback practices

Assessment formats

Neurodivergent students often face challenges with traditional assessments due to difficulties with executive functioning, processing speed, or anxiety. Offering varied, accessible options will ensure fairer opportunities to demonstrate learning.

It would benefit students if the university considered expanding the assessment format options across all modules. This can include students being able to select assessment types aligned with their strengths (e.g. verbal, visual, practical). Students will likely experience reduced anxiety and experience improved performance by minimising overload. This promotes fairness by acknowledging diverse processing styles and learning profiles. It encourages creativity and critical thinking through varied modes of expression. This can lead to stronger engagement and higher retention, particularly among marginalised learners.

Best practice recommendations:

- Collaborate with faculties to audit and map assessment types, identifying opportunities to offer alternative formats.
- Pilot flexible assessments, such as oral presentations, visual portfolios, or project-based submissions, with a formal evaluation framework.
- Develop equitable assessment guidance for tutors to ensure consistency across diverse formats.
- Communicate all assessment options clearly and early within module materials and student handbooks. Provide pre-recorded “empty room” sessions that cover core module content. This ensures consistency and frees up tutorial time for more interactive learning.

Tutor Feedback Practices

For many neurodivergent students, receiving feedback about their assignment can be a source of anxiety. The feedback is not always received in the tone or manner that it was meant. This is worsened by feedback that is vague or overly critical,

which can lead to misunderstandings and emotional distress, especially for students with Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria (RSD).

Students can be better supported to benefit from the feedback by developing clear, compassionate and consistent feedback practises for all assignments. This can include tutors using a standardised template and tone guidance to ensure consistency.

The aim is for feedback to become a constructive and motivating learning tool rather than a source of anxiety. We want to ensure that students are clear on how to improve and feel emotionally supported in the process. This can strengthen the student's academic resilience and motivation through affirming communication.

Best practice recommendations:

- Introduce standardised feedback templates that emphasise clarity, encouragement, and actionable next steps.
- Share annotated examples of high-quality, supportive feedback as part of staff development.
- Establish peer moderation panels to review feedback consistency and quality across courses.
- Encourage tutors to review student profiles or make use of tools such as *understand me as a learner*, to understand student support needs.

3) Accessibility of learning resources

Online library

Students report difficulty navigating the digital library interface, which can be cluttered and overwhelming. This leads to disengagement or loss of study time. Improving the online library and learning resources will help students navigate digital resources with greater ease, efficiency, and independence. This can help reduce cognitive overload and frustration, particularly for those with ADHD, dyslexia, or processing difficulties. It will enhance equity of access to learning materials through simplified design and inclusive features. Improved accessibility encourages deeper engagement with academic content through clear, user-friendly navigation. Ensures all students can make the most of available resources without needing to request adjustments.

Best practice recommendations:

- Redesign the library and digital learning interfaces based on usability testing with neurodivergent students.

- Streamline navigation, reduce visual and cognitive load, and enhance search functionalities.
- Provide walkthrough videos, plain language guides, and format filters to support self-navigation.
- Continuously collect feedback from diverse student users to inform iterative improvements.

Module Forums

Module forums have great benefits to students, they enhance peer to peer collaboration and build a strong sense of community. We would like to see a structured, inclusive digital space that accommodates neurodivergent communication style. Students want to engage more easily and frequently with their tutors and peers.

Many students forget to return to forum posts, struggle with cluttered layouts, or feel unsure how to contribute. This discourages peer interaction and collaboration.

Best practice recommendations:

- Introduce visual thread indicators, reply notifications, and summary functions to simplify forum engagement.
- Reduce interface complexity by decluttering layouts and refining post formatting tools.
- Provide templates for common types of responses to lower barriers to participation.
- Use continuous student feedback to drive iterative forum design enhancements.

Study Planning

Neurodivergent students often benefit from additional study skills support. As part of this support, it would greatly benefit students if study planning can be better supported, so that students are less reliant on extensions and are less likely to postpone their end of module exams. For many Neurodivergent students, executive dysfunction makes it hard to visualise deadlines, organise study time, or break tasks into manageable steps. A planner designed with these barriers in mind could provide vital scaffolding.

With the right support in place, students gain greater control over their time and academic tasks. They can reduce last minute stress and anxiety by promoting

routine and forward planning. We can encourage executive function development through structured and customisable tools. This will support independence and self-regulation in a non-judgemental, empowering format.

Best practice recommendations:

- Co-design the planner tool with neurodivergent students, prioritising usability and customisation.
- Include features such as visual timers, flexible time-blocking layouts, colour coding, and progress tracking.
- Ensure accessibility across both desktop and mobile platforms, with offline functionality where possible.
- Integrate seamlessly with course calendars and assignment deadlines for automatic reminders.