

# Supporting Neurodiverse learners in universities

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## Neurodivergent students are capable of visual thinking, pattern organisation and creative thinking, thus they should not be defined as intellectually disabled, write Bhuvaneshwari B and Sharoon Sunny

Today, organisations are compelled to include a diverse workforce and bring into their fold employees who can offer innovative solutions. Neurodivergent workers could offer organisations the competitive advantage they seek. But, they are unable to source neurodivergent employees with requisite skills because higher educational institutions (HEIs) are yet to find ways to include them on the campuses.



In India, the idea of neurodiversity is very fuzzy. The Rights of Persons with

Disabilities (RPWD) Act (2016) considers neurodiversity as a form of intellectual disability. Neurodivergent are capable of visual thinking, pattern organisation and creative thinking - necessary ingredients for innovation. Therefore, defining them as intellectually disabled positions their abilities erroneously. Knowing that these individuals possess average or above average intelligence, not including them on college campuses leaves a significant group out of the workforce.

Currently, we do not have accurate data indicating how many neurodiverse students complete high school and actually enter universities. University campuses pose several new challenges, and, for neurodiverse students, the challenges are manifold. In our experience, offering students summer programmes to transition into university spaces has been quite useful in acclimatising them. But, in conversations with several practitioners, we've learnt that several universities still have hurdles to cross before neurodiverse students can be fully included. The challenges largely arise from institutional and instructional problems.

## **Institutional-level problems**

Attitudinal barriers of stereotypes and prejudices about certain groups of students, such as those with disabilities prevent some people from fully accepting and valuing diversity in the classroom. Neurodiversity is not limited to a specific gender, caste or religion. It is more often, intersectional in nature. Therefore, exploring intersectionalities and providing the required mental health support and accommodations is important to meet the dynamic needs of these individuals.

While attitudinal barriers are somewhat imperceptible, the more visible barriers of limited resources are quite rampant in many universities and colleges in India. Providing accessible materials and hiring staff with expertise in supporting students with disabilities are some aspects that universities can consider. Some neurodiverse students may need sensory-friendly spaces. These 'sensory refuge' areas are quiet, low-stimulation spaces to help students feel comfortable and focused. Physical infrastructure in many universities is not designed to support such spaces.

While some institutions have been at the forefront in providing assistive technology, several still are unable to provide basic text-to-speech software and other tools to help neurodiverse students access and engage with the material. While the possibility of hiring trained faculty is ideal, the reality of quality training is still challenging since access and certifications are not easily accessible. The other hurdle is effective communication and coordination among various departments and support services leading to a lack of continuity of support, which in turn hinders students' progress.

## **Instructional-level problems**

An individualised approach that includes providing accommodations, such as extended test-taking time or note-taking assistance, or using different teaching methods that are more tailored to the student's needs, is the best way to handle neurodivergent. Many faculty and staff members find this particular aspect demanding and challenging since individualised support within a tight academic schedule requires time and expertise and not all teachers have the time and training to do so.

Ideally, training faculty in Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is useful since it supports the design of products, environments, programmes and services to be usable by all people to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialised design and applies to assistive devices including advanced technologies for a particular group of persons with disabilities (RPWD Act, 2016).

It is also important to consider recommendations from a certified physician, especially if the student has been assessed previously. Assessments provide important information about students' abilities, strengths, and weaknesses and can guide the process of providing individualised support.

There aren't ready-made solutions to support neurodiverse students on large university campuses, but embracing inclusionary practices has offered us ways of enabling meaningful engagement for our University students. Continued accommodations, support

services, creating an inclusive environment, sensitising peers, providing flexible curriculum and instruction, and encouraging self-advocacy can be effective ways to support neurodiverse students. Involving neurodiverse students in the process of creating accommodations and support services, and creating student-centric approaches where lessons are tailored to meet their needs has brought self-advocacy to the forefront where students articulate their own needs and communicate them effectively with stakeholders.

Although these tasks may look daunting, a few initial steps towards creating safe and inclusive environments for neurodiverse students is possible. A simple affirmation to provide entry and access to higher education spaces is the first step towards this goal. The more we include students with disabilities, the possibility of helping them find suitable jobs in the future becomes a reality. For organisations, leveraging talents that neurodivergence offers – innovation and productivity, helps them move towards progressive work environments.

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