

Neurodiverse ECR Experiences

**Roisin Gwyon, Bethan V. Ritchie, Dr Anna E. Seabourne,
Prof George A. Constantinides and Dr Paul M. Seldon**

Imperial College, London UK

External consultant: Rachel Van Krimpen

University of Nottingham UK

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1. Executive Summary

1.1. Project Overview

The Early Career Researcher Institute (ECRI) obtained funding from Research England to enhancing the research culture and community at Imperial by centering on the lived experiences of neurodivergent Early Career Researchers (ECRs), to create a more neuroinclusive research environment, with better support and awareness of the needs of neurodivergent researchers.

1.2. Data collection

Data collection for the project included:

- Desk based review of current practice at Imperial and other Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (see Section 3)
- Focus groups with doctoral researchers and a focus group with staff and supervisors supporting research (see Section 4)

1.3. Key Findings Summary

The following summaries key findings under the research aims.

Aim 1:- Enhancing Neurodiversity-Affirming Communication

- Education on Neurodiversity:
Awareness of different neurotypes and their associated strengths and challenges vary; Neuroinclusive communication must be based on individual communicative needs and lived experiences;
Literature recommends more widespread and mandatory training or workshop attendance on neuro-inclusion.
- Neuro-Inclusive Language
Neuro-inclusive language, including pronouns and vocabulary choice, is crucial in neuro-affirmative PGR-staff communication;
Evidence shows some HEIs promote open discussions on language preferences between neurodiverse students and staff;
It is important to discuss awareness and preferences around social and medical models of autism and resulting language in ECR-staff conversations.
- Other Neuro-Inclusive Communication Strategies
Select HEIs use explicit shared expectations and responsibilities practices in academic roles, such as around supervisory meetings or doctoral tasks;
Examples of needs and preferences in neurodiverse communication can be supported by providing examples;
This communicative transparency in HEIs can impact autistic view of themselves, trust and openness to communicate.
- Administrative Burden

Some administrative processes can be paperwork-heavy and repetitive, which can be detrimental to ECR-staff-departmental communication;
A centralised avenue for all ECR and staff support appears preferable in literature and other HEIs;
The requirement of a formal diagnosis for support access can be a barrier for neuro-affirmative practices and communication channels.

Aim 2:- Neurodivergent External Research Communication

- Support for External Events:
Other HEIs suggest support with planning the event, including booking and travel arrangements, can improve neurodivergents' experiences;
Literature suggests that neurodivergents reflect on their own capacities, such as number of events to attend in one day, to help planning;
Institutions offer skill-specific support, such as networking or presentation skills, before events to improve neurodivergents' familiarity and experience at the event.
- Building an ECR Community
Some HEIs propose mentorship or peer support which has social benefits for neurodivergent academics at external events;
Creating connections online with other attendees before events can help increase social contacts, familiarity with and sense of belonging at the event.

Aim 3:- Experiences of ADHD and Dyslexia in Academia and Doctoral Theses

- Awareness and Misconceptions of Neurodivergence:
Reports claim academic understanding of neurodivergence, such as ADHD, can be simplistic and lack nuance;
HEIs illustrate that writing support, such as assistance with planning and project management, can better support neurodivergent ECRs;
Staff need to be aware of prevalent experiences of RSD and shame, and approach feedback with positive reinforcement and support accordingly.
- Neurodivergent Strengths and Challenges
Both the strengths and challenges of ADHD and dyslexia need to be openly discussed, acknowledged and used to advantage when possible;
To support challenges, text-based support for dyslexics and executive functioning support for ADHD are most commonly illustrated in HEIs.
- Academic Research Cultures and Neurodivergence
Understanding of impostor syndrome varies, but needs to be supported appropriately due to its prevalence in neurodivergent PGRs' experiences;
Academic research cultures, including overworking and presenteeism, can be detrimental to neurodivergents due to their energy needs;
For this reason, practices to check on and support neurodivergent ECR wellbeing are crucial.

Aim 4:- PGRs - ECRs Transition and Reasonable Adjustments (RAs)

- **Administrative Processes:**
Similarly to aim one findings, administrative processes for RAs can be unclear for PGRs to staff transitions as managing sources and departments change in multiple HEIs; HEIs illustrate that integrating RAs processes into a streamlined and centralised location can better support neurodivergents.
- **Physical Environment**
The physical work environment is a significant cause for both increased neurodivergent institutional belonging and workplace challenges and requires prioritisation; Some reported RAs were positive in HEIs, while others noted work expectations change from PGR to staff, such as ECRs expected to work on-campus more frequently; For this reason, explicitly discussing necessary RAs before PGR-staff transition and regular RAs updates with relevant staff is reported to be positive for neurodivergent ECRs.
- **Mentorship and Outreach**
Few ECR mentorship or outreach opportunities were noted in other HEIs to support transitions, with most being UG or early ECR transition focused; As ECRs were underrepresented in information found, a possible avenue to expand support is PGR to staff transition and RAs support, including identifying department responsible for RAs and exploring more frequent RAs reviews and updates as needs change.

1.4. Key recommendations

The following highlights key recommendations from the research project.

Training

Facilitate education on neurodivergence and neuroinclusive practices (including verbal and non-verbal communication, ECR-supervisory relationships, and neuroinclusive language) across Imperial College, e.g. embedding it within current mandatory training and induction materials.

Examining opportunities to embed neurodiversity training within supervisor training and inductions and open it across all groups, as not everyone will be aware of neurodiversity within their team (or indeed of their own neurodivergence).

Examining opportunities for inclusive design, to embed neurodivergent ECR-specific support within existing training. This may be achieved by looking at existing training offerings through a neuro-inclusion lens.

Capture of neurodivergent strengths within training materials developed on neurodiversity and on relevant support webpages

Neurodivergent individuals could be recruited as organisers for workshops on neuro-inclusive communication due to their possible strengths as direct communicators.

Examine opportunities and training which link directly to writing and support neurodiverse ECRs including support for editing and proofreading.

Develop ECR-specific neurodivergent conference support, such as on ECR conference time management, conference experiences, or presentations training, together with. Development of conference mentorship practices.

Community

Build a neurodivergent ECR community, either via a Teams channel or in-person events such as coffee mornings or informal presentations on neuro-affirming topics. This creates space to share neurodivergent experiences and both informal and informal networking for neurodivergent ECRs across departments.

Create an activity to highlight neurodivergent role models at Imperial.

Recognise the need for down time and the impact of social activities in academia for neurodiverse ECRs, to improve expectations and scheduling.

Support

Incorporate preferences in neuro-affirmative communication and practices in PGR-supervisory 'Shared Expectations' documents to increase neuroinclusive ECR-supervisor communication.

Introduction of neuroinclusive feedback training would facilitate understanding and best practice. More regular and dedicated supervisory meetings to discuss neurodivergent RAs

Mechanisms to ensuring all support is available to people who need it whether they have a diagnosis or not e.g. sharing a list of examples of support available and ideas for reasonable adjustments that would assist in supporting neurodivergent researchers, who may be unaware of these.

Increase mentorship possibilities for neurodivergent ECRs in the form of PGR-staff mentorship, or first- and final-year PGR mentorship to increase informal neurodivergent support and sense of community and facilitate ECR transitions to less familiar environments and academic practices.

Process

Streamline Reasonable Adjustment processes for students and staff to one, centralised system. This would increase transparency of administrative processes and clarify appropriate contacts and routes for Reasonable adjustments and other support;

Implement the 'Workplace Passport' system currently available to staff , additionally for PGRs, which would facilitate student-staff workplace adjustments and transitions.

Environment

Creation of decompressed workspaces, development of a quiet spaces map and using the AUDE report to inform the development of a plan with Estates?

To assist neurodiverse ECRs it was recommended that more explicit mutual expectation practices around process and interactions in group or lab meetings across neurodiverse people would be beneficial.

Create a commitment to modelling best practice in neuro-inclusivity at all Imperial events, with the aim of influencing practice more widely or formation of a HEI sector working group to co-create a neuro-inclusive research conference charter or similar which you could then ask big name conferences and other universities to sign up to.

2. Full report

2.1. Glossary of Terms

For readers' reference, key terms related to neurodiversity and the project's aims are defined (Inclusive Practices, 2022):

Neurodivergent: to describe an individual whose brain functions, processes and learns information differently than neurotypicals. Someone who is autistic, ADHD or dyslexic is neurodivergent;

Allistic: an individual who is not autistic;

Neurotypical: to describe an individual who is not neurodivergent (i.e. not autistic, ADHD, dyslexic);

Neurodiverse: used for groups of people containing both neurodivergent and neurotypicals, to acknowledge that brains function differently;

Neuro-affirmative: acknowledges a person's strengths, interests, and differences in a positive way;

Neuro-inclusive: recognising the neurodiversity of groups and taking steps to embrace and support different types of information processing, learning and communication styles.

Early Career Researcher (ECR): an individual in their early academic career (e.g. a PhD student, postdoctoral researcher or fellow)

Postgraduate Researcher (PGR): a PhD student (i.e. undertaking a doctorate research degree)

Reasonable Adjustments (RAs): part of disability support tailored to individual needs. Reasonable Adjustments is a legal term derived from the UK Equality Act (2010).

2.2. Introduction

A neurodivergent mind is one that significantly differs from societal expectations of typicality. In a world designed around neurotypical people, neurodivergent people – some 1 in 7 of the population - can be disabled, unless an active effort is taken ensure neuroinclusivity.

We recognise that neurodivergent early career researchers already make a significant and valuable contribution to the research and research environment at Imperial College. We aim to further enable our neurodiverse community, raising awareness amongst staff and students of neuroinclusive practices in research, inline with Imperial's EDI Strategy to embed an EDI focus in our research culture, to improve the support of disabled research students.

Learning from the lived experience of neurodivergent early career researchers at Imperial College , we identify a number of neurodivergent barriers and recommend addition of further neuroinclusive measures within the university.

2.3. Methods

2.3.1. Review of Current Provision at Imperial

A graduate teaching assistant (GTA) was employed to conduct a desk based review of the current provision at Imperial across departments and support services. The GTA brought their lived experience and insight in being a neurodivergent researcher to the project. The GTA was supervised by a member of ECRI, supported by 3 further members of ECRI staff.

2.3.2. Review of Neuroinclusive Research Practices at other Higher Education Institutions (HEI).

The above GTA was also employed to conduct a desk based review of literature and HEI Web resources offered across the HEI sector. This review was primarily focused around 4 main areas:

1. Improving communication between supervisors / line managers and ECRs to ensure neurodiversity-affirming practice, bridging the autistic / allistic divide, whether it is the ECR or the supervisor / line manager who is autistic.
2. Practical approaches to improving the autistic and ADHD ECR community's experience of communicating research outside of the university, especially in unfamiliar settings (e.g. conferences).
3. The experience of dyslexic and ADHD PGR students in writing extended dissertations required for research degrees, and the role such dissertations play in a modern research environment with an ever-broadening scope of what counts as "research output".
4. The transition from PGR research student to research staff for those ECRs requiring reasonable adjustments, and how to ease the burden of different systems and approaches on opposite sides of this boundary.

2.3.3. Focus Groups

Three focus groups were conducted to explore the first-hand research experience of neurodivergent ECRs and neurodivergent PIs/supervisors at Imperial College. Two student focus groups and one Post-Doc, Fellow and Staff focus groups were conducted.

Questions were designed to address the 4 main research areas and reviewed in consultation with EDI groups; Able@Imperial, the Student Union's Neurodiversity society, EDIC and DAS. These questions were used in a semi-structured manner in the focus groups and circulated to focus group members.

The transcripts were anonymized prior to analysis. The transcripts were analysed and reviewed by the GTA and supervisor and examined for identified barriers, current support, practice and recommendations to assist neurodivergent researchers.

Emergent themes from each focus group were compared and combined where discussion focused around the same topic. These emergent themes were then grouped under the areas of environment, process, support and recommendations.

2.3.4. External Consultation

The desk based review (Section 3) on current practices at Imperial College and other HEIs and the focus group analysis (Section 4) were shared with Rachael Van Krimpen, Faculty Director of Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and People (Science), University of Nottingham, as our external consultant, to provide further insight and reflection on recommendations. These were incorporated into the reports.

2.4. Key Findings

The following summaries key findings under the research aims.

2.4.1. Neuroinclusive communication within the research environment and across the autistic/allistic divide.

Discrepancies in neurodiversity education among student-staff groups contribute to communication barriers at the ECR level. Institutional initiatives seek to address these gaps, to provide more effective autistic-allistic communication.

Education on inclusive language and explicit discussions of linguistic preferences are crucial for building acceptance and mutual respect within neurodiverse academic communities.

Fostering neuro-inclusive communication requires a multifaceted approach. Key considerations include explicit discussions on shared expectations, transparent communication of inclusion measures in academic and social settings, and increased awareness of structured communication practices.

Limitations of restricting support services to those with formal diagnoses was identified with many HEIs moving to inclusive access to support effective communication between autistic and allistic individuals in academic settings.

2.4.2. Communication of research outside of Imperial

Supporting neurodivergent ECRs at external academic events - such as conferences and networking opportunities - requires multifaceted strategies, including support with executive functioning, skill development, and sensory considerations. The current lack of institutionally available guidance on neurodivergent-specific external event support underscores the need for further development of resources and structured support systems to enhance these experiences within academic institutions.

A mentorship structure tailored to ECRs would enable experienced academics to share insights on conference navigation, increasing familiarity with these settings and facilitating smoother transitions into new academic environments. Such mentors could also offer guidance on implicit academic norms - such as self-introductions, appropriate dress, and distinctions between symposium and poster session etiquette - which are often not explicitly discussed in academia.

Mentorship can play a crucial role in addressing imposter phenomenon (previously referred to as imposter syndrome), a common challenge among neurodivergent PGRs who may feel inadequate or inexperienced compared to senior academics.

Dedicated neurodivergent community groups with varying objectives, such as to share experiences and offer peer support, or to foster broader neurodiverse discussions on neuro-inclusivity in academia are teaching and learning, provide a space for knowledge-sharing, potential research collaborations, and opportunities for neurodivergent researchers to engage beyond their institution.

The sense of connection can be particularly valuable for neurodivergent ECRs before academic events to build connections with other event attendees. This allows neurodivergent ECRs to exchange strategies, share experiences, and collectively develop approaches to navigating the academic landscape more effectively. By establishing relationships within networks, individuals may experience a greater sense of belonging and support when engaging in external academic events.

2.4.3. The experience of dyslexic and ADHD PGR students in writing extended dissertations required for research degrees

Reports have emphasised the importance of supervisor training to improve feedback, particularly by incorporating positive reinforcement in feedback and fostering open discussions on emotional responses to criticism. Increased awareness and support mechanisms are essential in ensuring that neurodivergent ECRs can navigate their academic careers effectively.

The literature contains limited reports on the lived experiences of ADHD and dyslexic individuals in academia, but highlights various strengths, challenges, and example

support systems. Continued research and inclusive policy development are necessary to ensure that neurodivergent perspectives inform institutional practices, regarding the demands of the doctoral thesis process.

While many institutions provide resources focused on study strategies, productivity, and social integration, it is equally important to address the emotional needs of neurodivergent ECRs. Initiatives to share emotions and the challenges faced during doctoral research ensure that academia is affirming for neurodivergent researchers, fostering environments that encourage their continued participation and success.

2.4.4. Transition from PGR to research staff

Reasonable Adjustment (RA) processes differ across institutions and often entail varying administrative routes for ECRs and staff. Gaps remain, particularly in supporting transitions from student to staff status. Expanding and adapting successful initiatives, such as centralised adjustment tracking systems, to encompass student-staff transitions represents a valuable area for future development.

The transition from PGR to staff presents challenges due to shifting workplace expectations and academic culture. At the institutional level, ensuring that neurodivergent staff have a designated point of contact to discuss their evolving workplace requirements is imperative, given the diversity of neurodivergent profiles and needs.

The provision of virtual transition support, such as tours of new workspaces or campuses, could be a valuable resource for neurodivergent ECRs, allowing them to familiarise themselves with new environments from a safe space and appropriately plan potential RAs.

2.4.5. Focus Groups

The three focus groups discussed their experiences, barriers, current support and examples of good practice. The themes listed below emerged from their discussions and were grouped by environment, process and support topics to aid flow and narrative.

Environment

- Academic research culture
- Neuroinclusive language and communication
- Neuroinclusive Awareness
- Neurodivergent self-awareness
- Applying autistic strengths to special interests
- Neurodivergent Community
- Conferences
- Wider community

Process

Diagnostic process
Reasonable Adjustments (RAs)
Transparent processes vs Vague administrative processes
Disability Departmental Officer (DDO)
Neurodiverse communication/Academic communication
Managing expectations
Physical Workplace
Accommodation
Mentorship
Project management
Thesis writing / Viva
PGR-ECR Transition

Support

Neurodivergence as Invisibility
PhD Structure and Neurodivergence
Individual Cultures and Neurodiversity
Social Processing
Practical Support
Education
Accessibility of Academic Information

2.4.6. External consultation

The external consultant Rachel Van Krimpen added examples of current practice to enhance the desk based review of current HEI provision. These have been added within the report (Section 3)

2.5. Key recommendations

2.5.1. Recommendations from Desk based research.

The following highlights key recommendations under the research aims.

Short-Term Recommendations

- Facilitate mandatory education on neurodivergence and neuroinclusive practices (including verbal and non-verbal communication, ECR-supervisory relationships, and neuroinclusive language) for individuals working in neurodiverse ECR, supervisory, or other staff teams;
- Consider incorporating preferences in neuro-affirmative communication and practices in PGR-supervisory ‘Shared Expectations’ documents to increase neuroinclusive ECR-supervisor communication;
- Build a neurodivergent ECR community, either via a Teams channel or in-person events such as coffee mornings or informal presentations on neuro-affirming topics. This creates space to share neurodivergent experiences and both informal and formal networking for neurodivergent ECRs across departments;
- Develop ECR-specific neurodivergent support, such as on ECR time management, conference experiences, or presentations training.

Long-Term Recommendations

- Discuss possibilities of streamlining RA processes for students and staff to one, centralised system. This would increase transparency of necessary administrative processes and clarify appropriate contacts and routes for RA and other support;
- Consider implementing the ‘Workplace Passport’ system currently available to staff additionally for PGRs, which would facilitate student-staff workplace adjustments;
- Increase mentorship possibilities for neurodivergent ECRs in the form of PGR-staff mentorship, conference mentorship, or first- and final-year PGR mentorship to increase informal neurodivergent support and sense of community and facilitate ECR transitions to less familiar environments and academic practices.

2.5.2. Recommendations from Focus Groups

A total of 38 recommendations were received within the different themes identified; these have been grouped by environment, process and support topics.

Recommendations include training, clarity in expectations, raising awareness of neurodivergence, practical support, community development and celebrating a neurodiverse culture.

Environment:

Academic research culture

- Neurodivergent Inclusion could be assisted by more support and mentorship to creating positive inclusion. The recognition of dedicated role models could be used to change culture of departments that have varying acceptance or knowledge of neurodiversity.

Neuroinclusive language and communication

- Training or conversations around best communicative practices would assist inclusivity
- Introduction of neuroinclusive feedback training would facilitate understanding and best practice. More regular and dedicated supervisory meetings to discuss neurodivergent RAs
- Some PGRs reported using analogies to describe neurodivergent experiences to neurotypical supervisors who may not understand, and have found this to work well.
- Neurodivergent individuals could be recruited as organisers for workshops on neuro-inclusive communication due to their possible strengths as direct communicators.

Neuroinclusive Awareness

- It was recommended that more widespread or mandatory training on neuro-affirming practices would improve awareness.

Neurodivergent self-awareness

- Sharing a list of examples of support available and ideas for reasonable adjustments would assist in supporting neurodivergent researchers, who may be unaware of these.

Applying autistic strengths to special interests

- Training and communication should highlight different strengths that a neurodiverse mind bring to research were highlighted within research e.g. engaging in a PhD as an opportunity to use special interests of deep research as an autistic strength.

Neurodivergent Community

- Creation and promoting of neurodivergent communities and groups to make connections and share experiences would facilitate community for neurodivergent researchers.

Conferences

- Social support at conferences and more inclusive practices, including support for navigating them as neurodivergent researcher would facilitate inclusion.
- Support accommodations for presentations (e.g. shorter slots, use of scripts) may be offered but not all students have found these accommodations appropriate for their needs
- Training for ADHD researchers for how to navigate distractions in conferences, where conference sessions can be distracting if topics are repeated or slow paced in delivery.
- Inclusivity could also be improved by conference skills sessions for presenting to neurodiverse audiences.
- The practice of having conference networking volunteers was seen as of benefit. Other suggested adjustments included; examples of conference etiquette and explicit guidelines, support for navigating poster sessions as neurodivergent, assisting with travel adjustments for conferences (e.g. appropriate seating on plane), coloured ribbons for different needs in conferences or conference buddy support, would also support neurodivergent researchers.

Wider community

- It was recommended that more dedicated initiatives could be used to connect neurodivergent ECRs across departments and raise awareness of their experiences which can feel as invisible to the wider community.

*Process***Diagnostic process**

- Post-diagnosis support was recommended to develop self-awareness of own neurodivergence, as were more regular check-ups on changing needs or neurodivergent researchers post-diagnosis.

Reasonable Adjustments (RAs)

- The development of inclusive practices and support guidance to remove the need to receive a neurodivergent diagnosis and declare to access support, would enable more researchers to put strategies in place to support themselves.

Transparent processes vs Vague administrative processes

- To assist neurodivergent researchers, it is recommended that communication and administrative processes be streamline to clarify who to contact for adjustments and the relevant link to research departments.

Disability Departmental Officer (DDO)

- Communication expectations between Departmental Disability Officers in facilitating staff-student communication, need to be clarified to standardise best practice.

Neurodiverse communication/Academic communication

- Training to improve communication differences between autistic-allistics and improve awareness of challenges in understanding of social cues and norms, as well as acceptance of differences so that neurodivergents do not have to justify their experiences to neurotypicals.
- Dissemination of current good practice, involving providing written and visual information for neuro-inclusive academic communication, supported by ensuring feedback is supportive, constructive, and inclusive was recommended. Neurodiversity could be further supported by more flexibility in forms of academic research communication beyond written communication.

Managing expectations

- To assist neurodiverse researchers, it was recommended that more explicit mutual expectation practices around process and interactions in group or lab meetings across neurodiverse people would be beneficial.

Physical Workplace

- Laboratory spaces were identified as presenting various sensory difficulties in workplaces potentially resulting overwhelm, these spaces would be improved by providing elements of control e.g. dimmable lighting for workspaces or viva locations. and calm space options.
- Neurodiverse researchers would be supported by clear workspace expectations, e.g. what equipment goes where, cultivating responsibility, together with the provision of further disabled researcher spaces.

Accommodation

- The provision of PGR-specific bursaries to assist with living costs for disabled students, to access PGR accommodation nearer campus to reduce travel time and overwhelm.

Mentorship

- The generation and use of a buddy or mentoring system was recommended to support neurodiverse researchers.

Project management

- Raising awareness of supervisors of different neurodivergent approaches to large projects.
- Providing guidance and advice to neurodivergent researchers e.g. ADHD researchers, in breaking down big projects into small tasks.

Thesis writing / Viva

- Support for editing and proofreading would be of benefit and access to and use of bionic reading as a methodology was suggested.
- Increase staff awareness of how the Viva affects neurodivergent researchers and potential Viva accommodations, consider current practice that act as a barrier.

PGR-ECR Transition

- Support in transitioning from current practice to unfamiliar spaces would benefit neurodiverse researchers. This would be facilitated by more regular check-ins and specifically when transitioning from PGR-ECR.

*Support:***Neurodivergence as Invisibility**

- Recommended having more dedicated initiatives to connect neurodivergent ECRs across departments to support Neurodiversity and raise awareness of neurodivergent experiences, as the experiences can feel invisible.

PhD Structure and Neurodivergence

- Explicit conversations between ECRs and supervisors or managers need to cover individual preferences and needs around the structural demands of the PhD and research, acknowledging that no two neurodivergent experiences are the same. These conversations would ease transitions into research.

Individual Cultures and Neurodiversity

- Publicising Imperial neuro-inclusive practices and education to neurodiverse ECRs from cultures that do not have neuro-inclusive practices and education, to facilitate and encourage transition into research at Imperial.

Social Processing

- Recognising the need for down time and the impact of social activities in academia for neurodiverse ECRs, to improve expectations and scheduling.

Practical Support

- The focus group identified the benefits of having regular neurodivergence-specific meetings between PGR and supervisors, separate from research progress discussions. Allocating specific time rather than tagging on end of meetings.

Education

- Education of Imperial supervisors could be improved, increasing awareness and acceptance of neurodivergent behaviours and challenges, and the support available.

Accessibility of Academic Information

- Ensuring uptake of good practice in the beneficial use of accessible technology (e.g. in presentation slides), and the central training and guidance provided at Imperial would improve accessibility of academic information.

2.5.3. Recommendations from External consultation

The external consultation of the focus group activities, desk based report and recommendations, resulted in further recommendations as shown below.

- Examining opportunities to embed on neurodiversity within supervisor training and inductions and open it across all groups, as not everyone will be aware of neurodiversity within their team (or indeed of their own neurodivergence).
- Examining opportunities for inclusive design, to embed neurodivergent ECR-specific support within existing training. This may be achieved by looking at existing training offerings through a neuro-inclusion lens.
- Examine opportunities and training which link directly to writing and support neurodiverse ECRs.
- Creation of decompressed workspaces, development of a quiet spaces map and using the AUDE report to inform the development of a plan with Estates?
- Capture of neurodivergent strengths within training materials developed on neurodiversity and on relevant support webpages
- Create an activity to highlight neurodivergent role models at Imperial
- Mechanisms to ensuring all support is available to people who need it whether they have a diagnosis or not.
- Create a commitment to modelling best practice in neuroinclusivity at all Imperial events, with the aim of influencing practice more widely or formation of a HEI sector working group to co-create a neuro-inclusive research conference

charter or similar which you could then ask big name conferences and other universities to sign up to.

2.6. Web page development

New Web pages will be generated on the ECRI site to showcase best practice and highlight resources. These Web pages will link to support and training for neurodivergent researchers and to support and training to develop a more inclusive neurodiverse culture at Imperial College.

3. ECRI Neurodiversity Literature Review Report

Title: ECRI Neurodiversity Literature Review Report

Project: Early Career Research Institute (ECRI) Neurodiversity Project

Project Supervisor: Dr Paul Seldon

Report Author: Roisin Gwyon

External Reviewer: Rachel Van Krimpen
Faculty Director of Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and People (Science)
University of Nottingham

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Glossary of Terms

For readers' reference, key terms related to neurodiversity and the project's aims are defined (Inclusive Practices, 2022):

Neurodivergent: to describe an individual whose brain functions, processes and learns information differently than neurotypicals. Someone who is autistic, ADHD or dyslexic is neurodivergent;

Allistic: an individual who is not autistic;

Neurotypical: to describe an individual who is not neurodivergent (i.e. not autistic, ADHD, dyslexic);

Neurodiverse: used for groups of people containing both neurodivergent and neurotypicals, to acknowledge that brains function differently;

Neuro-affirmative: acknowledges a person's strengths, interests, and differences in a positive way;

Neuro-inclusive: recognising the neurodiversity of groups and taking steps to embrace and support different types of information processing, learning and communication styles.

Early Career Researcher (ECR): an individual in their early academic career (e.g. a PhD student, postdoctoral researcher or fellow)

Postgraduate Researcher (PGR): a PhD student (i.e. undertaking a doctorate research degree)

Reasonable Adjustments (RAs): part of disability support tailored to individual needs. Reasonable Adjustments is a legal term derived from the UK Equality Act (2010).

Chapter 1: Introduction to Project Context

Introduction

Conversations around neurodiversity - defined as the diversity of human minds in neurocognitive functioning (Walker, 2021) - have gained increasing attention within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Quinn, 2023). This shift is largely driven by efforts to develop more inclusive teaching, learning, and academic cultures (Logan, 2024). Additionally, the topic has become increasingly relevant as more students receive diagnoses of neurodivergence, such as autism spectrum condition (ASC), attention dysregulation hyperactivity development (ADHD), or dyslexia (Supporting a Neurodiverse PGR Community, 2023). The trend is particularly pronounced in the doctoral student community. Since the 2017/18 academic year, the proportion of postgraduate research students (PGRs) in the UK with a declared disability, including neurodivergence, has risen by 54%, now representing 20% of home-status PGRs (HESA, 2023). Neurodivergent individuals' experiences and needs in academia have been shown to differ from neurotypical individuals (Quinn, 2023), necessitating further inquiry on their rich experiences in HE.

Despite this, the strengths, challenges and needs of neurodivergent early career researchers (ECRs) remain under researched and less understood in comparison to those of undergraduate students transitioning into HEIs (*ibid.*). This lack of representation contributes to limited institutional awareness and support, as well as gaps in academic practices that could better accommodate neurodivergent students and staff. Only 24% of doctoral students receive disability allowances, and research indicates that PGRs are generally less informed about available support services than their undergraduate counterparts (Pugh, 2023). Moreover, the level of

neurodiversity awareness among academic staff, including doctoral supervisors, varies considerably, influencing the support available to neurodivergent PGRs (Quinn, 2023). The distinct trajectory of PGRs - characterised by a high degree of independent work, transitions between research and teaching, and increased social interactions in conferences and vivas - further underscores the need for targeted research to inform more inclusive academic cultures.

Imperial College London, the institution where this project is based, has implemented multiple initiatives to promote neuroinclusive practices. These include services offered by the Disability Advisory Service, such as mentorship and neurodivergent study skills workshops. The University has established the 'Neurodiversity Champions' program, which provides informal guidance on supporting neurodivergent students. However, existing services primarily cater to undergraduates rather than PGRs (Logan, 2024). This project, therefore, comes at a critical time to expand and tailor support systems that accommodate both neurodivergent ECRs and neurotypical individuals working alongside them. By fostering collaborative academic practices, the initiative seeks to advance both a moral obligation and a practical imperative for inclusivity within research environments.

Note on Project Framework

As an autistic and neurodivergent PGR student in educational research, I have intentionally selected literature that aligns with the social model of neurodivergence rather than the medical model. The social model of neurodivergence is equally adopted institutionally by the University and its departments. This perspective recognises neurodivergent individuals as having distinct ways of processing

information and interacting with the world, rather than viewing them as having deficits requiring correction (Inclusive Practices, 2022). I emphasise both the strengths and challenges of neurodivergent ECRs in academia, highlighting abilities such as attention to detail, creative problem-solving, and pattern recognition. To ensure inclusivity, this report adopts a strengths-based as well as challenge-aware approach. Below, I provide a glossary of key terms to enhance clarity. I additionally present information in this report in bullet-point summaries to enhance accessibility and embody neuroinclusive practices throughout the literature analysis.

Report Outline

This report reviews existing literature on neurodiversity support within HEI academic practices, identifying both effective neuroinclusive strategies and gaps. While focusing on UKHE institutions (UKHEIs), it also includes international comparisons. Structured around the four project aims, the report begins with an overview of current support, education, and practices at Imperial College London. Subsequent chapters examine relevant literature for each aim, highlighting institutional practices and gaps. At the end of each chapter, the main findings are summarised and highlighted in yellow. The final section presents short- and long-term recommendations to enhance neuroinclusive academic practices for neurodivergent PGRs and ECRs and neurotypical colleagues at Imperial.

Project Aims

The four aims of the project are listed below:

1. How to improve communication between supervisors, line managers and ECRs, ensuring neurodiversity-affirming practice and bridging the autistic / allistic divide,

whether it is the ECR or the supervisor / line manager who is autistic;

2. Suggest practical approaches to improving the autistic and ADHD ECR community's experience of communicating research outside of the university, especially in unfamiliar settings (e.g. conferences);
3. Look into the experience of dyslexic and ADHD PGR students in writing extended dissertations required for research degrees, and the role such dissertations play in a modern research environment with an ever-broadening scope of what counts as 'research output';
4. Investigate the transition from PGR research student to research staff for those ECRs requiring reasonable adjustments, suggesting ways to ease the burden of different systems and approaches on opposite sides of this boundary.

Summary

This introduction outlines the background and purpose of the research, establishing a foundation for the report by defining project aims and key terminology. It provides the groundwork for the next chapter, which examines Imperial College London's current neuro-inclusive support.

Chapter 2: Imperial College London Current Practices

Introduction

Building on the introduction's overview of neuroinclusive research in higher education, this chapter examines the current context at Imperial College London. It first outlines the available support for neurodivergent PGRs and staff, including services provided by the Disability Advisory Service (DAS) and reasonable adjustments (RAs) processes. It then reviews the College's neuroinclusive awareness and research initiatives, such as training programs, neuro-affirmative workshops, and ongoing research on neurodiversity. This establishes a foundation for assessing the institution's approach to neuroinclusive academic practices before comparing similar initiatives at other institutions and addressing the project's research aims.

Support Available

The University provides various support services for neurodivergent doctoral students, primarily through the Disability Advisory Service (DAS). For students suspecting they are neurodivergent, DAS facilitates referrals and subsidised diagnostic assessments for autism or ADHD. While students contribute a small portion of the private assessment fee, the College covers most of the cost, in contrast to institutions that do not provide financial assistance (Services and Support, n.d.). Given the increased independence, reading and social networking required in doctoral study (Quinn, 2023), obtaining formal recognition is needed in securing necessary academic adjustments for neurodivergence.

DAS also offers disability mentors who provide individualised support for students with mental, physical, or social disabilities. Together, mentors and students

co-develop strategies for academic, personal, and social development (Support Available, n.d.). Additionally, DAS assists students in applying for RAs, such as modifications to viva processes or study schedules (e.g., increased remote work). Formal applications require an initial appointment with a DAS Disability Advisor, completion of paperwork, and communication with the student's department or relevant personnel (e.g., viva examiners). Alternatively, students can request RAs informally through their department's Disability Departmental Officer (DDO), who liaises with relevant staff. However, research indicates that unclear application routes and poor cross-departmental communication often leave students uncertain about whom to contact for RAs (Logan, 2024). Similar challenges may exist at the University, suggesting a need for greater procedural transparency.

Students can also apply for the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) through DAS to cover additional costs related to their needs, such as specialised study equipment or accommodations (Adjustments and Support, n.d.). However, the process involves multiple administrative steps, which can be a barrier for neurodivergent students due to the demands of executive functioning and processing extensive paperwork. Further complexity arises from the variation in application procedures based on funding sources: for instance, doctoral students funded by a UK Research Council must complete different paperwork than those with other funding sources (*ibid.*). The need for clearer, more accessible administrative pathways is thus evident.

For study spaces, the University provides limited dedicated areas for disabled students. The Assistive Technology Room in the Abdus Salam Library, available exclusively to disabled students, includes five desks equipped with ergonomic

seating and noise-cancelling headphones (*ibid.*). This space serves all students across undergraduate and postgraduate levels and can be fully occupied during peak times. Doctoral students, in contrast, are typically allocated hot-desking spaces or open-plan offices, which research has found to be unsuitable for many neurodivergent students due to sensory overload, distractions from conversations, and the lack of predictability in desk availability (Quinn, 2023). The Chemistry Department offers a self-regulation room designed for neurodivergent students, featuring weighted blankets, low lighting, and a calming environment (Disability and Mental Health, Department of Chemistry, n.d.).

DAS also organises various workshops and events, including a monthly Autism Support Group for autistic students, providing a space to share experiences and engage in informal discussions. This group is primarily attended by undergraduates, with no equivalent solely for doctoral students. Study skills workshops specific to neurodivergent students are available, such as a February 2025 presentation by an institutional staff member with ADHD who shared insights on academic strategies before and after her diagnosis. DAS also facilitates FLOWN webinars on productivity, time management, and software tools for study efficiency (Staying Productive, n.d.). Despite these initiatives, most workshops focus on taught students, with limited content addressing the distinct challenges of doctoral study, such as networking and conference presentation skills.

The Activate Mentoring programme developed by the Early Career Researcher Institute (ECRI) recruits and trains mentors from across Imperial to mentor both PhD students with disabilities and Minority Ethnic PhD students. Postgraduate Coaching is also available as part of ECRI wellbeing and support and

several workshops on Developing Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Wellbeing are available.

For neurodivergent staff, support is primarily available through the Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Centre (EDIC). The EDIC website provides information on obtaining a neurodivergence diagnosis and undertaking a Work Needs Assessment (WNA) for workplace adjustments, including office space modifications and specialised equipment (Support Process, n.d.). One-to-one coaching sessions are available for both neurodivergent staff and neurotypical colleagues seeking guidance on inclusive communication. Additionally, the Business Disability Forum's Neurodiversity Toolkit, provided on the EDI website, offers resources on sensitive workplace discussions, performance management, and adjustments for neurodivergence (Information for Managers, n.d.). The EDI website also links to British Dyslexia Association resources, which suggest accommodations to support dyslexic individuals. This includes using coloured paper, providing information in multiple formats, and incorporating diagrams or highlighted key points (Dyslexia and Neurodivergence, n.d.).

While these resources offer varied staff support, there is limited information on the transition from research student to staff. This gap includes unclear changes in contacts for workplace RAs, differing procedures for formal diagnoses, and variations in office equipment request processes (e.g., WNAs for staff accommodations versus DSA applications for students). Research indicates that support pathways exist but are informally communicated or not explicitly outlined, creating challenges for neurodivergent individuals (Coughlan & Lister, 2018).

Additional challenges are likely to be faced for those transitioning from PGR to ECR who have studied abroad or at another UK university, where processes are different.

Additional University Neuroinclusive Practices

Following the discussion on key support mechanisms available to neurodiverse groups at the College, this section examines broader neuroinclusive initiatives within the institution, highlighting best practices. A primary strategy involves increasing awareness of neurodiversity and fostering neuroinclusive practices. The university provides staff training on neurodiversity awareness (Neurodiversity Awareness, n.d.), which covers cognitive processing differences, common misconceptions, terminology, and stereotypes associated with autism, dyslexia, and ADHD. This training aims to enhance understanding and promote neuroinclusive practices within staff communities and academic settings.

Additionally, an external course facilitated by the National Autistic Society, *'Autism in the Workplace'* (Autism in the Workplace, n.d.), is available asynchronously via Blackboard Learn. This course equips staff with knowledge of effective academic practices for fostering positive interactions between allistic and autistic colleagues, thereby improving neurodiverse communication and relationships. Complementing these initiatives is the *'Inclusive Teaching Toolkit'* (Inclusive Learning and Teaching, n.d.), a resource designed to assist teaching staff in making academic content more accessible to neurodivergent students. Together, these initiatives contribute to a broader institutional commitment to promoting neuroinclusive education, improving academic culture, and building inclusive practices.

Beyond training and educational resources, the University has established a network of *Neurodiversity Champions* (Neurodiversity Champions, n.d.). These are staff members who provide informal guidance on maintaining neurodivergent-friendly work environments. Some Champions specialise in specific neurodivergences, such as dyslexia, offering tailored support and advocacy.

From a research perspective, a staff member from the Chemical Engineering department is leading a project entitled '*Neurodiversity from the Lens of Neurodiverse University Students*' (Neurodiversity, n.d.). This study interviews students across various academic levels - from UG to PhD - to explore their lived experiences and strategies for navigating academia. This aligns with contemporary higher education scholarship, which seeks to integrate neurodivergent perspectives into academic discourse and institutional awareness. However, as discussed in the introduction, the experiences and academic challenges faced by taught students and doctoral researchers differ significantly. In this regard, the ECRI '*Neurodiversity Project*' complements the Chemical Engineering department project by presenting a more targeted approach to understanding the doctoral experience within neuroinclusive academic environments. Furthermore, ECRI's project emphasises practical applications to enhance research culture and promote neuro-affirmative practices, holding potential for tangible improvements for doctoral students, staff, and broader academic communities.

Chapter 3: Aim 1 - Enhancing Neurodiversity-Affirming Communication

Introduction

Following the institutional context provided in the previous chapter, which outlined existing support for neurodiverse student and staff cohorts, this chapter examines relevant practices at other institutions in relation to the first project aim. Specifically, the first aim investigates:

1. *Strategies to enhance communication between supervisors, line managers, and early career researchers (ECRs) to foster neurodiversity-affirming practices and bridge the communication gap between autistic and allistic individuals, whether the ECR or the supervisor/line manager is autistic*

This chapter explores four key aspects of autistic-allistic communication from HEIs' literature: increasing education on neurodiversity; promoting neuro-inclusive language; raising awareness of alternative forms of neuro-inclusive communication, and addressing the administrative burden faced by ECRs. By examining effective academic practices implemented at other institutions, this analysis will identify existing gaps and potential areas for improvement. The chapter concludes with a summary of key insights.

Theme 1: Increased Education on Neurodiversity

Expanding education on neurodiversity - enhancing individuals' awareness and understanding of different cognitive processing styles within higher education institutions (HEIs) - is arguably foundational to improving communication between autistic and allistic individuals. Awareness of autism varies significantly depending on individuals' cultural backgrounds, prior education, and lived experiences, as reflected in existing research findings (Quinn, 2023). In a study involving nearly 150

neurodivergent ECRs, Quinn (2023) found that while some PGR supervisors demonstrated a willingness to support their students' academic challenges, they can provide inadequate or irrelevant guidance due to a lack of understanding of neurodivergent needs. For instance, supervisors frequently suggested accommodations to students by offering extra time to complete academic tasks such as writing; however, not all autistic individuals benefit from extended deadlines or increased time. Instead, they may require support in transitioning between tasks or prioritising smaller components of a larger project. Logan (2024) similarly reported that both supervisors and disability advisors tend to offer generalised recommendations for supporting neurodivergent students, failing to acknowledge that autism exists on a spectrum. Consequently, autistic individuals with varying support needs can receive identical, one-size-fits-all solutions.

Research from Durham University (Times Higher Education, 2025) highlights a critical gap in awareness among supervisors and staff regarding autistic masking: when autistic individuals consciously mimic neurotypical behaviours, such as maintaining eye contact and engaging in small talk, to conform to social expectations (*ibid.*). While masking may facilitate short-term interpersonal interactions, it can result in sensory overstimulation and, in prolonged cases, autistic meltdown. The latter is an intense response to overwhelming stimuli and can manifest in withdrawal from conversation, temporary inability to speak, or emotional distress (National Autistic Society, n.d.). Given that communication is central to academic collaboration, it is imperative that HEI staff receive education on the diversity of autistic experiences. By fostering open discussions on individualised support strategies, institutions can mitigate misconceptions and promote more inclusive communication practices.

To enhance staff education on neurodiversity, University College London (UCL) has developed a comprehensive toolkit specifically for supervisory staff (Teaching Toolkits, 2023). This resource includes a glossary clarifying key terminology - such as the distinction between 'neurodivergent' and 'neurodiverse'; thereby promoting the use of language that reflects contemporary neuro-affirmative research perspectives. Notably, the UCL toolkit contains a section dedicated to the unique challenges faced by neurodivergent ECRs, a topic that remains underexplored in many other institutional policies.

Neurodiversity programmes, working with trainers with lived experience and support guides have been used by Nottingham University to raise awareness and implement supportive practices by PGR supervisors. The Newcastle's Supportive Practice Tool is also useful because it looks at the specific symptoms or challenges an individual might face, rather than taking a diagnosis-first approach (Johnson and George 2020) .

In addition, several UK HEIs have introduced workshops on neuro-inclusive education. Edinburgh Napier University's program (Inclusive Practices, 2022) emphasises autism's presentation as a spectrum, illustrating how support needs vary across different domains, including sensory, social, and environmental factors. This framework departs from outdated classifications that labelled autistic individuals as having 'mild' or 'severe' autism, instead recognising the complexity of individual needs (National Autistic Society, n.d.). Similarly, Durham University hosts a series of workshops designed to increase awareness of both the strengths and challenges experienced by neurodivergent PGRs (Supporting Neurodivergent PGRs, 2023). These workshops adopt a discussion-based approach, allowing students and staff to

exchange experiences and collaboratively develop strategies for fostering neuro-inclusive communication. Multiple scholars have argued that such training should be mandatory rather than voluntary, ensuring that all relevant individuals - including students, supervisors, and faculties - have access to essential neurodiversity education, rather than only those who take the initiative or allocate the time to participate (Coughlan & Lister, 2018; Logan, 2024).

Beyond the UK, the University of Melbourne is currently engaged in a project aimed at strengthening connections between neurodiverse students and academic staff. This initiative involves updating staff resources on neurodivergent education, designing professional development workshops focused on neurodivergence, and creating platforms for student-staff collaboration. These platforms include virtual communities and university-hosted web spaces where individuals can share experiences and strategies for navigating academia (Neurodiversity Project, n.d.). While this project is not exclusively focused on PGRs, it reflects a broader institutional commitment to fostering neurodiversity awareness and facilitating collaboration between autistic and allistic individuals within academic settings.

In summary, discrepancies in neurodiversity education among student-staff groups contribute to communication barriers at the ECR level. The examples discussed highlight effective institutional initiatives aimed at addressing these gaps, providing a foundational knowledge base from which more effective autistic-allistic communication can emerge. By implementing structured education programs and fostering collaborative learning environments, HEIs can take meaningful steps toward a more neuro-inclusive academic culture.

Theme 2: Neuro-inclusive Language

A strong foundation in neurodiversity education is essential for fostering effective communication within neurodiverse groups. Building from this education, the second key theme in findings, the use of neuro-inclusive language, or language that acknowledges and respects diverse cognitive processing styles, also plays a crucial role. Numerous studies and HEIs have emphasised the importance of adopting neuro-inclusive language to facilitate clearer and more respectful communication between neurodiverse groups.

One such initiative is the ‘Code of Conduct’ developed by *EdInMind*, a neurodiverse group at the University of Edinburgh consisting of diagnosed and undiagnosed ECRs and academic staff. This document explicitly outlines communication expectations and preferences, including preferred modes of interaction (written, audio, or visual), pronoun usage, and specific communicative challenges experienced by group members (*EdInMind*, n.d.). By completing and sharing this document, participants create a collective resource that fosters communicative awareness and mutual support. Of particular significance is the inclusion of pronoun preferences, as research has indicated that autistic individuals are more likely than neurotypical individuals to experience intersectionality relating to gender-diversity, belonging to LGBTQ+ communities, or identifying with other minority groups (*How to Support Neurodivergent PGRs*, 2025). The *EdInMind* ‘Code of Conduct’ thus serves as an effective model for enhancing communication between autistic and allistic PGRs and staff, ensuring that expectations and preferences are explicitly stated and respected.

Other HEIs emphasise the importance of using person-centred language rather than diagnosis-centred language when communicating with autistic individuals. Edinburgh Napier University (*Inclusive Practices*, 2022) and UCL (*How to Plan for Tailored Adjustments in Postgraduate Research*, n.d.) advocate for terminology that affirms identity rather than pathologises autism. For instance, they recommend using the term ‘*autistic individual*’ rather than ‘individual *with* autism’ (emphasis added), as the former acknowledges autism as an integral part of a person’s identity rather than a condition that exists separately from them. While individual preferences for these distinctions vary, encouraging open discussions about language use is an important step in developing more inclusive and respectful communication between autistic and allistic ECRs and staff.

Within academic literature, Bhandari and Rainford (2023) highlight the significance of neuro-inclusive language by advocating for the avoidance of terminology rooted in the medical model of autism, which frames autism as a disorder requiring a cure. Such language includes terms like ‘deficits,’ ‘autism disorder,’ and the juxtaposition of ‘autistic’ with ‘*normal* people’ (emphasis added), all of which reinforce a deficit-based perspective. Similarly, Bolton and Hubble (2021) caution against the use of terms such as ‘severe autism,’ as contemporary research has shifted away from a one-dimensional autism scale and instead recognises the diverse ways in which autism manifests. Scholars emphasise that adopting a neuro-affirmative approach - one that views cognitive differences as natural variations rather than impairments - has a direct impact on autistic individuals’ self-concept, or view of their identity. When autistic individuals view their neurodivergence through a strengths-based lens, they are more likely to seek support for their needs and

engage in open discussions about their experiences, rather than perceiving themselves as burdens or fundamentally deficient.

Ultimately, education on inclusive language and explicit discussions of linguistic preferences are crucial for building acceptance and mutual respect within neurodiverse academic communities. By integrating informed and respectful terminology, institutions can create environments where individuals feel empowered to collaborate based on their respective strengths and challenges, thereby strengthening communication within neurodiverse groups.

Theme 3: Other Forms of Neuro-inclusive Communication

Beyond the development of neuro-inclusive language - encompassing vocabulary, pronoun usage, and preferred forms of communication - additional communicative strategies play a role in enhancing allistic-autistic interactions. In alignment with the EdInMind 'Code of Conduct,' which facilitates the sharing of communicative preferences, scholars have emphasised the significance of 'Shared Expectations' documents specifically for neurodiverse groups in academic settings (Fletcher-Watson, 2021). These documents serve as formal agreements established at the outset of doctoral study, outlining the roles and responsibilities of both PGRs and supervisors while specifying key deadlines. However, research indicates that not all supervisors are aware of or actively engage with this document in discussions with their PGR supervisees (Quinn, 2023).

Furthermore, while these documents generally address academic responsibilities - such as the extent of supervisory support and the self-initiated responsibilities of the PGR - they often lack social details pertinent to autistic individuals. For instance, they do not specify who is responsible for initiating

supervisory meetings, how these meetings should be structured, their expected frequency, or the rationale for fluctuating meeting schedules during different stages of the doctoral journey. Given that autistic individuals often benefit from increased specificity (Fletcher-Watson, 2021), including such details could enhance communication and clarity between students and staff. Research suggests that these elements should be incorporated into a shared resource co-created by both autistic and allistic participants, offering a platform to express concerns, clarify doubts, and communicate specific needs.

In addition to establishing clearer expectations, institutions have underscored the importance of explicitly defining inclusion measures for academic events. This includes allowing individuals to communicate their preferences regarding meeting locations, catering options, and physical or sensory requirements (Logan, 2024). By addressing these factors in advance, institutions can not only facilitate smoother cross-communication but also help autistic individuals manage expectations and mitigate potential overstimulation by receiving an expectation of support at the event. Moreover, many universities have developed resources on universal learning, offering guidance on adapting educational materials to accommodate neurodivergent needs. For example, UCL's recommendations advocate for incorporating more visual content, such as diagrams and images, to highlight key concepts (How to Take Action: Inclusive Education, n.d.). This approach aligns with research suggesting that some autistic individuals process information in a holistic, pattern-based manner and may find visual communication beneficial for their needs. This approach can also be discussed and implemented in PGR-supervisory meetings to facilitate neurodiverse communication.

However, one barrier to effective implementation of inclusion measures is that some autistic PGRs may not fully understand their own needs or how to articulate them (Quinn, 2023). To address this, AGCAS, a graduate career advisory service, has developed a structured list of reasonable adjustments categorised by multiple specific areas, including social interactions, reading and writing, and spatial navigation (AGCAS Reasonable Adjustments, n.d.). This resource can serve as a template for initial conversations between allistic and autistic individuals in academia, providing a framework for identifying needs and discussing possible accommodations

A further institutional strategy for fostering autistic-allistic communication concerns the structure of communication itself. Many autistic individuals encounter challenges in processing vague information, idiomatic expressions, non-literal language, or verbal instructions (National Autistic Society, n.d.). In response, some universities have developed online resources to guide staff in adopting more neuro-inclusive communication practices. The University of Oxford, for example, advises staff to avoid sarcasm, which may be interpreted literally; to illustrate ideas with concrete rather than abstract examples; and to supplement verbal instructions with written formats (Autism, n.d.). However, despite the availability of such resources, there is no formalised process ensuring that these strategies are actively discussed and implemented in PGR-supervisor relationships. Instead, their use often depends on individual initiative and awareness, suggesting a need for a more structured, centralised approach to student-staff neuro-inclusive communication.

Research at Keele University by Adam Jeffery et al (2023) used asynchronous communication techniques to deliver the research project “Autistic

voices in geoscience: towards greater inclusion of neurological diversity” to aid inclusivity.

Other research highlights the importance of recognising rejection sensitivity, a common experience among neurodivergent individuals - including those with autism and ADHD - wherein perceived negative feedback is felt particularly acutely. This has been linked to the experiences of bullying or social trauma that neurodivergents more commonly experience (Quinn, 2023). Given that constructive criticism is an integral part of the ECR journey, scholars emphasise the need for staff to balance critical feedback with positive reinforcement. Providing clear acknowledgment of both strengths and areas for improvement can contribute to more supportive and effective ECR-staff interactions (Logan, 2024).

In summary, fostering neuro-inclusive communication requires a multifaceted approach. Key considerations include explicit discussions on shared expectations, transparent communication of inclusion measures in academic and social settings, and increased awareness of structured communication practices. By integrating these strategies, institutions can enhance understanding, build trust, and create more inclusive academic environments for both allistic and autistic individuals.

Theme 4: Administrative Burden

The final aspect influencing autistic-allistic communication is the administrative process required to communicate needs and request support between neurodiverse parties. Institutions such as the University of Warwick (Our New and Improved Adjustments Process, 2025) and reports on neurodivergent ECRs' experiences (Quinn, 2023) have highlighted the complexity of these processes, which often involve extensive paperwork, assessments by affiliated organisations such as

Occupational Health teams, and confirmation from multiple departments. These bureaucratic demands require considerable time and energy, posing significant challenges for autistic individuals. Research further indicates that the existence of multiple avenues for accessing support at the ECR level - both formal and informal - can lead to confusion and frustration (*ibid.*).

As discussed in the first chapter, institutions often provide multiple channels for neurodivergent ECRs to communicate their needs, including DAS, departmental support, or direct engagement with supervisors. However, the lack of a clear, standardised pathway can result in inefficiencies, causing individuals to expend unnecessary effort navigating the complex system. For autistic individuals who may be more selective about where to expend limited energy, and with heightened susceptibility to burnout, these obstacles can be detrimental. In response to these concerns, the University of Warwick announced in January 2025 the development of a streamlined adjustments process for staff, consolidating all disability-related adjustments into a single centralised system. Similarly, outside the UK, the University of Adelaide is undertaking a project to establish a neurodivergent hub that provides a unified access point for student support and resources, irrespective of a PGR's discipline, funding source, or social network (Neurodiversity Project, 2025).

Beyond centralising support services, City, University of London has proposed a 'Neurodiversity Passport' as part of its future strategy for students (Wigmore, 2025). This initiative envisions a document containing key disability-related information and the specific support needs of each student, thereby facilitating smoother communication between students and staff. By consolidating all relevant information in one place, such measures aim to increase transparency, reduce

redundancy in communication, and prevent autistic individuals from having to repeatedly disclose the same information to multiple departments. Moreover, this approach mitigates the risk of miscommunication between administrative units. Given that Quinn's (2023) report found that many supervisors remain unsure or confused about the avenues through which disabled ECRs can access support, establishing a clear and standardised system is crucial for improving mutual understanding and communication between ECRs, supervisors, and other staff members.

Another consideration in addressing administrative barriers is the widespread institutional requirement for a formal diagnosis to access disability support services. Many universities restrict access to student support services (Disability and Neuroinclusion: Services and Support, n.d.) or specific workshops (Office of Student Affairs, 2025) to those with an official diagnosis. This policy can function as a form of academic gatekeeping, limiting support to those with the financial means, social resources, or knowledge necessary to obtain a diagnosis. As a result, autistic individuals without a formal diagnosis may feel uncertain about communicating their needs or suspected neurodivergence to staff, including doctoral supervisors. Quinn (2023) reports that some undiagnosed ECRs feel inferior to their diagnosed peers, leading to reluctance in discussing their needs with others.

Conversely, some institutions, such as Newcastle University (Elliott & Brundell, 2024) and LSE (Neurodivergent Student Academic Mentoring, 2023), do not require a formal diagnosis for students to access support services, including DAS appointments or mentoring with a DAS professional. The University of Nottingham also supports neurodivergent students without a diagnosis and provide co created

guidance on running virtual sessions, which was created as part of the EPSRC-funded STEMM-ON project.

<https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/edi/characteristics/neurodiversity.aspx>.

Others remain ambiguous, stating that ‘appropriate evidence’ is necessary to qualify for accommodations, though it is unclear whether such evidence must be a formal diagnosis (What Evidence Do I Need? n.d.). Given the growing body of literature advocating for inclusive access and a move away from diagnosis-based models of neurodivergence, it is essential to evaluate the benefits and limitations of restricting support services to those with formal diagnoses. Doing so has implications for effective communication between autistic and allistic individuals in academic settings.

*Project Aim 1: Enhancing Neurodiversity-Affirming Communication**Key Findings:**1. Education on Neurodiversity:*

- Awareness of different neurotypes and their associated strengths and challenges vary;
- Neuroinclusive communication must be based on individual communicative needs and lived experiences;
- Literature recommends more widespread and mandatory training or workshop attendance on neuro-inclusion.

2. Neuro-Inclusive Language

- Neuro-inclusive language, including pronouns and vocabulary choice, is crucial in neuro-affirmative PGR-staff communication;
- Evidence shows some HEIs promote open discussions on language preferences between neurodiverse students and staff;
- It is important to discuss awareness and preferences around social and medical models of autism and resulting language in ECR-staff conversations.

3. Other Neuro-Inclusive Communication Strategies

- Select HEIs use explicit shared expectations and responsibilities practices in academic roles, such as around supervisory meetings or doctoral tasks;
- Examples of needs and preferences in neurodiverse communication can be supported by providing examples;
- This communicative transparency in HEIs can impact autistic view of themselves, trust and openness to communicate.

4. *Administrative Burden*

- Some administrative processes can be paperwork-heavy and repetitive, which can be detrimental to ECR-staff-departmental communication;
- A centralised avenue for all ECR and staff support appears preferable in literature and other HEIs;
- The requirement of a formal diagnosis for support access can be a barrier for neuro-affirmative practices and communication channels.

Chapter 4: Aim 2 – Neurodivergent External Research Communication

Introduction

The previous chapter examined strategies for enhancing communication between neurodiverse autistic-allistic ECRs and academic staff. Key themes included the significance of neurodiversity education, the role of neuro-inclusive language, broader aspects of communication, and the impact of administrative burdens on neurodivergent individuals and academic communication. This chapter shifts focus to project aim 2, which seeks to:

2. *Identify practical strategies to enhance the experiences of autistic and ADHD early-career researchers (ECRs) when communicating their research beyond the university, particularly in unfamiliar settings such as academic conferences*

This chapter covers two themes from HEIs' practices related to improving neurodivergent experiences of external research communication: support for external academic events, including the role of transitions and sensory considerations; and building a supportive PGR community and its role in the neurodivergent ECR community. Key takeaways from the chapter will be summarised at the end.

Theme 1: Support for External Academic Events

A review of the literature revealed limited specific guidance on supporting neurodivergent ECRs in external academic settings, such as visiting scholars, conferences, or event attendance. This gap highlights a potential avenue for further research, given the unique challenges external events pose for neurodivergent individuals due to their unfamiliarity and need for transition.

A researcher from the University of Manchester offers insights into practices that can enhance the neurodivergent experience in external research communication (PhDiaries: Approaching Conferences as a Neurodivergent Student, 2023). She emphasises that engaging with Manchester's DAS team prior to an event can provide essential support, such as assistance with booking accommodations and developing a structured travel plan to the conference location. This proactive approach helps address executive functioning challenges commonly associated with autism and ADHD, increasing the likelihood of a well-regulated and positive event experience.

Additionally, the researcher underscores the importance of self-reflection among PGRs to assess their individual capacities. For instance, recognising whether they function better in the morning or afternoon can help in scheduling presentations accordingly. Another key consideration is the realistic assessment of the number of sessions a neurodivergent ECR can attend. In this regard, doctoral supervisors and DAS staff can play a crucial role in offering guidance on how best to communicate these needs to conference organisers.

Further institutional insights come from Durham University, which provides recommendations on inclusive communication strategies (How to Support Neurodivergent PGRs, 2025). It emphasises the importance of ensuring the availability of accessible information formats, such as visual aids, summarised notes, and bullet-point content. Neurodivergent ECRs can request these materials in advance to facilitate preparation and engagement with conference content. The broader literature also highlights significant accessibility barriers at conferences (Ketcham, 2023), including physical environments and information delivery methods.

Addressing these challenges requires a commitment to inclusive practices, such as incorporating neuro-inclusive elements in presentations, including visual materials and video excerpts. Conferences, such as the Festival of Neurodiversity are specifically designed to be neuroinclusive. There is also emerging inclusive practice of using rating systems for each session to indicate the level of participation required – e.g. 1. No participation – just listen, 2. Some audience participation via polls and opportunities to ask questions, 3. Workshop with significant participation to facilitate engagement at conferences. Such strategies not only enhance the experience for neurodivergent attendees but also promote neuro-affirming practices within academic settings.

The University of Warwick extends specialised support to neurodivergent PGRs by offering guidance on key academic skills, particularly in preparation for external events such as conferences (What are Neurodivergence Advice Discussions & Diagnostic Assessments? n.d.). This includes training in productivity tools to assist with scheduling and planning, as well as skill development sessions focused on public speaking and academic networking. A neurodivergent PGR shared their positive experiences with these services through the University of Warwick student blog (Too Many Tabs Open: Doing a PhD with ADHD, 2022). Similarly, at the University of Sussex, challenges related to conference preparation - such as abstract submissions and timely bookings - were identified, particularly for individuals with ADHD (Being a Neurodivergent Researcher, 2023). To mitigate these difficulties, an ECR with ADHD collaborated with doctoral supervisors to establish regular checkpoint meetings, allowing for the breakdown of conference preparation into manageable tasks. However, such support often relies on self-initiation by the neurodivergent individual or the quality of the student-supervisor

relationship, as explicit guidance on these matters is rarely available on institutional websites.

An additional consideration for enhancing the external academic event experience involves addressing sensory needs. While some universities, such as the University of Surrey, provide designated quiet spaces for neurodivergent students featuring sensory accommodations like soundproof walls, low lighting, and weighted blankets (Services and Support, n.d.), few institutions explicitly acknowledge the necessity of these spaces for ECRs. Given the sensory sensitivities experienced by many autistic and ADHD individuals (Quinn, 2023), the availability of such spaces is crucial. Booking accommodations near conference venues is another strategy to reduce sensory overload from crowded or noisy event spaces (PhDiaries: Approaching Conferences as a Neurodivergent Student, 2023).

In line with this, the University of Nottingham has developed the AccessAble app, allowing neurodivergent students to rate the accessibility of university spaces based on factors such as entrance design, noise levels, and lighting (New AccessAble App Launches, 2023). Although currently limited to internal university spaces, a similar initiative could be valuable for neurodivergent ECRs to share their experiences of external academic venues. Collating such accessibility data could enable future ECRs and staff to make informed decisions regarding their participation in external events.

Supporting neurodivergent ECRs at external academic events - such as conferences and networking opportunities - requires multifaceted strategies, including support with executive functioning, skill development, and sensory considerations. The current lack of institutionally available guidance on

neurodivergent-specific external event support underscores the need for further development of resources and structured support systems to enhance these experiences within academic institutions.

Theme 2: Building an ECR Community

Beyond support for academic event preparation and attendance, fostering a robust neurodivergent ECR academic community is another avenue for enhancing external research communication. Events such as networking opportunities and conferences can be more accessible for neurodivergents when accompanied by a strong social support system. Several institutions are actively developing or trialling programmes aimed at connecting neurodivergent students.

For instance, LSE has implemented a system that pairs neurodivergent students with a mentor or peer in a more senior academic year (Neurodivergent Student Academic Mentoring, 2023). While currently designed for UG students, this initiative demonstrates the potential of peer mentoring in building stronger social connections and shared experiences among neurodivergent individuals. Notably, this program does not require formal diagnosis, thereby promoting inclusivity and reducing barriers to receiving social support. Similarly, the University of Oxford offers an ADHD-specific mentorship program through the Access to Work scheme, allowing ECRs to discuss necessary adjustments for academic events, including conferences (ADHD, n.d.). Meanwhile, the University of Adelaide is piloting a neurodivergent mentorship initiative in which senior students guide younger students through academic transitions, strategies, and experience sharing (Neurodiversity Project, 2025). Although limited to undergraduates, a similar mentorship program for ECRs could provide substantial benefits for external academic events.

A mentorship structure tailored to ECRs would enable experienced academics to share insights on conference navigation, increasing familiarity with these settings and facilitating smoother transitions into new academic environments. Such mentors could also offer guidance on implicit academic norms - such as self-introductions, appropriate dress, and distinctions between symposium and poster session etiquette - which are often not explicitly discussed in academia (PhDiaries: Approaching Conferences as a Neurodivergent Student, 2023). Furthermore, mentorship can play a crucial role in addressing imposter phenomenon (previously referred to as imposter syndrome), a common challenge among neurodivergent PGRs who may feel inadequate or inexperienced compared to senior academics (Too Many Tabs Open: Doing a PhD with ADHD, 2022; Quinn, 2023). Establishing mentorship opportunities within a neurodivergent peer community could provide a supportive environment to challenge these perceptions and improve confidence in external research communication.

In addition to mentorship, several institutions have established dedicated neurodivergent community groups with varying objectives. The University of Nottingham, for example, launched an MS Teams network in 2021 for individuals who identify as neurodivergent to share experiences and offer peer support (About Informal Staff Networks, n.d.). This network also includes a separate group for those interested in neurodiversity in education and learning, fostering broader neurodiverse discussions on neuro-inclusivity in academia. Such communities provide a space for knowledge-sharing, potential research collaborations, and opportunities for neurodivergent researchers to engage beyond their institution. This sense of connection can be particularly valuable for neurodivergent ECRs before academic events to build connections with other event attendees. This can help with the

transition to the event and gain familiarity as attendees who can be approached in the event are identified. By establishing relationships within these networks, individuals may experience a greater sense of belonging and support when engaging in external academic events.

Moreover, these groups serve as platforms for discussing neurodivergent-specific academic challenges, including those related to conferences and networking. Providing a dedicated forum for these conversations allows neurodivergent ECRs to exchange strategies, share experiences, and collectively develop approaches to navigating the academic landscape more effectively.

*Project Aim 2: Neurodivergent External Research Communication**Key Findings:**1. Support for External Events:*

- Other HEIs suggest support with planning the event, including booking and travel arrangements, can improve neurodivergents' experiences;
- Literature suggests that neurodivergents reflect on their own capacities, such as number of events to attend in one day, to help planning;
- Institutions offer skill-specific support, such as networking or presentation skills, before events to improve neurodivergents' familiarity and experience at the event.

2. Building an ECR Community

- Some HEIs propose mentorship or peer support which has social benefits for neurodivergent academics at external events;
- Creating connections online with other attendees before events can help increase social contacts, familiarity with and sense of belonging at the event.

Chapter 5: Aim 3 - Experiences of ADHD and Dyslexia in

Academia and Doctoral Theses

Introduction

Building on previous discussions of allistic-autistic communication and external neurodivergent research communication external events, this chapter focuses on the experiences of dyslexic and ADHD PGRs:

3. Investigate the experiences of dyslexic and ADHD PGR students in writing extended dissertations and their role in an evolving research landscape where definitions of 'research output' continue to expand

Despite limited HEI resources on this topic, key themes emerge from existing literature. The chapter first examines the lack of academic awareness and misconceptions surrounding dyslexic and ADHD experiences. It then explores the research strengths and challenges faced by these individuals, before considering the impact of academic research culture on ADHD and dyslexic individuals. The chapter concludes with a summary of key findings.

Theme 1: Awareness and Misconceptions of Neurodivergence

This section clarifies that while some information on the lived experiences of ADHD in academia was found, there was little available on dyslexic individuals. The literature review for this project did not identify direct accounts of dyslexic ECRs' experiences, with available information largely limited to institutional support mechanisms. These institutional findings will be explored at the end of this section.

Chapter One established that increased education on neurodiversity and specific neurodivergent conditions is crucial for improving communication between neurodiverse groups. Similarly, research into the experiences of neurodivergent PGRs has revealed a significant lack of awareness and persistent misconceptions. A study by two researchers with ADHD from the University of Birmingham and Aston University reported that PGRs with ADHD are at the highest risk of PhD attrition (Conner & Brown, 2022). Challenging the common perception of ADHD as merely hyperactivity and difficulty concentrating, these researchers highlighted more nuanced academic experiences. Among these, support with long-term goal setting - an essential aspect of the PhD trajectory - was particularly notable, as most PhD milestones involve sustained long-term planning with relatively few short-term goals. Time perception difficulties further compounded these challenges, such as when accurately estimating task completion times.

These points above significantly impacted their thesis writing process, which requires self-efficacy in setting goals, taking actionable steps toward them, and sustaining long-term effort toward major milestones such as thesis submission. This lack of time awareness also had broader implications, affecting event preparation and planning for conference presentations or article submissions. One PGR with ADHD noted that undertaking a doctorate does not inherently teach skills such as time management and self-efficacy; rather, it places individuals in situations where they must already possess and apply these skills, creating a 'sink or swim' scenario (Quinn, 2023). This PGR noted assistance with project management skills would have significantly benefitted his thesis writing and overall doctoral journey.

The above ADHD researchers also highlighted that ADHD ECRs are underrepresented in academic literature, resulting in misconceptions that frame ADHD solely in terms of hyperactivity and restlessness. Other elements of ADHD that impact ECRs need to be recognised to challenge this misconception.

This issue extends to dyslexic experiences, which similarly suffer from a lack of research representation. The researchers argue that better education on ADHD - including first-hand lived experiences - would be a valuable addition to academic research culture. Some institutions have begun implementing initiatives in this direction, such as the University of Bristol, which hosted a 2023 conference on neurodivergence that included talks by ADHD women in academia sharing their experiences (Neurodiversity in Higher Education Conference, 2023). Such discussions provide opportunities for ADHD PGRs to share knowledge and experiences, helping to challenge misconceptions and improve institutional support.

Similarly, the University of Warwick has launched the '*Neurodivergent PGR Students Academic Learning Experience Project*' (2024), a collaboration between academic staff and PGRs that focuses on neurodivergent experiences through interviews and focus groups. The project aims to develop a resource pack for both staff and students to improve understanding and support for neurodivergent PGRs.

An ADHD PGR at the University of Warwick reinforced the points raised by the above researchers, offering additional insight into their experiences (Too Many Tabs Open: Doing a PhD with ADHD, 2022). This student described experiencing Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria (RSD), a heightened sensitivity to rejection, negative feedback, or perceived failure, commonly associated with ADHD (Cleveland Clinic: RSD, n.d.). Beyond ADHD, research on neurodivergent academic staff experiences

also notes that RSD is commonly experienced by dyslexic and autistic staff that report feelings of shame, anxiety of possible discrimination, and fear of institutional rejection for disclosing their neurodivergence (Martin, 2020; Mellifont, 2021). It is noted that RSD is rarely acknowledged in academia but significantly affects supervisory meetings, conferences, and discussions, which rely heavily on feedback and require emotional resilience (Too Many Tabs Open: Doing a PhD with ADHD, 2022). The University of Oxford also recognises that ADHD individuals often experience low self-esteem, shame, or anxiety, which may not be immediately apparent to those unfamiliar with the condition (ADHD, n.d.). Given the prevailing misconception that ADHD is primarily characterised by high energy and enthusiasm, these emotional challenges can often go unnoticed.

Reports have emphasised the importance of supervisor training to improve feedback, particularly by incorporating positive reinforcement in feedback and fostering open discussions on emotional responses to criticism (Quinn, 2023). The experiences of ADHD PGRs are multifaceted and nuanced, highlighting the need to reframe academic understandings of ADHD and its impact on doctoral study. Increased awareness and support mechanisms are essential in ensuring that neurodivergent ECRs can navigate their academic careers effectively.

Theme 2: Strengths as well as Challenges

In the introduction, we outlined that this report adopts a social rather than a medical model of neurodivergence (see p. 4). This approach emphasises both the strengths and challenges of neurodivergent experiences, a theme that also emerges in the literature on dyslexic and ADHD experiences. In addition to the ADHD-related challenges previously discussed, neurodivergent ECRs possess multiple strengths

that can be advantageous in academia. Dyslexic individuals and those with ADHD are often skilled problem-solvers, capable of generating creative, 'outside-the-box' solutions, demonstrating strong attention to detail, and identifying patterns quickly (Quinn, 2023). Neurodivergent academic staff are reported to be particularly loyal, dedicated and diligent workers with a strong sense of justice and value system (Martin, 2020). These attributes are relevant for ECRs researching towards extended dissertations, which require analytical thinking, methodological rigor, and data interpretation. Dyslexic individuals can exhibit strong verbal communication, numerical proficiency, or entrepreneurial skills (Dyslexia and Dyspraxia, n.d.).

An academic from Newcastle University reported that openly discussing her dyslexia in academia fostered empowerment and reduced stigma. By serving as a role model, she contributed to stronger neurodivergent connections within the academic community (Elliott & Brundell, 2024). Contrastingly, other dyslexic experiences in staff-focused scholarship narrated feelings of job anxiety and fear of discrimination due to disclosing dyslexia: one academic reported feeling disempowered after requesting conference adjustments for dyslexia and being met with indifference from colleagues (Mellifont, 2021). However, it is notable that many HEI websites fail to explicitly acknowledge neurodivergent strengths, instead predominantly offering problem-based support, such as guidance on productivity, time management, or study skills (Office of Student Affairs, 2025). An exception is the University of Oxford, which dedicates a section of its website to outlining both the strengths of neurodivergent individuals and best practices for supporting them (ADHD, n.d.; Dyslexia and Dyspraxia, n.d.). Additionally, institutions such as Durham University (Supporting Neurodivergent PGRs, 2023) and Edinburgh Napier University (Inclusive Practices, 2022) offer neurodiversity workshops that emphasise

these strengths. These examples illustrate the value of a strength- and needs-based approach, which is increasingly recognised as a recommended model for institutional neuroinclusive practices.

For ADHD, an additional strength reported in lived experiences is hyperfixation: the ability to sustain intense focus on a specific activity, common in both ADHD and autism (Understanding ADHD, 2024). Some ADHD ECRs described experiencing hyperfixation during periods of creative energy or inspiration, leading to significant bursts of productivity and rapid PhD progress (Too Many Tabs Open: Doing a PhD with ADHD, 2022; Being a Neurodivergent Researcher, 2023). In staff research, scholars noted their high productivity when hyper-focusing on intrinsically rewarding academic tasks (Elsherif *et al.*, 2025). These scholars however caution against colleagues' ableist expectations of hyperfixation as a 'superpower' as neurodivergent energy availability varies due to multiple everyday factors, such as sleep quality, diet, or social contact (*ibid.*). While hyperfixation can result in exhaustion due to prolonged activity, these accounts highlight the complexity and nuance of neurodivergent experiences. It is therefore crucial to shift away from a deficit-based perspective that frames neurodivergence as a disorder. Instead, institutional policies should explicitly recognise strengths, incorporate lived experiences, and adopt a needs-based, neuro-affirmative framework (Quinn, 2023).

Beyond the previously discussed challenges, such as time management difficulties and sensitivity to rejection in ADHD, additional challenges can be inferred through the types of support offered by HEIs. While such institutional resources do not explicitly stem from lived experience, they nonetheless provide further insight into the support neurodivergent students require.

Doctoral responsibilities, particularly writing the extended dissertation, involve extensive reading and other text-heavy activities, such as writing and editing. For dyslexic individuals, these tasks may be particularly demanding, as they often require additional time to process written material (Dyslexia and Dyspraxia, n.d.). To address this, the Access to Work programme has been implemented by the University of Oxford to provide text-to-speech software and training to help neurodivergent staff and students mitigate reading-related challenges (Funding, n.d.). Similarly, the University of Manchester offers assistive technologies such as speech-to-text software for note-taking and mind-mapping tools to present information in a dyslexia-friendly format (Equipment, n.d.). Imperial College London also recommends strategies such as using coloured paper and exempting dyslexic individuals from taking meeting minutes (Dyslexia and Neurodivergence, n.d.). These institutional support mechanisms in text-intensive doctoral research and the broader academic environment. However, further research on lived experiences is essential to continuously evaluate and refine such interventions based on neurodivergent perspectives.

Another consideration is the inclusivity of academic conferences, which often rely heavily on text-based communication. As discussed in 'Chapter 4: Project Aim 2,' research has found that academic conferences frequently lack accessibility (Ketcham, 2023). Common issues include distributing presentation materials only moments before sessions begin, leaving little time for review, and an over-reliance on textual information, which can pose difficulties for dyslexic attendees. While HEI support measures, such as mind-mapping software and coloured overlays, assist students and staff with their academic work, it remains unclear how similar inclusive practices can be extended to external academic events. Increased awareness of

neurodivergent experiences and improved education on neurodivergent conditions may enhance conference inclusivity, particularly if neurodivergent ECRs adopt alternative communication methods in their presentations, such as incorporating visual material or video formats. Additionally, greater openness about neurodivergence within academic spaces, as exemplified by the previously mentioned Newcastle University academic (Elliott & Brundell, 2024), may contribute to a broader cultural shift toward inclusivity.

In conclusion, the literature contains limited reports on the lived experiences of ADHD and dyslexic individuals in academia. However, the available sources highlight various strengths, challenges, and example support systems. By comparing these experiences with institutional support frameworks, a more comprehensive understanding of neurodivergent academic experiences emerges, particularly regarding the demands of the doctoral thesis process. Continued research and inclusive policy development are necessary to ensure that neurodivergent perspectives inform institutional practices.

Theme 3: Academic Research Cultures and Neurodivergence

Building on the experiences of ADHD and dyslexic ECRs, as well as the available support structures, this final section examines the third emerging theme: the influence of academic research cultures on neurodivergent individuals' lived experiences.

The previous section highlighted that both ADHD and dyslexic individuals often experience anxiety or shame regarding challenges such as task management and extensive reading, despite possessing notable strengths in creativity and

problem-solving (Being a Neurodivergent Researcher, 2023; Dyslexia and Dyspraxia, n.d.). An extension of this phenomenon is impostor syndrome, which is defined as the persistent inability to internalise one's achievements and a belief that success is not attributable to one's own skills (OED, n.d.). Impostor syndrome is frequently cited as a significant challenge for individuals with ADHD, as described by psychology ECR Josh Francis at the University of Sussex (Being a Neurodivergent Researcher, 2023). Francis highlights the prevalence of impostor syndrome among ECRs, attributing it to their relative inexperience compared to more established academics. Moreover, the stereotypical association of ADHD with hyperactivity and an inability to focus - discussed in the first section of this chapter - exacerbates these feelings of self-doubt. Additionally, a lack of diversity in academia, particularly in terms of representation of marginalised groups and socio-economic status, has been reported to intensify impostor syndrome among neurodivergent individuals (Elsherif *et al.*, 2025). This aligns with broader findings on the underrepresentation of marginalised groups in academia (Bravata *et al.*, 2020).

Francis further notes that his doctoral journey fluctuates between productive and unproductive periods, with the latter characterised by difficulties in task-switching, time mismanagement, and frequent distractions. These challenges not only hinder productivity but also reinforce impostor syndrome, fostering a persistent and strong desire to leave academia. As previously discussed, the ADHD PGR drop-out rate is the highest among neurodivergent conditions (Quinn, 2023), and Francis' experiences provide insight into one potential contributing factor. He also highlights how these challenges affect his writing process, as academic expectations for concise, methodical, and linear communication do not align with his unique cognitive strengths. In an environment where academic ability is assumed to be high and there

is substantial pressure to publish, fostering open discussions about impostor syndrome and implementing tailored support mechanisms for neurodivergent PGRs is crucial. One recommendation in scholarship to reduce perceptions of the pressure to publish is to adopt *slow science* practices (Elsherif *et al.*, 2025). The *slow science* approach emphasises fewer publications but higher research quality and research team building between neurodivergent and neurotypical colleagues. This can be one beneficial practice for building neuro-inclusive academic cultures and, within them, more positive work-life balance for neurodiverse academics.

Beyond impostor syndrome, wider aspects of academic culture also impact the experiences of neurodivergent ECRs. A survey of nearly 150 disabled PGRs revealed that many perceive a pervasive culture of overwork within their HEIs (Quinn, 2023). This includes expectations of working late into the evenings, responding to emails over weekends, and using annual leave to catch up on academic tasks. This has further been reported in staff-focused research, where, despite promoting inclusive practices, HEIs implicitly adopt ableist practices that view neurotypical behaviours as the 'norm'. An example of this are non-inclusive academic interview practices reported by HE staff, in which interview questions were not provided in advance (Martin, 2020), and more widely in the workplace, an autistic study participant reported a hostile response from colleagues when she took quiet time breaks outside for sensory regulation (North, 2021). Given that neurodivergent individuals can have such diverse needs, such as need for increased breaks or additional time to complete specific tasks (Of Metrics and Managerialism, 2020), such ableist cultures present significant barriers to maintaining a sustainable and fulfilling ECR experience without experiencing burnout.

Reports from multiple sources have linked the prevalence of overworking in academia to declining mental health among ECRs. For instance, a PGR experience report from the University of York (Tazzyman *et al.*, 2021) and conference discussions (Royal Society, 2018) highlight the detrimental effects of excessive workloads. Similarly, Quinn's (2023) UK-wide study indicates that some neurodivergent ECRs experience 'presenteeism': a pressure to work on campus for extended hours in hierarchical and often unsupportive environments. Academic staff research has further noted the increasing use of open-plan offices, resulting in noisy environments and unstructured social interactions without quiet, individual spaces for sensory breaks (Mellifont, 2021).

In response to these challenges, some universities have introduced initiatives aimed at fostering a more supportive research culture. For example, the University of Cambridge has implemented a 'Wellbeing Advocate' programme within various disciplinary departments (Current Wellbeing Advocates, n.d.). These Wellbeing Advocates - students trained as Mental Health First Aiders - are assigned to peer research groups of 12-14 members. They hold regular meetings with ECRs and staff, facilitating a sense of connection and shared experience within research communities (Quinn, 2023). This initiative serves as one model for promoting a positive research culture that balances academic demands with social connection and mental well-being.

While many institutions provide resources focused on study strategies, productivity, and social integration, it is equally important to address the emotional needs of neurodivergent ECRs. Regular opportunities to share experiences - particularly concerning emotions and the challenges faced during doctoral research -

can help build a more inclusive and supportive academic culture. Such initiatives are essential for ensuring that academia is not only accommodating but also affirming for neurodivergent researchers, ultimately fostering environments that encourage their continued participation and success.

Project Aim 3: Experiences of ADHD and Dyslexia in Academia and Doctoral Theses

Key Findings:

1. Awareness and Misconceptions of Neurodivergence:

- Reports claim academic understanding of neurodivergence, such as ADHD, can be simplistic and lack nuance;
- HEIs illustrate that writing support, such as assistance with planning and project management, can better support neurodivergent ECRs;
- Staff need to be aware of prevalent experiences of RSD and shame, and approach feedback with positive reinforcement and support accordingly.

2. Neurodivergent Strengths and Challenges

- Both the strengths and challenges of ADHD and dyslexia need to be openly discussed, acknowledged and used to advantage when possible;
- To support challenges, text-based support for dyslexics and executive functioning support for ADHD are most commonly illustrated in HEIs.

3. Academic Research Cultures and Neurodivergence

- Understanding of impostor syndrome varies, but needs to be supported appropriately due to its prevalence in neurodivergent PGRs' experiences;

- Academic research cultures, including overworking and presenteeism, can be detrimental to neurodivergents due to their energy needs;
- For this reason, practices to check on and support neurodivergent ECR wellbeing are crucial.

Chapter 6: Aim 4 - PGRs - ECRs Transition and Reasonable Adjustments (RAs)

Introduction

This chapter presents a summary of the findings related to the fourth and final aim of this project. As with the previous chapter on ADHD and dyslexic experiences, the desk-based review yielded limited information on this topic. However, the findings that were identified are outlined below.

Building on previous research into neuroinclusive communicative practices (Aim 1), neurodivergent external research communication (Aim 2), and the lived experiences of neurodivergent individuals with ADHD and dyslexia (Aim 3), this chapter shifts focus to the transition from PGRs to ECR staff:

4. Investigate the transition from PGR research student to research staff for those ECRs requiring reasonable adjustments, suggesting ways to ease the burden of different systems and approaches on opposite sides of this boundary

The chapter is structured around three key themes. Firstly, it discusses the administrative processes involved in securing RAs, highlighting the need for clear and consistent communication and procedural transparency in the transition from ECR to staff status. Secondly, it examines the physical work environment of ECRs, considering how workplace design and accommodations impact neurodivergent researchers' accommodations. Finally, the chapter explores the role of mentorship and outreach initiatives in facilitating smoother transitions for neurodivergent ECRs moving into academic research positions.

Theme 1: Administrative Processes for RAs

A key theme emerging from the literature on the transition from ECR to staff among neurodivergent individuals is the shift in procedures for requesting and assessing RAs. This issue has been highlighted both in HEI students' reported experiences (Quinn, 2023) and in the information provided on HEIs' websites. In Quinn's (2023) study of nearly 150 neurodivergent PGRs, participants consistently reported that administrative pathways for requesting RAs - such as identifying the appropriate point of contact and understanding the procedural steps required for implementation - were often vague and difficult to navigate on institutional websites. Some PGRs noted that the primary contact for initiating RAs was unclear, while others highlighted inconsistencies in the communication of disability sick leave policies, particularly regarding the changes in entitlements when transitioning from ECR to research staff status. For individuals who struggled with processing large amounts of administrative text, the lack of clear communication exacerbated accessibility challenges (*ibid.*).

A further complication arises from the shift in departmental responsibility for overseeing RAs when students transition to staff roles. This distinction is evident in various HEIs, such as the University of Oxford, where DAS manages student RAs (Disability, n.d.), whereas the Equality and Diversity Unit administers the 'Access to Work' scheme for staff requiring workplace accommodations (Funding, n.d.). Similarly, at Imperial College London, the DAS is responsible for PGR RAs (Adjustments and Support, n.d.), while staff adjustments are managed by the EDI Centre through the Workplace Adjustments process (Disabled Staff and Workplace Adjustments, n.d.). Notably, no explicit information was found on institutional

websites regarding this departmental shift in responsibilities for ECRs transitioning to staff roles, suggesting that such knowledge may be communicated informally rather than through official channels.

Quinn (2023) also found that neurodivergent ECRs who changed departments or funding sources were often required to reapply for RAs, even within the same institution. This finding mirrors previous discussions on the bureaucratic complexities of administrative processes such as RA applications, underscoring the need for a centralised, standardised approach to ensure a more seamless transition between ECR and staff status. Recognising these challenges, some HEIs have begun implementing measures to improve RA processes. For example, the University of Warwick has introduced a new adjustments process designed to consolidate all adjustment needs into a single, comprehensive system. Despite being only for university staff, this revision is informed by feedback highlighting the previous system's lengthiness, complexity, and duplication of information requirements. The new approach is advertised as being 'more accessible, efficient, and supportive, particularly for staff with intersecting or overlapping needs' (Our New and Improved Adjustments Process, 2025).

In contrast to institutions with separate administrative pathways for student and staff RAs, some universities have adopted more integrated approaches. For instance, the University of Manchester manages RAs for both students and staff through its Disability Advisory Support Service page (Disability Advisory Support Service, n.d.), offering a streamlined online system for accessing RA-related information.

Further efforts to enhance administrative efficiency and accessibility are also underway in some HEIs. The University of Oxford has piloted a screening and assessment system designed to help PGRs reflect on their learning preferences and identify necessary adjustments. This system generates a personalised report that can inform RA discussions across departments, potentially improving continuity in support provisions. Similarly, Nottingham University also provide a Reasonable Adjustments Passport to try to counter the challenges of changes of role or line management and needing to re-agree adjustments. Imperial College has recently introduced the Workplace Adjustment Passport for staff, as a centralised document that records individual RA needs, allowing for easier communication between departments, line managers, and institutions. This system facilitates tracking changes over time and ensures that adjustments remain up to date (Workplace Adjustment Passports, n.d.). However, no comparable initiative currently exists for students, despite the potential benefits of such a system for ECRs transitioning to staff roles. A student-oriented version of the Workplace Adjustment Passport could significantly enhance continuity in RA provisions during academic transitions.

In summary, RA processes differ across institutions and often entail varying administrative routes for ECRs and staff. While some institutions have made progress in streamlining these processes, some gaps remain, particularly in supporting transitions from student to staff status. Expanding and adapting successful initiatives, such as centralised adjustment tracking systems, to encompass student-staff transitions represents a valuable area for future development.

Theme 2: Physical Workplace Environments

Following RA administrative processes, the second primary theme pertains to the physical workplace environment. This aspect varies significantly for ECRs, as STEM doctoral students often engage in laboratory-based, practice-oriented work, whereas social science PGRs typically undertake more desk-based tasks, allowing for increased remote work. Despite these disciplinary differences, the physical workplace environment has emerged as the most frequently cited factor affecting PGRs' well-being and sense of institutional belonging in UKHE (Quinn, 2023). Survey findings from this study highlight that the physical environment plays a crucial role in doctoral experiences (*ibid.*).

Students (*ibid.*) reported positive experiences when requesting RAs, including access to specialised laboratory equipment for sensory needs and accommodations for office work, such as noise-cancelling headphones or quiet spaces separate from shared, open-plan offices. This has equally been reported by staff in scholarship, who experience inclusive interview practices for academic positions, such as institutions sending interview questions in advance, and interview panels creating a calm, predictable interview structure (Elsherif *et al.*, 2025). These adjustments had significant implications for fostering positive rapport with peers, staff, and the wider university community, contributing to a more inclusive and neuro-affirmative culture. Notably, during the PGR journey, particularly in some disciplines, there is greater flexibility in remote working and self-management of schedules. However, upon transitioning to other ECR or staff roles, flexibility can decrease. The prevalence of presenteeism and overwork in academic cultures has been documented in multiple

reports, with a notable shift occurring when individuals transition to staff positions. Specifically, in-person attendance becomes a social expectation, reinforcing the perception of visibility and active contribution to office culture, interactions, and professional rapport (Logan, 2024). This has been reinforced in research on academic staff experiences, who report workplace environments of presenteeism as implicitly enabling a sense of ableism in academia (Martin, 2020; Mellifont, 2021). This transition can be challenging for former PGRs, who experience a shift from the relative flexibility of remote and self-directed work to heightened social expectations within the institutional physical environment.

Institutional websites highlight several commonly implemented RAs for students and staff, including access to quiet or sensory rooms for breaks, such as those at the University of Bath (Sensory Room, n.d.) and City, University of London (Locations, n.d.); hybrid working policies, as seen at UCL (Hybrid Working Guidance for All Staff, n.d.) and the University of Leicester (Reasonable Adjustments Guide, n.d.); and assistive technologies and specialist equipment to minimise sensory stimulation, as offered by the University of Oxford (Supporting Staff with Disabilities, n.d.).

The Association of University Directors of Estates Guide on Neurodiversity and Management for Higher Education environments (February 2025) proposes design criteria for neurodiversity as falling under one of three criteria, Clarity of space, Control of environment, and provision of calm spaces.

Scholarly literature has proposed various strategies to support neurodivergent individuals in academic workplaces. One suggestion involves encouraging ECRs to experiment with different work environments to identify what best suits their needs

while also fostering awareness among colleagues regarding signs of distress in neurodivergent staff (Logan, 2024). Additionally, Praslova (2023) highlights the importance of institutional awareness regarding prolonged absences, advocating for a reassessment of the sensory and social inclusivity of work environments. This suggestion may be more feasible for research staff, who are more likely to work in communal spaces, whereas many PGRs, depending on their discipline, can work in relative physical and social isolation for most of their doctoral studies. Scholarship also encourages neurodivergent ECRs to positively advocate for themselves, as there can be feelings of shame or being perceived as a burden when requesting RAs for academic staff (Elsherif *et al.*, 2025).

Ensuring access to a designated point of contact for discussing sensory or social workplace experiences remains vital for ECRs. This process should be as accessible and informal as possible to avoid overwhelming individuals already experiencing workplace stress. Logan (2024) further emphasises the necessity of designing inclusive academic workspaces from the outset, integrating both social and individual workspaces. Implementing features such as quiet rooms and noise-cancelling booths at an early stage is preferable to retrofitting these accommodations later.

In summary, the transition from PGR to staff presents challenges due to shifting workplace expectations and academic culture. However, HEIs are actively implementing multiple measures to improve RAs for both PGRs and staff. For neurodivergent individuals, experimenting with different workplace settings is crucial in informing RA processes, while for neurotypical colleagues, fostering awareness and sensitivity toward sensory and physical workplace needs remains essential. At

the institutional level, ensuring that neurodivergent staff have a designated point of contact to discuss their evolving workplace requirements is imperative, given the diversity of neurodivergent profiles and needs (*ibid.*).

Theme 3: Mentorship and Outreach

The final theme identified for project aim four discusses the potential of neurodivergent ECR mentorship and outreach initiatives. These can further facilitate academic role transition. Regarding mentorship, several initiatives previously discussed in this report exemplify neurodivergent ECR social support. For instance, the EdInMind group, comprising diagnosed and non-diagnosed neurodivergent ECRs and experienced academics, provides a platform for discussing academic expectations, which can influence ECR transitions and understandings of RA processes (EdInMind, n.d.). This forum enables PGRs to receive support in transitioning to staff roles and beyond through shared experiences within a neurodivergent community. Similarly, UCL offers a buddy system where first-year PGRs are matched with more experienced second- or third-year PGRs to aid in their transition to academic and research life (Supporting Neurodiversity in Education, n.d.). These initiatives represent relatively innovative approaches within HEIs, as few currently implement such support groups or mentorship systems. While institutions like the University of Adelaide are trialling similar initiatives as previously noted (Neurodiversity Project, 2025), these are primarily targeted at UG students. Given the distinct responsibilities and schedules of neurodivergent ECRs, as outlined in the introductory chapter, the development of programs specifically tailored for ECR transitions would be beneficial across a wider range of institutions.

Beyond mentorship and buddy systems, the identification of neurodivergent-focused outreach opportunities proved limited. Notably, UCL provides several such programs. These include 'Experience UCL,' which offers disabled prospective students, which can include neurodivergents if they identify as disabled, the chance to experience student life at UCL for one day (Experience UCL, n.d.). Another noteworthy program is the AccessGranted podcast (AccessGranted Podcast, n.d.), a series produced by UCL students from underrepresented backgrounds. The first episode featured an autistic student's lived experience of mental health and wellbeing. Such initiatives can promote neuroinclusive representation at an institutional level and enhance awareness of neurodivergent lived experiences. This can positively impact ECR to staff transitions as they may feel heard and represented within the academic community. This is especially considering research reporting that neurodivergent staff can feel unseen in HEIs due to the perception of neurodivergence as an 'invisible' disability. Staff thus cannot recognise one another and build outreach initiatives or communities (Martin, 2020).

Outside UCL, the University of Manchester offers virtual campus tours to aid in university transition; however, these appear to be primarily focused on UG students and represent a single form of transition support (Disability Advisory Support Service, n.d.) at the beginning of studies. The provision of virtual transition support, such as tours of new workspaces or campuses, could be a valuable resource for neurodivergent ECRs, allowing them to familiarise themselves with new environments from a safe space, such as virtually from their home. This approach can accommodate specific transition needs by increasing familiarity with the new workplace or department and appropriately plan potential RAs in the new location.

*Project Aim 4: PGRs - ECRs Transition and Reasonable Adjustments (RAs)**Key Findings:**1. Administrative Processes:*

- Similarly to aim one findings, administrative processes for RAs can be unclear for PGRs to staff transitions as managing sources and departments change in multiple HEIs;
- HEIs illustrate that integrating RAs processes into a streamlined and centralised location can better support neurodivergents.

2. Physical Environment

- The physical work environment is a significant cause for both increased neurodivergent institutional belonging and workplace challenges and requires prioritisation;
- Some reported RAs were positive in HEIs, while others noted work expectations change from PGR to staff, such as ECRs expected to work on-campus more frequently;
- For this reason, explicitly discussing necessary RAs before PGR-staff transition and regular RAs updates with relevant staff is reported to be positive for neurodivergent ECRs.

3. Mentorship and Outreach

- Few ECR mentorship or outreach opportunities were noted in other HEIs to support transitions, with most being UG or early ECR transition focussed;
- As ECRs were underrepresented in information found, a possible avenue to expand support is PGR to staff transition and RAs support,

including identifying department responsible for RAs and exploring more frequent RAs reviews and updates as needs change.

Chapter 7: Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This report has aimed to investigate relevant literature on the project's four research questions on neurodiverse practices, neurodivergent experiences, and support at HEIs for ECRs. Where relevant, good practices have been highlighted at national and international HEIs, and gaps in practices or provision have equally been identified. To summarise these key findings from the four report chapters, recommendations for both short- and long-term neuroinclusive practice at the University are listed below.

Short-Term Recommendations

- Facilitate mandatory education on neurodivergence and neuroinclusive practices (including verbal and non-verbal communication, ECR-supervisory relationships, and neuroinclusive language) for individuals working in neurodiverse ECR, supervisory, or other staff teams;
- Consider incorporating preferences in neuro-affirmative communication and practices in PGR-supervisory 'Shared Expectations' documents to increase neuroinclusive ECR-supervisor communication;
- Build a neurodivergent ECR community, either via a Teams channel or in-person events such as coffee mornings or informal presentations on neuro-affirming topics. This creates space to share neurodivergent experiences and both informal and informal networking for neurodivergent ECRs across departments;
- Develop ECR-specific neurodivergent support, such as on ECR time management, conference experiences, or presentations training.

Long-Term Recommendations

- Discuss possibilities of streamlining RA processes for students and staff to one, centralised system. This would increase transparency of necessary administrative processes and clarify appropriate contacts and routes for RA and other support;
- Consider implementing the 'Workplace Passport' system currently available to staff additionally for PGRs, which would facilitate student-staff workplace adjustments;
- Increase mentorship possibilities for neurodivergent ECRs in the form of PGR-staff mentorship, conference mentorship, or first- and final-year PGR mentorship to increase informal neurodivergent support and sense of community and facilitate ECR transitions to less familiar environments and academic practices.

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4. Neurodiversity Project: Focus Groups Report.

Neurodiversity Project: Focus Groups Report.

Introduction

Three focus groups were conducted to explore the first-hand research experience of neurodivergent ECRs and neurodivergent PIs/supervisors at Imperial College. Two student focus groups and one Post-Doc, Fellow and Staff focus groups were conducted.

Questions were designed to address the 4 main research areas and reviewed in consultation with EDI groups; Able@Imperial, the Student Union's Neurodiversity society, EDIC and DAS. These questions were used in a semi-structured manner in the focus groups and circulated to focus group members.

The transcripts were anonymized prior to analysis. The transcripts were analysed and reviewed by the GTA and supervisor and examined for identified barriers, current support, practice and recommendations to assist neurodivergent researchers.

Emergent themes from each focus group were compared and combined where discussion focused around the same topic. These emergent themes were then grouped under the areas of environment, process, support and recommendations.

Current practice, support at Imperial and recommendations for supporting neurodivergent Researchers.

The focus groups discussed barriers, lived experiences, current practices and support, their responses are summarised below.

Environment:

Academic research culture

The academic work culture was seen as a barrier to inclusivity resulting in many experiencing impostor syndrome. Culture of pressure experienced negatively by some staff, suggesting less diverse practices and culture of acknowledging differing needs. The demands of an academic work culture, requiring the balancing of energy levels around research and socialisation was seen as a challenge. Academic promotions seem reliant on socialising and networking effectively, which can put neurodivergent individuals at disadvantage.

Current support involves flexibility with work structure but typical 9-5 neurotypical work day seen as 'disciplined'. Some neurodivergent supervisors get through academia and may be less accommodating to others' struggles and the support available, as they managed to get through fine.

Examples of inclusive practice identified included wearing of lanyards of EDI groups to show support and inclusivity, creating a sense of research community

Neurodivergent Inclusion could be assisted by more support and mentorship to creating positive inclusion. The recognition of dedicated role models could be used to change culture of departments that have varying acceptance or knowledge of neurodiversity.

Neuroinclusive language and communication

Barriers in communication across neurodiverse groups were discussed around more nuanced versus specific focused language, in particular in respect to literal autistic understanding and avoiding inference. Indirect communication or requests (e.g. in emails, feedback) can be unclear for some neurodivergents.

Current practice shows some understanding of affective experiences in feedback but this is inconsistent.

Training or conversations around best communicative practices would assist inclusivity

Current Support is provided in the neurodivergence screening process, which involves a coach who liaises between postdoc and their line manager. Open communication between ECR and managers facilitates open conversations and neuro-affirming practices.

Introduction of neuroinclusive feedback training would facilitate understanding and best practice. More regular and dedicated supervisory meetings to discuss neurodivergent RAs

Some PGRs reported using analogies to describe neurodivergent experiences to neurotypical supervisors who may not understand, and have found this to work well.

Neurodivergent individuals could be recruited as organisers for workshops on neuro-inclusive communication due to their possible strengths as direct communicators.

Neuroinclusive Awareness

Awareness of neurodivergence can vary. Some managers show awareness of neurodivergence as uniquely experienced while other staff are less aware or accepting of neurodiversity.

Some neurotypical focus group participants had volunteered to gain understanding of neurodiversity and support, showing the need for more neuroinclusive awareness institutionally

It was recommended that more widespread or mandatory training on neuro-affirming practices would improve awareness.

Neurodivergent self-awareness

Sharing a list of examples of support available and ideas for reasonable adjustments would assist in supporting neurodivergent researchers, who may be unaware of these.

Applying autistic strengths to special interests

Different strengths that a neurodiverse mind bring to research were highlighted within research e.g. engaging in a PhD as an opportunity to use special interests of deep research as an autistic strength.

Neurodivergent Community

The ECRs were unsure if there are neurodivergent communities or groups available to make connections and share experiences. Creating or promoting such interaction would facilitate community for neurodivergent researchers.

Conferences

For neurodivergent researchers public speaking and presenting was identified as a particular barrier. Course are offered to all students on presenting but other barriers were identified for neurodivergent researchers. Researchers reported being unsure how to navigate networking and making connections in conferences. Some supervisors provide conversation starter ideas for neurodivergent students attending conferences, and help with LinkedIn messaging other attendees to make connections before conference.

The scheduling of conferences and poster sessions are often packed which combined with networking events requiring small talk and social interaction was seen as draining, resulting in exhaustion or overwhelm. Current strategies include avoiding poster sessions to limit overwhelm.

Social support and more inclusive practices, including support for navigating them as neurodivergent researcher would facilitate inclusion.

Some support accommodations for presentations (e.g. shorter slots, use of scripts) may be offered but not all students have found appropriate accommodations for their needs

Conference sessions can be distracting for ADHDs if topics are repeated/slow paced in delivery, this might be supported by training for how to navigate distractions in conferences for ADHDs.

The practice of having conference networking volunteers was seen as of benefit. Others suggested adjustments included; examples of conference etiquette and explicit guidelines, Support for navigating poster sessions as neurodivergent, assisting with travel adjustments for conferences (e.g. appropriate seating on plane), coloured ribbons for different needs in conferences or conference buddy for support,

Inclusivity could also be improved by conference skills sessions for presenting to neurodiverse audiences.

Wider community

While focus group participants recognized support at the individual level, they commented on varying experiences of wider neuro-affirming practices at institution such as the use of Sunflower lanyards.

It was recommended that more dedicated initiatives could be used to connect neurodivergent ECRs across departments and raise awareness of their experiences which can feel as invisible to the wider community.

Process

Diagnostic process

It was recognized that there is a fast and efficient diagnostic process at Imperial, however post-diagnosis support is unclear, with newly diagnosed researchers having a lack of self-awareness of own neurodivergence. Current support requires neurodiverse researchers to recognise their limits and respect them (setting boundaries for self). To support neurodiversity: more regular check-ups on changing needs post-diagnosis is recommended.

Reasonable Adjustments (RAs)

The Disability Advisory Service support reasonable adjustments, however researchers must be transparent in accessing these. Current support includes lists of example accommodations to help students and advice on spaces to have sensory break.

Transparent processes vs Vague administrative processes

Lack of knowledge in who to approach for help and how communication is implemented between departments was identified as a barrier.

This was further hindered by unclear administrative avenues for reasonable adjustments and accessing support, with staff sending neurodivergent students in between various departments with no clear outcome.

To assist neurodiversity it is recommended to streamline and clarify who to contact for adjustments.

Disability Departmental Officer (DDO)

Departmental disability officers can facilitate staff-student communication, however the variability in level of communication was identified as a barrier.

Neurodiverse communication/Academic communication

The understanding of social cues and norms was identified as a barrier and the lack of awareness of communication differences between autistic-allistics., with neurodivergents having to justify experiences to neurotypicals.

Wellbeing advisors were identified as a potential source of support within Imperial

In academia the barrier of trying to communicate holistic thinking style in academic writing was identified, but that there is scope for different ways of presenting information. Neurodiversity could be further supported by more flexibility in forms of academic research communication.

Current good practice involved providing written and visual information for neuro-inclusive academic communication, which would be supported by ensuring feedback is supportive, constructive, and inclusive.

Managing expectations

Workplace expectations are discussed with supervisors and line managers with support offered by wellbeing advisors and scheduled check-ins with staff. However, the structure of lab meetings was identified as a barrier due to variable expectations of the process and interactions. To assist neurodiverse researchers it was recommended that more explicit mutual expectation practices across neurodiverse people would be beneficial.

Physical Workplace

Various sensory difficulties in workplace were identified as barriers, potentially resulting overwhelm, Labs can be overwhelming.

Current support identified involves flexibility in allowing remote working, however this is not always possible. Disabled PGRs are able to book rooms (e.g. Assistive Technology Room in library) but these are often full. The provision of further/other disabled student spaces was recommended.

Neurodiverse researchers would be supported by clear workspace expectations, e.g. what equipment goes where, cultivating responsibility, more consistent dimmable lighting for workspaces or viva locations

Accommodation

PGR accommodation can often be higher in cost than the PhD stipend, especially when located nearer campus. This can result in researchers having long journey times with the impact this can have on their wellbeing. The provision of PGR-specific bursaries to assist with living costs for disabled students would remove this barrier.

Mentorship

The generation and use of a buddy or mentoring system was recommended to support neurodiverse researchers.

Project management

One barrier in project management identified particularly in respect of researchers with ADHD was that of breaking down big projects into small tasks. Increased awareness of the barrier and support in project management support recommended.

Thesis writing / Viva

Several barriers were identified in the generation of the thesis; reading academic texts, writing, arranging ideas coherently in written form and revising drafts and texts

Current support and advice is available on selecting font types which are not a barrier for and so more suitable for dyslexic readers. Further support for editing and proofreading would be of benefit and access to and use of bionic reading as a methodology was suggested.

Viva accommodations are available however staff awareness of these seems variable. The focus groups recommended increasing staff awareness of how Viva affects neurodivergent students, considering accommodations that could be provided and current practice questioned.

PGR-ECR Transition

Current support from DAS at beginning of PhD on assessment of individual needs and support available was beneficial in transitioning into the PhD. Some staff are also aware of PhD-postdoc transitions and accommodations and support is available in selecting jobs post-PhD and in preparation for job interviews.

Further support in transitioning from current practice to unfamiliar spaces would benefit neurodiverse students. This would be facilitated by more regular check-ins and specifically when transitioning from PGR-ECR.

Support:**Neurodivergence as Invisibility**

Despite evidenced of support at the individual level, there were varying experiences of wider neuro-affirming practices at the institution, e.g. Sunflower lanyards.

Neurodiverse Individuals felt hidden and encouraged more explicit conversations around neurodiversity would help support neurodiverse individuals.

Recommended having more dedicated initiatives to connect neurodivergent ECRs across departments to support Neurodiversity and raise awareness of neurodivergent experiences, as the experiences can feel invisible.

PhD Structure and Neurodivergence

The structure and focus of a PhD was identified as a barrier to some. One participant decided against pursuing PhD due to challenges of a large single research project having a preference for multiple smaller projects as an ADHD researcher. Another participant crafted their own routine alongside help from a past PhD supervisor to manage the research.

Scheduling and project management support from line managers can vary and lack of support was identified as a barrier. Explicit conversations between ECRs and managers need to cover individual preferences and needs, acknowledging that no two neurodivergent experiences are the same.

Individual Cultures and Neurodiversity

The expectations of neurodiverse researcher will vary as many ECRs are from cultures that do not have thriving neuro-inclusive practices or education. This may present a barrier to seeking support or knowing what support is available.

Social Processing

Many groups choose to organise social activities, however the unseen impact of these on neurodiverse students was seen as a Barrier. Some ECRs feel social activities in academic can have a spill-on effect in their lives, e.g. their sleep and ability to work next day.

Practical Support

The 'Workplace Adjustments Passport' was seen to require an admin-heavy work but is useful and practical for having all RAs in one place. Workplace adjustments seem to vary departmentally and, although helpful to ECRs, there seem to be informal routes of support.

The implementation of practical strategies to assist with academic work and project management were particularly beneficial.

The focus group identified the benefits of having regular neurodivergence-specific meetings between PGR and supervisors, separate from research progress discussions. Allocating specific time rather than tagging on end of meetings.

Education

Some Imperial supervisors were seen as open and receptive to understanding neurodivergent challenges and the support needed, even if they did not always fully understand or know how to support students. The lack of training and education of some staff on neurodivergence was seen as a barrier to the awareness and acceptance of neurodiverse behaviours e.g. stimming. There seemed to be more understanding of autism accommodations than other conditions such as ADHD. This could be improved by more increasing awareness of neurodivergent challenges and the support available.

Accessibility of Academic Information

The focus groups highlighted the beneficial use of accessible technology (e.g. in presentation slides), and the central training and guidance provided at Imperial. However, uptake of training and good practice was variable, resulting in less accessible documents or presentations for neurodivergent audiences. Ensuring good practice would improve accessibility of academic information.

Recommendations:

A total of 38 recommendations were received within the different themes identified; these have been grouped by environment, process and support topics. Recommendations include training, clarity in expectations, raising awareness of neurodivergence, practical support, community development and celebrating a neurodiverse culture.

Environment:**Academic research culture**

Neurodivergent Inclusion could be assisted by more support and mentorship to creating positive inclusion. The recognition of dedicated role models could be used to change culture of departments that have varying acceptance or knowledge of neurodiversity.

Neuroinclusive language and communication

Training or conversations around best communicative practices would assist inclusivity

Introduction of neuroinclusive feedback training would facilitate understanding and best practice. More regular and dedicated supervisory meetings to discuss neurodivergent RAs

Some PGRs reported using analogies to describe neurodivergent experiences to neurotypical supervisors who may not understand, and have found this to work well.

Neurodivergent individuals could be recruited as organisers for workshops on neuro-inclusive communication due to their possible strengths as direct communicators.

Neuroinclusive Awareness

It was recommended that more widespread or mandatory training on neuro-affirming practices would improve awareness.

Neurodivergent self-awareness

Sharing a list of examples of support available and ideas for reasonable adjustments would assist in supporting neurodivergent researchers, who may be unaware of these.

Applying autistic strengths to special interests

Training and communication should highlight different strengths that a neurodiverse mind bring to research were highlighted within research e.g. engaging in a PhD as an opportunity to use special interests of deep research as an autistic strength.

Neurodivergent Community

Creation and promoting of neurodivergent communities and groups to make connections and share experiences would facilitate community for neurodivergent researchers.

Conferences

Social support at conferences and more inclusive practices, including support for navigating them as neurodivergent researcher would facilitate inclusion.

Support accommodations for presentations (e.g. shorter slots, use of scripts) may be offered but not all students have found these accommodations appropriate for their needs

Training for ADHD researchers for how to navigate distractions in conferences, where conference sessions can be distracting if topics are repeated or slow paced in delivery.

Inclusivity could also be improved by conference skills sessions for presenting to neurodiverse audiences.

The practice of having conference networking volunteers was seen as of benefit. Other suggested adjustments included; examples of conference etiquette and explicit guidelines, support for navigating poster sessions as neurodivergent, assisting with travel adjustments for conferences (e.g. appropriate seating on plane), coloured ribbons for different needs in conferences or conference buddy support, would also support neurodivergent researchers.

Wider community

It was recommended that more dedicated initiatives could be used to connect neurodivergent ECRs across departments and raise awareness of their experiences which can feel as invisible to the wider community.

Process

Diagnostic process

Post-diagnosis support was recommended to develop self-awareness of own neurodivergence, as were more regular check-ups on changing needs or neurodivergent researchers post-diagnosis.

Reasonable Adjustments (RAs)

The development of inclusive practices and support guidance to remove the need to receive a neurodivergent diagnosis and declare to access support, would enable more researchers to put strategies in place to support themselves.

Transparent processes vs Vague administrative processes

To assist neurodivergent researchers, it is recommended that communication and administrative processes be streamline to clarify who to contact for adjustments and the relevant link to research departments.

Disability Departmental Officer (DDO)

Communication expectations between Departmental Disability Officers in facilitating staff-student communication, need to be clarified to standardise best practice.

Neurodiverse communication/Academic communication

Training to improve communication differences between autistic-allistics and improve awareness of challenges in understanding of social cues and norms, as well as acceptance of differences so that neurodivergents do not have to justify their experiences to neurotypicals.

Dissemination of current good practice, involving providing written and visual information for neuro-inclusive academic communication, supported by ensuring feedback is supportive,

constructive, and inclusive was recommended. Neurodiversity could be further supported by more flexibility in forms of academic research communication beyond written communication.

Managing expectations

To assist neurodiverse ECRs it was recommended that more explicit mutual expectation practices around process and interactions in group or lab meetings across neurodiverse people would be beneficial.

Physical Workplace

Laboratory spaces were identified as presenting various sensory difficulties in workplaces potentially resulting overwhelm, these spaces would be improved by providing elements of control e.g. dimmable lighting for workspaces or viva locations. and calm space options.

Neurodiverse researchers would be supported by clear workspace expectations, e.g. what equipment goes where, cultivating responsibility, together with the provision of further disabled researcher spaces.

Accommodation

The provision of PGR-specific bursaries to assist with living costs for disabled students, to access PGR accommodation nearer campus to reduce travel time and overwhelm.

Mentorship

The generation and use of a buddy or mentoring system was recommended to support neurodiverse researchers.

Project management

Raising awareness of supervisors of different neurodivergent approaches to large projects.

Providing guidance and advice to neurodivergent researchers e.g. ADHD researchers, in breaking down big projects into small tasks.

Thesis writing / Viva

Support for editing and proofreading would be of benefit and access to and use of bionic reading as a methodology was suggested.

Increase staff awareness of how the Viva affects neurodivergent researchers and potential Viva accommodations, consider current practice that act as a barrier.

PGR-ECR Transition

Support in transitioning from current practice to unfamiliar spaces would benefit neurodiverse researchers. This would be facilitated by more regular check-ins and specifically when transitioning from PGR-ECR.

Support:**Neurodivergence as Invisibility**

Recommended having more dedicated initiatives to connect neurodivergent ECRs across departments to support Neurodiversity and raise awareness of neurodivergent experiences, as the experiences can feel invisible.

PhD Structure and Neurodivergence

Explicit conversations between ECRs and supervisors or managers need to cover individual preferences and needs around the structural demands of the PhD and research, acknowledging that no two neurodivergent experiences are the same. These conversations would ease transitions into research.

Individual Cultures and Neurodiversity

Publicising Imperial neuro-inclusive practices and education to neurodiverse ECRs from cultures that do not have neuro-inclusive practices and education, to facilitate and encourage transition into research at Imperial.

Social Processing

Recognising the need for down time and the impact of social activities in academia for neurodiverse ECRs, to improve expectations and scheduling.

Practical Support

The focus group identified the benefits of having regular neurodivergence-specific meetings between PGR and supervisors, separate from research progress discussions. Allocating specific time rather than tagging on end of meetings.

Education

Education of Imperial supervisors could be improved, increasing awareness and acceptance of neurodivergent behaviours and challenges, and the support available.

Accessibility of Academic Information

Ensuring uptake of good practice in the beneficial use of accessible technology (e.g. in presentation slides), and the central training and guidance provided at Imperial would improve accessibility of academic information.

Appendix 1

Focus Group Questions

Questions were used in a semi-structured way to allow participant to expand on experiences and insights. With some questions being more general and some targeted to specific roles or potential research questions.

For all

- What is your experience of being a neurodivergent researcher at Imperial?
- What are the main barriers you have faced, as a neurodivergent researcher?
- Do you have any examples where the university put in place adjustments that helped you?
- What other adjustments could have helped?
- Have you discussed neurodiversity with your supervisor / PI? And if so, how did that conversation go?
- Have you attended an external conference while a researcher at Imperial? Did you feel well equipped for this experience, and is there anything that the university could do to help?
- Are there any changes you think we could make, as an institution, for **all** researchers that would better address the needs of neurodivergent researchers?
- If you have considered asking for personal adjustments, who at Imperial would you naturally speak to first: your supervisor/PI, the department disability officer, DAS (for students) / EDIC (for staff) or someone else?
- For undergraduate students, there are certain "standard" adjustments that can be made, e.g. extra time in exams. Do you have any suggestions/ideas for standard adjustments that could support neurodivergent researchers?
- If you were struggling due to standard (neuronormative) practices, do you think your supervisor / PI would recognise this, or would you need to inform them?
- Is there anything you think the university could do to better equip supervisors and PIs to understand neuroinclusive practice?
- What practices would facilitate your transition as a neurodivergent researcher from postgraduate to research staff member and transition there after?

For autistic ECRs and PIs?

- If your supervisor / PI is allistic (not autistic) do you think that has made communication between you harder? If so, can you give some concrete examples.
- If your PGR, postdoc or fellow is allistic (not autistic) do you think that has made communication between you harder? If so, can you give some concrete examples.

- Is there anything the university could provide that might help you both adjust to each others' communication styles?

For dyslexic ECRs

- To what degree did the emphasis in PGR assessment on written dissertations impact on your decision over whether to enter research?

For dyslexic ECRs and PIs

- Have you sought out any help with the written element of your work? If so, what help & how useful has it been?

For postdocs, fellows and PIs

- Was your PhD at Imperial or elsewhere? If elsewhere, where?
- What level of neuroinclusivity and support did you received as a PhD student and what level are you now experiencing as a member of research staff?

Appendix 2**Neurodiversity Focus group members recruitment and diversity**

Focus group recruitment: The following advert was circulated to the Imperial community. With a similar advert circulated to staff.

Calling all Doctoral Students: Are you interested in neurodiversity in research?**Apply for a place at our focus groups and contribute to ECRI's Neurodiversity Project**

[The Early Career Researcher Institute \(ECRI\)](#) are pleased to invite Doctoral students to sign up to attend one of two focus groups, which we hope will help us develop support for neurodivergent ECRs and take steps towards improving the research environment and culture within our community. Your perspectives and experiences in this area are crucial in assisting us to extend the support and resources available to future PhD students.

As a thank you for your time and contribution, we are offering a £20 Amazon voucher to all participants

Doctoral Student Neurodiversity Focus Group Participants

Members of the focus groups declared differing interests in being part for the focus groups. Ranging from interest in the subject area or due to supervision of neurodivergent researchers, to lived experiences with Autism, ADHD, Dyspraxia, Dyslexia and/or chronic illness. Declared diagnosis status also varied and include self-diagnosis, awaiting diagnosis, recent diagnosis and longer term diagnosis.

Post Doc and Fellows Neurodiversity Focus Group

Members of the Post Doc and Fellows Neurodiversity Focus Group also declared differing interests and diagnosis status, including subject interest, working with neurodivergent researchers, and lived experience of ADHD, Autism and AuDHD.

Appendix 3**Themes identified by Focus Group****Focus groups: 1-3**

Summary: Within the focus group 1 the following themes were discussed:

- Support post-diagnosis
- Neurodiverse communication
- Managing expectations
- Academic research culture
- Reasonable Adjustments (RAs)
- Education
- Transparent processes
- Viva
- Disability Departmental Officer (DDO)
- Transitions
- Physical Workplace
- Mentorship
- Conferences
- Neuroinclusive language
- Writing Thesis

Summary: Within focus group 2 the following themes were discussed:

- Neurodiverse communication
- Academic culture
- PGR-ECR Transition
- Applying autistic strengths to special interests (Honing autistic special interests)
- Mutual expectations
- Vague administrative processes
- Academic communication
- Project management
- Diagnostic process
- Education

- Physical spaces
- Neurodivergent self-awareness
- Neurodivergent Community
- Academic conferences

Summary: Within focus group 3 the following themes were discussed.

- Open Neurodiverse Communication
- Neuroinclusive Awareness
- Practical Support
- Academic Culture
- Neurodivergence as Invisibility
- Wider Community
- PhD Structure and Neurodivergence
- Individual Cultures and Neurodiversity
- Social Processing
- Accessibility of Academic Information