

Discourses On Caring And Community In Neurodiversity Support: The Impact Of University Approach On Identity, Disclosure and Belonging.

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

Neurodiverse students and staff are under-represented and often marginalised at university. Accessing support for difficulties makes a difference to achievement and retention, yet we understand few of the factors influencing a sense of belonging or inclination to disclose differences and ask for help. Taking dyslexia as a case study, this paper presents findings from a qualitative project among UK dyslexic students and university support tutors. It highlights the impact of institutions' approach to dyslexia support on academic self-concept, course persistence, academic achievement and disclosure of a stigmatised identity. By advocating for university support departments to focus on inclusion and community, the paper contributes to discourses on the university as a caring institution, highlighting examples of support as self-care; neurodiverse communities as care-giving; and inclusive teaching as caring about marginalised groups. The benefits include not only improved achievement and retention among staff and students but also touch on mental wellbeing.

Full paper

This paper highlights factors influencing identity, inclusion and community among neurodiverse students and staff. It discusses findings from a project conducted with dyslexic students and support tutors, as a case study of one of the larger neurodiversity groups at university. The conclusions inform discourses on supporting students and staff from a foundation of **caring**, for example positioning support as part of **self-care**; fostering **care-giving** communities among staff and

students based on neurodiversity; and inclusive teaching as a demonstration of universities **caring about** neurodiverse staff and students.

Contrary to a common misconception, dyslexia has no correlation with low academic potential, however, while dyslexic students do progress to university and achieve appointments as university staff, the difficulties experienced may increase with greater demands on reading and writing (Snowling, 2012, Deacon et al, 2022). While 10% of the population is dyslexic (BDA, 2025), consistently fewer than 5% of undergraduates - and even fewer graduates - declare a specific learning difficulty at university (Advance, 2022). The extent to which dyslexic students and staff are under-represented (an issue of fairness in access to HE) or under-declared (an issue of low identification at school and poor inclusion in HE), is not known and the balance of factors are poorly understood. Dyslexia – alongside other areas of neurodiversity – is an under-represented and marginalised minority identity at university.

Dyslexia is still linked to societal assumptions of being lazy or slow (Deacon et al., 2022). Dyslexic students feel further marginalised at university as dyslexia is positioned as a defect needing remediation in academic settings, administered by disability support departments (Hamilton Clark, 2024). Yet dyslexic students don't see themselves as disabled, which is associated with bodily difference and social marginalisation (Grue, 2016). Further, having to declare a disability for support is stressful: filling forms takes time, and visiting physical spaces associated with disability makes the student extra-visible (Goode, 2007). These factors combine to suppress the acknowledgement of dyslexia by students and staff at university, reducing access to support and pushing dyslexia into the shadows as a stigmatised academic identity.

To examine the student lived experience of dyslexia, the small-scale study conducted detailed, exploratory, semi-structured interviews with five dyslexic students and with learning support tutors at four UK universities (Hamilton Clark 2022). It took a critical approach (Rexhepi & Torres, 2011) in the analysis of findings, applying thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to explore themes around the implications of institutional narratives and societal prejudice for individual identity, stigma, and disclosure decisions.

The study found that universities' disability-focused approach to supporting dyslexia influenced students' willingness to request help (Hamilton Clark, 2024). Positioning learning differences as a defect impacted student self-esteem by lowering academic self-concept, which was compounded by anticipated stigma and identity threat in academic settings. This builds on earlier findings that the language of bodily defect, medical diagnosis and expected remediation led to individuals' belief in limitations on studies (Fawcett, 2018).

As a result of anticipated stigma, the student narratives in the study focused on dyslexia as a solitary, not community-supported identity. Dyslexia was concealed among peers and lecturers to minimise anticipated prejudice (Hamilton Clark, 2024). Hiding dyslexia led not only to effort and inconvenience, but also to identity conflict in managing identities across different audiences and settings. Some students even disengaged from support as the impact of stigma on identity outweighed the perceived benefits of help. This limited their access to accommodations and help and led some to drop out from classes or entire degree courses, agreeing with earlier studies that showed an impact on lower course persistence and achievement among dyslexic students (Richardson & Wydell, 2003).

The project's conclusions highlight the importance of considering how an institution constructs neurodiversity, to counter prejudice, lessen stigma and promote social inclusion and a sense of belonging. This paper proposes that support departments promote a narrative of inclusion within a caring institution, celebrating the contribution of varied neurodiverse identities to the university body and encouraging affirmatory communities based on these identities.

Study support at university can manifest as caring in action, for example through: (i) community-building to foster a sense of belonging among care-giving affinity communities; (ii) positioning study support as part of self-care and managing well-being in academic settings, to de-stigmatise those who seek specific help; (iii) increasing the emphasis on inclusive teaching pedagogy to highlight universities' caring about and support for neurodiverse staff and students. Lessening the stigma

of neurodiversity not only potentially impacts retention and achievement but also has important implications for the mental wellbeing of students and staff.