Announcer: Hello everyone and welcome to this ADCET podcast. This episode is an audio recap of a recent ADCET webinar titled “I feel like the University is not made for people like me” - Embedding neuro-affirming practices and building a neurodiverse community in the Library. Presented by Jacinta Jones-O’Meara, Joshua Muir and Adam Ferris, from RMIT, this webinar provided an overview of the RMIT’s Neurodiverse Study Sessions from the background that led up to the initial pilot, through to how the library successfully implemented these sessions into the suite of learning supports. We hope you find this presentation interesting and engaging and you can find additional information supporting this podcast on the ADCET website. Now over to you Adam.

ADAM FERRIS: Hi everyone. I'm Adam. I am wearing a white T shirt with silver framed glasses, medium-ish length hair, a little bit of stubble that I should probably shave off for the workplace, and a lanyard. And I work in the RMIT University Library with Josh, and Jacinta is from the Equitable Learning Services.

To begin, I'd just like to do an Acknowledgement of Country from us, and I would like to acknowledge the people of the Woi Wurrung and Boon Wurrung language groups of the Eastern Kulin Nation on whose unceded lands RMIT conducts its business, learning, teaching and research. I respectfully acknowledge their ancestors and elders past and present, and acknowledge indigenous Australians as the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters across all of Australia where we all work and study. I come from the lands of the Peramangk People in the Adelaide Hills and pay my respects to them as the Traditional Custodians of the beautiful lands that I was privileged enough to grow up on.

One final thing on that, reconciliation, or as we say more now at RMIT, responsible practice, is a priority for our institution, and with that in mind I'd like to acknowledge that the lands where I work and live now were workplaces of learning, teaching and research long before all of our educational institutions were created, and it's up to all of us to ensure we do the best we can to integrate indigenous knowledges into our workplaces as much as possible, and there's a lot to learn from the culture that was here before us. These lands were places of diversity, inclusivity, queerness, acceptance long before colonisation. And I'm no expert on indigenous knowledge or history, in general or culture, but a quick Google search before today showed many things about how indigenous Australians viewed disability differently to the western models of disability, and that in many traditional languages there isn't even a word for disability, and they may have a very different understanding or concept of disability. So there are some interesting things there to think about in all of these PDs when we think about disability and comply with the frameworks and concepts that have arisen from western concepts of knowing, thinking and doing. That's that.

I'm Adam Ferris. Like I said, I'm an academic skills advisor in the library. I focus on writing and English. My pronouns are he/him. And a bit about me, I've studied foreign languages and applied linguistics ever since I was younger. I've done the languages and linguistics at university. And my background for work has mainly been in working with English as a second language speakers. So I worked in China for a few years teaching English in a public middle school, then I came back here to do my masters, and COVID happened and I stopped teaching because the borders were closed, and came to RMIT to try and help raise academic literacy for Australian students.

Josh, do you want to introduce yourself?

JOSH MUIR: Hi everyone. My name is Josh. I'm a 33-year-old male, I'm bald, I've got quite a good moustache, if you don't mind me saying, and I'm wearing a light shirt today.

I'm currently an academic skills advisor. Much like Adam, I'm working in writing and English and STEM. So I'm kind of doing two things at the moment. I have a bit of a strange background, typical of someone with ADHD. I started in fine arts, dropped out, ended up studying biomedicine, and now I've sort of changed into education, and I've really fallen in love with this project, in particular, that we're going to talk more about, so I'm really excited to be here today. I'll pass it over to Jacinta.

JACINTA JONES-O’MEARA: Hello everyone. My name is Jacinta Jones O'Meara. I use she and her pronouns. And a visual description of myself is I have dark brown hair in a bun. I'm wearing dark rimmed glasses, a bright blue top, and I have Caucasian complexion. And you can't see I'm wearing fabulous earrings, if I do say so myself.

I'm the Accessibility Coordinator within the Equitable Learning and Accessibility Team. We're the team that provides services to students who register with our service for lived experience of disability, neurodivergence, mental health condition and medical conditions. That's me.

ADAM: If you go to the next slide, Jacinta. Before we begin properly, we just wanted to ask the question: How can we make education more neuro affirming? Our program came out of a conversation between Jacinta in equitable learning services and a library business partner who runs the staff disability network and this question has become a focal point. So we were thinking if everyone wants to put in the chat what do you think for that question, you know, if there was anything you could dream of for making the tertiary sphere more neuro affirming, unlimited resources, no restraints, what do you wish you could see for our students?

We'll give it a minute in the chat. It can be anything at all. We have these discussions at work all the time, and in planning days, and all those meetings that you have to do at retrospectives and everything, and there's so many things we wish we could do, but let's see what you all think.

Personal, private low sensory rooms; library spaces unique for students with neurodiversity and disabilities, no barriers; dimmable lighting; embracing hybrid and different forms of communication; multi modal resources tailoring to individuals; regular pulse checks I like that; having a Canvas course version that you can choose that is built with neurodiversity lived experience in mind; personal library contacts; one on one support sessions.

These are all things that we are also trying to implement and thinking of as well, so it's good that we're all in the same place and all trying to do the same things. Areas with white noise. More training for staff. That's something that Jacinta's team is really good at doing that I've seen since I've been at RMIT for the last few years.

Decompress rooms, somewhere where you can go and scream. I think some of my neurotypical staff colleagues as well wouldn't mind that one. And school wide awareness. I think that's one of the bigger ones. I think a lot of the barriers that we've seen come from a lack of awareness and even a lack of willingness to be aware, and Universal Design for Learning, therefore less need for adjustments. Agreed. Sleeping areas. These are all really good ideas and I love them, so keep thinking about them. Some of these will come up today.

Jacinta, do you want to jump on to the next one? So for an overview of today, our neurodiverse study sessions came out of asking ourselves that question from the last slide, however we knew we didn't have, you know, funding for a new big project like the Uni of Adelaide one you might have heard about if you want to last week's webinar. And the study support team, we're a small team of 10 academic skills advisors and we often struggle to do all of the things that we want to do for the student experience, and we kind of wanted to implement something as soon as possible that could help ease the learning experience for neurodiverse students.

So this is what we came up with and today we'll be speaking about the background and rationale. Jacinta will go through that one. And then we'll be looking at the development of the neurodiverse study sessions, the features, the impacts and outcomes and the challenges and future directions that we might not, you know, yet have approval for, but these are the things that we want because we're always dreaming of how we can help these students best. I'll pass it over to Jacinta.

JACINTA: Thanks so much, Adam. This is Jacinta speaking. So, yeah, look, I'm going to take you through the conception and kind of zooming out on the lay of the land at the time. It is worth mentioning that this program was launched in 2021, so just off the back of COVID and the learning landscape was changing. So I am going to just do a bit of screen organising over here. Bear with me. Okay.

Our job today is to tell you about the embedded neurodiverse study sessions. They were started as a pilot and are now a regular offering of the library. So excitingly for me, as I've had the privilege of being involved in this program from the beginning, and now I've lived the dream of all disability practitioners which is I have I'm no longer involved, I've passed the baton on to the library who are providing inclusive action without the disability service needing to run it.

So we are going to share how we identified a gap in the support needs felt by our neurodivergent student community and then created a program. I'm going to take you through the background of how we identified this program by looking at the bigger picture of the time, of who was here and what were they telling us they needed.

Just a who's who in the zoo, to begin. In terms of the Equitable Learning Service, now nationally the Equitable Learning Service, you could be a current student or you work at a university and your unit is called Access and Equity, your unit is called the Disability and Access Team. So at RMIT we're called the Equitable Learning and Accessibility Team, and that's the team that supports students with a disability, medical condition, mental health condition, or neurodivergence, as well as carers of people with disability, to create equitable learning plans, we call them at RMIT you may know them as access plans or a different name and these access plans, they do the same thing in all institutes, which is they provide reasonable adjustments. These reasonable adjustments are provided to our educators as well as other relevant parties in the university.

So I don't know if this is uniquely RMIT, but one of the key practices that we've had in place for many years here is that we send a copy of every equitable learning plan on to RMIT's library. This has been the case for the 12 years that I've been here, and it's been done with the aim to ensure that the library can easily identify students and aim to work towards more inclusive and supportive supports.

So you might be wondering why has this so strong and long lasting relationship been established and, I mean, it's not absent of really great people that have existed in the library, but to give the library a gold star here, they really take the value of inclusion really seriously here at RMIT and have always led really strongly for accessibility and inclusion.

But another interesting reason here at RMIT is, very uniquely, the Melbourne campus, which is our main campus here of RMIT, it's in the CBD. Our business is spread throughout physical buildings all throughout the city campus, and that creates a really unique student experience as there isn't a central lawn where people might hang out. With people coming and going in the busy hectic CBD, we've often found that students with disabilities have said to us, "I don't know where to go. I don't know where to be", and the library has always been a bit of a central hub for many people, because it is in the central CBD component sorry, I get nervous and I lose my place in my mind and sing, apparently. Sorry. The library remains that central hub.

So like other institutes all over the country, RMIT's Equitable Learning Service has been experiencing steady increase in the number of students registering for support. Not only that steady increase has been present, but the complexity of the students that need our support to equitably access their education.

It's worth noting, as I said before, that this initiative, it started off the back of COVID and students having to navigate hybrid learning experiences. Many students were experiencing being an online learner and then they had to pivot to being a face-to-face learner. So that was bubbling up with us identifying some, you know, different kind of conversations we were having with our students and needing for support.

So the pressure on the equitable learning team was also being felt around this time, and we needed to lean more heavily on other services around the university. And as I shared that the library has our long-standing relationship, we thought let's go there first and see what opportunities there may be for us to improve some of these pain points that we were seeing.

I'm going to move on to the next slide. I'm not checking the chat, and that's okay, I assume. Yes. Okay. Slide 2. So on the screen here sorry to trigger anyone who doesn't like maths and graphs, me included we have a graph on the screen here of RMIT enrolled students starting from 2020 all the way to 2024. I'm bringing this to your attention as I was saying that really creating this opportunity for us to look around the university to see how else we can be supportive, we needed to really zoom out and look at the bigger picture.

So we have evidence of an increase in demand with a slight, interestingly, dip. So 8,000 students in 2023 identified on enrolment here at RMIT that they lived with a disability, neurodivergence, medical condition or mental health condition, and this year we had 7,500 tick that same identity marker.

Reasons for this increase, we've hypothesised, are there's been a greater understanding of acceptance of disabilities in many people’s lives. There's actually been an increase in mental health issues since COVID, particularly in young people. And we also changed our definitional change in our reporting category. So in 2020 we introduced mental health condition as a category of identifying as disability on our enrolment, as well as specific learning disability and neurological condition. These were some changes we made to really try and understand who was coming to RMIT.

We think that more students may have recognised themselves in this data and, therefore, felt comfortable to share that with us. So sharing these figures, it's important that we are learning, and there's no concrete data on what I'm about to say, but it is kind of anecdotal at this time, that many neurodivergent students don't register with our Equitable Learning Service, and therefore while the service is managing incredible numbers, which we'll show you later on in this presentation, we need to consider that the service numbers don't reflect the breadth of who is here and learning at RMIT. So inclusive actions that aren't embedded in the disability service were once again trying to be sought out.

As we saw the numbers increasing requiring increased support needs, it became clear that we needed to rethink how we were meeting those needs. So the growing demand for appointments to register with the Equitable Learning Service, coupled with a surge in requests for support, highlighted a crucial point. We couldn't simply keep up by adding more and more to our existing system. We had to look for opportunities to partner across the university and find innovative ways to share the load. This was especially true as more students, particularly those who were neurodivergent, began to disclose their diagnosis and seek some more tailored supports. It became evident that we needed to think more broadly about how we could support these students to ensure that no one was falling through our systemic cracks.

On the screen here is an image of a woman with a long plait and a blue shirt and her arms are very firmly up in a confused position. As you could appreciate, RMIT is a large organisation, and despite the Equitable Learning Service connection with the library, myself and the broader team of equitable learning advisors found ourselves wondering if we knew the student experience. What was happening with our students when we would refer our students to the library? Our team's inbox was always filled with students wanting study advice or sharing their experience of feeling unsure or unclear of the learning, and they needed more support to cement their understanding, and we would direct them to the library because we already had this established connection.

And we were just finding ourselves wondering did we actually know what that experience was feeling and looking like and was it as neural affirming and as useful as we needed it to be? So our questions and concerns were amplified around this time in 2021 as RMIT's Equitable Learning Service had long waitlists to gain access to an appointment and, therefore, we were even more desperate to support our students and hope that they could gain access to supports in other areas such as the library.

There's a lot of text on the page here, I'm so sorry, but I will take you through it. Basically, with our suspicions that maybe the available spaces and services weren't quite meeting the needs of our neurodiverse students, the next step really was finding those amazing people that I was talking about earlier that I knew already existed in the library. And I can't help but shout out to Lenny de Vries, a business partner in the library who was working really hard about trying to provide inclusive actions anywhere she could.

And basically the next step I met with Lenny and the next step was to see what was possible in creating a new learning experience. First and foremost, the first step was we needed the library to get involved. So we found a leader and that leader was Lenny at that time. She worked within the communication business part I don't know if Lenny is here Lenny might be here in this call. If you are, Lenny, woot woot. Show Lenny some love. I don't know how but see if you can.

So she has passion for disability inclusion and when I suggested that we seek to understand the experience of students with disability in the library, she was such an ally and a leader to make change. So the second point here was library leadership agreed to explore the student experience. So then Lenny and I were tasked to meet with the library executive, and we have an amazing ally in that team as well, Anne Lennox as well is one of the library executives, who met with us and allowed us to craft a survey with no stone unturned. The microscope was allowed to be put on all aspects of the library, being its accessibility in terms of its service, its staff and its services.

So then we created a survey. RMIT, we have a student newsletter to every student who is registered with our service, and it's about 3,000. So what we did is we then sent the survey out to over 3,000 students, and we were really pleased with what we got back. We then developed a proposal. Now, I'm just skipping over we developed the proposal because the meat on the bones that's a terrible expression, isn't it the details are coming. But just appreciate that then the proposal, based on the feedback that we received, we then crafted a suggested idea of what an affirmative approach and an opportunity could look like in the library.

We also approached RMIT's Student Union. Maybe other institutes around the country have had disability officers within their student unions, but that wasn't the case for RMIT. 2021 was its inaugural year of having a disability and carers rep who was motivated to create a sense of community and other opportunities to engage and create spaces that people could bring their authentic selves, and so we had to partner with them.

So Lenny and I got involved with the student union and they amazingly donated toys, snacks, fidget spinners, all kinds of amazing Play doh, books. The pilot was stacked with amazing cool stuff and still this has continued today in terms of feeding our neurodivergent students in the ongoing. Then we launched the pilot which was six weeks.

On the screen here are some quotes that really helped us learn more about, which Adam will take us through next what our students were asking for, but I just wanted to highlight some of the key findings that came out. I am going to read off the screen the quotes. The first one associated with physical spaces being overstimulating, this is just one of many quotes that I could have pulled from our information, but the "lighting is too bright". That was in a lot of our survey results, people commenting on the physical space.

The next one is unsure whether the service can meet their needs. I don't know about you, but in my experience of being a disability practitioner, being a neuro affirming practitioner, often people put a little asterisk above "all is welcome" or, you know, "we can meet your support needs", and that asterisk above that is often self-imposed because many people have felt like, "Well, they're not talking about me as a person with lived experience. All is welcome, but not me." And this was kind of picked up in our survey as well with people saying that they weren't sure whether they just wanted to talk, so the quote here says, "I'd just like to be able to talk and clarify instructions really thoroughly."

The other really big quote I love, and it was really insightful, it says "being directed to the library for people". This was directly, as in an ELS advisor had said, "Go to the library and they'll be able to help you." And the student was saying, "I need to be able to visualise and understand how everything works prior to attending. Trying to figure out expectations and norms can be difficult and cause so much stress that I will avoid the space altogether. It may be nice if established disability groups or walk through/tours as learning about a new space with similar minded people takes a lot of the anxiety away."

So that was really impactful for us as well, and now Adam is going to take us through the student experience a bit deeper and how we developed the neurodiverse study sessions. I will mute myself. Thanks, everyone.

ADAM: Thank you, Jacinta. That was, you know, all the big picture processes stuff, what it takes for an institution to come together on a project like this, but Josh and I, we're academic skills advisors so we're not the disability practitioners. We both have lived experience being neurodivergent, but we don't necessarily have all the power and ability and even knowledge to do a lot of the stuff that Jacinta does. But we work on everything under the umbrella of academic literacy, so referencing, essay writing, running workshops for academics, creating resources, all things like that.

What does that mean for a neurodiverse student? From an academic skills advisor perspective, what could we implement that could create a safe space for students to be able to access our services; what did we know that the students wanted and needed? As it says on the screen, the students were saying "I want to find a space that caters for my need for a dim study space separated from the library, which is usually very crowded, noisy and too bright. I want a place where I can study and not feel self-conscious with my fidget toys. I need a quiet place to get work done and be with other people like me."

So we knew what students needed, and Josh and I trying to work on academic literacy, how can we even help these students with academic literacy if they don't feel like they have a place at the university where they can even work, let alone belong?

In our business-as-usual stuff in the study support drop in, we often have a lot of neurodiverse students who come in and disclose their neurodivergence, and a lot of it is venting. They've got this problem at university, the teachers aren't listening or they're not getting the work done, and a lot of the time they just want help managing time and developing effective study techniques, which is part of our role that falls to the writing and English specialists. So we developed the neurodiverse study sessions.

So like Jacinta said, the library and ELS do have a long-standing relationship, but the ASAs, the academic skills advisors, we hadn't really worked that directly with ELS, so we think this has been a great partnership where we can support a lot of students who are falling through the gaps. I think all of us at universities know that there's always gaps that students fall into and there's a lot of things that it isn't someone's specific role to do.

But like Jacinta said, in 2023, I think that should be, we had over 3,100 equitable learning plans with 98% of them including extensions. When these students come into the hub, the first thing they usually say is "I've got an extension. The due date is coming up, I don't know how to get this done", and we have to try and help them with time management techniques before we can even help them with essay writing.

The students surveyed before the pilot expressed they're experiencing discrimination based on a lack of awareness from educators, and when RMIT was implementing its idea framework, inclusive diverse equitable accessibility potentially that framework.

JACINTA: Good try. Close

ADAM: It was close? Good. It came out that they were experiencing discrimination and academics just weren't aware enough of their either condition do we still use that word condition, situation, or even their equitable learning plan. So what did we have to do?

So the development of the neurodiverse study sessions. It began as a 6-week pilot program in 2021. We first called it Shut Up and Write, which maybe isn't the nicest title, and another group actually already had that title for their study sessions anyway. I think it was the higher research students. So after that we changed it to the Neurodiverse Study Sessions. And we quickly realised that our original focus of tailored academic skills support wasn't even going to be the most meaningful thing for the students. You know, we originally wanted it to be helping these students access our services because Jacinta had highlighted to us that a lot of these students don't access the traditional support services. They either feel like it's not for them, or with all the information that they get inundated with at the start of their studies, finding that information isn't high on their priorities yet. They're trying to figure out how to get around, how to exist in the university that they feel isn't made for them.

So we quickly realised the community part was going to be the most impactful for them. And the program has grown. So 2021 we had six weeks, 2022 we had eight weeks, 2023 ten, and this year we had 14. And it was a co design process with students and staff with lived experience.

But the biggest outcome, I think, for both students and us who work on the program, and the thing that we're the most proud of, has been the community aspect, so how the community was built and how students have shared they were honestly ecstatic to have found a safe space on campus, which we were really proud of, but at the same time broke our hearts because we realised, like the title of our presentation today, these students don't feel like the world is built for them, let alone the institution they're paying to attend. And some of them are paying a lot of money. And that was kind of, you know, saddening but also a push for us to make sure this program becomes business as usual, and that our team is doing the most we can to ensure that they have access to academic literacy help, because they need a safe space and they need to feel welcome in order to reach any service.

Like Jacinta was saying, they would be going to ELS and asking how can I get help in my essay instead of knowing to come straight to us. One of our quotes from the first session was, "For some, these resources are as fundamental as ramps and elevators, glasses, hearing aids, internet access, drinking water, computers and the library." So the community and safe space to a lot of these students is just as important as the drinking fountain over there, which is something that's really pushing us to make this kind of support service even better.

However, next slide, we have to acknowledge it wasn't easy to get off the ground. We quickly realised it wasn't going to just be a few simple planning meetings between Equitable Learning Services and the study support team, but that it would take a lot of different people to do a lot of different things. I think we all know at the universities there are so many people doing so many things and to get anything off the ground you have to think of the students. For us, the study support team, the library business partners, communications and engagement, sites and facilities people, we needed the rooms, the student union, Equitable Learning Services, and something that we're trying to do more is webinars like this where we can learn from or institutions and simply even just like the question we had the at the start, just brainstorming ideas with people who are in similar situations but maybe they have different perspectives because they've had different students and different journeys, and honestly just brainstorming with other people from other institutions is kind of also a part of what helps us create this kind of program.

And for us, we've been trying to find ways to be more proactive instead of reactive when it comes to reaching students, because in a drop in you get a lot of students coming in saying, "I'm failing this assignment", or "I've already failed this assignment, I have to resubmit", and I find that that's getting more and more frequent. Students are coming to us often very late and later than we can help them. And if we really want to help them to develop academic skills, we wish it would be sooner in the process instead of when they don't really want to learn from us, they just want someone to help them fix their essay quickly enough for them to submit and get a good grade.

So this kind of proactive approach is something that we're trying to do more in the study support team, especially for these students because they need this help and they're not accessing mainstream support services, so how can we go to them. Which leads to the key features of our program, which is on the next slide.

The things we had to consider on the screen, by the way, there's a little poster with a girl with a checkered shirt and glasses holding a cup of coffee and her laptop. She looks happy, and that is what we wanted our students to look like after the sessions, but for the environment, we use a spacious room, we use dimmable lighting, we always check with the students at the start, you know, do you want brighter, dimmer? How do you guys want it? We have the chairs, we have the tables around the outside, kind of like in a U shape. And we have the chairs facing inwards because the students express that they wanted to feel like no one was behind them watching them. They're already feeling judged, not just at uni but everywhere they go, and they wanted to be able to feel like no one's watching them, no one's checking up on them. They have us there watching and checking up on them if they need.

And we do actually get a lot of students come into the study support hub who just sometimes want to push. They want someone to check in on them. I have some students that come in on the days that I'm there and they just sit in the corner, and I check up on them every half an hour or so because some of them also come from a family where they might not have parents who understand education in general, let alone how a neurodiverse student should be educated. And some of them just come in just to be pushed and have someone checking in on them.

Privacy was also a big issue. We wanted to make sure that the students felt like they weren't, again, being judged, but also that people walking by, they weren't going to have their neurodivergence automatically disclosed just because they were in a study session. So we had moveable banners in front of the glass walls to ensure privacy and we used blue noise, or we just Googled ADHD study music on YouTube and we see what the vibe is for the day, see what everyone is feeling like. And I think at the beginning we did have the word "neurodiverse study sessions" on the screen, and I think very quickly we thought about it, and reflected and thought actually, no, we're just going to have the Pomodoro time on the screen because we don't want people walking past to know, and the students, they don't need to know, and we didn't want the students to feel that they were automatically disclosing their situation to strangers when they didn't really need to be. That wasn't the point of it.

The next slide is the structure. So we've structured them around the Pomodoro technique, so if you don't know what that is, I think it was an Italian man, sounds like an Italian man, Pomodoro, where we have the focus and rest periods. We generally do about 15 minutes of focus and then five minutes off. We have a longer break in the middle yes, Italian for tomato. I did know that. So we have the focus and rest periods. When we've had longer sessions, we have a longer break in the middle so the students can build that community.

What we found in the normal study support drop in was that a lot of these students, they just needed effective study techniques and if we can help teach them some time management techniques and things like that, for students who are struggling to get work done that's kind of how we decided to structure it. They socialised, they support each other. I've had students chatting about helping each other with applying for a job. One of the most amazing things that happened to me recently in these sessions was a student rocked up and they two students made eye contact and said, "I saw you just before at the train station and I waved, and I would never have done that before these sessions because I didn't know how to make eye contact with someone in public." That was kind of really cool to see as well. But the whole body doubling thing is also a big part of it. And we've even had staff and staff from visiting institutions take part who have said they get more done in these sessions than they do in the office too, and honestly, so do me and Josh.

Wellness support. We have healthy snacks and, of course, some unhealthy treats as well. RUSU, our student union, provides those. They also provide sensory toys through their funding. We have hidden Sunflower lanyards the students are free to collect on those days, and we have informal chats with the ASAs. We encourage students who are not registered with Equitable Learning Services to create an ELP. We talk most days that I'm there about nutrition, hydration, mindfulness. Sometimes just trying to get some of these students to keep drinking water is a push and something that we focus on. And we do remind students of the support services like counselling, the medical hub, support hub and things like that. I don't really know recommend a GP or medication or things like that, but students always ask. Because we usually start the session and say, "I have ADHD. This is how I work." And a lot of them do want to know that kind of quite private medical information, I suppose. And so we kind of just ensure that they know that there are GPs around, and get online and find a specialist GP who can help you, and things like that. Because I think a lot of the students who come from backgrounds where their parents, like mine, don't believe in ADHD and think you're just naughty, they don't have that support from them either. So if that's something that we can talk about with them that's good, I think.

Academic support. So they weren't accessing traditional services in the same way that their neurotypical counterparts were, so that's why we created it so they had access to us directly. And we help them with referencing, academic writing, English language support, cover letter, resume help, study skills, time management techniques and all the things we do with other students, we just tailor it for them.

In 2023 we had information literacy librarians with us in the sessions helping with referencing and finding journal articles, and potentially next year as well we're working on how we can have the whole study support team working on this program together.

The next one, the inclusive atmosphere. This is the big thing. It's a non-competitive, welcoming environment. It was originally Shut Up and Write, Do Your Essay, but now how are these students going to write their essay if they're thinking about the doctor's appointment they didn't book or they have 15,000 emails to sort through. We let them do anything, as long as they're focusing, doing something. If I can help them sort through their 15,000 emails in the session, then they'll have time to do their essay after, that kind of thing. We're trying to promote work smarter and work harder.

Any students can attend. It's not just neurodiverse students. They often bring friends and classmates. And 93% of the participants identified as neurodiverse but only 64% were actually registered with ELS. These are some interesting numbers.

The next slide, these are some of the student experiences. The first one I've read out already. The second one, "The neurodiverse study sessions are the reason why I stayed in my degree and kept going", and we're all big about success and retention at the moment at RMIT and that was really good to hear from a student recently. They appreciate the space with limited distractions, collective and collegiate emphasis on focussed work and understanding of the challenges, and the tribe membership being a key resource for success. Students think they should be on all day every day, why can't we have more. This is so good. More, please, I get so much more done. The science is there, the pedagogical knowledge is there, everywhere else at school has too bright lighting, creates headaches, lots of tension, and the social element was a surprise.

One student said they've never craved a safe space, but finding themselves in one they felt a positive influence just from the vibe of acceptance and belonging.

So we have a short video now of a student who was with us from the beginning in the pilot program, and this student recorded this video for our neurodiversity 101 training that Jacinta runs. I think the majority of library staff have attended, and we recommend it to anyone at the university who works directly with students, so we'll just see what Wendy has to say.

(Video played with captions)

JOSH: Alright everyone. It's Josh speaking, the bald man with the moustache, and I'm going to be talking a little bit about in this section some of the data that we've collected to really better quantify the impact of the neurodiverse study session because as you'll see, the numbers weren't overwhelming. The impact, the tangible impact is really significant for the students, on their lives and on their studies.

A short feedback survey from the students, you know, we found that participants come from all RMIT colleges irrespective of what level they're studying and irrespective of subject, too, which is really interesting. It's quite a diverse cohort who comes through.

These stats are repeated that are on the screen right now, so I'm going to instead just let you know that each session had about eight to 10 students coming in. Sometimes we had more, but we never wanted more than about 15. Eight to 10 was probably the average, and importantly most of those students were sticking around for the three hours. Two to three hours was probably the average time, which is, I think, a really fantastic level of engagement. Jacinta, could I have the next slide, please?

From the themes from this survey and I'm going to go through these quite quick just because I want to get to the questions, so pardon me if I'm being a bit scant on the details here but the theme No. 1 was increased productivity and focus. Students reported high levels of productivity with their studies during the neurodiverse study sessions. I've got some quotes here that I'll read out: "I get so much done, such a great space to study." Another student wrote, "These are the only times I can study", and someone else wrote, "Useful body doubling gets me committed to a certain task".

And that's true for me as staff who has ADHD. I actually am really productive during these sessions. You'd be surprised, this isn't a waste of time, you get a lot of work done as a staff member following this model, which is fantastic. Next slide, if that's okay, Jacinta.

Another really important theme was the sensory friendly environment enhances learning, and students commented unanimously on the sensory friendly adjustments in the study sessions. And I've got a quote here that says, "Everyone else at school has too bright lighting and it creates headaches and loss of concentration." And this really ties into theme No. 1, the low lights, ambient music, sensory toys, the room choice, these all contributed to these high levels of productivity.

Theme No. 3 was an enhanced sense of community and belonging. Being among peers who share similar experiences reduced feelings of isolation and loneliness, and I've got a quote here that says: "I was looking forward to being in an environment with other people like me." So one of the unintended consequences that we're now trying to capitalise on is that these study sessions are a central point of connection for a vulnerable cohort that otherwise don't have that point of connection at RMIT, given that we don't have a shared lawn or other sort of spaces that you might find your peers. Next slide, please, Jacinta.

The final theme I want to talk about is overall student satisfaction. Students reported consistent levels of satisfaction with the sessions, the environment, et cetera, and unanimously expressed a strong desire for the continuation and expansion of these sessions. I'm not going to read the quote on the screen because I want to read the quote on the next slide, if that's okay, Jacinta, if we could just skip ahead. And I'll get to what this is in responding to it, but this quote I think really captures the heart of what a lot of students feel about our session. I'm going to read it in full. The quote is: "For me, the neurodiverse study sessions have been the most productive hours in my weeks. I have even occasionally achieved more in these sessions than in the week between two of them. The difference between these inclusive islands and every other study environment on campus is profound, and I can see this may be difficult to really understand. Indeed, I could not appreciate the difference until I was finally offered such a space in the pilot neurodiverse study sessions last year. But then it is ripped away. Imagine offering ramps and elevators for only three hours per week, or large print text, or PCs with adaptive technology for only three hours per week, or multilingual resources or closed caption video or gender-neutral bathrooms for only three hours per week."

I think this really highlights the fact that this is obviously this is working but we're not doing it enough, and this really kind of brings us to the challenges for the future. If I could have the next slide, please, Jacinta.

So anyone who came to the webinar last week might recognise the next few graphics from napkin.ai. I went a bit crazy with them on the next few slides, so my apologies, but a few lessons that we've learnt. We need to have more sessions. Students need to have more flexible study sessions. 2, there is an awareness gap of our services that we need to improve on. No. 3 is that we need better facilities for neurodiverse students. This ties into the last point. Clearly, there is a desire for social interaction. Students really want to connect during these sessions, almost as much as they want to learn.

We did have low attendance issues at some locations, and this is really important. When we changed, at one point, the timing from the afternoon to the morning, we saw about a 50% drop in numbers. So when you are planning this sort of stuff, you need to consult with the students and meet them where they're at. Then the last point is that there's just a lack of low sensory spaces and neurodivergent students to be successful, and if we care about student success, really need to hammer this home, they need tailored requirements. It's not a want, it's not a desire, it is a need for them to succeed. Next slide, please.

Adam wanted to jump in for a second. Yeah.

ADAM: I have one point about that. Out of this program the library did, I think last year, create a sensory friendly study space for students to have a more chill, quiet zone with the lights dimmed where they can go, not for these sessions, but it's open the whole time the library is open, and we're hoping that that can be further developed as well, and that's something the library is also trying to focus on. Sorry.

JOSH: No, no, no. Thank you, Adam. That's perfect. It really ties into the next point. So what's next? The first point that comes to mind is this has always been a multi team effort and it needs to continue to be so, and we actually need to expand the amount of people who are joining. We don't have a learning and disability officer in this space right now, and so I think for longevity it requires outreach. We've got a student advisory board in the library we might try to get involved. There's a few options, but pushing the multi team collaboration, maybe even a multi-institution collaboration, if anyone here is interested.

Permanent study spaces, as Adam suggested, is what we're pushing for. Of course, increased service frequency. And importantly, staff training. I really think this is an important point, that most staff don't realise that neurodiverse students need these spaces. They need them. It's not a desire, it's a need, and if we want them to succeed we need to advocate on students' behalf and that also requires us to train staff and increase awareness.

Then lastly, we need to build more community through the activities. I've got one more slide to go with some information on it. This is what the future looks like for us next year at least. We're going to continue with the Pomodoro sessions we've been running. It's a failure proof model. It's fantastic. If anyone wants to copy it, please go for it. It's really, really good. We want to pinch some of the ideas from the workshop last week, actually, the ADCET seminar last week, pardon me, and have workshops that are interactive that build skills for neurodiverse students entering into university and also act as another point of connection.

And similarly we might also offer tailored constituted personalised sections. I notice a few comments there, people have noted that students have different needs, neurodiverse students have different needs and we want to make sure we're catering to that. The point of this slide is to emphasise we're trying to expand our operations. We're throwing stuff at the wall, we're seeing what sticks. Some things won't, some things will. But I just encourage all of you to do the same.

On to the last slide, Jacinta if that's okay. This is where we want to leave it. This is a quote from a student that really captures the core philosophy of what drives us. I'm going to read it out. It says: "I feel the world and the university is not made for people like me and I feel like every day is a challenge trying to compete in a world and in degrees that are clearly catered towards people who love talking, who are extroverted, who love interacting with strangers and whose brains work the same." The reality is university does not cater for those who have opposite qualities, and it's really on us to make those spaces. Again, neurodiverse students don't even know how much they need it, and when they walk into these spaces it's clear to them it's a revelation.

I guess this is the last slide, this next one. It should have our contact details on it. If anybody wants to reach out, please do. We are really looking to expand this idea. We want to chat with as many people as possible to get your ideas. And I do think that in the future this needs to be a multi-institution push because funding is hard to come by and I think if we all are collaborating together this might be something which is a permanent mainstay of the university sector.

Thanks everyone. I'm going to leave it there.

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