ANNOUNCER: Hello everyone and welcome to this ADCET podcast. This episode is an audio recap of a recent ADCET webinar titled Serving as a reminder you are not alone - Building Community and Supporting Neurodivergent Students through Study Skill Workshops at the University of Adelaide. This presentation, by Tiana Blazevic outlined the Neurodiversity Project at the University of Adelaide and highlights the Neurodivergent Study Skills Workshops and the feedback provided by students showing a sense of community and a decrease in isolation while building practical study skills and strategies.. 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 Tiana.

TIANA BLAZEVIC: Thank you, everyone. I'm really excited to present to you some of my findings and talk to you a little bit today about some of the work I've been doing at the University of Adelaide. Let's get started.

First, I would like to acknowledge the Kaurna people, the original custodians of the Adelaide Plains, and the land on which the University of Adelaide's campuses at North Terrace, Waite and Roseworthy are built. I also pay my respects to elders’ past, present and future and extend this acknowledgement to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and First Nations people.

A little bit about me as your speaker, I just want to state by firstly starting to say I would consider myself a specialist in this area of neurodivergence as I am neurodivergent myself and I have quite a lot of lived experience, and I'll talk a little bit about that today.

But my background is not in psychiatry or psychology or any related health practitioner degrees. I have been working directly with neurodivergent students since 2020 as an academic learning adviser. The learning advisers at the University of Adelaide are casual and I've been doing that since 2020. I've been teaching since 2019 across two institutions, the University of Adelaide and Macquarie University where I'm currently completing my PhD very slowly. I did my Masters at the University of Adelaide in research. I briefly worked at Kaplan Business School for nine months in the Academic Success Centre where I developed workshops there as well and worked very closely with international students in supporting international students with disabilities, until I accepted the role of Disability Support Project Officer at the University of Adelaide where I coordinate the Neurodiversity Project in the Student Life Division.

My research area is in philosophy, medieval medicine and epilepsy. My field of philosophy that I look at specifically, and I examined in both my Masters and I am examining in my PhD thesis, is an epistemic knowledge which, as I say to many people who ask "What the hell is that?", I say it's a fancy way to say knowledge building and how it intersects with belief systems.

I served on two governance boards, the Council of Australian Postgraduate Association and the Association for Academic Languages and Learning (AALL). I am currently a co-lead for developing the Higher Education Neurodiversity Global Network, which I ask everyone looks out for once we develop it. I am assisting the University of Melbourne's Neurodiversity Project team with this, and I currently sit on a specialist interest group for neurodivergence with other neurodivergent academics as part of the association.

I am dyslexic. I was diagnosed at 16. I had a late diagnosis of ADHD. I'm hoping to receive an autism diagnosis. I am slowly going through that process. I am also a childhood cancer survivor. I had a rare blood disorder when I was 18 that resulted in the removal of my spleen making me immuno-compromised. Safe to say I have had many challenges health wise in my life and I've had to navigate a world with hidden disability and hidden illnesses. Yes, I do plan on writing a book about it once I have finished my PhD thesis, whenever that will be.

A little bit about the Neurodiversity Project at the University of Adelaide. This project has been running since my employment in March of this year. The purpose of this project is a few different things. It has a few different core aims. Firstly, to create a peer mentoring program for undergraduate neurodivergent students, and this will pilot in 2025. We've currently recruited 30 volunteer mentors for this pilot for next year. It's also hoping to establish a neurodivergent hub, a web page that directs neurodiverse students to university support services in one convenient place. To create additional resources for both staff and students related to neurodivergent learning, which some of these workshops are now a part of.

Also to develop and run workshops for neurodivergent students to assist them with their study skills and transition into university; raise further awareness of neurodiversity and hidden disabilities on campus or events and collaborations. I've done quite a few collaborations with some of our staff at the University of Adelaide, which includes our student health and wellbeing team, and also our HR department on the needs of neurodivergent staff members. Part of this project is also to really connect with students on their experience as neurodivergent learners through student survey, collecting feedback, collecting data and incorporating that continuously and synchronously into the project as it develops and moves forward.

Before I started the workshops and started wanting to see how these workshops should be developed, I have a bit of a passion interest for data and data collection. I find it really fascinating. I really wanted to get a deeper understanding of what the registrations were looking like in the Disability Support Unit at the University of Adelaide. This was because I thought it was really integral and critical to make sure I'm giving the right advice and looking at our student cohort and seeing where our students are coming from as well.

What I found, after looking at about three years of data that was given over to me, was that the ADHD registrations for each year in the Disability Support Unit was increasing by about 34 per cent, on average, for every year since 2020. As we know, in 2020 there was a huge spike across the centre for disability conditions being registered with every university. I think many of those were obviously mental health because of the pandemic. Then I also noticed that we had an ASD registration every single year of an average of about 22 per cent every year since 2020.

The reason I wanted to do this data was, as I said, to really make sure I was getting a very clear snapshot and picture of the students that were coming through our unit. The data was collected through the system that we manage and assist our students with called Penelope. However, I also found that our web form data our web form registrations where students have their first point of contact with our unit was also really telling. This gave me a really clear idea of the types of students that were coming through and requiring additional support and the types of challenges that they were facing.

On the screen here you can see the monthly web form registrations from April to September. These are just students that are coming through with an official diagnosis. They've received their medical verification documents and now meeting with our disability advisers, and this is their first point of contact. On the screen here you can see that we've got 15 registrations in April, 11 in May, 14 in June, 21 in July, 18 in August and then 19 in September, and more have increased in the October web form data that I checked this morning.

These registrations were just for ADHD. This is quite a high number because, in comparison, our registrations for mental health, such as depression, anxiety and those conditions, is relatively around the same. Usually ADHD and mental health for our unit goes quite close to one another and the numbers keep rising every single month.

In terms of ASD, the students that are coming through with just a primary diagnosis of ASD we have the same web form registration that shows all of the registrations. In April we only had two registrations, in May one, June we had three registrations of ASD, July three, August was a spike with six and three in September. Not at many as ADHD. That's clearly a primary condition that's coming through to us, but ASD is still on the radar here and still technically increasing in 2024.

Same with specific learning disabilities. Dyslexia is the prominent one at the University of Adelaide, but we classify things like dyslexia and dyscalculia as specific learning disability in our datasets. Here our registrations are seven in April, down to three in May, three in June, four in July, two in August and three in September. Clearly, here we can see that ADHD is the primary that students are coming with, at least at our university. It will be interesting to see what other universities are also experiencing. I know that the ASES division also released their data as well.

But our co conditions tell a very different story. In the web form data is where our students would alert us to any co-occurring conditions that they are having challenges with. Of course, we only are tracking primary when we're looking at our data in this unit, and data is part of the project. But co conditions tell a really different story of what the students are actually facing in some of their challenges.

On the screen we have a visual representation created by AI. It's called Napkin.AI. It is a great website I recommend for students to use, and I use it myself quite often. Here in the middle we have the additional disabilities, and then we have branches that go into mental health conditions that were listed by students. This was just for August. In August we had about, I believe, close to 60 registrations, and out of those registrations we had 19 students who registered a co condition. That's quite a large and significant number.

Out of those registrations they cited things such as having major depressive disorder, generalised anxiety disorder, panic disorder, ADHD, insomnia, complex PTSD this is all under the mental health conditions branch. Here on the visual on the screen we have sensory impairments. There's another branch here, hard of hearing, auditory processing disorder. We then have neurological conditions as a branch here on the visual, and students stated they had conditions such as high functioning autism, ASD, epilepsy and ADHD, autism and ADHD undiagnosed. Then we have another branch which is our chronic conditions, chronic fatigue, chronic pain, medical conditions, or in the process of an RA diagnosis.

In our web form, obviously we're not asking students for any medical verification of these co conditions. What I notice, when looking at just the mental health registrations, is that often anywhere between 15 to 20 per cent of those students who are coming with a mental health condition and wanting support in those areas were listing ADHD or ASD as one of their co conditions.

Whilst tracking the data can be a really good way for universities and for disability support or access and equity and inclusion units to get a better understanding of their students, I think when we really dig into it, those co conditions tell a very different story and give a more holistic view of what some of the challenges are for our neurodivergent students and for other students who have different conditions.

Now I want to give you a little bit of reasoning as to why I decided to do workshops, so what was the reason for these workshops? As soon as I began my role in coordinating this project and reflecting over my time as a learning adviser because I'm still working as a learning adviser in a casual capacity I really have often noted the gap for undiagnosed students and students who are awaiting a diagnosis or are self-diagnosed. We know there are quite a lot of barriers to ADHD diagnoses in particular, same with ASD. My diagnosis was a 16-week project, which I would say is quite expedited. It still required a lot of executive functioning on my behalf, a lot of booking appointments, a lot of following up, and it cost me upwards of $1,800 for both my diagnoses as well as going back and forward with the GP to have medical clearance for my medication.

While the core of the project is to create a peer mentoring program, these workshops are really critical for student retention and experience beyond just peer mentoring, and a focus on the second largest concern for students, which is their academic skills. This was recently highlighted in the University Accord, is that one of the largest stressors for students was financial barriers or financial worries, but then we had academic concerns. I knew this as a learning adviser. I had seen it for five years.

So these workshops grew from both a need to not only bridge this gap for the Disability Support Unit and provide additional support for students that goes beyond that peer mentoring whilst peer mentoring is great, I think a focus on academic skills and strategies is really needed for this cohort but also a deeply personal reason. As I've stated, I'm neurodivergent myself, and I spent a lot of my time in both my postgraduate degrees and my undergraduate degree feeling quite alone and isolated, feeling like I didn't really know what I was doing and trying all these different strategies. Because I was quite a high achieving student I had to work very hard and I did get good grades and I was high achieving a lot of people didn't see all of the struggles that were going on behind that, how stressed I was or how much I had to trial these different strategies or the issues I was having with my executive functioning whilst not understanding or not knowing I had ADHD but just knowing I had dyslexia.

When thinking about what sort of academic skills should be focused on, these were some of the themes that were created based on my experience and knowledge of these students in this cohort, but also thinking about what are the critical things we know for neurodivergent students to help them and assist them in these workshops. The first session was on our introduction to neurodiversity and self-advocacy.

Time management/organisation was our second session. Creating a conducive study environment, that focused a lot on sensory needs. Different note taking strategies, because there are a plethora of note taking strategies that students don't realise are out there. Reading and comprehension skills. We've talked a lot here about visual tracking for ASD students. Understanding and managing executive functioning. That was really important and completely at capacity for this area. A lot of students booked this particular session.

Memory techniques and retention because we know students who are neurodivergent have issues with working memory and short-term memory. Writing skills and overcoming writer's block. This focused a lot on what I like to call neurodivergent paralysis. I don't like the word "procrastination". When we talk about neurodivergent students, I prefer the term "paralysis", because it is linked to executive functioning.

Research skills, how to avoid the research rabbit hole. That was the focus of this session. There might be some assumptions that students who are neurodivergent, specifically students who have ASD or ADHD, are not wanting to do their research or not wanting to do their work. But I've found over the last five years, in thinking about myself, too, it's getting them to stop going down the rabbit hole that's actually the hardest part of their study experience, because they become super interested and super passionate, which makes them amazing researchers, but it's also, again, really, really hard.

Then we looked at drafting. We talked a lot about grammar and how to use IA to help you with your drafting process. Presentation skills and public speaking. And then stress management and self-care, because we're going into the exam period in the semester.

The ones that had the most registrations were introduction to neurodiversity and self-advocacy, time management. That hit capacity, so we couldn't fit any more students in the registration, creating a conducive study environment, note taking, reading and comprehension, understanding and managing executive functioning and memory techniques. All of these sessions hit their capacity for registrations. There were about 35 registrations per session.

Creating the workshops. Each workshop, the way it was designed, the way I designed it, built on one another. So it's beginning with our key foundation, so understanding what does it mean to be neurodivergent? What does it mean to advocate for ourselves in these spaces? Thinking about our sensory needs, the discovery of those needs through self-reflection work sheets that I created on Canva for each session and I'll talk about those briefly.

I used quite a lot of research-based evidence. So most of my time over the last 12 weeks was spent reading lots of different journal articles, lots of different new research that's out there, and there is so much, which is fantastic to see. Also I consulted a lot of readings, general readings, things like Dr Devon Price's Unmasking Autism, and lots of other books that are now out and available for the general audience, because I found the academic stuff focused more on why is this happening or why do neurodivergent students do this, but these general readings are more focused on how do we overcome this challenge? How do we manage this?

That is where some of the workshops were focused, quite a lot of generalised reading and many hours scrolling on TikTok. I know that's a bit controversial, but TikTok has a plethora of different voices in community. As we know, the neurodiversity community did come out of the online community, specifically the autistic community. I think it is a really important source to look at and explore. I have an entire folder titled Spicy Brain and there are 250 videos saved in it right now. I am sure a lot of us have that too.

Each workshop contained a variety of worksheets, activities, self-reflection was the core activity, and optional group tasks. Students always had an option to participate individually through their self-reflection work sheets or discuss on their table their self-reflection. There was absolutely no expectation, and this was communicated consistently, that they needed to talk to each other. So no forced group work. I mentioned this to them all the time and reaffirmed that.

They had three options. It was do your self-reflection individually, sit in silence, put your headphones on if you need; talk with your group, use the reflection sheets as a talking point to collaborate with one another; or if you still want to participate in the wider group, I had an anonymous Slido that was always present on the screen so students could upload their thoughts and I would use that as a talking point and talk about it, so it took the pressure and anxiety off but allowed them to still participate in the wider group.

The marketing of the workshops. I think this is something that needs to be addressed and spoken about. How do you market these workshops? How do you start them, because that is really important. A lot of my role is doing marketing and outreach, which is great. I am a bit of an extrovert, so I'm comfortable in this area. I thought if I wanted to get students to know these workshops are existing, because I did not have that much lead in time for marketing, I really needed to hit the ground running on this.

Some of the variety of channels I used was quite widespread. I presented at learning and teaching committees for each of our faculties. We have three faculties at the University of Adelaide. I encouraged the leadership there to advertise the workshops in their lectures, in their course works and their own announcements. I had a global announcement published on our learning system Canvas.

So for three days every single student was able to see these neurodivergent study skill workshops and get the registration details. I contacted our social media department for my division who posted every single Tuesday at 8 am before the workshops to pick up any students who hadn't seen any of these announcements. I used my network I had built over 10 years of being both a student and a staff member. So I sent a lot of emails and had a lot of meetings with academics that I had come across, or people I had had conferences with and coffees with, to get them to put the word out there for me.

I had our disability advisers, who are fantastic, also promote these workshops in their consultation with students. This was really important and great. I also utilised our digital hub screens around campus. We have quite a lot of different digital media outlets. One of those is these really big screens that appear everywhere on our campuses. So I made sure that was consistently running on a loop for us as well.

In terms of the universal design for the workshops, I really put some thought into making sure that the wayfinding was appropriate, that we're considering UDL in the pre part of the workshop, not just during and post. The slides, every time I created them, were always different and incorporated accessible colours in their design, such as pastel colours or contrasting colours. There was also some sort of design what I would like to call a bit of sensory stimulation, something that's a bit different.

The workshop structure itself, the way that the hour and a half workshop went for, was really kept the same. Students were able to know when they entered the workshop if they'd come consistently that they were going to have the same structure but the slides, the images, were always different. This, I thought, kept a good balance of routine and interest for the students. Only specific fonts were used that were suitable for neurodivergent students. I know there is some controversy at the moment around this, but I wanted to make sure all of my bases were covered.

In the booking form itself we were able to use Calendly; it's quite a well-known booking system for appointments and workshops. Students were asked to supply me with the type of support they needed either in the workshop itself, whether that's physical access, captions, materials before, materials after, and I would consistently check these workshop bookings every single day during the week.

Text reminders were sent out 24 hours before and four hours before with very specific instructions on how to find the location of the workshops which was held in our library. I consistently checked in with students at the beginning of every workshop to see whether I was missing anything, whether that was through the booking form, the website, or prior to their arrival. If there were any access routes that were blocked, or any wayfinding becoming an issue for them in the library, because we are going through renovations at the moment.

In terms of the universal design learning and the workshop space itself, as I said, we were in the library, but something that I recommended to students all the time, whether it was communicating via email to them but also communicating in the workshops themselves, that there was absolutely no judgement for being late. I didn't care the reason. You didn't need to tell me why you were late or apologise, or do anything like that. So I affirmed to them in every workshop I don't mind if you're a couple of minutes late. We are talking about a cohort of people who have time blindness and executive functioning. It's not okay to shame them for being late or draw attention to that.

No requirement to participate in the group, hence why we always had the online Slido/self-reflection work sheets as an alternative. The students were encouraged to get up or walk around and stretch at the back of the room if they needed. We know that students with ADHD, people with ADHD specifically have hypermobility issues. I myself am one of those. And also to make sure that they had stimming toys close to them if they needed. Anything they needed, to stim or get up and walk around, was completely fine with me.

I provided paper on tables for anyone who wanted to draw or doodle on their paper to maintain focus. And we also discussed, every single workshop, how many lights we wanted to keep on in the area that we were in. We were lucky we were in a room where we were able to control the lives but this was something that built a lot of community within, and right at the very beginning of the workshop, because I'm also very sensitive to UV lights I really don't like them, and neither did the students so every single workshop we would decide how are we feeling today? Let's turn off these lights and see how it went. That was appreciated by the students.

In terms of the workshop attendances, the workshops were held in person. There was an average of 20 to 30 students for each week with an average of 21 students so far that have attended every single workshop. We had a few repeat students but there was always a very mixed cohort in each of these workshops. The workshops were held on a Tuesday only. I only work four days a week, from 10 o'clock to 11.30 am. The content was uploaded weekly to the disability support web page, along with further reading, as well as all of the workshop materials. This content was only available for University of Adelaide students.

Holding the workshops in person was really important because it created a sense of community. We did receive quite a lot of feedback from students who wanted them online or wanted them recorded as well. So next year, once the funding is secured, we are going to be exploring online and face to face options to see if we can make sure this is as equitable as possible for all the students.

Students were asked to fill out a survey after each session. They've reported in these survey results and I will show you them shortly they’ve really enjoyed this community atmosphere and being around other neurodivergent learners. The surveys for me really provided immediate feedback on my teaching and my pedagogy and the content of each workshop. I was able to adjust, when necessary, and it's also given me some really good feedback for next year and what I can be doing and how I can improve.

When I was tutoring for the University of Adelaide, the SELTs were really great, but I always felt like they came way too late because I want to adjust my teaching now. If I'm not doing the right thing or there is something I can do better, I want to know now. This is something I've been doing for a long time and I've found it's really helpful, and I would bribe the students with buttons, with bookmarks, with sunflower things, just so I could get them to fill out these surveys, because I know they get hounded all the time for surveys. But I communicated to them that it was really important I get this data.

As I said, students shared that they did not feel isolated and that was really important to me. The approach of the workshops, how I made sure I was doing this to the best of my abilities but also thinking about this cohort of students and what they interact with and hear every day. The workshops were scaffolded in a way that students first discuss common assumptions about neurodivergent students, and this is where my philosophy background comes in. We would often discuss how neurodivergent learners are always, or most of the time, boxed in to neurotypical study routines or ideas about what is best academic practice.

What I have seen and learnt as a learning adviser is that students are not really asked to reflect on their academic practices or reflect on what it means to be a student. So I drew quite heavily on my own experiences, as both a student and staff and being neurodivergent, and we often talked about these stereotypes and assumptions. For example, I am dyslexic, yet I have published two book chapters, I've gone through postgraduate degrees. I talk a lot, I run training sessions, but I'm a dyslexic academic. That, in and of itself, is an assumption that people make about me, when I say I have dyslexia. And I've spent a lot of my time advocating for myself to have the academic community recognise there are many of us, there are many dyslexic academics, and we are quite amazing at our jobs. We just sometimes need a little bit of help in certain areas.

I also reflected on some of my quirks I didn't realise were neurodivergent quirks growing up. So talking about my family, my relationships, and talking about those things in that neurodivergent space. Whilst this vulnerability can be really hard and you're always teetering that line of professional and also personable, I thought it was really necessary for me to open up first in order to give students the courage to start talking about it with each other, or start talking about it as a group.

And because these workshops were available to all neurodivergent students, regardless of their program status, whether or not they were are a PhD, or a first year undergraduate student, I found it really helpful that HDR students were often coming to these workshops because they had a little bit more confidence to speak about these things. In a sense, they started providing that peer mentoring to other undergraduate students or postgraduate course work students.

As I said, the workshops often examined how learning should also always be first situated within its cultural context and its social context. Same with neurological conditions or disabilities, and that we really need to look at the social constructs and ideas around that, rather than thinking about things in a deficit or biomedical deficit model. We often talked about how the biomedical model helps to explain our symptoms, helps to explain neurodivergence, but that social and cultural model is really important.

For example, to give you one, instead of discussing how to prioritise something in our session on time management, we discussed what I like to call peak productivity. This is the hours of the day you work best and for how long. We talked about how it is not reasonable, nor is it normal, for any person to work for eight hours straight and that studies show that, realistically, you're only working for three or four-hours max. And we talked about, "What's the time of day that really works well for me? How do I work with fatigue levels as well and an interest based nervous system? What does that look like for me for my peak productivity? And who defines what it means to be productive in this society and our own cultures as well? What is productivity?"

Every workshop, along with these sociocultural examinations, discussions and ideas, also provided students with tools and examples that they could use in their practice to help them. Virtual study tools, immersive YouTube writing sessions, 8D Audio which is experimental, goblin tools which I highly recommend everybody to look at for neurodivergent students, or being neurodivergent yourself. It saved me many a time. There is Zotero and Obsidian. I showed them how to use Zotero and Obsidian together to assist with their learning and to assist with executive functioning.

Also, there was quite a heavy focus on artificial intelligence, using systems such as NotebookLM, Mindgrasp as well as Audemic. A lot of these AI websites are now being used by students who are neurodivergent to help them with the workload and cognitive overload as well.

As I said, whilst most of the workshops do contain some sort of tool for students to implement, I emphasised to them that these tools I give you, it's not an authoritative use. If you use them, it will definitely help. Use them and discover whether or not it works for you and if it doesn't, push it to the side.

I call this the discovery process. I found that over my years in working closely with neurodivergent students and also reflecting on my own experience, that we feel this sense of shame and isolation, and we're often more prone to burnout because we're trying to make things work that just don't work. We're trying to fit into these systems that don't work for a neurodivergent learner. So how do we question this and how do we break out of those systems and find something that works for us?

So when we're discussing all of these topics in the workshops, a lot of students revealed quite a lot of learning trauma in high school and primary school and how many of their ideas of what makes a good student or how I need to study are coming from their high school experiences especially. That is then causing them to perhaps not have the best experience at university because they're doing things that don't work for their neurodivergent brain because they don't know anything else.

Our discussions revolved around that quite a lot, where we then talked about, okay, so if we've all been told to prioritise, that's not going to work for you. Let's talk about that peak productivity instead. Let's talk about how to get rid of burnout or how to avoid burnout, and let's talk about having a potato day, which is normalising, relaxing your body so you can have a better study day tomorrow and not feeling like you have to working all the time because it will lead to burnout.

I really wanted to stress to the students about my discovery process. I call it the discovery process. These workshops, each of them, are about discovering what works for you. I'm not here to tell you what to do. You can pick and choose the strategies you want and let me know if it's working for you. If you've tried any of these strategies and you want to talk about it with other students, you can do so in your self-reflection activities and you can also talk to each other. Those reflection work sheet activities I made them complete often there were about three or four reflection worksheets per workshop in most cases these were kept as a journal. So I said to the students, "Try and keep these in a safe space where you can because these are going to help you reflect on what's working for you in your past, present and potentially your future." Because I found I have lots of different strategies that I've tried. It's worked for six months and then, for whatever reason, my brain is like nope, it's not working now, and I forget what strategy I did. If I started writing it down, I knew I had somewhere to reflect back on what has worked for me in the past and I can go back to that.

I think it's really important when creating supports for neurodivergent students that we really need to approach them holistically. And this is because when I would have students come to me and I learnt this over the years it was hard to break out of that immediate response, that academic response. They would come to me and say, "I want to learn how to be a better student. I need to be a better student because I want to do better in this course and I'm really trying. How do I study better? How do I plan my time better?"

My first question, before I had experience and went through my own self-reflection, was, "Okay, so we need to prioritise and we need to do this, this and this." But realistically, I should have been asking, and I ask that now, "What are you sleeping? How many hours are you sleeping? What's your sleep patterns like? What's the wellbeing and nutrition like?", because all of that does impact your study and it impacts your life, and it impacts your experience, too.

Recent research is really highlighting the co-occurring conditions in the neurodivergent population. We know women with ADHD, those who menstruate with ADHD, are more likely to PCOS I have PCOS PMDD, hypermobility, Ehlers Danlos syndrome, insomnia, circadian rhythm issues, restless leg syndrome, fatigue, and a whole bunch of sleep issues. I have and had insomnia for many years and an immune disorder. This is all stuff that's now coming into the literature and being researched as well. So we have to start thinking about this.

In terms of the reflection activity, why reflection as an activity and did it work? Yes, it did work and I was very surprised that students were happy to fill out these reflection activities. I really thought this was going to flop but it didn't and it was great. Reflection work sheets I think are a really good synchronous activity. It allows collaboration, learning, self-acceptance, community building, because you can talk about each other's strategies. It also allows neurodivergent students that autonomy and agency over their own academic practices.

As I have said to many academics, neurodivergent students know what works for them. Many of them know that they're spending a lot of time, they already do a lot of internal monologuing and internal reflection, so this is giving them that physical outlet to put it down on the paper. The reflection allowed them to ask what each other's strategies are. When they became more comfortable with each other, and because I did have more experienced HDR students here in the workshops, it really provided that collaborative community building exercise.

These work sheets, as I have said, are really critical because it helps students to reflect on the past and what's worked for them, what will work for them, instead of focusing on what they can't do. I think with reflection the reason that some students might struggle with it is because often I think we're asking them the wrong questions. It's fine to ask a student in a reflection work sheet what's leadership? What's good leadership? What's good communication style?

But rarely have I ever seen any courses where lecturers or course coordinators are asking students to think about how do you take notes? Why do you take notes? What stands out to you? How do you memorise things? That's not being reflected on. That is the role of a learning advisor, to help students reflect on that, but I think it should be incorporated into curriculum.

So critical reflection worksheets are strength-based approaches that allow the student to discover more about what works for them rather than telling them what to do.

The satisfaction so far. I have collected the data for session 12 and it stayed exactly the same, but the workshop satisfaction session, we had a total of 108 responses from students and we had a 72 per cent extremely satisfied response, 24 per cent said they were somewhat satisfied, and four per cent said they were satisfied. There was no indication that students held a neutral position or a negative experience of any of these workshops.

Here's some of the feedback from students that they've liked about the workshops specifically. One student said "normalising memory issues rather than a personal failure and focus on stimming and also the different types of neurodivergence that impact different types of memory. I was really glad this covered the aspects of executive functioning paralysis I struggled with most. The post work sheets and talking to be able to identify things that work for me specifically. I really enjoyed the short demonstration on the Obsidian and Zotero, giving me a little hope that I can lift myself out of my misery in regard to the semester wide research project I'm currently undertaking. I love to listen to the presentation and the short reflections I have not done before especially through note taking. Visual reminder reflection and daily schedule sheet to see where my peak productivity is."

In terms of building community, students said they like getting to be around neurodiverse people and having it run by someone who is neurodiverse and has lived experience. It felt really inclusive and relaxed. They like talking in a group about strategies. It really helped with figuring things out and understanding new strategies. The inspiration for the title of this talk, serving as a reminder that you are not alone, negative outcomes are expected and plethora of strategies to try.

Some of the shorter feedback was knowledge sharing, open and supportive atmosphere, shared community, supportive environment and engaging activities. One email I received, which hit home to me, was an international student who was very grateful to not be pressured to interact with the classmates. He stated that it was really helpful to him and really understanding and thanked me quite profusely. This was a touching moment. And again, I think this is a really key thing when you're designing workshops and activities, you should be thinking about different ways that a student with ASD can still participate without being forced to discuss things.

I think another very really good thing to highlight is Slido. It is such a great tool and so simple and effective. This is where my research and background comes in. I want to highlight this quote from James Alcock's book chapter "The Propensity to Believe", where he states that "Virtually every society is a society of contradiction, valuing and promoting reason and logic to some degree, but at the same time valuing and promoting deeply held transcendental beliefs that defy that logic. In consequence, individuals learn to question, to analyse, to apply logic in one belief system, but not to do so in the other." Essentially, seeing is believing, and that is why the Slidos for me were really important in building that community because it showed students they were not the only ones that were struggling with this.

Here in one Slido I asked them, "What is the first word that comes to mind when you're told to write?" And many of them said "panic, anxiety and torture", and they're not alone in those emotions. "What has been your experiences with reading and interpreting texts, both positive and negative?" Many of them said "frustration, escape, thinking of connection". They're seeing physically here some of their responses, and they're seeing here they're not alone in some of these emotions.

The last one again I've had many Slidos, I am just highlighting a few but "in what ways, if any, do you find stimming helps your memory?" Many said "moving, focus, withdraw from excess stimuli". Again, that is seeing is truly believing.

Bridging the gap, I think these workshops are really important for bringing the gap for access, equity and inclusion services. For us, this was really important in my unit because, again, this is for all students. It's not just for students who have a medical diagnosis. In most sessions there was an even split between students who ticked yes, I have an access plan or no, I do not have an access plan, so reasonable adjustments when they registered for workshops.

There was a total of 157 students who ticked no. Again, some of those are repeat students, but in total we did have 338 registrations for the workshops and 204 students attended over the 12-week period. Many of the students who ticked no to not having an access plan, no not being registered with our Disability Support Services stated, they stated that they were either awaiting a diagnosis, not sure and exploring, self-diagnosed or did not want to disclose their status to the university.

I think it begs the question we can provide students with reasonable adjustments but what's the next step? How do we help students who are undiagnosed, who have financial barriers to diagnosis or are just exploring and figuring themselves out? Importantly, how do we help what I think is a forgotten cohort, which is HDR students? There's not much support for them, especially for academic skills and writing. So how do we provide support for them, too.

These workshops are one step that universities can take to acknowledge those barriers and provide students with assistance that goes beyond the legal requirements.

My final word, as I said, I often in these workshops have acknowledged the struggles of neurodivergent students and, of course, there are situations where there are inherent requirements or poor infrastructure, but I think acknowledging that, hey, I see that this is a problem, is really critical. Acknowledging this through either my own personal lived experience as a neurodivergent educator and using that research-based evidence, so making sure to incorporate other neurodivergent voices was really important. I try to highlight this as much as possible.

In order for us to start supporting neurodivergent students beyond those reasonable requirements and legal requirements, it's really important to think about how the staff are feeling, because how can we reduce stigma and how can we expect students or want students to disclose because we do; we want to provide support for them. I come from an amazing Disability Support Unit with amazing staff who really want to support these students, but how can we expect our students to disclose if within the staff community there's not much support for neurodivergent staff either? That is another thing universities need to focus on as well, is that, okay, you want us to support neurodivergent students, you need to support the neurodivergent staff at the same time because they're having the same problems, too.

So I find that students really appreciated that disclosure of my own struggles, both past and present. It reminded them that I'm human, I have layers of complexity and, really importantly, I'm not the source of truth on neurodivergence. So I really encourage my students to read the sources, to follow up and to question things, too. Again, I am not the source. I have my own lived experience and my own lens and other people have lots of different experience. I think sometimes when you are in a position of authority, students sometimes forget that, and it's really important to remind them you're not always the source of truth on things and that we're human, we will make mistakes and we're not always the best at what we do sometimes.

Here's my reference list from today. I encourage you to connect with me via email or LinkedIn if you would like to ask any questions about the project or the workshops. Thank you.

Announcer: Thank you for listening to this ADCET podcast. We hope you learnt something new about making tertiary education more inclusive and accessible for students with disability. You can keep up to date with our future webinars and podcasts by signing up for our fortnightly newsletter at our website [www.adcet.edu.au/newsletter](http://www.adcet.edu.au/newsletter). Thanks again for listening to this podcast from the Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training, Supporting you, Supporting Students.