QQI AHEAD Submission: Inclusive assessment and standards in further and higher education.

Enhancing the Academic Environment for Neurodivergent Students: A Focused Approach on ADHD in Trinity College Dublin

This paper takes as its theme the need to re-think inclusive assessment practices for neurodiverse learners and the sustainability of reasonable accommodations (RAs) to ensure the accessibility of in-person examinations. Inclusive assessment arises from the need to accommodate growing numbers of diverse learners in higher education, in a manner that both meets the ethos of sustainability, and the core principles of Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2018). The Appendices provide two illustrative examples with a focus on ADHD.

Background

Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin, is Ireland's leading university with a student body of more than 21,000 undergraduate and postgraduate students across three faculties – Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences; Science Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM); and Health Sciences. The structure of taught undergraduate and postgraduate courses is modular, and achievement of learning outcomes may be assessed through continuous assessment in the form of essays, projects, in-class quizzes, lab work, assignments, and/or formal examinations at the end of each semester.

Diversity of learners

National participation rates for disabled students in 2021/2022 (AHEAD, 2023) indicate that they account for 6.6% of the third level student body (AHEAD, 2022) and that 17.8% of the student body in third level declared at least one disability (HEA, 2022). The HEA National Access Plan (HEA, 2020) notes that Data for Trinity College Dublin (Disability Service, 2023) records 2,312 students with a disability (276 are international students) accounting for 10.8% of the total student population in the university. Eighty-seven percent (87% - 2,011) of disabled students require reasonable accommodations in examinations.

There are a number of alternative entry routes for widening participation groups such as HEAR, DARE, CDETB / FET links, the Trinity Access Programmes, and Mature student routes. In 2021, 26.7% of undergraduate students entered Trinity via alternative admission routes, which exceeds the target set out in the Trinity Strategic Plan 2020–2025 (Trinity College, 2023), and students with disabilities represent 10.8% of the total student population in the university.

In 2022, the number of students diagnosed with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) registered with the Disability Service (DS) increased from 229 to 322, a 41% increase on the previous academic year (Disability Service, 2022, 2023) accounting for 19% of the total number of students registered with the DS. Statistics for undergraduate registrations (n=2,036) indicate that ADHD accounted for the third highest disability category (n=276), and for postgraduate registrations (n=258) ADHD represented the second highest disability category (n=46) surpassed by Mental Health Condition and Specific Learning Difficulties, although this is based on indication of primary disability only.

Trinity College Dublin faces the challenge of ensuring inclusive assessment practices for a diverse student body, including neurodivergent students.

Challenges in Assessment

The university's traditional assessment methods, including timed, in-person examinations and rigid submission deadlines for coursework, have been identified as significant barriers. These practices often exacerbate the cognitive, linguistic, executive, and affective difficulties inherent in neurodivergent profiles, leading to undue stress and academic disadvantage. Principally, challenges are noted as:

1. Assignment deadlines might be included in module or course handbooks or communicated within Blackboard (VLE) materials from the beginning of the module or towards the end of the semester, or within a Blackboard announcement, or separately via email. Thus, there is no standardised, integrated method of identifying timelines for assessment across modules with a course to facilitate planning.
2. A reluctance to engage with alternative assessment to meet the diverse needs of learners perpetuates the need for timed, summative assessment, in-person examinations. This is partly based on notions surrounding the complexity of managing multiple means of assessment and also of ensuring fairness and parity in awarding grades.

3. Students are assessed through continuous assessment in the form of essay-based assignments, lab reports, group projects, and multiple-choice tests. They also sit modularised end of semester examinations and, often, deadlines for submission of coursework fall within or immediately prior to an examination period. This places a significant burden on the student in terms of completing assignments by the submission date to avoid a penalty, whilst simultaneously revising for examinations.
4. These complexities in assessment are particularly exacerbated for students studying between two Schools / Faculties, where differing assessment practices are utilised.

Moreover, there is a growing cohort of students transitioning from post-primary education who, despite requiring reasonable accommodations, lack the formal documentation to support their needs, further complicating the provision of appropriate support.

Aim of the Initiative

A pioneering initiative has been undertaken to reimagine assessment practices, ensuring they cater effectively to the diverse needs of neurodivergent students including those with Autism (ASD), dyslexia, dyspraxia, and other neurodivergences. The aim of this initiative is to:

1. Establish a support pathway for students diagnosed with or awaiting diagnosis of ADHD.
2. Capture data on the academic experiences of students with ADHD, focusing on teaching, learning, and assessment aspects.
3. Ensure that the Learning Educational Needs Summary (LENS) report act as evidence for neurodivergent students seeking extensions or alternative assessment.
4. Systemically review assessment methods across Trinity to ensure disabled students can perform optimally.

Building on this foundation, the initiative seeks to extend its findings and strategies to encompass all neurodivergent students, advocating for a universally inclusive approach to assessment and standards.

Implementing the Initiative

- Implementation of a mixed method research study to the ADHD population within the student body (estimated 1,700 based on previous research including those students who have not disclosed to establish an evidence base (Appendix 1).

- Introduction of Low Distraction Venues (LDVs) for exams, providing quieter, less distracting environments for neurodivergent students (Appendix 2).
- Creation of alternative assessment methods via the non-standard procedures available in the [Trinity Reasonable Accommodation](#) Policy to accommodate diverse learning and expression modes.
- Establishment of clear, standardised communication regarding assessment deadlines and requirements across all courses.

Outcomes

Results from the research survey revealed a critical need for heightened awareness and understanding of the challenges of ADHD. Only 15% of participants felt there was good awareness of ADHD within the college, with 46% noting a lack of understanding.

The Impact of ADHD on Academic Performance: Students with ADHD face unique challenges that significantly affect their academic journey. For UG students, activities that are impacted most significantly by ADHD (ranked in the top three impact indicators) are Management of Course Demands (87.2%) Completing Assignments (64%), Attending Lectures (44.8%), and Getting a Good Work / Life Balance (32.8%). For PG students, activities that are impacted most significantly by ADHD (ranked in the top three impact indicators) are Time Management of Research Demands (89.85%), Meeting Research Deadlines (57.97%), and Organising Research Inputs and Outputs (33.34%).

Challenges for students in Multi-School/Faculty Courses: Diverse assessment practices and administrative procedures across disciplines pose additional hurdles; 74% of the ADHD cohort are registered to Multi-school courses. This is important as studying across two Schools and contrasting disciplines (e.g., Mathematics and a Language) may create challenges arising from differing assessment practices, timetabling, and administrative processes; this challenge might be reflected in 48% of students sitting repeat examinations being registered to Multi-school courses.

This initiative has led to several positive outcomes, including:
- An increase in academic success and well-being among students with ADHD, as evidenced by reduced stress related to deadlines and exams.
- Improved accessibility and equity in assessment for neurodivergent students, as reflected in the positive feedback on LDVs and the ADHD toolkit.

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- Highlighted the need for sustainable, resource-conscious approaches to accommodating neurodivergent students in higher education settings.

Reflections

This case study underscores the critical need for higher education institutions to adopt inclusive assessment practices that recognize and accommodate neurodiversity. By leveraging the insights gained from the ADHD-focused study and applying them across the spectrum of neurodivergence, Trinity College Dublin advocates for a shift towards Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles. This shift not only ensures equitable access to education for all students but also promotes a more inclusive, understanding, and supportive academic environment.

The Trinity College Dublin case study on rethinking sustainable assessment practices for neurodivergent learners exemplifies the profound impact of inclusive education strategies. It calls for a collaborative, ongoing effort to dismantle barriers, foster understanding, and embrace the diverse capabilities of all students, setting a precedent for inclusive excellence in higher education worldwide.

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Appendix 1: Experiences of assessment for students with ADHD.

We argue that the parameters applied to submission of assignment work, in tandem with timed, in-person examinations, places a burden on students for whom cognitive overload is an intrinsic part of their neurological profile.

Aim of the initiative

The ADHD Project encompassing three strands: (i) to provide a support pathway to ensure successful progression for students with a diagnosis or awaiting a diagnosis of ADHD, (ii) to create an ADHD toolkit for use by students in Trinity College, and (iii) to capture data on the academic experiences of students with ADHD with a focus on aspects of teaching, learning and assessment. The *ADHD in Higher Education* study commenced in March 2022 and invited students to participate as researchers and as a Steering Committee; all undergraduate and postgraduate students in the university were invited to participate in a survey and to self-select for interview.   The study completed in May 2023 (Doyle et al, 2023).

Outcomes

N=227 students with ADHD across all Faculties participated in the survey, and n=11 agreed to an individual interview. Key findings point to the following themes.

- Significant concerns were expressed in relation to deadlines and in particular, competing deadlines, for course assessment; additionally, applying late penalties punishes inherent difficulties associated with Executive Function, rather than intentional non-submission.

"I do remember in my last maybe second to last week, I went through one of, you know, a very severe burnout … I think there's two sides of the coin. There's either not making deadlines and stressing and panicking, but in the end maybe getting the work done. And then there's working yourself to a burnout and feeling exhausted and depressed ... (P9).

- Systems and processes are disparate in their application from course to course and at Department/School level, including provision of and access to curriculum materials via the institutional VLE.

   "… the organization of course materials and deadlines, specifically on Blackboard, is very confusing and unintuitive. Having to wade through layers of poorly labelled folders to even figure out that I have an assignment due at all really doesn't help my organization" (Survey comment)

- Challenges in managing college are broadly associated with a lack of awareness and understanding within the college community – including misconceptions of peers.

   "More understanding regarding deadlines from professors - some were astoundingly rude and ignorant" (Survey comment).

- All student participants drew attention to teaching, learning and assessment practices and systemic processes that create major barriers to academic achievement and successful progression, and that fall short of Universal Design for Learning principles.

   "We have the technology and infrastructure from COVID times to make recordings available. At this point it's literally a choice not to do it and I don't think professors' egos and class attendance are more important here than for people with neurological conditions and disabilities to have the same ease of access to education as everyone else" (Survey comment).

   "… spend hours and hours refreshing pages, scouring over group chats and looking at multiple confusing timetables to get a clear idea of what deadlines they have (this can take hours) and repeat it weekly. And to get over the occasional feelings of hopelessness when you eventually still miss something even though you are trying so hard :)" (Survey comment).

- Adaptations to the physical environment are an important feature for improving focus and engaging with teaching / learning / study related tasks e.g., lighting, workspaces, silent areas.

Reflections

Findings from this research point towards key areas of need that include giving students the skill sets to directly target Executive Function symptom dimensions rather than the label of ADHD, addressing inadequate understanding of the nature of ADHD across the college community through robust and meaningful practices, and acknowledging the complexity of sensory sensitivity and its impact on academic activities.

Crucially, the evidence points to the need for establishing an ADHD-friendly university environment that can be accelerated through development and implementation of UDL policies and practices that focus on assessment, provision of accessible curriculum resources, and embedding these within academic practice, particularly to new entrants. Importantly, these issues are not confined to students with a profile of ADHD but are a fundamental aspect of neurodiversity.

Appendix 2: Sustainability of reasonable accommodations to support inclusive assessment.

We argue that a reluctance to engage with alternative assessment to meet the diverse needs of learners perpetuates the need for timed, summative assessment, in-person examinations. This is partly based on notions surrounding the complexity of managing multiple means of assessment and also of ensuring fairness and parity in awarding grades. The resourcing required to provide examination accommodations based on individual need for more than 2,000 students, is significant, involving multiple entities within the college. The approximate costs for semester examinations are based on room hire, materials cost per student and per examination sitting, and invigilation which is sometimes provided on a 1:1 basis.

	Student with reasonable accommodation	Main student cohort
Cost Per Sitting (standard cost to Furniture)	€16.03	€13.09
Cost per student (standard cost to Furniture)	€41.25	€26.22
Cost per Student for Invigilation	€18.10	€8.90

In semester one of AY 2019/20, Academic Registry provided 41 campus venues used to accommodate 1,187 students with reasonable exam accommodations primarily supported by staff in Academic Registry, Estates and Facilities, Disability Service, Junior Dean, Student Counselling, Student Health, and the Sports Centre. Subsequently, the year-on-year increase in students who require examination accommodations in order to access timed, in-person assessment in an equitable manner, means that it is now imperative that the sustainability of examination arrangements is brought into focus. To illustrate this need, the human and physical costs of providing Low Distraction venues for students with ADHD is examined here.

Aim of the initiative

Low Distraction Venues (LDV) as established by the DS in Trinity are provided to a student who finds it particularly difficult to work in a large examination hall. Historically, this is a venue with few students and rooms are set up in quieter areas of the campus, with desks facing a wall to reduce distraction. The DS works closely with Examinations Officers within Academic Registry, and personnel in Estates and Facilities to implement such venues for and may also loan ear defenders and desk dividers, as needed.

Outcomes

In Semester 1 of AY 2023/24, n=366 students indicated ADHD as a primary disability and were assessed in n=856 end of semester examinations requiring access to an LDV. The DS purchased 50 desk screens/dividers at a cost of €16,000, each of which needed to be individually set up across 15 LDV spaces across campus, four of which were large venues accommodating 20 students. The process of implementing these accommodations involved

considerable initial planning with college staff, and significant physical work in populating venues with desks and screens/dividers across approximately 15 hours including weekends.

LDVs have facilitated equitable access to examinations for neurodivergent students, reducing the impact of environmental distractions on their performance. Neurodivergent students report improved comfort and concentration in LDVs, leading to more equitable assessment outcomes. Effective collaboration among university departments, positive feedback from neurodivergent students, and improved accessibility in assessment are successful outcomes. They are also heavily used within library study spaces, departmental exams, and individual provision to PG students.

However, the resource-intensive setup of LDVs, logistical coordination across multiple venues, and the need for ongoing support and maintenance is unsustainable as the number of students requiring LDV in higher education increases. Therefore, streamlining the implementation process, enhancing communication and awareness of available accommodations, and exploring innovative assessment formats that cater to diverse learning needs requires national discussion.

Reflections

The sustainability of UDL design lies in ensuring that accommodations and assessment practices remain responsive to the evolving needs of neurodivergent students while also considering resource constraints and scalability. Expanding these case studies to encompass all neurodivergent students highlights the importance of inclusive assessment practices and sustainability considerations within a UDL framework. By addressing these challenges and leveraging UDL principles, universities can create more inclusive learning environments that support the diverse needs and strengths of neurodivergent learners.