

Neurodivergence in tertiary education

Introduction

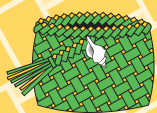
This briefing paper highlights the importance of supporting neurodivergent people, which is a priority for the [Manako programme](#) and the [Tertiary Education Commission](#). Common types of neurodivergence include [dyslexia](#), [autism](#), [ADHD](#), [dyscalculia](#), [dyspraxia/DCD](#), [dysgraphia](#), and Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder ([FASD](#)). Studies suggest that approximately 15 to 20% of the population is neurodivergent. The extent to which this will impact individuals' everyday lives and educational experiences can vary. Neurodivergent learners may have distinct strengths, such as critical and analytical thinking, adaptive problem solving, creativity, ideation, and identifying patterns, but may also experience challenges during their learning journey.

The [Manako programme](#) is provided by [Ako Aotearoa](#), the [National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence](#), and was formerly known as the Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Cultural Capability (ALNACC) programme. The Manako programme continues our partnership with the [Tertiary Education Commission](#) (TEC) to enhance educational capability across Aotearoa New Zealand. Embracing our roots and expertise in literacy, numeracy, and both [Māori](#) and [Pacific](#) cultural capability, the Manako programme expands our commitment to delivering inclusive and effective education, informed by the values and needs of all New Zealanders.

[PIAAC](#) is the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, and an initiative of the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). The [OECD](#) is an international, intergovernmental organisation with [38 Member countries](#), whose message is “Better policies for better lives”.

Current initiatives

The Manako programme's initiatives to build capability in supporting neurodivergent learners include the [Dyslexia- Friendly Quality Mark \(DFQM\)](#), a [Neurodiversity workshop series](#), a [Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\) workshop series](#), the Neurodiversity Educator Pathway, an Assistive Technology resource collection, tailored learning [resources](#), [webinars](#), and the research projects 'Scoping a Neurodivergent-Friendly Quality Mark for the Workplace', '[Ako Mai Me](#): The adult dyslexic learner journey and experience', and '[In the starting blocks](#): Scoping the experiences, vulnerabilities, and potentials of dyscalculic adult learners in Aotearoa New Zealand'.



Impact on learning outcomes

These initiatives have supported professional development and capability building for tertiary educators and organisations. However, the PIAAC report highlights several groups that face significant challenges in literacy and numeracy. Many of these groups may include, or overlap with, neurodivergent communities, especially where educational or social disadvantage intersects with cognitive diversity.

Recommendations for the tertiary education sector

» Expand support services:

» Increase the availability of specialised support for neurodivergent learners.

» Inclusive teaching practices:

» Train educators in inclusive teaching methods and raise awareness of neurodiversity-affirming approaches, Universal Design for Learning, and assistive technology.

» Collaborative approaches:

» Foster collaboration between educators and learners and support the development of Communities of Practice and supportive learning environments.

Conclusion

Supporting neurodivergent learners is essential for an inclusive education system. By enhancing current initiatives and addressing existing challenges, the Manako programme can raise awareness of neurodiversity to better support neurodivergent learners and improve their educational outcomes.

