

Ensuring high quality work-based learning for neurodivergent young people

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Outline for this session

- 1. Introduction to this topic**
- 2. Understanding neurodiversity**
- 3. Challenges for neurodivergent young people**
- 4. Key principles of quality work-based learning**



1. Introduction

Work-based learning:

- **Benchmark 5:** encounters with employers
- **Benchmark 6:** experiences of workplaces

For neurodivergent learners, the key aim is ensuring experiences are **high quality, inclusive and meaningful**

Gatsby Benchmarks: next 10 years

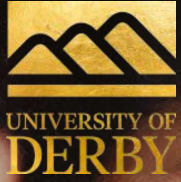
Review

1. Widespread adoption and implementation – by more than 90% of schools and colleges.
2. Benchmark achievement has more than tripled
3. Career readiness is increasing
4. Positive impact on outcomes

<https://www.gatsby.org.uk/education/latest/updates-on-good-career-guidance-the-next-10-years>

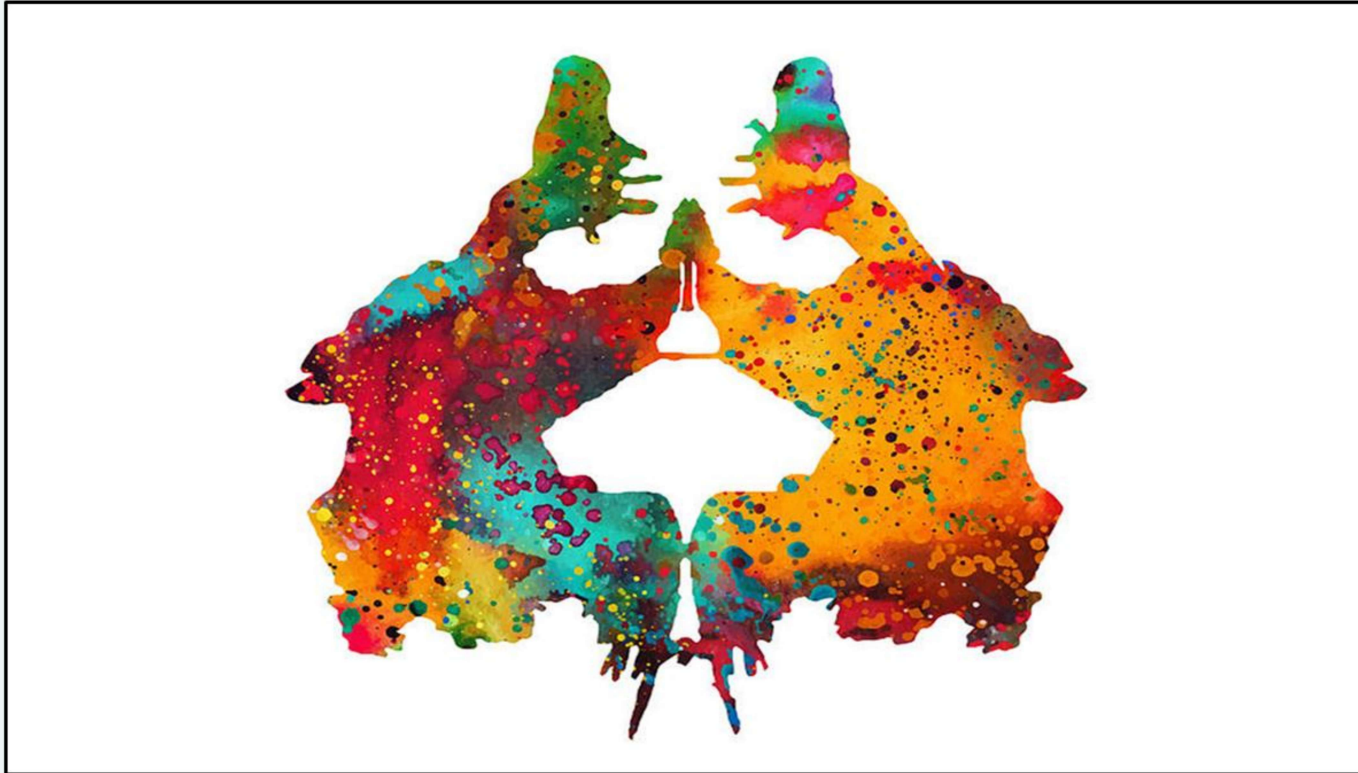
Updates

1. Careers at the heart of education and leadership
2. Inclusion and impact for each and every young person
3. Meaningful and varied encounters and experiences
4. Focusing on the use of information and data
5. Engagement of parents and carers



2. Understanding neurodiversity

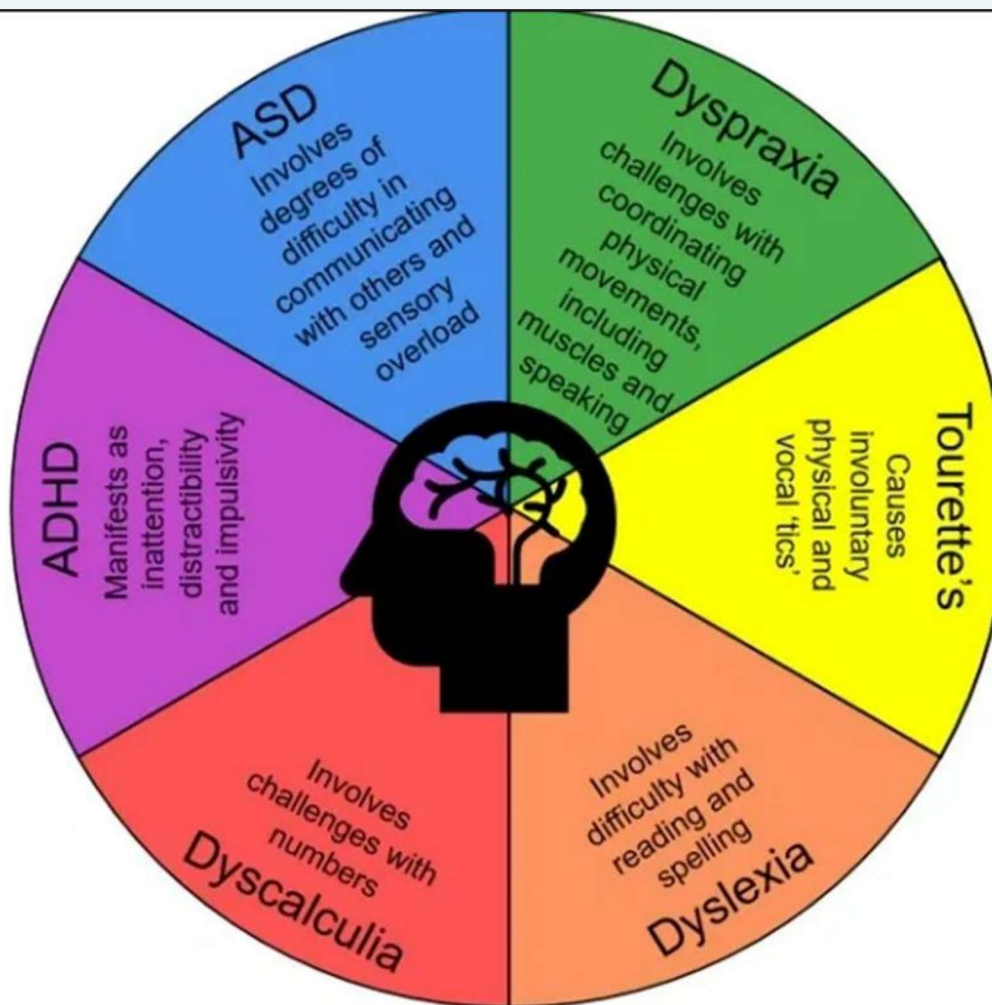
What do you see?



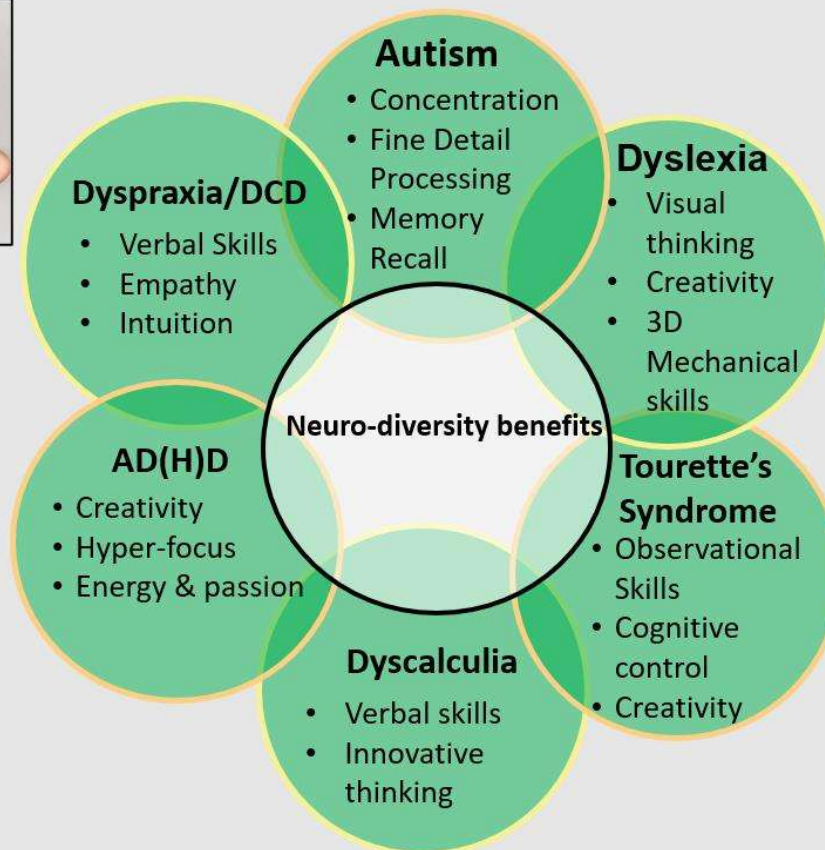
Understanding neurodiversity

- The term **neurodiversity** has been in use since the 1990s, coined by sociologist Judy Singer.
- Neurodiversity refers to the different ways the brain can work and interpret information.
- According to the National Symposium on Neurodiversity (2011) neurodiversity is:
“...a concept where neurological differences are to be recognised and respected as any other human variation. These differences can include those labelled with Dyspraxia, Dyslexia, ADHD, Dyscalculia, Autistic Spectrum, Tourette Syndrome, and others”.

Types of Neurodiversity



Strengths associated with Neurodiversity



Created by J. Fitzpatrick



3. Challenges for neurodivergent young people

**What are the potential challenges
for neurodivergent young
people...**

...in education?

...with career development?

...relating to work-based learning?

Challenges in education?

- 1. Sensory Overload** - Busy corridors, noisy classrooms, bright lights, and crowded lunch halls
- 2. Executive Functioning Difficulties** - issues with organisation, time management, planning, and prioritising work.
- 3. Social Communication and Interaction** - understanding unwritten social rules, body language, or group dynamics.
- 4. Processing Speed and Working Memory** - struggling to keep up with fast-paced lessons or verbal instructions.
- 5. Anxiety and Mental Health** - high levels of stress due to masking, unpredictability in school routines, or fear of failure.
- 6. Misunderstanding and Stigma** - may be misinterpreted as laziness, rudeness, or lack of ability.

Specific challenges related to career development?

- 1. Accessibility issues** - career development programmes often rely on generic assemblies, fast-paced fairs, or unstructured networking events
- 2. Challenges with self-advocacy and articulation** - career development often involves young people to articulate their skills, preferences and aspirations clearly
- 3. Overemphasis on 'traditional' pathways** - careers advice may promote linear routes (e.g. university, apprenticeships) without recognising alternative pathways
- 4. Hidden talents sometimes undervalued** - careers education often focuses on 'employability skills' like teamwork and communication, while undervaluing areas where neurodivergent students may excel
- 5. Lack of inclusive support** – careers practitioners may not have neurodiversity awareness; adjustments may not be offered



Challenges relating to work-based learning

During employer encounters:

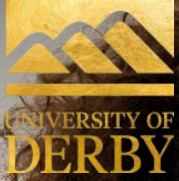
- Fast-paced, unstructured interactions (e.g. careers fairs, Q&A sessions)
- Difficulty with social communication and interpreting expectations
- Sensory challenges (noise, crowds, unfamiliar settings)
- Feeling uncertain about asking questions or participating confidently

During workplace experiences:

- Unfamiliar settings
- Lack of/different structures, routines
- Limited employer understanding of neurodiversity and adjustments
- Risk of being underused or overwhelmed

Risk of:

- Fear of being judged leading to reluctance to disclose
- Negative or confusing experience can reduce confidence and aspiration



4. Key principles of high quality work-based learning

- A scaffolding approach
- Inclusive by design
- Preparation and debriefing
- Employer readiness

A scaffolding approach

- Multiple, progressive encounters
- Carefully planned and sequenced activities
- Build familiarity, remove the ‘mystery’

One example:

Year 7 – Employer delivers a ‘guess my job’ session, fun, interactive

Year 8 – Same employer comes to deliver a session about the various roles in their organisation

Year 9 – Group of students go to the organisation on a visit

Year 10 – Individuals go to the organisation for work experience

Inclusive by design

- Understand the barriers facing neurodivergent learners
- Anticipate these challenges, seek to accommodate needs
- However, do not underestimate, over-protect

Examples (mainstream or SEND):

- Involve neurodivergent learners at all stages
- Provide quiet hour at start of careers fairs/employer events
- Seek continuity in provision
- Involve parents where this is helpful for the learner
- Find ways to remove the mystery of the workplace

Preparation and De-briefing

- Thorough preparation is key to success
- This can take time, cannot be tokenistic
- De-briefing and reflection afterwards is crucial for learning

Examples (mainstream or SEND)

Preparation:

- Video introductions/pre-visit discussions
- Role-plays
- Vital information provided and discussed – clarity is important
- Supporting young people to create a personal profile

De-briefing:

- Reflection on journals
- Group/individual de-briefs
- Skills-based careers education to understand transferability

Employer Readiness

- The need for neurodiversity awareness
- Partnering with those who are respectful, inclusive, understanding
- Representation is important

Effective practice:

- Seeking those who are inclusive
- Providing guidance on learners' needs and adjustments
- Highlighting the benefits for organisations

Before placement:

- Match students with employers who have neurodiversity awareness and are keen to make adjustments.
- Facilitate a visit to the placement site in advance for students to reduce anxiety (if this is not possible, provide a virtual tour or photos of the workplace)

During placement:

- Ensure that the students has a clear daily timetable with structured tasks.
- Ask the workplace to provide a named mentor at the placement for check-ins.

After placement:

- Debrief with the student using visuals or reflective prompts (*What went well? What skills did you use?*).

Examples of inclusive Work experience placements

Examples:

A student with autism who is sensitive to noise

- Placed at a local library instead of a noisy retail environment.
- Given structured tasks (organising books, helping with cataloguing) and a quiet space for breaks.

A young person with ADHD and dyslexia, who is highly motivated by working with animals but struggles with written instructions and maintaining focus on long, unstructured tasks.

- Given a placement at an animal rescue centre.
- Adjustments include a structured daily timetable with visual instructions, practical tasks and regular short breaks to help manage concentration levels

Over to you...

Take one encounter that your educational setting currently delivers...

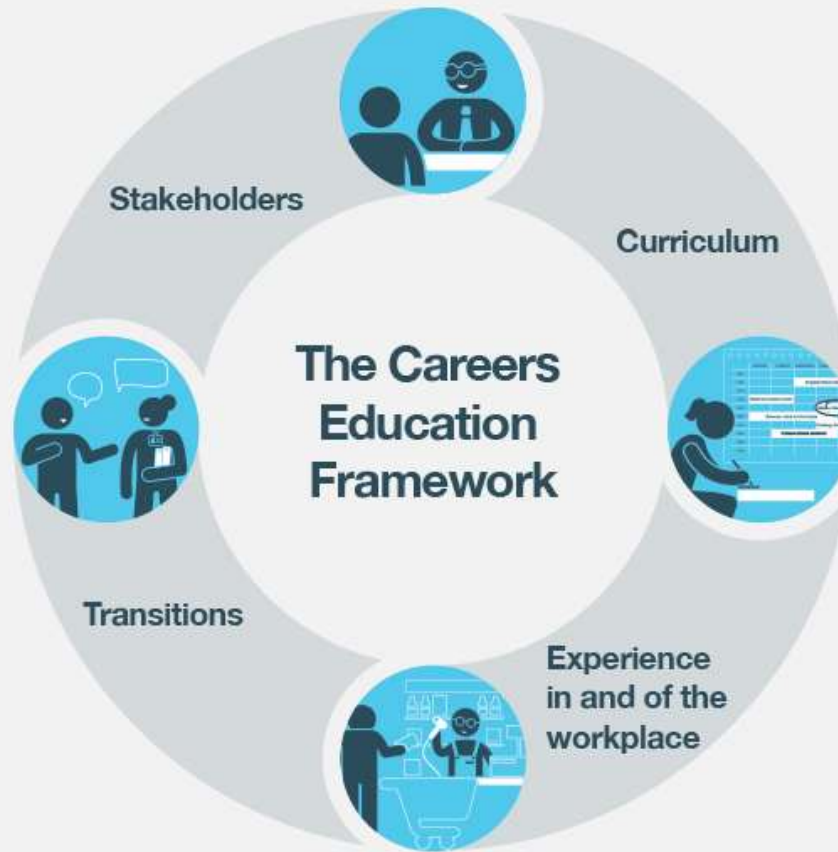
...thinking about the neurodivergent learners there:

- 1. What is being done well?**
- 2. From what we have considered today, are there any improvements you would like to make?**





**Ambitious
about Autism**



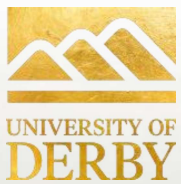


FINAL THOUGHTS

- **Neurodivergent individuals need accessible and meaningful work-based learning**
- **Encounters are effective when they are structured and involve informed employers**

Critical success factors:

- **Adopt a scaffolded, progressive approach**
- **Invest in preparation and de-briefing**
- **Listen to and incorporate the student voice**
- **Build strong partnerships with employers**
- **Focus on belonging, not just participation**



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THANK YOU

