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SUPPORTING NEURODIVERGENT STUDENTS IN EUROPEAN UNION HIGHER EDUCATION: AN ANALYSIS OF SELECTED UNIVERSITIES

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Purpose: The aim of this study is to analyse how selected European Union universities listed in the Times Higher Education Rankings support neurodivergent students and to identify examples of effective inclusive practices and remaining gaps in provision.
Design/methodology/approach: This comparative qualitative study analyzed documents from 27 top-ranked EU universities. Websites, support pages, portals, and policies were coded into 14 support categories via matrix.
Findings: Results indicate strong convergence around core individualized accommodations such as extended exam time, flexible deadlines, psychological counselling, mediation with lecturers, and peer mentoring, all designed to maintain academic standards while addressing neurodivergent students' needs.
Research limitations/implications: Limitations include reliance on publicly available documents, potentially missing internal practices. Future studies should incorporate student/staff surveys, longitudinal tracking of support efficacy, and cross-national policy comparisons to address neurodiversity beyond disability certification.
Practical implications: Support remains tied mainly to formal disability status, excluding many neurodivergent students without diagnoses. Universities should extend policies beyond traditional disability and embed neurodiversity‑informed support into mainstream practice.
Social implications: This study raises awareness of neurodivergent support gaps, promoting inclusive attitudes and transparent university policies. It informs EU education policy for equitable access, improving quality of life and workforce integration.
Originality/value: This paper provides the first comparative analysis of neurodivergent support in 27 top EU universities. It identifies transparency gaps and policy limitations.
Keywords: Neurodiversity, Neurodivergent students, Higher education.
Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction and Background

For many years, scholars and scientists have been intrigued by the diverse ways in which human cognition operates. Research into brain function has sought to elucidate the underlying causes of cognitive variability among individuals. A significant area of focus within this domain is neurodivergence, which examines the spectrum of neurological differences. Studying neurodivergence enhances our understanding and appreciation of the unique cognitive profiles that characterize each individual.

Neurodivergence and neurodiversity are new terms to describe how a person might think or function. Scientists like Sutton, Scott and Deemer (2025) argue that the word neurodivergence may be applied to every person in the world as nobody's brain works the same. By this definition, everybody's brain works differently, thus no one in the human race sees the world the same.

Traditionally, neurodiversity is a word for people with neurodevelopmental disorders. Neurodivergence is an umbrella term that refers to variations in the way people's brains function, affecting how they think, learn, and interact with the world. It includes a range of conditions such as ADHD, autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, Tourette's syndrome, epilepsy, and mental health challenges like depression and bipolar disorder, as well as neurological conditions like Alzheimer's disease (Mcgee, 2012). These differences are not disorders but natural variations in human neurology that contribute to diverse ways of experiencing and understanding life.

Regarding the etymological background, Walker (2014) distinguishes two main concepts related to neurodiversity: the "neurodiversity paradigm", which is a theoretical perspective recognizing neurological differences as natural variations within the human population, and the "neurodiversity movement", an activist effort aimed at promoting the rights and well-being of neurodivergent individuals.

Walker (2014) considers that neurodivergent, refers to individuals whose brain functions differ significantly from what society generally considers "normal". It is a broad term encompassing various ways in which people's neurological functioning can vary. On the other hand, Singer (1999) points out that neurodiversity is seen as a social category that underpins a framework for social justice. This viewpoint emphasizes neurological diversity as a political identity that reveals power disparities among individuals based on their neurological differences, much like how society organizes people by class, gender, or ethnicity.

Since there are no comprehensive definitions of neurodiversity or neurodivergence, the term neurotypicality which relies on these concepts also lacks a clear and agreed-upon definition. Viewed through the lens of the medical model, neurotypicality is described as the condition of an individual who is medically and psychologically healthy, exhibiting typical patterns of

neurodevelopment. This term is often used in contrast to individuals who experience atypical developmental trajectories, such as those with autism (Perszyk, 2013).

Overall, collective understandings of neurodiversity have changed a lot over the past 30 years and can be difficult to fully grasp without knowledge of their historical background. The concept is still evolving and continues to develop over time. Research estimates that approximately 15–20% of the global population is neurodivergent. This indicates that one in five people worldwide has a brain that operates differently from the neurotypical majority, including conditions such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and dyspraxia (Doyle, 2020).

2. Literature Review

The growing body of scholarship on neurodiversity in higher education underscores the multifaceted challenges faced by neurodivergent students and the institutional strategies required to foster inclusion. Pigato (2023) emphasizes the importance of training academic staff to better understand the needs of neurodivergent learners, such as autistic students and those with ADHD, and to implement concrete pedagogical adjustments including lecture recordings and flexible assessment formats. Crucially, Pigato highlights the necessity of involving neurodivergent students in the design of institutional change, thereby positioning them not only as recipients of support but as active contributors to inclusive practices.

Complementing this perspective, Hamilton and Petty (2023) propose a "compassionate pedagogy" rooted in Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Their conceptual analysis suggests that attention to emotional well-being, recognition of students' strengths, and flexible access to learning materials constitute foundational strategies for reducing barriers in higher education. The emphasis on UDL resonates with broader debates in the field, which call for systemic rather than ad hoc approaches to inclusion.

Research conducted outside Europe provides valuable insights into global trends and adaptable solutions for supporting neurodivergent students. A notable example is the study by Taneja, Viswanathan, and Rajan (2022), which examines initiatives in Indian higher education aimed at assisting students with autism, ADHD, and other forms of neurodivergence.

Indian universities have introduced dedicated support centers, faculty training, flexible assessment methods, and personalized learning pathways. The use of assistive technologies, such as mobile apps and alternative communication tools, plays a key role in enhancing learning and social participation. Collaboration with NGOs, strengthens the responsiveness and effectiveness of these measures.

These findings offer a useful point of comparison for European institutions, including those in Poland, by highlighting areas where current support may fall short. Particularly noteworthy are India's cost-effective innovations and the emphasis on including neurodivergent students in decision-making - an approach still underdeveloped in many European contexts.

At the same time, empirical studies focusing on specific conditions underline the academic risks associated with insufficient support. Henning, Summerfeldt, and Parker (2022) show that inattentive symptoms of ADHD strongly predict lower academic performance and higher dropout rates, while Doyle et al. (2021) detail the institutional and pedagogical barriers encountered by students with ADHD in Ireland. Both studies advocate for coaching, flexible assessment methods, and awareness-raising initiatives as effective forms of intervention. Relatedly, Jean et al. (2021) demonstrate the association between ADHD symptoms and increased stimulant use among French students, stressing the need for preventive screening and targeted assistance at the university level.

The mental health dimension of neurodivergence is also a recurring theme in recent scholarship. McKenney et al. (2022) report that low satisfaction with social connectedness among neurodiverse first-year students is associated with higher levels of depression and anxiety, thereby highlighting the centrality of inclusive social environments for academic adjustment and well-being. Bayeh and Ryder (2023) extend this discussion by exploring the intersection of neurodiversity and minority status among Canadian students, arguing that effective support requires system-level policies, institutional commitment to inclusive teaching, and collaboration between students, staff, and administrators.

A number of studies directly address faculty training as a critical mechanism for advancing inclusive education. Bolourian, Zeedyk, and Brown (2023) evaluate the NeuroPREP program, designed to strengthen faculty competence in supporting neurodivergent students. Their findings suggest that targeted, evidence-based training developed in consultation with neurodivergent stakeholders is a necessary precondition for institutional transformation. Such perspectives are consistent with Seale et al. (2015), who argue that inclusive digital and pedagogical practices depend on the alignment of staff awareness, institutional resources, and student participation.

Finally, the Finnish case study It Was Like Offering a Band-Aid for a Fracture (2022) illustrates systemic barriers to accessing support services through the lens of families of neurodivergent children. Although focused on primary and secondary education, its findings resonate strongly with the higher education sector. Key barriers including insufficient information, lack of professional expertise, bureaucratic obstacles, and rigid eligibility criteria mirror many of the challenges faced by university students. The study underscores the need for transparent communication, streamlined administrative procedures, and institution-wide policies to guarantee equity of access.

3. Methodology

In order to map the availability and forms of support for neurodivergent students across the European Union, we conducted a systematic review of information provided by higher education institutions in 25 member states. The selection of universities for analysis was based on the Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2025, which ensured the inclusion of leading institutions across the EU and facilitated cross-country comparability (Times Higher Education, 2025). The data collection process consisted of two complementary stages. First, we performed a structured examination of official university websites and publicly available resources, following established approaches to document analysis in educational research (Bowen, 2009; Scott, Morrison, 2019). This approach is particularly suitable for studies of accessibility and inclusion in higher education, where institutional policies and services are often communicated through online materials (Tight, 2012; Hockings, 2010). Particular attention was paid to the presence of dedicated offices, units, or services offering assistance to neurodivergent students, as previous studies have shown that institutional support structures are key determinants of academic inclusion and success for students with disabilities (Fuller, Healey, Bradley, Hall, 2004; Madriaga, 2010). During this stage, we documented whether such support offices existed, what types of accommodations or services were explicitly described, and the extent to which students could apply for or request specific forms of assistance. However, official sources may not fully reflect informal practices, internal procedures, or undocumented support mechanisms.

Secondly, in cases where relevant information was not retrievable through institutional webpages or publicly accessible documents, we contacted the respective institutions directly via email to request clarification regarding the availability and modalities of support. This methodological step aligns with best practices in international comparative research, where desk research is frequently supplemented with direct institutional inquiry to address information gaps and to validate findings (Teichler, 2014; Creswell, Plano Clark, 2018). The combination of document analysis and direct communication allowed us to gather both explicit, publicly available information and contextualized insights into institutional practices. Such triangulation not only enhances the reliability of the data but also reflects broader methodological trends in the study of higher education and disability services (Seale, Georgeson, Mamas, Swain, 2015). Ultimately, this dual strategy ensured the construction of a comprehensive and comparable dataset covering both documented provisions and information obtained through direct institutional communication.

Following the outlined methodological approach, the subsequent table presents a synthesized overview of available support and information for neurodivergent students across selected top-ranked European universities, as identified through the Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2025. This tabular representation organizes data by institution,

highlighting both the breadth of documented provisions, ranging from dedicated disability offices and exam accommodations to peer mentoring and assistive technologies and any identified gaps in publicly accessible or institutionally confirmed resources. By consolidating these findings into a clear, comparative format, the table facilitates a systematic analysis of institutional inclusivity practices, enabling researchers and policymakers to discern patterns, strengths, and areas for enhancement in supporting neurodivergent learners within EU higher education contexts.

4. Our findings

The table beneath (table 1) presents a comparative matrix documenting accessibility support services for neurodivergent and disable students across 27 European universities, organized by 14 predefined categories derived from institutional policies and practices. The identified categories of disability support across European universities include dedicated staff or teams, consultation and procedural options, exam and assessment adaptations, individual support plans, peer or mentoring programs, psychological and counseling services, assistive technologies and equipment, accessible materials and lectures, infrastructure and environmental adaptations, financial or scholarship support, staff training and awareness, safety and anti-discrimination policies, specialized support for specific groups, and additional student life supports. Categories were coded with an X only when institutional documentation explicitly mentioned the specific service (e.g., "disability office" for A, "extra exam time" for C).

The compiled data provide a comparative overview of institutional approaches to supporting neurodivergent students, capturing both formally communicated provisions and practices identified through institutional contact. Together, these findings offer insight into the scope and visibility of support structures across the examined higher education contexts.

Table 1.
Mapping Neurodivergent Accommodations Across 25 Top-Ranked Universitie

University	***A***	***B***	***C***	***D***	***E***	***F***	***G***	***H***	***I***	***J***	***K***	***L***	***M***	***N***
KU Leuven	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X			X		X
Medical University of Sofia	No information provided													
Charles University	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X			X		
University of Copenhagen	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X		
Technical University of Munich	X		X	X		X	X	X	X			X		
University of Tartu	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X		
Trinity College Dublin	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
National and Kapodistrian University of Athens	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
University of Barcelona			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
Paris Sciences et Lettres University	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X		X	X
University of Split	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		
University of Bologna	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Cont. table 1.

University of Cyprus		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Riga Technical University	X	X		X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X		X
Lithuanian University of Health Sciences	X		X	X		X	X		X	X	X		X	X
University of Luxembourg	X	X	X	X		X	X		X	X	X		X	X
Semmelweis University	No information provided													
University of Malta	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X		X	X	X
Delft University of Technology	X	X	X		X	X	X			X	X		X	X
University of Vienna	X	X	X	X	X	X	X			X		X	X	X
Wrocław Medical University	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
University	***A***	***B***	***C***	***D***	***E***	***F***	***G***	***H***	***I***	***J***	***K***	***L***	***M***	***N***
Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu			X			X	X			X		X	X	X
University of Coimbra		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Bucharest University of Economic Studies	X	X	X			X		X	X		X		X	X
University of Ljubljana			X	X	X	X			X	X		X		X
University of Žilina			X	X										X
University of Helsinki	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X		

Notes: A - Dedicated Teams and Coordinators, B - Consultations and Procedural Options, C - Exam and Assessment Adaptations, D - Individual Support Plans, E - Peer and Mentoring Programs, F - Psychological and Counseling Services, G - Assistive Technologies and Equipment, H - Accessible Materials and Lectures, I - Infrastructure and Environmental Adaptations, J - Financial and Scholarship Support, K - Staff Training and Awareness, L - Safety, Anti-Discrimination, and Policies, M - Specialized Support for Specific Groups, N - Additional Student Life Supports.

Source: compiled by the author.

5. Discussion

This analysis of disability support services across European universities reveals a strong consensus on core accommodations for neurodivergent students, including those with dyslexia, autism, and ADHD, prioritizing individualized plans that maintain academic integrity. The most frequently repeated adjustments across European universities for students with disabilities, particularly neurodivergent ones like dyslexia or autism, emphasize individualized accommodations without lowering standards. These appear in descriptions from over 20 institutions, with some phrasings varying (e.g., "extra time" vs. "additional exam time") but clearly overlapping in intent. Psychological counseling (remote/individual/group) and mediation with lecturers recur often for neuroatypical students, alongside peer mentoring programs. Flexible deadlines, reduced attendance, and priority housing appear consistently but less dominantly. These align with psycho-pedagogical supports for neurodivergent students, including autism and dyslexia, as researched in Polish and European contexts.

5.1. Limitations

While most universities offer support programs for neurodivergent students, such as coaching, mentoring, and transition services, national and international laws complicate access. National and international laws regulate support for people with disabilities by categorizing types of disability, granting specific rights, and incentivizing employer hiring, but they do not address neurodiversity directly.

As highlighted by Tomczak (2025) in the context of the labor market, many neurodivergent individuals choose not to pursue formal disability certification, which limits their access to accommodations and protections. This mirrors the situation at universities, where students without official recognition of disability may also miss out on necessary support, despite experiencing cognitive or sensory differences.

Banasik et al. (2025) also points out that neurodivergent people can be divided into three groups: those who are neurodivergent but do not have an official disability certification, those who have a recognized disability but are not neurodivergent, and those who are both neurodivergent and have a disability certification. Some in the last group seek certification to access benefits, while others choose not to. Current laws and university programs mostly address people with recognized disabilities, which creates gaps for neurodivergent individuals without certification or those who decline the disability status. This means many neurodivergent students, such as those with ADHD or dyslexia, might not get the support they need because they are not officially recognized as disabled. Therefore, authors stress the importance of broadening policies and support programs beyond just disability status to include all neurodivergent individuals.

6. Conclusion

Support for neurodivergent and disabled students in European higher education remains uneven and often insufficiently transparent. The comparative document analysis of 27 universities revealed a broad spectrum of formally declared provisions, ranging from exam adaptations, individual support plans, and assistive technologies to counseling, staff training, and dedicated support roles. At the same time, the complete absence of accessible information for several institutions underscores persistent gaps in how support is communicated, documented, and made visible to prospective and current students. These findings suggest that, beyond developing services themselves, universities should strengthen the clarity, accessibility, and neurodiversity-sensitive framing of their policies and resources. Improving transparency and standardizing terminology across institutions could significantly enhance equity of access and provide a more reliable basis for future research and policy development in inclusive higher education.

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