

UQ Neurodiversity Hub: Tailoring Support for Neurodivergent Students

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Abstract

Over the past few years, neurodivergent students have disclosed challenges they have experienced in undertaking study in a tertiary educational setting. Further to this, some students have also raised issues in relation to getting a diagnosis which, in turn, has limited their support options. In response to this feedback, members of the University of Queensland (UQ) Student Advice Team have worked towards developing a suite of programs under the umbrella of the UQ Neurodiversity Hub. The programs include support for those transitioning into tertiary education for the first time, through to all undergraduate students at any stage of their degree. In developing these programs, we have actively sought input and feedback from neurodivergent students and collaborated with other teams and staff at UQ.

Keywords

Neurodivergent students, Academic supports, Tertiary education

Since 2021, The University of Queensland (UQ) has been in the process of developing a range of supports for neurodivergent students, under the umbrella of the UQ Neurodiversity Hub. This initiative was started by members of the Student Advice Team. The need to develop these supports stemmed from students requesting tailored support to improve their academic progress and experience.

The design of the UQ neurodiversity programs was based on our practice experience, along with regular consultation and feedback from neurodivergent students. We have also included the knowledge and experience of our Learning Advisor team and Counselling team in developing and presenting these programs, ensuring we are able to provide holistic support.

We have welcomed all students who identify as neurodivergent to participate in the programs. Through service delivery, team discussions, and enquiries, we have observed an increased need for neurodivergent student-specific support. Many students have reported to us their challenges with receiving a diagnosis, attributing this in part to cost and waitlists. As a result, these students can have difficulty accessing appropriate support for their study. In recognition of these barriers, and the fact some students may not want to disclose their diagnosis, we have been able to run all the programs in the UQ Neurodiversity Hub for students without needing proof of a formal diagnosis.

Currently being offered as part of the UQ Neurodiversity Hub are:

- Tertiary Transition Toolbox
- Neurodiversity Mentoring
- ADHD Group Coaching
- Neurodiversity Check-In
- Neurodiversity Meet-Up

The Tertiary Transition Toolbox was one of the first initiatives of the Neurodiversity Hub, established in 2021. It was developed in recognition of the fact that adjusting to university is a significant milestone for neurodivergent students, but they reported finding orientation too overwhelming, not explicit enough, or not relevant. The Tertiary Transition Toolbox is an interactive workshop supporting students' transition to university. It was developed in response to feedback emerging from a range of sources, including conversations with neurodivergent students, colleagues, and other UQ staff. The messages we received highlighted challenges with transitioning from well-scaffolded support in high school to a large adult learning environment.

The Tertiary Transition Toolbox runs over two mornings prior to Orientation Week of Semester 1, when the campus is relatively quiet, and covers a range of information. During the first morning, we present information on what to expect from different classes and how to understand course/subject profiles. Available supports and services are explained, and the session concludes with a unique campus tour with neurodivergent students' needs in mind. On the second morning, we provide a safe space for students to share their concerns, identify their strengths, and set up plans to manage their triggers/stressors. We invite members of our Learning Advisor team and Counselling team to share strategies for neurodivergent students, and a current or former neurodivergent student shares their lived experience of commencing and studying at UQ. In 2023, following a targeted marketing strategy, we were excited to have almost 30 new students join us over the two days. Furthermore, we were heartened to witness participants connect and voluntarily exchange numbers; while we always had the goal of providing a space for people to connect, it was not something that we had previously observed.

Dovetailing with the Tertiary Transition Toolbox is Neurodiversity Mentoring, also offered since 2021. Starting with two staff and one social work placement student, this program originally offered one-on-one mentoring for commencing neurodivergent students for the first six weeks of Semester 1. Since then, it has expanded to three staff, several social work placements students, and volunteer mentors to support the needs of all neurodivergent students in any year of their undergraduate program. Neurodiversity Mentoring aims to address the individual needs of the students through developing their skills and independence, with a strengths-based focus, in a safe environment. The person-centred program allows students to determine their unique goals and timeframes. We also provide training and regular supervision for the mentors.

ADHD Group Coaching has been developed in collaboration with our Learning Advisor team, following a Student–Staff Partnership program and driven by demand for more targeted support from students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Results from the Student–Staff Partnership suggested group coaching was worth implementing as a study support. We piloted the first coaching sessions during the last four teaching weeks of Semester 1, 2023, focusing on exam preparation. The sessions were facilitated by a Learning Advisor with assistance from student volunteers. We had a total of 19 participants. After review of the sessions and feedback from students, we will be running these sessions during the first six weeks of each semester.

Neurodiversity Check-In is a one-hour workshop run in Week 2 of the semester, designed to identify potential challenges and triggers around study, and strategies to address issues. We frequently hear from neurodivergent students that they can become overwhelmed with academic demands and balancing life, health, and wellbeing. This workshop provides students with the opportunity to reflect early in the semester and normalise their experiences. Students are guided through steps to identify their skills and strengths, which can then be implemented when challenges arise, thereby allowing a proactive and individualised approach to managing the challenges of their studies.

Neurodiversity Meet-Up is our newest offering, which runs for the first six weeks of each semester. The program was developed in collaboration with a UQ-based partner who identifies as neurodivergent. Being able to form connections with other students has been identified as one of the primary unmet needs for neurodivergent students. The meet-ups have been designed to provide a safe and non-confronting space for neurodivergent students to hear from experts, including neurodivergent staff, about various topics and skills development. Afterwards, students are invited to participate in social activities and connect with others, with the support of volunteer mentors. Informal feedback has indicated students benefited from these sessions, with several participants making connections outside of the group.

Creating the UQ Neurodiversity Hub has been a rewarding experience, especially seeing the participation numbers increase over the years. We have also taken the opportunity to connect with Queensland Department of Education and UQ faculties and events to promote the UQ Neurodiversity Hub. The initiative been received with interest and enthusiasm, with feedback being positive. At this stage, while our programs are targeted towards commencing and current undergraduate students, we are exploring ways to extend support and services to higher degree by research students and provide information to parents. The UQ Neurodiversity Hub also receives regular requests from UQ staff to provide information and education sessions to help staff better support neurodivergent students. We are committed to providing support to our neurodivergent community and looking forward to seeing the UQ Neurodiversity Hub grow.

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