A holistic approach to enablement

The 'Universal Design for Learning' agenda is an exciting one. The need for education to become progressively more accessible and inclusive is growing, giving opportunity to institutions in the UK to lead on accessibility and share best practice throughout the world of higher education. **The question is however, can Universal Design truly meet its potential without a space for individuals to explore their own diversity and unique ways of working? I would argue not, and here's why…**

The Universal Design agenda allows us to move away from the medical model of disability, which is something to be proud of as a sector and a society. The agenda, by its very nature engages with the notion of neurodiversity - that we all learn, do and think differently. In this sense, teaching and studying are becoming more inclusive, which allows us to focus less on medical diagnoses, but instead on working to strengths, achieving and reaching potential. This creates a far more celebratory learning environment, which in turn, has a huge impact on how students think and feel about themselves in the context of education (and beyond!). This is a really positive shift, but I wanted to unpick the idea that inclusive Universal Design may only be truly effective when combined with individualised support that has been shaped by the end-user. For those with specific needs, requiring different reasonable adjustments than those offered by a universal approach, it seems necessary to maintain tailored holistic support too.

We at DnA have worked over the last six years in providing support to individuals across the UK. During this time it has become apparent that most enabling outcomes need to look at a holistic view of the student's situation. I would quickly point out that the inclusive learning agenda plays a large part in an individual's journey to enablement. However, there is still a need to unpack the individual personal circumstances of each student. To elaborate, when looking at an individual's environment, we need to take into consideration their emotional journey in terms of their diversity and self-understanding of it, including the impact it has on their day-to-day studies. External attitudes and culture regarding their diversity are also important to take into account.

So let's explore this personal and individualised environment further. Still to this day many students are being screened and diagnosed once they have arrived in higher education. Higher education takes a lot of adapting for every student, and not just in the academic sense. Moving away from home from their existing support network, making new friends, adapting to new physical surroundings is no mean feat, on top of meeting the academic requirements of the institution. If you are a disabled student, however, you then have to get your head around this perceived label you have just been given. Even though the student is aware they can get support for their newly discovered diagnosis, which is a positive outcome, there is still a massive unpacking of the emotional connection to their neurodiversity.

Using a metacognitive approach to learning enables the student to establish strategies and techniques that enable them to study effectively, playing to their strengths. This helps create a positive understanding of oneself, with the recognition that all learning styles are valid, a crucial building block to enablement. Once the individual reaches an informed and self-reflective space with their neurodiversity, they can then start to look at the wider barriers they face in society. The student can apply this approach to other personal challenges, whether it be note taking in a lecture or looking after their own wellbeing. Whilst there is a mandate for the sector to support the student's access

to learning, it is also crucial that we look at strategies that support them in day-to-day life. For example, whilst building strategies around note taking in a lecture is important, it is critical to assess any barriers the student may have in getting to the lecture in the first place. Therefore, there might be a need to look at strategies around remembering to eat healthily, practice positive wellbeing techniques or time management strategies to make sure they allow enough time to get up and dressed, eat, and to get to the lecture on time.

We also need to address the culture the student is learning and living in. Open-minded, multi-sensory teaching practices, that perhaps allow a student to record their lecture or access presentation slides beforehand, really support the idea that students learn differently, regardless of a diagnosis. Traditionalist approaches that prohibit these kinds of strategies essentially block perfectly valid ways of learning. This can negatively impact on a student's confidence and desire to disclose their neurodiversity.

The continued move towards an accepting and celebratory culture where neurodiversity is seen as a positive difference, will only stand to benefit students and their institutions. Neurodiverse students, when supported well, bring much needed diversity and success to universities. By creating an inclusive and holistic learning environment we widen participation and see things like retention and grade attainment soar. Universal Design, tailored support and celebratory attitudes are all key in enabling disabled students to truly reach their potential!

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Adam Hyland is DnA's co-founder and Campaigns and Equalities Director, edited by Raphaele von Koettlitz, DnA's Communications Director. DnA (Diversity and Ability) is a social enterprise designed and led by, and for, neurodiverse and disabled learners in education and the work place. As cofounder of DnA, Adam's mission is to share information, technologies and knowledge that celebrates diversity and challenges deficit-based conceptions of disability. Adam self-identifies as disabled, having been born with Cerebral Palsy and the can-do attitude that makes all thing seem possible.

After graduating with a first class honours degree in Internet and Communication Systems, Adam was also awarded the Vice Chancellor's Award and the DEC (Design, Electronic and Computing) Award. In 2007 Adam was elected as President of the University of Bournemouth Students Union, after which Adam was elected as NUS National Disabled Students Officer a post he held for two full terms 2008-2010. Adam also continued his work representing disabled students as an Independent Director and Board member of DSA QAG, until 2013. Adam's experience in HE and the NUS makes him a powerful driving force behind the DnA Ambassador Scheme and our broader disability campaigning work.

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