BRAIN.HE

Best Resources for Achievement and Intervention re Neurodiversity in Higher Education

www.brainhe.com is a non-commercial resource website for students and staff in higher education. BRAINHE is designed to help students with specific learning differences and staff working with them.

www.brainhe.com is packed full of resources including advice for staff on teaching strategies for neurologically diverse students, useful material on all types of neurodiversity, and learning strategies for students.

www.brainhe.com aims to improve the higher education sector's response to neurodiversity, including dyspraxia, dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, Asperger's syndrome, Attention Deficit (Hyperactivity) Disorder, Tourette's syndrome, Meares-Irlen syndrome and aspects of mental well-being.

www.brainhe.com has great accessibility including a text reader and changeable text style, size, colour and background colour to suit the viewer. BRAINHE includes video and audio interviews with a wide range of students.

www.brainhe.com is run by National Teaching Fellow Dr David Pollak and is funded by the Higher Education Academy via the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme. Its main work is now completed, but the website will continue – sponsored by Wiley Blackwell Publishers.

In recent years, the range of neurodiversity found in university students has been widening. We have been seeing steady increases in numbers identified as dyspraxic and as ADDers, and in particular Asperger's and mental health issues are becoming much more evident. There is also more awareness of neurodiversity, partly through the work of bodies such as DANDA, the Developmental Adult Neurodiversity Association. Alongside these developments, there was a ten-fold increase between 1995 and 2005 in the number of UK higher education students known to be dyslexic. University staff clearly need information about neurodiversity in students. There is also a need for students, especially those who have just been assessed and identified, to find out about the nature of neurodiversity and the support available.

There are several principles which the project adheres to:

Use of the term 'neurodiversity'. It was coined by the relevant people themselves – in this case, autistic Americans. Users of the term propose that atypical (neurodivergent) neurological wiring is a human difference that should be respected, as any other human difference. The concept includes the view that a learning difference is not a disorder, but part of who the person is, and that attempting to 'cure' it is absurd. It also bridges the division proposed by some professionals between 'learning difficulties' (such as dyslexia) and medical 'conditions' (such as ADD)

The social model of disability. We avoid medical language, but that is not to say that we deny the existence of impairments. There are aspects of being dyslexic (and other types of neurodiversity) which can and do feel like disabilities, but for the most part the disability of neurodiversity is created by social conditions

Linking neurodiversity in students to the student diversity and equality agenda rather than disability. There are still too many members of academic staff who adopt a 'where do I send them?' approach, regarding dyslexia (for example) as a matter for the disability unit, rather than as an important challenge to inclusive learning and teaching practices for all

Listening to students. The project has interviewed neurodiverse students from a range of UK universities. Extracts from these video and audio interviews are on the website. Their purpose is two-fold: to enable students to hear from their peers, and to provide staff with examples of the kind of issues students face. The extracts portray both success and difficulty

International links. The project website provides links to conferences and other events in all major English-speaking countries. It also offers links to the student support pages at the main universities in those countries

Modelling accessible practice. In common with the BDA, we have the Textic Toolbar and Talkbar. These allow website users easily to change the appearance of the pages (including font, size, text colour and background colour) and to hear the text spoken. The site adheres to the guidelines of the World Wide Web Consortium. Our conference papers are printed on multi-coloured paper in sans serif fonts, and include diagrams.

We believe that our website is unique in bringing together information about a wide range of types of brain, and in doing so with specific reference to higher education. It also includes advice on assistive technology and links to relevant websites. We have published our own essays on the social model of disability, on social anxiety and on Tourette's syndrome.

We are aware that in common with most websites, our internet pages are very text-heavy. Although the Talkbar helps, we have converted some of the information to diagrammatic form.

Project interview data has been analysed using a qualitative paradigm; papers have appeared in the journals 'Dyslexia' and 'Dyslexia Review'. In March 2008 there was an article about the project in the SKILL Journal.

We welcome feedback on the project in general, which can be sent by visiting the 'contact us' page or using the details below.

Dr David Pollak
Principal Lecturer in Learning Support
De Montfort University
dpollak@dmu.ac.uk
0116 257 7831

Eddie Griffin
Research Assistant
De Montfort University
egriffin@dmu.ac.uk
0116 255 1551 ext 6723