

DUT Guide: Teaching in the neurodiverse classroom

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Abstract

A rising number of Danish university students experience functional impairment related to learning differences common in AD(H)D, autism, anxiety, depression and other forms of neurodivergence. Research indicates that the pedagogical support offered is not sufficient to prevent students' reduced well-being and dropout, main reasons for this being stigma and non-inclusive classroom environments and practises. Both students and teaching staff report academic teachers lacking resources and competences to address this situation. This guide responds to this gap by providing practical advice for university teachers on how to depathologise difference and facilitate the classroom with learner diversity in mind.

Practical tips

1. Depathologise difference
2. Rely on neuroaffirmative language and communication
3. Commit to universal design for learning and instruction
4. Facilitate cross-neurotype collaboration
5. Support student well-being and act trauma-informed
6. Stand up against prejudice and discrimination

Introduction

In 2024, 7.5% of all students at Aarhus University (AU) received special pedagogical support (SPS). While around 40% of these did so based on a dyslexia or dyscalculia assessment, 54% received it on the basis of a (formal) neurological, neurodevelopmental or psychiatric diagnosis, with AD(H)D, autism, anxiety and depression being the most common (Counselling and Support Centre AU, 2024). These figures reflect a steady rise in diagnosis registrations across Danish higher education over the past two decades (Danish Agency for Higher Education and Science, 2022), while still likely underestimating the true prevalence due to those undiagnosed or unregistered (Dansk Evalueringsinstitut, 2023).

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Students with diagnoses including AD(H)D, autism, anxiety and depression, are in Danish administrative and legal terms further categorised as students with “psykisk funktionsnedsættelse” – a “psychological functional impairment”. A recent scoping review, mapping fifteen years of research on the experiences of students with “psykisk funktionsnedsættelse” in Danish academia, found that despite increased SPS provision, these students continue to report significantly reduced well-being and higher dropout rates than their peers (Gjedde et al., 2026). In line with international research, the review identifies two principal reasons for this persistent gap: ongoing stigma and an almost exclusive reliance on individual and out-of-class accommodations, such as extended deadlines, prolonged study periods, and individual or group mentoring (Price, 2024; Hamilton, 2026). While such measures are necessary and helpful for many, they leave classroom environments largely unchanged. Importantly, both students and staff report that teachers lack the resources and competences needed to foster inclusion – thus inadvertently reproducing the very exclusion and stigma SPS is meant to address (Bertilsdotter, 2023; Gjedde et al., 2026).

This guide addresses that gap. Written by an international and interdisciplinary group of neurodivergent and neurotypical university teachers, facilitators and educational developers, it offers academic teachers practical knowledge and advice on two fronts: a) actively depathologising difference – countering stigma by drawing on the social model of disability and the neurodiversity concept – and b) implementing neuroaffirmative teaching practices that counter exclusionary classroom habits through universal (re)design.

While we anchor our advice primarily in the experiences of students described by Gjedde et al. (2026), we believe that our recommendations will benefit a far broader range of students and reflect best pedagogical practice for university teaching more generally rather than accommodate for functional differences specifically.

Tip 1: Depathologise difference

Across the studies reviewed by Gjedde et al. (2026), students consistently report a felt lack of belonging, driven by stigmatisation and internalised oppression (David, 2015; Pisula et al., 2024). Both stem from treating difference as inherent deficit – as established by the medical model of disability (Goodley, 2018). The social model disagrees: the “normal ability” that students are measured against is not biological, but a social construct, upheld by environmental barriers, attitudes and institutional practices that disable those who diverge from it (Shakespeare, 2006). This is easy to illustrate through physical accessibility: if we accepted that most people eventually lose the ability to climb stairs, our buildings would look very different. We argue that the same deficit thinking around cognitive and social functioning disables neurodivergent students in academic environments, and that inclusive teaching requires replacing it with a neuroaffirmative approach.

One framework that may prove particularly useful here is neurodiversity. Developed in the 1990s by autistic advocates and later scholars, the term holds that there is no “normal” brain and that people think, sense and engage with the world in meaningfully different ways – a diversity that is valuable and worth protecting (Singer, 1999; Botha et al., 2024). The concept has since broadened to encompass anyone diverging from those functional norms – i.e. neurodivergent people – regardless of the underlying biology (Chapman & Fletcher-Watson, 2026; Seymour, 2025; Chapman, 2023). Following the social model of disability, neuronormative environments are understood to actively dis-able neurodivergent individuals (Graby, 2015; Sonuga-Barke & Thapar, 2021; Walker, 2021). At the same time, neurodiversity proponents attend to the fact that some differences associated with neurodivergence can actually be advantageous under certain circumstances (Rządeczka et al., 2025). For example, hyperfocus – the capacity to concentrate so intensely on a task that awareness of the surrounding environment is temporarily reduced – is commonly reported by both autistic and AD(H)D students and academics. While it can mean missed appointments and overlooked social cues, it can

equally enable deep immersion and flow states that are genuinely valuable in academic work (Austin & Pisano, 2017, Hargitai et al., 2025). With this nuance in mind, we suggest neurodiversity as a particularly useful framework for depathologising and instead embracing difference in higher education.

Tip 2: Rely on neuroaffirmative language and communication

Gjedde et al. (2026) report that neurodivergent students feel anxious about asking for help. One of the reasons for this can be past experiences or fear of meeting stigmatising language and responses. As medical terminology usually implies the need for cure, management or improvement, thus deficit thinking, we generally recommend teachers to avoid medical framings such as diseases, conditions, or diagnoses. We are of course aware that much current "special pedagogical support" terminology relies on medical and deficit-implying frameworks. When referring to functional impairment or disability, we therefore recommend to include signalling that these can result from normative environments rather than individual differences alone. We thus recommend avoiding describing students without functional impairments as "healthy", "normal" or "well-functioning", as this implicitly casts others as their opposite (unhealthy, etc). Instead, consider referring to different learning types or, especially where students themselves use it, the non-medical language of neurodiversity (Pearson et al., 2026).

This said, students have their own preferences and language is in constant flux. We therefore recommend using the terms that individual students prefer when communicating with or about them (Best et al., 2022). For example, many who identify with neurodiversity prefer, what is called, 'identity-first' terminology (e.g. "I am an ADHDer" or "Dyslexic students often experience..."), viewing their neurodivergence as an integral part of who they are. Others prefer 'person-first' language (e.g. "individuals with autism" or "I live with dyspraxia"), feeling their neurodivergence does not define them as a person (Dunn & Andrews, 2015, Botha, 2022; Grant et al., 2025). When in doubt, it is fine to ask. And in case one makes a mistake, the appropriate response – as with gender pronouns – is a brief apology and a correction (Sorlin, 2026).

On a related note, we advise against proactively asking students about their neurotype or diagnosis. Many students with functional impairments have experience with stereotyping and misplaced expectations (Liasidou & Liasidou, 2025), and such questions may be perceived as prejudice and damage the relationship.

When a student does voluntarily disclose, acknowledge the trust this involves – a simple "Thanks for sharing this with me" is usually enough. Trust that students are being truthful; few will risk stigma and discrimination without good reason. Finally, note that both EU GDPR and Danish professional secrecy law require confidentiality around such disclosures. For this reason, do not share the information with others (e.g. the Course Director) without the student's explicit agreement.

Finally, of course, teachers can also be neurodivergent (Price, 2024; Bonsall et al., 2024). Neurodivergent teachers might choose to share this with their students – in the authors' experience, this can be a powerful tool for normalisation. However, this will not work for everyone, and, like students, teachers have a right to privacy.

Tip 3: Commit to universal design for learning and instruction

The students described by Gjedde et al. (2026) commonly report a need for greater structure and overview, as well as difficulty sustaining concentration and energy throughout class. To address this, we draw on Universal Design for Learning (UDL; Burgstahler, 2015; for comparison with principles of differentiated learning see also Cai et al., 2024) and Universal Design for Instruction (UDI; Scott et al., 2003). Both frameworks are rooted in the Universal Design principles (Mace et al., 1990), proposing that environments and processes should be usable by as many people as possible from the outset – thereby reducing the need for individual accommodations and the stigma that can accompany them (Ostroff, 2001). Notably, the advice below is thus not about creating

alternative arrangements for disadvantaged students; it is about redesigning the learning environment for the benefit of everyone.

Structure and overview

Students' ability to follow teaching can be impacted when instruction is not welcoming, for instance, variations in attention (Henning et al. 2022; Jones et al., 2026), nonlinear reading, thinking and writing (Attias, 2020; Basten, 2023; Huijg, accepted; Tan, 2018), differences in memory (Kercood et al., 2014; Çağlar & Kaynak 2021, Reading, 2022) and the need to organise around assistive technology use (Wang et al., 2002; McDowall & Kiseleva 2024). To allow for easy direction at all times, UDI and UDL advice to create a simple and intuitive structure for each class as well as the entire curriculum and provide students with straightforward access to plans and resources at all times. Start by ensuring that your online teaching platform is consistently and accessibly organised, with meeting times, required readings, out-of-class activities, deadlines and exam-related links clearly signposted from the start of the course. Where possible, agree with colleagues on a shared platform structure across courses. Begin each class with a brief recap of previous content and an outline of the session ahead; end with a summary of key take-aways and an overview of any tasks expected before the next meeting. For assigned readings or media, provide a few guiding questions and explain how the material will feed into the following session. Present this framing information consistently – for example, on the first and last slides – and share slides in advance to support orientation, note-taking and assistive technology use. Provide clear guidelines for in- and out-of-class tasks and assignments, including expectations about formatting, length and style as well as your grading/evaluation criteria, ideally supported by an exemplary assignment from previous years or similar. During class, maintain a reasonable pace, build in moments of individual silent reflection and adhere to planned breaks (see also Tip 5). Finally, keep to your plans as much as possible; when changes are necessary, communicate them early and clearly in a single, prominent announcement rather than multiple emails.

Flexibility and autonomy

Neurodivergent students differ specifically in how they best acquire, process and express knowledge – both generally and depending on context. UDL and UDI address this by recommending flexibility across three dimensions (Burgstahler, 2015).

What (learning materials): Offer choice across levels and media in and outside of class. Alongside core readings, suggest accessible introductions for students who need to build background knowledge, and more advanced material for those who want to go further. Complement texts with visuals and diagrams, podcasts, films, or other media where possible, and make students aware of transcription and text-to-speech tools.

Why (motivation): Where possible, offer choice of topic or question for presentations and assignments, including an open option for students to propose their own within the learning goals. When choice is not possible, explain your reasoning and link it explicitly to the learning goals – this can support extrinsic motivation where intrinsic motivation is harder to sustain (Morsink et al., 2022). This needs to be accompanied with appropriate scaffolding, making sure students feel supported in navigating their choice.

How (participation and expression): Offer varied modes of working and presenting – individually, in pairs, or in small groups; via essay, oral presentation or other formats; in person or online; through active contributions or quieter alternatives such as digital polling or written responses. Consistently building in this choice also removes unintended access barriers – the routine use of post-it notes in teaching activities, for instance, can be genuinely difficult or impossible for students with dyslexia, cerebral palsy or other functional differences affecting handwriting (Tops et al., 2023).

Research indicates that consistently applying UDL and UDI principles strengthens students' sense of agency, belonging, and well-being, and improves engagement and performance (Rusconi & Squillaci, 2023; Cumming & Rose, 2022). Where individual needs are still missed, or where universal solutions are hard to identify alone, UD frameworks also offer teachers co-design tools for developing solutions collaboratively with students (Hubrig & Barrit, 2024). While requiring some investment, such can be genuinely rewarding and transformative for all involved.

Tip 4: Facilitate cross-neurotype collaboration

Despite forming a central part of Danish higher education, group work is consistently reported as one of the most exclusionary modes of participation for neurodivergent students (Gjedde et al., 2026). We identify as a key reason the double empathy problem: people of different neurotypes, shaped by vastly different ways of experiencing the world, and histories of discrimination, often struggle to understand each other's thoughts, feelings, communication styles and reactions – making empathy for and collaboration with each other harder (Hillary, 2020; Milton, 2012; Milton et al., 2022). Research suggests still that neurodiversity in teams enhances both individual and group performance and experience, but only if carried by diversity practises and attitudes that are affirmative of diversity (Quigley et al., 2026; Rosqvist et al., 2023). Previous studies indicate that intellectual humility and continuous, curious and respectful inquiry into others' experiences are essential for this.

We therefore encourage teachers to offer defined opportunities for one-to-one exchanges between them and students via both email and during office hours. These conversations are irreplaceable opportunities to get to know students and can at times be the only way that allows them to share in which way the physical or social learning environment is disabling them and what – often low-effort – reasonable adjustments would help (Sarrett, 2018). We recommend to explicitly ask students about their strengths and current edges of change to shift the focus away from deficit and stress the opportunity to develop and contribute to the learning community.

Teachers can furthermore model humble and curious inquiry from the very outset by voicing in class that they expect a wide variety of learners in the room and are curious about different approaches, skills and styles and how best to support them and empower their collaboration. A useful follow-up activity can invite students to first reflect on and thus become more aware of their own learning profiles and working preferences before leading them into a facilitated, non-stigmatising dialogue about difference, complementarity and possibilities of conflict-preventing and resolving meta-communication (Cecil-Lemkin, 2022). Previous research has also pointed to the power of educating about stages of small group formation and discuss and prepare for common group disfunctions (Johnson & Patterson, 2016).

A specifically hot topic in group work is peer-feedback. To achieve a neuroaffirmative learning environment, we advise teachers to train themselves and students in feedback literacy *before* engaging students to comment on each other's work (Carless & Winstone, 2023). In particular, we recommend to teach by example: be consistent in modelling and educating the principles of clear, balanced, specific, constructive and timely feedback (Hatty & Timperley, 2007; Shute, 2008). Make clear and normalise that receiving critical feedback, even if sticking to above principles, can evoke strong reactions. Facilitate students supporting each other and constructively engaging with individual critical responses. Prepare them that conflict and intensity *will* arise but can be made productive if worked through with care. Normalising this helps students feel prepared and their responses welcomed.

As none of the above is learned overnight, classrooms will critically benefit from teachers developing skills in group facilitation, conflict engagement, mediation and trauma-sensitive pedagogy, though we are well aware

that current professional development offered to academic teaching staff is scarce of respective opportunities (Nishiyama et al., 2020; Parker & Bickmore, 2012).

Tip 5: Support student well-being and act trauma-informed

Studying is demanding, and the overwork culture, common in academic environments (Tekeste, 2025), makes it hard for students to allow themselves rest. Rest is particularly necessary for those also navigating an environment that does not adequately support their learning, neurodivergence or mental health difficulties (Gjedde et al., 2026; Spaeth & Pearson 2023). Academic teachers can send an important signal by modelling that well-being comes first. In particular, we recommend that teachers avoid sharing if they work evenings or weekends (even if on flex time), and do not encourage and model coming in when sick. If emails are written outside of working hours, we recommend to schedule them to be sent during the next working day. During classes, we advise to schedule and adhere to breaks – at least ten minutes per hour and a longer break every three hours. Approaches of relaxed pedagogy (Huijg & Acton, 2020) that encourage students tending to their needs, but agree that this is without interrupting others' learning can be inspiring. Some scholars have had good experiences with so-called 'traffic light' stickers allowing students to signal their capacity without drawing attention to themselves or disrupting the flow of teaching (Seymour, 2024). Finally, a check-in with students you are concerned about is valuable, particularly during periods of potential isolation, such as thesis writing, when a supervisor is the only regular point of academic contact (Szorenyi & Payne, 2025). Inform yourself about support for students experiencing health and well-being issues at your institution and, when listening is not enough, advise students on how to receive further help (Dowes et al., 2023).

Exam situations can be particularly stressful for students, potentially triggering fight, flight, freeze or fawn responses that can manifest as anger, panic or withdrawal (Doyle & McDowall, 2025). For neurodivergent students, there are additional factors. For instance, many carry histories of exclusion, bullying and discrimination; some experience sensory or social overload in crowded or noisy environments (Ross et al., 2026; Tcherdakoff et al., 2025) or difficulty with recognising and responding to one's own distress in time (Nowicki, 2025). Together, these can lead to overwhelm.

We encourage teachers to stay calm and empathetic when encountering an overwhelmed student. To create an affirmative environment, a good start can be to calmly voice to the student that they might be experiencing nervousness, fear or panic. We recommend explaining that this is common, and that how they feel in the moment is not indicative of their *actual* skills and knowledge. Students might feel supported by being asked of what has helped them before in such a situation, or, in case they cannot respond, being presented with some suggestions. These can include drinking a glass of water, walking together around the building, engaging in a short box-breathing exercise or engaging in an exercise that redirects focus from the acute distress to the environment and body (Balban et al., 2023; Cherrill, 2026). But sometimes the only option is for the student to leave, ideally accompanied by someone they trust. Such situations can affect teachers too, and we encourage seeking out a trusted colleague to debrief afterwards.

Tip 6: Stand up against prejudice and discrimination

Gjedde et al. (2026) report students suffering from prevailing stigma and exclusion. Indeed, international research points to (neuro)ableist discrimination remaining common in university settings (Brown, 2021; Dolmage, 2019; Hamilton & Petty, 2023; Huijg, 2020) while often being compounded by intersecting forms of oppression such as racism, homophobia and misogyny (Byrd et al., 2019; Mireles, 2022; Stephens-Peace, 2025; Wilke & Barry, 2025). Discrimination does not only appear in overt acts – it also surfaces in jokes and casual

remarks that simultaneously reinforce stigma and invalidate neurodivergent students' experiences. Microaggressions such as "I would never have guessed you were X" or "a bit of X makes the real academic" – replace 'X' with any minority neurotype – may seem harmless or even well-intentioned, but they are detrimental to students' mental health, sense of belonging and academic performance (Hudson & Hunter, 2020). Importantly also, the stigma supported by such micro-aggressions can lead peers and teachers to underestimate students' potential or question the legitimacy of their difficulties.

Recognising and addressing *any* expression of prejudice or discrimination – regardless of intent – is both a formal responsibility of teachers at Danish universities (see AU's zero-tolerance policy: <https://studerende.au.dk/en/zero-tolerance/academicenvironment>) and a foundation of an affirmative learning environment. When a neuroableist comment or behaviour occurs, teachers can respond publicly in the moment – calling out what happened to limit harm and establish clear norms. Ideally, this is combined with a gentler approach in a (later) one-to-one conversation, where, curiously and critically, the discriminatory behaviour, its impact and neuroaffirming alternatives can be explored together (Herbison & Podolski, 2024). In a teaching context, neither response should be aggressive or shaming – both are framed as learning opportunities towards a more socially just environment. Finally, teachers should always lead by example: acknowledging their own missteps when occurring, apologising for them and reflecting on how to do better (Schumann, 2018).

Conclusion

This guide is a starting point; not a comprehensive training in affirmative university teaching. We have not been able to address the structural constraints – resources, time, teaching spaces, institutional and organisational frameworks – in which academic teachers operate. Still, we hope that our guide makes teachers aware of how important their engagement is and how much there is to gain by adhering to good pedagogical practise combined with a depathologising and neuroaffirmative approach to difference. As bell hooks famously wrote, "The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility within academy" (1994, p.12). We hope this guide is a useful step towards its realisation.

Acknowledgements

The research underlying this guide was funded by the Danish Foundation LB fonden. We thank Amos Blanton, Flor Campise, Stephanie Lee Ellison, Anna Sofie Daugaard, Ida Rebsdorf-Gregersen, Nicola Simonetti and Nicola Visser for their participations in meetings and workshops informing the practical advices.

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