Redesigning Learning for Belonging: Supporting Neurodivergent Learners in Mental Health and Addiction Workforce Training

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Abstract

As the Discipline Lead for a workforce development programme that prepares support workers for the mental health and addiction sector, I have witnessed firsthand the transformative impact of creating truly inclusive learning environments. Many of our learners enter the programme with rich lived experience of mental health and addiction challenges, and an increasing number also identify as neurodivergent.

Traditional programme structures did not always meet the diverse learning needs of these learners. In response, our team reimagined the programme through a strengths-based and learner-centred approach. We redesigned study plans, enhanced academic and pastoral support, increased flexibility in learning and assessment processes, and worked collaboratively with learners to identify barriers and solutions.

This presentation shares the lived experience of leading this change and highlights the stories of several learners who, despite significant challenges, successfully completed their studies and progressed into meaningful employment in the support workforce. Their journeys demonstrate how inclusion goes beyond accommodation and requires intentional design, belonging, and genuine partnership with learners.

Through these stories, I will explore lessons learned about creating affirming educational environments, the value of neurodiversity in the mental health and addiction workforce, and how small but purposeful changes can significantly improve learner success and wellbeing. This presentation offers practical insights for educators, programme leaders, and organisations seeking to build more inclusive pathways into employment and community participation.

Objectives of Research: This presentation aims to explore how creating more inclusive, flexible, and learner-centred educational environments can support neurodivergent learners and those with lived experience of mental health and addiction challenges. It highlights approaches that promote learner success, wellbeing, and meaningful employment outcomes.

Methodologies Were Used in Research: The presentation draws on my experience as a Discipline Lead, reflections on programme development, and the stories of learners who participated in the programme. Learner experiences and outcomes were used to identify effective practices and lessons for creating more inclusive learning environments.

Main Contributions of Your Research: This work demonstrates how intentional changes to programme design, learner support, and assessment practices can improve inclusion, belonging, and learner achievement. It provides practical insights for educators and organisations seeking to create more accessible pathways into employment and community participation.

Keywords

Addiction Support, Inclusive Education, Student Success, Strengths-based Practice, Accessibility, Employment Pathways.