

Designing for Neurodiversity in Academia: Addressing Challenges and Opportunities in Human-Computer Interaction

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Abstract

Academia is primarily structured around neurotypical norms, posing significant challenges for neurodivergent academics, who often face additional barriers that hinder their success. This Special Interest Group (SIG) examines the experiences of neurodiverse researchers in Human-Computer Interaction and explores how HCI can contribute to more inclusive academic environments. By bringing together HCI researchers, neurodiverse academics, and allies, this

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SIG aims to develop strategies for a more neurodivergent-inclusive, affirming, and supportive academic landscape. Since enhanced well-being can boost productivity, addressing these challenges may unlock greater research output and contributions, particularly by harnessing the talent and creativity of neurodivergent individuals. We will focus on challenges faced across career stages and roles (from students to senior academics, research to teaching staff), and explore the role of technology in academia — assessing how it alleviates and exacerbates barriers. Additionally, we aim to critically examine how policies and governance within the HCI community impact neurodiversity inclusion.

CCS Concepts

- Human-centered computing \rightarrow Accessibility theory, concepts and paradigms.

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Keywords

Neurodivergence, Neurodiversity, HCI, Academia

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1 Introduction

Academia is predominantly structured around neurotypical norms [42, 44], posing significant challenges for an increasingly neurodivergent-aware population, with more individuals recognising their own neurodivergence or that of their peers [19, 58]. While these environments often pose accessibility barriers for neurotypical individuals [11, 40, 46, 57], the additional complexities neurodivergent academics face can further hinder success and confidence [4, 12, 13, 17, 19, 22, 47, 52, 54, 59, 61]. Indeed, systemic [techno]ableism persists in academia [55], creating compounded barriers for neurodivergent academics [4, 11-13, 17, 32, 35, 54, 59, 60]. The demand for academics to excel across all domains - research, management, teaching, engagement - places disproportionate strain on neurodivergent individuals [42, 43] throughout different stages of their career, though their inclusion brings significant cognitive and creative benefits to teams [49, 63]. While new technologies such as generative AI [7, 16, 69] can both heighten barriers [27, 28] and offer new neuro-inclusive tools [2, 18, 33], this Special Interest Group (SIG) seeks to explore these tensions across career stages and technologies, fostering a more inclusive academic landscape. Furthermore, it aims to explore both the lived experiences of neurodivergent researchers within HCI and the role of HCI in shaping more inclusive academic environments for neurodivergent staff and students [15, 20, 21, 24, 25, 31, 36, 53], focusing on three key areas:

- (1) Challenges and Best Practices Across Career Stages and Roles: From students to senior academics, researchers to adjunct teaching faculty, we will examine the unique obstacles neurodivergent individuals face and discuss strategies for support and inclusion at each stage.
- (2) Tensions in the Use of Technology in Education: The pervasive integration of various technologies in academia (from assistive technologies to generative AI) presents opportunities and challenges. We will explore how these technologies can alleviate or exacerbate existing barriers for neurodivergent academics.
- (3) Institutional Policies and Governance in the HCI Community: We will critically examine how current policies, practices, and governance in academic institutions and the HCI community either enable or hinder neurodiversity inclusion.

Who's invited? This SIG welcomes neuro*diverse*¹ HCI academics and invites them to come together and collaboratively explore the challenges and opportunities for fostering a more inclusive

academic environment. Neurodivergent academics and allies are particularly encouraged to participate².

This SIG aims to co-create actionable insights, frameworks, and strategies (in the form of a publicly availabe agenda [62]) to foster a more empowering, neuro-inclusive, and supportive academic landscape that improves research quality, diversity, and output. In doing so, we will address systemic barriers by bridging the gap between neurodivergent needs, technological innovation, and institutional policies [6, 70]. By integrating both human-centred technology (leveraging neurodiversity-HCI principles [20]) and inclusive governance, we thus aim to create a more neuro-affirming academic future that values and supports diverse contributions.

2 Background and Motivation

Twenty-five years ago, Kitchin highlighted that "spaces are currently organised to keep disabled people 'in their place'" [34], and arguably, little has changed since. Academia continues to embody structural ableism, reinforced through inaccessible online and physical spaces, signalling to disabled and neurodiverse academics that they are not welcome and have less value [4, 11–13, 17, 32, 35, 54, 59, 60, 71]. This exclusion is a manifestation of technoableism [55], where technology and design choices implicitly prioritise neurotypical and able-bodied experiences, further marginalising those who do not conform to these standards. The marginalisation and stigmatisation of neurodivergent students starts well before higher education, as the education system overall expects and rewards neuro-normative behaviour and labels and punishes non-conformity [3, 5, 45]. This stigma follows students through to higher education if they are not pushed out by burnout before reaching it [4, 12, 17, 19, 60].

For academic faculty, fears around job security often prevent disclosure of disabilities [71], with some feeling unsafe to reveal their conditions while others are pressured into doing so [39]. The invisibility of disabled academics [46] perpetuates the stigma around disability, reinforcing the idea that success in academia is tied to able-bodied or neurotypical norms. However, neuro-normative expectations in academia [26, 29, 50] leading to a lack of disclosure may deprive students of exposure to the reality of disabled academics. This leads to increasing biases about academia not being available for disabled people [65], reducing the number of disabled students entering university and becoming academic staff themselves. To create a more inclusive environment, it is thus essential to address academic policies and governance structures that contribute to these systemic barriers, which this SIG seeks to create meaningful discourse around.

Cyborg theory offers a nuanced lens through which to view the relationship between disabled academics and technology: cyborg identity embodies a blending of the human and technological, where assistive technologies and adaptive tools can become extensions of the self [30, 48, 66, 67]. This fusion can empower neurodivergent and disabled individuals to navigate hostile environments. Still, it also reveals a tension: instead of disrupting ableist norms, technology is often framed as a way to help individuals "fit in" to fundamentally exclusionary environments [41, 56]. In this SIG, we thus acknowledge cyborg theory in our approach to this issue.

The motivation for this SIG extends beyond simply addressing

¹Neurodiverse academics here encompasses both neurodivergent and neurotypical HCI academics as long as they are interested in neurodiversity inclusion.

²Acknowledging that disclosure is a personal choice with real ramifications and, thus, should not come from external pressure.

the challenges neurodivergent academics face. While neurotypical norms in academia can be exclusionary, neurodivergent individuals bring significant creative and cognitive strengths to their teams and institutions [49, 63]. Embracing ability-based design [68] and interdependence theory [9, 64], we can shift the conversation toward recognising how neurodivergent academics can enhance research and innovation when fully included. For example, the expectation that academics excel across all areas - project management, public engagement, teaching, and research [42] - can be especially burdensome for neurodivergent individuals [43, 44]. We must rethink these demands, promoting more inclusive recruitment processes and team-based approaches [1, 8]. While technological challenges such as generative AI [7, 16, 69] (which may play a role in amplifying the biases that already exist [27, 28] but may also become an important tool for neuro-inclusivity [2, 18, 33]) are important, they should be considered within the broader framework of technological tensions and best practices. By exploring these issues across different career stages and academic roles, this SIG aims to foster a more inclusive, empowering academic landscape that values neurodivergent contributions. The organisers, deeply committed to these efforts, bring together diverse perspectives to foster a more inclusive future.

2.1 Positionality

Members of the organising team are various combinations of neurodivergent, disabled, mad [10, 37, 51], queer [14, 23], and ethnically marginalised. Despite belonging to the communities we are writing about, we recognise that as participants in academia, we have privileges that others in our community do not. As such, we lack knowledge of many factors interfering with neurodivergent access to and within academia. Our goal is not merely to address neurodivergent exclusions that we have experienced but to explore the edges of these experiences to deliberately break apart and disrupt the practices in academia that cause broad harm and exclusions across differences.

3 The SIG: Plans and Outcomes

Our plan for the SIG is to foster a pre- and post-SIG **community** and to address issues in a bottom-up, community-driven way [23] during the SIG. We plan it as a **show-and-tell and discussion** session, with the outcome goals of the discussion being an **agenda** (addressing all three key points listed in the introduction).

3.1 Pre-SIG: Community

We will recruit participants by sharing a link to our community (Slack group) via multiple outlets such as a post on LinkedIn, CHI spaces such as Discord, X, and Slack servers, CHI Meta Facebook group, and email distribution lists. Before the SIG, we will create a **Slack** group for participants to join and continue the supportive conversation after the SIG. We will create and link a **Padlet** to the Slack group. The Padlet will include examples of what to *optionally* bring in for the show-and-tell portion of the SIG, so that participants can add theirs to the Padlet before the SIG date. These examples will include a template for a journey map (which participants would be free to deviate from); participants could also bring in a short story, vignette, scenario, a zine, or another creative output, as long as it pertains to the talking points, which would also be included on the Padlet with these instructions. We will send participants a Microsoft Form to ask

them about access needs, consent to record, and if they would like to be matched with another participant to make them feel less socially anxious and lost. We will run this matchmaking service according to participant-requested preferences. We will also test our technical setup before the SIG to make sure all accessibility provisions can unfold as planned in a rehearsal pre-SIG with organisers.

3.2 75 Minutes: Show-and-Tell and Discussion

During the hybrid SIG (after a brief, 2-minute introduction), pre-selected participants (based on **community** responses, relevance, willingness of the participants, and organiser selection) would be invited to show their contributions, speaking for one to four minutes each. Each show-and-tell would be followed by a brief discussion, with concrete goals being added to the **agenda** in each of the three categories, amended throughout the session. The final agenda would be shared after the SIG, on Padlet, Slack, and in the form of a formal outcomes document.

3.3 Accessibility

Our commitment to accessibility is paramount to the community we seek to build with this SIG. In order to achieve this, as discussed, we will ask all participants about any accommodations we can make for them. During the SIG, we will encourage and accommodate hybrid participation, we will honour all forms of communication, and we will leave special time for written or other non-verbal contributions to the discussion [38, 72]. We will encourage all participants to include their names and pronouns when contributing to the discussion and to help us create an overall low-fragrance environment. We also welcome floor seating, sensory accommodations such as fidgets and ear-defenders, and movement.

3.4 Post-SIG: Going Further

We will invite the wider CHI Community to join the Slack group and view (but not edit) the Padlet where the discussion and agenda were recorded. This should enable a continuous international conversation about improving accessibility at CHI and Academia as a whole, as it gives a space for future collaborative work. Our **agenda document**, with its concrete goals in the three key categories, will be available publicly, and regular community discussions post-SIG will be continued by the organisers in order to keep the conversation going.

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