

## Embrace the spectrum: a series of events to promote neurodiversity

Applicants: Mario Boot, Isabella Cadoni, Mira El Akkawi, Janike Bolter, Muriel Holzreuter, Lauro Jeronimo Olivera (all UT-employed PhD or EngD candidates).

Contact person: Mario Boot, [p-nut@utwente.nl](mailto:p-nut@utwente.nl).

### Intro

The PhD & EngD Network of the University of Twente (P-Nut) seeks funding to organize a series of events at the University of Twente (UT), aimed at supporting people with neurodiverse conditions. P-Nut is a well-established organization with a track record of organizing successful informational and social events. P-Nut received signals that events about neurodiversity would be highly appreciated and aligned with recommendations to foster a more inclusive culture. By facilitating the sharing of experiences, connections, and knowledge, P-Nut aims to cultivate a sense of belonging and friendship while leveraging expert knowledge to address challenges. Simultaneously, these events aim to raise awareness among neurotypical individuals about neurodiversity, fostering a more inclusive and diverse atmosphere at UT.

### Background

The term neurodiversity originates from the [autistic rights movement](#) campaigning against discrimination. This movement proposes a paradigm shift: humans have natural diversity on the neurological, cognitive, psychological, and behavioural levels. Therefore, differences should be accepted and supported instead of stigmatized and fixed, even if these differences cause very severe and difficult life conditions. Some advocates state that neurodiversity, both born and acquired, is crucial to humanity's development and well-being. Conditions such as autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADD/ADHD), dyspraxia, hypersensitivity, and dyslexia make neurodiverse people experience the world and interact with their surroundings in distinct ways. Meanwhile, neurodiversity is often associated with incredible skills, interests, and personalities. Despite their potential value, these often cause behaviour that distance neurotypical individuals who lack knowledge and awareness on how to engage with the neurodiverse.

Various examples show momentum and inspiration for how to understand and accommodate people with unusual talents in academic circles. Well-established initiatives include the [Stanford Neurodiversity Project](#) and the [Rowan Center for Neurodiversity](#). Rowan University created a Neurodiversity Center through a community and neurodiversity center comprised of neurodiverse faculty, staff, students, and community partners aiming to promote research and community engagement with neurodiversity as a priority. A community can be a helpful tool to improve the feeling of belonging, but also to increase mutual support and can lead to advocacy and activism<sup>1,2</sup>. At the University of Twente, events such as "[Embrace the Spectrum](#)" organized by P-NUT and a [lecture on neurodiversity organized by Studium Generale](#) led to positive feedback from participants, showing the value and impact of such events. It is important to acknowledge that [more critical voices emerged](#), mentioning for example risks of romanticizing conditions, or overlooking those with very severe conditions. For example, a supposed amount of 40% of children with autism do not talk at all, leading to questions about what type of efforts are beneficial and not harmful.

### The Problem

The problem that P-Nut aims to address, can be seen at multiple levels. Firstly, within academic settings, [the Recognition and Rewards program](#) shows a growing need for accommodating diverse talents, personalities, skillsets, and connections. Also, according to the [2022 Inclusion Report produced by the Shaping Expert Group](#) (SEG), one of the problems that physically disabled and neurodiverse employees face is an individualistic and competitive academic climate where people feel uncomfortable allowing themselves space and seeking it. Secondly, neurodiverse people often experience discrimination and injustice in the workplace, often due to

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<sup>1</sup> Ryan Idriss, C. (2021). Invisible Autistic Infrastructure: Ethnographic Reflections on an Autistic Community. *Medical Anthropology*, 40(2), 129–140. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01459740.2020.1849185>

<sup>2</sup> Dwyer, P., Mineo, E., Mifsud, K., Lindholm, C., Gurba, A., & Waisman, T. C. (2022). Building Neurodiversity-Inclusive Postsecondary Campuses: Recommendations for Leaders in Higher Education. *Autism in Adulthood*, aut.2021.0042. <https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2021.0042>

misperceptions or stigmatization of their behaviours and abilities. For example, there is a stigma that people with ADHD lack concentration, competence, laziness, or predictability<sup>3</sup>. In addition, ADHD is associated with violating social conventions, and people with ADHD are accused of not being motivated enough to conform<sup>4</sup>. Thirdly, it is often overlooked that neurodiverse people have unique strengths. Examples of such strengths are high attention to detail, recognition of complex patterns, creative problem-solving abilities, or higher-than-average awareness of social injustice. Such skills are very valuable to academia. Fourthly, there are many unanswered questions regarding neurodiversity. Are some conditions indeed normal variations, or are they better framed as disorders? How to avoid overlooking those with very severe conditions? In line with these concerns, and fifthly, it may be that current efforts within the UT are insufficient. The [ANDY project](#) is a valuable initiative for a platform built by and for neurodiverse students, but unfortunately, it has been used very little in the past 6 months. The SACC offers consultation hours for autism and ADHD. Nevertheless, the SEG report as well as examples from other universities and feedback from members of the P-Nut community show that more and different efforts to promote natural diversity at the UT are possible and desirable.

### Project Plan

Our proposed solution is a set of events aimed at supporting people with neurodiverse conditions, inspired by examples at Stanford, Rowan University, and earlier at the UT. Changing a culture is challenging, but attempts can be made by providing opportunities for employees to share experiences and by making information more accessible. In this context, employees with difficult life conditions interviewed by SEG mentioned that they would appreciate the opportunity to find other employees with similar disabilities to share experiences and support. Throughout these events, it may then be explored if and how a larger neurodiversity community at the UT can be established. Also, the events are a potential source for the Twente Graduate School (TGS), Human Resources, Diversity Equity Inclusion team (DEI), etc., to gather inspiration for policy improvements. The target audience consists of anyone related to the UT, including academic and staff, students, as well as their families and acquaintances.

On purpose, the exact content, speakers, format, etc. of the events are not yet decided. These will be determined together with members of the community, to ensure a good match with the needs and interests of neurodiverse individuals. Hence, the event series would start with a co-creation event in a facilitated brainstorming style in Q3 2024. This starter event around inspirational personal stories can collect ideas, activate future event organizers, and. Further events will be organized in the period between Q4 2024 and Q2 2025. Expressions of interest in event themes have been made about living and working with ADHD, in alignment with [ADHD Awareness Month](#); supporting supervisors to supervise neurodiverse individuals; and living with acquired neurodiversity due to, for example, illness, bullying, or trauma.

These events will be organized by and for neurodiverse individuals from within the P-Nut community. Multiple persons, some of whom have conditions themselves, have shown interest and capability to organize an event about the previously mentioned themes. Both experts by profession and experts by experience will be sought to contribute to the events. A student assistant will be sought to support organization efforts, and this student assistant is expected to engage with a professional marketing agency. Outsourcing organizational, administrative, and marketing tasks is expected to help reach a larger audience with attractive visual material via creative marketing channels. Tankstation in Enschede is approachable as a suitable, creative, inclusive, and international event venue. Disseminating our approach and findings in an international context is expected to deliver new energy for future efforts, as well as put the UT in the spotlight.

The goals of the event series are as follows:

- **Raise Awareness:** Our primary aim is to disseminate information and educate individuals about neurodiversity. Through targeted outreach efforts and awareness campaigns, we seek to normalize diverse cognitive styles and promote acceptance within our community and beyond. Our success will

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<sup>3</sup> Corrigan, P. W., & Shapiro, J. R. (2010). Measuring the impact of programs that challenge the public stigma of mental illness. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 30(8), 907–922. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2010.06.004>

<sup>4</sup> Mueller, A. K., Fuermaier, A. B. M., Koerts, J., & Tucha, L. (2012). Stigma in attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. *ADHD Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorders*, 4(3), 101–114. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12402-012-0085-3>

be measured by the organization of 3-4 events with at least 100 participants in total. Additionally, we aim to reach 10,000 individuals through a diverse range of communication channels, ensuring widespread engagement and awareness. We recognize the importance of, and will work on, reaching audiences who may be less familiar with neurodiversity.

- **Organize Events:** We envision a series of inclusive events where like-minded individuals can come together, exchange ideas, and learn from experts in the field. These events will feature a blend of lectures, interactive workshops, and brainstorming sessions, catering to a diverse audience of 20 to 50 attendees per event. By aligning event timing with global initiatives such as [ADHD Awareness Month](#), we aim to maximize our impact and reach. We aim to reach event valuation rates of at least a 7 or higher to demonstrate the value and effectiveness of our programming.
- **Expand Community Engagement:** Through meetups and by highlighting relevant projects like the [ANDY project](#), we aim to create a space where individuals feel valued, understood, and empowered to share their experiences and support one another. We will track the number of recurring visitors to our community events and assess the rating of event value to well-being. We aim to engage with at least 5 different stakeholders or partners, such as TGS and the Student Affairs Coaching and Counselling (SACC) department, to ensure a multifaceted approach to outreach and engagement.
- **Collect Feedback and Share Findings:** By sharing our learnings and insights at an international academic forum, like the annual meeting of the [European University Association](#) or the [European Council of Doctoral Candidates](#), we aim to contribute to the global conversation on inclusivity and advocate for positive change. Additionally, we aim to generate at least 10 co-created ideas for future events and facilitate the organization of 2 spin-off events to further expand our reach and impact.

#### Budget planning

Item	Cost	Description
Student Assistant	€2000,-	+5 months +-3 hours per week
Communication agency	€750,-	Professional support with advertising & PR
Event catering and fees	€2000,-	3-4 event costs for catering, venue costs, speaker charges
Attend EUA conference	€750,-	Disseminate in a global context
Miscellaneous	€250,-	
<b>Total</b>	<b>€5750,-</b>	

#### Time planning

- April 2024: Funding request
- September/October 2024: co-creation starter event
- Q3 2024: recruit event organizers, student assistant, and marketing agency
- Q4 2024 to Q2 2025: Prepare and conduct events
- Q2-3 2025: Evaluation of impact
- Q2-3 2025: Disseminate findings at academic conference

#### Supporting stakeholders

The P-Nut Board, P-Nut Equity subcommittee, and the PhD & EngD Councillors have confirmed to be willing to be a stakeholder for these event series. Furthermore, assistant professor Jelle van Dijk from the [Design Your Life project](#) as well as TGS Dean Ariana Need endorse this project. Being a stakeholder means that these organizations will be asked to be present during events, as well as to support the preparation, dissemination, and evaluation of the events.