

Ep.5 Let's Go Further

Autism, ADHD, Dyslexia, Dyscalculia – most of us have heard of these neurodiverse conditions. But even if you do not have a diagnosed condition, you are still neurodiverse in some way – no two human minds are the same.

In this episode, we hear from Dr Louise Karwowski, Director of Education at Cognassist, and Paul Eeles, Chief Executive at the Skills and Education Group.

Louise says that individuals should take neurodiversity assessments to unearth their 'hidden needs' so that they have the best chance of succeeding. Paul then shares how taking an assessment has helped him understand himself better and work more effectively.

Join us to increase your understanding of neurodiversity, how it affects us all, and why it should be celebrated.

Transcript

Joe Mcloughlin 0:01

Hello, and welcome to Series Two of Let's Go Further a podcast from the Skills and Education Group that challenges the way we think about skills and education. I'm Joe Mcloughlin, Foundation Manager at the Group and in this series, I'm speaking to people from inside and outside the education sector, about equity, diversity and inclusion. In this episode, we're talking about neurodiversity in education. And joining me are Dr Louise Karwowski, Director of Education at Cognassist and Paul Eeles, Chief Executive of the Skills and Education Group, who has recently undergone a neurodiversity assessment. Beginning with Louise, I'd like to ask you a little bit about the work of Cognassist.

Dr Louise Karwowski 0:40

Cognassist is a neuroinclusion platform, we provide a digital performance based cognitive assessment, and then ongoing support for learners and employees who require it. We develop approaches that help people thrive in education, but also in the workplace. And we've assessed well over 200,000 individuals to date. So we've got a huge data set, which enables to employ really clever analysis and research to then mould the education space in the workspace to be more neuroinclusive for everybody.

Joe Mcloughlin 1:16

And so when you talk about neuroinclusivity, and the kind of associated term of neurodiversity, can we just offer a definition of neurodiversity for our listeners?

Dr Louise Karwowski 1:25

Neurodiversity is just an elaborate word for all the different atypical ways in which individual brains can function. It covers both learning difficulties or challenges such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, but also neurological conditions such as ADHD, and autism, it's really commonly associated with specific diagnoses such as those and actually, it was a term that was coined by a sociologist called Judy Singer in the late 90s. And she said that she sees neurodiversity as the simple fact that no two human minds are the same. And she uses this as a paradigm for social change.

Joe Mcloughlin 2:07

So recognising that then is she making the case that everybody to a greater or lesser extent is neurodiverse in some way? Have I understood that correctly?

Dr Louise Karwowski 2:17

Absolutely. You know, our brains are cognitively...well, we are unique cognitively. And we all sit on a spectrum. And neurodiversity is at one end of that spectrum. We do process information in different ways, and we perceive the world in different ways. So cognitive diversity is very much a thing.

Joe Mcloughlin 2:35

So recognising this diversity then, if you're at the end of the spectrum where your diversity is manifesting in different ways, how is that likely to affect your educational experience?

Dr Louise Karwowski 2:46

It depends on a lot of different factors. It depends how information is being packaged up for your particular brain, it depends on the environment, the setting the requirements of you as a student, as well, and also the types of programmes that you're studying. The problem with education and some workplaces is that we expect people to function in the same way, but a lot of Cognassist learners have come to us following their assessment and said, it's like a light bulb moment, because for a long time in education, they felt like they were square pegs trying to fit into a round hole. And it just wasn't working for them. They became frustrated with their own abilities, their confidence was low. And they started to struggle, because the information wasn't being delivered in the right way for them. And it's not that learners have to change it's that the educational system has to be accommodating to all types of thinker. And that's where cognitive diversity comes into it. We need to accommodate that there are differences in processing of information, in perception and synthesis of that information, but also retention of that information.

Joe Mcloughlin 3:51

So ultimately, then, is that a kind of end goal for yourself and Cognassist to kind of create a more open and inclusive classroom or a more open and inclusive learning environment?

Dr Louise Karwowski 4:01

Yeah, absolutely. So we work with 16+, so our youngest learner is age 16. Our oldest is mid 80s. So it's adult learning that we're interested in predominantly. Generally, our learners have had a tough time in education. And they've chosen the FE sector by way of inclusive support. So it's about changing the perception for everybody and providing everybody with the ability to succeed.

Joe Mcloughlin 4:28

And so thinking kind of practically, how would we do that, kind of what would be some top tips or best practice that you would...that you would recommend or that you're working through at the moment?

Dr Louise Karwowski 4:38

So the tweaks we're talking about are really easy to implement, and quite simple to do. And actually, neuroinclusion benefits everybody, not just people with cognitive challenges. So as an example, you could think about presenting information in more than one format. So if you're sharing some reading with your class, make sure you send it to them before the session don't just expect people to read on the spot. Same if you're having like a Q and A session with your learners or your employees. Best practice would be to share the discussion points in advance because it's really difficult for people to think on the spot. If you're asking people questions, don't ask question after question. Make sure you take a breather in between give them space to process that information and then consider their answer. Have a look at the Cognassist website. We've got a plethora of resources designed to support educators and employers. We provide guidance handbooks, a recorded masterclass as well, that goes into quite a lot of depth about practical adjustments you can make in the workplace and in colleges and end-point assessment as well.

Joe Mcloughlin 5:46

Just taking a step back for the moment and thinking a little bit about scale now, you mentioned at the outset there that Cognassist has helped assess or led assessments on around 200,000 learners. In kind of relation to the whole population of those in education, regardless of age, kind of what proportion of them are leaving school without that kind of assessment, whether it's accurate or fully extensive. How many neurodiverse learners do you think we're missing at the moment?

Dr Louise Karwowski 6:11

It's so difficult to pinpoint. It is estimated that between 15 to 20%, of school children are neurodiverse. And one question we ask every client of ours is how many of your learners are self-declaring on enrolment with some sort of learning difficulty and/or disability. And the answer usually sits in between the 2 and 5% region. So between 2 and 5% of people either have an EHCP, or a diagnosed need, that they actually start their apprenticeship programme with, which is really, really low. Cognassist data is actually identifying one in three learners at Levels 1 to 5, so that's in between GCSE and Level 5, one in three. So around the 30% mark, which is far higher than that estimate. And at higher levels at

Levels 6 and 7, which is degree level and Master's level, we're identifying one in five. So still significant numbers at those higher levels of education.

Joe Mcloughlin 7:11

Just to get in on a technical point there, the EHCP you mentioned? Can you just explain what that is what it stands for?

Dr Louise Karwowski 7:18

Yeah, it's the Education Health and Care Plan, which is where if you have a need diagnosed as a child or a young person, it's a way of getting support.

Joe Mcloughlin 7:28

Just from what I'm picking up there then, your data would suggest there's a gap between what you would expect to see and the range and number of learners who are turning up at FE skills providers, FE colleges with clear, open and accurate diagnoses. Is that is that fair?

Dr Louise Karwowski 7:44

Yes, I'd say that's fair. I mean, you know, we know that waiting lists are really lengthy for getting access to an educational psychologist. There are other barriers there with regard to costs. I've heard of educational psychologist assessments costing, you know, the price of £1000. And it's really difficult to find that sort of money, particularly nowadays.

Joe Mcloughlin 8:07

Yeah, and once those learners arrive at colleges then or within FE providers or apprenticeships, what pressures do these kinds of undiagnosed or under-diagnosed kind of conditions put on education providers?

Dr Louise Karwowski 8:19

It's hidden needs, hidden needs, as you're saying, quite often those needs are hidden to the individual as well, it's really difficult to figure out how you think and learn yourself by trial and error. So actually, that leads to a lot of stress and frustration on both the provider side and the learner side, because there's a disjoint there, it can lead to a breakdown in communication. I've heard this time and time again, from providers, you know, they tell me that they thought their learner had a bad attitude towards learning because they were always failing to turn up on time for classes. They were missing deadlines. They weren't...they were missing emails, they weren't responsive. And actually, when they sat the Cognassist assessment, it turned out that that person had organisational difficulties. So they had challenges with their executive function. And once those difficulties were surfaced, communication improved, because strategies could be put into place quite easily. You know, for example, sending text reminders to a learner say, you know 'Remember you've got a class at 11 today' and that solved a lot of the communication issues as a whole. So what I'm saying is, it's really difficult to support hidden needs when they're hidden. It adds to tutors having to dedicate a lot more time to getting learners through to try and figuring out how they think and learn what strategies work because actually, how can

you determine which strategies are relevant to a person's needs if you don't know what you're starting with, so it does add to additional stress. It also leads to a disjointed learner support journey. It's really difficult to identify what reasonable adjustments are required, not just on the journey, but at end-point assessment. So I've had plenty of discussions with EPAOs - End-Point Assessment Organisations, and awarding organisations saying a lot of learners with needs are arriving at their assessment on the day and asking where their reasonable adjustments are. And because that...it wasn't pre-planned, they're having to go down as special circumstances so it leads to a really rough assessment experience as well at that point. We know that a lack of identification of needs leads to drop out as well. And obviously we have staggeringly poor statistics around withdrawal in this sector. So you know, it all comes back to one thing, and that's about surfacing how somebody thinks and learns right at the start of enrolment, because it then leads to a smoother journey and a more informed journey for everybody.

Joe Mcloughlin 10:51

We're going to pass over to Paul in just a moment. But before we do, I just wanted to ask a quick kind of general overview question, Louise. Is there one popular neurodiversity myth or misconception that you'd love to dispel? And then on the other side of that, is there one thing about neurodiversity that you wish more people knew?

Dr Louise Karwowski 11:10

Absolutely. I love those questions. So the myth, I would say, 'high-level learners don't have learning needs'. So I've come across providers who just don't believe that people who are studying at higher levels so degree level could possibly have cognitive learning differences. And actually, that's a really dangerous myth. Because that type of learner, if they've got to that high level off their own back without accessing support, they're a very different type of learner. So they're probably reluctant to ask for support, they're probably reluctant to say that they're struggling. They're more likely to drop out, or they're going to be working around the clock to achieve at the same rates as their peers. So they won't have a social life, they will struggle to have family time or friend time, they won't have hobbies, because they just have to dedicate every single minute to passing their qualification. So what I'd say is, be aware that at higher level, you know, we're identifying 20% of learners at that level, be aware there may well be needs in that in that cohort. And the one thing that I wish more people knew was that two diagnoses two diagnoses of the same type might have very different requirements. So you know, the amount of times I've heard people say 'Well, you know, like, I thought dyslexia meant people can't spell'. Actually, it can be very, very different. So two learners with dyslexia can have very different requirements. And as you said in your intro, this is about equity. So quality is a fantastic thing. But equity is so much more important. It's about what that particular individual needs to succeed.

Joe Mcloughlin 12:50

Louise, that's great. Thank you. So, Paul, turning to you now, having had a great overview there from Louise, about the lay of the land, the issues within the sector, I just wondered if we could start a little more kind of personally and small scale, and if you could tell us a bit about your experience of education?

Paul Eeles 13:07

My experience of education is...school I loved school, I really liked going to school I thrived in lots of different ways. But none of them related to academia and what I was there for to learn and to gain a set of O Levels as they were then didn't actually happen. And I walked out of school without an O Level to my name, but really liked school in lots of ways so it was never...never found that school was something I hated. I hated being picked up for not getting my spelling's right...interesting listening to Louise talking about dyslexia, it doesn't always necessarily present in bad spellings, it did in my case. And I had detention at least once a week, every week because of my lack of ability in being able to get the spelling tests right. So I was punished for not being able to present the right spellings, it's still an issue I have today in certain things I have to work really hard at some of the words that even today, I cannot remember how to spell bureaucratic, for instance, no matter how many times I try and write it or try and say it. Going to college at the age of 16 educationally transformed my ability to learn to retain things to...I wasn't being punished for not getting spellings right. I've often tried to think why it changed, and it was just a different learning environment. It was very practical. I started to thrive I had people that believed in me.

Joe Mcloughlin 14:47

Recognising that transition then where you move from school, which is something you enjoyed but found challenging in places through to college where it was much more engaging, much more exciting. Did you at the time did you think that any of this was around neurodiversity or an issue within yourself? Or was it just, you felt that you'd found a new way of learning or a way that worked for you?

Paul Eeles 15:09

I think I'd found a new way that worked for me...those sort of things weren't recognised. You know, in terms of dyslexia, neurodiversity, were just not things that were on the radar as far as I was concerned, and being on the receiving end as a pupil as a student in an education setting. So nobody had ever talked about that I was in the I was in the low groups, I was in the, in the groups that needed additional support. I can remember saying...somebody saying to me at one point 'We're not sure why you're in this special needs group for English', it was as bottom a group as you could possibly get, the...I don't think people thought that people in my group had a lot of chance of doing well in life.

Joe Mcloughlin 15:56

Recognising then that at the time, it wasn't the medical side of things, the pathological side of things wasn't on people's radar. When did that start to

change for you? When did you start to notice new ways of thinking about yourself or new ways of thinking about the kinds of situations you were facing?

Paul Eeles 16:12

I'll never forget, in my third year at college, I chose to do a third year equivalent to what would be a Level Three today. And one of the lecturers that had been my second year form tutor said to me, 'I think you ought to teach. I think you ought to be teaching FE, you're really good at supporting and training in the college restaurant', which was, I think the thing that stuck with me the most as a... 'I've got something to offer'. And I don't think I'd ever felt that in an education setting before then. I'm not sure I really thought that I had something to offer the education sector. And then one day one of my tutors said, 'No, I think you should teach'.

Joe Mcloughlin 16:57

Was that a sort of transformative moment for you a moment of a...you know, like a lightbulb moment, almost?

Paul Eeles 17:03

It was, but I don't think I really knew what to do with that information. You know, I was 19 I'm not sure I, you know, it was really nice to hear. I'm not sure I would have known what to do with it. Until a year later, his colleague phoned me up and offered me a teaching job at Walsall College, becoming the youngest lecturer at that time to have worked in the college.

Joe Mcloughlin 17:27

And so that was the beginning of your educational career. Flash forward a few years, and you're now the leader of the Skills and Education Group, and you sit on boards and committees of numerous other education bodies, looking back on your journey then, looking back on your experiences, how do you use your kind of positions of power, and where you are now, to make education and employment more inclusive and more supportive of all learners?

Paul Eeles 17:53

The word power is an interesting word, I would...I think I'd like to call it more influence than power. And I think it's about actually, first of all, somebody like me is around the table. And I think that's really important. I think the fact that we all bring something different to the party, we're not a society that all look the same. And therefore, those boards, it's important that people like me are around that table. So first of all, I count my lucky stars that I'm around that table. And increasingly, particularly since I have really understood my assessment that I did with Cognassist, actually advocating for equity around the table, advocating for people like me, which is actually most people, because we're all different. We've all got something that is different, that makes society and makes education and education policy important that we advocate for. Making sure that people understand that when they're forming policy and developing programmes and assessment, that it is fully inclusive, that it is...understands the diversity of the people for which that policy is going to serve.

Joe Mcloughlin 19:07

Just picking up there on your assessment that you said you undertook with Louise and the team at Cognassist. Was that helpful to you kind of once you went through that process? And if so, how was it helpful to you?

Paul Eeles 19:19

I think it helped me understand how I'm made up in terms of when I'm looking at my neurodiversity and the challenges that I have. And it made a lot of sense. For instance, you know, you asking me a question as you've done today is probably the thing that I struggle most with - verbal memory remembering what you've...which is probably why with some of my questions, my answers waffle on a bit because I'm trying to remember what you asked me. The verbal memory is one of my biggest challenges remembering what somebody said to me in the moment. Visual perception, visual information processing, executive function are above average, and they balance things out. So I'm trying, it helps me understand why I do things in a certain way, why I write a lot of things down but don't necessarily go back and read those notes. Because I'm actually trying to process what has been said at the time. So I've picked up a lot of coping strategies over my time.

Joe Mcloughlin 20:22

And looking back then from that point of assessment backwards, did you then recognise behaviours that you'd, you know, built up over years and years? Or was it about then putting in place new strategies moving forward?

Paul Eeles 20:35

I'm not so sure I've put lots of new things in, it's helped me understand why I do things, it's helped me understand why you can have asked me something or told me something. And I haven't remembered it two minutes later. It helps me understand in the context of work, why I annoyed a lot of people by asking the same thing time and time again, because I'm trying to remember it, or actually say 'Can you drop me an email?' Just before we arrived, a colleague from another organisation phoned me and asked me to do something and I went 'Can you drop me an email? And then I will absolutely do it'. And I did it within about five minutes of receiving the email, I'd have probably gone away and completely forgotten about it and remembered it in two weeks' time. And I think for that it's actually sharpened up for me how I work, and how I remember things.

Joe Mcloughlin 21:26

Louise, turning to you for a second now is that experience of Paul's one that resonates with a lot of the people you assess kind of just helping them better understand how they work?

Dr Louise Karwowski 21:35

Yeah, absolutely, how they work. And as Paul describes, he's got a really good knowledge there of an area of challenge, which you recognise, and then his areas of strength, which he uses to compensate in those situations. And that's

what this is about. It's about mapping somebody's cognitive profile, and showing them the spread of it. And actually, very few of us have a completely uniform average profile, when we've done a data sweep across all of the nine domains that we measure, we've found that less than 10% of us sit in the average range. And that just shows you how cognitively diverse we really are. So this information about, you know, areas where you might struggle or settings where you might struggle is really empowering to the individual, not just to understand themselves better, but to employ those strategies, and also ask people to support...as Paul just described, I'm similar to Paul, I struggle with my verbal memory as well. And the worst situation for me, is where I have to have a conversation and not take notes. So like, if I'm travelling on a train, for example, rushing about, and somebody phones me and gives me important information, I can't remember it even if I'm forcing myself to concentrate, I can't remember it. So like, Paul, I will ask that person to send me the email, send me my action, so I can remember, it's about having the confidence to be able to do that.

Joe Mcloughlin 22:59

Recognising you can balance out you know your sort of differences with strengths and those kinds of things. What would you say to people kind of either who are unsure of their status, maybe wondering, they might be close to getting assessed, or they think they might be dealing with a divergent sort of aspect, but they're unclear. What kind of advice would you give to people in that situation? And, Paul, I'd like to start with you if that's okay.

Paul Eeles 23:20

For me, I think it was it would be go ahead and have an assessment. I don't think you're too young to have an assessment, or too old. Probably my case more to the point. My son, my youngest son has severe dyslexia, and he was diagnosed at the age of 15, which meant that we were able to give him the right levels of support, for me being much much older than him when I had an assessment, it actually probably would have helped me navigate through my formal learning my degree, my Master's, my work much more easily, and actually helping me to have a language to articulate to other people where I need additional support, where actually I can support others because I'm particularly good at something in a particular way, because we end up focusing on the negatives, rather than the positives. So my advice would be, go and get an assessment and work out from there, where you go and how you might move forward.

Dr Louise Karwowski 24:21

I completely agree with Paul, you need to know what you're working with. My verbal memory difficulty wasn't surfaced until I started the cognitive assessment. I just struggled. You know, I was just that person. If you were watching a film with me, I'd be that annoying friend who would ask you halfway through what was going on with the plot? You'd have to go 'Well, did you not hear that big discussion at the beginning of the film that explained everything?' 'Well, yeah, I was present, I heard it, it just didn't stay.' So yeah, I'd absolutely echo Paul, get yourself an assessment. Make sure it's performance based, not

self report, because you can't work with your own perception on these things, you know, I remember doing the self report questionnaire, the question I was asked was 'Is your reading speed slower or faster than your peers?' And I thought 'Well, I'm alright, as a reader, I think I'm faster.' And then actually, like, it's come to light that, you know, I've got friends who read three books a week. Compared to them, I'm probably a slow reader, but you can't really put your finger on it. So performance-based assessment all the way, then you've got your landscape, then you know what you're working with cognitively. And you can start to explore strategies for yourself then.

Joe Mcloughlin 25:32

Finally, if those assessments aren't forthcoming, what's the damage it can do - from Louise, I suppose, from your perspective, from seeing the sector as a whole, and then Paul kind of more personally, what's the issues that you've seen in your in your life?

Dr Louise Karwowski 25:45

So we did a piece of research actually, to investigate confidence. So we looked at the correlation between low cognition scores and confidence. And actually, learners were telling us through data that there was a link between having low cognition and low confidence in their own abilities, which was really heartbreaking to see because this is the learner voice saying 'Not only am I struggling with my cognitive differences, but actually I feel that I'm unable to achieve in education'. We actually asked the same learners the same questions three months after they received support through our system, but also from their providers. And I'm happy to say that their confidence increased by 16%, over just that short period of time. So that that is change. But that's what I'll say like if you leave it, there is a danger that that low perception of yourself can manifest in more challenges in terms of mental health in terms of anxiety, depression, you know, I've seen it, when I used to work in higher education. Learners who are diagnosed in later life often carried around these additional frustrations with them, because they knew they could succeed. But there was just something pulling them down. So the earlier you can get somebody assessed the better.

Joe Mcloughlin 26:58

And then Paul, just focusing on yourself finally, does that kind of story of the low points, the lack of confidence, does that resonate with you? Or was your experience slightly different?

Paul Eeles 27:07

I think my experience was slightly different. But it actually does resonate with me, because actually, I've had a whole host of people along the way that have believed in me have seen my other talents. And whilst there wasn't a language to align with that, I think that I'm probably an exception to the rule that people like me that left school with not an O Level or a GCSE to their name, probably, as Louise describes, don't have confidence, give up, don't push through. Because actually, where do you start. I was really lucky, I was really fortunate that I had

somebody that said to me, 'I think you ought to teach, I think you ought to do this'. And I've come across a whole host of people along the way that haven't recognised, you know...the person that was teaching me the qualification to be an adult teacher didn't see that I had neurodiversity needs, and actually really pushed me down and really kicked against me and actually humiliated me in class. But the colleagues around me pushed through and supported me. So I could have given up at any point. And I think we miss out as society, not just in education, but in wider society of people that have...are just like me, that didn't have those opportunities, weren't seen or understood. And therefore we as a country have missed out on talented people that have different ways of looking at things, different ways of looking at what success means. And we're much poorer for having missed those people. The thing that excites me about the work of Cognassist, particularly as we develop and support into apprenticeships, is that actually we're picking those people up and giving them the support, helping them with their confidence, and hopefully, we will see those people in positions of authority and positions of power. That'll mean that in the future, we'll have education systems, developed by people that are from neurodiverse backgrounds. Isn't that an exciting prospect?

Joe Mcloughlin 29:17

Thank you to my guests, Dr Louise Karwowski and Paul Eeles and to you for listening. We hope you enjoyed the conversation and that it's got you thinking about the connections between neurodiversity, education and wider society. You can keep up to date with the podcast on social media. Follow us on Twitter @SkillsEduGroup or search Skills and Education Group on LinkedIn and Facebook. Do remember to subscribe wherever you receive your podcasts and let's go further together.