Neuroinclusivity in Peer Review: A Pilot

Authors:
Lucy Threadgold, Scheherazade Khan, Andrea Watson Lee
Peer Review Leads,
Emerald Publishing

In 2025, Emerald Publishing initiated a Neuroinclusive Publishing programme, informed by a 2024 industry panel chaired by CEO, Vicky Williams on the topic. Building on this formation and insights from Emerald's Neuroinclusive Publishing Advisory Board, we designed a pilot aimed at improving the submission and peer review process for neurodivergent academics.

Section 1

Why Neuroinclusivity Matters in Publishing

Despite the growing literature on neurodiversity in academia [1,2], scholarly publishing systems are largely designed around neurotypical norms, including comfort with ambiguity, dense written communication, and unstructured evaluative feedback. This can create barriers for neurodivergent scholars due to mismatches between cognitive diversity and system design.

Neurodivergent researchers report particular challenges during manuscript submission and peer review, including:

- unclear or conflicting reviewer feedback
- ambiguous expectations at revision stages
- emotionally charged or inconsistent decision letters
- complex submission interfaces and instructions
- rigid timelines that intensify cognitive load

When publishing processes lack clarity and predictability, the cognitive and emotional labour required to navigate them increases, often disproportionately affecting neurodivergent contributors.

Evidence of barriers for neurodivergent scholars

Research shows that neurodivergent academics experience structural and systemic barriers within academic environments, including reduced sense of belonging, higher levels of cognitive load when systems are poorly designed, and increased exposure to stigma and misunderstanding [3,4].

Studies examining online and institutional systems demonstrate that:

- cluttered interfaces and unclear instructions increase extraneous cognitive load for neurodivergent users [3]
- lack of communication clarity disproportionately affects neurodivergent participation [1,6]
- academic systems remain structurally ableist despite wider DEI initiatives [5]

While publishing specific evidence is still emerging, these findings are highly relevant given the parallels between educational platforms and manuscript submission and peer review systems.

Section 2

Neuroinclusive Peer Review Pilot Overview

Aims and Objectives

This pilot aimed to improve the peer review process by applying neuroinclusive design principles to existing publishing workflows, without requiring disclosure of neurodivergence. The pilot deliberately focused on peer review as a critical intervention point within the publishing lifecycle.

The pilot focuses on three objectives identified as critical for neuroinclusivity:

Evidence of barriers for neurodivergent scholars

1. Enhanced feedback clarity and structure in peer review

- Structured review questionnaires for clearer, detailed, and consistent feedback
- Removing Decision Recommendations from review questionnaires to focus on feedback-rich reviews

2. Explicit expectations for authors at each stage

- No-questions asked extension policy to reflect institutional extension policies
- Linked publisher practices on deadline emails and limit authors' needs to search multiple sites for relevant information

3. Improved guides and resources

- Manuscript descriptions and wordcounts for all journals so authors have access to information they need prior to submission and limit desk-rejections due to minor errors
- Updates to Reviewer Centres with relevant training, policy and best practice links for experienced and new reviewers

Process

Ahead of the pilots launch, the objectives were shared with the journal editors for approval and buy-in. The response was overwhelmingly positive and an eagerness to see the measures in place.

"In terms of the deadline request – this will be brilliant"

"All of these suggestions sound really interesting and something I'd personally be interested in implementing"

"I would be really happy for [the journal] to be part of the pilot. We have a lot of autistic or neurodivergent authors and I believe changes made for this group will be helpful to all authors."

Once journal editors confirmed their interest, internal teams could configure journal sites and create the necessary resource.

Section 3

Findings and Response

Challenging dominant assumptions of inclusive forms of peer review

Some of our early findings have highlighted several challenges:

1. Constraints imposed by existing platforms and their capabilities:

- Most submission and review platforms were not built with accessibility-first design principles, so teams have had to find creative solutions to achieve the pilot's goals.
- Peer Review tools can often be customised for neuroinclusive design, but companies have not usually packaged this as a product. This pilot could help demonstrate market interest.
- Aligning neuroinclusive changes across multiple teams and systems saw a significant resource intensity. Training needs are high and buy-in is needed across these teams for this to be successful.

2. Fear of perpetuating bias and causing harm:

- Despite strong support, some neurotypical participants are hesitant due to worries about "getting it wrong", which can slow progress.
- Consequently, this worry can limit participant numbers and place undue pressure on neurodivergent colleagues to be both pilot designers and pilot participants, rather than collaborators.

3. Peer review exists in many forms, but which gets prioritised when they serve different groups' needs?

- Transparent peer review can improve accountability and recognition for work that is rarely seen. However, at a publishing session held at the Neurodiversity & Entrepreneurship Association 2025 conference, a group of neurodivergent academics discussed how transparent peer review was more stressful than the double-anonymous model and stated they would rather opt-out than review or be reviewed in this way.

When the goal of inclusion is to reduce barriers to publication, we need innovative solutions to solve problems holistically.

Section 4

Looking Forward: Areas of Improvement

The biggest area of improvement identified is the need for the peer review process to focus on feedback and not criticism. However, the criticism-heavy reviews that built the "Reviewer 2" archetype did not occur in a vacuum. As such, we cannot assume that improving neuroinclusive peer review will magically improve the publication process as a whole.

Neuroinclusivity must extend beyond peer review into wider publishing practice.

Priority areas for development include:

- Templates: structured reviewer forms and decision letter templates
- Guides: plain language written guides, visual workflows, and short explanatory videos
- Training: neuroinclusive communication training for editors and editorial boards
- Culture: normalising flexibility and reducing stigma around accommodations.

These interventions are low cost, scalable, and beneficial to all contributors — not only neurodivergent scholars.

Section 5

Framework

This poster proposes a six stage framework to help publishers begin embedding neuroinclusivity into peer review:

Awareness:
Recognise neurodiversity and reflect on how existing systems privilege certain cognitive styles.

Identification:
Be critical of your submission and peer review offering and identify where pitfalls are in your current process and roadmaps.

Clarity:
Make expectations explicit through structured feedback, transparent criteria, and predictable communication.

Flexibility:
Offer choice in formats, timelines, and guidance delivery without requiring disclosure.

Embedding:
Integrate neuroinclusivity into policy language, training, workflows, and platform design.

Community:
Be an active member of peer review communities by sharing your progress to making peer review more neuroinclusive at industry and internal events.

Neuroinclusive peer review strengthens research integrity by making quality assessment clearer, fairer, and more accessible for all.

Sources

[1] Clouder, L., Karakus, M., Cinotti, A., et al. (2020). **Neurodiversity in higher education: A narrative synthesis.** Higher Education, 80, 757–778. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00513-6

[2] McLennan, H., Aberdein, R., Saggers, B., & Gillett Swan, J. (2025). **Neurodiversity: A scoping review of empirical research.** Neurodiversity, 3, 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1177/27546330251337874

[3] Le Cunff, A.-L., Giampietro, V., & Dommett, E. (2024). **Neurodiversity and cognitive load in online learning: A focus group study.** PLOS ONE, 19(4). https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0301932

[4] Le Cunff, A.-L., Brandon Lee Martis, B., et al. (2025). **Cognitive load and neurodiversity in online education.** Frontiers in Education. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2024.1437673

[5] Meletiadou, E. (2026). **Inclusion without structural change: What neurodiverse academics tell us about inequality in higher education.** SRHE Blog. https://srheblog.com/2026/03/27/inclusion-without-structural-change-what-neurodiverse-academics-tell-us-about-inequality-in-higher-education/

[6] Le Cunff, A.-L., Giampietro, V., & Dommett, E. (2024). **Neurodiversity Positively Predicts Perceived Extraneous Load in Online Learning: A Quantitative Research Study.** Education Sciences 14(5), 516. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14050516

25375 4/26