

## Beyond Deficit Discourses: Inclusive Pedagogies, Neurodiversity, and Teacher Well-being in Supporting Students with ADHD

**Author:** Mark Stuart McInnes\*

Affiliation: University of New England (Student)

\*Corresponding author: Mark Stuart McInnes, Email: markmcinnes@hotmail.co.uk or mmcinn5@myune.edu.au

**Citation:** McInnes MS (2026) Beyond Deficit Discourses: Inclusive Pedagogies, Neurodiversity, and Teacher Well-being in Supporting Students with ADHD. *Int J Teach Learn Sci-IJTLS*: e145.

**Received Date:** 11 February, 2026; **Accepted Date:** 20 February, 2026; **Published Date:** 25 February, 2026

### Abstract

*Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is one of the most prevalent neurodevelopmental conditions affecting school-aged children globally; however, educational responses frequently remain grounded in deficit-based and behaviourist discourses. These approaches often marginalise students with ADHD and contribute to teacher stress and burnout. This paper critically examines contemporary research on ADHD within educational contexts to explore how inclusive, equitable learning environments can be fostered through evidence-based pedagogical practices. Drawing on a neurodiversity paradigm, the paper challenges medicalised conceptions of ADHD and emphasises the role of environmental, relational, and pedagogical factors in shaping student engagement and outcomes. Key frameworks, including Universal Design for Learning, multiliteracies pedagogy, and the Index for Inclusion, are analysed as proactive, whole-class approaches that support diverse learners while reducing reliance on reactive behaviour management strategies. The paper also foregrounds the importance of teacher-student relationships as a mediating factor for both student engagement and teacher well-being. Situated within Australian and international policy contexts, including the Disability Standards for Education and the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration, this paper argues that inclusive education must be understood as a systemic responsibility. Ultimately, sustainable inclusion for students with ADHD requires pedagogical flexibility, relational practice, and structural support that prioritise both student and teacher well-being.*

**Keywords:** Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD); Inclusive education; Neurodiversity; Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Teacher well-being.

### Author Biography:

Mark McInnes brings a unique perspective to inclusive education, shaped by an extraordinary career transition from community service to educational practice. After 25 years in policing, where he dedicated himself to supporting and protecting the community, Mark recognised an opportunity to create even greater impact by working with young people during their formative years. This realisation led him to transition into primary education, where he could intervene earlier in children's lives and help shape positive futures. Mark's passion centres on inclusive education and ensuring every child has the opportunity to reach their full potential, regardless of their abilities, backgrounds, or circumstances. He believes that education is the cornerstone of social equity and that all learners deserve access to quality, supportive learning environments where they feel valued and capable. Currently pursuing a Master of Education (Special and Inclusive) at the University of New England, Australia, Mark combines his extensive community engagement experience with evidence-based pedagogical practice. His research interests focus on inclusive frameworks, relational pedagogy, and practical strategies for embedding equity in mainstream educational settings. Mark's unique journey from policing to education enriches his understanding of systemic support, collaborative practice, and the importance of building trusting relationships to foster student success and wellbeing.

### Introduction

Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is described by The American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2022) as "a neurodevelopmental disorder defined by impaired levels of inattention, disorganisation, and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity". Furthermore, ADHD as a neurodevelopmental disorder regularly co-occurs with other comorbidities, including behavioural issues and mental health conditions (APA, 2022; Jensen & Steinhausen, 2015). Globally, ADHD is one of the most prevalent neurodevelopmental conditions in school aged children, with international estimates between five and nine per cent of all school-aged children having the condition (Ayano et al., 2023; Davidovitch et al., 2017). Despite the significant prevalence of ADHD, many educational institutions continue to struggle to provide equitable and inclusive learning environments, that result in negative consequences for students and teachers (Aldabbagh et al., 2024a; Lanas & Brunila, 2019). Research including Azuka et al. (2024), Cook (2024), Hamilton and Petty (2023) and Lanas and Brunila (2019) demonstrates that ADHD is most commonly framed through a deficit based lens that focusses on the perceived weakness of students in terms of their behavioural disruption, inattention and ability to self-regulate rather than recognising the strengths of students with ADHD, such as, students with ADHD demonstrate increased creativity, hyperfocus, and bring extra energy (Cook, 2024), or importantly the role that environmental factors play including classroom discourse and pedagogy delivery that shape student participation and outcomes (Cook, 2024; Lanas & Brunila, 2019; Mukhopadhyay, 2009).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of teaching students with ADHD and to identify how an inclusive and equitable education can be provided through evidence-based pedagogical practices, namely multiliteracies pedagogy (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009), accompanied by inclusive pedagogical frameworks. At the same time, addressing the reciprocal impact that teachers suffer on their own well-being. Aldabbagh et al. (2024a) and DeShazer et al. (2023) stipulate that the traditional deficit viewpoint approach to behaviour management is limiting for dealing with students with ADHD, as it fails to address the complex learning and relational needs of students with ADHD and can contribute to teacher burnout when used in isolation. At the same time, research argues for a shift towards a systematic approach characterised by flexible pedagogy, inclusive educational design, and relational practice between teachers and students (Azuka et al., 2024; Cook, 2024). Flexible inclusive pedagogical frameworks, such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Center for Applied Special Technology [CAST], 2024) and Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2011) have been proven to enhance engagement and reduce behavioural issues for neurodivergent students by offering multiple means or representation, expression and engagement (Allan & Persson, 2016; Azuka et al., 2024).

A neurodiverse paradigm, as described by Hamilton and Petty (2023), represents a shift away from a medical lens that labels neurodivergent students and holds a narrower view of their deficits, toward a more holistic lens that sees them within their context, while recognising their strengths. Utilising this paradigm emphasises how environmental and pedagogical choices shape learning outcomes and student engagement (Cook, 2024; Hamilton & Petty, 2023). Additionally, research demonstrates the clear importance of teacher-student relationships (TSRs) for both student engagement and teacher well-being, as positive teacher-student relationships are linked to reduced conflict, improved academic participation, and decreased teacher stress and burnout (Ewe, 2019; DeShazer et al., 2023). Together, this research paper supports a holistic, inclusive approach to education of students with ADHD that considers pedagogical design, a positive neurodiverse paradigm and the well-being of students and teachers, supporting the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL, 2021): Classroom Management: Standards-aligned evidence-based approaches that include building relationships and providing a safe and supportive learning environment.

## Background and Literature Context

### ADHD in Educational Context

ADHD in educational discourse can be characterised by patterns of developmental inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity that may interfere with academic and social functioning (Ayano et al., 2023; Rushton et al., 2020). These symptoms often impair functioning across multiple settings, especially within a classroom environment where students with ADHD are already associated with the characteristics of academic underachievement, social difficulties and classroom disruption (Ayano et al., 2023; Berchiatti et al., 2022; Rushton et al., 2019; Sulu et al., 2023; Zendarski et al., 2022). While the characteristics of ADHD are often positioned as being intrinsic deficits, contemporary research increasingly recognises ADHD as a neurodevelopmental condition that is influenced by environmental factors and relationships (Cook, 2024; Hamilton & Petty, 2023). When considering this perspective, the difficulties experienced by students with ADHD are not solely

contributed to by the condition itself, but the educational contexts that prioritise sustained attention and uniform modes of learning that may not be conducive to students with ADHD.

Wiener and Daniels (2016) argue that students with ADHD are at an increased risk of negative outcomes, including academic underachievement, social exclusion and negative school experiences. Unfortunately, peer rejection, reduced participation in school and class activities, and strained teacher-student relationships are common, compounding the feelings of disengagement and low self-efficacy (Berchiatti et al., 2022; Koray et al., 2025). Therefore, it is critical that not only the characteristics of students with ADHD are examined, but also the broader pedagogical approaches and relational environments in which learning occurs to improve academic, social and emotional outcomes for students with ADHD.

### Inclusive Education and Policy Context

There has been a considerable shift in the position of inclusive education, with a greater focus on moving away from segregated care to a more inclusive, community-based discourse within mainstream education (Azuka et al., 2024; Berchiatti et al., 2022). Internationally, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities emphasises inclusive education as a fundamental human right, emphasising that all students have the equal right and access to meaningful participation that is equitable (UN, 2006). A further international policy change occurred with the breakthrough Salamanca Declaration (UNESCO, 1994), signed by 92 governments, which aimed to move away from the integration model, in which students with additional needs often had to fit into an unchanged environment. Rather, the declaration created a requirement for mainstream education to be restructured to accommodate the unique needs of every student (Ainscow et al., 2019; Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Bindhani & Gopinath, 2024; Nilholm, 2021).

In the Australian context, inclusive education is underpinned by the Disability Standards for Education 2005 legislation (Australian Government, 2005), which provides the legal framework for supporting and accommodating students with additional needs within mainstream educational settings (Woodcock et al., 2022). Furthermore, the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration emphasises the importance of educational equity by foregrounding excellence in both teacher and student well-being as foundational to inclusive education (Education Council, 2019). Zendarski et al. (2022) and Woodcock et al. (2022) highlight how the Australian Curriculum, Assessment, and Reporting Authority (ACARA, n.d.) advocates that all mainstream schools provide an inclusive curriculum that offers equitable educational provision to all students. O'Connor et al. (2020) provide Australian data indicating that only 4% of students have a medical diagnosis that qualifies them for additional support, while 18% who do require additional support remain undiagnosed, posing a significant challenge for teachers and school leadership. However, the Australian National Consistent Collection of Data is beginning to address this imbalance by having schools report the adjustments they make to meet students' functional needs, rather than a clinical diagnosis (O'Connor et al., 2020; Woodcock et al., 2022).

Despite legislation and policy frameworks, inclusive education internationally and in Australia remains inconsistent. Aldabbagh et al. (2024a) argue that teachers are frequently expected to accommodate students with ADHD without the appropriate

training, support mechanisms, or resources, which leads to tensions between inclusive ideals and classroom realities. For students with ADHD, this gap between policy and practice results in poor outcomes due to a reliance on behavioural management strategies or medicalised interventions, rather than pedagogical adaptation (Aldabbagh et al., 2024a; Aldabbagh et al., 2024b; Wiener & Daniels, 2016; Zendarski et al., 2022).

## Barriers to Inclusion

### Teacher Stress and Self-Efficacy

Teaching is recognised as an emotionally draining profession, compounded by student unproductive behaviour, which is a key contributor to teacher stress (DeShazer et al., 2023; Karlsdóttir et al., 2023; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). At the same time, Ewe (2019) and Rushton et al. (2020) recognise that students with ADHD are often perceived as more challenging to teach due to behaviours including inattention, impulsivity and difficulty in self-regulation. Managing these behaviours significantly contributes to stress and a sense of helplessness among teachers, which is often exacerbated when they attempt to maintain a safe learning environment for all students (Aldabbagh et al., 2024a, 2024b). As a result, teachers report reduced job satisfaction and an increased risk of burnout when supporting students with ADHD (Aldabbagh et al., 2024a; Zendarski et al., 2022). Importantly, the relationship between ADHD behaviours and teacher stress is bidirectional, with high levels of stress reducing teachers' emotional capacity to build strong teacher-student relationships with students with ADHD (DeShazer et al., 2023; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

The systemic pressures of neoliberalism within education mean that teachers face conflicting priorities between meeting set standards of academic excellence through high-stakes standardised testing and ensuring that a compact curriculum is delivered, which leaves little time for a personalised pedagogy that includes reflective practice that is required for true inclusion (Cook, 2024; Visser et al., 2025). Furthermore, early career teachers experience a stark difference between the theoretical principles of inclusion they learned in training and the reality of a complex classroom environment (Aldabbagh et al., 2024b; Cook, 2024; Karlsdóttir et al., 2023). Over time, this cycle can lead to reduced self-efficacy and negative connotations of inclusive education, resulting in teachers feeling isolated and experiencing burnout, which can lead to their leaving the profession (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017; Woodcock et al., 2022; Zendarski et al., 2022).

### Behavioural Misconceptions and Stigma

Deficit-based discourses continue to shape how ADHD behaviours are interpreted within schools. Lanas and Brunila (2019) argue that dominant educational discourses construct an idealised notion of what constitutes a well-behaved student, positioning those who deviate from this perceived norm as problematic. Within this framework of perceived norm, ADHD students are often labelled, medicalised or pathologised, merely serving to reinforce a stigma of unproductive behaviour and reducing the tolerance for behavioural diversity further (Cook, 2024; Nilholm, 2021). This stigmatising of labels leads to students with ADHD having their sense of belonging and academic ability greatly hindered (Hamilton, 2023; Visser et al., 2025). The inclusion of students with ADHD is often undermined by a deficit lens that focuses on what is wrong with a student, rather than their strengths, and fails to identify the environmental factors that contribute to unproductive behaviours (Ainscow, 2020; Calandri et al., 2025; Cook, 2024).

The labelling of students with ADHD leads to a circular causation whereby deficit views of teachers and parents reinforce the negative behaviours that they expect to see (Kazda et al., 2021; Wiener & Daniels, 2016). The educational discourses highlighted not only marginalise students with ADHD, but also position teachers in a position of power, either being in control or out of control of their classroom, intensifying professional pressure to achieve the perceived well-behaved student (Allan, 2010; Nilholm, 2021).

### Gaps in Training and Support

A consistent finding across academic research is that teachers feel underprepared to support students with ADHD effectively. Teachers consistently feel under resourced and ill prepared to meet the diverse needs of students with ADHD (Azuka et al., 2024; Cook, 2024; Copsey et al., 2007; Visser et al., 2024). Aldabbagh et al. (2024a) stipulate that there is a limited availability of professional learning to equip teachers to understand and manage the needs of students with ADHD that significantly contributes to teacher stress and students' underachievement, which is echoed across international educational contexts (Kuyini et al., 2018; Woodcock et al., 2022). Similarly, pre-service teacher training is inadequate. Many educational courses designed to qualify individuals to teach focus on inclusive education as a list of competencies rather than on the deep, reflective training needed to understand neurodiversity as a natural human variation (Cook, 2024; Karlsdóttir et al., 2023). Without adequate training in inclusive pedagogy practices, teachers may rely on reactive behaviourist strategies that are not advantageous to students with ADHD and are detrimental to teacher and student well-being (Ewe, 2019; Sulu et al., 2022).

System-level constraints are at every level of educational discourse. Macro-level constraints, including a congested curriculum, policy and legislation, and neoliberal influences of accountability, compound the challenges already faced by teachers at the meso and micro levels. (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020; Hamilton, 2023; Nash-Luckenbach & Friedman, 2024). Meso-level barriers manifest through school leadership decisions and access to educational assistants to support teachers. Furthermore, education assistants are often used in ways that increase students' dependence rather than fostering the independence that inclusive education aims to achieve (Aldabbagh et al., 2024b; Visser et al., 2025). A micro-level challenge is a teacher's reduced self-efficacy when dealing with students with ADHD that results from ongoing behavioural demands and a lack of ability to deal with such demands. At the same time, a limited emotional capacity can negatively impact relationships and classroom interactions (DeShazer et al., 2023; Ewe, 2019; Rushton et al., 2020; Woodcock et al., 2022). When inclusive education is framed as an individual teacher's responsibility rather than a systemic commitment, there is a risk of inequity for both students and teachers, undermining its sustainability (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Woodcock et al., 2022).

### Evidence-based Best Practice

Inclusive education for students with ADHD is most effective when pedagogical practices are designed to move beyond reactive behaviour management strategies and instead focus on a proactive, flexible, and relational approach that benefits all learners. Research on evidence-based best practices for students with ADHD emphasises a neurodiverse paradigm, shifting from

viewing ADHD as a deficit within the individual student to identifying and removing environmental and pedagogical barriers (CAST, 2013; Hamilton & Petty, 2023; Woodcock et al., 2022). Research consistently indicates that universal, whole class strategies are more sustainable and equitable than individualised accommodations that rely heavily on teacher time and capacity (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Nilholm, 2021). This approach aligns with the Index for Inclusion, which advocates removing environmental and systemic barriers to participation rather than focusing on identifying difficulties within individual students (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Booth & Ainscow, 2016).

### **Universal Design for Learning and Flexible Pedagogy**

Hamilton (2023) describes Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as a compassionate pedagogical approach that embeds flexibility into the design of curriculum delivery, rather than relying on bolt-on accommodations. UDL provides a robust evidence-based framework for students with ADHD by anticipating students' diverse needs (Azuka et al., 2024). By utilising the three pillars of UDL: representation, action and expression, the engagement reduces the need for individual adjustments while supporting attention, motivation and executive functioning (Azuka et al., 2024; CAST, 2013; CAST, 2024; Hamilton, 2023; Woodcock et al., 2022). Examples of the UDL pillars being implemented in a real world classroom environment include multiple means of representation, such as presenting information in a multimodal way, accompanied by explicit teaching to reduce cognitive load (Ewe, 2019; Sinzig et al., 2008). For example, using visuals and hands-on manipulatives helps reduce cognitive load and encourages student engagement (CAST, 2024; Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). Multiple means of engagement are achieved by designing a curriculum that incorporates choice, interest based learning, and movement. Providing choice and autonomy significantly increases task initiation, performance and motivation for students with ADHD, while reducing unproductive behaviour (DuPaul & Stoner, 2014; Rushton et al., 2020). At the same time, multiple means of expression enable students with ADHD to demonstrate their learning, such as visually or verbally, without the unnecessary barriers related to high demand writing tasks (DuPaul & Stoner, 2014). Therefore, UDL helps to improve engagement and maintain high expectations (CAST, 2013; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Research suggests that incorporating all three pillars of UDL into curriculum design will significantly improve on-task behaviour and engagement among students with ADHD, while also fostering a safe learning environment for all students and reducing teacher stress (Rushton et al., 2020; Sulu et al., 2022).

The UDL approach closely aligns with the Disability Standards for Education 2005 legislation (Australian Government, 2005), which stipulates that reasonable adjustments are made to accommodate the learning of diverse students without being disadvantageous. Important, UDL reframes the idea of reasonable adjustments as an embedded practice rather than a mere bolt-on adaptation for students and an individualised burden placed upon teachers (CAST, 2024; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

### **Structured Environments**

Wiener and Daniels (2016) propose that ADHD is often described as a disorder of performance, rather than a lack of skill, whereby students know what to do but struggle to apply it

in the moment. To tackle this issue, structured classroom environments that are enacted through consistent lesson routines, such as clear learning intentions and a visual outline of lesson stages, can assist students with ADHD. The predictability of a structured environment reduces uncertainty and supports self-regulation, allowing them to manage attentional demands more effectively (DuPaul & Stoner, 2014; Sinzig et al., 2008). Equally, effective classroom environments for students with ADHD use contingency management to reinforce positive behaviour through clear oral and visual rules and consistent daily schedules (Aldabbagh et al., 2024b; Karlsdóttir et al., 2023; Lawrence et al., 2021).

The Salamanca Declaration (UNESCO, 1994) advocates pedagogical adaptations within mainstream educational discourse that support the meaningful participation of all students, regardless of their needs, rather than withdrawal and segregation. Assistive technologies can achieve the intention of the Salamanca Declaration (UNESCO, 1994) when integrated into clearly structured learning environments. Assistive technologies can aid students with ADHD by reducing executive functioning demands through digital tools such as text-to-speech software, mind-mapping apps, and digital organisers (Azuka et al., 2024; Bindhani & Gopinath, 2024; Hamilton, 2023; Lawrence et al., 2021).

### **Relational Practice and Teacher–Student Relationships**

The quality of teacher-student relationships is a critical mediator for school engagement; however, students with ADHD find this relationship eroded due to their perceived unproductive behaviours as a result of their ADHD, leading to increased conflict and decreased closeness (Berchiatti et al., 2022; DeShazer et al., 2023; Rushton et al., 2020). To improve the relational practice between teachers and students with ADHD, teachers must create a compassionate learning environment by prioritising individual check-ins, proactive encouragement, and emotionally attuned responses to students' behaviour (Calandri et al., 2025; Hamilton et al., 2023). Such practices have been shown to strengthen students with ADHD's emotional engagement and connection and to reduce oppositional behaviour by fostering trust and psychological safety (Ewe, 2019; Rushton et al., 2020).

Fostering trust and safety will enable students with ADHD to feel heard within ethical, reciprocal relationships, where their whole being and contributions are relevant and matter (Murdoch et al., 2020). Murdoch et al. (2020) argue that this relational practice requires a paradigm switch to recognise the perfectibility of all students and act as agents of change against deficit thinking. When teachers respond calmly to dysregulation and co-regulate emotional responses, it de-escalates behavioural incidents, which are distressing for both teachers and students with ADHD (DeShazer et al., 2023; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Over time, relational strategies contribute to decreased unproductive behaviours, improved classroom learning environment and teacher and student well-being.

This relational emphasis on building strong teacher-student relationships aligns with the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration, which positions student engagement, well-being and supportive relationships as central to educational equity and excellence (Education Council, 2019). Providing a safe classroom environment allows students to explore their learning, which is especially important for students with ADHD who may have perceived behavioural issues (Aldabbagh et al.,

2024b; Hamilton et al., 2023; Zee et al., 2020). Importantly, aligning with a strong teacher-student relationship recognises the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration's (Education Council, 2019) intention to sustain an inclusive pedagogical practice.

### Recommendations for Practice and Policy

While system level constraints operate at the macro level, their effects are mediated through meso-level school structures and practices. At the micro and meso levels, teachers should be encouraged and supported to implement UDL informed, multimodal pedagogies within their curriculum design, promoting students' agency, engagement, and flexibility (CAST, 2024; Booth & Ainscow, 2016). Implementing such an approach will reduce reliance on reactive behaviourist style management and enable a proactive approach to supporting students with ADHD through predictable routines, flexible representations of content, and alternative modes of expression (DuPaul & Stoner, 2024; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Schools should therefore invest in ongoing professional development focused on ADHD informed practice, relational pedagogy, and emotional strategies to improve teacher self-efficacy and provide a more sustainable and inclusive practice (Aldabbagh et al., 2024a; Aldabbagh et al., 2024b; Woodcock et al., 2022).

At the same time, macro-level recommendations include ensuring that inclusive education is adequately resourced and structurally supported through policy alignment, reduced workload pressures, and access to specialist services, such as learning support teams and school psychologists (OECD, 2021; Nilholm, 2021). Policy frameworks and legislation, including the Disability Standards for Education (Australian Government, 2005) and the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Education Council, 2019), position inclusive education as a shared responsibility, requiring systemic conditions that enable teachers to meet learners' diverse needs. Recognising that teacher well-being is an integral aspect of inclusive education rather than a secondary consideration, it is critical that system level support is provided to sustain equitable practice and prevent teacher stress and burnout in classrooms supporting students with ADHD (DeShazer et al., 2023; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

### Conclusion

To truly provide an inclusive and equitable education to students with ADHD, a significant shift from a deficit based medical viewpoint of ADHD to a neurodiverse paradigm that recognises student strengths and that the environmental and relational factors cause any unproductive behaviours is required. Teachers must be supported in delivering relational and flexible pedagogies, with adequate training, resources, and policies that prioritise teacher and student well-being. Therefore, creating an environment in which inclusive practices become sustainable rather than burdensome. Effective inclusive practices benefit not only students with ADHD but also teachers and the broader learning community.

### Acknowledgement

The author gratefully acknowledges the support of the University of New England for providing access to academic resources and library services that supported the completion of this research. I am also grateful to Dr Haoran Zheng for her advice and guidance throughout this research

### Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

### Authors contributions

The author is solely responsible for, design, analysis, interpretation of data, and writing of this manuscript.

### Source of funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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