

Living with Autism as a University Student at Dublin City University: Developing an Autism Friendly University

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Acknowledgements

The project team would like to acknowledge the following:

Peter Brabazon, General Manager, Specialisterne, Ireland, co-partner in
the overall project "The All-campus initiative" for his support of the research
team.

Eadaoin Whelan, BSc, MSc Psychology, for her support in conducting the
literature review.

Sinead Begley and Associates www.begley.ie for conducting and transcribing
the focus groups with staff at DCU.

Adam Fakih, Assessment and Support Executive, Specialisterne, Ireland,
for supporting the project team.

Students and staff at DCU, who gave so generously of their time to inform
and facilitate this project. Special thanks to those who volunteered at the
Autism Awareness Exhibition.

The DCU Research Ethics Committee for their review of the research protocol.



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Overview



In January 2016, Dublin City University (DCU) announced its intention to become Ireland's first Autism-Friendly University through a unique collaboration with AsIAM an Autism advocacy organisation and Specialisterne Ireland, a specialist recruitment and support agency for people with autism.

Autism is a developmental disability that affects how one relates to, and communicates with other people. A number of definitions for autism exist but there is general agreement that the following characteristics are common amongst those on this spectrum - difficulties with communication, socialising, repetitive behaviours and a heightened sensory perception.

According to the World Health Organisation,

Autism/Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) "... refers to a range of conditions characterised by some degree of impaired social behaviour, communication and language, and a narrow range of interests and activities that are both unique to the individual and carried out repetitively. ASDs begin in childhood and tend to persist into adolescence and adulthood. In most cases the conditions are apparent during the first 5 years of life.

Individuals with ASD often present other co-occurring conditions, including epilepsy, depression, anxiety and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). The level of intellectual functioning in individuals with ASDs is extremely variable, extending from profound impairment to superior levels"

AsIAM describes Autism as:

"a complex, invisible condition which a person is born with. Autism is a developmental condition which means that the way a person communicates, interacts and understands other people, and the world, is different to those who do not have the condition. It can be described as a "spectrum" which means it impacts different people, in different ways, to differing degrees at different times and in different situations."

The project reported on here marks the beginning of a programme of activity designed to create an environment that allows students with Autism to take part more fully in college life and to enhance their opportunity to gain employment after completing their studies.

Researchers at the School of Nursing and Human Sciences at DCU, in collaboration with AsIAM undertook a multi-arm study that explored the experiences of DCU students living with Autism. The study aimed to identify and explore the support

services and structures currently in place in DCU for students with Autism, assess their adequacy in terms of meeting students' needs, and to highlight any gaps that could be addressed to improve life on campus. A whole-campus approach to the study was taken, involving students, academics and support staff from across the multi-site university.

In announcing this initiative, Professor Brian MacCraith, President of DCU said:

"This unique project is consistent with DCU's commitment to an ethos of education for all. We are very aware of the challenges faced by our students with Autism and Aspergers. We hope both to lead and to learn, applying innovative thinking to bring down barriers to education and employment in collaboration with AsIAM.ie and Specialisterne. We want all students to be able to get through difficult transition points at third level, stay the course and have a full and fulfilling university experience, both socially and academically."

Autism is a developmental condition which means that the way a person communicates, interacts and understands other people, and the world, is different to those who do not have the condition.

Background



The most recent report published by the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD) on the participation rates of students with disabilities in Higher Education in Ireland (AHEAD, 2017) revealed that, in the 2015/2016 academic year, a total of 11,244 students with disabilities were registered with the disability/access services of the 25 participating institutions. This number represents 5.2% of the total student population and a 4% rise from the 2014/2015 academic year in terms of the total number of students with disabilities registered with the disability/access services (AHEAD, 2016).

Of the 11,244 students represented in the disability profile for 2015/2016, 535 (4.8%) were in the Aspergers/Autism category, 461 (4.1%) had ADD/ADHD, 205 (1.8%) were Blind/Visually Impaired, 313 (2.8%) were in the Deaf/Hard of Hearing category, 678 (6%) had DCD – Dyspraxia/Dysgraphia, 1,416 (12.6%) had a Mental Health Condition, 474 (4.2%) had a

Neurological/Speech and Language Condition, 1,193 (10.6%) had a Significant Ongoing Illness, 731 (6.5%) had a Physical Disability, 5,116 (45.5%) had a Specific Learning Difficulty, and 122 (1.1%) were listed under Other category.

These figures almost certainly under-represent the numbers of students with disabilities currently attending Irish Higher Education Institutes, because, as noted in the AHEAD (2017) Report, the data captured only those students who have registered with the disability/access services of the participating institutions. Thus, students with a disability who have not registered with the relevant services are not included in the findings.

Of interest, almost a quarter of all students who newly registered with disability services in higher education institutions in Ireland in 2015/16 were not in their first year of study (AHEAD, 2017, pg. 18). In total, the responding institutions identified 975 students newly registered with

disability services who were not new entrants to the institutions, representing 9.7% of the total number of students with disabilities registered with the relevant support services in these institutions (up from 6.7% the previous year) and representing 24% of total new registrations.

Based on the AHEAD 2015/2016 data (AHEAD, 2017), 652 students with disabilities were registered with the DCU disability/access service, representing 5.6% of the total student population of DCU. These data reflect a participation rate that is running slightly above the average for the Irish Higher Education Sector as a whole (5.2% participation rate across the sector) and above the average for the Irish University Sector specifically (5% participation rate across the university sector). DCU, which has recently expanded to approximately 17,000 had 44 students with Autism/Aspergers registered with its Disability and Learning Support Service (academic year 2016-2017).

The true number of students with Aspergers/Autism at DCU it not known, however, because it is reasonable to expect that not all students with Aspergers/Autism elect to register with support services. Indeed, it is well recognised that many students who have

received the diagnosis of Aspergers/Autism choose not to disclose their diagnosis, and gain access to support services, until a significant problem has arisen (Barnhill, 2016; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2012; Simmeborn Fleischer, 2012; Taylor, 2005). Furthermore, as Barnhill (2016) says:

“..... the diagnosis of AS is often delayed and many individuals do not receive this diagnosis until adulthood. Therefore, college students may arrive on campus without the diagnosis or they may be misdiagnosed and not even realize that they need accommodations to be successful (Langford-Von Glahn et al., 2008; VanBergeijk et al., 2008).” (Barnhill, 2016, pg. 4)

What is clear is that across the third level sector, both in Ireland and internationally, an increasing number of higher education places are sought and accepted by students on the Autism spectrum (Barnhill, 2016;

In the 2015/2016 academic year, a total of 11,244 students, or 5.2% of the total student population, with disabilities were registered with the disability/access services of the 25 participating institutions

Nolan, Quinn, & Gleeson, 2010; Nevill & White, 2011, White, Ollendick & Bray, 2011; While et al., 2017) and this number is likely to grow into the future.

Given the prevalence of Autism in Ireland, which has been identified by the current study PI and her colleagues as a minimum of 1% of the population (Autism Counts Report, Sweeney et al., 2016; Boilson et al., 2016), coupled with the growth of supports throughout primary and second level education and increased recognition of the abilities and capabilities of many students with Autism, Irish HEIs will, almost certainly, see a continued rise in the number of students with Autism.

Despite this national and international trend of increased participation, relatively little is known about the specific challenges students with Autism face in attempting to navigate their University life. It is, however, recognised that students with Autism are likely to face challenges that extend beyond those routinely addressed by traditional third level student support services.

Of significant concern is the fact that despite this increase in student enrolments, only a minority of students with ASD successfully complete their university or college education (Levy & Perry, 2011). As noted by Siew et al. (2017), almost a quarter of Australian students

with ASD withdrew from higher education before completion (Autism Spectrum Australia, 2013) and, in the UK, students with ASD achieve the lowest percentage of first class or upper second degree classifications across all disability groups (Blandford, Brill & Neave, 2011). Together, these findings suggest that despite high academic ability, university students with ASD are not reaching their full academic potential (Siew et al., 2017). In discussing the increased involvement of students with AS in higher education, Barnhill (2016) says:

“Institutions of higher education (IHEs) have accepted these students for admission based on their excellent academic scholarship and many have assumed that their campus centers for students with disabilities and learning differences would handle any tutoring needs these students may have, similar to the way these centers have been assisting students with learning and other disabilities for the last 25 to 30 years.” (Barnhill, 2016 pg. 3).

She continues:

“Unfortunately, students with AS and HFA present unique needs that differ in many respects from the needs of the students requesting accommodations for their learning disabilities, especially in the area of nonacademic supports such as social and emotional supports to

deal with significant deficits in these areas and with the fear and anxiety that typically accompanies these conditions. Many IHEs currently are not equipped to handle these challenges (Dillon, 2007; Glennon, 2001; Graetz & Spampinato, 2008; Pillay & Bhat, 2012; M. J. Taylor, 2005) and often the college disability offices are already stretched thin in resources and staff (Wenzel & Rowley, 2010). (Barnhill, 2016 pg. 3).

Similarly, relatively little is known about the initiatives that HEIs/IHEs are taking to address the challenges faced by their students with Autism or about the efficacy of those initiatives. Hence, in this project, we set out to identify the challenges faced by students with Autism specifically within the context of DCU. We also set out to identify how we might address these challenges within the context of the university. The study aimed to identify and explore current services for DCU students with Autism, to explore their adequacy in meeting the needs of students with Autism and to identify any gaps that could be addressed to improve life on campus. A whole campus approach to the study was taken, involving students, academics and support staff from across the multi-site university.

As an integral part of this project, a review of peer-reviewed studies was undertaken to explore what other HEIs/IHEs have been doing in this

space. A search and review of HEI/IEH websites across Europe and the United States of America was also undertaken.

By reviewing what is currently known about the challenges faced by students with Autism in higher education, what is known about successful interventions, and by identifying the specific concerns/difficulties of DCU students with Autism, the research team set out to make a series of recommendations to Dublin City University to further meet their needs. In making these recommendations, it is hoped that they will, in turn, lead to an improved University experience for DCU students with Autism.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the vast majority of intervention programmes for students with ASD were found to have been developed and applied across universities in the USA. Indeed, since the 2008 introduction of the US Department of Education Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA, 2008), a large number of higher education programmes have been piloted, with the aim of assisting students with Autism in achieving further education and independence (Grigal et al., 2013). The recent study by Barnhill (2016), designed to identify the services and accommodations that are currently being provided in American IHEs for students with AS and HFA and to determine the components of successful programs provides a

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useful resource for those who wish to introduce and/or provide specific support services. For the purpose of the study, an Internet search was conducted to identify colleges and universities in the United States that offered specific support for students with AS. Other IHEs that offered additional specific services for students with AS/HFA were identified through review of the research literature. The search strategy resulted in the identification of 45 IHEs and these were invited to participate in a telephone survey. Thirty-one of the 45 IHEs indicated that they offered/provided specific support services above and beyond services typically offered by IHE disability offices and 30 of these IHEs agreed to complete the survey. Fourteen of the initially identified IHEs were not currently providing additional support services. Two institutions indicated that they were currently conducting research to determine what supports would best meet the needs of their students, whilst several of the others indicated that they previously provided additional services but were no longer doing so. Among the reasons provided for this change were that they had tried to have an AS or ASD support group for their students, but it did not work, that an outside organisation such as AHEADD (Autism, AS, and Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder [ADHD] Support for College Students) provided the services in the past, or the grant money was no longer

available to provide the program that was provided in the past.

As noted by Barnhill, the support services currently offered by the IHEs offering specific support services varied substantially, mirroring earlier findings by Smith (2007). Other key findings were that resource limitations, including lack of funding and professionals trained in ASD, act as barriers to implementing support programs and there is no consensus on the best approach to provide supports. Larger IHEs were significantly more likely to offer specific support programmes that were smaller IHEs (only 10% of the IHEs offering specific support programmes having enrollments of <5000 students) and most of the IHEs were not serving all of the students with AS or ASD in their specific support program - because of budget and staff constraints.

Eleven of the 30 responding IHEs reported that they did not charge for specific supports for students with AS and ASD, but several charged if counseling was accessed (and where offered, there was a fee for the freshman seminar course). The

Resource limitations, including lack of funding and professionals trained in ASD, act as barriers to implementing support programs

other HEIs charged a fee that ranged from a low of US\$1,050 to a high of US\$17,400 a year, above the standard tuition and room and board fees. The average yearly fee for the IHEs that charged for these additional services and supports was US\$6,525 above the standard tuition and room and board fees, payable either per academic semester or per academic quarter. It is interesting to note that this research revealed that more students with ASD accessed the support services at IHEs that charged a fee for their supports than at those that do not charge, but the reasons for this finding are not immediately apparent. It might be that the fee-based programmes were in a position to offer more tailored, structured or supportive programmes thereby appealing more to the ASD cohort.

Also of interest is the fact that some IHEs reported that they were considering changing their fee structures to a tiered structure, so that they could charge less when fewer supports were accessed. Most IHEs charged a fee per academic semester and a few charged a fee per academic quarter.

Of note, very few of these IHEs had outcomes data. More than half of the IHEs had been providing services for less than 5 years, so did not have outcomes data as many of their students had not yet graduated. The two IHEs that reported retention



data indicated that the students with AS or ASD who received supports stayed in college at a higher rate than the students with and without disabilities who did not receive additional supports.

Across the programmes surveyed by Barnhill (2016), almost 75% identified peer mentors working with students as a critical component. Many reported that it was more natural for the students with AS/ASD to bond with the graduate mentors than with the support program directors. The role of the peer mentor did, however, differ between HEIs. In some IHEs, the peer mentors function as academic coaches, whereas in others they act as liaisons between the students and their professors and also serve as social coaches. Peer mentors were typically graduate students who were recruited from psychology, special education, school psychology, applied behavior analysis, or social work departments (on either a paid or unpaid basis).

Whatever the role of the peer-mentor, the involvement of fellow, typically-developing, students is an important if not crucial element in contributing to the success of creating a more Autism Friendly college environment, as it not only reduces the likelihood of stigma but also increases levels of awareness, knowledge and empathy (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004; Matthews et al., 2015).

To illustrate the variability in programmes in IHEs in the USA, a number of examples are detailed below. As noted by Hurewitz & Berger (2008), some of the first pilot integrated/support based programmes for students with autism were introduced at Alabama, Marshall and Boston Universities. At this point in time, the **University of Alabama, ASD College Transition and Support Program (UA-ACTS)** provides individualised services to help students develop appropriate skills for self-advocacy, daily living, and social interactions. According to publicity material, the program provides each UA-ACTS student with a therapist-mentor, who meets approximately three times weekly with the student to provide services in academics (including organization and planning of study time, using classroom attendance efficiently, prioritizing of assignments, preparation for exams, etc.) as well as social and daily living skills (focusing on the social aspects of college life, including interacting

with instructors and classmates, roommates, dating, etc.). The program also interfaces with existing support services on campus such as the Office of Disability Services (ODS), Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL), and Residential Life. The program also seeks to promote awareness and understanding of ASDs throughout the campus community through education, training, and collaborations with University programs, faculty, staff, and students.

Marshall University's West Virginia Autism Training Center provides academic, social and life skills training through The College Program for Students with ASD, which was established in 2002. Students participating in the program must meet acceptance criteria for Marshall University and are admitted to The College Program through a separate application process.

- Academic Supports include:
- Teaching and modeling self-advocacy skills for effective communication with campus faculty and staff
 - Individualized strategies designed and implemented to teach students executive functioning skills
 - Students and program staff working together to determine and request reasonable accommodations

- Course recommendation, based on the learning strengths, abilities and interests of each student.
- Individual and small group mentoring.

Social Skills Supports include:

- Individualized assistance from program staff for student involvement in campus organizations, clubs and extra-curricular activities
- Staff lead and student driven skill building group sessions that role play and teach appropriate social skills fit for a college lifestyle
- Individual and small group mentoring sessions Supported access to campus activities and organizations that provide opportunities and develop social skills.

Independent Living Skills Supports include:

- Teaching effective living skills designed to meet the needs of individuals transitioning into adulthood

- Providing assistance to students as they navigate through the day-to-day demands of a college lifestyle Collaborating with Residence Hall staff to ensure proper living accommodations are being provided.

Boston University, through its Office of Disability Services, offers Strategic Education Services (SES) for students with psychiatric, attentional and developmental conditions that might impact on the student's studies. Services are provided for students with, for example, ADHD, head injuries and concussions, mood disorders (depression, mania, bipolar disorder), anxiety disorders (OCD, PTSD, panic and phobic disorders), eating disorders (anorexia, bulimia), psychotic disorders, personality disorders, and autism spectrum disorders, including Asperger's.

As detailed on their website, **"Strategic Education is individualized, practical assistance that helps students with psychiatric, attentional and developmental disabilities to**

Whatever the role of the peer-mentor, the involvement of fellow, typically-developing, students is an important if not crucial element in contributing to the success of creating a more Autism Friendly college environment

achieve their goals in college. SES services promote the skills and support necessary for students to be successful and satisfied in their educational pursuits. SES provides individualized one-to-one weekly strategy sessions. We work with students to facilitate access to reasonable and appropriate accommodations. We also refer students to other resources on campus and in the community and coordinate with other Boston University offices. When circumstances require, we can assist in facilitating leaves of absences.”

During the weekly strategy sessions, students receive help to help develop better skills in the areas of time management, planning and organization, study and test taking, self-advocacy and interpersonal skills (i.e. approaching professors, resolving peer conflicts, etc.).

To find information on unpublished initiatives in higher education settings, we explored the websites of Universities nationally and internationally using Google and employing key search terms to explore what HEIs have been doing in this area. The key search terms used were: Autism friendly campuses, Autism friendly colleges, Autism friendly higher education institutions, Autism friendly postsecondary programmes, ASD and college students, young people with Autism in college, peer perception of Autism, Autism and higher education.

This search provided us predominantly with personal stories and articles that were shared by Universities, having obtained consent from their enrolled student on the Autism spectrum. The most popular Google search result associated with the current study was College Autism Network (CAN).

CAN provides a list of current initiatives that are underway in various colleges and institutions across the United States. At present, the list comprises 42 Universities that have piloted Autism friendly programmes since 2010. Overall, the initiatives provide support for the application of peer mentoring programmes as a means of intervention for students with ASD at postsecondary level. Although the majority on this list have implemented peer mentoring as a means of support, this support often comes at a financial cost that may be beyond the means of many students.

Grand Valley State University (GVSU), Michigan, is recognised as a University providing additional support for young people with ASD, due to the introduction of the Campus Links Peer Programme in 2012. The programme is facilitated by the University’s Disability Support Resources Office. The Resource Office carries out the student mentor training, enabling students to act as mentors to their peers on the Autism spectrum. GVSU is unique

in the sense that both mentors and mentees live in on-campus housing, allowing for daily support. In order to participate in the programme, mentors must meet the requirements set out by the University, as well as adhere to their code of commitment. All mentors must, therefore, complete two training sessions once the selection procedure has been completed, attend monthly meetings with fellow support staff, ensure they are available every Wednesday between the hours of 4-7pm, and fulfill their role for a minimum of one academic year.

The level of commitment required is clearly outlined by the college. This not only reflects the values of the support staff, but also of the mentors who enroll to participate in the programme. The goal is made clear through the intentions of those involved, in the hope of providing the highest quality of additional support to students with Autism.

Adelphi University in New York offers similar services for young people with Autism at third level education. However, in addition to the peer mentoring programme, which is the most commonly used approach, students with Autism enrolled in Adelphi University are given the option of either meeting with a peer mentor or a designated academic coach and learning strategist. Both options are there to be availed of twice a week as part of the Bridges to Adelphi programme.

Students select their mentor based on preference and suitability, as well as level of needs required. The learning strategist and academic coach offer a nice alternative to the peer programme, as students with Autism gain the opportunity to deal with individual challenges and identify their strengths and weaknesses in forming a strategy of coping with these challenges

Texas Tech University has also adopted this approach, through the Connections for Academic Success and Employment Programmes (CASE). CASE provides students with an assigned learning specialist in order to develop these individual solution-based approaches to coping with challenges that arise throughout college life, predominantly of social or organisational origin. Additional support is also offered from a range of other college services, such as; academic advisors, campus activity leaders, as well as counseling and career services

However, although this provides students with an extensive support network, advocates of the peer programme may argue that its strength lies in enhancing the social interaction between both mentor and mentee, and, in turn, overcoming anxieties associated with forming close bonds with fellow students. As these services are still in their early stages of development, the additional cost involved in

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facilitating these programmes remains too high for many parents. This heightened cost is evident in the ASD College Transition and Support Programme that is provided by the **University of Alabama**.

The programme itself begins with a two-day orientation programme before classes start, so that students and parents have the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the campus. The mentoring programme then provides students with one-on-one discussions with mentors, group meetings every second week, four hours of designated study time per week, and assistance following graduation on seeking employment opportunities. The cost of the ASD College Transition and Support Programme is \$7,200 for the Fall and Spring Semesters combined, on top of standard tuition and housing fees, as well as an additional \$1,100 per Summer session [insert link here].

Because programmes to provide additional services for students with Autism are not standardised and due to a insufficient research in this area, it is difficult to identify which ones produce the best outcomes for students. In addition identifying the most cost effective programmes is difficult. What is clear, however, is that the cost of available programmes varies greatly and some would appear to be outside the financial means of students.

Other programmes are detailed on the College Choice website, where a

listing of the College Choice 25 Best Colleges for Students with Autism for 2017 – as determined based on features such as promoting self-advocacy and development across social, academic and vocational levels - is presented. Each of the programmes listed go above and beyond the services typically offered by a Disability Resource Center.

Featured on the listing is **Syracuse University, New York**, which, through its Lawrence B. Taishoff Center for Inclusive Higher Learning serves students with any intellectual or developmental disability, including ASD. The university also supports students with ASD through scholarships, transition programs, and social groups. Notable resources and services include: Peer-to-peer mentoring for academic and social support, classes in disability studies, The Disability Cultural Center, Student-centric academic advising, Access to the Center on Human Policy, the Burton Blatt Institute (provides employment resources for people with disabilities) and the Taishoff Center.

Also listed are:

- **University of Alabama** (UA-ACTS program);
- **George Mason University, Virginia** (Mason Autism Support Initiative (MASI), a comprehensive (though fee-based) program that gives additional, extensive support to students who are on the autism spectrum. Students have access to skill-building classes and groups to develop career-readiness, social techniques, and academic skills;
- **University of Arizona** (UA Autism Collective) – offering a number of resources, services, and educational programs to promote holistic health among its ASD community;
- **Kent State University, Ohio** (the Autism Initiatives, housed under Kent State's Division of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion – an initiative where students work closely with a faculty or staff member, who will act as their advocate. Other groups and supports are: PALS (Partnering for Achievement and Learning Success), in which a student with ASD is partnered with a neurotypical student with each acting as mentor and companion to one another, and College Success for Students with Asperger's or Autism, a program that provides self-advocacy training, job and career assistance, KSU's Autism Diversity Program;
- **Grand Valley State University, Michigan** (the START - Statewide Autism Resources and Training – Project);

- **Drexel University, Philadelphia** (Drexel Autism Support Program – a student-centric program that includes a Personalized Assessment for Student Success (PASS) plan, PASS monitoring with the AJ Drexel Autism Institute, PASS case management with professional staff, Psychoeducational, social, and adaptive evaluation opportunities and workshops in life skills, social development, academic success, and career planning);
- **Appalachian State University, North Carolina** (hosting an affiliate chapter of Autism Speaks, whose mission is to promote options and opportunities for individuals with ASD. Students with ASD can access, among other things, a range of events, social networking, academic resources, career services, high school to college transition programs and counseling);
- **University of Michigan** (also home to an Autism Speaks chapter - students with ASD have access to: ASD specific scholarship opportunities, housing accommodations, exam proctors, CAPS: The Autism Spectrum Self-Advocacy Group and academic counseling);
- **University of Connecticut** (UConn's SEAD - Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder) - program building skills, self-advocacy, and confidence. UConn's ASD inclusionary efforts is also supported through the Center for Students with Disabilities, which provides students with access to all the same opportunities and experiences as the rest of campus. This includes study abroad assistance, scholarship and funding assistance, access to technology that enhances both independence and academic success, research opportunities, social networking such as AHEADD (Achieving in Higher Education with Autism/Developmental Disabilities);
- **Rutgers University, New Jersey** (Rutgers' College Support Program (CSP), which works specifically with students who fall somewhere on the Autism Spectrum. Assistance provided includes scholarship and funding opportunities and personalized assistance with activities of daily living such as daily dorm living, academic planning, socializing, etc. Other resources and services offered through the CSP include: weekly meetings with a personal coordinator, help defining academic and life goals, identifying and utilizing social skills appropriate for university and adult life, work with trained peer mentors and referrals for future employment or education opportunities);
- **University of West Florida** (the Argos for Autism Program (AAP), promoted by the Student Disability Resource Center on UWF's campus is a service that provides academic support, social and community involvement, life skills, and career planning to its students with ASD. Students who join the program will work weekly with a coach to address their needs in the areas of academia, social life, daily living, and career preparation);
- **Utah State University** (ASSERT - the Autism Support Services in Education, Research, and Training) - program. Although primarily an academic resource for those in special education, social work, and rehabilitation programs, ASSERT's mission is to work with students with ASD to provide research-based support. USU's Disability Resource Center also makes a wide range of services and resources available to its students;
- **St. Joseph's University, Philadelphia** (the Kinney Center ASPIRE Program - one of the best known transition programs. Program staff work closely both with the student and with the larger campus community—professors, administration, interdepartmental staff, residence life—to provide holistic academic and social support to its ASD students. Facets of ASPIRE include: crisis intervention and prevention, time management strategies, independent living and social skills training, student mentoring, athletic involvement opportunities and access to The College Bound Retreat, a summer seminar that prepares students for college life);

Whatever the role of the peer-mentor, the involvement of fellow, typically-developing, students is an important if not crucial element in contributing to the success of creating a more Autism Friendly college environment

- **Portland State University, Oregon** (emphasizes networking, partnership, and collaboration to create an inclusive learning environment. Funded by TPSID - Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities - The Disability Resource Center at PSU offers a range of resources, activities, and opportunities for its students, including The Invisible No More Project, which recognizes, celebrates, and supports students with invisible disabilities);
- **Western Kentucky University** (Kelly Autism Program, which offers, among other things, educational support through personalized academic plan assistance, tutoring, community involvement, job coaching, social activities);
- **University of Missouri** (Mizzou's Thompson Center for Autism & Neurodevelopmental Disorders provides training and service programs to its students as well as the larger community. These services span the diagnostic, medical, and treatment needs for those with ASD. Mizzou also has a multi-functional Disability Center); **Texas Tech University** (CASE - Connections for Academic Success and Employment - program, for helps students navigate the ins and outs of college life; The Transition Academy, housed in the Burkhart Center for Autism Education and Research, helps students develop job and social skills Its TECHniques Center is a unique tutoring program that provides holistic coaching and tutoring to students with ASD);
- **University of Idaho** (the Disability Support Services offers many opportunities for those with Autism/ASD to connect with staff and peers, develop academic and social strategies, and participate in curricular and extra-curricular events. The Autism Spectrum Alliance is just such a group, housed under the Raven Scholars Program. Raven Scholars is an award-winning transition program that provides tailored services to its students with Autism/ASD, including peer mentoring and academic advising, daily or weekly planning meetings with program staff, study group opportunities, life and social skills classes and service learning opportunities);
- **University of Tennessee Chattanooga** (Mosaic - developed by UTC's Disability Resource Center - Mosaic is steeped in ASD

research, best practice analysis, and student collaboration. In year 1, students focus on, and are coached through, issues of independence, social and academic strategies, and self-advocacy, in Year 2, students learn about developing identity, reframing their understanding of self in positive ways, and how to navigate unwritten social rules, in Year 3, students build on what they learned in the first two years to begin thinking about their careers. They work on job shadowing, mock interviews, resume building, and more. The final year builds on the third in that students gain internship experience, volunteer experience, attend career fairs, etc.);

- **Eastern University, Philadelphia** (the College Success Program, CSP - was designed specifically for students with ASD. Partnered closely with the Cushing Center for Counseling and Academic Support, the CSP ensures its programs address not just the academic well being of its students, but also their social, mental, and physical health. Eastern CSP staff also work closely with faculty, staff, and administration to provide ASD-specific training, consultation, and understanding. Other services provided by the CSP include pre-fall semester orientation for first-year students, Individual counseling, weekly skills groups that focus on academic, daily life, cultural support, and social issues, weekly support groups that focus on perceptions and being a college student and facilitation and liaison support with faculty, staff, and university departments and community events and outings);
- **Adelphi University, New York** (Bridges to Adelphi program - is Among the services and resources available are twice weekly meetings with an academic coach and learning strategist, one -on-one counseling to reduce anxiety, stress, and to improve time management, organizational, and social skills, collaboration with a vocational coach to identify areas of interest and strengths, assistance with resume writing and mock job interviews and peer mentorship);

- **Fairleigh Dickinson University, New Jersey** (COMPASS program, designed specifically for students with ASD to improve the rates of graduation and gainful employment. This fee based individually tailored program provides services such as peer mentorship with upperclassman, monthly social events, two hours of individualized, hands-on academic advising on a weekly basis, one hour of individual counseling and one group therapy session on a weekly basis and a summer transition orientation;
- **Marshall University, West Virginia** (College Program for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder – described above);
- **Bellevue College, Seattle** (Autism Spectrum Navigator – ASN – program, which works closely with its students in the areas of social interaction, study habits, self-advocacy, and self-regulation. Bellevue offers peer mentoring, career prep, campus awareness programs and skillbuilding but the ASN program also offers distinct features such as: members attend cohort classes in conjunction with their other classes. These cohort classes cover, among other things, career preparation skill building, stress-management, occupational-wellness, interpersonal- communication. In addition, ASN staff are happy to work with students' parents and faculty to improve communication and inspire better insight into the lives of students with ASD).



Even a cursory overview of these programmes highlights the diversity of services and supports offered to students. Many of these programmes do, however, feature a peer-mentoring component. The peer mentoring approach has become the most commonly applied approach to student support due to the positive outcomes that have been associated with its successful implementation (Hart, Gigal & Weir, 2010; Nevill & White, 2011; Hamilton, Stevens & Girdler, 2016).

Because evidence suggests that the provision of peer mentoring may improve third level education outcomes of students with ASD, Curtin University, in Western Australia, implemented the Curtin Specialist Peer Mentoring Programme (CSPM), modelled, according to the programme developers (Siew, Mazzucchelli, Rooney & Girdler, 2017) on similar programmes provided by Cambridge University in the UK (see Hastwell et al, 2013) and York University in Canada (AMP; Bebko, Schroeder & Ames, 2011), as well as on strategies for supporting students with ASD identified in the literature (Wolf, Brown & Bork, 2009).

As described by Siew et al (2017), the peer-mentoring program is centred on the provision of “specialist peer mentors”. “Specialist peer mentors” are Curtin University postgraduate students, recruited from the School

of Psychology and Speech Pathology or the School of Occupational Therapy and Social Work. Mentees are paired with a specialist mentor, who provides individualised support based on need. Topics may include time management, academic performance and communication with teaching staff and peers. CSMP mentee-mentor pairs meet weekly for an hour to discuss issues pertinent to the mentee (e.g. managing stress, approaching support staff for help). Prior to the commencement of the CSMP, mentors underwent specialist training workshops that covered both generic topics (e.g. roles of a mentor, resources available on campus, ways to engage with mentee, confidentiality and boundaries), as well as ASD-specific topics (see Hamilton, Stevens & Girdler, 2016 for further detail regarding mentor training).

In describing and reviewing the programme, the authors report preliminary evidence that a specialised support program can improve the well-being of students with an ASD in a university setting. They recognize that although several specialised programs exist and have been implemented at universities, few published evaluative studies are available. They pointed out that the results replicated many of the preliminary findings from comparable university programs and, like mentoring-program participants at York University

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(Ames, McMorris & Hancock, 2010) and Sheffield Hallam University, participants in the CSMP were highly satisfied with the program (Madriaga et al, 2008) and they conclude that interventions that meet an individual's needs, while also targeting environmental barriers such as attitudes of others, are likely to be the most effective in improving the outcomes of young adults with ASD.

An important issues raised by the authors was the fact that the social difficulties that arise for people with ASD are influenced by the perceptions, judgments and social decisions formed by those around them. Although the Curtin University program dealt specifically with psychology and occupational therapy students as peer-mentors, it is possible that if applied on a broader scale, with appropriate supports, peer mentor programmes could be rolled out more widely as an approach to developing and supporting young people with ASD at third level (Gelbar et al., 2014; MacLeod & Green, 2009). Education of the mentors would also serve to increase knowledge about ASD and, for the student with ASD, the intensity of the transition to third level is lessened by peer-mentor programmes and the skills that are taught. Key skills include social, organisational and practical skills, which are deemed as transferable skills in the sense that they will

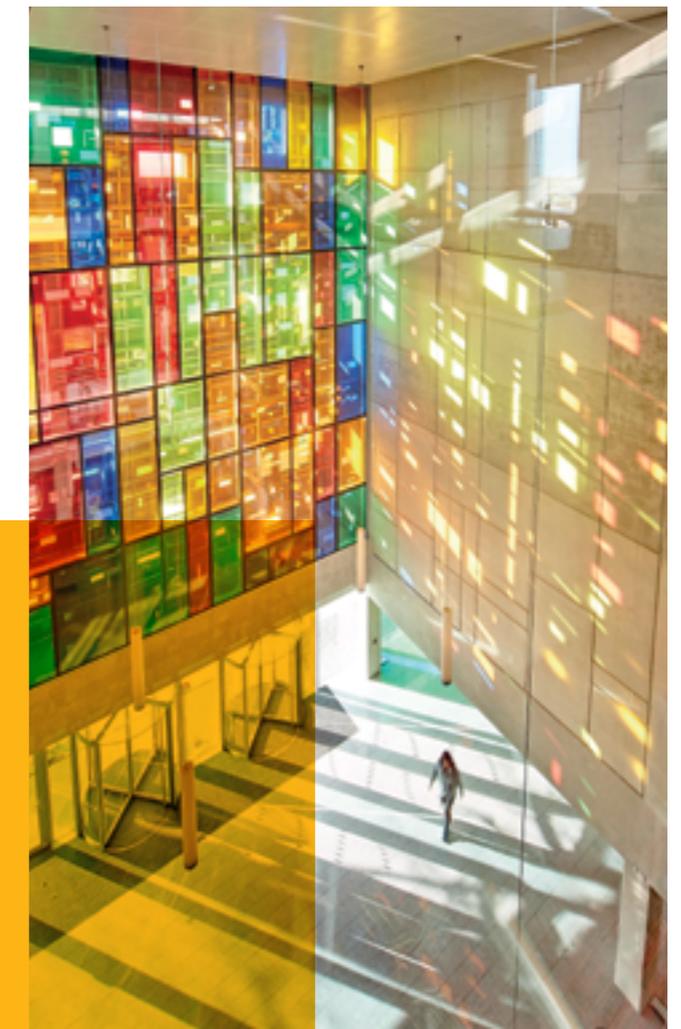
continue to aid the young person as they progress into adulthood and various stages of their lives. Important research is also currently underway at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech) in assessing the Stepped Transition in Education Program for Students (STEPS) for young people with ASD. The research is led by Dr. Susan White, who specializes in this area, having published a considerable amount of work enhancing educational environments for people on the Autism spectrum (White, Ollendick & Bray, 2011; White et al., 2013; White et al., 2016). STEPS targets improved self-regulation (SR) and self-determination (SD) in young people with ASD, in the hope that it will yield positive outcomes with respect to college adjustment and functional behavior. STEPS is comprised of two levels (or steps), which match the student's particular needs in relation to transition planning. In Step 1, students facing transition (i.e., have identified the college they will attend (either 2-year or 4-year institution) but are still in high school) and their caregivers receive information to assist in transition planning, undergo readiness self-assessments (to identify degree of preparedness for post-secondary school) and participate in interactive sessions online and in person to promote self-knowledge and determination. The goal of Step 1 is to assist families and students with transition

planning, specifically ensuring that families and students have the tools needed to make informed choices and take necessary steps (e.g., remediating identified skill deficits) to increase the likelihood of a successful transition out of high school. In Step 2, college students with ASD receive fairly intensive supports and interventions, including individual counseling, structured support services, social integration activities and coaching to promote academic and social success. STEPS is currently being evaluated in a randomized controlled trial (RCT), with participants assigned to either STEPS or 'transition as usual' (TAU), after which time they can enroll 'open-label' into STEPS (White et al., 2017).

Motivated by the paucity of research on how to support most effectively the growing number of young adults with ASD enrolled in higher education institutions, White et al. (2016) published a report on their pilot trial of two novel intervention programs developed for college students with ASD. In their pilot study, college students with ASD (n = 8) were randomly assigned to one of two new programs – either an intervention based on a virtual reality – Brain-Computer Interface for ASD (BCI-ASD) or a psychosocial

intervention, the College and Living Success (CLS) program. Preliminary evidence supports the feasibility and acceptability of both programs, but behavioral outcomes were inconsistent across participants and interventions. Given the preliminary findings, they concluded that expanded research on psychosocial and computer-assisted intervention approaches for students with ASD is warranted.

Closer to home, research has also continued to progress across Ireland and the UK. In 2014, Autistica UK, an advocacy agency for those with



Autism, outlined that of the £4 million spent each year on Autism research in the UK, an estimated 7% is spent on research into adults living with ASD. With this in mind, Autistica have launched a new programme, 'Ageing with Autism', in collaboration with Newcastle University, which aims to provide insight into the challenges that adults face in transitioning throughout the various stages of life with Autism (Autistica Report, 2014).

Based on our search results, support initiatives for students with Autism in Universities across the UK appears to have been funded mainly by the National Autistic Society and the Disabled Student's Allowance. A wide range of support is available to students through the disability service, including: support from an adviser who will provide advice and guidance about the potential impact of Autism on their studies and how this can be accommodated, drop-in sessions to meet with a Disability Adviser, access to Student Enabling IT (SEnIT) Suite which has assistive software such as mind mapping software, support applying for special exam arrangements – such as extra time, use of a PC, opportunity to sit exams in a smaller venue, assistance with requesting copies of handouts or lecture slides in advance of teaching sessions and regular specialist mentoring support.

Similar peer programmes are

run in select areas across the UK, such as Lancashire, Leicestershire, Northamptonshire, North East England, Scotland and Wales.

The Royal Holloway, University of London offer a comprehensive service to students with social or communication difficulties. As detailed on their website, a wide range of academic supports are offered. Among these are permission to record lectures while in attendance, access to class material at least 24 hours in advance, where possible, access to more frequent one-to-one meetings with a personal adviser, if needed, additional time to respond to oral questions in workshops, tutorials, seminars or appointments, exemption from being asked to read passages aloud in class, if needed and requested, available upon request and with some input from Disability & Dyslexia Services, help and advice with discussing the student's disability with relevant parties (e.g. host

Closer to home, research has also continued to progress across Ireland and the UK

institution or work placement). Other supports offered from the Disability & Dyslexia Services include study skills sessions, to be agreed on an individual basis, an orientation buddy during Welcome Week), initial support and advice on relevant assistive technology, organisation of exams access arrangements, dependent upon the recommendations contained in the student's current medical evidence, advice regarding application for additional support via Disabled Students Allowance. Supports from other professional services in Royal Holloway include library support (such as flexibility with loans, help with locating material, etc.), the possibility of requesting priority to accommodation in the first year and permission to stay in halls in the second and third years, a pre-arrival visit to College accommodation in order to determine accommodation needs, the possibility of participating in a two-day residential orientation programme called Unistart in early September before starting your first year.

Autism & Uni was a research initiative funded between 2013 and 2016 by the European Union under the Lifelong Learning Programme and facilitated partnerships across five European countries (Leeds Beckett University UK where it initiated, Kekuspuito Vocational College, Finland; Academy of Humanities and Economics, Poland; Autismo Burgos,

Spain; and Technical Uni Eindhoven, Netherlands). Since 2016, Leeds Beckett University has continued the project in the UK, under the leadership of Dr Mark Fabri. The initiative works in conjunction with students on the Autism spectrum to assist them in making the transition from second level to third level education. Unlike other initiatives, Autism & Uni aims to adopt a more integrative approach within the Autism community at third level. Rather than incorporate elements of the popular peer mentoring programme, Autism & Uni gains insight from the students' first hand experiences by conducting interviews and questionnaires, which provide the grounds for the development of Toolkits and Guides then used to assist both the student with ASD as well as academic professionals. According to Fabri and Andrews (2015), Autism & Uni is unique in the sense that unlike other interventions that tend to emphasize student deficits, it focuses on student strengths.

Autism & Uni advocates for the use of technological tools and interventions as a means of enhancing students' strengths, as these can be tailored in a manner suited to each individual. The Autism&Uni Online Toolkit provides students with access to information and strategies to help students to overcome the challenges they typically encounter during the

transition to university. It also allows users to create an online profile, so that the content and information that appears on screen is relevant and related to their needs. The four key themes that have been identified within the Toolkit in order to assist students are: informing the university of the student's diagnosis, managing expectations, study situations, and difficult situations. The Toolkits were designed for open access so that the whole University / HEI community could increase their knowledge of ASD. However, they cater, in particular, for students with a diagnosis of autism.

Three Best Practice Guides were also designed: Best Practice for HEI managers and senior academics; Best Practice for HE lecturers and tutors, and Best Practice for professionals supporting autistic students within or outside HE institutions.

Autism & Uni has been supported across a number of other European Universities and research from this initiative has aided in future developments for aiding students with ASDs in their transition to third level education. Evidence of this can be deduced from the more recent collaboration of work between the National Autistic Society (NAS) and Autism & Uni, as in April this year, the NAS asked Autism & Uni to assist them in designing an Autism Accreditation Programme for UK Universities in order to prompt HE settings to reflect on their current Autism Support Services and to consider ways to develop them further.

Development of Autism Support Services for students studying in Ireland have developed, at least in part, as a result of changes in legislation and Government Policy. The 2005 Disability Act directed that students with disabilities are entitled

to access the same educational and support services as their typically developing peers. This, naturally, includes students with ASD and many of the initiatives that have developed in recent years to aid students with ASD at University level in Ireland have been facilitated through the Disability Support Services of Irish HEIs. The year 2010 was marked by the appointment of Disability Officers in every Higher Education setting across the country (HEA, 2010a).

In addition to the introduction of the Disability Act, 2005 saw the Department of Health and Children propose an initiative to promote positive mental health and develop counselling and support services in all third-level education settings. These initiatives, although of importance for typically developing students, are even more necessary for students with ASD. Since 2005, the wider body of legislation has placed a responsibility on Universities to take the steps necessary to provide a supportive environment for the entire student population, including the development and progression of services aimed at supporting students with disabilities. Not surprisingly, then, a number of initiatives supportive of students with disabilities, including Autism/Aspergers, have been implemented in Irish HEIs.

In order to identify current initiatives in Irish HEIs, we scoped the broad range of supports available to students across the HEIs - this exercise was undertaken to find out more about the types of supports commonly offered to students with Autism in the Irish third level sector, a sample of which is presented below (note: this is not intended to be an exhaustive list of the services provided by all of the 27 HEIs in Ireland, but is merely to present a flavour of the activities currently offered in this area). For the interested reader, AsIAM.

Dublin City University offers a wide and comprehensive range of student support services for its students with and without disabilities (see next section of this Report). It does not, however, currently offer an Autism-specific programme or service. The University does have a strong track record of providing innovative support programmes and, in 2010, ran a highly successful project through the Autism College and Community Life Acclimation and Intervention Model (ACCLAIM). This DCU project, run by the School of Nursing and Human Sciences and funded by Genio, ran a pre-orientation programme in conjunction with Irish Autism Action and the Watson Institute, Pittsburgh for students with Autism who had secured a University place. This 2-week orientation programme ran in DCU during the summertime

The four key themes that have been identified within the Autism&Uni Online Toolkit in order to assist students are: informing the university of the student's diagnosis, managing expectations, study situations, and difficult situations.

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and incorporated orientation talks and site visits to aspects of the University that would almost certainly be encountered during the course of their studies (e.g. Library, Restaurant, Health & Safety etc).

Trinity College Dublin (TCD) has reported having the highest number of students with ASD registered with Support Services in the country. The TCD Disability Service, in collaboration with the University's Unilink Service, have developed a model of support for students with ASD (TCD Autism Spectrum Disorders Support Service), which aims to support students at all stages from University entrance to graduation and employment.

The Unilink service in TCD was designed initially in 2004 as a service for students with significant mental health problems. The project was based in the TCD Disability Service and was funded through the European Social Service for Students with Disabilities. The focus of the service was on supporting students in achieving their occupational goals of being full time students, meeting deadlines, passing examinations, participating and managing their coursework (Gleeson, Quinn & Nolan, 2010; Nolan & MacCobb, 2006). Later, because of demand and need, an Autism-specific component was introduced. The Irish Asperger's Syndrome Association of Ireland (ASPIRE) highlighted to

the National Strategy for Higher Education that the Unilink service has had a profoundly positive effect in supporting students with ASD. However, they emphasised the need for this level of support to be provided by all third level institutions in Ireland (ASPIRE, 2009). In developing its support services, TCD has a dedicated section of the University website that provide links to academic guides detailing how best to support students with ASD through their transition to college, as well as a range of student support materials. The site also houses video links to students' accounts of their own personal experiences of attending college.

University College Dublin (UCD) offers a range of supports to students with disabilities. To receive these supports, students are invited to register with UCD Access & Lifelong Learning. As per the UCD website, the aim of the UCD Access & Lifelong Learning (ALL) is to allow all students registered with Disability Support to become independent learners so they can develop the skills expected of successful graduates and take these skills into the workplace. A comprehensive range of supports are offered and these are outlined in a PDF "How to Manage Your Asperger's Syndrome at UCD" available on the UCD website. These supports include the range of supports available to all UCD students, writing supports,

maths supports, counselling, exam supports as well as supports provided specifically for students with Autism. These consist of software and devices such as the Livescribe Smartpen, an electronic pen with a built-in recorder, the Mind Mapping software, which can help students to organise their ideas in a useful way or to create notes following lectures or reading. It can also be used when planning essays. Another service, Learning Support ALL, provides learning support primarily through group workshops. These workshops are run several times over the course of both semesters and are advertised to students via email. These workshops are designed to help students learn the skills needed to succeed at university and include note taking, time management and organisation, study skills, academic writing, research skills, presentations and group work, avoiding plagiarism as well as exam preparation.

University College Cork (UCC) has also noted the increase in applications and enrolments of students on the Autism spectrum, with just 7 students enrolled during the 2012/2013 academic year, increasing to 60 at present. The University staff have, therefore, anticipated a continued rise in the number of students with ASD, and their website now caters for this in outlining the procedures that have recently been put in place to aid

these students in their transition to third level. Among the documents available are:
<https://www.ucc.ie/en/dss/current/aspergers/supports/>

<https://www.ucc.ie/en/media/support/disabilitysupportservice/as/>

UCC has collaborated with the Cork Association for Autism, ASPECT, to address the additional needs of the students with Autism. Both the UCC Disability Support Service and ASPECT have begun by piloting programmes to assist with overcoming the barriers that students with ASD face throughout university life.

One of the main initiatives outlined is the Pre-Entry Support Programme, specifically targeted towards second level students with ASD and their parents. The two-day programme, which was piloted in June 2016, was attended by fourteen prospective students (two females and twelve males), all of whom were enrolled in Leaving Certificate classes across a variety of secondary schools in Cork city. The programme dealt with various aspects of college life, in particular the development of social, organisational and study skills, as well as providing prospective students and their parents with a tour of UCC's campus and a talk from a current student with a diagnosis of AS on his personal experience of transitioning to third

level. Parents were also informed of the range of support services available to themselves as well as their child at UCC and were presented with information on the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) application process.

In terms of current students, the UCC DSS currently supports over 60 students who have a primary diagnosis of AS. These students, depending on outcome of assessment of needs, can avail of a range of supports (educational, technical or personal). In addition, students who also register with ASPECT can avail of the support of a key worker who assists students, on an individual basis, to better manage the social dynamic of making a good transition to University and ultimately to work and employment.

As detailed on the UCC website, among the services offered by the UCC DSS to incoming and current students are:

Specialist Orientation Programme: designed to provide students with ASD and their parents an introduction to University life. Students and their parents can attend this one-day programme where staff of the DSS give an overview of the support available on campus to support incoming students with a diagnosis of AS. Key workers from ASPECT also input into the programme outlining the social

and personal supports available in UCC for students who register with DSS. A current student with AS also speaks about their college experience and gives an account of the clubs and activities that may be of interest to entrants. Successful applicants and those previously registered with ASPECT, are invited to attend a one-day orientation programme that runs during the last week of August. It is designed to give students a first-hand experience of what the transition to University may entail and the programme provides each student with contact details of support staff who will be there to assist their transition to higher education.

Additional services that can be provided for students on the Autism spectrum consist of both educational and technical support, as well as occupational therapy and employment programmes. Educational and technical support ranges from study skills, alternative exam arrangements, identifying specific needs to lecturers, to training in specialist software designed to assist students with ASD. Students involved in the Occupational Therapy (OT) programme are also provided with the opportunity to develop their executive functioning skills either on a one-to-one or group basis. OT programmes at UCC focus on developing skills to cope with stress, enhancing self-advocacy,

organisation and problem-solving, and developing communication skills that will aid in fostering social bonds. All of these elements are aimed at targeting the barriers that students with ASD face on a day-to-day basis, by developing strategies and skills in the hope of overcoming these barriers and, in turn, facilitating an overall positive experience in third level education.

Overall, the range of supports and services provided to students with Autism within Irish HEIs is encouraging, but more can, undoubtedly, be done to support students. Thus, this project. It is interesting to note that the peer-support system widely deployed internationally, has not been adopted as a feature of the supports in HEIs in Ireland.

At third level, student's well-being not only relates to academic achievements, but, in addition, and, more importantly, relates to the social relationships and support that manifest during their time in University (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010). Research across Ireland and the UK recognises the higher incidence of students with poor mental health, as they find the stresses associated with higher education difficult to manage (Kracen, 2003). Students on the Autism spectrum are, in turn, recognised as a higher risk population, due to the likelihood of presenting with comorbid symptomatology, in particular, depression and anxiety (White et al., 2011; Wilson, Rickwood & Deane, 2007). As both academic and social aspects play such fundamental roles in contributing to



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student's overall well-being, it is, therefore, imperative that students with ASD, who encounter challenges with both executive functioning and social skills, are provided adequate supports to prevent any further threats to their individual well-being.

Further evidence of implementing training and support for students with ASD at third level can be seen within the Special Education Initiative. This initiative is funded by the Department of Education and Science, which provides qualified teachers and educational professionals the opportunity to further their knowledge of Special Education Needs by enrolling in Continuing Professional Development (CPD) provision courses. The fundamentals of this initiative are key in that they provide educational professionals with appropriate training to apply their knowledge and skills to improving the quality of education for students on the Autism spectrum across third level institutions in Ireland. The Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD) highlights four key elements of legislative change: **Equal Status Acts, Disability Act 2005, Employment Equality Acts, and the Special Needs Act** that are relevant in service provision. Underlying each of these key elements is the recognition of the transformative effects of education and the statutory right of equal access to

opportunities and services for all citizens.

The State provides the overall block of funding for HEIs, while the Higher Education Authority (HEA) is then responsible for the allocation of this funding and monitoring the implementation of services funded for students with disabilities (HEA, 2010). Following the successful implementation of services in recent years, Minister Bruton welcomed the publication in July 2016 of the National Council Special Education (NCSE) Policy Advice on supporting students with ASDs in schools across the country.

Minister Bruton reiterated the fundamentals of the NCSE Report by acknowledging the fact that education is the key element required in order to provide every child with equal opportunity in life. The publication of that Report was a major step in identifying the additional needs of people with Autism and was the first major report in almost fourteen years to focus on the importance of education for these individuals. Many of the initiatives and services that currently exist in Ireland are targeted at supporting young people at primary and secondary level education, with less focus on the needs of the third level sector.

It is within the context of the growing recognition of the need to support

students with Autism adequately throughout their third level education (and beyond) that DCU outlined its intention to become an Autism Friendly Campus. Because no previous research has been conducted at Dublin City University to explore the experiences of life on campus for students with Autism, we set out to explore this in order to identify gaps in our current service provision.



Study Aims

The overall study, which was composed of four separate but related studies, aimed to explore current services at DCU for students with Autism, their perceived adequacy, and to identify any gaps that could be addressed to improve life on campus for students with Autism. Student and staff experiences, knowledge and attitudes were captured as part of this study. All aspects of the study were approved by the DCU Research Ethics Committee (see Appendix 1).

Methods

Study 1: An online anonymous survey, adapted with permission from the survey used by Gelbar et al (2015) was administered via the Qualtrics software platform to DCU students with Autism who have attended DCU for at least one semester. This survey was advertised to students through the DCU Disability & Learning Services (DLSS) (see Appendix 2 for Call for Participants issued by DLSS) but was also advertised via a Call for Participants issued by the Principal Investigator to the general student mailing list under the subject heading: Living with Autism as a University Student: A DCU experience: Invitation to Students with Autism to complete a short anonymous survey (see Appendix 3), as we wanted it to be accessible to all students with Autism, including those who have not disclosed their diagnosis to the DLSS. The Call for Participants included the study Plain Language Statement (PLS) (see Appendix 4) and some information on the project funders (see Appendix 5) as attachments as well as a live link to the survey (see Appendix 6 for survey content). The purpose of the survey was to explore the experiences of students with Autism attending DCU, to examine what services and parts of the university experience were and were not working well for them and to explore how these might be improved.

Inclusion Criteria: All DCU students aged 18 years and above with a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). For the purposes of this survey, the umbrella term of "Autism Spectrum Disorder" as defined in DSM-V, was used in order to be inclusive of those with diagnosis of specific conditions on the Autism Spectrum, such as Asperger's Syndrome, Pervasive Development Disorder – Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS), Rett Syndrome and Childhood Disintegrative Disorder. Only those who provided consent gained access to the survey.



Study 2. An online anonymous survey which was adapted, with permission of the authors (Nevill and White, 2011) was administered to the entire student body in DCU via Qualtrics Software (see Appendix 8). This explored the attitudes of the general student body to their peers with Autism and also examined their levels of knowledge about Autism. This survey took the format of a short vignette and a range of questions about the vignette character (who has Autism). Following a Call for Participants (see Appendix 7) with an attached PLS (see Appendix 8), students who confirmed that they had read the PLS and who consented to participate in the study were asked to read a short vignette (see Appendix 9) and to respond to a series of eight statements about the central character, using a 5-point Likert scale, where responses ranged from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree.

Inclusion Criteria: All DCU students aged 18 years and above. Only those who provided consent gained access to the Vignette and associated questions.

When the baseline data were collected, a highly visible Autism Awareness Exhibition (see Section: Autism Awareness Exhibition below) was held on both the DCU Glasnevin and DCU St. Patrick's campus. To capture the impact of the overall project on levels of knowledge and change in attitudes, this student survey will be repeated 12-18 months after the key recommendations of this Report have been implemented.



Study 3. Focus groups and semi-structured interviews were conducted with academic and support staff of the University to explore the current services and supports available for students with Autism on campus, to examine the issues arising for staff in engaging with students with Autism and to explore how they could be supported to engage more effectively with this student group.

Following a Call for Participants (see Appendix 10 & 11) a focus group was conducted with academic staff/technical support staff (n=9) from a range of Schools and Faculties in the University including the:

- School of Computing, DCU Faculty of Engineering and Computing
- School of Physical Sciences, DCU Faculty of Science and Health
- School of Nursing and Human Sciences, DCU Faculty of Science and Health
- School of Biological Sciences, DCU Faculty of Science and Health
- School of Chemical Sciences, DCU Faculty of Science and Health
- School of Mathematical Sciences, DCU Faculty of Science and Health
- School of Inclusive and Special Education, DCU Institute of Education
- School of Policy and Practice in Education, DCU Institute of Education

A separate focus group was conducted with support staff (n=4) who regularly engage with students with Autism. This focus group included a staff member from the Disability and Learning Support Services (DLSS), the Student Services, the Accommodation Services and the Intra Services. For both focus groups, all participants provided written consent (see Appendix 12). Focus groups were facilitated by an external consultancy (Sinead Begley and Associates) accompanied by a member of the project team. They lasted approximately 1-hour and were audio recorded, and transcribed verbatim and thematically analysed into the main themes arising from the discussions.

See Appendix 13 for focus group question guide. Five semi-structured one-to-one interviews were also conducted (see

Appendix 14 for interview guide). For the purpose of this aspect of the project, a number of key services were contacted in order to recruit a staff member from the service who might engage frequently with students with Autism. Interviews were conducted with a representative from each of the following:

- DCU Students' Union
- Disability and Learning Support Service
- Centre for Talented Youth in Ireland (CTYI)
- DCU Library
- Restaurants and Catering DCU

These interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Inclusion Criteria:

- First Focus Group: All DCU Staff.
- Second Focus Group: DCU support staff who regularly engage with students with Autism.
- Semi-structured one-to-one interviews: staff who might frequently provide services to students with Autism.

For both Focus Groups and one-to-one interviews, a PLS was provided (see Appendix 12) and written consent was required (see Appendix 13).

Study 4. A sensory audit of both the DCU Glasnevin and DCU St. Patrick's Campus was conducted by students with Autism (n=4) and two project team members to explore the issues that might arise for students in negotiating the physical environment. For the purpose of this study, an audit tool was developed. The goal of this audit was to look at the physical environment primarily from the perspective of noise, smells, lighting, and signage. Photos were taken to capture visually the physical environment and descriptive notes were kept for each photo.

Ethics Approval: All aspects of the project were approved by the DCU Research Ethics Committee (see Appendix 1).



DCU - Study Context



DCU is a multi-campus university occupying approximately 60 hectares just north of Dublin City Centre. Following the incorporation of St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra (SPD), Mater Dei Institute of Education (MDI) and the Church of Ireland College of Education (CICE) into DCU, there are now five Faculties and a range of linked Institutes and Centres.

Throughout their studies, students are supported through provision of a range of Student Support and Development (SS&D) services.

Faculty Structure

Students undertake their studies in one of five Faculties.

1. Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

The Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, which was expanded greatly as part of the recent incorporation of SPD, MDI and the CICE into DCU, comprises six Schools as well as the Institute of Ethics.

- School of Applied Language and Intercultural Studies (SALIS)
- Fiontar & Scoil na Gaeilge
- School of Law and Government
- School of English
- School of History and Geography
- School of Theology, Philosophy, and Music
- Institute of Ethics

2. DCU Institute of Education

The DCU Institute of Education is the newest faculty of DCU, established through the incorporation of SPD, MDI and the CICE into DCU. It has a staff of more than 125 full-time academics and a student body in excess of 4,000. The new Institute brings together students of education across all sectors of the education system - early childhood, primary, post-primary and further education and training. The Institute offers a range of undergraduate programmes in education, as well as a range of taught and research-based post-graduate programmes. Within the Institute, there are six schools.

- School of Arts Education and Movement
- School of Human Development
- School of Inclusive and Special Education
- School of Language, Literacy and Early Childhood Education
- School of History and Geography
- School of Policy and Practice in Education
- School of STEM Education, Innovation and Global Studies

Throughout their studies, students are supported through provision of a range of Student Support and Development (SS&D) services

3. DCU Faculty of Science and Health

The Faculty of Science and Health is made up of six constituent Schools and offers a range of over 20 honours degree courses from Chemical Sciences to Athletic Therapy and Training, Astronomy to Nursing, Psychology to Sport Science and many more.

- School of Biotechnology
 - School of Chemical Sciences
 - School of Health and Human Performance
 - School of Mathematical Sciences
 - School of Nursing and Human Sciences
 - School of Physical Sciences
-

4. DCU Faculty of Engineering and Computing

The Faculty of Engineering and Computing focusses on preparing students to pursue careers in the STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) and ICT (information communication and technology) sectors and offers degree programmes at Bachelors, Masters and PhD levels. It is home to the:

- School of Computing
- School of Electronic Engineering
- School of Mechanical & Manufacturing Engineering

and hosts or participates in a number of large scale research centres, including: the Rince Institute (National Research Centre in Advanced Engineering Technologies), INSIGHT (Data Analytics), the CNGL Centre for Global Intelligent Content, the Centre for Scientific Computing and Complex Systems Modelling (SCI-SYM) and the Centre for Medical Engineering Research (MEDeng).

5. DCU Business School

DCU Business School is Ireland's most ambitious business school, offering a range of undergraduate and graduate programmes. It has recently confirmed its position as a world-leading business school, with the award of AACSB accreditation - placing it in the top 5% of business schools worldwide. It is home to the Dublin Aviation Institute (DAI); Ireland's Centre for Family Business; the Leadership & Talent Institute; and the Irish Centre for Cloud Computing.

DCU Student Support Services - DCU Student Support & Development

DCU provides a comprehensive range of support services to all students and has in place specific supports for students with additional needs. These supports are delivered by a multidisciplinary team with relevant expertise. Given the range of services offered by DCU, we have provided a brief overview of the main services and supports that students at DCU can avail of.

DCU Student Support & Development is made up of a broad range of units serving the professional, academic and personal development and support needs of a diverse student population. The units within SS&D comprise the Student Advice Centre, the Access Office, the Careers Office, Counselling & Personal Development, the Disability & Learning Support Service, the Inter Faith Centre, the INTRA Work Placement Unit, the Sports Development Unit and the Student Health Centre. A brief overview of these services and their core roles are presented in Table 1. In addition to a range of services available to all students, DCU offers a range of services and supports for all students with a disability, specific learning difficulty or long-term medical condition. While the support available is based on individual needs, they may include an educational needs assessment, study skills support, assistive technology and examination support.

Table 1: DCU Student Support and Development (SS&D)

SERVICE	SERVICE OVERVIEW AND CORE ROLE
Student Advice Centre	Students may have various questions about their studies, personal circumstances or professional development, which they wish to discuss with a Student Advisor. Student Advisors can speak to students about any aspect of their lives at the University and refer them to individuals or other services, where relevant.
Access Office	<p>The three main aims of the DCU Access Service are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — To promote a positive experience of education — To increase the numbers from the University’s target communities entering third level — To support students completing their programme of study. <p>It achieves these aims through their Primary and Second level schools programme with North Dublin. They also have an extensive Post-Entry supports programme for students who have entered DCU as an Access Scholar. Supports include, Top-Up Scholarships, Academic Support, One to One Support, Peer Mentoring Programmes and an Orientation Programme.</p>
Careers Office	The Careers Service works with students at the start of their career journey and provides opportunities for students to transition successfully into the world of work after graduation. Services include CV Clinics, Preparation for the World of Work, Class work on topics such as Career Planning and Decision Making, One-to-one/group career guidance and career planning, Online careers resources, Mentoring programme and an online vacancy system.
Counselling & Personal Development	The Counselling and Personal Development Service is a professional and confidential service that is available free of charge to all DCU students. The service offers one-to-one counselling, expert support and input to students when in a crisis and specialist help on a wide range of personal growth, psychological health and developmental issues.
Disability & Learning Support Service (DLSS) [see overleaf for more details on services available]	<p>The DLSS promotes equality of access and opportunities in DCU for learners with disabilities, long-term medical conditions and/or specific learning difficulties. The DLSS is one of a number of support services within DCU SS&D committed to promoting an environment that encourages students to reach their academic goals and develop personally and professionally during their time at the University. The DLSS put in place a wide range of supports to meet individual learning needs. These supports include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Exam Supports – including smaller exam room, low distraction room, extra time, use of laptop — Assistive Technology – specialist software & apps — Personal/Academic Assistant - including note taking — 1-1 Academic Support – Individual sessions with an Occupational Therapist — Orientation specifically for 1st year students with a disability
Chaplaincy - Inter Faith Centre	The Chaplains promote spirituality, provide hospitality and offer a confidential space for students in need of support or a confidential ear.
INTRA Work Placement Unit	The INTRA (INtegrated TRaining) Unit is responsible for organising work placements, which are a mandatory feature of many degree programmes in DCU. Work placements range from 2 to 12 months in duration, depending on the degree in question. The INTRA placement integrates the student’s academic study with a work placement provided by an employer from a relevant industry. The experience greatly enhances students’ prospects of securing a job offer upon graduation.
Sports Development Unit	The Sports Development Service is responsible for the development of student sport in DCU. The programmes focus on developing sporting opportunities for all students, from the recreational sports person, to talented athletes who wish to perform and compete at the pinnacle of their sport.
Student Health Centre	The Student Health Service aims to provide students with quality primary health care and education about healthy lifestyles. This is delivered in a caring, compassionate and confidential manner. The Health Service provides students with a GP medical service during the academic year, which is an ‘addition’ to the student’s own family doctor or specialist medical services, and a walk-in Nurses Consultations service during opening hours. The nurse will assess any student presenting with an urgent problem and, if necessary, refer on to the doctor.

General supports Available for All-Campus Population

- Student Support & Development services, particularly Health Centre and Counselling
- Student Learning (online, group and individual support in areas such as study skills, time management, assignment writing etc.)
- Educational Psychologist as part of the Student Learning team
- Orientation and Discover DCU programmes to support settling into college.
- Writing Centre

Students registering with the DLSS can avail of the following, based on their needs:

- Pre-entry support and consultation with Disability Officer
- Specific DLSS Orientation programme for new entrants
- Comprehensive needs assessment
- Communication of disability and accommodations to School and academics
- Support and guidance from Disability Officer throughout the semester when requested
- Exam Supports
- Individualised support from an Occupational Therapist for managing academic and social elements of college life, including executive functioning
- Access to a range of group programmes e.g. the Get Connected communication skills programme.
- Liaison of DLSS staff with other services and units within DLSS in order to best support the student.

Working with Staff

- DLSS also work to promote more inclusive practices/environments for all students, which benefit students with autism.
- DLSS makes guidelines available for staff on inclusive teaching practises, how to support students with autism, and how information on students with disabilities is distributed

Other Relevant DCU Services & Supports for Students

Students registering with the DLSS can avail of the following, based on their needs:

The Centre for Talented Youth (CTYI) at DCU

The CTYI provides enrichment courses for students with high academic ability. The Centre also offers university style courses for students of all ages and abilities. CTYI aims to allow all talented students to reach their potential both academically and socially by providing relevant and interesting challenges based on ability and interest rather than age. CTYI was established at DCU in 1992 to meet the needs of high ability students aged 6 to 17 years from Ireland and abroad. Since the first summer programme in 1993, over 35,000 students have attended or participated in programmes run by CTYI.

CoderDojo

CoderDojo is a programme run in DCU for young participants with an interest in technology.

Student Orientation at DCU

Orientation is organised to assist and guide students through their first week with DCU. It is marketed as an opportunity to do all of the following:

- Meet with DCU staff and classmates
- Adjust to new surroundings
- Locate times and venues on different sessions

With separate pages on the website for:

- Undergraduate students: [see link here](#)
- Postgraduate students: [see link here](#)
- International students: [see link here](#)

Results: Study 1

Online Survey for DCU Students with Autism

Full details of the survey materials, including Plain Language Statement (PLS) and survey instrument are presented in **Appendix 4 and 6**.

Respondent Profile

Of a total of 113 visits to the Qualtrics platform, 45 students indicated that they had been diagnosed with Autism (includes Asperger Syndrome) (Q1). Of these 45 students, all indicated that they had attended DCU for at least one semester (Q2). Two students indicated that they were less than 18 years of age (Q3) and were, therefore, ineligible to participate further. The remaining 43 confirmed that they had read and understood the PLS (PLS – see **Appendix 4**) (Q4) and indicated that they consented to taking part in the survey (Q5).

One student did not then answer any further questions, with a further 3 students providing no information other than to confirm their diagnosis. A further 13 provided only basis demographic data but did not proceed beyond the first questions on educational background. Thus, a total of 26 students proceeded to the main body of the questionnaire, but with just 17 completing all questions. Of interest, the 9 students who did not complete all questions elected not to answer the final questions requiring open-ended answers (Q40 onward).

Demographic details for these 26 students are summarised in **Table 2**. The majority were aged 18-24 years (21/26) and were male. All but 2 of the respondents were undergraduate students.

The majority were studying in the Faculty of Science and Health (12/26: 46.15%) followed the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (19.23%) with equal numbers of students with Autism studying in the Faculty of Engineering and Computing and the Institute of Education (15.38%). All students who responded were in taught programmes. Twenty seven percent of students had obtained an Irish language exemption for entering college. The majority (92%) were full-time students.

TABLE 2: Demographic Data – Students with Autism	
AGE (YEARS)	
18 - 24	21 (11 Male, 8 Female, 2 Other)
25 - 34	
35 - 44	
STUDENT STATUS	
Undergraduate	24
1st Year	6
2nd Year	4
3rd Year	5
4th Year	9 (4 repeat)
Postgraduate	
1st Year	1
3rd Year	1
DCU FACULTY	
Institute of Education	4
Faculty of Science and Health	12
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences	5
Faculty of Engineering and Computing	4
DCU Business School	1

Diagnosis and Co-Morbidity

The majority of respondents indicated that they obtained their diagnosis during their school years [Primary School years -6/26: **23%**; Secondary School years (8/26: **31%**), but a significant proportion reported obtaining their diagnosis after leaving school (11/36: **30.56%**). Just 1 student reported having been diagnosed before the age of 5 years.

Summary data for diagnostic category and reported co-morbidities are presented in **Table 3**. As can be seen, additional difficulties were identified by a large number of students.



The majority of respondents indicated that they obtained their diagnosis during their school years

ASD DIAGNOSIS	N
Autism	1
Autism ++	4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — ADD / ADHD - x 3 — Dyslexia
Asperger's Syndrome	10
Asperger's Syndrome ++	7
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Dyslexia, Mild/General Learning Disability, — Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Generalized Anxiety Disorder — Intellectual Disability (dyscalculia) — Dyslexia, ADD / ADHD — ADD / ADHD — General anxiety disorder (with obsessive compulsive coping mechanisms); auditory processing problem; depression — Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Auditory Processing Disorder
Pervasive Development Disorder - Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS) ++	1
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Dyspraxia / DCD
Rett Syndrome	0
Childhood Disintegrative Disorder	0
Not Specified	3
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Dyspraxia / DCD, ObsessiveCompulsive Disorder

++ Additional diagnosis

Results: Study 1

Disclosure: Figure 1 shows the number of students who reported having disclosed their diagnosis of Autism to the DLSS, to other students and to members of DCU academic staff.

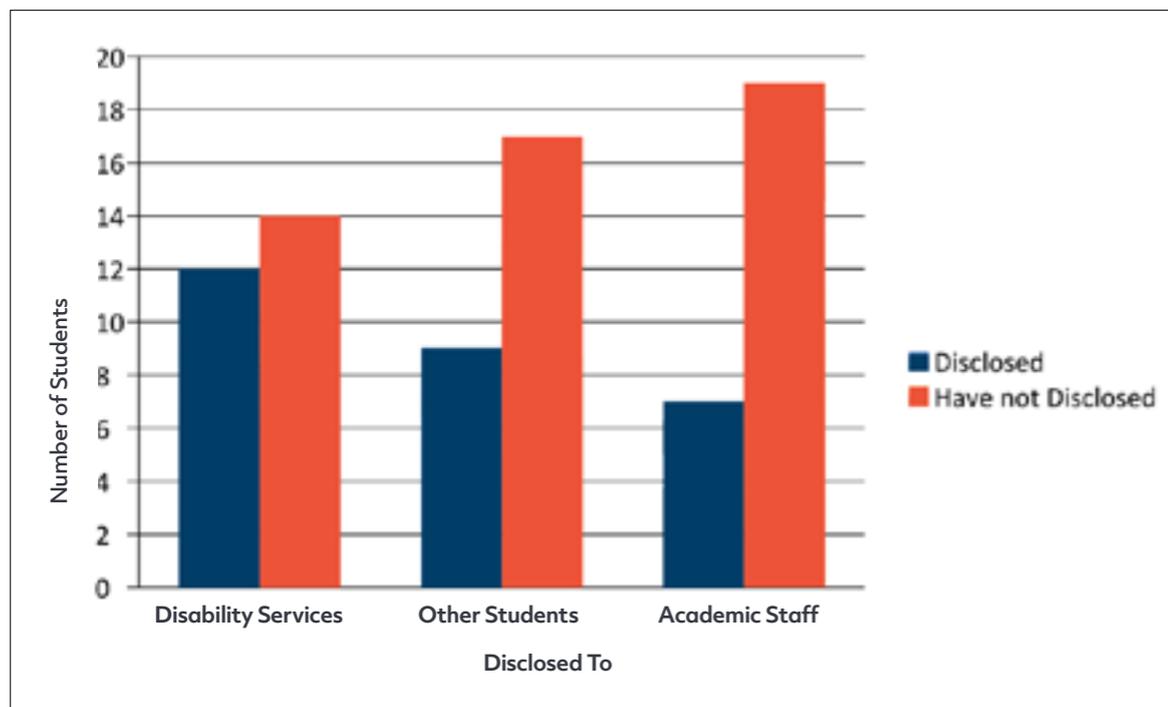


Figure 1
Disclosure patterns: number of students who have and have not disclosed their Autism diagnosis to DCU Disability and Learning Support Services, to other students and to DCU academic staff

Fourteen of the 26 students (54%) indicated that they had not disclosed their diagnosis of Autism to DCU DLSS, with only 34% disclosing prior to commencing college. Two students disclosed during their first semester with one other student disclosing at a later stage. The majority (17/26: 65%) of students had not revealed their diagnosis to fellow students.

Just 9 students had disclosed their diagnosis to other students whilst 17 had not - citing fear of stigma, discrimination, negative attitudes, discomfort and fears about lack of understanding or awareness as the main reasons for wanting to keep the diagnosis private.

Only 27% had disclosed their diagnosis to academic staff, citing stigma, discrimination, fear, isolation, embarrassment, shame and the personal nature of their condition as reasons for non-disclosure. Some doubted that disclosing would be of any benefit to them. Others said they had not had the opportunity to disclose.

Availing of Supports:

Forty-two percent of students (11/26) indicated that they had received supports from the DLSS at DCU and 8% (2/26) had linked in with Centre for Talented Youth (CTYI) offices for support. Thirty-eight percent of students had not received or sought any supports.

A small number of students had also received supports from the office of Student Services. The majority (65%) of students said that the range of supports available at DCU were adequate to meet their needs while 35% said they were not adequate.

When asked what else would support them, the sample cited a Society for students with Autism, to help them make friends and socialise and have a more involved role in DCU extra curricular life, greater involvement with the disability office, more information, conversations and awareness of the needs of persons with Autism on campus, tackling the sensory issues on campus that impact negatively on students with Autism, more overt offers of support (without having to go looking for them), support with exams, assignments, planning and organisation, quiet spaces to sit and eat at breaktimes, as the canteens can be daunting and high noise levels can lead to social isolation at break times, and more information on the supports available.

Life on Campus:

Table 4 [following page] illustrates the responses (as percentages) provided to a range of statements (see Q33) intended to gauge life on campus for students with Autism.

(65%) of students said that the range of supports available at DCU were adequate to meet their needs while 35% said they were not adequate

TABLE 4: Responses (as percentages) provided to a range of statements intended to gauge perceptions of life on campus for students with Autism. The numbers of students who responded to that statement are depicted as N.

#	QUESTION	N	STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	SOMEWHAT AGREE	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE	DISAGREE SUBTOTALS	AGREE SUBTOTALS
1	I enjoy life at DCU	26	7.69	11.54	15.38	15.38	3.85	23.08	23.08	34.61	50.01
2	I have the academic skills to attend DCU	26	7.69	3.85	11.54	0.00	3.85	26.92	46.15	23.08	76.92
3	I have the social skills to succeed at University	26	15.38	7.69	26.92	3.85	26.92	7.69	11.54	49.99	46.15
4	I find it easy to live with my roommates	9	11.11	11.11	11.11	11.11	0.00	11.11	44.44	33.33	55.55
5	I have made new friends in college	26	11.54	7.69	0.00	0.00	30.77	26.92	23.08	19.23	80.77
6	I knew some people studying in DCU before I came	26	23.08	26.92	7.69	0.00	3.85	30.77	7.69	57.69	42.31
7	I feel able to advocate for myself in DCU	26	11.54	19.23	7.69	15.38	19.23	19.23	7.69	38.46	46.15
8	I have a good routine around study and assignments (both in terms of how often and how effective)	25	16.00	28.00	12.00	8.00	12.00	12.00	12.00	56	36
9	I eat alone in the cafeteria by choice	22	9.09	13.64	4.55	9.09	13.64	36.36	13.64	27.28	63.64
10	I have friends that often contact me outside of DCU	26	11.54	11.54	11.54	7.69	19.23	23.08	15.38	34.62	57.69
11	I spend my spare time alone by choice	26	3.85	19.23	0.00	15.38	19.23	23.08	19.23	23.08	61.54
12	I find it easy to participate in group work during class	26	23.08	30.77	15.38	3.85	7.69	11.54	7.69	69.23	26.92
13	I prefer to spend time in quiet places on campus	26	3.85	3.85	3.85	3.85	3.85	34.62	46.15	11.55	84.62
14	It is easy to ask questions and seek guidance from lecturers	26	34.62	15.38	7.69	7.69	11.54	19.23	3.85	57.69	34.62
15	It is easy to get support or information from DCU Support services	24	20.83	12.50	4.17	16.67	8.33	16.67	20.83	37.5	45.83
16	I find attending lectures stressful	26	7.69	7.69	15.38	11.54	11.54	26.92	19.23	30.76	57.69
17	I find it easy to keep up in lectures	26	7.69	11.54	11.54	3.85	23.08	30.77	11.54	30.77	65.39
18	I find the campus overwhelming	26	7.69	26.92	15.38	7.69	15.38	7.69	19.23	49.99	42.3
19	I get grades which reflect my personal abilities	26	23.08	23.08	19.23	11.54	7.69	11.54	3.85	65.39	23.08

Table 4, Continued

TABLE 4: Responses (as percentages) provided to a range of statements intended to gauge perceptions of life on campus for students with Autism. The numbers of students who responded to that statement are depicted as N.

#	QUESTION	N	STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	SOMEWHAT AGREE	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE	DISAGREE SUBTOTALS	AGREE SUBTOTALS
21	I feel lonely in DCU	26	3.85	19.23	15.38	11.54	7.69	15.38	26.92	38.46	49.99
22	I enjoy living away from home	11	9.09	9.09	9.09	9.09	0.00	27.27	36.36	27.27	63.63
23	I talk to other students who are in my class	26	0.00	7.69	11.54	7.69	26.92	38.46	7.69	19.23	73.07
24	I manage my time effectively	26	11.54	30.77	15.38	15.38	7.69	15.38	3.85	57.69	26.92
25	I can cope effectively with stress and anxiety	26	38.46	7.69	15.38	7.69	19.23	3.85	7.69	61.53	30.77
26	My Secondary School supported me in preparing to transition to University	23	47.83	13.04	4.35	8.70	8.70	8.70	8.70	65.22	26.1
27	I have difficulty learning abstract information	26	26.92	7.69	23.08	7.69	19.23	3.85	11.54	57.69	34.62
28	I find it easy to focus when I am studying	26	15.38	15.38	26.92	15.38	3.85	19.23	3.85	57.68	26.93
29	I find college teaching staff knowledgeable about Autism	21	14.29	23.81	9.52	42.86	0.00	4.76	4.76	47.62	9.52
30	I find college services staff (Library, Eatery, Estates) knowledgeable about Autism	19	15.79	21.05	15.79	47.37	0.00	0.00	0.00	52.63	0
31	I feel isolated in DCU	26	11.54	15.38	3.85	7.69	19.23	23.08	19.23	30.77	61.54
32	I generally feel depressed	26	11.54	11.54	11.54	3.85	7.69	15.38	38.46	34.62	61.53
33	I have previously dropped out of college	22	59.09	9.09	4.55	0.00	0.00	13.64	13.64	72.73	27.28
34	I have thought of dropping out of DCU	26	23.08	3.85	3.85	3.85	15.38	11.54	38.46	30.78	65.38
35	People ignore me in DCU	26	3.85	30.77	7.69	11.54	15.38	23.08	7.69	42.31	46.15
36	There are internship opportunities through my University that are tailored to my needs	18	33.33	11.11	5.56	27.78	11.11	5.56	5.56	50	22.23
37	Final Year Students Only - I feel I get enough support in constructing a CV to prepare for a job	11	36.36	0.00	0.00	27.27	9.09	27.27	0.00	36.36	36.36
38	Final Year Students Only - I feel I receive adequate support from the Careers Service in DCU to transition to employment	11	36.36	18.18	0.00	27.27	9.09	9.09	0.00	54.54	18.18

Results: Study 1

Figure 2 summarises student’s ratings of their social experience at DCU (Q34). As can be seen, although responses were obtained from just 17 students, responses ranged across the rating scale. Of note, a significant number of students provided ratings that indicate a negative experience.

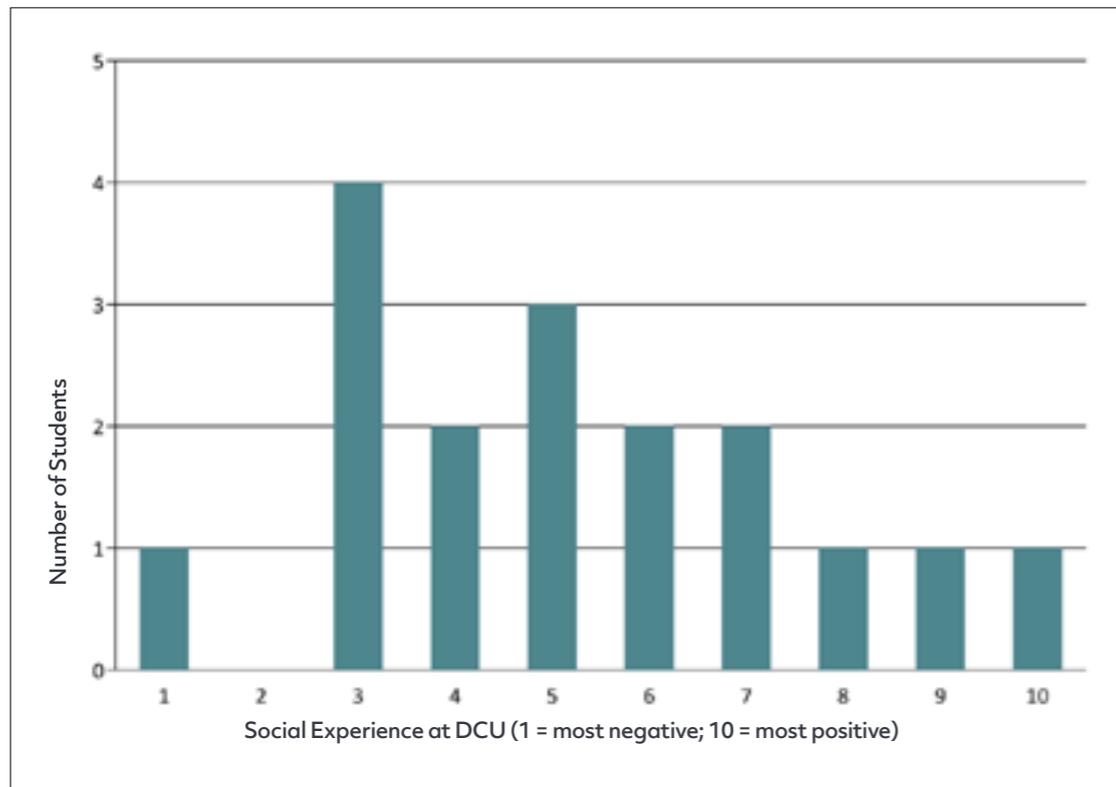


Figure 2: Students with Autism ratings of their social experience at DCU on a scale of 1-10 (where 10 is the most positive and 1 is the most negative).

TABLE 5: Most difficult things about social interaction or socialising on campus – ranked ordered by most frequently selected among individual top 3.

#	ANSWER	% OF SAMPLE SELECTING #	COUNT
2	Talking to people	47.00	8
6	Not knowing what to expect	41.10	7
3	Meeting people with similar interests	35.20	6
7	Being part of a group	35.20	6
8	Initiating a conversation	29.40	5
9	Maintaining a conversation	23.53	4
5	The venue is unsuitable to my sensory needs	17.65	3
1	Finding the venue or location of event	11.76	2
11	Other, Please explain	11.76	2
4	Meeting people who understand my needs	5.88	1
10	When Times and locations change	5.88	1

TABLE 6: Most difficult things about social interaction or socialising on campus – ranked ordered by most frequently selected among individual top 3.

#	ANSWER	% OF SAMPLE SELECTING #	COUNT
1	Finding the venue or location of event	70.59	12
3	Meeting people with similar interests	41.18	7
7	Being part of a group	35.29	6
9	Maintaining a conversation	35.29	6
2	Talking to people	29.41	5
5	The venues are suitable to my sensory needs.	23.53	4
8	Initiating a conversation	17.65	3
10	When Times and locations change	17.65	3
11	Other – Please explain	5.88	1
4	Meeting people who understand my needs	0.00	0
6	Not knowing what to expect	0.00	0

Improving Social Experience:

When asked whether the University could do anything to improve the social experience of students with Autism, some participants thought that the university already did enough to help students to socialise. This view was exemplified by the following remark:

“I think the university has more than enough clubs and societies and tries to promote their activities throughout campus by funding them. There is a society for almost anything and it is not hard to find a group of people that are open to meet and interact with new people and who share similar interests throughout campus thanks to the amount of societies available”.

Others thought that the college could help them to socialise, but had no specific suggestions as to how this might be achieved.

Still others indicated a number of things the university could do. Among the suggestions were:

- To increase the amount of group work for students as this would provide an opportunity to socialise students.
- To educate class reps about helping people with social problems who are feeling isolated.
- Lessen the workload or spread the workload more evenly throughout the semester to make more time for socialising.
- Offer more support and actively appear to try to help students.
- Try to organise more frequent buses to certain areas.

Two students identified physical aspects of the university that were problematic. One indicated that the library is not suited to the sensory needs of autistic people, stating that it is often too bright and noisy such that it can be stressful to even be there. The other student stated that social venues are high arousal from a sensory perspective and are unpleasant at times. Finally, one student indicated that it was their responsibility alone to look after themselves.

When asked whether the Student’s Union or the Clubs and Societies could do anything to improve the social experience at DCU (Q38), some students did not think that the Student Union or the Clubs and Societies could help them socialise.

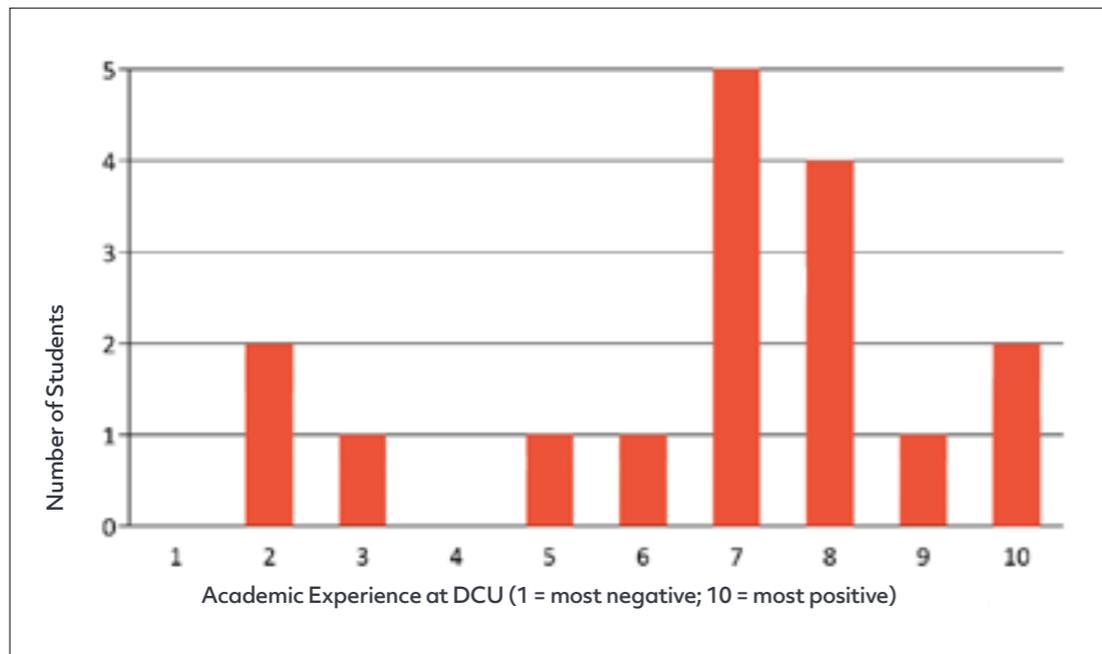
Others suggested:

- More events earlier in the day as it can be awkward to get to and from DCU, especially for those who do not drive
- Holding workshops regarding interaction and socialising with other students and within Clubs and Societies.
- Hosting smaller events for people with Autism and greater effort to integrate people with Autism into the Clubs and Societies.
- Increasing awareness, possibly a society for students with Autism, and more information on the DCU disability services.



Academic Experience of DCU

Figure 3 illustrates how students with Autism rated their academic experience of DCU (Q39) on a scale of 1-10 (where 10 is the most positive and 1 is the most negative).



As can be seen in **Figure 3**, a significant proportion of students rated their academic experience highly. However, for others, the rating was negative.

When asked about the most difficult things about academic work in DCU (Q40), many students said that they find it very difficult to manage their time due to tight deadlines, social/familial engagements, work, or the volume of work required. Indeed, one student suggested that at times they consider it “better not to go to lectures at all and just stay at home reading and getting assignments done” and another indicated that “some lecturers seem to forget that we have more than one module that we have to do work for”.

A number of students felt that their lecturers could be insensitive to their students’ mental health issues, or that they did not allocate enough time to their students and could be quite dismissive.

One student mentioned that they find lectures mentally and physically draining due to the sensory environment around them. Another mentioned that some of their peers do not seem to take their academic work as seriously as others, which can hinder students in a group setting. Also mentioned by a student was their lack of core academic skills: e.g. not knowing how to write an assignment or a written project resulting in becoming overwhelmed and not submitting the required work. Finally, a student mentioned their difficulty motivating themselves to complete tasks they lack interest in.

A number of students felt that their lecturers could be insensitive to their students’ mental health issues, or that they did not allocate enough time to their students and could be quite dismissive

Results: Study 1

When asked about the best or easiest things about academic work in DCU (Q41), students responded with a range of comments. Among these were:

- Working alone / Independent work
- Being able to submit work digitally / online
- Supervisory support
- Emails and Loop to help with structure and routine
- Being able to bounce ideas off friends - can make doing assignments and studying easier
- Understanding lecturers, who try to accommodate problems caused by anxiety and depression
- Talking to lecturers about coursework and other academic issues.
- Helpful and knowledgeable Lecturers, who are clearly interested in their job.
- Assignments are clear and teachers often try to find out how far along are you on a particular assignment and guide you whenever you have some doubts about them.
- Clear marking scheme - reduces stress.
- Lectures that have a good CA test and an end of semester test balance.
- Motivating myself to complete tasks I am interested in
- Huge range of modules available to students.

“There is a general atmosphere of prioritising your work over your social life which is what attracted me to DCU when I was picking CAO courses.”

One student commented that, “There is a general atmosphere of prioritising your work over your social life which is what attracted me to DCU when I was picking CAO courses.”

When asked “What could the University do to improve your academic experience?”, one student felt that the university could not do much more than it is already doing. Three students indicated that they were unsure as to what the university could do, whilst 2 indicated that this issue did not apply.

The remaining students offered a number of suggestions as follows:

- Provide more support and guidelines for students with Autism.
- Provide greater range in learning/teaching methods and academic supports for people with disabilities.
- Offer different types of assessment (with one student indicating that they have difficulty writing essays but perform very well in exams).
- Notably, another student indicated that the university should increase number of modules with CA components and made the CA a more significant portion of the mark (with the student indicating that exams do not suit all students).
- Spread the workload more evenly throughout the semester.
- Drop group work (with the student indicating that group work consistently causes them stress and drags their grade down).
- Be more flexible (with the student indicating that they were not offered a resit opportunity for a missed in-class test – adding greatly to levels of upset and stress).
- Fix overcrowded and noisy lectures/computer labs/science labs.
- Remove intense time pressure in laboratory.
- Offer far more varied accounts of peoples’ experiences of college (like people of different academic levels, people who commute, people who repeated etc).

Finally, two students indicated that they felt lecturers did not treat students very well. When asked “What could lecturers do to improve your academic experience? (Q43), student responses were mixed. One student commented that lecturers are “doing as well as they can - so nothing” Other students (n=6) indicated that they were not sure what lecturers could do to improve their academic experience (n=4) or that no improvement was needed. In contrast, 4 students commented that some lecturers could be rude, intimidating and/or dismissive.

Among the key suggestions for improvement were:

- Maybe some could post more notes on Loop.
- Lecture notes that emphasis the important points
- Be more proactive about Loop / make greater use of Loop
- Explain assignments more clearly
- Work with students that are having difficulties with assessments more

Securing Job / Internship or Work Experience

When asked “What are the most difficult things about getting a job / internship or work experience?, two students indicated that they did not think that there was anything difficult about finding work, with one even describing it as “unnervingly easy”. Two others indicated that this question was not applicable in their case. Others reported a range of difficulties as follows:

- Making a good first impression, with the student commenting: “I am not good at first impressions and internships/getting a job and what-not are based around first impressions”.
- “The anxiety of sending CVs and Cover letters”.
- “Stress of meeting new people/interviewer and contacting people; Interviews; not knowing what will happen if you don't find an Intra placement”.
- “Figuring out how to talk to different people on different levels in the job's hierarchy”.
- Dealing with change, with the student commenting: “the starting process of getting into a new way of life”.
- Reliance on social abilities, with the student commenting, “They rely on a lot of social abilities I don't necessarily have”.
- “Getting interviews”.

In relation to identifying the best or easiest things about getting a job / internship or work experience, 17 students provided a response. Of these, some students dealt with the process. Others addressed the question by reference to personal experiences and attributes.

In relation to the process, students indicated that the best or easiest things about getting a job / internship or work experience were:

- “The application process was well explained beforehand”.
- “Applying for internships is very simple”.
- “Placements are found for us”.

Among the comments provided by those who identified personal attributes and experiences, were:

- “I am a dedicated person so I can manage to learn quickly when I am given a chance”.
- “Its great working in a school”.
- “New skills”.
- “The actual work”.
- “I am very good at organisational tasks, i.e., cleaning, keeping an area neat and tidy”.
- “Meaningful employment”.

Another indicated that the best thing was having money for independence.

When asked “if DCU could do anything to improve your employment/ internship or work experience, what are they?” the 11 students who responded provided a number of suggestions. Among the suggestions were:

- Provide more information, with 1 student suggesting provision of more information in general and another suggesting that the INTRA job descriptions might be streamlined – more information on job requirements, location, and company culture.
- “help with creating a CV as well as help with finding jobs that would be suited for me”.
- “...it was hard to tell what I'd even be doing at certain jobs, let alone if they were a good fit. Not exactly DCU's fault though as the intra people are probably busy enough as it is”.

Of interest, most students who responded were unsure about how DCU could improve their employment/internship or work experience.



Advantages to being a college student with Autism

Seven of the 17 students (41%) indicated that there were advantages to being a college student with Autism and when asked to explain what these advantages were, 5 students identified their ability to focus attention and their attention to detail (citing the following: I can cram well, Can study or work for hours without needing a break or losing focus, Intellect and hyper focus, Exclusive focus/concentration when indicated, highly developed attention to detail). Two students cited their fascination with their subject (science; languages, which help in terms of enjoying study). One of these students indicated: "Because I am so interested in my course, I genuinely enjoy carrying out extra research in my own time which helps me develop my skills faster."

Perceptions of DCU

A further question asked students to indicate what they like about DCU. Of the 17 students who answered this question, several mentioned that they like the campus and location of the university. They said that the community as a whole was very friendly and accepting. A couple of students also mentioned that the disability office staff were very nice and friendly. Others mentioned that they liked how many clubs and societies there were, and how easy it was to find people with similar interests. One student said that they don't like anything about DCU. More specifically, student responses identified:

- "Nice campus".
- "Small campus size; good travel links".
- "Plenty of places to meet people with similar interests".
- "Very good lecturers for the most part".
- "The library and location".
- "Students' Union".
- Fellow Students, with one student commenting that "DCU is a university that has a diverse number of students and plenty of options to interact with new people and get to know them".
- The people, with students commenting: "People talking to each other" "People in DCU are mostly very friendly", "the friendly atmosphere in many clubs and societies".
- "Friendly disability office".
- "Campus Accomodation".

One student indicated that the thing they liked most was the fact that DCU was close to their home, which another student's experience was summarised as follows:

"I could talk for a hundred years about why I love DCU. Rarely have I felt so relaxed in an atmosphere that emphasises the importance of hard work. Everyone here is so welcoming and warm, from the students right up to the president. I feel accepted here. I feel like here is the perfect place I can become the best graduate I possibly can."

- A Student with Autism at DCU, 2017



Greatest Challenges

When asked to identify the greatest challenges faced as a student with Autism in DCU, a number of difficulties were identified by the 16 students who responded. Responses ranged from "Everything" to very specific issues. Among the specific issues identified were:

- "The 3-hour breaks in my schedule".
- "Difficulty with organisation - of schedule, study etc".
- "Difficulty sleeping".
- Socialising, with one student indicating that they "only talk to people in my course because of being in groups with them for assignments" and another saying: "Socialising is really difficult. Even if I'm having a regular conversation with a friend, I still get the feeling that I'm saying the wrong thing."
- Social isolation, with a student commenting: "People who are social can ask their friends for help or missed lecture notes if they were out or figure out problems together." Another student identified, "trying not to feel alone or overwhelmed".
- Difficulty getting to know others: with one student commenting: "It is at times hard to make an impression on someone you meet and at times you can see groups of friends forming at events all around you while you struggle to get to know people". Another commented: "Being alone and being out of the loop".
- Finding a partner for labs or group projects, which a student identified as "a daunting experience".
- Staying in control of everything that is happening, which a student identified as "constantly overwhelming".
- Sensory difficulties – with one student indicating that current noise levels were too much and another indicating that noise levels can sometimes be too much: ".....especially when there is an open-day or an event that has more people in the building than usual".
- "Dismissive people; ignorant people, time wasters".
- "Having to interact with people as if I didn't have Autism".
- "The less practical modules".
- "The business of campus".

Personal Strengths

When asked "What are your greatest strengths you have as a college student with Autism in DCU?", some students felt that their strengths lay in academia, as their work was received well, and their friends benefited from talking to them about the work. Others said that they found it easy to concentrate and work well. One student felt that their greatest strength was that they weren't worried about fitting in. Another student said that their sleeping pattern was better than other students, which benefitted them. Some students also felt that their dedication and interest in their subjects were their greatest strength. Among the personal strengths identified were:

- "I'm interested".
- "Resilience".
- "I'm not worried about fitting in".
- "Ability to focus for long periods of time".
- "Intellect, detachment and single-mindedness".
- "Zoning others out when I have to concentrate".
- "Most lecturers like my assignments".
- "I dislike going out, so I have a better sleep routine than most students".
- "When friends don't understand lecture notes and I do I tend to explain it in a logical way that they understand".
- "My fascination in science and my extensive knowledge in many fields of science".
- "Dedication".



Results: Study 2

Survey of General Student Body

A total of 305 students indicated that they had read and understood the study Plain Language Statement (see Appendix 4) and consented to take part in the study. However, 78 did not then complete the vignette study, leaving a total of 227 valid responses.

Figure 4 presents summary data for these 227 students. Data are also summarised in Table 7. As can be seen from these data, responses ranged from **Strongly Disagree** to **Strongly Agree** for each of the 8 statements, reflecting a wide range of attitudes and beliefs in this student sample.

Responses generally reflect positive rather than negative attitudes and beliefs. On **Item #1**: This person makes me feel afraid - the majority of student responses fell into the **Strongly Disagree** and **Disagree** categories (58.59% and 33.48% respectively), with just 5/227 students indicating that they **Agree** (n=1) or **Strongly Agree** (n=4).

On **Item #2**: This person is probably as smart as I am, **#3**: I would not mind this person living in my apartment building, **#4**: I would hang out with this person in my free time, **#5**: I would feel comfortable around this person, and **#8**: Overall, I think I would like Jamie as a person, the majority of students expressed positive beliefs, as demonstrated by responses in the **Agree** and **Strongly Agree** categories [**#2**: 78.41%; **#3**: 73.57%; **#4**: 53.51%; **#5**: 69.61%; **#8**: 78.85%. There were, however, still significant numbers of students who indicated that

Figure 4

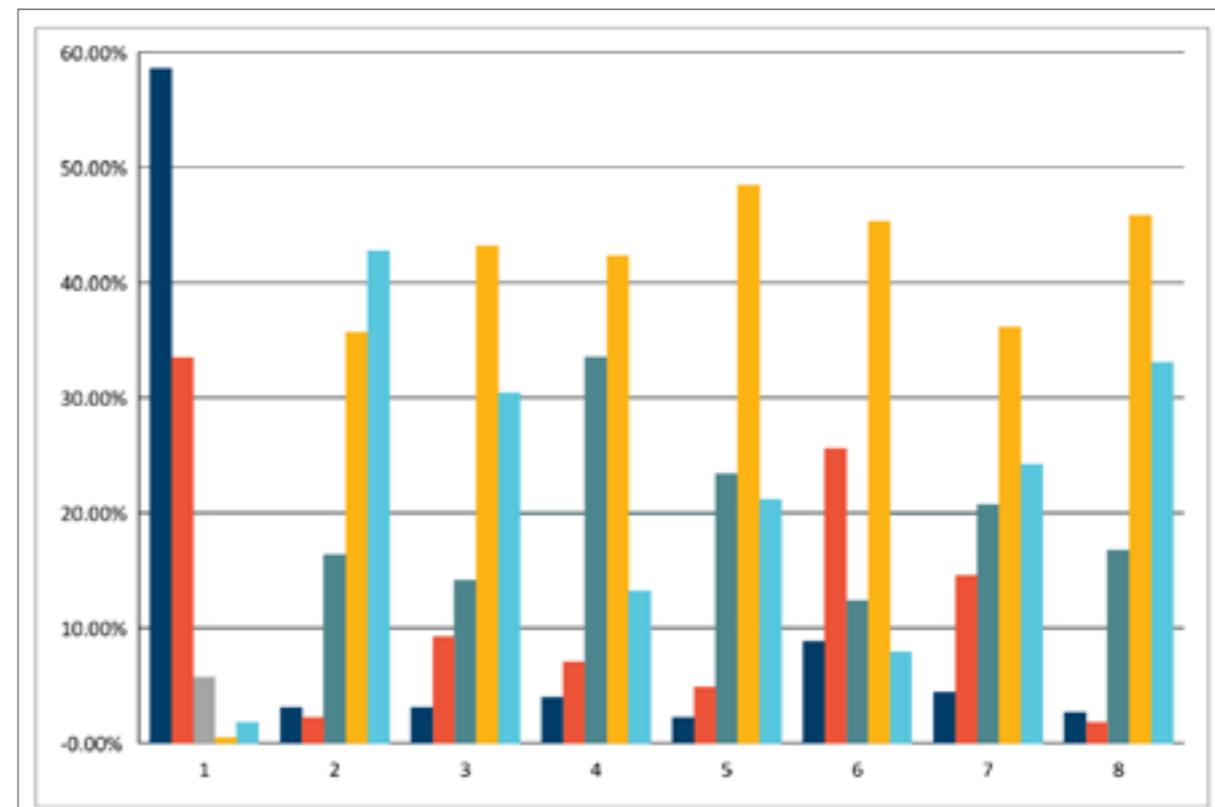


Figure 4: Responses to vignette - general student survey (n=227).

*Responses to Items 6 and 7 were more nuanced, likely reflecting some ambiguity in terms of the statement.

In response to **Item #6**: This person is different from me, a total of 78/227 (34.36%) students disagreed [**Strongly Disagree**: 8.81%; **Disagree**: 25.55%], 28/227 (12.33%) indicated that they did not know, whilst 121 (53.3%) agreed [**Agree**: 45.37%, **Strongly Agree**: 7.93%].

In response to **Item #7**: I think this person would be able to apply for the same jobs as me, a total of 43/227 (18.94%) students disagreed [**Strongly Disagree**: 4.41%; **Disagree**: 14.54%], 47/227 (20.70%) indicated that they did not know, whilst 129 (60.35%) agreed [**Agree**: 36.12%; **Strongly Agree**: 24.23%].

TABLE 7: Vignette study responses

#	QUESTION	STRONGLY DISAGREE	N	DISAGREE	N	DON'T KNOW	N	AGREE	N	STRONGLY AGREE	N
1	This person makes me feel afraid.	58.59	133	33.48	76	5.73	13	0.44	1	1.76	4
2	This person is probably as smart as I am.	3.08	7	2.20	5	16.30	37	35.68	81	42.73	97
3	I would not mind this person living in my apartment building.	3.08	7	9.25	21	14.10	32	43.17	98	30.40	69
4	I would hang out with this person in my free time.	3.96	9	7.05	16	33.48	76	42.29	96	13.22	30
5	I would feel comfortable around this person.	2.20	5	4.85	11	23.35	53	48.46	110	21.15	48
6	This person is different from me.	8.81	20	25.55	58	12.33	28	45.37	103	7.93	18
7	I think this person would be able to apply for the same jobs as me.	4.41	10	14.54	33	20.70	47	36.12	82	24.23	55
8	Overall, I think I would like Jamie as a person.	2.64	6	1.76	4	16.74	38	45.81	104	33.04	75

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Knowledge of and Experience with Students with Autism

Some members of the academic staff focus group had professional expertise and/or personal experience of people with Autism and knew a lot about the topic. Others had contact with students with ASD, but felt ill-equipped to deal with some situations they found themselves in. Participants were clearly keen to support students and made suggestions as to what support they would require to do this (see below).

When discussing their experiences of dealing with students with Autism, it was clear that the academics were aware of the diversity of Autism. Participants agreed that every student with Autism is unique, and that it is necessary to get to know the abilities and talents of the individual student. Among the points made was the fact that:

Participants were clearly keen to support students and made suggestions as to what support they would require to do this

Students with ASD present in a diverse range of ways

- e.g. from demanding of time and support, to having little interaction, attending few lectures but submitting work because they find sitting in a class with others difficult.
- There are differences with people with ASD, both as a group, and as individuals.

There can be a more diverse set of challenges with learning for people with ASD.

- They may, for example, be excellent at some things but find other things really challenging.

Group or collaborative learning can be difficult for a person with ASD

- “They accelerate their own learning and may become impatient with others in the group.....when given an assignment with others... it can be a huge challenge.....This can potentially impact negatively on the student with ASD and the students they are working with”.

Teaching practice or INTRA placements could pose challenges for students with ASD, the employers and the Intra Office.

- A participant described how a student who they suspected was on the spectrum commented that the INTRA interview process favours people who are good at presenting themselves well and is unfair to those with ASD.
- Specialisterne work with the INTRA Office and employers on addressing issues related to the workplace was mentioned.

Structure and clarity is helpful

- “Setting out at the start of a module what the student can expect/the point of it/ the context is good teaching practice and works well”
- Students may have sensory difficulties





As with the academic staff focus group, knowledge and experience of people with Autism varied in the support-staff group. Experience and knowledge ranged from not being aware of having dealt directly with a student with Autism and wanting to know more, to having professional expertise and broad experience both in DCU and other contexts.

One participant described gaining insight and understanding from a friend who is expert in the area of Autism. This helped them to identify a person with Autism who was at risk from the possible consequences of extreme anxiety and enabled staff to respond, with the support of the DLSS, and get the person the medical attention required. Another participant, as far as they were aware, has never met a student with Autism and expressed an interest in how many people there are in DCU with Autism, how they might recognise them and how they could help.

As part of the discussion related to what participants know about students with Autism, a range of issues relating to disclosure was discussed and participants returned to the issue of disclosure throughout the focus group discussions. The consensus was that whilst it is a student's right not to disclose, students can benefit from a range of supports when they do disclose.

Experience and knowledge ranged from not being aware of having dealt directly with a student with Autism, to having professional expertise and broad experience

Among the points made by the academics in relation to disclosure were the fact that:

"Statistically, there had to be more students with ASD in DCU than they are aware of".

"It is a student's right not to disclose, even if it has consequences for the student".

- This appeared to be accepted and understood by the group.
- **"Some students with ASD will not want to engage and we can't force them".**
- Here, there was an understanding that social interaction in itself can be a source of stress.

There are benefits to the student who discloses.

- Staff are keen to support students.
- If staff are aware, they can put supports in place.
- If academics are aware, they can make accommodations as appropriate and are able to help students who are struggling -
- **"Our default is we want to support..... remind students of that..... that's where we are coming from..... if we don't..... it's not out of any badness ... so please do remind us!..... it's just we have that many students and draws on our time....."**

Early disclosure allows staff to react and support students at an early stage.

- At times, staff are only aware of diagnosis a couple of weeks into term and the student may have been struggling.
- At times, the DLSS will not know if first year students have an issue until a few weeks into term.

Some students are not disclosing at all, or may, in fact, not have been diagnosed.

Failure to disclose occurs for many reasons:

- **"A person with ASD might never disclose because of people's reaction e.g. 'speaking slowly to me'. Being perceived as a 'weirdo' is preferable to being seen as having a mental handicap".**

Awareness raising is hugely important

- “people can be open about dyslexia or a physical handicap but ASD still has a stigma attached”.

The balance between confidentiality/need-to-know basis and trying to help a student is difficult.

- A Programme Chair may know of students registered with the DLSS as having ASD, and possibly other issues also, but it is not clear whether and to what extent this information might be shared.

Where students do not disclose, staff have difficulty recognising students with ASD

- “What are we supposed to do? We are not clinicians”

An Autism Awareness Campaign should encourage students to disclose and to seek support

- “e.g. if writing an essay, remind the lecturer if you have a particular issue”.

Concept of inclusion is not working properly – labelling still exists

- “if inclusion was working properly at second level, this wouldn't be an issue. but the whole issue of labelling still exists”.

In relation to disclosure, experiences varied for participants in the support staff focus group, with their role being an influencing factor. As noted in the first focus group, a person with Autism may be registered with the DLSS, or they may decide not to disclose. Participants also had experience of dealing with people who did not have a diagnosis of Autism [but were suspected of being on the spectrum].

As with the first focus group, the issue of benefits of disclosure in terms of accessing services and supports was raised and this group also recognised that many students do not disclose. Participants noted that students rarely appear to disclose directly, other than to the DLSS. Where information on students registered with the DLSS is shared with other Units, it has been very helpful in terms of helping to meet students' needs.

In relation to disclosure, experiences varied for participants in the support staff focus group, with their role being an influencing factor

Participants described situations where, in the absence of disclosure, they were relying on making assumptions based on behaviour and making allowances accordingly.

Non- or late-disclosure can mean that staff cannot help as much as they could if they knew.

Students worry that if they disclose it might affect the sort of work placement they get or that they would be discriminated against.

- Participants were clear that it does not influence placements

The degree of disclosure a person is comfortable with may vary. some may not want to disclose in a CV or at interview - the placement services can help with this.

- Participants realise that disclosure is a personal choice - disclosure is encouraged, but it is the individual's choice.

Participants described developing strategies to help individual students who did not disclose, but who were having difficulties.

- e.g. mock interviews to address issues with eye contact, supporting students to deal with the stress of moving for a job, transport to and from placements, company ethos and nuance etc.

Students with Autism often do very well on work placements and are sought after by employers although they may not realise this.





Issues that Arise in Engaging with Students with ASD

In opening this aspect of the discussion, a member of the academic staff focus group pointed out that it has to be recognised that there is a resource issue and it is difficult to ensure that everything runs smoothly – “people are stretched and things don’t always work perfectly”.

A participant made the point that once someone does disclose, they need guidance on how to deal with that disclosure. They described how they need guidelines (the dyslexia guidelines for grading were mentioned as a good example). Without these, disclosure could be a negative experience all round.

Another identified how, in their experience, communication difficulties or other issues can manifest as challenging behaviour and a participant described feeling “horrendously ill-equipped” to deal with a situation unfolding in front of them, when a student had an outburst in class and described having had no idea what to do. They stated: “I need some tools to be able to deal with it”. Another described a difficult scenario that escalated and identified how there is need for support on how to deal with such situations.

“People are stretched and things don’t always work perfectly”

Several key issues were identified by member of the Support Staff Focus Group, likely reflecting the direct experience of service provision by some group members. Among the issues identified as problematic were:

Being unaware of the student’s condition, and unable able to recognise it.

Lack of or intermittent engagement by student with the DLSS

- with the participant noting that when students engage, DLSS can support them very well.

Students not known to the DLSS

- with the participant noting that awareness raising could help here.

People can have more than one condition, or more complex needs.

Difficulty with social interaction.

Rigidity of Exams System - that present difficulties for students with special needs

- with the participant noting that perhaps this might change if there is a knowledge of the practical requirements.

Work Placement Recruitment Processes

- with the participant noting that the recruitment process in some companies is still old fashioned and HR people “can still be looking for the ‘cookie cutter’ graduate, but the company can be looking for diversity”.

Rigid application processes for employment, or even an internship screening procedures, that act as a barrier for people with Autism.

- It can be overwhelming.
- Staff are trying to address this with employers.
- Specialisterne is supporting students in navigating these processes.

It was noted that there is a wider problem in that there are virtually no supports for adults with Autism outside of the College and so the College can’t address all of the issues people may be facing. Even social supports can be stigmatising for some.

Supports Needed by Staff - to Support Students

There was a broad consensus among the academic staff that staff need guidance, information and training on how best to support people with ASD. Among the identified support needs were:

Autism Awareness Training for Academic Staff

- Lecturers need a broad understanding of how people with Autism present in education and how to support them.
- Staff need knowledge and understanding of ASD and what to do, how to react or respond.
- Participants acknowledged that DCU have good processes, policies and training in respect of lots of things. Participants mentioned that CTYI has a lot of experience with students with ASD and has practical advice to share.
- A participant mentioned a workshop that took place a few years ago on ASD that was very helpful. A video of how a person with ASD would perceive things was shown.
- It was suggested that training could happen at a forum where staff were already gathering (e.g. as an Agenda point at a School Staff Meeting) as this would ensure engagement.
- It was felt that this would be preferable to voluntary attendance because people are so busy.
- This would also mean that everyone would have the same exposure, information and guidelines, and students will receive a consistent message, which is very important.

Autism Awareness Training for Laboratory Staff

- Demonstrators in labs would also benefit from training and support, possibly embedded in their initial orientation
- this did happen once before; DLSS provided a speaker.



There was a broad consensus among the academic staff that staff need guidance, information and training on how best to support people with ASD

Broad guidelines or an information sheet (laminated and displayed on a notice board for staff/given to every lecturer annually) with details of who to contact for advice or to whom a student can be referred.

- This could be disseminated through the Teaching Conveners in each School, who could be given a more detailed handbook.
- While it was acknowledged that this will not address every issue, there was general agreement that it would be useful.
- A list of key points on general good practice that would improve things for everyone, could make a big difference.
- Some participants mentioned useful tips like writing changes to schedules or deadlines on the board rather than only mentioning it verbally (and it was noted that this would be positive for all students).

A clear point of referral

- If staff don't know how to react, is there a role for somebody else? Another office in the University who can make a call or judgement e.g. in relation to grading/assessment. It's important to have someone to refer to 'to calibrate'.
- It was mentioned here that the DLSS is always very helpful.

Increase knowledge of available resources

- The DLSS could let staff know what resources are available to support them in dealing with students with ASD.

Additional support needs identified by staff were:

- Provide a leaflet/ briefing/workshop/video/discussion group on how to recognise and deal with a person with Autism.
- Key questions and issues that should be addressed are: how can I help or support them? How can I best meet their needs? What type of behaviour to expect, how to recognise that someone is having a problem, how to help if someone is upset.

Help with Allocating Accommodation

- DLSS provide direction on where and how to allocate accommodation for people with other special needs/ medical conditions Perhaps similar direction could be provided in relation to people with Autism?



Making DCU a More Inclusive Place for Students with Autism

Suggestions arising from the Focus Groups

- Raise Awareness about Autism among staff
- Raise Awareness about Autism among students
- Raise awareness amongst students with Autism of specific support services available
- Increase supports to students with Autism
- Support students in the social aspects of college
- Establish a mentor/buddy system
- Recognise the potential role of Clubs and Societies in terms of enhancing the experiences of students with ASD.
- Make student support systems more formal
- Help improve communication skills and increase social interaction
- Engage more with CTYI to learn from their expert experiences
- Raise awareness among others sharing accommodation of the needs of those with Autism.
- Develop a Policy Document / Policy Framework to support students on placement and their

Key Point: Improvements made in the context of being inclusive are likely to benefit all students.

Example of a good-practice model that seems to be working well – The School of Nursing and Human Sciences - described by a focus group participant

The School of Nursing and Human Sciences has a group established for students with disabilities to support them in their clinical practice. Students were presenting with issues such as dyslexia or hearing problems that impact on clinical practice, so a group, consisting of clinical-practice staff, academic staff and DLSS staff was set up to look at ways of supporting students. The group meets bi-monthly and examines issues students are having and looks for ways to make reasonable accommodations where appropriate. The student consents for the Disability Service to disclose to an academic staff member and for them to disclose to the practice co-ordinator in the hospital so they can link in to make sure the student has the accommodations they need for their placement. Occupational Therapists from the Disability Service are doing great work with these students.

A booklet has been prepared on this service model, with disclosure consent forms and this booklet can be shared with others. Trust is being built with the students and the initiative is impacting positively and changing attitudes in the workplace - this model is “getting everybody together and is working well”. At present, this sort of model is not in place in other participant’s Departments/Schools.

[\[Insert link to PDF here\]](#)

Results: Interviews

Each of the interviewees detailed their experiences of dealing with students with Autism. As might be expected, experiences differed substantially depending on role. What was apparent was a shared desire to increase levels of knowledge, engagement and service provision for students with ASD. Presented below (quotes in italics) is a summary of suggestions in relation to increasing how DCU could become a more inclusive place for students with Autism.



1. Students' Union Interviewee

Increase Autism awareness:

- The roles of Student Support and Development Officer and Democracy and Development Officer are potential sources of neutral guidance, advice and training and could be influential in terms of an awareness campaign.
- Awareness is needed for Clubs and Societies and SU Officers and could be provided as part of their training.
- Class representative training, provided by the SU over two days, would be another possible way of raising awareness/offering training/briefing.

Avoid seeing ASD as a mental-health issue:

- Clearly, mental health is a huge issue of concern and awareness is a good thing. The implications of seeing ASD as a mental health issue alone should be considered in the context of planning the ASD campaign. It is important that ASD is seen as a separate issue, although clearly it could impact on mental health.

Consider appropriate methods of dissemination of information about ASD

- Fliers do not work, they are too common, and people don't read them.
- Online videos work well and interviewee recommends working with student groups to disseminate information to the student body.
- "It will be ignored if it's from a body they don't recognise".
- Note: it was indicated that the Students' Union would be open to helping with dissemination, possible through the Marketing and Communications role.

Engage with Student Ambassadors

- Student Ambassadors are very committed and would take the issue of raising Autism Awareness very seriously - engaging them would be a good idea.

Consider timing of information provision:

- Perhaps use Orientation week - All students/ courses receive a talk from their own Schools, a talk on student life/getting involved and a talk in the Helix from the President of the College and Head of Security.
- The Business School does a two-day team building session called the BES programme and it works well.

Identify / provide quiet space and advise students accordingly:

- The 'Mezz' in the SU is a quiet space, as it's underused.
- There is an Interfaith space, which is mainly used by international students.
- In relation to the campus, the facilitator explained some of the difficulties that people with ASD might have and asked for input in relation to suggestions made by other.
- Interviewee's view was that having classes on multiple campuses is not a major issue for students and that an App [to help with directions] would be a good idea.

If guidelines are provided to staff on dealing with people with ASD, it should address over compensation and inappropriate support.

Look at Student Support Models

- The School of Nursing and Human Sciences model of supporting students with disabilities (described by a participant in the academic staff focus group) is working well and is hugely helpful.
- Component from first year onwards, this will have implications for support requirements.

Raise Awareness in relation to Autism among students.

- A Disability Service speaker at orientation works very well.
- If considering a buddy or mentor system, there is a need to be mindful of how this is structured so as not to change the dynamics to 'there's the student I look after'.

Improve campus physical environment

- More awareness of the particular needs of some students would be good.

"DARE is opening up conversations – 'yes, you can apply for teaching if you have Asperger's'"



3. CTYI Interviewee

A buddy system might work at third level, where people could sign up to do this.

Recognise sensory issues/difficulties:

- The restaurant is hectic and noisy and needs to be addressed urgently – CTYI manage and schedule meal times, have their own queue and prepay so this works well.

Increase availability of quiet space on campus

Increase supports for students with ASD

- “It makes sense to have more supports for a student with ASD in the same way as it does for a student who is blind or has another disability.”
- If DCU is promoting itself as Autism friendly, a designated support structure needs to be in place.
- People may not disclose or may not be diagnosed. People do not want to risk being stigmatised. If those who disclose are well supported by the College, it might encourage others to disclose.

Increase provision of initial support for students with ASD

- Increase support in how to use the library services
- DCU is good at this, but with large numbers, it needs to be generically covered. Perhaps students with ASD might attend for an orientation in a week before other students (as presently done with Access students) so they know the designated support structure.

Increase availability of staff and peer support:

- People are willing to help those with special needs, but this is not promoted enough, - it's not always obvious.
- Staff could sign up to being a designated support, students could sign up to be a buddy for someone with Autism.
- Look at the Access model of support – studies show that their results are better so it's working.
- If people knew how to help, they would.

Increase visibility of the role of the DLSS

Increase levels of engagement with students with ASD

- Increase opportunities for engagement – as students with ASD may not seek out the support they need

Facilitate the involvement parents of students with ASD

- “..... parents need to be involved to ensure the student is getting support. A targeted mechanism could be put in place for parents of students with ASD”.

Ensure staff diversity

- “When you have a population that includes people with ASD, then it's good they are also represented among staff.”

Consider designated Autism Service

- “DCU pioneered Access and are good at it..... so maybe they can be first to have an Autism Service in a University.
- “If DCU committed to a certain intake of students with ASD, it would justify having a dedicated staff. This could attract more students with ASD..... parents would see there's a dedicated support structure”



4. Library Staff Interviewee

Education:

- “Perhaps students would benefit from instruction in filtering out materials that are not relevant to their area of study - there is so much information available nowadays with the internet - but this applies to all students as well”.

4. Catering Staff Interviewee

Increase Autism Awareness

- “Some simple short flyers or pamphlets informing catering staff how to engage better with individuals with ASD could be very effective or short 5-minute videos outlining the main issues and strategies needed - some things like patience, answering questions, giving them time to select their choice from the menu and advising them on what’s available”

Quite spaces off the main busy areas would be very useful

- “Agreement of the level (decibels) of music would be helpful across all outlets”
- Introduce Buddy System
- “Being accompanied by a member of staff from Student Services for the first few visits to the restaurant would be very useful to some students, to help them transition to being able to go alone”.
- “Showing them the layout, where to queue, pay and how to pay would help”
- “Let them meet the chef and some staff members before they have to do it alone would be very beneficial”
- “Pre-orientation tour would be great too”

A Society for students with ASD would be great

- “...then they could have guest speakers in to talk to them - for example, the chef could do demos on 6 main meals that they could prep themselves, or a dietitian could talk to them about food groups, sugar reduction etc.”

Support with procrastination may also be needed

“Diversity – a University should reflect society with no restrictions.

We are here to make sure all students reach their potential whatever that might be”.



Results: Study 4

Sensory Audit

The sensory audit, conducted by a small number of students with Autism (n=4) and two staff members, was not intended to be an exhaustive audit of DCU but was, rather, intended to identify the types of issues that arise for students on a day-to-day basis. As part of the audit, examples of positive features of the DCU environments were also flagged. Summarised below are some notable aspects of the audit, together with a photographic record of some exemplars. For ease of summary, examples are provided by building and campus site.

✓ denotes a positive comment made about a feature or aspect of campus by a student with Autism

✗ denotes a negative comment



School of Nursing and Human Sciences Building Glasnevin Campus - Restaurant

- ✓ The restaurant benefited from the single bench along the wall.
- ✓ Students can sit and eat without looking like they are on their own.
- ✗ In terms of flooring, there is a mixture of tiles and lino, which makes it difficult for students to move chairs and it is loud when cutlery falls onto the floor.
- ✗ Noise levels are high.
- ✗ There needs to be awareness of noise levels in the restaurant space.
- ✗ It would be useful if there was a small quieter space that students could go to eat.
- ✗ Signage is not clear
- ✗ It is not obvious where you have to queue for the food or clear where to get knives and forks.
- ✗ The menus are not clearly displayed.

School of Nursing and Human Sciences Building Glasnevin Campus - Other Areas

- ✓ Room HG20 is a good example of a room.
 - ✓ There are no unnecessary signs, and the colours on the walls are muted.
 - ✓ There is minimal noise coming from the corridor.
- ✗ Noise levels in HG18 are high
 - ✗ There is a lot of noise coming from the canteen.
 - ✗ There are high pitch noises from the electrics.
 - ✗ You can hear the traffic from outside.
 - ✗ You can hear noise from the chairs in a room on the level above.
- ✗ Room HG09 is painted red, which is too bright and there is a lot of excess furniture.
- ✗ The disabled toilet door is not automatic.
 - ✗ The door closes too quickly for wheelchair access.

Results: Study 4 - Sensory Audit Glasnevin Campus



Sensory Audit: Glasnevin Campus

- ✘ Over furnished small classroom, which can be very cluttered for a student with sensory difficulties.



Sensory Audit: Glasnevin Campus
Medium size lecture hall

- ✘ Red walls can be difficult for students with sensory difficulties.



Sensory Audit: Glasnevin Campus

- ✘ The room is spacious, with low lightening and the wall coverage is muted.



Sensory Audit: Glasnevin Campus

- ✘ High degree of cigarette waste outside the main DCU restaurant building, notably on the ground next to a bin.



Sensory Audit: Glasnevin Campus
Main Restaurant

- ✘ Rotating tray-clearing system is very noisy, confusing and visually distracting.



Sensory Audit: Glasnevin Campus
Main Restaurant (at 1.15pm)

- ✘ Very crowded and noisy.



Sensory Audit: Glasnevin Campus
Main Restaurant

- ✘ Very hard surfaces on chairs - no padding
- ✘ No soft ends on the legs to reduce noise when the chairs are moved.

Results: Study 4 - Sensory Audit Glasnevin Campus

Note: The students conducting the sensory audit were aware that the Student Union building is temporary while there is building work taking place.

The following observations were made:

Glasnevin Campus - Temporary Student Union (SU) building

- ✗ The hallway entrance into the SU building is very dark, with a lot of colours on the wall.
- ✗ There are a lot of posters on the wall; it is hard to distinguish between them.
- ✗ The Student Bar is very distracting with multiple coloured lights and writing on the walls.
 - The room feels very claustrophobic, with the different types of food and drink.
 - The signage is unclear on the walls for the food and drink.
- ✗ The hallway up to the SU offices is very dark, with unclear signage.
- ✗ The room with pool tables beside the SU offices is beside the Radio Station, where low level noise is needed.
- ✗ The room in the SU with sofas and projectors does not have any signage to say what the room is; There is a lot of unnecessary furniture in the room.
- ✗ Poor quality signage.
- ✗ The sign to leave the SU offices is unclear and at a high level on the door.
- ✗ In the corridor beside the SU offices, there is a sign for the men's toilet. However, the door also leads to other rooms and a lift.
- ✗ There is no signage in the lift at the SU offices to state what is on each floor.



Sensory Audit: Glasnevin Campus - Students' Union

- ✗ Room in Student Union building with a lot of furniture in it.



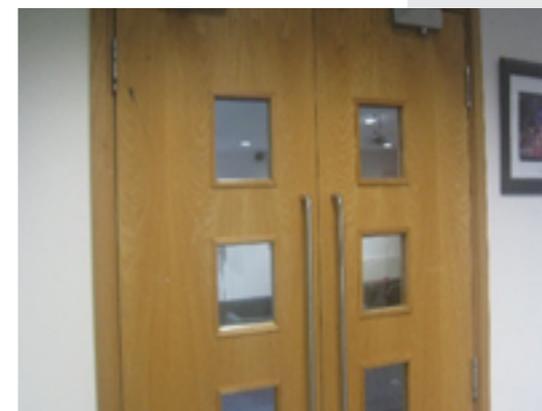
Sensory Audit: Glasnevin Campus
SU Building

- ✗ Unclear sign when leaving the SU offices



Sensory Audit: Glasnevin Campus
SU Building

- ✗ The bar with a lot of visual stimuli.



Sensory Audit: Glasnevin Campus
SU Building

- ✗ Door into SU room, with no signage.

Results: Study 4 - Sensory Audit Glasnevin Campus



Sensory Audit: Glasnevin Campus
Terrence Larkin Building

- ✗ Poor signage
- ✗ The signage on the doors is inconsistent and is small to read.
- ✗ There is no signage on the door leading into the main lecture room.

Signage on the front of a door in the Terrence Larkin building.



Sensory Audit: Glasnevin Campus
Henry Grattan Building

- ✗ Each room is painted differently, with bright colours that could be distracting for students with sensory difficulties.
- ✗ Fluorescent lights on during the day.
- ✗ Projectors are left on in rooms that are not used.
- ✗ Rooms had frosted glass on the door panel. This could make students anxious to go into a room they cannot see.



Sensory Audit: Glasnevin Campus
Henry Grattan Building

- ✗ Frosted glass on the inside of the door in the Henry Grattan building.

School of Nursing and Human Sciences Building Glasnevin Campus - Public Spaces

- ✗ Poor Signage: There are maps allocated in certain areas of the campus but not at every building. Students would benefit from a QR code that could contain more information, so the maps are not too overcrowded with information, and hard to read.
- ✗ Cluttered signs - It would be useful to keep all the maps clear, without stickers or posters on them.
- ✓ The train timetable is in a very visual place and is useful for students.
- ✗ High Noise levels: All students would benefit from each main campus building having a designated quiet room.



Sensory Audit: Glasnevin Campus
Public Spaces

- ✗ Map outside the SU building.



Sensory Audit: Glasnevin Campus
Public Spaces

- ✓ Clear and prominent Train Timetable information.

Results: Study 4 - Sensory Audit St. Patrick's Campus

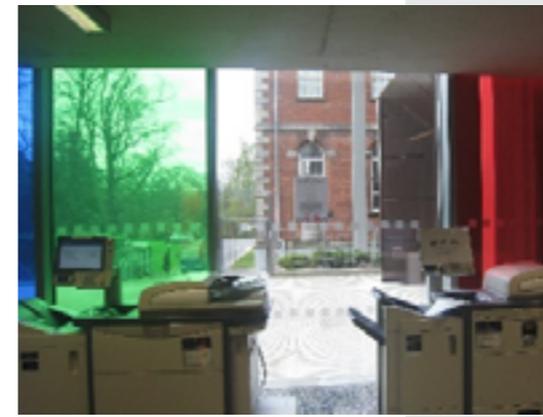
St. Patrick's Campus - Library

- ✗ The lighting in the library is very bright.
- ✗ All of the seats are hard.
- ✗ The photocopiers are in a space where students are studying.
 - There can be high noise levels in this area.
 - The noise level can be high on level 2; the carpet reduces the noise on level 1.
 - It would be useful if the signage could direct students to certain areas of the library.
- ✓ The foyer leading into the library is very open and there is a nice use of colours and wide spaces.
- ✓ The coffee dock beside the library is quiet and relaxed, there are minimal smells coming from the area and coffee shop.
- ✓ All the seats are comfortable and padded in the foyer leading into the library.



Sensory Audit: St. Patrick's Campus Library

- ✗ View at one aspect - it is very noisy with passing traffic and very bright for people with visual sensitivity.



Sensory Audit: St. Patrick's Campus Library

- ✓ The use of the colours at the entrance is good.
- ✗ There are no maps in the building to direct students.



Sensory Audit: St. Patrick's Campus Library

- ✗ Some of the chairs are very hard.



Sensory Audit: St. Patrick's Campus Library

- ✗ Photocopiers should be housed in separate spaces.



Sensory Audit: St. Patrick's Campus Main Restaurant

- ✓ Very nice space - the lights are not too fluorescent. The chairs have rounded edges and the colours are muted.

Results: Study 4 - Sensory Audit St. Patrick's Campus

St. Patrick's Campus - Java Restaurant

- ✓ There is a lot of natural light coming into the restaurant which is beneficial to all students.
- ✗ The system for queuing for food is confusing as there are signs for the food on the glass, and students have to join a trafficlight system to navigate the space around the restaurant.



Sensory Audit: St. Patrick's Campus
Java Restaurant

- ✗ The traffic-light system to enter the Java restaurant.

St. Patrick's Campus - Open Space

- ✓ The use of open space and lockers is inviting to students. The space is bright, with comfortable chairs.
- ✗ The signs for the rooms and lecture halls are large and are above the doors. However, this signage is inconsistent across the St. Patrick's Campus.
- ✗ There is a light above some room signs which could make the signs hard to read for some students.



Sensory Audit: St. Patrick's Campus
Open Space

- ✓ Open space with comfortable seating.



Sensory Audit: St. Patrick's Campus
Open Space

- ✓ Lightening above signs

Conclusion & Next Steps



Summary & Discussion

Researchers at the School of Nursing and Human Sciences at DCU, in collaboration with AsIAM conducted this research to explore the experiences of DCU students living with Autism. We began this project by undertaking a review of peer-reviewed literature and of University websites nationally and internationally in order to explore what other HEIs have been doing to support students with Autism.

The vast majority of intervention programmes identified in the literature review were found to have been developed and applied across Universities in the United States and the UK, with some support projects dotted across Europe. Increasingly, Irish HEIs are developing supportive structures specifically for their students with Autism.

In conducting the review, we did not identify any HEI that took a whole-campus approach with respect to supporting students with Autism. Thus, for the purposes of this project, a whole-campus approach was taken, involving students, academics and support staff from across the multi-site University that is the new DCU.

The overall project, which was composed of four separate but related studies, aimed to explore current services at DCU for students with Autism and their perceived adequacy so that any gaps that might exist could be addressed to improve life on campus. Student and staff experiences, as well as their knowledge and attitudes, were captured as part of this project.

In Study 1, an online anonymous survey was administered to DCU students with Autism who have attended DCU for at least one semester. This survey was advertised to students through the DCU Disability & Learning Services (DLSS) but was also advertised via the general student mailing list as we wanted it to be accessible to all students with Autism, including those who have not disclosed their diagnosis to the DLSS.

Although 43 students indicated that they read the study PLS and indicated their consent to participate, only 26 students

proceeded to the main body of the survey and, of these, only 17 completed all questions asked. Of note, those who did not answer all questions invariably omitted the final open-ended questions asked at the end of the survey. The reasons for this relatively low completion rate is not immediately apparent.

Despite this relatively low completion rate, this arm of the study revealed some interesting insights into the lives of our students with Autism. In the first instance, it revealed that the number of students who identified as meeting the study criteria was higher than the number registered with the DLSS as some of the respondents indicated that they had not registered with the DLSS. This finding is consistent with literature that indicates that many students with Autism do not disclose, register or seek out support services.

In terms of the demographics of the sample, the majority of students with Autism who responded to the main body of the survey were male and were attending programmes in the Faculty of Science and Health. Next, in terms of student numbers was the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences and then the Faculty of Engineering and Computing and the Institute of Education.

The survey results identified the positive aspects of campus life

for these students but also the challenges and struggles faced by many on a daily basis. It is obvious from the findings that disclosure of an Autism diagnosis is a significant issue for students, as over half of the students who proceeded to the main body of the survey indicated that they had not disclosed their diagnosis of Autism to the DLSS and less than a third of the students had disclosed to academic staff. The reported reasons for non-disclosure included stigma, fear of discrimination, embarrassment and shame. Because of this, these students had not linked in with the DLSS, which could have provided valuable support resources. Going forward, the reasons for non-disclosure will need to be addressed so that more students will feel free and able to disclose.

The majority of students said they enjoyed living away from home and approximately half of the students said they enjoyed life at DCU. Most indicated that people in DCU were nice and several students mentioned specifically how friendly and supportive the staff in the disability office (DLSS). Students also remarked on how they liked the fact that there was a large number of Clubs and Societies available to them and others spoke highly of the campus accommodation.

The majority of students felt that they had the academic skills to attend DCU, but only around half of the sample felt they had the social skills needed to succeed at University. Half of those surveyed reported that they felt lonely in DCU and that they do not cope effectively with stress or anxiety. A majority of students reported that they feel isolated or generally depressed and reported that they eat alone in the cafeteria or preferred to spend spare time alone in quiet places on campus. The majority indicated that they have even considered dropping out. Difficulties related to socialising most commonly cited were difficulties in talking to people, not knowing what to expect, difficulties

The reported reasons for non-disclosure included stigma, fear of discrimination, embarrassment and shame. Going forward, the reasons for non-disclosure will need to be addressed so that more students will feel free and able to disclose.

in meeting people with similar interests and difficulties in being part of a group. The most common positive aspects of socialising in DCU were cited as being able to find the venue or event, meeting people with similar interests and being part of a group and maintaining a conversation.

While some students with Autism felt that there was little else that DCU could do to support them in their social experience, others had clear ideas about what they would need to improve their opportunities for socialising on campus. This included the education of Class Representative regarding the problems faced by students with Autism socially, reduction in the academic workload, the setting up of a Society specifically for students with Autism as well as the hosting of smaller events and workshops by the Student's Union.

It is apparent from these findings that many students with Autism are struggling with issues related to isolation and loneliness, as well as issues related to mental health. These are clearly issues of concern that will need to be considered by the University Offices best placed to provide support or to advise on strategies to help them. In addressing these issues, consideration must be given to the question of how best to provide support to those students who

do not disclose their diagnosis. A higher level of visibility of available supports will be required, so that all students are aware of what is on offer and can, therefore, access and avail of the supports.

The majority of the students with Autism reported that they did not find group work easy and just over half the sample felt they did not have a good routine established around their study and assignments. Just over half of the students felt that it was not easy to ask questions and seek guidance from lecturers and just over one third said it was not easy to get support and information from the DCU Support Services. The majority of these students found attending lectures stressful and almost one third reported that it is not easy to keep up with lectures. Over half the sample said they did not manage their time effectively. Around half the sample reported that they did not find academic or support staff knowledgeable about Autism.

Some students offered suggestions as to how DCU could support them further in their academic work. This included the provision of guidelines to staff around students with Autism, having a greater range of teaching and learning methods, having a greater variety of assessments, having a better spread of workload across the semester and having greater

Summary & Discussion

flexibility with, for example, re-sit opportunities. Other suggestions for improvements related to reducing overcrowding and noise in lectures and in laboratories, reducing time pressure in labs, more posts on Loop and better explanations of assignments.

Although the numbers are small, just over a third of final year students who responded to the survey felt that they do not get enough support in preparing their Curriculum Vitae in preparation for employment and less than one fifth of students felt they received adequate support from the DCU Careers Service to transition to employment.

Taken together, these findings indicate that some

students with Autism are coping well with University life and rate DCU very positively in terms of how it supports them socially and academically. However, it also identifies a complex range of issues from both the social and academic perspective that many students with Autism are struggling with.

At this point, it is not possible to determine the extent to which any or all of the issues identified as problematic for students with Autism represent Autism-specific issues, issues that affect students with Autism disproportionately or issues that arise for the wider cohort of DCU students. It would, therefore, be interesting to administer this same survey to the

Autism-specific training could be useful in helping academic and support staff raise their knowledge and awareness of the issues that commonly arise for students with Autism

general student body to examine the extent to which specific problem areas are common issues for all students on campus. It is, however, reasonable to expect that at least some of the issues identified by the student sample affect students with Autism to a greater extent than the general student body.

In so far as some of the difficulties identified by the survey sample reflect difficulties that are widely recognised as problem areas for students with Autism, Autism-specific training could be useful in helping academic and support staff raise their knowledge and awareness of the issues that commonly arise for students with Autism as well as strategies that they could implement to help support students with Autism even in the absence of disclosure. To this end, the DCU DLSS has already made available a range of resources for staff.

In the second study of this project, an online anonymous survey of the entire student body in DCU was administered in the form of a short vignette to explore the attitudes of the general student body to their peers with Autism and also to examine their levels of knowledge on the subject. Responses generally reflected positive rather than negative attitudes and beliefs about their peers with Autism. However, we readily acknowledge



that the vignette used may not have been sensitive enough to detect deeply held views and we appreciate that respondents may have provided what they considered to be the politically correct response. Consequently, DCU is fully committed to increasing knowledge and awareness amongst the general student body of the needs of their peers with Autism and this is reflected in the Principles and Actions detailed at the end of this report.

Important findings also emerged from the focus groups and semi-structured interviews conducted with academic and support staff of the University. A good proportion of staff appear to have a clear understanding of the difficulties arising for students with Autism in the University setting while also acknowledging their talents, skills, diversity and uniqueness. Some staff felt well equipped to support these students, while others did not and identified a training need. While participants' professional and personal knowledge and experience vary widely, there was a clear willingness to engage to address this knowledge gap. The staff interviews also highlighted the need for

Summary & Discussion

Autism-specific training for support staff with the Accommodation Office, Catering Services and the Library Services having important roles. This need for Autism-specific staff training will be addressed by DCU and is reflected in the Principles and Actions detailed below.

There was a clear openness among participants in all focus groups and interviews to the concept of DCU becoming an Autism Friendly University. Participants were keen to support students with Autism and offered a range of suggestions about how this could be approached in a way that would utilise existing forums and structures to embed the necessary principles and practices into a busy, growing University. The groups/interviewees also offered insight into the best methods of communication and dissemination of a campaign about Autism. Concerns about disclosure of an Autism diagnosis was a recurrent theme in discussions with participants and it was recognised that it was clearly a complex issue. While a decision to disclose is an individual choice and may raise a range of concerns, participants were agreed that if staff are aware a student has Autism, they can support the student more effectively. In light of the difficulties and sensitivities surrounding disclosure of an Autism diagnosis, which is recognised internationally,

DCU is committed to a range of strategies to help address this issue. This commitment is articulated in the DCU-specific proposed action plan.

As noted in this report, the DLSS proactively offer a wide and varied range of support to students with Autism and to staff working with this student cohort. The service works with staff to develop support models that are working well and could, potentially, be replicated across the University. Success of these supports is, however, contingent on widespread awareness of the supports available and campus-wide engagement with the services provided. Staff at CTYI have valuable experiences in working with students with Autism and are happy to share this experience with the study team. Similarly, the School of Nursing and Human Sciences model of good practice might be replicated in other settings within the University. DCU is committed to capitalising on the wealth of expertise that already exists within the University and this expertise will be reflected in the make-up of implementation group that has been established to develop a plan to deliver on the recommended actions.

Practical recommendations obtained from the qualitative element of this project include the need for clearer guidelines for staff,

There was a clear openness among participants in all focus groups and interviews to the concept of DCU becoming an Autism Friendly University. Participants were keen to support students with Autism and offered a range of suggestions about how this could be approached

some additional resources and greater visibility of the resources already on offer. Improved or shared communications between the various University offices with appropriate staff, along with a clear referral pathway for students with Autism may provide solutions to many of the difficulties currently experienced. An increased role for the DCU Office of Student Life, which is made up of a dedicated team that supports both the Student's Union and DCU Clubs and Societies, was identified as a potential route to explore. Increased visibility of Autism-specific services provided by the DLSS at events such as Student Orientation has clear potential to improve their reach and potential impact. Provision of quiet times at typically busy events and provision of quiet spaces are also very important issues to consider and this need is recognised and reflected in the DCU proposed actions. In addition, and in line with DCU's Policy regarding parental involvement, students with Autism should be made aware that they can request parental involvement in their studies.

Replication of existing student support models that appear to be working well within the University, such as the model used in the School of Nursing and Human Science to support nursing students with disabilities,

Summary & Discussion

is another initiative worth exploring to support further DCU students with Autism. The concept of a designated Autism Service was proposed and it was agreed that this is something that is worthy of further consideration.

It was apparent from the Sensory Audit that some aspects of the physical environment on campus was working well for the students who took part in the audit, while other aspects could be a source of potential difficulty, particularly for those students with heightened sensory awareness to smells, bright colours, fluorescent lighting, or a bustling noisy space such as the restaurants at peak times (lunch time). Queuing systems in eateries on campus created significant difficulties for some of the participants whilst other less obvious things like hard seating surfaces, dimly lit spaces or spaces with unused or stacked cluttered furniture were also identified as making life more difficult for these students. Other aspects of the campus environment that could potentially cause difficulties included missing, busy or ambiguous signage or signage not being at eye level. A low humming noise from a projector left turned on in one of the lecture theatres was also highlighted as a potential sensory irritant, as it could be detected by some as a high-pitched sound. In recognition of these sensory issues for students

with Autism (and perhaps other students as well), DCU is committed to minimising them, in so far as this is possible.

In summary, the findings from the four distinct but related aspects of this research reveal that although clearly doing much to support students with a range of disabilities, DCU could, subject to time, personnel and budgetary considerations, do more to ensure that all students, including those with Autism, are **"...able to get through difficult transition points at third level, stay the course and have a full and fulfilling university experience, both socially and academically."** (Prof. Brian MacCraith, President of DCU).



Conclusions & Next Steps

This project provides a wealth of information about the lives of DCU students with Autism. While DCU is already providing a comprehensive variety of supports to students with Autism, as it does for all students with disabilities, we have identified that high level, as well as a range of practical supports across the University would enhance the experiences of students with Autism and would empower them to flourish socially and academically. This will, we believe, be particularly important as more students with Autism transition from secondary education to third level in the future.



Based on the project findings, we outline a series of principles and recommended actions that are grounded in the findings of this research and we have, with the assistance of key stakeholders across DCU, identified the DCU Offices that are best placed in terms of their expertise to drive forward and to implement these recommendations. These recommendations are outlined in the next section of this report under **Principles of an Autism Friendly University** and under **DCU-specific proposed actions to embed the principles of the Autism Friendly University**. These Recommendations and proposed actions cover the domains of: Policy, Information/Communication, Access, Support, Engagement, Training and Employment. An implementation group has been established comprised of staff from a range of DCU offices to develop a plan to deliver on the recommended actions. This implementation group includes staff from the Office of the President, the DLSS, Intra, CTYI, Teaching Enhancement Unit (TEU), Training and Development, Catering Services, Library Services, Estates, Accommodation Services, the Office of Student Life and from the School of Nursing and Human Sciences. This will constitute Phase 2 of this ambitious project.

Ultimately, it is hoped that the **Principles of an Autism Friendly**

University detailed below will be adopted by other HEIs wishing to become Autism friendly. The specifics of the actions will, however, vary across institutions. The President of DCU, Prof. Brian McCraith, has committed to adopting the eight **Principles of an Autism Friendly University** outlined and to delivering on the proposed **DCU-specific proposed actions to embed the principles of the Autism Friendly University** over the next three years. This commitment is consistent with the goals of the new DCU Strategic Plan (Talent, Discovery, and Transformation: 2017-2022), which was launched in September 2017.

Raising Awareness

Given our commitment to raising Autism awareness, a range of publicity events has already been undertaken (see later section: Raising Autism Awareness) and we submitted an abstract on this research project to the International Meeting for Autism Research (IMFAR) 2017 which was hosted by The International Society for Autism Research (INSAR) in San Francisco from May 10th to 13th 2017. The poster along with other events to raise awareness of this project are included in the section - Raising Autism Awareness.

Recommendations, Principles and Actions

Recommendations

Following extensive consultation with the DCU community about the experiences of student life for students with Autism, we developed 8 key Principles (see overleaf) that should underpin the culture of any 'Autism Friendly' University/ Higher Education Institution.

As noted, the President of DCU, Prof. Brian McCraith, has committed to adopting the eight **Principles of an Autism Friendly University** outlined below and to delivering on the proposed DCU-specific proposed actions to embed the principles of the Autism Friendly University over the next three years. Given this commitment, AsIAM and Specialisterne Ireland now recognise DCU as an Autism Friendly University and will award DCU Provisional Accreditation as an Accessible, Welcoming and Empowering (AWE) University.

It is envisaged that AsIAM and Specialisterne Ireland will support the implementation of these actions, but the co-ordination and the responsibility will rest with designated DCU Offices as part of the larger implementation group.

We developed 8 key Principles that should underpin the culture of any 'Autism Friendly' University/ Higher Education Institution

Principles of an Autism Friendly University

- 1 Encourage and enable students with Autism to transition into and participate in university programmes.
- 2 Support and build capacity to equip students with Autism to meet the academic challenges of everyday university life.
- 3 Support and build capacity to equip students with Autism to meet the social challenges of everyday university life.
- 4 Seek to establish an Autism friendly operational environment.
- 5 Seek to combat the stigma around Autism and recognise the diverse experiences of those with the condition.
- 6 Develop understanding and relevant knowledge and skills within the University community.
- 7 Establish channels so that students with Autism can have a voice in various aspects of university life.
- 8 Increase employability of graduates with Autism, through a range of initiatives that will help develop their soft skills to support their transition beyond University.

DCU-specific proposed actions to embed the principles of the Autism Friendly University



These actions will, where appropriate, be supported by AsIAm.

1. Encourage and enable students with Autism to transition into and participate in university programmes.

- a. DCU Communications and Marketing team will lead a campaign about DCU's commitment to Autism Friendly University status at both internal and external information and promotional events.
- b. DCU will ensure greater visibility of information provided to students at orientation events about the suite of Autism-specific resources available at DCU to complement routinely-provided student support services.
- c. Students with Autism will be invited to submit a profile of their Autism-specific needs to the DCU DLSS prior to commencing their studies at DCU.
- d. DCU Head of Access will add an Autism-specific element to the current DCU Outreach Access Programme to complement the information currently provided.
- e. DCU will promote increased awareness of the existing DCU model that permits students to designate an advocate (e.g. parent/guardian) to support them during the course of their studies.
- f. DCU will continue to promote its programmes to prospective students with Autism who attend, for example, the Centre for Talented Youth, Ireland (CTYI) and the Coderdojo programmes.

2. Support and build capacity to equip students with Autism to meet the academic challenges of everyday university life

- a. DCU Library Service will add an Autism-specific element to their orientation programme to support students with Autism who have difficulty filtering material.
- b. DCU will put in place a peer mentoring model (buddy system) to support students with Autism to transition to university life.

In line with international best practice, this peer mentoring will take the format of a buddy system provided by appropriately trained graduate students (e.g. from health and allied disciplines).

- c. DCU will, where required, add an Autism-specific element to complement the recently launched 'Discover DCU' suite of resources: www.dcu.ie/studentlearning/online-tutorials.shtml

The 'Discover DCU' resources were developed to support students in the areas of balanced lifestyle, developing a community, learning and study skills, organisational skills, assignment writing and exam success.

- d. DCU will develop guidelines for academic staff to empower them to support students with Autism to reach their full potential academically.
- e. DCU will develop tools to help students with Autism to improve their attention and problem-solving skills.

3. Support and build capacity to equip students with Autism to meet the social challenges of university life

- a. DCU Student Support and Development will run Autism-specific courses and/or workshops to support students in managing anxiety.
- b. DCU Estates Office will ensure that DCU Student Accommodation is suitable for students with Autism.
- c. DCU will offer workshops on independent living skills for students with Autism who are living away from home.
- d. DCU will develop guidelines for the general student body on promoting the social engagement of their peers with Autism.

4. Seek to establish an Autism friendly operational environment

- a. DCU will provide designated quiet spaces in a number of locations across the University.
- b. DCU will be mindful of the sensory issues arising for students with Autism when infrastructure is being updated.
- c. DCU will develop sensory guidelines for major Students' Union events.
- d. DCU DLSS will scope potential for development of support tools such as 'DisabledGo' to improve Autism accessibility.
- e. DCU Communications and Marketing team will provide information on the DCU website about known issues that might present difficulties for students with sensory processing difficulties (e.g notification of fire alarm drills).
- f. DCU researchers will develop a DCU Campus Map App, to help students navigate their way around the University.
- g. DCU staff will continue to improve local signage and other communication strategies to help students identify staff, office locations etc.
- h. DCU will work to improve further its communications with students by ensuring that all student information and policy documents are available in plain English following the National Adult Literacy Agency's Guidelines for Plain English.

5. Seek to combat the stigma around Autism and recognise the diverse experiences of those with the condition.

- a. DCU will hold an Annual Autism Inclusion Day/s in DCU.
- b. DCU's Office of Student Life will aim to ensure that the needs of students with Autism are considered routinely as part of routine activity planning.
- c. DCU will develop a network of "Student Champions" to support the Autism Friendly University initiative.
- d. DCU will provide specific supports for students who receive their Autism diagnosis in late teens/early adulthood.
- e. In order to continuously improve service provision, DCU DLSS will review the current processes and procedures in place for students wishing to disclose and formally register their diagnosis of Autism.

6. Develop understanding and relevant knowledge and skills within the University community (staff and service providers)

- a. DCU DLSS will expand and promote the resources available to support academics in their teaching of students with Autism.
- b. DCU will aim to ensure that all staff know where information on how to support students with Autism can be found.
- c. DCU will aim to ensure that all DCU Schools, Units, Services and on-campus businesses receive a short training programme on Autism Awareness from the DLSS at the start of each academic year.
- d. DCU will implement a pilot Autism training scheme for a sample of academic staff, with support of DCU Training & Development, the DCU Teaching Enhancement Unit and the Middletown Centre for Autism, with a view to extending the training to all academic staff in DCU.
- e. DCU will expand the Autism section / resources available on the University's DLSS webpages – in order to improve access to and visibility of relevant information.
- f. Given its role in education, DCU will capitalise on its potential to increase Autism awareness and knowledge amongst educators at all levels (primary, secondary and third level) through development and provision of a Module on Autism-specific Teaching and Learning issues.

7. Establish channels so that students with Autism can have a voice in various aspects of University life.

- a. DCU Clubs and Societies will run Autism friendly events.
- b. DCU will support the establishment of an Autism Society to provide a safe space for students with Autism and their friends.
- c. DCU will aim to ensure adequate representation of students with Autism on the Autism Friendly University implementation group.

8. Seek to increase future employability of DCU students with Autism

These actions will be facilitated and supported by the DCU Intra and DLSS offices and, where appropriate, will be supported by Specialisterne.

- a. DCU will complement current supports designed to build the social skills and other personal attributes of students, with an Autism-specific element.
- b. DCU will complement current student supports designed to develop Curriculum Vitae, interview skills and internship opportunities, with an Autism-specific element.
- c. DCU students will be advised of the additional specialist training offered and provided by Specialisterne which has been designed to enhance opportunities to secure and retain employment. This includes access to assessment workshops and advice on career opportunities.
- d. DCU students will be advised that all of the services detailed above are available to them and they will be given reminders about these services at a number of key transitory points / stages.
- e. DCU will continue to identify and to grow the number of companies prepared to offer internship and employment opportunities for students with Autism.
- f. DCU will continue to disseminate information to all students about companies that are interested in taking students with Autism on to internship programmes or into employment.



Raising Autism Awareness

Autism Awareness Exhibition

Twitter: @AweCampus

As a first step toward raising awareness of Autism amongst DCU staff and students, we hosted the **AWE** (Assessable, Welcoming and Empowering) Campus Project: **An Autism Experience Exhibition**



As part of the AWE Campus Project in DCU, AsIAM showcased the 'Autism Experience Exhibition' in the Helix on the DCU Glasnevin Campus and in the library building of the DCU St. Patrick's Campus.

The aim of the exhibition was to engage students and staff in gaining a better insight into what it is like to live with Autism, therefore giving them a greater understanding of their peers with ASD. Attendees were invited by all staff and student emails. In addition, a twitter page (@Awecampus) was set up and shared on social media platforms to raise awareness of the exhibition.

Upon visiting the exhibition, students explored the daily challenges that their peers must contend with. This was through a Q&A format on pop-up banners, an audio guide and interactive activities.

The activities challenged people's sensory perceptions and their understanding of the world around them. Students and staff were welcomed to experience what it is like if they could not understand language, or read and see words clearly. Students and staff were also given the opportunity to taste and smell new foods, while their senses were heightened. This enabled them to see how this can cause anxiety in many situations. Those who visited the exhibitions also found out what it could be like to do daily tasks, when experiencing a heightened sense of sight, noise and touch.



AWE Campus Project:
An Autism Experience Exhibition
Experiencing the sense of proprioception and the subconscious awareness of body position.



AWE Campus Project:
An Autism Experience Exhibition
A student experiencing a heightened sense of smell, when their sense of sight and sound is blocked.



AWE Campus Project:
An Autism Experience Exhibition
A student trying to follow simple instructions of tracing shapes, while processing external stimuli.



AWE Campus Project:
An Autism Experience Exhibition
Staff and students experiencing the sensory fidgets that are available to help students to regulate their sensory processing.

Raising Autism Awareness

The aim of the exhibition was primarily to start a conversation about Autism and to explore how everyone has an important role to play in understanding others. Meanwhile, students and staff experienced first-hand the challenges that people with Autism face every day. This, in turn, allowed those experiencing the exhibition to appreciate better the strengths, abilities and talents that people with Autism have.

There was also a Social Media Campaign that ran alongside the exhibition, where the Spin Team from Spin1038 103.8 FM directed students to social media, reaching 3000 followers on Twitter and 80,000 followers on Instagram.



The Social Media Team from Spin 1038 -103.8 fm, Helix, DCU

Establishing an Autism Society at DCU

An expression of interest invite (see text below) was sent to all students using the all-students email server about a plan to set up a new Autism Society at DCU. Paper flyers were also posted around the campus. Three separate evening information sessions were hosted by the project team to gauge the level of interest in such a Society.

A Facebook page was also set up to raise awareness about the society. [insert link]

Meeting of Interest in Setting Up a New Autism Society in DCU



Do you have Autism? Are you a friend or family member of someone with the Autism? Are you interested in life with Autism and building a more accepting community? Would you like to join a society where you can meet new people who share similar interests?

We would like to invite all students, those that have Autism, and those that have friends and family members with Autism to come along to our meet up on Wednesday 19th in Room HG19.

DCU and AsIAM are hoping to set up an Autism Society in DCU and we want to hear if are interested in this. This society would set its own agenda - from being a place to share experiences, through to building Autism awareness and promoting Autism-friendly activities.

On Wednesday 19th April

Where – School of Nursing and Human Science Room HG19, Open to all students. Bring a friend!

Conference Presentation

Poster presented at the IMFAR conference
[View online here]



Prof. Teresa Burke presenting at IMFAR



Living with Autism as a university student: An Irish university experience

Mary Rose Sweeney¹, Teresa Burke¹, Adam Harris², Katie Quinn².
¹School of Nursing and Human Sciences, Dublin City University; ²AsiAm



In association with





Funded by:



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INTRODUCTION

Last year, Dublin City University (DCU) announced its intention to make the University more autism friendly.

<https://www4.dcu.ie/news/2016/jan/30/1181.shtml>

This project marks the beginning of an 18-month programme designed to create a learning environment that allows DCU students with Autism to take part more fully in college life.

The study aims were to explore current services for students, to determine their perceived adequacy and to identify any gaps that could be addressed to improve life on campus for students with Autism.

A whole-campus approach was taken to the study, involving students, academic staff and support staff.

By identifying key concerns/difficulties of students with Autism, we hope to make a series of recommendations to the University to meet more adequately the needs of students. This will then lead to an improved college experience for students with Autism.

AIM

The project aim is to explore the college-related experiences of students with autism. Of particular interest is

- Their interactions with staff and other students
- Their teaching and learning experiences
- Their integration into the University community
- The physical campus environment

Methods

A mixed-methods approach was employed, with four elements

1. An online anonymous survey with DCU students with Autism – exploring the issues that arise for them on campus.
2. Semi-structured interviews or focus groups with academic staff and key campus staff who regularly engage with students with Autism – exploring issues arising for them in engaging with this student cohort.
3. An online anonymous survey of the entire DCU student body (n=16,000 potential participants) to explore their attitudes toward individuals with autism and their knowledge of the issues arising for their peers with Autism.
4. A student-led sensory audit of campus.

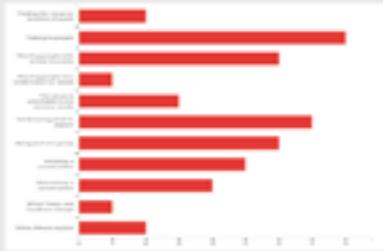


Fig 1. Students with autism Survey: 3 most difficult things about social interaction or socialising on campus?



Sensory audit of campus: very noisy and busy student restaurant

RESULTS

Response rates / participant numbers

1. Forty-five students with Autism began the online anonymous survey, but only 17 completed it.
2. A focus group was conducted with academic staff (n=9) representing chemistry, mathematics, physics, education, nursing, biotechnology, engineering, computing and special education.
3. A focus group was conducted with key support-services staff (1 from each of: Disability Services, Student Services, Accommodation Services and INTRA Services).
4. Five one-to-one interviews were conducted with a representative of the Student's Union office staff, Disability office staff, CTYI staff, Library staff, and Catering staff.
5. 227 students completed the general student body survey.
6. Four students with autism accompanied by 2 staff members completed a sensory audit of the campus.

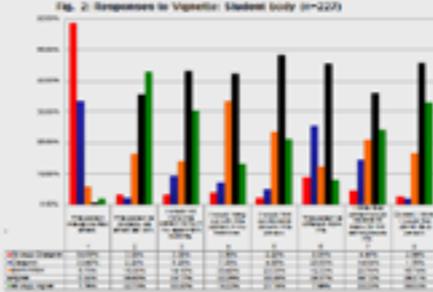


Fig 2. Responses to Vignette: Student body (n=227)



Sensory audit of campus: Over-furnished small classrooms can be very cluttered for a student with sensory difficulties

RESULTS Continued:

- Many students with Autism reported that they feel stigmatised by their diagnosis and are reluctant to disclose it even to the disability office. 54% of students had not disclosed their diagnosis of Autism to the DCU disability services. Only 27% had disclosed their diagnosis to academic staff.
- Social isolation is a feature of life for students with Autism on campus, often driven by heightened sensory awareness of noise, smells and lighting, but also by embarrassment or fear of stigmatisation.
- Anxiety and depression are a common problem for students with Autism.
- Academic staff are often unaware of students with Autism in their lecture theatre or unsure of how to engage with them - this study highlights the need for specific autism training for staff across all sectors of campus – appropriate to their level of engagement with students.
- Academic staff talked about the benefit to students who disclose early, as support and resources can be actioned early on. There was a consensus that staff need guidance on how to support people with ASD.
- The role of the Student's Union, student ambassadors, class reps and Clubs and Societies was highlighted as a means to increasing awareness, promoting inclusion and improving life on campus for students with Autism.

SUMMARY & CONCLUSIONS

This study provides novel insights, from a range of perspectives, using mixed-methods approaches that will now be used to develop a set of principles and actions to make DCU Europe's first Autism friendly campus.

Student with ASD quote

"Social isolation. People who are aware can ask their friends for help or invited lecture notes if they were out or figure out problems together. Finding a partner for talks or group projects is a daunting experience."

Academic staff member quote

"Our default is we want to support – remind students of that... that's where we are coming from... if an alert is not out of any badness... it's just as have that many students and drive on our time... it's easier to remind us."

Newspaper and Other Publicity

Article in Irish Independent - Education Section
[Link to Article [here](#)]

Creating an Autism Friendly Campus

A new project at Dublin City University aims to ease the transition to college for students with ASD and boost job prospects



Helping hands: Adam Harris (left) with student ambassadors Conor Gilligan and Olivia Forde at the Autism Experience exhibition at DCU



By Kim Bielenberg
27 April 2017

Going to college can be a difficult transition for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). In school they may have received special support, but they can struggle when they have to make the change to third level, even if they are academically gifted.

Once they are established in college, they then have to plan their careers. Finding internships and graduate jobs can present more difficult obstacles.

Dublin City University (DCU) is aiming to become 'Ireland's first autism-friendly campus' and students will see changes starting in the next academic year.

It is an ambitious undertaking that aims to change the university's environment and raise awareness among students and staff.

Led by DCU's Dr Mary Rose Sweeney, the project involves Adam Harris's autism support service, AsIAm.ie, and Specialisterne, a recruitment support agency for people with autism.

Harris sees DCU's project as a breakthrough and he hopes supports for students with autism

will become more important at all third level colleges as a large cohort who were diagnosed as children reach adulthood.

He says while much has been done to provide support and raise awareness at school, there is now a need to look at the next phase.

"Going to college is a huge opportunity for students with autism. It can be a lot more suited to some people because they can pursue their academic interests, and they can pursue their interests socially in college societies. However, the transition can be so big that they have a negative experience," says the autism campaigner, who is a brother of Health Minister Simon Harris.

He says the difficulties faced by students are often not academic. Many of the problems are connected with the social environment.

People with autism may be sensitive to noise, big crowds, smells and particular types of decor. Colleges may be difficult to navigate, and staff and fellow students may lack awareness about autism. Surveys among students at DCU have also

shown that there is still a strong stigma attached to the disability, and many are reluctant to talk about their diagnosis openly. Research by DCU found that some students fear isolation.

Harris says: "When people with autism cannot discuss it openly, others may make assumptions about them. There is a greater risk of being isolated, and they may not be able to get the support they need."

Dr Sweeney helped to inspire the autism-friendly campus initiative after DCU held a successful orientation programme for students arriving at the university four years ago. It was held during a quiet time in the summer.

She says it gave the students an opportunity to be on campus and to see all the facilities and services: "They were able to meet staff at the college and to see what it was like to hang out on campus. The students really enjoyed it, and there was great feedback."

When it was suggested that DCU could be turned into an autism friendly campus, she leapt at the opportunity.

Students with autism have already been carrying out a 'sensory audit' in DCU. This assessment of the physical environment is looking at building design, decor, noise, and smells. It suggests ways to alter the physical layout of the university.

Among the changes coming to DCU in the year ahead are quiet spaces where students can go for meals. For some students, fluorescent lighting and certain colours on the walls can provoke anxiety. The decor can be altered to alleviate this.

Harris says the sensory environment can be extremely debilitating for people with autism. He says students with autism can schedule their activities so that they are not exposed to big crowds.

"It is often a big help to students if they know what to expect. For example, if they know it is going to be noisy somewhere, they can bring earplugs."

Harris says it can be harder for people with autism to change routine, or to adapt to a change in schedule.

"If a lecture is cancelled it can cause a higher level of anxiety. Consistency is important. It is inevitable that

change will happen in a person's life. So, for someone with autism it is about letting them know that it will happen, so that they can prepare for it. It is a bit like having a guide book before you go on holidays," he says

Harris says: "When people with autism cannot discuss it openly, others may make assumptions about them. There is a greater risk of being isolated, and they may not be able to get the support they need."

In another initiative, before they arrive in DCU from school, students with autism will be given a handbook containing advice.

Dr Sweeney says coming to college can be difficult for any student, but students with autism can struggle a bit more.

An important part of DCU's transformation to being an autism-friendly campus is a programme to promote greater awareness

among staff and the general student population.

Autism experience exhibitions have been held. They provide students with an opportunity to understand what life is like for people with autism, as well as learning the basics of what autism is. In some activities, students are blindfolded and experience unexpected tastes and smells.

"If you don't live with autism it is very hard to understand what the challenges are, because it is an invisible disability. As a result it may be hard to have empathy and a recognition of what a person is experiencing. People might think someone is just being difficult, because they don't understand it," says Harris.

Funding of €50,000 has been received from the Dormant Accounts Fund for the DCU project.

College helps students on spectrum to find internships and work suited to their abilities

DCU is working with the recruitment agency Specialisterne to help students with autism to find

Raising Autism Awareness

internships and pursue careers. The agency helps people with autism to find work. Although their interests vary, students with autism are often drawn to tasks that have a regular routine or are mathematical. They commonly work in IT.

Peter Brabazon of Specialisterne says many students still find it difficult to show their academic abilities when they are applying for jobs and seeking internships.

The challenges for jobseekers include difficulties in navigating the job application and interview process, gaps in work experience, or fitting into a work environment which might not be sensitive to their needs.

He says: "The community needs to be aware of the ability or disability

of autistic people. Some people still see it as threatening, or think that people with autism could not do a regular full-time job.

"Some of our candidates work in high level jobs including coding and programming."

Researchers at DCU are collaborating with other researchers on a study, Autism Spectrum Disorders in the EU.

They are inviting people with autism, their family carers and professionals working in autism services to complete three online surveys at asdeu.eu

Obtaining Buy-in

Meeting with the staff of the Office of Student Life and new Student's Union representatives on June 20th, 2017 to talk about the important role they will have in rolling out some of the recommendations from the report.



"Creating an Autism Friendly Campus"
by Kim Bielenberg for the Irish Independent
27 April 2017

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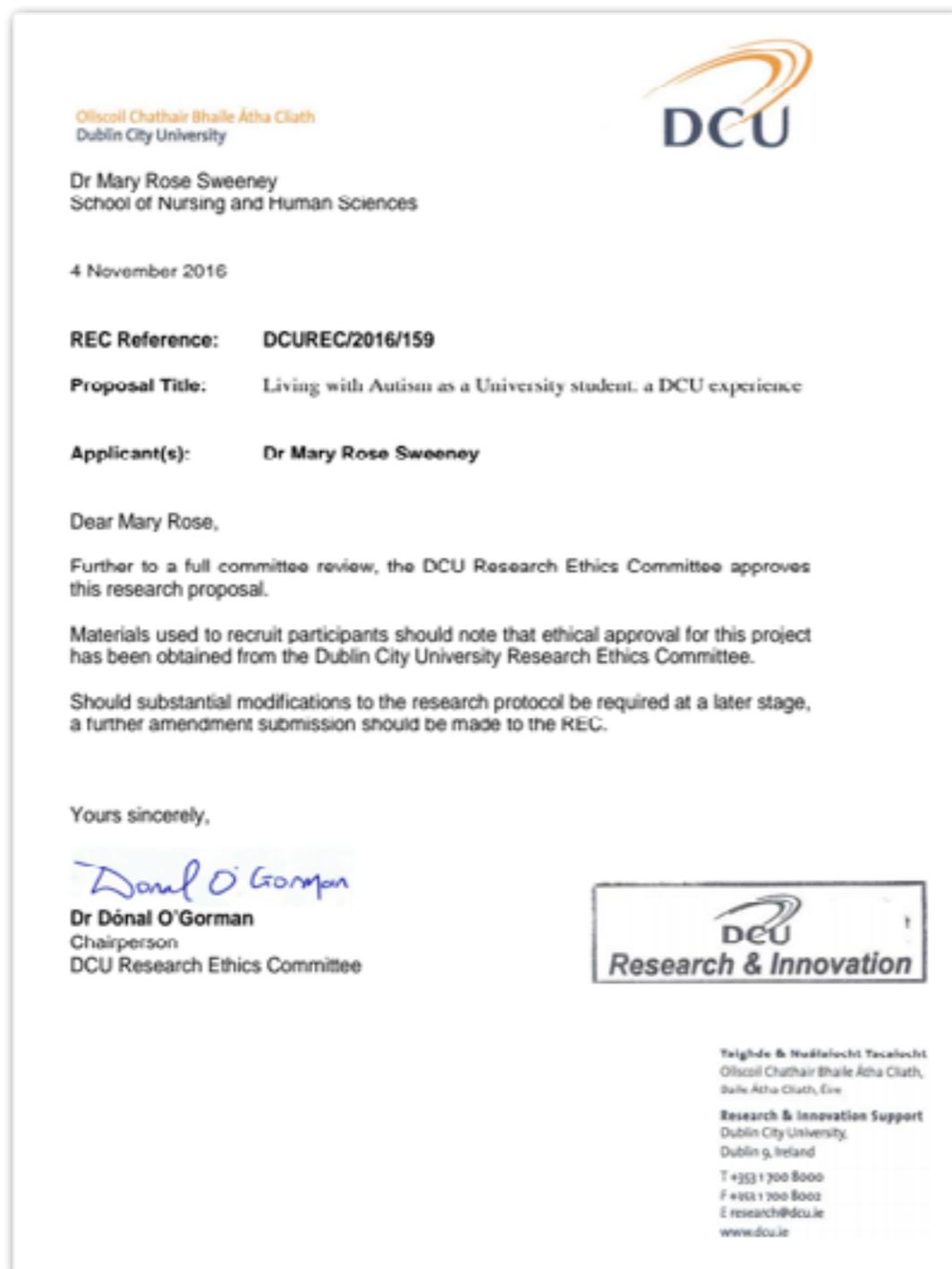
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Appendices

All study materials are available in the following appendices.

Appendix 1

DCU Research Ethics Committee Approval



Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath
Dublin City University



Dr Mary Rose Sweeney
School of Nursing and Human Sciences

4 November 2016

REC Reference: DCUREC/2016/159

Proposal Title: Living with Autism as a University student, a DCU experience

Applicant(s): Dr Mary Rose Sweeney

Dear Mary Rose,

Further to a full committee review, the DCU Research Ethics Committee approves this research proposal.

Materials used to recruit participants should note that ethical approval for this project has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee.

Should substantial modifications to the research protocol be required at a later stage, a further amendment submission should be made to the REC.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Dónal O'Gorman
Chairperson
DCU Research Ethics Committee



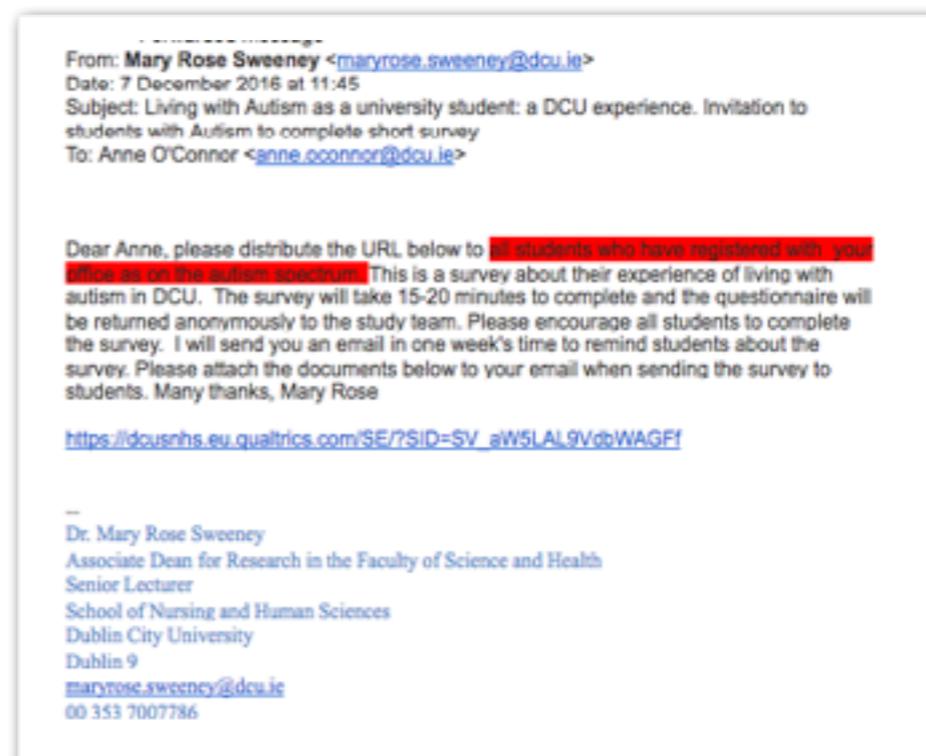
Teighde & Nuáilocht Teicneolaíochta
Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath,
Bailé Átha Cliath, Éire

Research & Innovation Support
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E research@dcu.ie
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Appendix 2

Call for Participants (Students with Autism)

Issued by DLSS to Students with Autism who were registered with the DLSS

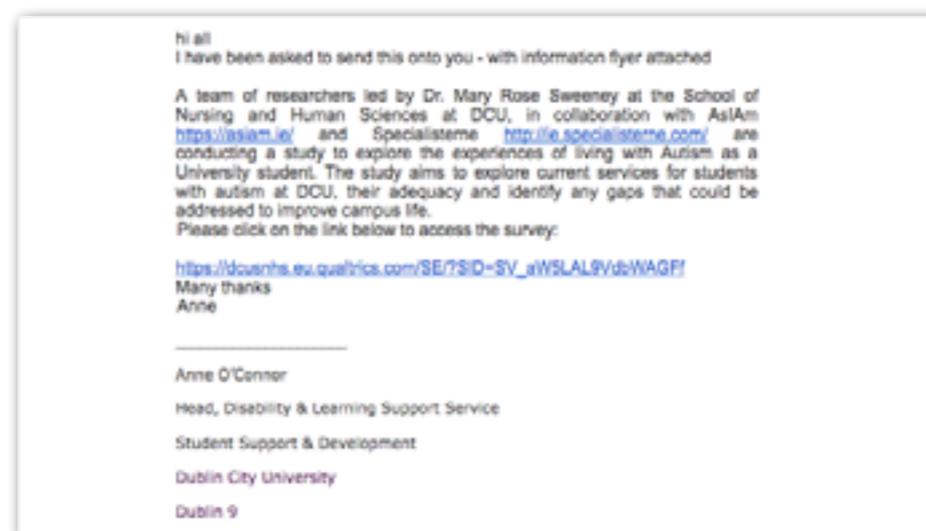


From: **Mary Rose Sweeney** <maryrose.sweeney@dcu.ie>
Date: 7 December 2016 at 11:45
Subject: Living with Autism as a university student: a DCU experience. Invitation to students with Autism to complete short survey
To: Anne O'Connor <anne.oconnor@dcu.ie>

Dear Anne, please distribute the URL below to **all students who have registered with your office as on the autism spectrum**. This is a survey about their experience of living with autism in DCU. The survey will take 15-20 minutes to complete and the questionnaire will be returned anonymously to the study team. Please encourage all students to complete the survey. I will send you an email in one week's time to remind students about the survey. Please attach the documents below to your email when sending the survey to students. Many thanks, Mary Rose

https://dcunhs.eu.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_aW5LAL9VdbWAGF1

—
Dr. Mary Rose Sweeney
Associate Dean for Research in the Faculty of Science and Health
Senior Lecturer
School of Nursing and Human Sciences
Dublin City University
Dublin 9
maryrose.sweeney@dcu.ie
00 353 7007786



Hi all
I have been asked to send this onto you - with information flyer attached

A team of researchers led by Dr. Mary Rose Sweeney at the School of Nursing and Human Sciences at DCU, in collaboration with AsIAM <https://asiam.ie/> and Specialiste <http://ie.specialiste.com/> are conducting a study to explore the experiences of living with Autism as a University student. The study aims to explore current services for students with autism at DCU, their adequacy and identify any gaps that could be addressed to improve campus life.
Please click on the link below to access the survey:

https://dcunhs.eu.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_aW5LAL9VdbWAGF1
Many thanks
Anne

—
Anne O'Connor
Head, Disability & Learning Support Service
Student Support & Development
Dublin City University
Dublin 9

All study materials are available in the following appendices.

Appendix 3

Call for Participants (Students with Autism)

Issued by Project PI to all DCU students

From: **Mary Rose Sweeney** <maryrose.sweeney@dcu.ie>
Date: 8 December 2016 at 12:47
Subject: Living with Autism as a University Student: A DCU experience: Invitation to Students with Autism to complete a short anonymous survey
To: 2017-dcu-pg <2017-dcu-pg@dcu.ie>, 2017-dcu-ug <2017-dcu-ug@dcu.ie>

Dear students,

A team of researchers led by Dr. Mary Rose Sweeney at the School of Nursing and Human Sciences at DCU, in collaboration with AsIAM <https://asiam.ie/> and Specialisterne <http://ie.specialisterne.com/> are conducting a study to explore the experiences of living with Autism as a University student. The study aims to explore current services for students with autism at DCU, their adequacy and identify any gaps that could be addressed to improve campus life.

If you have a diagnosis of autism (including aspergers) but are not registered with or have not disclosed this to the Disability Service at DCU, you are invited to complete this online questionnaire

https://dcusnhs.eu.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_aW5LAL9VdbWAGff

The questionnaire will ask you questions about your experience of living with autism as a University Student at DCU and will be returned anonymously to the study team. Thank you for your participation.

Best wishes, Mary Rose

Dr. Mary Rose Sweeney
Associate Dean for Research in the Faculty of Science and Health
Senior Lecturer
School of Nursing and Human Sciences
Dublin City University
Dublin 9
maryrose.sweeney@dcu.ie
00 353 7007786

Appendix 4

Participant information leaflet (Students with Autism)



Living with Autism as a University Student: A DCU experience.

A team of researchers led by Dr. Mary Rose Sweeney at the School of Nursing and Human Sciences at DCU, in collaboration with AsIAM <https://asiam.ie/> and Specialisterne <http://ie.specialisterne.com/> are conducting a study to explore the experiences of living with Autism as a University student. The study aims to explore current services for students with autism at DCU, their adequacy and identify any gaps that could be addressed to improve campus life.

You are being invited to complete the anonymous online questionnaire. The questionnaire will ask you questions about your experience of living with autism as a University Student at DCU.

Students with Autism who are registered with the disability services in DCU will be asked to complete an anonymous online questionnaire.

If you are not registered with the Disability Service, you will be invited to complete this questionnaire through the all student email.

On completion of the study all data will be held securely by the principal investigator, Dr. Mary Rose Sweeney in DCU for a period of 6 years post publication and all data subsequently destroyed.

We are committed to protecting those involved in our research, however confidentiality cannot be promised with regard to information disclosed that indicates a persons' safety or welfare is at risk from peers, staff, family or another source.

It is not thought that there any risks to participants from involvement in the study.

Participants are not obliged to take part in the study are free to drop out at any time should they so wish.

The results of the study will be available in a report published by the research team at DCU.

If you have any questions, please contact Dr. Mary Rose Sweeney, Principal Investigator at maryrose.sweeney@dcu.ie

Ethical approval for this project has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee.

If participants have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, please contact:

The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000

All study materials are available in the following appendices.

Appendix 5

Information about Pobal (project funders)



Living with Autism as a University Student: A DCU experience.

The study, *Living with Autism as a University Student in DCU* is funded by Pobal.

The following information is about Pobal and the work that they do.

Pobal is a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee, without share capital. It was established in 1992 as Area Development Management Ltd. (ADM) by the Irish Government with the agreement of the European Commission, as an intermediary company working on behalf of Government to support social and economic development within Ireland. Over time our work has evolved in line with developments in Government policy and the needs of the groups and communities we serve. In 2005 the company name changed to Pobal.

The company is governed by a Board of Directors appointed by Government and they give of their time and expertise on a voluntary basis.

Pobal's work is primarily influenced by the policy context pertaining to: the Programme for Government; the National Development Plan 2007-2016; Putting People First Action Programme for Effective Local Government and the Action Plan for Jobs.

The company operates on the basis of a framework agreement with the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government (DECLG) and programme-specific Service Level Agreements with individual Departments. Pobal's accounts are subject to audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General.

The work of the company is guided by a Strategic Plan and our annual business plans reflect the requirements of the specific years in question.

The company works on an all-island basis, with offices in Dublin, Monaghan, Cork, Clifden, Sligo and Letterkenny. It employs 231 staff.

Pobal's programmes are subject to audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General, our funding Departments and the EU.

Pobal acts as an intermediary for programmes funded by the Irish Government and the EU.

We do this by supporting groups and communities across the country that are applying for, or receiving, funding for specific programmes. In practical terms, this can involve assessing funding applications, providing support, checking financial returns, processing payments, and auditing to ensure funds are used for the intended purposes.

Appendix 6

Questionnaire for completion by students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (Study 1)

Living with Autism as a University student: a DCU experience.

This survey is for persons with a formal diagnosis on the Autism spectrum

(For the purposes of this survey, we are using the Umbrella term of "Autism Spectrum Disorder" as defined in DSM-V, to be inclusive of those with diagnosis of specific conditions on the Autism Spectrum, such as Asperger's Syndrome, Pervasive Development Disorder – Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS), Rett Syndrome and Childhood Disintegrative Disorder)

Screening Questions

- I have been diagnosed with Autism (Includes Asperger Syndrome)?
 - Yes
 - No
- I have attended DCU for a least one semester
 - Yes
 - No
- I am at least 18 years old
 - Yes
 - No
- Have you read and understood the plain language statement?
 - Yes
 - No
- Do you consent to taking part in the survey?
 - Yes
 - No

Diagnosis

- Have you been diagnosed with any of the following conditions?
 - Autism
 - Aspergers Syndrome
 - Pervasive Development Disorder – Not Otherwise Specified
 - Rett Syndrome
 - Childhood Disintegrative Disorder (CDD)
 - Other
- Have you been diagnosed with any of the following conditions?
 - Dyslexia
 - Dyspraxia / DCD
 - ADD / ADHD
 - Epilepsy
 - Mild / General Learning Disability
 - Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
 - Intellectual Disability - if yes please state what it is if known _____
 - Don't know _____
 - Other _____

Appendix 6, Continued

Questionnaire for completion by students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (Study 1)

Demographic section

8) What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Other _____

9) Age

- 18-25years
- 26-30 years
- 30-40 years
- 40+ years

10) What is your current highest academic qualification?

- Leaving Certificate
- Higher Certificate / Advanced Certificate
- Ordinary Bachelor Degree
- Honours Degree / Higher Diploma
- Master's Degree / Post-Graduate Diploma
- Doctoral Degree / Higher Doctorate
- Other (please state) _____

11) In what year did you obtain this qualification

- 2010-2015
- 2003-2009
- 1996-2002
- _____

12) Is English your first language?

- Yes
- No

13) When did you receive your diagnosis of an Autism?

- Birth - 4 years old
- National School (5 - 12 years old approximately)
- Secondary School (12- 18 years old approximately)
- After you left school (18 years old + approximately)

This section is about your DCU Experience.

14) Did you come directly from secondary school to DCU?

- Yes
- No - if no what did you do in the interim?
- _____

15) Are you an undergraduate student or a postgraduate student?

- Undergraduate
- Postgraduate

16) What faculty are you currently studying in?

- DCU Business School
- Faculty of Engineering and Computing
- Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
- Faculty of Science and Health
- Institute of Education
- Royal Irish Academy of Music
- Open Education

17) What is your current Grade Points Average? (eg. 2nd class honours, 1st class honours)

- 1st
- 2.1
- 2.2
- 3rd
- Don't know

18) If you are a postgraduate, is it a taught or research post-graduate degree?

- Taught
- Research

19) What year of study are you currently in?

<input type="radio"/> 1 st	<input type="radio"/> Repeating 1 st Year
<input type="radio"/> 2 nd	<input type="radio"/> Repeating 2 nd Year
<input type="radio"/> 3 rd	<input type="radio"/> Repeating 3 rd Year
<input type="radio"/> 4 th	<input type="radio"/> Repeating 4 th Year
<input type="radio"/> 5 th	<input type="radio"/> Repeating 5 th Year

20) Did you have any academic credits or exemptions on entering DCU?

- Yes
- No

21) If yes, what was it / they (e.g. Irish language exemption, course credits etc)

22) Have you taken any courses, that did not earn credits towards your degree, in any of following areas at DCU? Please indicate below (select all that apply)

- Maths
- English
- Essay Writing
- Academic / Life Skills
- Other _____
- I did not take any courses that earned credits

23) Are you enrolled in DCU as a full-time or part-time student?

- Full Time
- Part Time

24) If Part Time, why did you select this option

25) When did you disclose your diagnosis of Autism to the DCU Disability Service?

- Prior to starting in DCU
- During 1st Semester
- After 1st Semester
- Have not disclosed

26) Have you ever disclosed your diagnosis of Autism to other students in DCU?

- Yes
- No

27) If you have not disclosed your diagnosis of Autism to other students, why did you choose not to?

28) Have you ever disclosed your diagnosis of Autism to a member/members of DCU Academic Staff (e.g. lecturers)?

- Yes
- No

29) If you have not disclosed your diagnosis of Autism to a member of DCU Academic Staff, no, why not?

Appendix 6, Continued

Questionnaire for completion by students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (Study 1)

30) What DCU offices have you received support from? (specific to your needs related to Autism)

- Disability Service
- Accommodation Office
- Student Services
- Estates
- Intra Office
- Library
- Centre for Talented Youth in Ireland (CTYI)
- None
- Other

31) Do you think the range of supports available at DCU are adequate to meet your needs related to Autism?

- Yes
- No

32) If you do not think that the range of supports at DCU are adequate to meet your needs related to Autism, why not and what else would support you in DCU?

33) Please read the statements below and tick the box which is most applicable to you

STATEMENT	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
I enjoy life at DCU							
I have the academic skills to attend DCU							
I have the social skills to succeed at University							
I find it easy to live with my room mates							
I have made new friends in college							
I knew some people studying in DCU before I came							
I feel able to advocate for myself in DCU							
I have a good routine around study and assignments (both in terms of how often and how effective)							
I eat alone in the cafeteria by choice							
I have friends that often contact me outside of DCU							
I spend my spare time alone by choice							
I find it easy to participate in group work during class							
I prefer to spend time in quiet places on campus							
It is easy to ask questions and seek guidance from lecturers							
It is easy to get support or information from DCU Support services							
I find attending lectures stressful							
I find it easy to keep up in lectures							
I find the campus overwhelming							

STATEMENT	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
I get grades which reflect my personal abilities							
People in DCU are nice to me							
I feel lonely in DCU							
I enjoy living away from home							
I talk to other students who are in my class							
I manage my time effectively							
I can cope effectively with stress and anxiety							
My Secondary School supported me in preparing to transition to University							
I have difficulty learning abstract information							
I find it easy to focus when I am studying							
I find college teaching staff knowledgeable about Autism							
I find college services staff (Library, Enery, Estates) knowledgeable about Autism							
I feel isolated in DCU							
I generally feel depressed							
I have previously dropped out of college							
I have thought of dropping out of DCU							
People ignore me in DCU							
There are internship opportunities through my University that are tailored to my needs							
Final Year Students Only - I feel I get enough support in constructing a CV to prepare for a job							
Final Year Students Only - I feel I receive adequate support from the Careers Service in DCU to transition to employment							

34) Overall, how would you rate your social experience of DCU on a scale of 1-10 (where 10 is the most positive and 1 is the most negative)

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10

35) What are the 3 most difficult things about social interaction or **socialising** on campus?

Appendix 6, Continued

Questionnaire for completion by students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (Study 1)

Finding the venue or location of event
 Talking to people
 Meeting people with similar interests
 Meeting people who understand my needs
 The venue is unsuitable to my sensory needs
 Not knowing what to expect
 Being part of a group
 Initiating a conversation
 Maintaining a conversation
 When Times and locations change
 Other, Please explain _____

36) What are the 3 best or easiest things about social interaction or socialising on campus?

Finding the venue or location of event
 Talking to people
 Meeting people with similar interests
 Meeting people who understand my needs
 The venue is unsuitable to my sensory needs
 Not knowing what to expect
 Being part of a group
 Initiating a conversation
 Maintaining a conversation
 When Times and locations change
 Other, Please explain _____

37) Could the University do anything to improve your social experience? Please explain your answer

38) Could the Student Union or the Clubs and Societies do anything to improve your social experience at DCU?

39) Overall how would you rate your academic experience of DCU on a scale of 1-10 (where 10 is the most positive and 1 is the most negative)

1
 2
 3
 4
 5
 6
 7
 8
 9
 10

40) What are the most difficult things about academic work in DCU? Please explain your answer

41) What are the best or easiest things about academic work in DCU? Please explain your answer

42) What could the University do to improve your academic experience?

43) What could lecturers do to improve your academic experience?

44) What are the most difficult things about getting a job / internship or work experience?

45) What are the best or easiest things about getting a job / Internship or work experience?

46) If DCU could do anything to improve your employment /internship or work experience, what are they?

47) Are there any advantages to being a college student with Autism?

Yes
 No

48) If yes, Please explain what you feel the advantages are of being a student with Autism.

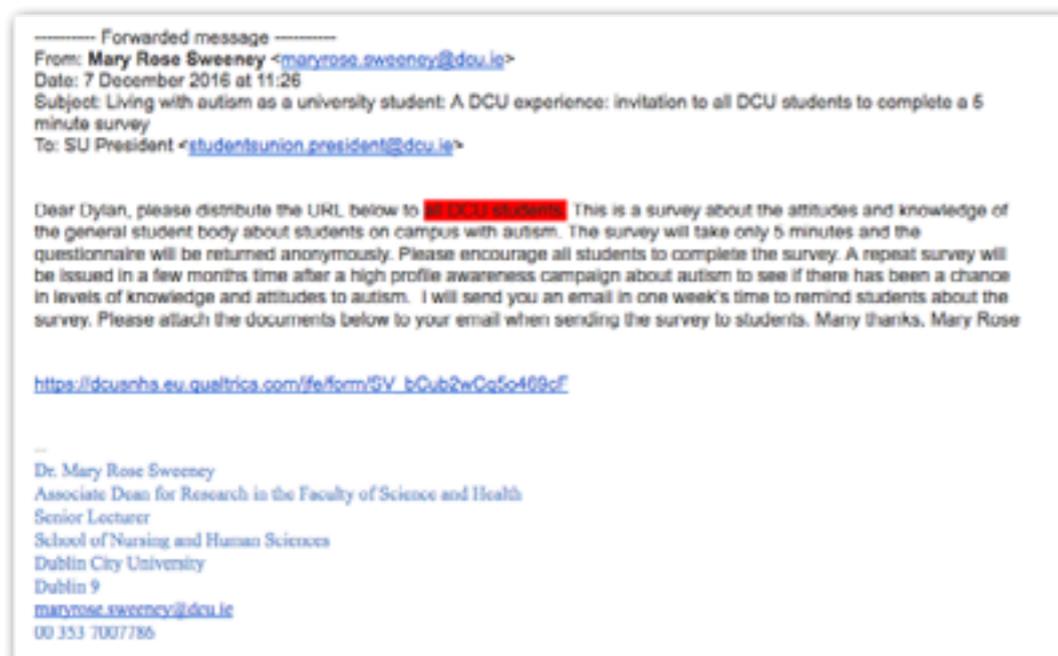
49) What do you like about DCU?

50) What are your greatest challenges you face as a student with Autism in DCU?

51) What are your greatest strengths you have as a college student with Autism in DCU?

Appendix 7

Call for Study Participants (All DCU Student -Vignette Study)



Appendix 8

Participant information leaflet (All DCU Students)



Appendix 9 Questionnaire / Vignette for All Students in DCU

DCU AS I AM JE Autism Spectrum Information, Advice and Meeting Point SPECIALISTERNE Passion for details pobal government supporting communities

"This project was approved by Government with support from the Dormant Accounts Fund"

Screening and Consent:

- I have read and I understand the plain language statement?
 - Yes
 - No
- I consent to taking part in the survey?
 - Yes
 - No

Short Vignette

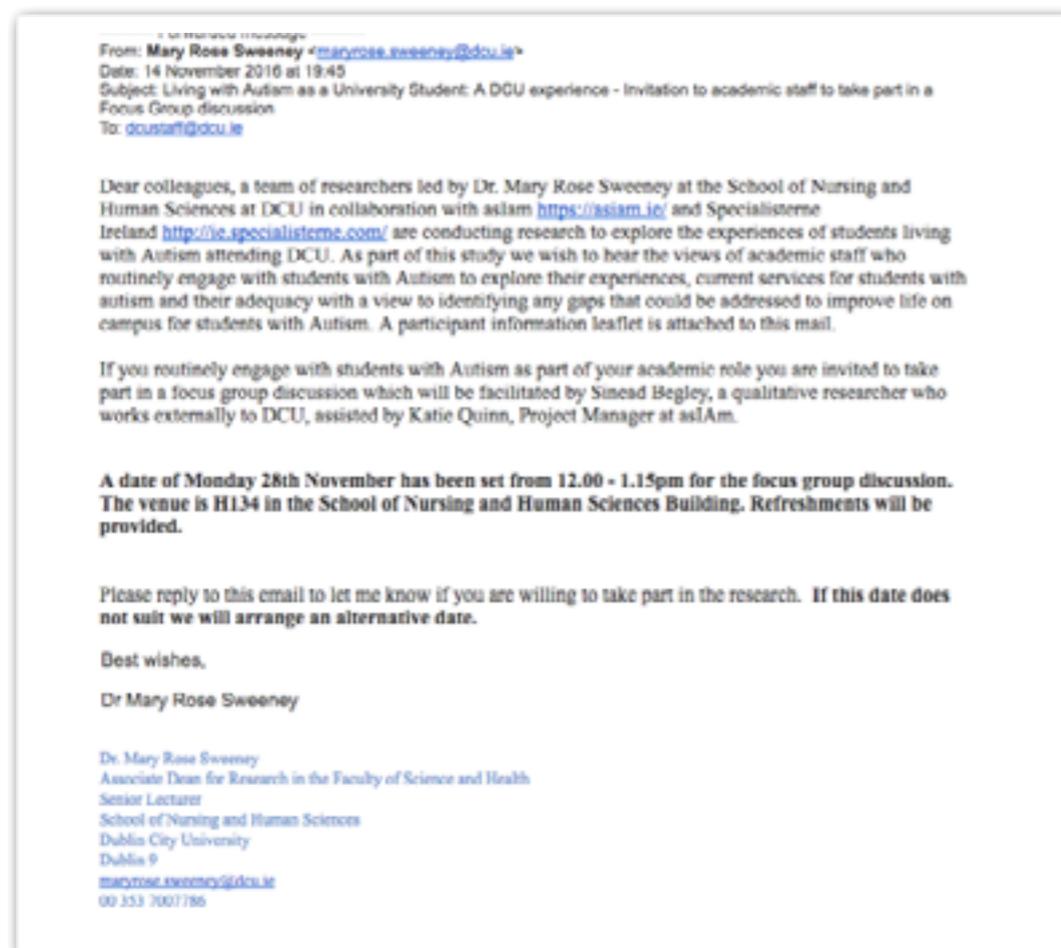
- Short Vignette - Please read the following vignette (description) and answer the questions below.

Jamie is a student on your course in DCU. Jamie is of average height and looks similar to peers of the same age. Jamie is quite clumsy and often has very poor eye contact. When Jamie attends lectures, Jamie often sits alone. If someone sits beside Jamie, Jamie does not make eye contact or engage in conversation. Jamie can often make noises during lectures and sometimes sits very close to other people, but does not seem to be aware of their personal space. When Jamie is in a social situation, Jamie can often talk loudly, and repeats things that have already been said. Jamie finds it difficult to read facial expressions and social cues. Jamie would often continue the conversation, even when it is clear that people are no longer interested in the topic or have left. Jamie often copies other people because Jamie is very conscious of fitting in. Sometimes Jamie says the wrong thing at the wrong time and can come across as very blunt and rude. Jamie is very interested in Animation and is a member of the Anime Soc. Jamie really likes hanging out with people who share this interest but sometimes it is all Jamie seems able to talk about and it can be hard to get an opportunity to speak when Jamie is speaking about something Jamie is interested in. Jamie also likes to always have a plan and can come across as bossy. When going to lectures if there is any change in schedule or if the theatre is very busy or noisy Jamie can appear to be quite on edge or irritable. Occasionally Jamie does unusual things. For example, on a night out, when Jamie is having fun, Jamie frequently will run ahead of the group and flap hands. While Jamie is in University, Jamie often seems to be very immature and doesn't have a lot of common sense. Jamie frequently breaks things in the apartment and can be quite fussy about the appearance of the apartment. Jamie is a good student and is quite generous with giving time to others. Jamie is always willing to help out others with their work if they ask for help. Jamie has a small, close knit group of friends to whom Jamie is very loyal and is very socially conscious, being involved in a number of humanitarian societies.

This person makes me feel afraid.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Don't Know	Agree	Strongly Agree
This person is probably as smart as I am.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Don't Know	Agree	Strongly Agree
I would not mind this person living in my apartment building.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Don't Know	Agree	Strongly Agree
I would hang out with this person in my free time.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Don't Know	Agree	Strongly Agree
I would feel comfortable around this person.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Don't Know	Agree	Strongly Agree
This person is different from me.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Don't Know	Agree	Strongly Agree
I think this person would be able to apply for the same jobs as me.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Don't Know	Agree	Strongly Agree
Overall, I think I would like Jamie as a person.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Don't Know	Agree	Strongly Agree

Appendix 10

Call for Participants: Focus Group with Academic Staff

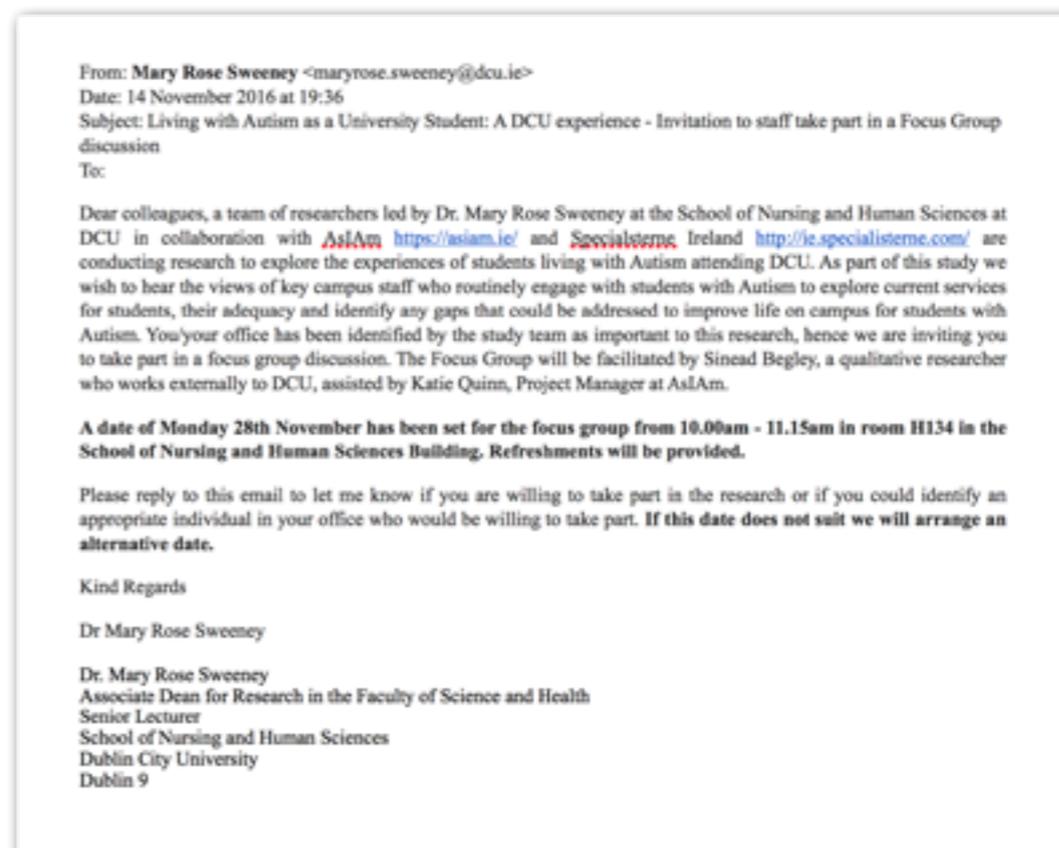


2nd Call:



Appendix 11

Call for Participants: Focus Group with University Support Staff



Appendix 12

Participant Information Leaflet (*Focus Groups and Semi-structured interviews with University Support Staff*)



DCU ASIAM Autism Spectrum Information Advice and Meeting Point SPECIALISTERNE Passion for details

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"This project was approved by Government with support from the Dormant Accounts Fund"

Living with Autism as a University Student: A DCU experience.

A team of researchers led by Dr. Mary Rose Sweeney from the School of Nursing and Human Sciences, at DCU in collaboration with [asiam](https://asiam.ie/) <https://asiam.ie/> and Specialisterne Ireland <http://ie.specialisterne.com/> are conducting a study to explore the experiences of living with Autism as a University student. The study aims to explore current services for students with Autism, their adequacy and to identify any gaps that could be addressed to improve life on campus for students with Autism. This study had obtained ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee at DCU.

You are being invited to take part in the study as outlined below:

A number of key staff members who routinely engage with students with Autism on campus will be invited to take part in a focus group or individual interviews. The Focus Group will be facilitated by Sinead Begley, a qualitative researcher who works externally to DCU, assisted by Katie Quinn, Project Manager at [Asiam](https://asiam.ie/). The focus groups or individual interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. Once the transcripts have been completed we will delete the audio recordings and analyze the data.

On completion of the study all data will be held securely by the principal investigator Dr. Mary Rose Sweeney in DCU for a period of 6 years post publication after which time all of the data will be destroyed.

We are committed to protecting those involved in our research, however confidentiality cannot be promised with regard to information disclosed that indicates a person's safety or welfare is at risk from peers, staff, family or another source. It is not thought that there are any risks to participants from involvement in this study. Participants are not obliged to take part in the study and are free to drop out at any time should they so wish. The results of the study will be available in a report published by the research team at DCU.

If you have any questions, please contact Dr. Mary Rose Sweeney, Principal Investigator at maryrose.sweeney@dcu.ie

If participants have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person,

Please contact: The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, C/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000

Appendix 13

Consent Form: Staff semi-structured interviews / Focus Groups



DCU ASIAM Autism Spectrum Information Advice and Meeting Point SPECIALISTERNE Passion for details

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"This project was approved by Government with support from the Dormant Accounts Fund"

Title: Living with Autism as a University Student: A DCU experience.

A team of researchers led by Dr. Mary Rose Sweeney at the School of Nursing and Human Sciences at DCU in collaboration with [Asiam](https://asiam.ie/) are conducting a study to explore the experiences of living with Autism as a University student. The study aims to explore current services for students, their adequacy and identify any gaps that could be addressed to improve life on campus for students with Autism.

You are invited to take part in the study that is outlined below:

A number of key staff members who routinely engage with students with Autism on campus will be invited to take part in focus group of individual interviews.

The purpose of these focus groups is to find the key staff's perception of autism within a university context and their openness to inclusivity in theory and practice. The focus groups or individual interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. Once the transcripts have been completed we will delete the audio recordings and ~~analyze~~ analyze the data.

On completion of the study all data will be held securely by the principal investigator, Dr. Mary Rose Sweeney in DCU for a period of 6 years post publication and all data subsequently destroyed.

We are committed to protecting those involved in our research, however confidentiality cannot be promised with regard to information disclosed that indicates a persons' safety or welfare is at risk from peers, staff, family or another source. It is not thought that there any risks to participants from involvement in the study.

Participants are not obliged to take part in the study are free to drop out at any time should they so wish. The results of the study will be available in a report published by the research team at DCU.

If you have any questions, please contact Dr. Mary Rose Sweeney, Principal Investigator at maryrose.sweeney@dcu.ie

If participants have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, please contact:
The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000

I have read and understood the information in this form. My questions and concerns have been answered by the researchers, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to taking part in this research project.

- I consent to take part in a focus group discussion or a semi-structured interview.

Signature: _____
 Print Name: _____
 Contact number: _____
 Date: _____
 Researcher's Signature: _____

Appendix 14

Topic guides for DCU staff undertaking one-to-one interviews or focus groups

Focus groups/semi-structured interview topic guide

When you hear the word Autism, what do you think about? (Ice breaker question)

- What do you know about students with autism?
- What would you think would be difficult about DCU if you had Autism?
- What experience have you had with students with autism at DCU?
- What issues arise for you in engaging with students with Autism at DCU?
- What supports have you received from DCU to help you deal with students with Autism?
- How well do you feel the supports have met your needs?
- What additional supports do you need?
- How could DCU become a more inclusive place for students with Autism?
- What benefits do you think students with Autism bring to DCU?



This project was approved by Government and was funded from the Dormant Accounts Fund and DCU

**Purposefully different,
consistently excellent**





Autism Spectrum
Information Advice
and Meeting Point



Comhshaoil, Pobal agus Rialtas Áitiúil
Environment, Community and Local Government



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