



**SUPPORTING  
NEURODIVERGENT  
STUDENTS AS THEY NAVIGATE  
INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS  
AND CONSENT IN HIGHER  
EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTES  
(HEI)**

**Michele Dunleavy, Kathleen Maher, Nicola Mannion, Maria Dervan, Sarah Gallagher, Lorraine McIlrath, Matthew O'Rourke, Dede Hearity, Colin Moran, Rabiya Ali, and Maria Healy**

ISBN 978-1-900146-52-4

## Foreword

This research report, *Supporting Neurodivergent Students as they Navigate Intimate Relationships within Higher Education*, represents a significant and timely contribution to how higher education institutions in Ireland understand, engage with, and respond to the lived experiences of neurodivergent students beyond the academic sphere. At Mary Immaculate College (MIC), our commitment to Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Interculturalism (EDII), alongside the prevention of Sexual Violence and Harassment (SVH), is grounded in the belief that higher education must support the whole student. College life is not solely about academic attainment; it is also a formative period of personal, social, and relational development. For neurodivergent students, navigating consent, intimacy, and relationships often takes place within systems and cultures that have not been designed with their experiences in mind. This research squarely addresses that gap.

Central to this study is a participatory, social justice-informed approach, guided by the principle of “*nothing about us without us.*” Neurodivergent students were not merely participants but co-researchers, shaping the research questions, data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Their voices, insights, and expertise are embedded throughout this report, resulting in findings and recommendations that are authentic, grounded, and actionable.

We are deeply grateful to Dr. Michele Dunleavy, Faculty of Education at MIC for her expertise and leadership on this research and report, and for supporting a culture of collaboration among all stakeholders. We sincerely thank the thirty seven students who generously shared their time, perspectives, and lived experiences, and to the student co-researchers whose leadership, integrity, and commitment strengthened this project immeasurably. Their courage and honesty have provided an evidence base that challenges assumptions, highlights systemic barriers, and points clearly towards more inclusive, neuro-affirmative practice across the higher education sector.

This project was led by Mary Immaculate College in close collaboration with our partner institutions, Technological University of the Shannon (TUS) and the University of Limerick (UL). We wish to sincerely thank colleagues across all three institutions—particularly those working within EDII, Access, Student Services, and Sexual Violence and Harassment prevention and response roles—for their expertise, cooperation, and shared commitment to fostering safe, respectful, and supportive campus cultures.

We also wish to acknowledge and thank the Higher Education Authority (HEA) for funding this research through the *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Enhancement Fund*. This support made it possible to undertake a rigorous, cross-institutional study that aligns directly with the *National Framework for Consent in Higher Education Institutions* and national priorities to end sexual violence and harassment in the sector. The HEA’s investment signals the importance of evidence-based, inclusive approaches that centre student voices and address inequality at a structural level.

This report can be read alongside the two other project outputs that include an infographic and animation that represent the main themes stemming from the research. It is our hope that these resources will serve as a catalyst—informing policy, shaping practice, and encouraging further collaboration across the sector. The insights and recommendations contained here challenge us to move towards equity-driven, skills-based, and neuro-affirmative supports that enable all students to thrive.

Finally, we extend our sincere thanks to everyone who contributed to this work. We hope that the knowledge generated through this research will support meaningful change and contribute to higher education environments where neurodivergent students are not simply accommodated, but genuinely understood, valued, and included.

**Professor Lorraine McIlrath**

Director of Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Interculturalism Mary Immaculate College

**Kathleen Maher**

Ending Sexual Violence and Harassment Prevention and Response Manager  
Mary Immaculate College

April 2026

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## Acronyms

Acronym	Full title
ADD/ADHD	Attention Deficit Disorder/Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
AHEAD	Association for Higher Education Access and Disability
APA	American Psychological Association
ASD	Autistic Spectrum Disorder
CAST	Center for Applied Special Technology
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DARE	Disability Access Route to Education
DSM	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual
EDII	Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Interculturalism
ENGAGE	Each letter represents a specific workshop component in the framework. <b>E</b> = Establishing a Plan for Success; <b>N</b> = Next Stop: Strengths; <b>G</b> = Getting Ready with Planning and study skills; <b>A</b> = Accounting for Energy and Self-Care; <b>G</b> = Getting Familiar with Accommodations and Advocacy; <b>E</b> = ENGAGE Toolkit, final iteration and refinement of personal supports
ESVH	Ending Sexual Violence and Harassment
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEI	Higher Education Institute
HEAR	Higher Education Access Route
ICD	International Classification of Diseases
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, the + is an inclusive symbol representing all other sexual orientations and gender identities not explicitly covered by the letters
MIC	Mary Immaculate College
MISU	Mary Immaculate Student Union
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
PAR	Participatory Action Research
PI	Principal Investigator
RSE	Relationship and Sexuality Education
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SLD	Specific Learning Difficulty
SVH	Sexual Violence and Harassment
TUS	Technological University of the Shannon
TS	Tourette's Syndrome
UDL	Universal Design for Learning
UL	University of Limerick

## Acknowledgements

This research would not have been possible without the support of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and the funding awarded to undertake the research. The collaboration between Mary Immaculate College, the Technological University of the Shannon and the University of Limerick has been an enriching, engaging and insightful partnership. The learnings gleaned from this research will inform future policy and practice to create deeper approaches towards equality, diversity and inclusion. The study would not have been possible without the 37 students who came forward to volunteer their time, perspectives, wisdom and lived experiences, along with the four student co-researchers. We thank you all most sincerely for your genuine collaboration, honesty and engagement.

# Section 1

## 1.1 Background and Rationale

This research entitled *Supporting Neurodivergent Students as they Navigate Intimate Relationships within Higher Education*, investigates the supports informed by neurodivergent students to navigate intimate relationships within Higher Education Institutes (HEIs). A funding proposal was submitted to the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in December 2023 addressing Action 6 (Pilot initiatives targeted at supporting high-risk groups and smaller or hard to reach groups in a small number of HEIs) of the Ending Sexual Violence and Harassment in Higher Education Implementation Plan 2022-2024. MIC was the lead partner on this project with our partners in TUS and UL.

Funding of €23,248.03 was awarded to undertake participatory research to produce a report, video and infographic to present the voice of students within three Irish HEIs. The report provides the full qualitative data, discussion and consideration for HEIs to further support students. These resources have been presented to policymakers and higher education staff to provide an evidence base for further policy and practice consideration. The infographic provides a visually representation of overview of the key findings. The video enhances the presentation of data by integrating participants' lived experiences of navigating intimate relationships and consent in HEIs. The research report unearths the full findings.

Historically, HEIs focused on academic achievement, and although there has been a move towards more inclusive environments, neurodivergent students still face many barriers (Quigley, 2024). Quigley (2024, p. 1) suggests that this may be due to a lack of understanding within HEIs in relation to the 'nuance of neurodiversity'. Föcking and Rahul (2025) reported that primary and post-primary relationship and sexuality education such as Relationship Sexuality Education (RSE) programmes 'missed key aspects of an autistic person's lived experiences navigating relationships. For this reason, one can contend that there is a need within HEIs to better understand and then provide support for neurodivergent students to enable them to navigate intimate relationships and consent within these relationships. Existing literature highlights that autistic students face unique challenges in this area. Recognising the importance of inclusive terminology, the study adopts the term 'neurodivergent' to reflect the student preference within this research.

Three HEIs participated in this project, with Mary Immaculate College (MIC) as the lead partner. The three Sexual Violence and Harassment (SVH) Prevention and Response Managers were central to this work. These new roles established in 2023 is to coordinate each institution's response to sexual violence and harassment through a whole-institution approach, engaging partners both internally and externally. The role aims to strengthen institutional capacity to prevent and address SVH, and to monitor progress and impact, reported annually to both the institution and the HEA. The participating HEIs are committed to fostering a safe, respectful, supportive, and positive campus culture and to actively work to end all forms of sexual harassment and violence. They are implementing the *National Framework for Consent in HEIs: Safe, Respectful, Supportive and Positive – Ending Sexual Harassment in Irish Higher Education Institutions*. This Framework identifies four key outcome areas:

### 1. Institutional Culture

Effective structures are in place, with responsibility assigned to senior leadership and with meaningful engagement of stakeholders.

## 2. Institutional Processes

Clear systems for recording and reporting incidents and related statistics.

## 3. Institutional Policies

Policies aligned with the Framework's aims, with defined responsibilities, transparent reporting mechanisms, and strong leadership support.

## 4. Targeted Initiatives

Evidence-based initiatives for students and staff, including direct educational activities on consent, structured education plans, systems to evaluate effectiveness, and access to trauma-informed services.

## 1.2 Legislative Context and Policy

Within the Irish context, there is evolving legislation in relation to sexual consent. The Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 1990, Section 9 was amended in the 2017 Act and states that:

9. (1) A person consents to a sexual act if he or she freely and voluntarily agrees to engage in that act.

(2) A person does not consent to a sexual act if-

(a) he or she permits the act to take place or submits to it because of the application of force to him or her or to some other person, or because of the threat of the application of force to him or her or to some other person, or because of a well-founded fear that force may be applied to him or her or some other person,

(b) he or she is asleep or unconscious,

(c) he or she is incapable of consenting because of the effect of alcohol or some other drug,

(d) he or she is suffering from a physical disability which prevents him or her from communicating whether he or she agrees to the act,

(e) he or she is mistaken as to the nature and purpose of the act,

(f) he or she is mistaken as to the identity of any person involved in the act,

(g) he or she is being unlawfully detained at the time at which the act takes place,

(h) the only expression or indication of consent or agreement to the act comes from somebody other than the person himself or herself,

(3) This section does not limit the circumstances in which it may be established that a person did not consent to a sexual act.

(4) Consent to a sexual act may be withdrawn at any time before the act begins, or in the case of a continuing act, while the act is taking place.

(5) a failure or omission on the part of a person to offer resistance to an act does not of itself constitute consent to that act.

The legal age of consent in Ireland is 17. Coco's Law, namely the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020 was enacted in Ireland in 2021 that aims strengthen the law against online abuse, cyberbullying, and image-based sexual abuse. Additionally, the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences), Domestic Violence and International Instruments Bill 2025 is being introduced to strengthen the law in relation to consent. The Irish Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017 defines consent as consent is defined as the voluntary, free, and informed agreement to engage in sexual activity that is an active, ongoing process. HEIs have been directed to ensure that students can apply this knowledge in real-life contexts through targeted workshops.

In higher education institutions (HEIs), the *Framework for Consent* translates this legal definition of consent into practical, evidence-based supports that are now required across the sector. The Framework obliges HEIs to move beyond theoretical instruction by equipping students with the skills needed to understand and apply consent in real-life situations. All HEIs are working toward ensuring that all students attend a consent workshop during orientation, but participation rates vary across the sector.

### 1.3 Methodology and Research Questions

Grounded in a social justice paradigm that will be discussed in greater detail in Section 2.2, provides opportunities for active participation among all of the participants in this research. This approach aligns with the 'nothing about us without us' principle (Cala, 2024), ensuring that the voices of neurodivergent students are central to the study, rather than relying on the voices of parents and professionals (Joyal et al., 2017; McNally et al., 2025). This research was underpinned by the concept that 'participatory research is not only ethical but emancipatory' (Cala, 2024, p. 312). The research Supporting neurodivergent students as they navigate intimate relationships and consent within higher education embeds a number of research questions that include:

- What supports do neurodivergent students need to navigate intimate relationships and consent within HEIs?
- How do neurodivergent students define intimate relationships and consent?
- What supports would help neurodivergent students understand consent within intimate relationships?
- What institutional supports could HEIs implement to assist neurodivergent students?

### 1.4 Literature Review

The literature review explores core scholarship related to social justice; inclusion; intimate relationships; neurodiversity; autism; masking, camouflaging and compensations; neurodivergent students in HEIs; RSE Pre-Higher Transition; and theories that include Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory. The literature commences with an exploration of the concept of social justice, its various interpretations, and its relevance to educational contexts—particularly in supporting fairness, equity, and the recognition of individual differences among neurodivergent students. Discussion will focus on the principles of inclusion, how these intersect with social justice and neurodiversity, and the importance of fostering a sense of belonging for neurodivergent students in HEIs. The study explores the literature on intimate relationships and examines the complexities for neurodivergent students, including definitions, challenges, and the

importance of explicit support and education in navigating these relationships. An overview of the neurodiversity paradigm, its contested definitions, and the implications for educational practice and support structures in HEIs will be assessed. A focused discussion on autism including diagnostic criteria, strengths-based approaches, and the unique support needs of autistic students in higher education. Analysis of the phenomena of masking, camouflaging, and compensation among neurodivergent students, their prevalence, and their impact on well-being and authentic participation. Exploration of the specific experiences, challenges, and support needs of neurodivergent students as they transition to and participate in higher education. A review of the adequacy of RSE (Relationship Sexuality Education) at primary and post-primary levels, its impact on neurodivergent students, and the gaps that persist as they enter higher education. There is a discussion of research findings on the lived experiences of neurodivergent students in HEIs, including issues of inclusion, well-being, and the diversity of needs within this population. Analysis of the barriers and risks faced by neurodivergent students in forming and maintaining intimate relationships, including heightened vulnerability, social communication, and institutional shortcomings. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory provides a multi-layered lens for understanding how neurodivergent students navigate intimate relationships and consent within HEIs.

## Section 2

### Literature Review

#### 2.1 Introduction

This literature review situates the research within the intersecting frameworks of social justice and neurodiversity, examining how these perspectives inform the experiences of neurodivergent students in HEIs (Sala et al., 2020; Baeto et al., 2024). The review draws on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which emphasises the importance of belonging, safety, and self-actualisation in human development. For neurodivergent students, the ability to form healthy, consensual intimate relationships is closely linked to these foundational needs, yet institutional, social and systemic barriers can sometimes impede their fulfilment. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory further highlights how multiple layers of environment—from individual relationships to institutional policies—shape students' experiences and opportunities for growth within HEIs. Research highlights both the strengths and challenges faced by neurodivergent individuals as they navigate intimate relationships and consent, with barriers sometimes arising from a limited understanding of neurodiversity by peers and staff, within higher education. By synthesising prior research on institutional supports, particularly those focused on autistic and neurodivergent students, this review aims to identify effective strategies and gaps in current provision. Through this lens, the literature review establishes a foundation for investigating how HEIs can better support neurodivergent students in developing healthy, consensual intimate relationships, ensuring their voices are central to the conversation.

Social justice is a multifaceted concept, with numerous interpretations discussed across the literature. As Levin (2020, p. 186) observes, there exists 'a proliferation of interpretations of social justice', and equality within this framework is not about uniformity of people, but rather about individuals maintaining their inherent differences while enjoying equal rights and opportunities. This nuanced understanding is particularly relevant in educational contexts, where social justice has become a central theme in research concerning children and young adults with diverse needs. Noltemeyer and Grapin (2020, p. 3) note that social justice is now 'an increasingly prominent pillar for school and educational psychology research, practice and training around the world'. Today, in educational psychology, there is a shift towards a social justice lens, as researchers such as Noltemeyer and Grapin (2020) advocate a move away from a 'deficit' or 'medical' model that focuses on *curing* or *fixing* the individual. The social justice paradigm focuses on an exploration of systemic obstacles that may negatively impact students' learning and development. This is particularly relevant in Ireland, where increasing school diversity means a 'one-size-fits-all' approach is no longer effective.

In the context of neurodivergent students within Irish HEIs, exploring how these students navigate intimate relationships can reveal challenges related to supports, barriers and inequalities in their experiences. As Russell (2016) suggests, research must be 'conscious of biases, power, and privilege... [attend] to inequalities in lives ... [and attend] to well-being which demand attention and action' (p. 4). To counteract these inequalities, this research employs a participatory approach, involving neurodivergent students in all aspects of the research to ensure that barriers to navigating intimate relationships are fully investigated and addressed in a co-created manner.

Institutional structures and processes should be freely available to all individuals, regardless of their identity and characteristics, as Bhugra (2016, p. 337) asserts. Social justice, in this sense, is about fairness and empowering individuals to lead worthwhile lives. Drawing on Sen's (1985, 1999) theory of capability, Bhugra (2016) argues that everyone should have the capacity for a fulfilling life, which includes the opportunity for healthy intimate relationships. Duignan (2025, p.2) further contends that social justice should accentuate 'institutional conditions that encourage individual Stokes and Kaur (2005) self-development and self-determination' in line with Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

This research adopts Duignan's (2025, p. 6) definition of social justice:

a society that values fairness and equity for all individuals and social groups in all areas of life; that recognises and respects differing ethnic, cultural, gender, and other identities among citizens; and, most importantly, that affords a dignified and fulfilling existence for all individuals

This research aims to identify social justice actions that HEIs can take to deliver what Adams and Spalding (2013, p. 22) describe as 'actions designed to remove hurdles to equal opportunity, equal rights, and human liberty.' A critical distinction in the literature is between the concepts of equality and equity. Adams and Spalding (2013, p. 24) define equality as treating everyone the same, while equity 'takes into account historical disadvantages, human diversities, and potentially unique needs.' For HEIs, this means acknowledging and responding to the unique and nuanced needs of neurodivergent students—not only in academic performance but also in personal growth. When providing workshops and opportunities to learn about and develop the skills for consent, the unique needs of neurodivergent students within these settings must be recognised and addressed. As Adam and Spalding (2013, p. 25) state, 'the goal is not equality where everyone gets the same amount of the pie. It's equity where people get what they need.' Thus, HEIs must strive to provide what students need, rather than simply aiming for equal provision.

The principles of inclusion, social justice, and neurodiversity are deeply interconnected in shaping the experiences of neurodivergent students within HEIs. Inclusion, at its core, is about fostering a sense of belonging among students; when students feel they belong, their well-being is likely to follow. However, as Dunleavy (2015) notes, defining inclusion remains challenging, often resulting in varied local interpretations. Despite these challenges, inclusion is widely recognised as an antidote to prejudice and discrimination, as Maxwell (2024) asserts. Inclusion, as a concept, recognises and values the wide range of neurological diversity among students, including autism, ADHD, and other neurodivergent presentations. This perspective challenges traditional deficit-based models and instead promotes a strengths-based approach to education. By adopting neurodiversity-affirming practices, HEIs can create environments where neurodivergent students are supported to achieve their potential and participate fully in academic and social life.

Frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (CAST, 2018) and the ENGAGE programme (O'Neill, 2017) exemplify how inclusion and social justice can be operationalised to meet the needs of neurodivergent students. UDL's principles include:

1. Multiple means of engagement
2. Multiple means of representation
3. Multiple means of action and expression

The six pillars of the ENGAGE Framework include:

1. Establish a plan for success
2. Next step strengths
3. Getting ready – executive functioning and study
4. Accounting for energy and self-care
5. Getting familiar with accommodations and advocacy
6. Engage toolkit – bespoke and developed with the student over a six- week period

The use of these frameworks can promote educational practices that are flexible and responsive to individual differences, offering practical, neuro-affirmative support that adapts to each student, reinforcing the idea that systems should be modified to meet the needs of the learner, not the other way around. Ultimately, the integration of inclusion, social justice, and neurodiversity requires HEIs to move beyond equality—where everyone receives the same support—towards equity, where each student receives the support they need to thrive. By embracing these interconnected principles, HEIs can remove barriers, foster a sense of belonging, and empower neurodivergent students to lead fulfilling academic and personal lives (David, 2019; Government of Ireland, 2022-2028).

Understanding intimate relationships is essential when considering the broader aims of social justice and inclusion within HEIs, especially for neurodivergent students. Intimate relationships are multifaceted, encompassing not only sexual relationships but also close, non-sexual bonds that involve trust, communication, and mutual support. As Moreira et al. (2021) note, the term intimate relationship can refer to both sexual and non-sexual connections, highlighting the importance of recognising diverse experiences and definitions among students.

The frameworks of social justice and inclusion provide the ethical and practical foundation for supporting neurodivergent students as they navigate these relationships. Social justice, as articulated by Levin (2020) and Duignan (2025), is not about uniformity but about ensuring fairness, equity, and the recognition of individual differences. In the context of intimate relationships, this means acknowledging that neurodivergent students may face unique barriers—such as challenges interpreting social cues, understanding consent, or accessing appropriate relationship and sexuality education. Equity requires that HEIs provide tailored supports and resources, rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach.

Literature highlights the importance of understanding the complexities of intimate relationships, especially for neurodivergent students navigating social and romantic contexts in HEIs. Drawing on Sternberg (1986), loving relationships are conceptualised as comprising three core components:

- Intimacy: feelings of closeness, connectedness, and bondedness;
- Passion: feelings and desires that lead to physical attraction, romance, and sexual consummation;
- Commitment: feelings that lead a person to remain with someone and move towards shared goals.

As Feuerman (2024) explains, understanding these components is crucial for distinguishing between platonic and romantic relationships and for recognising how romantic relationships may progress to intimacy and commitment. In psychological and philosophical terms, the main difference between

platonic and romantic relationships rests in the presence of passion, sexual desire, and exclusivity. This can be further defined using Sternberg’s (1986) Triangular Theory of Love that platonic love is characterised by emotional closeness and trust—termed ‘intimacy’—but remains without passion (i.e., without physical or sexual attraction). Conversely, romantic love integrates both intimacy and passion, often necessitating a level of exclusivity and physiological drive that distinguishes it from a deep friendship. For neurodivergent students, these nuances may be particularly challenging, as research indicates difficulties in interpreting non-neurodivergent social cues and navigating the transition from friendship to romance.

Lavoie et al. (2015) discuss evolving dating habits and the phenomenon of *friends with benefits*, highlighting the need for explicit instruction and support in understanding dating, flirting, and relationship boundaries. These nuances are often difficult for autistic students to grasp, underscoring the importance of tailored relationship and sexuality education.

Moreira et al. (2021) emphasise the need to help adolescents improve peer communication, as healthy relationships depend on effective communication skills. This is especially important as students transition to higher education, where understanding and practising consent becomes critical (MacNeela and Higgins, 2023-2024). Relationship experiences in adolescence are formative, influencing how individuals approach intimacy and consent in adulthood. Research from Guzman et al. (2009), and Bradbury and Lavner (2012) highlight how adolescent patterns and adult intimate relationships fundamentally shape long-term health and well-being. Guzman et al. (2009) identify adolescence as a critical period for forming relationship patterns that influence adult intimacy, while Bradbury and Lavner (2012) highlight that stable, authentic relationships can buffer external stressors and yield lasting positive health outcomes

In summary, understanding the nuances of intimate relationships—through frameworks like Sternberg’s model and contemporary research on adolescent relationship patterns—is essential for supporting neurodivergent students. HEIs may need to provide explicit, accessible, and inclusive education to empower these students to navigate relationships safely and confidently, promoting their well-being and personal development.

There is no single, universally accepted definition of neurodiversity, and its meaning remains contested within academic and advocacy circles. Quigley et al. (2024, p. 2) highlight the ‘tension between the medical model, the strong social model, and the neurodiversity approach model’, which complicates efforts to define the term. Although the term ‘neurodiversity’ is often attributed to Judy Singer in the 1990s, its origins are also disputed. Many, such as Dekker (2020), argue that the concept emerged organically within online communities, evolving through grassroots discourse rather than being attributed to a single academic source. Regardless, the concept was developed to bridge the gap between medical and social models of disability, particularly in relation to autism, and has since become an umbrella term encompassing a range of neurodivergent presentations. Table 1 that is adapted from the Neurodivergent Inclusion & Advocacy Toolkit (2023) helps clarify those broadly included within the neurodiversity field and highlights general characteristics for those within these communities.

Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD)	Autism (the preferred terminology) is a developmental condition characterised by differences in social interaction, communication and behaviour. While some individuals may have challenges in these
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	areas, many also exhibit exceptional skills in memory, problem-solving or creativity.
Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder	ADHD is marked by persistent inattention, hyperactivity or impulsivity that can interfere with daily life. Individuals with ADHD often excel in environments that value energy, creativity and adaptability.
Dyslexia	Dyslexia is a learning difference that impacts reading and language processing. While reading may be a challenge, many individuals with dyslexia are highly skilled in problem-solving and innovative thinking
Dyspraxia	This motor coordination disorder affects physical tasks such as handwriting, balance, and coordination. Often misunderstood, dyspraxia does not affect intelligence and may coincide with unique strengths in creativity and empathy.
Dyscalculia	Dyscalculia impacts the ability to learn and understand numbers and math-related concepts. Children with this neurodivergent presentation may thrive in other areas, such as art, music or storytelling, where numerical skills are less critical.
Tourette syndrome (TS)	Tourette Syndrome (TS) involves repetitive movements or vocal tics. Individuals with TS often exhibit resilience and adaptability that serve them well in life.

**Table 1:** Adapted from the Neurodivergent Inclusion & Advocacy Toolkit (2023)

Irish data indicate that approximately 18.7% of adults have either been diagnosed with a specific neurodivergent condition or suspect they are neurodivergent (CSO, 2024). However, quantifying the neurodivergent demographic in Irish HEI remains challenging due to the aggregate nature of DARE entry data. Although 8.1% of 2024/25 entrants utilised this route, a more nuanced understanding of student needs is found in AHEAD’s longitudinal data. Their 2022/23 findings indicate a high prevalence of Specific Learning Difficulties (38.8%), ADD/ADHD (12.8), and Autism (11%), highlighting a significant requirement for targeted institutional supports beyond general disability frameworks.

The neurodiversity movement is a complex space, characterised by the interplay of multiple, and sometimes competing, frameworks. Dwyer (2022, p. 74) notes that ‘the term neurodiversity is evolving,’ making it difficult to establish a definitive meaning. Advocacy groups such as Neurodiversity Ireland (2024, p. 2) emphasise that ‘neurodivergent people experience and interact with the world differently. Embracing these different brains and their qualities and strengths can benefit the entire community.’ However, the adoption of strengths-based language and ethos within HEIs can sometimes obscure the real challenges faced by neurodivergent individuals. Quigley et al. (2024, p.3) report that participants in their study felt that an ‘overly positive space [that] negated the struggles they have and still face in their daily life’ led to increased masking, particularly among girls, as they attempted to develop strength-based skills to cope. Masking or camouflaging—where neurodivergent individuals suppress or hide their differences to fit in—can give the impression that additional support is not needed, when in fact it may be crucial. Hull et al. (2017) discuss how camouflaging in girls can impact relationship formation and lead to under-recognition of support needs in educational settings. When HEIs provide training on topics such as consent, masking may obscure the need for tailored support to

ensure neurodivergent students gain an in-depth understanding and can apply this knowledge in real-life situations.

Critics of the neurodiversity approach sometimes argue that it opposes access to supports or fails to recognise autism as a disability. The Warnock Report (1978), published in the UK, is considered a landmark document that changed thinking on what was then known as special education and inclusion in the UK and internationally. However, the legacy of the Warnock Report (1978) further complicates the landscape, as the introduction of 'special educational needs' (SEN) was intended to promote respectful language but inadvertently created the impression of a homogenous group with uniform needs. Warnock (2005-2006) later reflected that this was a 'major disaster', as it failed to account for the diversity of needs among individuals with different disabilities.

Neurodiversity Ireland (2024, p. 2) highlights that:

neurodivergent children encounter challenges across many aspects of life, often due to unmet support needs and a lack of societal understanding of neurodiversity. These challenges frequently result in marginalisation, separation within schools, or exclusion from social activities. The prevailing medical model of disability has contributed to stigma by focusing on what needs to be 'fixed' so that neurodivergent individuals might 'fit into' society.

In contrast, the current study does not seek to 'fix' or 'fit in' neurodivergent students. Instead, it aims to understand and amplify the voices of neurodivergent students regarding the supports they feel are necessary to thrive within HEIs, especially in areas beyond academic achievement. The focus is on fostering a supportive environment where all students can enjoy the full experience of college life. As Neurodiversity Ireland (2024, p. 2) states, the goal is to:

Promote positive, holistic solutions to the challenges faced by neurodivergent people in a society that has not been built with them in mind, respecting and supporting neurodivergent culture and identity and wrapping supports around a child, within the local community

Further, Neurodiversity Ireland (2024, p. 3) envisions 'an inclusive educational system where schools are empowered and equipped to be as inclusive as possible, both in mindset and practice.' This aligns with the aims of this study that acknowledge the challenges neurodivergent students may face and seeks to provide supports that students themselves have identified as helpful. The approach is not simply about advocating for equality or creating superficial positive spaces, but about working collaboratively with neurodivergent students to build a more inclusive and supportive campus environment.

As previously discussed, the neurodivergent umbrella encompasses a wide range of presentations and experiences. However, since the majority of student co-researchers in this study identified as autistic, the authors believe it is important to provide a more detailed discussion of autism and its specific support needs within the context of HEIs. This approach marks a shift from deficit-based models to student-driven, strengths-based approach, emphasising inclusion, respect for neurodivergent identity, and the co-creation of solutions that enable all students to thrive in campus life.

In this study, autism is discussed with reference to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5<sup>1</sup>) and the International Classification of Diseases, 11<sup>th</sup> Revision (ICD-11<sup>2</sup>). The authors recognise that relying solely on these frameworks can be contentious, as they tend to focus on difficulties and challenges, thus reinforcing a deficit-based model of understanding autism. For this reason, the researchers in this study believe it is important to acknowledge that autistic individuals also possess a wide range of strengths, talents, and abilities. This study adopts a strengths-based approach, actively promoting the involvement of autistic students as co-researchers and valuing their unique perspectives and contributions.

Autism is a complex developmental condition characterised by persistent challenges in social communication, restricted interests, and repetitive behaviours. While autism is considered a lifelong condition, the degree of difficulty experienced in daily functioning varies significantly among individuals (APA, 2013). The research does not attempt to review the many theories that have been proposed to explain autism or the specific reasons why autistic students may encounter challenges in learning environments. Instead, the focus is on understanding the lived experiences of autistic students and identifying the supports they themselves deem necessary to thrive in higher education settings. By centring autistic voices and adopting a participatory, strengths-based approach, this study seeks to move beyond traditional deficit models and contribute to a more inclusive and empowering understanding of autism within HEIs.

Milton's theory of Double Empathy (2012, 2024) is central to understanding interactions between neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals. This theory posits that challenges with perspective-taking exist on both sides, not solely for neurodivergent people. As a result, it is recommended that social and life skills related to communication be taught to both neurodivergent and neurotypical groups, especially in contexts such as consent training workshops in HEIs.

Another important factor impacting autistic students as they navigate intimate relationships and consent at HEIs is empathy—both cognitive and emotional. Trimmer et al. (2017, p. 450) define emotional empathy as 'the ability to emotionally resonate with others' feelings while understanding that they are distinct from one's own,' while cognitive empathy is the capacity to be aware of what another person is thinking and feeling. Research indicates that autistic students often experience non-neurodivergent social and emotional challenges, including difficulties identifying and analysing their own and others' mental states, which can inhibit both cognitive and affective empathy (Chou, 2024; Tani et al., 2015). Emotional abilities and difficulties can act as protective or risk factors for intimate relationship quality (Tani et al., 2015; Eid & Boucher, 2012; Reis, 2014; Cavallo, Murray & Holmes, 2014). Empathy is an essential element of prosocial skills, leading to advanced interpersonal competency and overall well-being (Chou, 2024). The ability to both express and contain one's own emotional states has positive effects for psychological and social well-being and is a significant protective factor for relationship quality (Tani et al., 2015).

Given these insights, the authors suggest that factors such as Double Empathy and empathy should be considered when developing supports for neurodivergent students in HEIs, including within consent

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<sup>1</sup> DSM 5 is considered the authoritative handbook used by healthcare professionals in the United States and much of the world to diagnose and classify mental disorders.

<sup>2</sup> ICD 11 is considered the global standard for recording, reporting and monitoring all health conditions, injuries, and causes of death

workshops. Addressing these factors can help ensure that supports are responsive to the nuanced needs of neurodivergent students and foster healthier, more inclusive relationship dynamics.

Masking, camouflaging, and compensation are complex phenomena that warrant careful consideration in the context of neurodivergent students. Venkatesan and Tolani (2024, p. 2) define these behaviours as a ‘process of suppressing or hiding your traits, natural behaviours and responses while adopting alternative traits and behaviours in order to fit in, survive, cope and meet expectations’. These strategies are frequently employed by neurodivergent individuals, particularly autistic students, to minimise the visibility of their autism during social situations (Leaf et al., 2023, p. 283). Research indicates that camouflaging, masking, and compensatory behaviours are more commonly used by females than males (Leaf et al., 2023, p. 293). While these strategies may help individuals navigate social environments, they can have detrimental effects on health and well-being. Venkatesan and Tolani (2024, p. 3) suggest that these behaviours are ‘associated with lower self-esteem, reduced authenticity, increased self-alienation, and an acceptance of external pressures’. This, in turn, can lead to loneliness, depression, anxiety, and even suicidal ideation (Leaf et al., 2023). Understanding and addressing masking, camouflaging, and compensation is essential for developing effective supports for neurodivergent students in HEIs. By recognising the prevalence and impact of these behaviours, HEIs can create more inclusive environments that reduce the need for masking and promote authenticity, well-being, and a sense of belonging. The transition to higher education presents a multiplicity of challenges, especially for those who may require additional assistance in navigating intimate relationships and understanding consent. Neurodivergent students often face unique barriers—ranging from social communication differences to a lack of tailored educational resources—that can make these aspects of campus life particularly complex.

Research suggests that neurodivergent students may require additional support to navigate intimate relationships and consent when they transition to HEIs. Cheak-Zamora (2019) argues that relationship and sexuality education at the post-primary level is often inadequate for autistic students, resulting in missed opportunities for social engagement and experimentation during adolescence. Solomon et al. (2019) report that autistic individuals have similar levels of sexual desire as their non-autistic peers but are dissatisfied with the sex education they received in school, expressing a need for more autism-specific content. Likewise, Pecora (2020, p. 544) notes that many autistic students do not ‘receive adequate, and developmentally appropriate sexual education, and have less access to sexual health information from common sources than their typically developing peers.’ This gap can lead to ‘sexuality-related problems ... with many individuals experiencing barriers in the development of a healthy sexuality and desired relationships,’ increasing vulnerability to abuse. Solomon et al. (2019) further support this by stating that sex education materials lack specific details and facts, preventing autistic students from gaining the in-depth understanding needed to form healthy sexual relationships.

The inadequacy of RSE at the post-primary level may stem from core characteristics of neurodivergent individuals, such as challenges with non-neurodivergent social communication and interpreting non-verbal cues. Solomon et al. (2019) highlight that these challenges mean autistic individuals may require more support when initiating and maintaining healthy sexual relationships, including asking for and giving consent. Dunleavy et al. (2025, p. 41) emphasise that ‘all aspects of sexuality, that is physical, biological, social, emotional and psychological need to be taught together and the connections between all aspects of relationships made explicit for autistic students.’ However, within the Irish context, this integration is often lacking, with confusion about who teaches RSE and fragmented

delivery across subjects. Adolescence is a critical period for exploring sexuality and developing intimate relationships, but for neurodivergent individuals, this process may occur later or be more challenging. Additionally, RSE programmes often focus on heterosexual relationships, leaving some students struggling with sexual identity as they enter higher education.

There is an increasing emphasis on student wellbeing within Irish schools, as evidenced by policies, such as the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework Practice (2018-2023). The Government of Ireland (2019, Foreword) states that ‘the promotion of wellbeing is central to the Department’s mission to enable children and young people to achieve their full potential.’ However, questions remain about how this commitment translates into practice, particularly in the teaching of RSE. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) ‘Preparing to Teach’ (2021) report acknowledges that language reflects values, attitudes, beliefs, prejudices, and principles, and that it shapes culture. Teachers are advised to be mindful of language when teaching RSE, ensuring that all pupils feel included, that they belong, and can have relationships. The important aspects can be viewed in Table 2 with a summary of the advice to teachers.

<b>Important aspects</b>	<b>Summary</b>
Anatomical language for body and growing and changing	From an early age, children should be taught and encouraged to use the correct anatomical terms for the body and biological processes.
Respectful language about relationships	The correct use and understanding of the meaning of vocabulary can help children in their understanding of relationships
Being LGBTI+ inclusive	By making your everyday language more inclusive, you can create a climate which is responsive to LGBTI+ terminology. When children question or use LGBTI+ language incorrectly, take the opportunity to teach the correct use or definition of the term in an age-appropriate way.
A gender inclusive language approach	A gender inclusive environment affirms all children and allows them to express their interests and find confidence in their strengths. It is important to challenge unhelpful gender stereotypes that relate to all genders and provide space for children to challenge their thinking and how they use language related to gender.
Names and pronouns	If a child, through discussion with their parents, chooses to change their name and pronouns, it is important to respect these changes and to ensure that other children and teachers are aware of this and use them appropriately.

**Table 2:** Summary from *Important Aspects of Language within RSE* (NCCA, 2021)

This suggests that there is a need for HEIs to provide tailored, inclusive supports for neurodivergent students as they navigate intimate relationships and consent. Addressing gaps in RSE and ensuring that language and teaching practices are inclusive can help foster healthy relationships and promote student wellbeing. Despite the existence of numerous policy documents outlining the teaching of relationships and sexuality education (RSE) at both primary and post-primary levels, neurodivergent students frequently report that these policies are not effectively translated into practice. As a result, the teaching of RSE is often described as inadequate, leaving students underprepared to navigate intimate relationships and consent when they transition to Higher Education Institutes (HEIs).

Consequently, neurodivergent students may enter HEIs without the necessary skills, knowledge, or confidence to navigate intimate relationships safely and meaningfully. Addressing this gap requires not only revisiting policy documents but also ensuring their practical implementation, with input from neurodivergent students themselves to create responsive, inclusive, and effective RSE.

Attending HEIs for students encompasses a myriad of reasons including the pursuit of a degree but campus and student life encompasses much more—it is a time for personal growth, learning to live independently, and developing social and emotional skills. Song (2024) highlights the significant interplay between personal growth and well-being among university students, aligning with Tinto's (1993) view that both social and academic integration are foundational to the student experience. Moreover, Song (2024) describes personal growth as multidimensional, encompassing academic, personal, and social development—elements that are essential for the transition to Kegan's (1994) stage of self-authorship and Maslow's (1954) self-actualisation.

Research by Tan et al. (2023, p. 2) suggests that 'autistic students often feel a sense of otherness at universities,' a feeling that may stem from a lack of understanding among other students and staff. Their study further concluded that this lack of understanding extends to the university teaching curriculum and academic discussions, which were described as 'extremely ableist.' Similarly, Hancock et al. (2020) discuss the challenges experienced by autistic individuals, including those related to romantic relationships. Importantly, they acknowledge that autistic individuals are 'highly heterogeneous', meaning that their experiences, strengths, and support needs can vary widely. As a result, supports must be individualised and responsive to each student's unique circumstances. This indicates that neurodivergent students often feel misunderstood and marginalised when institutions rely on standardised approaches. Instead, HEIs must accelerate the shift toward fostering understanding, actively reducing ableism, and implementing tailored supports that empower all students—not just in academic engagement, but across social, emotional, and relational domains of college life.

Historically, there has been a misconception that neurodivergent individuals, particularly autistic individuals, did not desire sexual relationships. However, research now recognises sexuality as a normative and integral aspect of development for autistic individuals. Tullis and Zangrillo (2013) note that autistic individuals undergo typical pubertal development, experiencing emotional and hormonal changes and sexual desires. Pecora (2020, p. 543) affirms that 'sexuality in autism is now recognised as a normative, and integral aspect of development and functioning.' This view is supported by Baeto et al. (2024), Hannah & Staggs (2016), and Sala et al. (2020), who all highlight that autistic individuals are interested in sexuality and aspire to have intimate relationships, though they may encounter unique challenges such as sensory sensitivities and difficulties interpreting non-neurodivergent social cues.

To help autistic and neurodivergent students reach Maslow's self-actualisation in relation to sexuality and relationships, it is essential to acknowledge and address these core characteristics when planning workshops in HEIs. For example, Schöttle et al. (2017) report that sensory sensitivities can negatively impact sexual experiences, while Solomon et al. (2019) discuss challenges in interpreting socioemotional situations and navigating consent. Garcia Winner (2015) outlines four steps to social thinking, which are crucial for understanding and negotiating consent within intimate relationships. These are:

1. Sharing space;
2. Both social partners consider the intentions of others;
3. Both have thoughts about the other person and wonder what the other person thinks of them;
4. Each partner monitors and potentially modifies their own behaviour to increase the likelihood of being viewed desirably.

Research by Baeto et al. (2024) and Sala et al. (2020) further emphasise social communication challenges—such as recognising boundaries, social anxiety, understanding flirting, and fear of rejection—that can hinder the formation of romantic and sexual relationships. Baeto et al. (2024) found that autistic individuals want to learn how to interpret, accept, and express sexual and intimacy needs, as well as receive training on boundaries and sexual consent. Addressing these issues would foster security and guided discovery of sexuality.

Mental health and well-being are closely linked to experiences of intimacy and relationships. While policy documents such as the Government of Ireland's Health Promoting Universities and Colleges (2020-2025) advocate for holistic, inclusive campus cultures, they often lack explicit reference to neurodivergent students and their needs regarding intimate relationships and consent. Czyzowska et al., 2020; Noble, 2023; Saif, 2024 suggests a correlation between intimate relationships and well-being, with challenges such as social interaction, anxiety, camouflaging, and lack of peer understanding contributing to loneliness among autistic individuals (Grace et al., 2023). Loneliness is not static and can change over time, impacting mental health and psychological well-being (Wang, 2017; Grace et al., 2023).

Another consideration is the generalisation of skills. Neurodivergent individuals may struggle to transfer skills learned in workshops to other environments. Therefore, HEIs should incorporate planned generalisation into workshop designs for navigating intimate relationships and consent.

It is also crucial to recognise the diversity of sexual identities among neurodivergent students. Many identify as LGBTQI+ and face additional barriers, discrimination, and inadequate sex education (Hilliars et al., 2020; Lang, 2025). The Dublin Rape Crisis Centre Report (2025) recommends accessible, autism-specific consent education, using clear language, visual supports, practical scripts, and repeated practice, reflecting both autistic and neurotypical communication styles.

Finally, Solomon et al. (2019) advocate for a positive approach to RSE curricula, within all levels of education, enabling healthy attitudes about sex and empowering students to negotiate effectively and minimise risks.

Research highlights that the first semester of college, often referred to as the 'red zone', is a period of heightened sexual assault risk for all students, attributed to factors such as increased alcohol use,

substance abuse, and casual sex. McKenny et al. (2026) note that autistic students may be at even higher risk of being victims of traumatic events, and some research suggests they may also be more likely to be involved in incidents of sexual misconduct. One contributing factor is that autistic and non-autistic students may have different understandings of sexual consent cues, possibly due to differences in sexual education experiences and comfort with navigating neurotypical communication norms. Nonverbal consent indicators—such as body language—may be especially challenging for some neurodivergent students to interpret. This challenge is compounded by the broader struggle neurodivergent students may face in adapting to neurotypical structures such as HEIs. Cheak-Zamora (2019) highlights the lack of research from the perspective of autistic adolescents and young adults regarding sexual and romantic relationships, underscoring the need to give neurodivergent students a platform to share their views on how HEIs can support their transition and foster inclusion.

The transition to higher education is stressful for all students (McKenny, 2026), but it can be particularly challenging for neurodivergent individuals if their needs are not understood or addressed (Farrant, 2022). While some practical steps have been proposed to create neurodivergent-friendly campuses, these often focus on academic learning and may not address the holistic needs of neurodivergent students. Farrant et al. (2022) advocate for the use of visual exemplars, clear spoken and unspoken information, and a cultural shift to increase the representation of neurodivergent academics among staff.

Autistic individuals may face additional barriers in forming romantic relationships, including difficulties with interpreting non-verbal communication, making social judgments, decision-making, and managing sensory sensitivities. Joyal et al. (2017) identify three types of barriers: personal (social cognition), institutional (inadequate relationship and sexuality education), and societal (ableism, assumptions, and stigmatisation).

Historically, there has been a tendency in HEIs to emphasise academic achievement, but true success at higher education involves more than academic attainment. Quigley et al. (2024) argue that self-development, self-fulfilment, and a sense of belonging are essential for intellectual and personal growth. Sexuality and intimacy are important factors that impact health and quality of life for all individuals, and HEIs, as part of a shift towards meeting the holistic needs of all students, have a responsibility to support this development for all students.

Support strategies must also recognise that males and females may present differently and require different supports. The right to an inclusive education is underpinned by legislation such as Article 24 of the 2016 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which mandates that HEIs create environments that support the holistic development of all students.

## 2.2 Conclusion

There is a multiplicity of factors that impact how neurodivergent students navigate intimate relationships and consent in HEIs. Neurodivergent students are a heterogeneous group, they can share some core characteristics but also exhibit a wide range of individual differences. Research indicates that positive learning environments are essential within HEIs, but it also suggests that these environments must acknowledge and provide the necessary supports for neurodivergent students to thrive. Transitioning to higher education is more than academic learning; it is also about personal growth and developing independence. However, the literature consistently contends that relationships and sexuality education (RSE) at primary and post-primary levels does not adequately prepare

neurodivergent students for navigating intimate relationships and consent. This inadequacy stems from gaps in neurodivergent-specific content, fragmented delivery, and insufficient explicit teaching on social communication and consent.

Therefore, additional supports—such as targeted workshops and inclusive programming—are required in HEIs to assist neurodivergent students in understanding the nuances within romantic relationships. These supports need to be responsive to the diverse needs of neurodivergent students, providing practical guidance, skill-building opportunities, and safe spaces for discussion.

## Section 3

### Methodology

#### 3.1 Research Design Background

The Higher Education Authority's HEA (2022) *Ending Sexual Violence and Harassment in Higher Education Institutions: Implementation Plan 2022–2024* sets out actions to support cultural change across Irish HEIs. Action 6 centres around pilot initiatives targeted at supporting high-risk groups and smaller or hard to reach groups in a small number of HEIs. In support of this objective, Mary Immaculate College (MIC) partnered and collaborated with the Technological University of the Shannon (TUS) and the University of Limerick (UL) all based in the mid-west of Ireland to incorporate the views and perspectives of neurodivergent student within this framework. The MIC Equality, Diversity, inclusion and Interculturalism (EDI) Office led the collaborative project proposal and secured over €23,000 from the HEA Fund in 2023 for the study entitled *Supporting Neurodivergent Students as they Navigate Intimate Relationships within Higher Education Institutions*. The project examined three core questions:

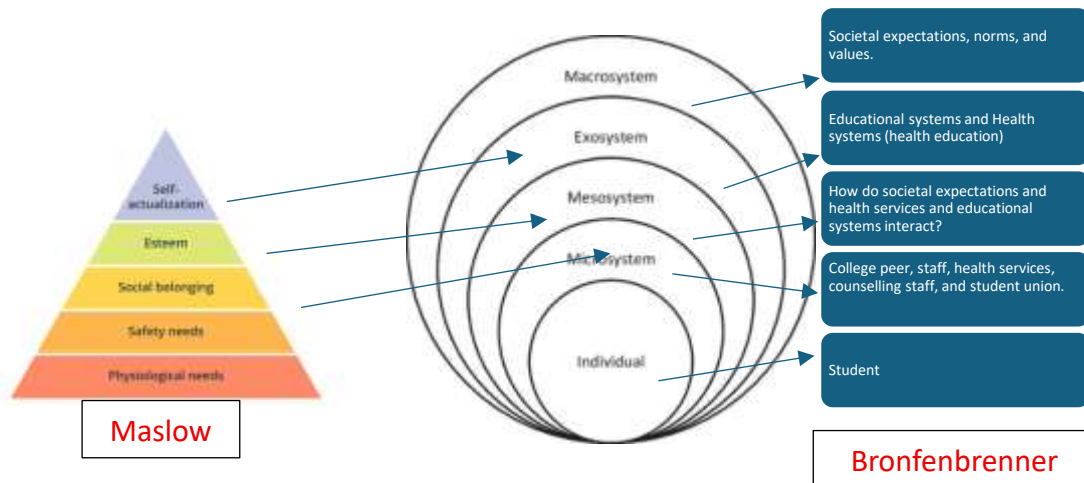
1. What supports do neurodivergent students need to navigate intimate relationships within higher education, particularly regarding consent?
2. How do neurodivergent students define intimate relationships and consent?
3. How can HEIs best support neurodivergent students in navigating intimate relationships, with a focus on consent?

#### 3.2 Participatory Action Research (PAR)

This research is grounded in the principle of 'nothing about us without us', upholding the belief that 'participatory research is not only ethical but emancipatory' (Cala, 2024, p. 312) underpinning Dwyer (2022, p. 73) suggestions that researchers should 'listen and learn from neurodivergent people'. The study employs participatory action research (PAR), empowering neurodivergent students to voice their opinions on the supports required to help them navigate intimate relationships and consent when transitioning to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). PAR empowers neurodivergent students to co-create knowledge and to voice their opinions on the support required to navigate intimate relationships and consent in HEIs.

#### 3.3 Conceptual Framework

The study's conceptual framework combines Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (1998) and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory (1954). This dual framework enables exploration of the relationship between environmental influences (Bronfenbrenner) and individuals reaching self-actualisation (Maslow), aligning with the researcher's epistemological stance of a social justice paradigm. Bronfenbrenner's theory acknowledges that human development is shaped by a variety of interrelated environmental variables, rather than occurring in isolation.



**Figure 1:** Intersections - Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (1998) and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory (1954).

The data analysis is grounded in Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory, which provides a multi-layered lens for understanding how neurodivergent students navigate intimate relationships and consent within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Each system—from the microsystem to the macrosystem—plays a distinct role and include:

- Chronosystem: Transitioning to higher education is a normative milestone, marking a shift from the microsystem (daily contact with parents/guardians and childhood friends) to greater autonomy, new social circles, and expectations around romantic relationships.
- Microsystem: Prior to higher education, students' lives are shaped by close relationships and reduced autonomy. Upon entering HEIs, students experience increased independence and new social dynamics.
- Mesosystem: Acts as a bridge between microsystems, such as the academic and intimacy microsystems. The interplay between these systems influences how neurodivergent students develop and maintain relationships. For example, the academic environment and peer interactions both impact personal growth and relationship skills.
- Ecosystem: Includes HEI policies and administrative frameworks, which can affect access to supports. If workshops or policies do not meet neurodivergent students' needs, they may be perceived as perfunctory rather than genuinely supportive. Policies that use a neurodivergent paradigm but fail to address cultural beliefs and stigma may result in students feeling 'accommodated' rather than 'accepted'.

- **Macrosystem:** Societal norms and cultural expectations, such as the perception that all neurodivergent students are ‘savants’, can lead to ‘double masking’ and the creation of overly positive spaces that overlook real challenges. HEIs may struggle to balance providing support with avoiding environments that negate the difficulties neurodivergent students face.

Bronfenbrenner’s theory also highlights the need for students to renegotiate their identity across all environmental levels, transitioning from dependent child to independent adult and relying on self-determination to succeed academically and personally. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs complements this framework, emphasising that the transition to higher education is not only a rite of passage but also a time when students begin the process of self-actualisation. HEIs must balance the humanistic goal of fostering self-actualisation and holistic development with the economic goal of preparing students for employment. Lundy’s Model of Participation (2007) was also central to this research, ensuring neurodivergent students were fully included as co-researchers and their voices were authentically represented in the data collection and analysis. This model focuses on four interrelated elements:

- **Voice:** Opportunity to have their opinions heard;
- **Space:** A safe environment must be provided to enable views to be expressed;
- **Audience:** The opinions must be presented to those who can have the power to change policy and practice;
- **Influence:** The opinions must be presented to those who can have the power to change policy and practice.

Neurodivergent students across the three HEIs were invited to participate in the research as co-researchers and participants to ensure their voices are authentically heard. To create a safe and inclusive environment, participants could choose between face-to-face or online focus groups. They were informed that the findings would be presented to HEI including governance and senior management structures —those with the power to influence policy and practice—and that the report would be made available to all.

How this approach aligns with best practices:

- **Voice and Choice:** By offering both face-to-face and online focus groups, the research respects individual preferences and accessibility needs, ensuring a safe space for participation.
- **Audience and Influence:** Presenting the report to HEI governance and senior management and making it available to all HEIs targets those with the power to enact change, fulfilling the audience and influence principles central to participatory research.
- **Ethical Participation:** This process is guided by the ‘nothing about us without us’ principle, emphasising ethical and emancipatory involvement of neurodivergent students in research that affects them.

This participatory approach not only amplifies neurodivergent students’ voices but also ensures that the resulting recommendations are grounded in lived experience. By engaging those with decision-making power and disseminating findings widely, the study aims to foster meaningful reflection and action across HEIs. By analysing data through Bronfenbrenner’s and Maslow’s frameworks, this study

captures the complexity of environmental influences, transitions, and institutional supports that shape neurodivergent students' experiences. This approach ensures that supports are not only responsive to individual needs but also embedded within broader systems of inclusion, participation, and self-actualisation.

### 3.4 Ethics and Practical Considerations

The research was submitted and was granted research ethical approval by Mary Immaculate College (MIC) and Technological University of the Shannon (TUS) prior to the commencement of the research. As MIC is affiliated with UL ethical approval was not sought by UL.

### 3.5 Sampling

The original proposal stated, '[It] is proposed that a qualitative study will be undertaken with neurodivergent students enrolled at MIC (Mary Immaculate College), Technological University of the Shannon (TUS) and University of Limerick'. The sample was recruited through the equality, diversity and inclusion units and access offices of the three HEIs. An information letter (Appendix 1) and a recruitment poster (Appendix 2) were circulated to all students across the three HEIs. Recognising that some students may identify as neurodivergent without having disclosed this to the HEI, the principal investigator's (PI) contact details were provided so students could reach out directly. Following the HEA Framework for Consent (2019), this study employs a purposive sampling strategy to gain deep, information-rich insights. As Tinto (1993) emphasises, institutional commitment at all levels is essential for meaningful cultural change within higher education institutions. The inclusion of neurodivergent students as co-researchers is a key priority, aligning with the Framework's recommendation to capture the voices and unique experiences of neurodivergent students as they navigate intimate relationships and consent within HEIs.

In addition, to facilitate recruitment a range of services alerted students to the research opportunity including student unions, counselling services, access offices, academic learning support centres. These sets of communications and posters invited expressions of interest from neurodivergent students who wished to participate as co-researchers. Interested students received an information letter outlining the project's purpose and scope. The Sexual Violence and Harassment (SVH) Prevention and Response Manager and the Principal Investigator met with these students to address any questions regarding the co-researcher role.

To recruit additional neurodivergent student participants for the focus groups, purposive sampling was initially employed. When the response rate proved limited (perhaps because of the sensitive nature of the research topic), a snowball sampling strategy was adopted, enabling early participants to encourage further engagement among their peers. Additionally, a gift voucher as payment for participation to create equity was offered to all those who took part as co-researchers and focus group participants. Eligibility criteria required that all co-researchers and focus group participants be registered undergraduate or postgraduate students in MIC, TUS, or UL.

A total of 37 neurodivergent students took part in the study and four neurodivergent co-researchers facilitated the focus group sessions.

. The breakdown is as follows:

- MIC: 15 students (14 female, 1 male)
- UL: 14 students (8 female, 6 male)
- TUS: 8 students (6 female, 2 male)

### 3.6 Role of Co-researcher

The role of co-researcher was advertised by the EDII Office to all students who identified as neurodivergent. A number of students who expressed interest in the project and they were contacted by the EDII office and the PI to join the project as co-researchers taking on the role of co-interviewers, co-focus group facilitators and advisors. Four students were selected and took on the role of co-researchers. The original plan was to conduct focus groups in person for interested participants. However, after discussions with the co-researchers, the approach was adapted to online focus groups reflecting their preference for a comfortable and accessible environment in which to express their opinions. The co-researchers contributed to compiling and refining the interview questions. The PI and SVH Manager arranged for training by an external company, Slí Nua<sup>3</sup>, who specialise in interviewer and focus group facilitator training. This training was bespoke to neurodivergent participant needs and was attended by the four neurodivergent co-researchers, the SVH Manager, and the Principal Investigator.

### 3.7 Consent Process

Those who expressed an interest in becoming co-researchers were invited to one-to-one online meeting with the SVH manager and PI to ensure that their roles and responsibilities were fully understood and to answer any questions the potential co-researcher had. Co-researchers and participants were then asked to sign a consent form (Appendix 4). Consent was checked before the start of each focus group. Participants were assured they could withdraw from the research at any point, without consequence. Before each session, the facilitator checked in with the group and reviewed key points to ensure a safe and ethical environment:

- Participants would be given pseudonyms.
- Consent to participate and to record the session was confirmed.
- Confidentiality and anonymity would be maintained.
- There were no right or wrong answers; all opinions were valued.
- Participants could choose to pass on any question.
- Camera use was optional.

Once all participants confirmed their readiness, the facilitator began asking questions on the agreed-upon topics (Appendix 3). Importantly, participants received a copy of the discussion topics in advance, allowing them time to reflect and prepare. This approach was used to ensure the focus groups were accessible, comfortable, and empowering for neurodivergent students. By providing advance notice of topics, emphasising participant choice, and maintaining confidentiality, the sessions fostered open and authentic discussion. The presence of trained neurodivergent facilitators, supported by the PI and EDII

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<sup>3</sup> Further information on Slí Nua - <https://slinua.org/>

manager, further reinforced the commitment to a safe and inclusive research environment. The research was guided by the principle ‘nothing about us without us’, ensuring ethical and emancipatory participation. This ethical framework demonstrates a strong commitment to participant autonomy, transparency, and inclusivity. By securing ethical approval from relevant institutions, providing clear information, ensuring informed consent, and upholding the ‘nothing about us without us’ principle, the research prioritises the rights and well-being of neurodivergent students throughout the study.

### 3.8 Safe Space and Accessibility

The approach of online focus groups demonstrates a strong commitment to participatory and ethical research. By adapting methods in response to student feedback, prioritising accessibility, and empowering neurodivergent students as co-researchers. The use of purposive and snowball sampling ensured that a diverse range of neurodivergent voices could be included, even those who may not have formally disclosed their identity to their institution. These sessions were facilitated by co-researcher who had completed specialised training and at their request, the PI and the SVH manager attended the focus groups to provide additional support. The focus groups participants were led through a predetermined set of topics and questions (see Appendix 3), developed by the research team to capture the lived experiences of neurodivergent students and informed by the student at the first in-person focus group. The sessions were characterised by lively discussion and debate, with participants eager to share their opinions and experiences.

### 3.9 Data Analysis

The data collected from focus groups and interviews were analysed for two distinct purposes namely for the production of this report and an animated video. For the animation, Braun and Clarke’s Thematic Analysis (2022) was used to examine complex social phenomena, such as the navigation of intimate relationships and consent within higher education institutions. Thematic analysis enabled the researchers to investigate not only the explicit statements of students but also to uncover underlying power dynamics, gender norms, and institutional barriers that may impede commitment at various levels. This involved repeated readings of transcripts to gain an in-depth understanding, coding for themes and sub-themes, and prioritising a limited number of themes in collaboration with neurodivergent students, the PI, and the SVH manager. For the final report, three additional academic colleagues joined the team to conduct additional in-depth analysis of the focus group data. Saldana’s Framework (2015) was selected because it offers a structured, systematic approach ideally suited for group-based analysis, especially when analysts were not involved in the original data collection. The framework’s clearly defined coding cycles reduced ambiguity. They provided step-by-step guidance on initiating coding, labelling data, and moving from initial codes to broader categories or patterns. This structure was particularly valuable given the team’s limited familiarity with the study design. Furthermore, Saldana’s emphasis on documenting analytic decisions through memos and codebooks supported the team’s early lack of involvement. Analytic memos were regularly shared to record coding decisions and emerging themes, making the process more deliberate and less reliant on prior immersion in the research context. Member checking was used to ensure that the lived experiences of neurodivergent students were accurately represented. This participatory approach strengthened the study’s credibility by consolidating themes and enhancing its overall rigour.

### 3.10 Presentation and Validation:

Findings under these themes were presented in a coherent narrative to answer the research questions. Throughout, a reflexive approach was adopted to support integrity and rigour. Member-checking was used to ensure analysts accurately presented the views expressed in the focus groups, strengthening accuracy, validity, credibility, and trustworthiness.

This rigorous, multi-layered approach to data analysis ensured that both the animation and the report authentically reflected the lived experiences and perspectives of neurodivergent students. Collaboration, reflexivity, and member-checking were central to maintaining the integrity and credibility of the findings.

### 3.11 Limitations of the Study

#### 3.11.1 Regional Focus

The study had a regional rather than national focus, and although three HEIs participated in the research with a sample size of 37, which is substantial, the regional scope limits the extent to which the findings can be generalised nationally, when contrasted with the entire student enrolment figure of 256,785 (CSO, 2022). This further limits the ability to generalise findings to the wider population. Participants self-identified as neurodivergent, which means the sample may not represent all neurodivergent students, including those who have not disclosed their identity or who identify differently. In addition, the research provides a snapshot rather than a longitudinal perspective, and a longer-term study would offer more accurate and comprehensive insights into the experiences and needs of neurodivergent students.

#### 3.11.2 Potential Researcher Bias

This study recognised the risk of researcher bias, particularly since the PI and some staff were not neurodivergent, and may not fully understand the perspectives of co-researchers and participants. To mitigate this, the study implemented member-checking and engaged in reflective discussion with neurodivergent co-researchers. Member-checking involved sharing findings and interpretations with participants to ensure their views were accurately represented, while reflective discussion provided opportunities for neurodivergent co-researchers to offer feedback and insights throughout the analysis process. These strategies enhanced the accuracy, validity, credibility, and trustworthiness of our findings. To enhance reliability and robustness, the final report underwent peer review. The peer review process engaged the entire project team across MIC, TUS and UL. The report was peer reviewed by two of the co-researcher students and five staff from these institutions.

## Section 4

### Findings

#### 4.1 Introduction

Using Saldana’s thematic analysis, three main themes emerged from the data and similar themes were identified through Braun and Clarke’s (2022) thematic analysis, allowing for the integration of findings from both approaches. The results are presented under the following three main themes:

1. Disconnect between understandings of neurodivergence and the supports offered in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs);
2. Navigating social relationships and social hurdles in consent education for neurodivergent higher education students;
3. Understandings and experiences of consent among neurodivergent third-level students.

Within each of these themes, several sub-themes emerged. These will be presented under their respective sub-theme headings, providing a nuanced and comprehensive account of the experiences and perspectives shared by neurodivergent students.

#### 4.2 Theme 1: Understandings of Neurodivergence and Supports Offered at HEIs

A central finding from the focus group discussions was the sense of disconnection experienced by neurodivergent students within HEIs. This disconnect often impacted their ability to feel accepted and gain a sense of belonging. To better understand what participants mean by ‘disconnect,’ we can examine the concept through the sub-themes that emerged during analysis. The following sub-themes were identified and are presented below:

- Living in a neurotypical world
- Support for neurotypical individuals
- Support for neurodivergent individuals
- The way forward

##### 4.2.1 Living in a neurotypical world

Neurodivergent students described the challenges of navigating environments and expectations shaped primarily by neurotypical norms. One participant stated, ‘[N]eurotypicals rule the world, and we have to go and live in their world’. This can lead to masking or as another participant reported, ‘we are constantly throwing ourselves masking into the neurotypical realm instead of asking people to come into our neurodivergent realm’. This often led to feelings of otherness and marginalisation, as institutional structures and social interactions did not always support neurodivergent perspectives or needs. One participant stated, ‘[W]e get talked to like a baby a lot of the time, and we are treated like we are mentally immature’. The focus group data revealed that many neurodivergent students experience a profound fear of rejection, which discourages them from expressing their true needs and preferences in social and intimate contexts. This fear often leads to masking—suppressing or hiding neurodivergent traits to fit in with neurotypical peers. Participants described masking as a pervasive

and emotionally complex part of their college experience. One participant shared, 'you get taught very young, it's how women are often socialised, which is only stacked upon when you are on the spectrum. And you kind of just learn to be what you need to be rather than who you are.' Another added, '[I] wasn't getting to know them, and they weren't getting to know me as I am. They were getting to know the mask.'

The emotional effort of masking can have serious negative effects, including loneliness, depression, anxiety, and even suicidal ideation. Participants reported that masking interfered with forming authentic connections and made it difficult to engage in genuine consent discussions, as these require openness and self-advocacy. The fear that revealing sensory needs, communication differences, or emotional vulnerabilities might lead to rejection further increased these challenges. One participant reported that their 'social battery is drained' whilst another shared 'it is a gamble trying to explain your needs to others'.

Participants also reported being misunderstood by peers and lecturers. When discussing neurodivergence, they highlighted a lack of understanding and widespread misinformation. One participant stated, '[T]here's a large amount of misinformation.' This misunderstanding intensified for individuals with multiple diversities, such as autism and LGBTQI+. Many participants described feeling merely tolerated, not truly accepted in class. For example, '[I] feel very isolated ... it's not nice to feel isolated'; '[I] don't get invited'; '[T]hey [neurotypicals] don't share the inner secrets of the class.' The resulting loneliness and frustration were discussed openly. For example;

'[T]here are so many unwritten rules and norms and expectations where everybody just seems to be like reading from the same hymn sheet and you are like playing a clarinet solo.'

I'll be honest, I want to finish up as soon as I can, just get these two years done and switch to [name of online distance education provider]. I'd rather be lonely in [name of online distance education provider] than lonely in a crowd.

Participants also noted that challenges in making friends and forming connections stem from these barriers. These insights suggest an urgent need for HEIs to move beyond mere accommodation and actively foster understanding, acceptance, and inclusion. Addressing misinformation, providing education for neurotypical peers, and creating environments where neurodivergent students feel genuinely accepted can help reduce isolation and promote well-being.

#### 4.2.2 Support for Neurotypical Individuals

Participants highlighted the importance of providing education and support for neurotypical students and staff. They suggested that workshops and training aimed at neurotypicals could foster greater understanding and empathy, reducing the pressure on neurodivergent students to mask or conform. Participants gave concrete examples of how neurotypicals may struggle to fully understand neurodivergent needs. One participant described working in a professional kitchen and needing to turn off the lights due to sensory sensitivities that caused them physical pain. The participant had to demonstrate the effects of the lights to enable their boss to understand the impact on them. This lack of awareness is also evident in HEI settings. Participants emphasised the need for specialised training, support, and 'general awareness' for neurotypical students, lecturers, peers, student services and others working and interacting with neurodivergent individuals. As one participant stated, 'I think

there should be a lot more support given to neurotypicals to help them understand us.’ One participant advocated for educating neurotypicals, ‘Let’s educate neurotypicals; they should learn how to talk to us.’ Participants felt that such training may reduce the misinformation and misunderstanding that currently exists within the neurotypical world.

Participants discussed the need for HEI staff, and made reference in particular to Student Services staff, to be ‘qualified and informed’. Some described feeling ‘uncomfortable’ and felt they had to mask because of (name of student service) limited understanding of neurodivergence. Participants expressed a wish for neurodiversity to be more visible and represented throughout the HEI. One participant recounted an experience in which the choice of research topic helped them to feel seen and represented: ‘I thought it [research topic] was great, and I felt really seen. To be represented like that in class, in such a non-intrusive way, I thought it was great, so more of that.’ Other participants reported feelings of shame and embarrassment when seeking support with coursework from lecturers. One participant stated, ‘You are almost shunned for needing the support that you do’, leading to a feeling of being ‘treated completely differently and isolated from everyone else’.

These insights highlight the need for HEIs to provide specialised training for all staff and students, to ensure that all services are informed and inclusive, and to make neurodiversity visible and valued across campus. By doing so, HEIs can reduce stigma, foster genuine understanding, and create environments where neurodivergent students feel safe, supported, and empowered to express their needs without fear or shame.

### 4.2.3 Support for Neurodivergent Individuals

Participants also indicated the need for HEIs to provide tailored support for neurodivergent individuals, with particular emphasis on communication skills. They identified specific tools and approaches to address their needs. Communication skills training that relies heavily on verbal discussion was described as ‘a very neurotypical solution’, and participants found this approach challenging.

The unwritten rules and expectations of communication were reported as being particularly problematic for neurodivergent students. As one participant stated, ‘People think you will just figure out’, but it would appear from the participants discussion that this is not the case. For this reason, participants suggested the provision of communication classes where they can learn skills in a structured and explicit manner. There was also a suggestion that these classes could be open to neurotypical individuals, fostering mutual understanding and reducing the pressure on neurodivergent students to conform to neurotypical norms. These insights highlight the importance of moving beyond traditional, verbal-only communication training and providing explicit, skill-based instruction that accommodates diverse communication styles. Opening these classes to neurotypical students can further promote inclusion and understanding across the campus community.

### 4.2.4. The Way Forward

Focus group discussions also explored potential solutions and recommendations for HEIs to mainstream a culture of inclusion. Suggestions included the adopting of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles for all HEIs, offering skills-based and interactive workshops for staff and students, and ensuring that neurodivergent voices are central to policy and practice changes.

Participants suggested helplines and text messaging as possible approaches to support neurodivergent people in accessing help. These tools can provide discreet, immediate assistance, especially for

students who may find verbal or face-to-face communication challenging. Participants proposed that peer groups or 'having someone to go to', could assist students who have difficulty with communication, particularly in large group situations. These supports foster a sense of belonging and provide practical avenues for connection and advice.

Education and training were identified as essential to alleviate the disconnect between neurotypicals and neurodivergent individuals in HEIs. As one participant stated, 'Without education, how can we guarantee we are going to get somebody who will listen and understand?'

These proposals highlight the importance of accessible, responsive, and empathetic supports for neurodivergent students. By implementing helplines, text-based services, peer groups, and ensuring staff are trained or identify as neurodivergent, HEIs can bridge communication gaps and foster genuine inclusion. Education and training for all staff and students are crucial for building understanding and reducing barriers.

### 4.3 Theme 2: The Complexity of Consent

Another central finding from the focus group discussions was theme of complexity of consent, with findings organised under the following subthemes, each supported by direct evidence from the focus group data. To better understand what participants meant by 'complexity of consent', the sub-themes that emerged during analysis will provide an in-depth understanding exploring different facets of the theme. The following sub-themes were identified:

- Understandings of Consent
- Consent Education
- Parents and Consent Education
- Workshops and Messages in HEIs
- Consent Workshops
- Messages and Campaigns
- The Way Forward

#### 4.3.1 Understandings of Consent

The focus group discussion provided clear evidence that students were aware that consent is not a single verbal exchange, but a continuous, mutual communicative process between individuals. While none of the participants mentioned the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act (2017), consent was defined by participants in practical, accessible and everyday terminology. Consent was described as an ongoing negotiation requiring individuals to show respect, comfort, and clarity in what they were conveying. One participant stated;

I think it's important because a lot of people don't respect consent, and they don't really understand that it's important and not consent once, but they can also change their mind later.

The participants reported on the importance of knowing about the different forms of consent, and the importance of knowing what consent is and is not. One participant noted that '[C]onsent does not just extend to sex,' and highlighted the importance of 'explicit consent'. Even though all participants understood consent there existed challenges particularly related to sensory issues. For example, sensory issues could make it difficult to deny consent. One participant expanded on the challenges; 'Sensory issues are such a tricky concept ... I feel too guilty saying to my friends not to hug me.' Direct

and clear communication was of particular importance to participants, but uncertainty around social cues was a recurring theme for many in the focus group.

These findings emphasise that neurodivergent students understand consent as a dynamic, ongoing process, but face unique challenges in communicating boundaries—especially when social cues or sensory sensitivities are involved. This underscores the need for HEIs to provide explicit, skill-based consent education and supports that consider diverse communication styles and needs.

### 4.3.2 Consent Education

Many neurodivergent students felt that relationship and sexuality education (RSE) at the post-primary level was inadequate, especially for autistic students. This led to missed opportunities for social engagement and experimentation during adolescence. The focus group data indicate that neurodivergent students feel unprepared for navigating intimate relationships and consent upon entering higher education.

They indicated that sex education materials often lacked specific details and facts, preventing neurodivergent students from gaining the in-depth understanding needed to form healthy sexual relationships. The lack of autism-specific content and fragmented delivery across subjects contributed to their feeling that this prior education was inadequate. Participants consistently reported that consent was not a frequent topic in post-primary education. When it was addressed, it appeared briefly within sex education or personal development classes. From their perspective the content delivered tended to emphasise risks and dangers—such as avoiding harm or abuse—rather than fostering open communication about consent and relationships. This risk-focused approach left students without practical guidance on how to communicate about consent with others. A recurring reference among participants was the ‘infamous’ tea video<sup>4</sup>, which was used as a teaching tool to illustrate consent. However, apart from this video, participants did not recall any meaningful discussions or instructions about consent. There was a notable absence of interactive or skill-based learning, and no one remembered teachers or facilitators engaging in conversations about consent beyond the video.

This educational gap meant that students entered higher education feeling unprepared to navigate intimate relationships and consent, especially in real-life contexts where clear communication is essential

### 4.3.3 Parents and Consent Education

The role of families in preparing students for navigating intimate relationships and consent was inconsistent, often resulting in a support vacuum and increased reliance on HEIs. Participants described a spectrum of experiences regarding parental conversations about boundaries and consent. Some recounted having open discussions with their parents about boundaries, respect, and safety. For example, one participant shared that their parents allowed them to have boundaries:

When I was young, my parents were very good at saying, listen, if you don't want to hug that person, you don't have to. We can keep you over here, and you will be ok, we'll stand up for you.

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<sup>4</sup> YouTube video on this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oQbei5JGiT8>

This reflects a proactive approach to bodily autonomy and respect for personal boundaries. Other participants recalled that consent and boundaries were addressed more implicitly, often through ingrained social or gender norms. For instance, one participant reported that '[C]onsent was ingrained in us at an early age ... like in primary school. These are boys, and these are girls. You don't cross over.' These highlight how some families conveyed boundaries through traditional gender roles rather than explicit conversations about consent. Conversely, some participants could not recall having any conversations with their parents about boundaries, respect, or safety. This absence of guidance often resulted in a support vacuum, increasing reliance on schools or HEIs to provide this education.

These findings illustrate that parental involvement in teaching about consent and boundaries is highly variable. While some families foster open dialogue and support autonomy, others rely on implicit norms or do not address the topic at all. This inconsistency highlights the importance of comprehensive, explicit consent education in both home and school environments to ensure all students are equipped with the knowledge and confidence to set and respect boundaries.

#### 4.3.4 Consent Workshops

Participants recommended that workshops be sequential, interactive, accessible, and skill-based, rather than one-off sessions. They highlighted the need for explicit instruction, visual supports, practical scripts, and repeated practice, reflecting both autistic and neurotypical communication styles. Although participants acknowledged the value of consent workshops, they expressed concerns regarding their effectiveness. Workshops were often described as too brief and lacking comprehensive guidance on communication skills. The topic of consent was 'watered down and a simple version of it, but in real life, it's never that simple when you are actually like in a relationship with other people'. Participants noted that sessions tended to focus on rules and definitions rather than practical strategies for developing relationships. Orientation workshops and related videos were perceived as 'too general' and 'didn't click' and as a result was disconnected from real-life scenarios. There was a consensus that consent education should be more interactive, explicit, practical and move beyond analogies such as the 'cup of tea video'. Participants recommended incorporating role-play and concrete exercises to foster a deeper understanding of consent. Additionally, the influence of a drinking culture and the difficulty some neurodivergent individuals experience were identified as further challenges in applying workshop content.

#### 4.3.5 Messages and Campaigns

Messages and campaigns about consent were often seen as too general or not sufficiently inclusive of neurodivergent experiences. The effectiveness of posters and other passive supports was discussed, with students preferring more direct and practical forms of education.

Participants reported varied experiences with consent education in HEIs. Discussions focused on the effectiveness of both mandatory and optional workshops, as well as the impact of campus messaging. Many participants indicated that posters, online videos, and campaigns were frequently overlooked, describing them as superficial and lacking meaningful engagement. Current approaches in HEIs were seen as insufficient for developing communication skills, both in expressing personal boundaries and interpreting others' intentions. Workshops were perceived as relying on neurotypical communication styles, lacking inclusivity and neuro-affirmative strategies that would better support neurodivergent students in understanding social cues and engaging effectively.

### 4.3.6 The Way Forward

Participants recommended tailored and skill-based workshops with the inclusion of neurodivergent voices in programme design, and broader institutional support for diverse communication styles. They also suggested that workshops for neurotypical students could foster mutual understanding and reduce the pressure on neurodivergent students to mask, camouflage or conform.

Participants provided several targeted recommendations to enhance consent education:

- Incorporate role play, concrete materials, and scripted exercises to help students practice asking for, giving, refusing, and withdrawing consent in various scenarios.
- Structure workshops sequentially, allowing skills to build progressively rather than relying on single or isolated sessions.
- Offer workshops exclusively for neurodivergent students in smaller groups to create a safer environment for discussing sensitive topics.
- Facilitate explicit discussions on communication styles, signals, and social cues relevant to consent.
- Utilise diverse teaching methods, including visuals and videos, to accommodate different learning preferences.
- Ensure facilitators recognise that neurodivergent students are not a homogeneous group and adapt content accordingly.

## 4.4 Theme 3: Navigating Social Relationships and Social Challenges

This theme captures the unique interpersonal, emotional, and communicative challenges described by neurodivergent individuals when engaging with consent-related content. Participants reported that difficulties did not arise solely from the content of consent education but from how the broader social skills, neurodivergent communication styles, and social expectations intersect with the concept of consent. A better understanding of this theme can be gained from an examination of the sub-themes that emerged during analysis. The following sub-themes were identified:

- Understanding Social Cues and Communication
- Awareness of LGBTQI+-specific challenges
- Masking and trust issues
- Self-awareness
- Forming friendships and Social Issues

### 4.4.1 Understanding Social Cues and Communication

A common thread throughout the participant narrative was the difficulty of decoding and interpreting social cues. One participant reported;

As a person with autism, I would say there are two things that are the bane of my existence. One would be ambiguity in situations, and the other would be the risk of breaking the social norm.

This is an area that significantly shapes how consent is understood and practised. Participants also noted difficulty with general social understanding. One participant stated; 'they [neurodivergent people] don't necessarily have the tools to recognise or set what a healthy relationship should look like'. Another participant reported that;

it's a social communication disorder. It makes it harder to communicate with people, which makes it harder to know people and to form relationships and then inform intimate relationships ... because it's already so hard to just know people casually.

Frustration was expressed in relation to self-doubt and it was reported that this created feelings of anxiety. These feelings of anxiety were particularly related to understanding the social cues and norms in relationships, intimacy and consent. One participant stated; 'it can be strange to have everybody else understand something, and you feel like the weird one even though it does not feel like it makes sense at all'. Another participant stated;

I think when you are neurodivergent, it's harder to read other people, and so you are always feeling you miss that there's something going on. But you are not sure if you are right or not. I feel like there's a lot more doubt when you are autistic.

Another participant stated;

even when I'm close friends with someone, am I actually friends, do they actually like me. Like self-doubt doesn't stop with entering a relationship. It continues, and it stays around, and you just have to learn to deal with it or maybe just going to be haunting you all the way until the end.

Participants demonstrated an awareness of the importance of communication, being able to communicate and interpret someone else's communication. Another related that;

knowing what to communicate in a way, which means a really good understanding of how do I feel about this relationship and what are the signals, what is happening, and how can I communicate this.

Another participant stated, '[Y]ou need to know where your boundaries are and to understand, to be able to communicate with your partner so that they are best able to negotiate with you; it needs to be both sides'.

Participants recounted experiences where they struggled to determine and understand their own thoughts and feelings in relationships. One participant put forward that, '[T]he most stressful part about it is it can be when you are on the spectrum, it can be quite difficult to understand your own feelings'. Another stated;

like understanding what you actually want. Because I run into that a lot ... I don't know if I want to have sex or engage with people sexually. It's hard to figure out whether that's just because I do want it and I'm scared, or whether I actually don't want it and that's also ok. That's really difficult to figure out.

Participants also noted the difficulties that neurodivergent individuals felt with their ability to perceive the needs of others and this could present a barrier within consent. One participant elaborated;

I think there is a prerequisite kind of skill which is being able to assess and analyse the realistic needs of another person. Which I personally found very difficult. Like what the other person is needing in this moment and not getting the clues of something else when it was meant to be, or said it another way.

Participants also emphasised that their interpretations are often logical and rule-based. This leaves them uncertain and self-doubting in dynamic and emotionally nuanced social contexts, especially in knowing when a relationship is healthy or unhealthy. As noted by one participant;

When a neurodivergent person is in a relationship with a non-neurodivergent person it might be harder for the neurotypical person, I suppose to understand some of the demands I suppose of someone on the spectrum.

Another participant stated;

I think that part of it would be giving, devising ways to give neurodivergent people the tools they need to actually figure out how to approach a healthy relationship so that they know when a situation is unhealthy.

This logical and rule-based thinking can create challenges when the relationship is between a neurodivergent and a neurotypical person. For this reason, participants reported that relationships between neurodivergent individuals were easier. One participant stated,

I think it's easier if you, as a neurodivergent person is in a relationship with another neurodivergent person just because you have just like a shared experience. I mean, depending on your neurodivergent but like if you are autistic with another autistic person, there's an understanding that you may not have with a neurotypical person.

Another participant stated, '[W]hen you are autistic with other autistic people, it's very easy to form relationships with them because they understand you'.

Participants reported that training and seminars rarely provided explicit, concrete behavioural examples on social cues and communication. Instead, they relied on abstract or metaphorical language and as a result, students felt underprepared to assess consent in real time.

#### 4.4.2 Awareness of LGBTQI+-Specific Challenges

Participants highlighted that identifying as LGBTQI+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, and intersex) adds an additional layer of complexity to the challenges already faced. Several described the compounded difficulties of navigating campus life while managing both neurodivergent traits and LGBTQI+ identities. Some expressed concerns about potential rejection or discrimination, noting that disclosing multiple aspects of their identity could increase vulnerability. One participant stated, '[I]f you are LGBTQI+ on top of being neurodivergent, it's just another opportunity for people not to like you.' Others described the emotional burden of managing these intersecting identities, with one participant stating: '[I]t's tough enough being in college, but to have autism on top is tougher. I couldn't even imagine how hard it would be to also be on the LGBT spectrum.'

A lack of inclusive sex education was also noted, particularly for those who identify as asexual. One participant shared; '[I] realised throughout first year that I'm actually asexual, but most sex education

doesn't account for that. I spent much of my early college experience confused and anxious, not understanding what I wanted versus what I was expected to want.'

These reflections suggest the need for more inclusive, nuanced support and education that addresses the intersectionality of neurodivergence with LGBTQI+ identities.

#### 4.4.3 Masking and Trust

Masking, consciously or unconsciously, and suppressing neurodivergent traits to appear more neurotypical, emerged as a pervasive and emotionally complex part of students' experiences. Participants reported feeling they have to mask or camouflage to be accepted. One participant stated,

you get taught very young, it's how women are often socialised, which is only stacked upon when you are on the [autistic] spectrum. And you kind of just learn to be what you need to be rather than who you are.

Another participant stated, 'I wasn't getting to know them, and they weren't getting to know me as I am. They were getting to know the mask'. However, when given a safe space to be who they are can be liberating for neurodivergent individuals. One participant stated,

When I feel comfortable with people, and people give me a safe space to be who I am, then I actually form stronger attachments and relationships with them. Because they allow me to exist how I am without having to mask or anything.

This act of masking prevents or interferes with forming authentic connections. Participants expressed a fear that if they did not mask, camouflage or conform and reveal their sensory needs, communication differences or emotional vulnerabilities, others might reject them. Additionally, this fear increased challenges engaging in genuine consent discussion as these require openness and self-advocacy. One participant stated, 'I think masking definitely made it very hard for me to form relationships because even if I was doing all the right steps, I still have that layer between the masks'.

When asked about what hindered intimate relationships, trust emerged as another nuanced topic for discussion. Participants reported that past experiences had a negative impact on their ability to trust. Past experiences created a heightened sense of caution around intimate situations, where the stakes feel higher. One participant stated, 'I was going to say trust, someone being able to understand you or not, needed to mask with someone'. Participants also reported needing more time than their neurotypical peers to build trust, understand relational dynamics, and feel safe enough to discuss or negotiate consent. However, it was acknowledged that consent education rarely appreciates these interpersonal processes. As a result, neurodivergent students can feel pressured to match their peers' pace of social and romantic development.

#### 4.4.4 Self-Awareness

This sub-theme concerns the process of developing self-awareness and participants reported that understanding their own boundaries, sensory triggers and emotional needs is essential for navigating consent. However, some participants reported learning this through 'trial and error'. One participant stated,

I feel like you as a person you need to be aware of yourself, especially if you are neurodivergent because I have so many friends who are dyslexic and autistic and they don't know their own

traits of like the condition or whatever you want to call it and then they figure it out and they are like so that why I act like that in friendships, or that's why I didn't realise it was romantic or platonic and so on.

Participants reported finding it challenging to recognise what sensory experiences made them feel uncomfortable or overwhelmed. They mentioned sensory inputs such as certain types of lighting, touch, or noise levels. One participant stated, 'I love physical touch, I love hugging, I love handholding'. On the other hand, another participant stated, 'I am literally like no don't touch me'. Participants reported that becoming more self-aware helps them to articulate their preferences more confidently but conceded that consent education rarely facilitates or encourages this type of introspection.

#### 4.4.5 Forming Friendships and Social Challenges

In this final sub-theme, participants discussed how general social challenges influence their ability to form and maintain relationships. One participant stated that;

[I] don't have a lot of friends from my primary school years or secondary school years. So, I was quite socially isolated when I arrived at the college. So, it was one of those scenarios where I was very alone and a little sad at the beginning. This makes it hard to develop any kind of intimate relationships because you just never know

Additionally, they discussed how this could impact and shape their experiences with consent. Participants reported that friendships were often a precursor to romantic or intimate relationships in the higher education environment. However, they also discussed how the process of forming these friendships can be fraught with misunderstandings or social friction. Moreover, maintaining friendships or intimate relationships is where the difficulty arises. One participant stated, 'making friends isn't necessarily that hard, but it's making the intimate relationships that is hard'.

Additionally, under this sub-theme, participants described challenges, such as misinterpreting other people's intentions. They described struggling with unspoken social norms or feeling unsure how to navigate conflict. These challenges, it can be argued, can indirectly affect consent by limiting access to social circles where romantic relationships typically develop and social norms are learned. This lack of understanding of social norms can also lead to isolation and loneliness.

Navigating social relationships highlights the multifaceted challenges faced by neurodivergent students in higher education. These challenges arise from the complex interplay between neurodivergent communication styles, social difficulties, identity-related experiences, and consent education. Collectively, these factors significantly influence students' ability to form relationships, interpret social cues, and engage confidently within the college environment.

#### 4.4.6 The Way Forward

To better support neurodivergent students in navigating consent and intimate relationships within Higher Education Institutes (HEIs), future programmes and workshops participants provided several targeted suggestions:

- Within consent workshops, provide explicit instruction and practical examples to help neurodivergent students understand and negotiate consent. Use visual supports, scripts, and repeated practice to facilitate diverse communication styles.

- Acknowledge and support the wide range of neurodivergent experiences, including sensory sensitivities and intersecting identities such as LGBTQI+. Ensure that content and delivery are inclusive and responsive to individual needs.
- Recognise the impact of masking, camouflaging and conforming on well-being, and create environments where authenticity is encouraged. Provide safe spaces and neurodivergent-identifying counsellors to reduce the pressure to conform.
- Facilitate opportunities for neurodivergent students to explore and articulate their boundaries, sensory triggers, and emotional needs. Encourage introspection and provide tools for self-advocacy.
- Address institutional and societal obstacles that hinder inclusion, such as ableism, and a lack of tailored supports. Be aware that the delivery of RSE at the post-primary level is often inconsistent and fragmented, particularly for neurodivergent students. Advocate for systemic change and regular curriculum review.
- Understand that building trust may take longer and require more explicit support. Design consent education to appreciate these interpersonal processes and avoid pressuring students to match neurotypical social development.
- Ensure that consent and relationship education are inclusive of diverse sexual and gender identities. Address gaps in sex education for asexual, LGBTQI+, and neurodivergent students.
- Do not rely solely on intuitive or implicit social norms when working with neurodivergent individuals. Provide explicit, concrete guidance and recognise that neurodivergent students may require more structured support to navigate social situations.

## 4.5 Future Research Considerations

There exists opportunities to conduct further longitudinal studies with students over a three to five-year period to gain deeper and deeper understandings of consent as they move through their life course and as the HEA Framework for Consent becomes mainstream. This would enable the capturing of a dynamic evolution of student experiences, which is not possible with a snapshot provided by this study, however this study as a catalyst is foundational.

Equally it would be a worthwhile endeavour to conduct national research on this particular topic and expand participation to include students from a greater number of HEIs for broader representation. Including a broader range of HEIs in a national study is crucial to ensure that research findings are both comprehensive and representative of Ireland's diverse educational population.

## Section 5

### Discussion

#### 5.1 Introduction

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory is positioned as the central lens for interpreting how individual, institutional, and societal factors interact to shape neurodivergent students' experiences in HEIs, especially regarding the navigation of intimate relationships and consent. Utilising this framework enables this study to explore how different systemic levels influence neurodivergent students' transition to higher education and their progression towards self-actualisation, including the navigation of intimate relationships and consent. This framework is used to explore possible tensions within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) between academic learning and holistic student development. Section 5 presents a critical comparison of the findings presented in Section 4 with existing literature, highlighting both convergences and divergences. The lived experiences of neurodivergent co-researchers and participants must be foregrounded to ensure that policy and pedagogical suggestions are grounded in authentic and lived experiences voices.

In the context of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory, the mesosystem refers to the interactions and relationships between students' different microsystems—such as the connections between students' personal experiences, peer groups, and institutional supports within HEIs.. Strengthening these mesosystemic links means ensuring that the support structures, policies, and pedagogical approaches within HEIs are responsive to the needs of neurodivergent students.

Cheak-Zamora (2019) and subsequent studies (Swan, 2022; Dunleavy et al., 2025) highlight a lack of research on sexual and romantic relationships among autistic adolescents and young adults from their own perspective. This gap complicates direct comparison with prior work, but where relevant literature exists, points of agreement and difference are identified. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory is applied to illustrate the complexities neurodivergent students encounter in forming intimate relationships and understanding consent when they transition to higher education.

Section 5 is intentionally organised around the main themes that emerged from the findings. This structure ensures that each major area of insight—such as the between understanding and support, the complexity of consent, and the navigation of social relationships—is explored in depth and in direct relation to the lived experiences of neurodivergent students

#### 5.2 Understandings of neurodivergence and the support offered in the HEIs

This study concludes that neurodivergent students often feel misunderstood by staff and peers, echoing Tan et al. (2023) who noted a 'sense of otherness' among autistic students in higher education. This unmet need is particularly evident regarding information on navigating intimate relationships and consent. Bronfenbrenner's microsystem highlights the lack of mutual understanding, while the macrosystem reflects the perceived marginalisation of neurodivergent students in traditional neurotypical institutions (Quigley et al., 2024). These challenges are especially pronounced for students with intersecting identities, such as autism and LGBTQI+.

Neurodivergent students, within this study, report that, within higher education institutions, they feel tolerated rather than genuinely accepted. This distinction is significant: tolerance implies passive allowance, while acceptance involves active inclusion and affirmation. The lack of true acceptance often results in feelings of isolation and loneliness, as students sense that their authentic selves are not fully welcomed or understood.

A key barrier identified is the perceived lack of awareness and understanding of neurodiversity among staff. Neurodivergent students describe having to ‘mask’—that is, suppress or hide their neurodivergent traits—in order to fit in or avoid negative judgment. This perceived need to mask undermines the effectiveness of counselling experiences and can exacerbate feelings of alienation.

In response to these challenges, there is a clear call from neurodivergent students for the recruitment of neurodivergent-identifying counsellors. Such counsellors are seen as better equipped to provide appropriate, empathetic, and effective assistance, as they are more likely to understand the lived experiences and unique needs of neurodivergent individuals. This suggestion aligns with broader calls for neuro-affirmative practices and the creation of safe, inclusive spaces within higher education

While academic achievement is prioritised, holistic development – including self-fulfilment and self-actualisation (Maslow, 1954; Quigley, 2024) – is often overlooked. This can result in less than adequate support for neurodivergent students in navigating intimate relationships and consent.

Cheak-Zamora (2019) advocates for relationship and sexuality education (RSE) at the higher level, noting that post-primary provision is often inadequate for neurodivergent students. As a result, many neurodivergent students enter higher education without the foundational skills or knowledge needed to navigate intimate relationships and consent safely and confidently.

Lavoie (2015) highlights that evolving dating norms—such as the concept of ‘friends with benefits’—present additional challenges for neurodivergent students. These new relationship dynamics require students to navigate complex social cues and boundaries, which can be particularly difficult for those with neurodivergent communication styles. The lack of adaptive relationship and sexuality education curricula is identified as an exosystemic barrier, meaning that institutional policies and practices outside the immediate learning environment can hinder neurodivergent students’ ability to access relevant, effective support. Regular curriculum reviews are suggested to ensure that content in HEI workshops keeps pace with changing social norms and remains inclusive.

Moreira et al. (2021) notes that sexual exploration may occur later for autistic individuals, underscoring the importance of targeted workshops in HEIs. Neurodivergent students request that HEIs support diverse communication styles, suggesting that workshops using visual supports, role play, concrete materials, scripts, and smaller groups are more effective than traditional verbal instruction within larger group settings. This approach aligns with the bioecological framework, promoting the need for specialised proximal processes that directly support students’ unique needs.

The findings also advocate for communication workshops for neurotypical students to foster mutual understanding, aligning with Milton’s Double Empathy theory (2012, 2024). This theory posits that challenges in perspective-taking exist on both sides—neurodivergent and neurotypical. Within Bronfenbrenner’s framework, this reflects a mesosystem failure to support bidirectional perspective-taking, as the interactions between students and their immediate environments (peers, staff, workshops) are not always responsive to the diversity of communication styles and needs.

## 5.3 The Complexity of Consent

Findings indicate that neurodivergent students perceive consent as an ongoing, mutual process rather than as a single, static agreement, and participants described it as a continuous negotiation that requires respect, comfort, and clarity between individuals. Notably, legislative frameworks such as the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 1990 are not always referenced by students in their definitions or discussions of consent. Instead, their understanding is grounded in practical, everyday experiences and challenges, particularly around communication and sensory sensitivities.

Recent curricular updates in Ireland place greater emphasis on well-being and consent. However, HEIs may assume that students transition to HEIs with sufficient knowledge of navigating intimate relationships and consent, which is not always the case. It can be argued that HEIs have a responsibility to confirm that all students, particularly neurodivergent students, fully understand consent.

The findings suggest that consent workshops are optional and not tailored to the needs of neurodivergent students. The effectiveness of posters and other passive supports is questionable. The findings suggest that workshops tend to focus on rules and definitions rather than practical communication skills. Moreover, workshop design does not always facilitate generalisation and transfer of skills beyond the learning environment (Carruthers et al., 2020). More sequential, interactive, accessible, and skill-based pedagogical approaches are suggested.

### 5.3.1 Emotional Empathy

Emotional challenges are a core characteristic of autism and can significantly impact relationships and well-being (Tani et al., 2015; Trimmer et al., 2027; Chou, 2024). The study highlights the link between affective empathy and communication, noting that interpreting verbal and non-verbal cues can present a challenge for some neurodivergent students. This aligns with what Bronfenbrenner refers to as individuals' internal traits that impact how individuals interact with their environment. The findings suggest that workshops designed for neurotypical students may disadvantage neurodivergent students, emphasising the need for tailored, scaffolded learning experiences, including those mentioned in Section 5.

As students may still be exploring their sexual identity during their transition to higher education, a supportive and inclusive environment is essential, particularly for those with intersecting identities. Emotional abilities are not isolated traits but interact dynamically with the microsystems of the HEI.

## 5.4 Navigating social relationships and social challenges

Neurodivergent students face unique interpersonal, emotional, and communicative challenges in consent education, often struggling to interpret social cues and unwritten norms (Grandin & Baron, 2005). This can be compounded when these challenges are not addressed within the broader educational context, when non-neurodivergent staff find it difficult to deliver consent education within an inclusive framework. Additionally, Bronfenbrenner (1998) emphasised how an individual's traits influence their social interactions. They seek recognition of these challenges and appropriate support from HEIs. Whilst HEIs aim to create positive, strengths-based environments (Quigley et al, 2024), supports must be substantive and not merely symbolic. However, previous research and the findings of this study caution against providing an 'overly positive space' that negates the challenges faced by neurodivergent students (Quigley 2024).

Many neurodivergent students, participating in this study expressed a preference to form relationships with other neurodivergent individuals due to reduced social stress. They advocate for explicitly detailed, sequential sexual education and skills-building, rather than one-off sessions. This aligns with Cheak-Zamora's (2019, P. 2612) study that posits neurodivergent students require 'more detailed sexual education, including specific information about what intercourse is ... [and] education and skills building classes on dating etiquette and emotional and safety rules. For neurodivergent students who identify as LGBTQI+, the heteronormative focus of current workshops within the HEI microsystem adds complexity and confusion. However, societal norms and ableism within the macrosystem (external to HEIs) may limit the inclusive potential of HEI programmes. The findings from this study also identify the need for broader, more inclusive approaches and neuro-affirmative counselling. Within HEIs, there is a shift towards a neurodiversity paradigm, and this, it can be argued, is creating a move away from symbolic inclusion towards evidence-based and strengths-based pedagogical approaches.

Masking, camouflaging and compensation are common coping strategies but can lead to exhaustion, depression, and anxiety (Leaf et al, 2023; Venkatesan and Tolani, 2024). Workshops for neurotypical students are suggested to foster greater understanding and reduce pressure on neurodivergent students to mask their identity. The availability of counselling services varies, and this study identifies the need for counsellors with expertise in neurodiversity.

#### 5.4.1 Parental concerns

Parents express concerns about their autistic young people's ability to form fulfilling relationships and understand societal norms and conventions (Nicholas et al., 2009). Many feel unprepared to provide sexuality education, particularly regarding behaviours. For example, undressing and masturbating in public, and kissing strangers, understanding privacy, boundaries and personal space (Stokes and Kaur, 2005; Chan et al., 2012; Murrie et al., 2002; Newport & Newport, 2002; Ruble & Dalrymple, 1993) that are outside societal norms and conventions. Within the microsystem of the home, the proximal process regarding sexuality is often postponed.

## Section 6

# Signposts and Conclusion

### 6.1 Introduction

Grounded in Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory and Universal Design for Learning principles, the considerations for HEIs set out below are intended to address gaps and promote neuro-affirmative, inclusive practices within HEIs. These considerations aim to foster accessibility, inclusion, and well-being for neurodivergent students, ensuring that HEIs support not only academic achievement but also personal and relational development. The following signposts are offered for HEI reflection in Ireland.

### 6.2 Signposts

- HEIs should consider implementing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles in workshops and curricula. This involves using a UDL pedagogy by providing multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression, so neurodivergent and non-neurodivergent students can access content in ways that suit their strengths and needs.
- Consider developing sequential, interactive, and skill-based consent workshops that utilise visual supports, scripts, and practical examples. Reflect on the use of one-size-fits-all approaches and ensure that content is accessible for students with diverse communication styles and sensory needs.
- Recruitment of HE staff and counsellors who identify as neurodivergent or have specialised training in neurodiversity. This approach helps students feel understood and reduces the pressure to mask or camouflage their identity during support sessions.
- Check that campus campaigns about consent and relationships explicitly include neurodivergent perspectives and experiences. Use clear, direct language and avoid relying solely on intuitive social norms.
- Consider offering both online and face-to-face options for workshops, focus groups, and support services, allowing neurodivergent students to choose environments where they feel comfortable and safe.
- Regular reviews of institutional policies with input from neurodivergent students, engaging them as co-researchers and advisors to ensure policies reflect lived experiences and address real barriers to inclusion and well-being.
- Ensuring that navigating intimate relationships and consent education is inclusive of LGBTQI+ identities, and address gaps in sex education for asexual, LGBTQI+, and neurodivergent students.
- Develop staff and student training to recognise and address ableism.
- Review the existence of tailored supports.
- Conduct curriculum reviews to remove institutional obstacles and promote the holistic development and self-actualisation of all students.

### 6.3. Conclusions

The primary objective of this study was to examine the experiences of neurodivergent students as they navigate intimate relationships and consent within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Ireland. Using Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (1998), the analysis highlights the complex interactions between students and their immediate educational environments (Microsystems), as well as broader institutional and societal structures (Ecosystems and Macrosystems). The findings reveal a disconnect caused by a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to support, suggesting the need for more substantive, neuro-affirmative supports to foster holistic development and self-actualisation among neurodivergent students.

There is a clear request from participants to replace predominantly verbal workshops with sequential, interactive, and skills-based pedagogical methods. Approaches such as visual aids, role-play, concrete materials, and scripts in small group settings are essential for effective learning processes.

The prevalence of masking, camouflaging and conforming behaviours among neurodivergent students suggests an inflexible microsystem that inhibits authenticity. These experiences are further shaped by the Mesosystem, reflecting the interconnectedness of various aspects of student life. The study identifies inconsistent family preparation and inadequate post-primary RSE curricula as contributing factors to a support vacuum, which HEIs are currently ill-equipped to address due to limited neuro-affirmative expertise.

Macrosystemic barriers, including heteronormative and neurotypical orientations, can marginalise students with intersecting identities such as LGBTQI+ and neurodiversity, especially when their needs are treated as secondary in support planning.

While awareness-based supports like posters have some value, the findings advocate for a shift towards skills-based, sequential workshops with explicit curricula. Adopting a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach can facilitate a transition from traditional verbal instruction to interactive small-group sessions, reducing sensory overload and anxiety while promoting active participation.

Recruiting neurodivergent specialists counsellors and providing neurodiversity training for staff are recommended to address support provision. These measures can reduce the pressure on students to mask or conform during counselling.

Finally, workshops for neurotypical students are identified as a means to foster mutual perspective-taking and alleviate the social pressure on neurodivergent students to conform to neurotypical norms and communication styles.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1

### Information letter



### **Supporting neurodivergent students as they navigate intimate relationships within higher education.**

#### **Participant Information Letter**

#### **What is the project about?**

The researchers want to work with neurodivergent students as co-researchers to examine how higher education institutions can gain an in-depth understanding of what supports neurodivergent students require. This will assist higher education institutions to provide the supports the neurodivergent student to feel they belong, take an active part in the social activities, and potential intimate relationships within campus life.

#### **Who is undertaking the research?**

Staff from within the Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Interculturalism and the Educational, Psychology, Inclusive and Special Education Departments in Mary Immaculate College.

Kathleen Maher, Sexual Violence and Harassment Prevention and Response Manager, MIC.

Michele Dunleavy, Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Psychology, Inclusive and Special Education, Mary Immaculate College

#### **Why is the research being undertaken?**

Sexuality education is a core right for all students and fosters well-being and quality of life. It also provides for safety and protection if they are provided with accurate information from a reliable source. Research suggests that neurodivergent students require additional support in developing social skills that will help them to access a differentiated RSE curriculum

## Appendix 1

(Hannah & Stagg, 2016; Tissot, 2009; Beddows & Brooks, 2015) and this is the foundation to our research as neurodivergent students navigate third level.

### **What are the benefits of this research?**

It is hoped that the data collected will:

- (a) Help to gain an in-depth understanding of what supports neurodivergent students want from higher education around intimate and sexual relationships. This will include the giving and seeking consent within relationships.
- (b) As neurodivergent students will be co-researcher their voice will be central to the research and data analysis.
- (c) To collate the views of students about what is necessary to raise awareness of consent in an inclusive manner.
- (d) Build skills and confidence for students participating in the project as co-researchers

### **What is involved for the participants (time, location, etc.)**

The study will involve participants taking part in an interview lasting approximately half an hour. At a later stage, participants will be asked to take part in a focus group lasting approximately half an hour. This will involve you sitting in a small group where they can expand on their answers they gave in their interviews. A facilitator will guide the discussion based in the interview topics. Interviews and focus groups will take place in a neurodivergent friendly environment to be agreed with the you.

During the interview, if you find you cannot answer a question, you can say 'I do not know' or give the interviewer a card like this one.



If you do not understand a question you can say 'I do not understand' or give the interviewer a card like this one. The interviewer will then use different words or pictures to help you understand the question.



## Appendix 1

If you want to stop and have a rest you can say 'I need a break' or show the interviewer a card like one of these.



### **Right to withdraw**

Your anonymity is assured; this means that your name will not be used on any of the documents. Additionally, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason and without consequence. To withdraw from the study all you need to do is email Michele Dunleavy [michele.dunleavy@mic.ul.ie](mailto:michele.dunleavy@mic.ul.ie) or Kathleen Maher [Kathleen.maher@mic.ul.ie](mailto:Kathleen.maher@mic.ul.ie) saying you wish to withdraw from the study.

### **How will the information be used?**

The qualitative data gathered from you will be combined and used to publish articles in academic journals and for presentation at conferences. The data will be used to develop a fully designed infographic/booklet encompassing students' needs around consent to be made available to all students. The data will also be used to help colleges create neurodivergent campus and support student's holistic education.

### **How will confidentiality be kept?**

The qualitative data collected will not be shared with anyone outside the research team. Participants will be allocated a pseudonym and their identity will only be known to the interviewer. Your pseudonym rather than their name will appear on their interview transcript in order to maintain their anonymity, unless the student wishes to make public their participation.

### **Limits of Confidentiality:**

In exceptional circumstances we will have to share your information with other appropriate services/individuals. If we are worried that you might harm yourself, we will contact the relevant services so that you can get the help you need. If you have disclosed a specific danger to yourself or other people, we will have to report it.

## Appendix 1

If we are concerned that a child is at risk of harm, we will need to contact and work with TUSLA's Social Work Department.

However, be assured that what you disclose will not be used in the research data.

### **What will happen to the data after research has been completed?**

In accordance with MIC Record Retention Policy, data may be retained indefinitely as required by the researcher.

#### **Contact details:**

Name: Michele Dunleavy

Email address: [michele.dunleavy@mic.ul.ie](mailto:michele.dunleavy@mic.ul.ie)

Contact: Kathleen Maher

Email address: [kathleen.maher@mic.ul.ie](mailto:kathleen.maher@mic.ul.ie)

#### **Contact details for Additional Supports within Mary Immaculate College**

- College Support Services - Student Counselling Service - Room T.3.11/T.3.12 – 061 204948/19
- Student Medical Centre - Room T.3.07 – 061 204343
- Chaplaincy Service - Room G.48 – 061 204331 / 086 2550436

#### **Contact details for Additional Supports within University of Limerick**

- College Support Services - Student Counselling Service - 061-202327
- Student Health Centre - 061 202534
- Chaplaincy Service -John Campion – 086-2632458 Room CM071  
Sarah O'Rourke – 086-4127485 Teach Fáilte.

#### **Contact details for Additional Supports within Technological University of Shannon**

- College Support Services - Student Counselling Service - email: [counselling@midwest.tus.ie](mailto:counselling@midwest.tus.ie) or [counselling@midlands.tus.ie](mailto:counselling@midlands.tus.ie)
- Student Health Centre – [nurses@midwest.tus.ie](mailto:nurses@midwest.tus.ie) or for TUS Athlone students contact 090 6468063.
- Chaplaincy Service - I: [joseph.walsh@tus.ie](mailto:joseph.walsh@tus.ie) (Limerick and Clare)
- Email: [theresa.osullivan@tus.ie](mailto:theresa.osullivan@tus.ie) (Tipperary)
- [seamus.casey@tus.ie](mailto:seamus.casey@tus.ie) (Athlone campus)

## Appendix 1

### Contact Details for Statutory Services HSE

- Safeguarding and Protection Teams
- Email: [Safeguarding.cho3@hse.ie](mailto:Safeguarding.cho3@hse.ie) – Limerick Clare, North Tipperary.
- Email: [Safeguarding.cho8@hse.ie](mailto:Safeguarding.cho8@hse.ie) – Westmeath.
- Email: [Safeguarding.cho5@hse.ie](mailto:Safeguarding.cho5@hse.ie) – South Tipperary.
- An Garda Síochána Protective Services Unit, Henry Street Garda Station, Limerick.  
061 212448 [Limerick.psu@garda.ie](mailto:Limerick.psu@garda.ie)
- An Garda Síochána Protective Services Unit, Henry Street Garda Station, Limerick.  
061 212448 [Limerick.psu@garda.ie](mailto:Limerick.psu@garda.ie)
- Contact 999 or 112 for emergencies.

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC) (quote reference number when you have received it). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent authority, you may contact: Mary Collins, MIREC Administrator, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick.  
Telephone: 061-204980 E-mail: [mirec@mic.ul.ie](mailto:mirec@mic.ul.ie)

## Appendix 2

### Recruitment Posters

**Are you a neurodivergent student in MIC?**

**Are you a neurodivergent student?**

We are recruiting interviewers for an upcoming research project.

We are recruiting for an upcoming research project with MIC, TUS and UL

"Supporting neurodivergent students as they navigate intimate relationships within higher education."

"Supporting neurodivergent students as they navigate intimate relationships within higher education."

For more information, contact: [Kathleen.Maher@mic.ul.ie](mailto:Kathleen.Maher@mic.ul.ie)  
Kathleen Maher, Sexual Violence and Harassment Prevention and Response Manager

or [Michele.Dunleavy@ul.ie](mailto:Michele.Dunleavy@ul.ie)  
Michele Dunleavy, Assistant Professor,  
Department of Educational Psychology,  
Inclusive & Special Education

Contact: [Kathleen.Maher@mic.ul.ie](mailto:Kathleen.Maher@mic.ul.ie)  
Kathleen Maher, Sexual Violence and Harassment Prevention and Response Manager

MIC TUS UNIVERSITY OF LIMERICK

EDII

## Appendix 3

### Interview script

My name is \_\_\_\_\_

I want to thank you for agreeing to take part in the interview today.

For the purposes of the interview, you are given the pseudonym

I just want to check that you are still happy to take part and you are ok that this interview is recorded.

I want to go over a few things before we begin the interview

Confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained that is why we use a pseudonym

Remember there is no right or wrong answer, we are seeking your opinion

If you don't want to answer you can just say pass or show me the pass card

You can pass on any question you do not feel comfortable answering.

You can have your camera on or off – it is your choice

#### **We will now begin the interview questions:**

1. Have you seen any messages about consent in your college or university?
2. What message have you received about consent? From school, work, and friends.
3. Do you think it is important to deliver Consent Workshops in Third Level? Why is it important?
4. If you have done a Consent Workshop in college, what was your experience?
5. Have you completed a Bystander Training (intervening if you witness sexual harassment or violence)? What was your experience?
6. Have you any other feedback on it?
7. Is there any potential issues on acting as a Bystander in your opinion for a neurodivergent student?
8. Define an intimate relationship in your opinion?
9. Do you think being neurodivergent impacts on a person's ability to form intimate relationships?
10. How well were you prepared for intimate relationships before you came to college? What helped (family, friends, media, school ed.)
11. If you are resistant to physical touch, do you have the tools to say no?
12. What additional supports do you think Colleges could put in place to support neurodivergent students in relation to sexual violence and harassment and intimate relationships?
13. What additional supports do you think neurodivergent students who belong to the LGBTQ+ community need to navigate intimate relationships in higher education?

## Appendix 3

14. Do you think neurodivergent students with sensory challenges impact on having an intimate relationship?
15. What do you understand are the key features of a healthy intimate relationship?
16. What hopes and concerns do neurodivergent students have about an intimate relationship in your opinion?
17. What skills to you feel a person needs to develop to have a successful relationship?

## Appendix 4

### Informed Consent



### **Supporting neurodivergent students as they navigate intimate relationships within higher education.**

#### **Informed consent document**

Dear Participant,

As outlined in the **participant information letter**, the researchers wish to work with neurodivergent students as co-researchers to assess how the Higher Education Institutions can gain an in-depth understanding of what supports neurodivergent students require. This will assist Colleges to provide the right supports the neurodivergent students feel they belong and take an active part in the social activities and potential intimate relationships within College life.

The participant's role is explained in the information letter, and I would ask that you read this carefully before consenting to take part.

You can be assured that your name or other details will only be shared with the researchers. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time without giving an explanation. Any information you give will remain confidential. In accordance with MIC Record Retention Policy, data may be retained indefinitely as required by the researcher.

Please read the following statements before signing the consent form.

- I have read and understood the **participant information letter**.
- I understand what the study is about, and what the information will be used for.

## Appendix 4

- I am fully aware of **all** of the procedures involving myself, and any risks or benefits associated with the study.
- I know that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any stage without giving a reason.
- I am aware that anonymity is assured.

Name (printed) \_\_\_\_\_

Name (signature) \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

### **Contact details:**

Name: Michele Dunleavy

Email address: [michele.dunleavy@mic.ul.ie](mailto:michele.dunleavy@mic.ul.ie)

Contact: Kathleen Maher

Email address: [kathleen.maher@mic.ul.ie](mailto:kathleen.maher@mic.ul.ie)

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