



*Ms Fiona Earley, DCU Autism Friendly University Coordinator, Opening statement, 22 November 2022.*

# DCU Autism Friendly University Project

Thank you for the opportunity to address the committee today. I will give an outline of the DCU Autism Friendly University Project.

In 2016, DCU declared its intention to become autism friendly after a meeting with Adam Harris of ASlam and President of DCU. Between 2016 and 2018 research was conducted by Dr Mary Rose Sweeney (DCU) and ASlam. It focused on the challenges and support needs of autistic students. Alongside a sensory audit of the physical environment from a sensory perspective was completed.

The research found that additional supports most needed were in the areas of - communication, socialisation, and coping with an overloaded sensory campus environment. The research created the eight principles of an *Autism Friendly University* and DCU set out to implement the actions over the previous three years.

Since the project, the number of students disclosing an autism diagnosis has increased by 60%. Alongside this, a growing number of autistic staff began contacting the project seeking support, information, and advice. This may indicate that autistic individuals are more comfortable about disclosing now because of the ethos of the Autism Friendly University Project and/or potentially indicating that more autistic students now attend DCU because of the ethos of the project. Disclosure opens pathways of support.

In response to autistic staff disclosure a new principal was developed to establish how DCU will provide support. This will be launched in Phase 2 of the project. Another key objective in Phase 2 is to address the sensory challenges of campus. Autistic students and staff described it as sensorially challenging with significant impact on their ability to concentrate. Pursuant of that goal, DCU published the Autism Friendly University Design Guide. It is the hope that this will serve to guide all HEIs assessment and adjustment of current spaces across campus and provide guidance for any future builds.

As the number of students disclosing is increasing yearly there is a growing need for more supports and services. Particularly sensory friendly spaces, academic and social supports, and mentorship programmes.

The early 2000's was the point where autism diagnoses spiked. Almost 20 years later, this "peak cohort" has progressed through Primary and Secondary level education. They now find themselves ready for a higher education that is unfortunately often unprepared for them. The Autism Friendly University Framework may, however, play a key role in creating opportunity for more authentic inclusion of autistic students and staff with their fellow learners and colleagues.