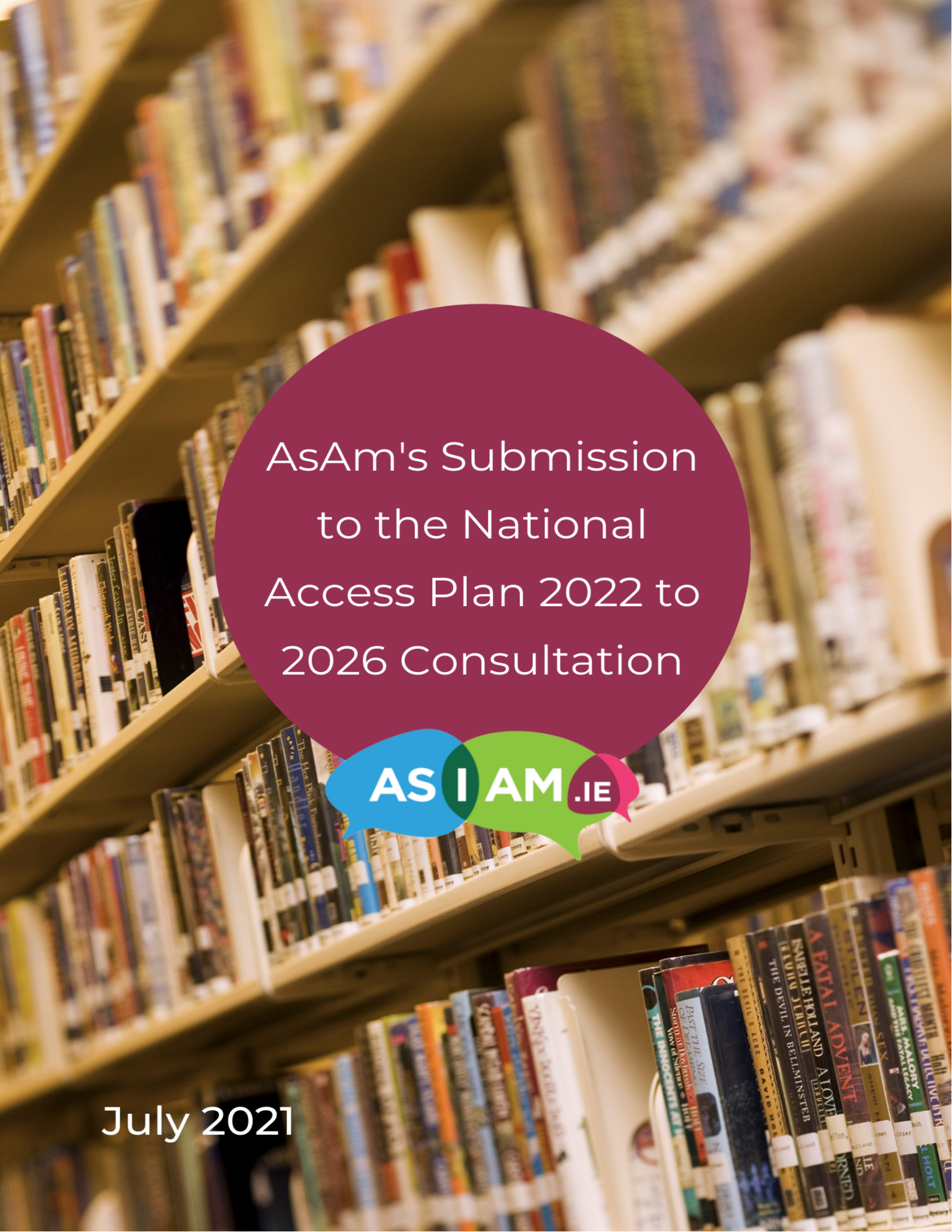

AsAm's Submission to the National Access Plan 2022 to 2026 Consultation

AS I AM .IE

July 2021

Introduction

AsIAm welcomes the opportunity to contribute to developing the next iteration of the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education. It is our ambition that this new strategy broadens its scope to proactively address the many barriers to accessing third level opportunities for an often-overlooked cohort of the student population. As Ireland's national autism charity, our organisation has consistently campaigned for greater, tailored supports for autistic students studying at both further and higher levels of education, as well as building greater awareness of autism as a spectrum condition amongst institutions' academic and support staff; our Autism-Friendly Universities Programme is AsIAm's flagship project in this regard. Close collaboration with institutions such as Dublin City University (DCU) has facilitated an in-depth understanding of the practicalities tied to campus life for us. This partnership has led to exciting developments in supporting autistic students as they open a new chapter in their lives, at an academic and social level, with huge potential to support far more nation-wide.

AsIAm welcomes National Plan's re-examination by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHRIS). We note the positive trajectory that the policy has delivered on improving accessibility to third level education for students living with physical disabilities, as well as those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. Nevertheless, we would be remiss if we did not also note the conspicuous absence of statistics on students living with invisible disabilities, such as autism. This is not a unique phenomenon to the National Plan; yet it is within the realm of third level education policy where robust data collection must occur to better inform how the State might help students on the autism spectrum. International literature bears out the scale of the obstacles autistic individuals face as they enter tertiary education, with as less than half completing their course in full, and markedly less being able to find work afterwards. The nature of these challenges is highly varied, yet common denominators typically come down to (but are by no means limited to) difficulties transitioning into new learning environments, managing substantially increased workloads, as well as maintaining relationships with peers and faculty[1].

[1] Cage, Eilidh and Howe, Jack. (2020). 'Dropping out and moving on: A qualitative study of autistic people's experiences of university,' *Autism*, Vol 24 (7). Pgs. 1664-1675. Online. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1362361320918750

As a whole-of-life condition, it is only appropriate that equally wide-ranging and tailored assistance is given to prospective students on the autism spectrum. Significant investment into the Plan from its first interaction in 2015 has generated a solid foundation for the Department to develop a wide-ranging framework going forward. As we recover in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, this presents an excellent opportunity to tie into the work of the recently announced Autism Innovation Strategy[2], whereby a cross-departmental collaboration may begin to develop pathways to accessible services for autistic people of all ages and backgrounds around Ireland, as befits it as a whole-of-life spectrum condition. In this submission, AsIAm will outline our proposals of how we envisage the next National Plan might provide opportunities and tailored supports for autistic students, not only make the most of their individual potential, but also enable them to realise their dreams and ambitions as full and equal members of society.

Executive Summary

- **Include autistic people as an explicit cohort within targeted under-represented groups as a subcategory of students with disabilities within the next National Access Plan for 2022–2026.**
- **Initiate a formal data collection programme on autistic learners enrolled in higher education institutions to build a comprehensive picture of these students' diverse profiles and inform future policy decisions.**
- **Implement a pilot autism training scheme with a sample of academic and support staff from institutes across Ireland, with a view to extending such training to all staff in the short to medium-term.**
- **Streamline colleges' and universities' Disability Services support continuums into a uniform suite of comprehensive resources, so that autistic students around the country can avail of supports without discrepancy.**
- **Invest additional resources into providing remote learning supports for autistic students, specifically around greater access to assistive technology, upgrading students' digital skills, and improving remote accessibility of college services to part-time/flexible learners.**

[2] Department of Children, Disability, Equality, Innovation and Youth. (2021). 'Minister Rabbitte to establish Working Group on Autism Innovation Strategy.' 2nd April. Online. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/7de7e-minister-rabbitte-to-establish-working-group-on-autism-innovation-strategy/

- **Remove the means-test requirement for families seeking to access the SUSI Grant for all students with disabilities and people who experience educational disadvantage, including autistic students.**

About AsIAm

AsIAm is the national charity and advocacy organisation for Ireland's autism community. We are working to create a society in which every autistic person is empowered to reach their own personal potential and fully participate in society. We believe that by developing the capacity of the autism community and addressing the societal barriers to inclusion, we can make Ireland the world's most autism-friendly country.

Our organisation has made its mark on the national landscape since our founding in 2014, from our award-winning campaigns to lobbying lawmakers to prioritise autism on the Dáil's agenda. AsIAm has developed a range of innovative supports for Ireland's autism community; as well as providing vital information and advocacy supports, we have also delivered several nationally and internationally renowned training and accreditation programmes for businesses and services to become autism-friendly.

Better Data Collection for Better Policy Decisions

The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science should . . .

- **Include autistic people as an explicit cohort within targeted under-represented groups as a subcategory of students with disabilities within the next National Access Plan for 2022–2026.**
- **Obligate the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) initiative to begin a formal data collection programme on autistic learners enrolled in higher education institutions to build a comprehensive picture of these students' diverse profiles.**
    - **AsIAm would also recommend DFHERIS to engage with other stakeholders in this endeavour, namely the various Access Offices in institutions around the country, as well as advocacy and representative organisations such as the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD).**
- **Publish data collected on autism's prevalence rate and the demographics of autistic students in an accessible manner in print and online on an annual basis.**

Rationale: Significant inroads have been made towards instilling a culture of appreciating data collection's importance to inform better policy decisions within the Department of Further and Higher Education, and its various agencies during the last several years. This has been critical, as the Department itself notes[3], in enhancing policymakers' understandings of the diverse profile of students in higher education over the lifetime of the present strategy. Deprivation Index Scores are one instance of such a measure, whereby students' various socioeconomic backgrounds might be measured and duly considered as part of an explicitly *evidence*-based decision-making ethos. AsIAm welcomes this shift in the Departments' policy process, and we would strongly encourage its application towards gathering further information on autistic learners within our student population.

A bank of specific and comprehensive data is a crucial component for deciding policy targeted towards any populational cohort, and it is all the more essential for *autistic*

[3] Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. (2021). *Invitation to Make a Submission on the next National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2022-2026)*. Pg.4. Online. Available at: https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/ 2021/04/NAP-consultation_deadline-extension.pdf

cohorts, given how varied profiles on the spectrum are. Whilst the condition has enjoyed a greater profile in mainstream discourses during the past twenty years, autism-specific statistics remain persistently elusive for researchers and policymakers alike, especially in an Irish-context. From the outset of this paper, we noted the difficulty of discerning an accurate picture of autistic students' third level experiences due to a lack of reliable data at an international level; this is acutely felt on a *national* level. Indeed, much of the data on Irish autistic students' experiences in recent years has been gathered by AsIAm itself and a very limited number of academic studies. As we have reiterated in separate submissions on inclusive education[4] and the need for an Autism Empowerment Strategy[5], regular and robust data collection must be implemented to inform how we can best support our autistic citizens – particularly for those transitioning from school to academic settings.

Better Staff Training for Better Inclusion

The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science should . . .

- **Implement a pilot autism training scheme for colleges and universities across Ireland, in close collaboration with the Higher Education Authority, with a sample of academic and support staff from each, with a view to extending the training to all staff in their respective institutes.**

The Higher Education Authority should . . .

- **Establish regional hubs of excellence whereby academic and support staff from different institutes may share experiences and knowledge of how to support autistic learners.**
- **Set up a central online hub of autism resources available on their websites, accessible at the point of need for staff to address a particular knowledge gap.**

Rationale: During the evaluation process of AsIAm's Autism-Friendly Universities project, our organisation closely collaborated with DCU's School of Nursing and Human Sciences. Several studies constituted the review which involved focus groups and semi-structured

[4] AsIAm. (2020). *Inclusion in Our Special Classes and Special Schools: A Submission to the National Council for Special Education from AsIAm*. Pg.16.
[5] AsIAm. (2021). *An Autism Empowerment Strategy for Ireland: A Briefing Document from AsIAm*. Pg.4.

interviews with DCU's faculty and support staff, so as to explore existing services for autistic students and to gauge their working knowledge of autism. A key finding from this phase was that a lack of knowledge about autism and the tools and techniques to provide appropriate support to autistic students were an issue for staff[6]. There was, nevertheless, a clear willingness amongst those interviewed to address this knowledge gap; chiefly through engagement with others and improved communication with autistic students[7]. It is critical that the next Plan capitalises on this appetite and integrate it into future professional development courses for institutes' staff.

Better Participation for Better Third-Level Experiences

Colleges and universities should . . .

- **Establish and designate a full-time Transition Officer role within their respective Disability and Access Services, mandated with expressed responsibility to assist autistic students and those with other disabilities manage the change to campus life during orientation and beyond.**
- **Encourage their respective Students' Unions to help autistic students navigate potential academic challenges, conduct awareness-raising initiatives on campus throughout the year, prevent dropouts, and assist with career guidance for working life.**
- **Create a greater range of courses and study opportunities in further and higher education for autistic students with high support needs and/or a co-occuring intellectual disability.[8].**
- **Ensure that autistic students have readily available access to Disability Services on campus as part of their support plan, including access to professional advocacy services such as the National Advocacy Service to act as their advocates in the event of academic and or personal crises.**
- **Invest additional resources, in collaboration with the DFHERIS, into providing remote learning supports for autistic students, specifically around greater access to assistive technology, upgrading students' digital skills, and improving remote accessibility of library services to part-time/flexible learners.**

---

[6] DCU. *Living with Autism as a University Student at Dublin City University: Developing an Autism Friendly University*. Pg.8. Online. Available at: https://www.dcu.ie/sites/default/files/president/autsim_friendly_report_no_crops.pdf

[7] *Ibid.* Pg.8.

[8] Modules may be structured along the lines of short courses, conducted over a set period of time accounting for a select number of credits agreed by the High Education Authority and institutes' accreditation bodies.

- **Ensure their respective Student Accommodation Services are appropriately resourced to support autistic students, with particular attention to conducting regular sensory audits, establishing clear communication lines with autistic service-users, and training attending staff in autism-friendly best practices.**

The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science should . . .

- **Establish an Assistive Technology Passport Initiative[9] for autistic students and those with other disabilities as part of a broader streamlining process of the Fund for Students for Disabilities' service continuum, tailoring these students' individual digital supports on an as-and-when-needed basis throughout their enrolment.**
- **Commence a formal data collection initiative, in close collaboration with the HEA, specifically gathering statistics on the rate of suspended studies and dropouts amongst autistic students and others with disabilities, to be published in accessible format every twelve months.**

Rationale: Third-level education presents a plethora of opportunities for autistic people to discover their passions and fully pursue them. Unfortunately, many Irish institutes are without the structures and supports that are needed to support their autistic learners for what is often an entirely new way of living. According to our joint study, whilst most autistic students feel they possess the necessary academic skills to study their chosen courses, less than a third believe that they have the required level of social skills to truly succeed at university[10] This presents a key dilemma cutting across several layers, namely surrounding autistic students' self-confidence not only to form and maintain meaningful relationships with their peers and faculty, but also to know when to reach out during a crisis and ask for support from Disability Services.

Any future Access Plan must recognise the importance of empowering autistic students to be able to fully participate in an inclusive campus life. Colleges and universities themselves would play a major and proactive role in this regard, setting down much of the groundwork that would upgrade their Disability Services' working knowledge of autism, assisting with the transition process, and broadening their remit to include full

[9] AsIAm supports the Disability Federation of Ireland's calls for a streamlined approach to the SDF and easier access to assistive technology, as denoted in the DFI's submission to the National Access Plan (2021, Pg.6, Online, Available at: https://www.disability-federation.ie/assets/files/pdf/dfi_submission_on_nap_2022-26.pdf).
[10] *Ibid*. Pg.4.

access to professional advocacy services on campus, *vis-à-vis* the National Advocacy Service. This would provide specialist help in a multitude of crisis scenarios, ranging from renegotiating looming deadlines with lecturers to lodging formal complaints if a student feels unsatisfied or mistreated.

Another critical component AsIAm would encourage the next Access Plan to consider is around how best to support autistic students during their academic studies. Given how complex and multifaceted autism manifests within individuals, it is imperative that an extensive suite of resources be made easily available to learners on the spectrum at the point of need. COVID-19 has demonstrated the reality of the digital divide amongst students, resulting in significant academic regression due to inaccessibility and an uncoordinated system of support allocation. Closely tied to this is the phenomenon of higher dropout rates for autistic students; most autistic students surveyed in our report with DCU indicated they had seriously considered withdrawing from their studies altogether[11]. A coordinated support policy must be developed at an Executive-level, informed by targeted data gathering and analysis.

Better Funding for Better Supports

The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science should . . .

- **Recognise the proven added cost of living and learning with a disability by providing additional SUSI grant funding to students with disabilities to cover disability-related living costs[12].**
- **Remove the means-test requirement for families seeking to access the SUSI Grant for all students with disabilities and people who experience educational disadvantage, including autistic students.**
- **Address the anomaly by which individuals with a disability in receipt of Rent Supplement, Disability Allowance, One-Parent Family Payment and Jobseeker's**

[11] *Ibid.* Pg.5.

[12] AsIAm supports Trinity Ability Co-Op's calls for additional investment into the SUSI Grant in recognition of the additional living costs for students with disabilities, particularly for those studying and living in Dublin. (2021. Pg.10, Online, Available at: https://abilitycoop.com/2021/06/17/trinity-ability-co_ops-submission-to-the-national-access-plan-2022-2026/)

Transitional Payment, who wish to enter education or training are not eligible for SUSI maintenance[13].

Rationale: Student poverty is a well-documented phenomenon, yet its effects on autistic students has received significantly less attention in research and policy-making circles. AsIAm notes the progress that has been made in recent years to develop and invest comprehensive financial supports for third level students with disabilities, particularly via the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) and Student Assistance Fund (SAF); and we would be remiss not to welcome the latest investment into tertiary education under the Government's National Recovery and Resilience Plan[14]. The lengthy, staggered, and oftimes unequal application processes for such schemes, however, leaves autistic students at a distinct disadvantage at a critical moment, as they transition to a new stage in their lives. Indeed, in tandem with the range of additional costs attached to living with a disability in Ireland[15], many autistic students are at far greater risk of experiencing financial hardship during their studies than their neurotypical peers.

Recognising the additional costs of living for students with disabilities is critical, AsIAm believes, in the DFHERIS meaningfully addressing the poverty traps that autistic individuals are prone to falling into; reforming the aforementioned funding initiatives, as well as the SUSI Grant Scheme's means-testing criteria, are central actions towards this. Doing so would also go a long way to recognising the autism spectrum's diverse profiles and their equally diverse needs - particularly those from lower and middle income backgrounds and autistic women, both of whom face additional barriers to early diagnostic interventions and follow-up supports in educational settings.

[13] AsIAm supports the Society of St Vincent de Paul's calls for reformatting the social welfare system so that loopholes do not prohibit people with disabilities from building their skillset in full or part-time education whilst availing of much-needed financial support from the State. (2021, Pg.16, Online. Available at: https://www.svp.ie/getattachment/f84ad03b-907d-47e5-a927-5270583b1083/SVP-Submission-to-HEA-DFHERIS-on-the-new-Equity.aspx).

[14] Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Science and Innovation. (2021). 'Minister Harris announces €225 million investment in further and higher education and research under National Recovery and Resilience Plan.' 1st June. Online. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/f7c87-minister-harris-announces-225-million-investment-in-further-and-higher-education-and-research-under-national-recovery-and-resilience-plan/

[15] Cullinan, J., Gannon, B. and Lyons, S. (2011). 'Estimating the Extra Cost of Living for People with Disabilities', *Health Economics*. 20 (5). Pgs.582-99. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1002/hec.1619

Rock House
Main Street
Blackrock
Co. Dublin
A94 V9P1

info@asiam.ie

AsIAm is a charity registered in Ireland (CRN20144838) with a charitable tax-exempt status (CHY21201), and a company limited by guarantee (553241).