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University College Cork, Ireland
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SOAR
Inter Institutional Collaboration on Access

PREPARE ENTRY GUIDE

Supporting Students with Autism transition to Higher Education – an Evaluation

Rebekah Brennan
Maire Leane
Aoife Horgan
Sheila McGovern
Julie O'Donovan

MTU
Ollscoil Teicneolaíochta na Mumhan
Munster Technological University

PATH
Programme for Access to Higher Education

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It is a superpower – autism is a superpower. I love my autism – sure I have some struggles, but I love it, I love being autistic – it is great!

Participant 2, Interview 2

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The SOAR Project is an inter-institutional collaboration on Access. It brings together the South Cluster of higher education institutions, i.e. Munster Technological University, Institute of Technology Carlow, University College Cork, and Waterford Institute of Technology. In collaboration with community partners, the project devises and implements strategies to increase access to higher education for under-represented groups. The SOAR Project is funded by the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) Strand 3 and is operationalised through five work streams: Travellers in Education, Enabling Transitions, Connecting Communities; Connecting Curriculum, 1916 Bursary Fund, and Partnership for Access. The Prepare Entry Guide reviewed in this report is part of the Enabling Transitions work stream and supports access to higher education for students with autism.

We wish to extend our gratitude to all the students who kindly participated in the research and shared their individual stories. We also wish to thank the following Access Practitioners for assisting with this research:

- Julie O'Donovan, Disability Transitions Programme Co-ordinator, MTU Cork Campus
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- Deirdre Creedon, Access Officer, MTU Cork
- Leanne McDonagh, Traveller Education Co-ordinator, MTU Cork
- Christine Nolan, Mature Student Officer, MTU Cork
- Shane Nelligan, Team Leader, Aspect Autism Service

Executive Summary

The Transitions Programme at MTU Cork Campus, housed in the Disability Support Service within Access, was launched at the beginning of the 2019/20 academic year, initially as a three-year project. The goal of the Transitions Programme is to link with, understand and support students with autism in their first year of higher education. The idea for the Prepare Entry Guide emerged when Aspect Autism Service, a service providing specialist supports and interventions to adults with autism in Cork, highlighted that students with autism were asking for detailed information on where to eat on the MTU campuses. Producing information on this specific topic created an opportunity to develop a more extensive resource guide providing student-informed information on other topics that may be of benefit to students with autism in terms of transitioning to higher education.

Research Questions

This report presents the findings of an evaluation of the guide by key stakeholders including first year students, post first year students and Access Practitioners. The evaluation was conducted by the SOAR Project. As the development and dissemination of the Prepare Entry Guide was undertaken as a pilot project, the aim of this evaluation was to answer the following research questions:

1. What evidence, ideas and theory underpinned the development of the Prepare Entry Guide?
2. What was the uptake of the first iteration of the Prepare Entry Guide amongst first year students?
3. How effective is the visual design and layout of the Prepare Entry Guide for students with autism?
4. How comprehensive and appropriate to the needs of first years with autism is the content of the Prepare Entry Guide in its current format?
5. What do students with autism recommend be changed to improve future iterations of the Prepare Entry Guide?

The evaluation also aimed to spotlight opportunities for future development, derive "lessons learned", and make recommendations for the next iteration of the Prepare Entry Guide. Few evaluations of initiatives for university students with autism have been conducted previously despite a building body of evidence on supports for students with other disabilities (Gillespie-Lynch *et al.,* 2017). This report is a useful preliminary evaluation of the Prepare Entry Guide which can be drawn upon to inform future iterations of similar guidance documents to support students with autism in their transition from second to third level education. It is best positioned as a snapshot of a pilot initiative, which will be developed over time and as part of an existing suite of supports for this cohort of students (see Appendix 1 for a list of these supports).

Data Collection

The fieldwork for this research took place between December 2020 and May 2021 and consisted of three phases.

In the first phase, 40 first year students registered as having autism with the Disability Support Service (DSS) in MTU Cork were invited to complete an online survey exploring whether they used the Prepare Entry Guide, how useful they found it, and recommendations for improvement. 19 out of the 40 students completed the online survey resulting in a response rate of 47.5%.

A pilot of the survey was conducted with one student with autism and feedback from this pilot was included in a redesign of the survey.

In the second phase of the research, online interviews (N=4) took place with students with autism from MTU Cork to interrogate the data from the survey in more depth, with a view to improving and informing future iterations of the Prepare Entry Guide.
In phase three, Access Practitioners working within the DSS and Aspect took part in two focus group interviews. One interview focused on the design of the Prepare Entry Guide itself where two Access Practitioners and a member of staff from Aspect Autism Service participated, whereas the second focused on the theoretical underpinnings of the programme, primarily Universal Design for Learning (UDL) involving four Access Practitioners.

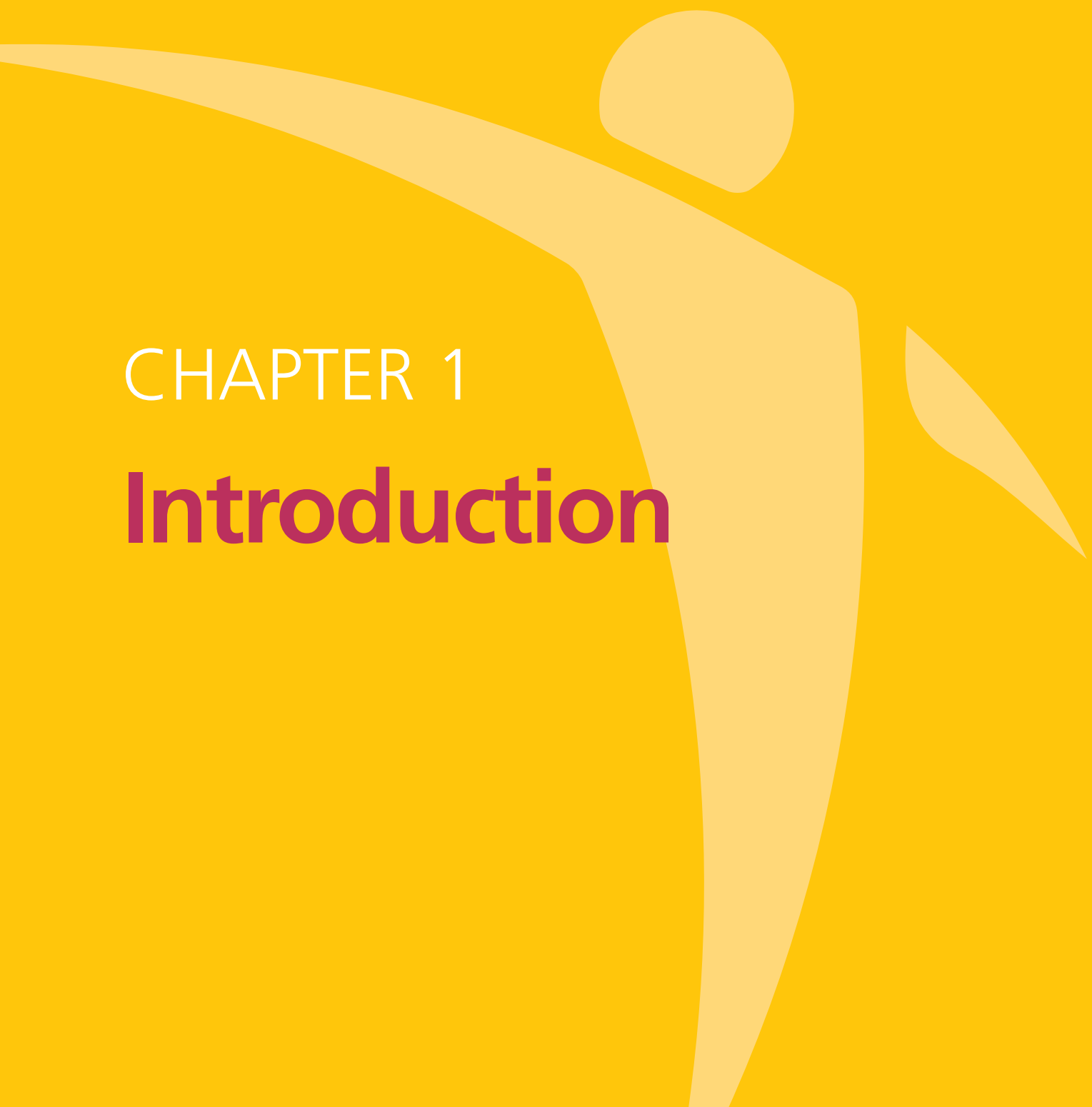
Key Findings

- Despite challenges including COVID-19, student uptake of the Prepare Entry Guide (how many used it) was relatively good.
- Participants stated that they would like more information in the areas of mentoring, stress relief and socialisation to feel truly prepared for higher education.
- Responses about the layout and design of the guide were overwhelmingly positive, indicating that the underpinning theories of Universal Design for Learning had benefited the students.

Key Recommendations

Recommendations which arose from this evaluation were:

- Development of initiatives around managing stress and self-care for inclusion in the next iteration of the Prepare Entry Guide.
- Expansion of an autism inclusive environment to encompass the entire university in line with UDL principles is recommended.



CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

In order to provide background and context to the Prepare Entry Guide, this chapter will describe the MTU Cork Transitions Programme, a programme within the DSS which aims to meet the needs of students with autism transitioning to higher education and support them in navigating their education experience in a positive way. It will also outline how the Prepare Entry Guide was first envisaged and developed as a key component of the Transitions Programme.

1.2 Background and Context to the Transitions Programme

The Transitions Programme at MTU Cork was launched at the beginning of the 2019/20 academic year, initially as a three-year project. The goal of the Transitions Programme is to link with, support and understand the needs of students with autism in their first year of higher education. This new MTU Cork Campus programme is in the process of developing a unique and tailored service to meet the transition needs of students with autism. The primary focus of the programme is to gain a thorough understanding of the learning and support needs of students with autism in this phase of their education and to begin establishing tailored services to adequately meet those needs.

As such, the MTU DSS is piloting a transitions support service for first year students with autism, one element of which is the Prepare Entry Guide, which is the focus of this evaluation report. To support the overall work of the MTU DSS in relation to students with autism, a collaborative relationship was established with Aspect Autism Support Service,[1] (hereafter referred to as Aspect) where Aspect acts as a consultant for the Transitions Programme. The Transitions Co-ordinator liaises with Aspect keyworkers, an occupational therapist and a speech and language therapist. A suite of initiatives continues to be developed to meet the needs of students with autism in addition to the Prepare Entry Guide. For example, an Education Mentoring Programme was established which provides online meetings, and phone and email support for students with autism (see Appendix 1 for further details of work completed and planned by the Transitions Programme at MTU Cork Campus). This report however only focuses on the preliminary stakeholder evaluation of the Prepare Entry Guide which was provided to registered students with autism at the beginning of the 2020/21 academic year.

1 Aspect is a support service developed specifically for adults with autism which was formerly run by the Cork Association for Autism.It provides specialist supports and intervention to approximately 600 people in the Cork and Kerry area, whilst also promoting awareness, education and understanding of Asperger Syndrome.

1.3 The Prepare Entry Guide

The Prepare Entry Guide consists of ten separate, themed PDF pages combined to make one overall guide for first year students with autism to provide them with the detailed information required on entering a new university environment and engaging with it. The Prepare Entry Guide was distributed to the students via email this year due to COVID-19 restrictions. In order to access the report, a student must log in to their email account and open each PDF page individually from the email received. The guide contains an introductory page which explains the purpose of the guide and introduces the DSS and specifically the Transitions Programme Co-ordinator. The Prepare Entry Guide contains nine further pages providing information regarding the MTU Cork Campus, the physical environment, the new learning environment and how to communicate effectively online with lecturers. Also included within the guide is information on where to eat within the campus, and tips are given to promote social, organisational, and other relevant skills. Additionally, the guide includes information on the Transitions Education Mentoring Programme and spotlights a current student reviewing their experience of first year at MTU Cork and their engagement and interaction with the Transitions Programme. The overall structure of the Prepare Entry Guide is as follows:

- Introduction
- Education Mentoring
- Skills Building Tips
- New Learning Environment
- New Physical Environment
- Eating at Bishopstown Campus
- College Communication Online
- College Communication with Lecturers
- Sample Email to Lecturers
- Student Review

The idea for the Prepare Entry Guide began in 2019/20 when Aspect highlighted that students with autism were asking for detailed information on where to eat on the MTU campuses. The literature shows that as the university environment is less structured and involves more socialisation than secondary school, students with autism can struggle with transitioning (e.g. Kapp et al., 2011). There is a substantial body of literature on making universities more accessible for students with autism (e.g. Chown, Baker-Rogers et al., 2017; Jansen et al., 2016; Thompson et al., 2019). Students with autism are intrinsically motivated to succeed at university through self-determination and agency (Ward and Webster, 2018) through their enhanced skills for focus and absorption of information on topics which interest them (Barnhill, 2014; Van Hees et al., 2015). However, social interaction difficulties and sensory sensitivities (Knott and Taylor, 2014; Van Hees et al., 2015) can make navigating university difficult, particularly in the first year.

Due to the nature of online learning, it was anticipated that there would be additional difficulties for students in accessing relevant information, and additional stress associated with the climate of COVID-19. DSS felt that it was important to support students in managing their potential anxiety around moving into a new learning environment. Thus, the development of the Prepare Entry Guide by the DSS began over the summer of 2020. The themes of the Prepare Entry Guide arose from regular meetings with Aspect, who acted in a consultancy role, and feedback communicated from students at MTU Cork Campus in identifying needs around information that were not currently being met by the university. This consultation underscored the need for an information resource that would be compatible with the information processing and communication style of a student with autism. Originally, it was envisaged that students would be involved in the design of the Prepare Entry Guide. Unfortunately, this did not go ahead as planned.

The four basic design principles for the Prepare Entry Guide were: contrast (relates to colour choice); alignment (relates to how information is laid out); repetition (for clarity); and proximity (relates to the positioning of words and pictures) (see Fig. 1). Guidelines



Figure 1: Guidelines for designing documents for individuals with autism

around these areas were taken from several international resources, outlined later in the report (see Fig. 1 as an example).

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, providing a hard copy of the guide to each student was not feasible, so the guide was designed for electronic dissemination and was emailed. The guide was emailed to all registered first year students with autism who had applied for supports with the DSS in 2020/21 in the week prior to the start of semester one. In addition to this cohort, several other students with autism who registered with the DSS after they had commenced university were also provided with the Prepare Entry Guide.

The purpose of this report is to present the findings of a preliminary evaluation of the MTU Cork Prepare Entry Guide by key stakeholders including first year Students with autism, post first year students with autism and Access Practitioners. As the guide was a pilot project, the aim of this preliminary evaluation is to make recommendations for the next iteration of the guide with a focus on two key areas: content and design/layout. The table below presents the details of the two focus groups undertaken for this evaluation report:

Focus Group with Community Partner Aspect	Focus Group with MTU Cork Campus DSS Staff
Development of the Prepare Entry Guide	*Theoretical Underpinnings of the Prepare Entry Guide*
Disability Support Officer (Acting)	Traveller Education Co-ordinator
Team Leader, Aspect	Access Officer
Transitions Programme Co-ordinator	Mature Students Officer
	Transitions Programme Co-ordinator

Table 1: Focus Group themes and participants

At the center of this research is empowerment of the autism community. The voice of the student with autism will inform future versions of the Prepare Entry Guide in accordance with the 'nothing about us, without us' ethos (Cascio, Weiss and Racine, 2021) and recognition of the need for more research which gives a voice to people with autism (Van Schalkwyk and Dewinter, 2020; Pellicano *et al.* 2014; Milton and Bracher, 2013; Crane *et al.* 2021).

CHAPTER 2

Methodology

2.1 Introduction

This chapter details the methodology employed in the research for this evaluation, including discussion of research approach, ethical protocol, data collection methods, study participants and data analysis.

2.2 Research Approach

The aim of this research was to garner stakeholder feedback on the Prepare Entry Guide. Particular attention was paid to recommendations from students who had used the guide, and whose input was considered central to informing future iterations of the guide. In terms of research methodology, a mixed methods approach was taken to ensure the participants' experiences were accurately captured and represented. A combined use of qualitative and quantitative methods 'adds rigor, breadth complexity, richness, and depth to any inquiry' (Denzin, 2012: 82), and data collection instruments were selected in line with this ethos.

2.3 Ethics

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants were made aware that the research project had received ethical approval from the Social Research Ethics Committee at UCC and was governed by ethical principles including anonymity, confidentiality, the safety of participants, informed consent, and freedom to withdraw from the study (see Appendices 2 and 5 for student information sheet and consent form; Appendix 8 for consent form for the focus groups with professional participants).

2.4 Methodology

The fieldwork for this research took place between December 2020 and May 2021 and consisted of three phases. All instruments for data collection from students were reviewed by students with autism to ensure their suitability prior to use. The participatory nature of the research design, where students with autism reviewed data collection instruments, was intentionally selected to support empowerment and self-advocacy (Clifford, 2013; Block *et al*. 2011; Morgan and Yoder, 2012). This approach represents:
'a method by which individuals and communities exert influence and control over resources, events, and outcomes' (Block *et al*. 2011).

Phase 1: The online survey (available on request[2]) conducted using the Google Forms platform consisted of 13 questions; 9 questions were multiple choice and 4 were optional short answer questions. All questions, apart from one which referred to gender of the respondent, focused on the Prepare Entry Guide and its adequacy, usage, aesthetics, and content. Open-ended and closed questions were used throughout the survey. A pilot of the survey had previously been conducted with one student and feedback gathered had informed the version of the online survey distributed to the full cohort. The survey was disseminated to 40 students and 19 responses were received which equated to a 47.5% response rate. Survey data was analysed using Excel.

Phase 2: Online interviews were conducted with four self-selected students with autism. One of the four students was a first year who had used the Prepare Entry Guide. The remaining three interviewees acted in an advisory capacity in terms of how to improve the guide and make it more accessible and useful for first year students (see Appendix 4 for interview guide). Interviews were conducted by Dr. Rebekah Brennan and Aoife Horgan of the SOAR Project and recorded using the Microsoft Teams platform and transcribed verbatim. The data from the interviews was thematically coded using NVIVO, a qualitative data management software programme. Thematic analysis was then used to analyse the data and organise the findings of the research.

Phase 3: Two focus group interviews took place with Access Practitioners who either played a role in designing the Prepare Entry Guide, or who worked in the DSS or Access and could contribute to a discussion around the evidence base and theoretical underpinnings for decision-making when designing the Prepare Entry Guide (see Appendices 6 and 7 for interview guides). The first focus group concentrated on the design of the Prepare Entry Guide and included two Access Practitioners and a member of staff from Aspect. The second focus group comprised of four Access Practitioners and focused on the theoretical underpinnings of the Prepare Entry Guide, primarily Universal Design for Learning. Interviews were conducted by Dr. Rebekah Brennan and Aoife Horgan of the SOAR Project and recorded using the Microsoft Teams platform and transcribed verbatim. The data from the interviews was thematically coded using NVIVO. Thematic analysis was then used to analyse the data and organise the findings of the research.

2.5 Limitations

This research was limited by the small sample size who self-selected for interview. This research took place during the COVID-19 pandemic and was significantly impacted by the associated restrictions on MTU Cork – along with all higher education institutions – regarding maintaining contact with students with complex needs. However, this report is a useful preliminary evaluation of the Prepare Entry Guide which can be drawn upon

2. For sample survey please contact Rebekah.brennan@ucc.ie

to inform future iterations of similar guidance documents to support students with autism in their transition from second to third level education. It is best positioned as a snapshot of a pilot initiative, which will be developed over time and as part of an existing suite of supports for this cohort of students (see Appendix 1 for a list of these supports), elements of which will also be evaluated by the SOAR Project and used to improve access to and navigation of higher education for students with autism and their families. Through evaluation of initiatives, the Transitions Programme at MTU Cork Campus can be evaluated as a model of good practice which can be replicated across higher education institutions nationally.

CHAPTER 3

Findings

Developing the Prepare Entry Guide

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the research as they relate to decision-making processes in developing the Prepare Entry Guide (see Fig. 2). Three Access Practitioners collaborated on the development of the Prepare Entry Guide: the Transitions Programme Co-ordinator, a Disability Support Officer, and the Team Leader of Aspect.

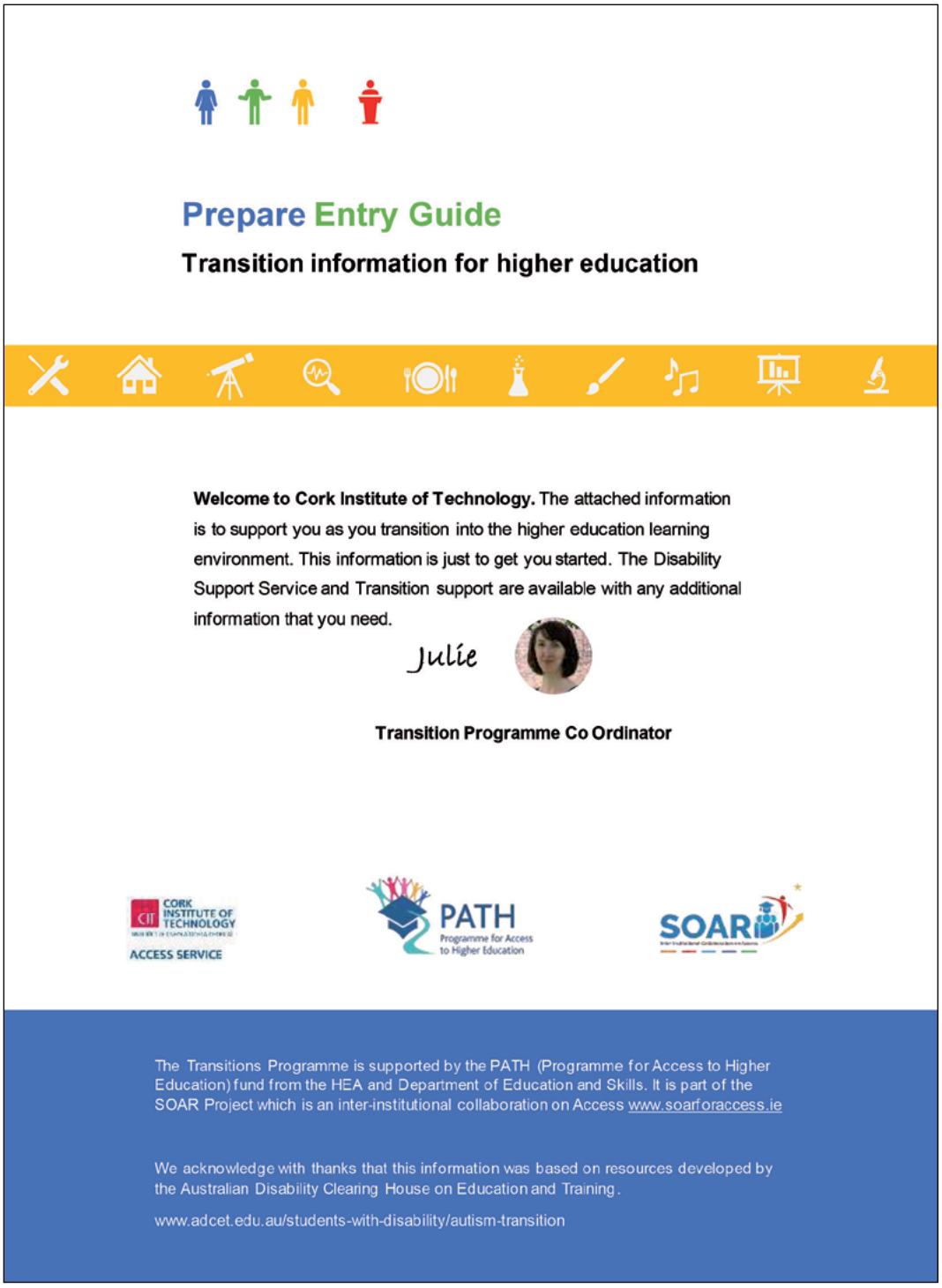


Figure 2: Excerpt from the Prepare Entry Guide

3.2 Needs Analyses: Students and Parents

The identified need for a Prepare Entry Guide was centred on a lacuna in autism specific resources at MTU Cork that had become evident, despite the DSS provision of a range of multimedia resources for students with disabilities. Through the initial provision of information on places to eat for students with autism, the Transitions Programme staff identified a need for more information delivered in a way that was compatible with the preferred communication style of students with autism.

> *…there was a general understanding that students needed more information and, for students on the spectrum, they needed more detail.* FG1 Access Practitioners

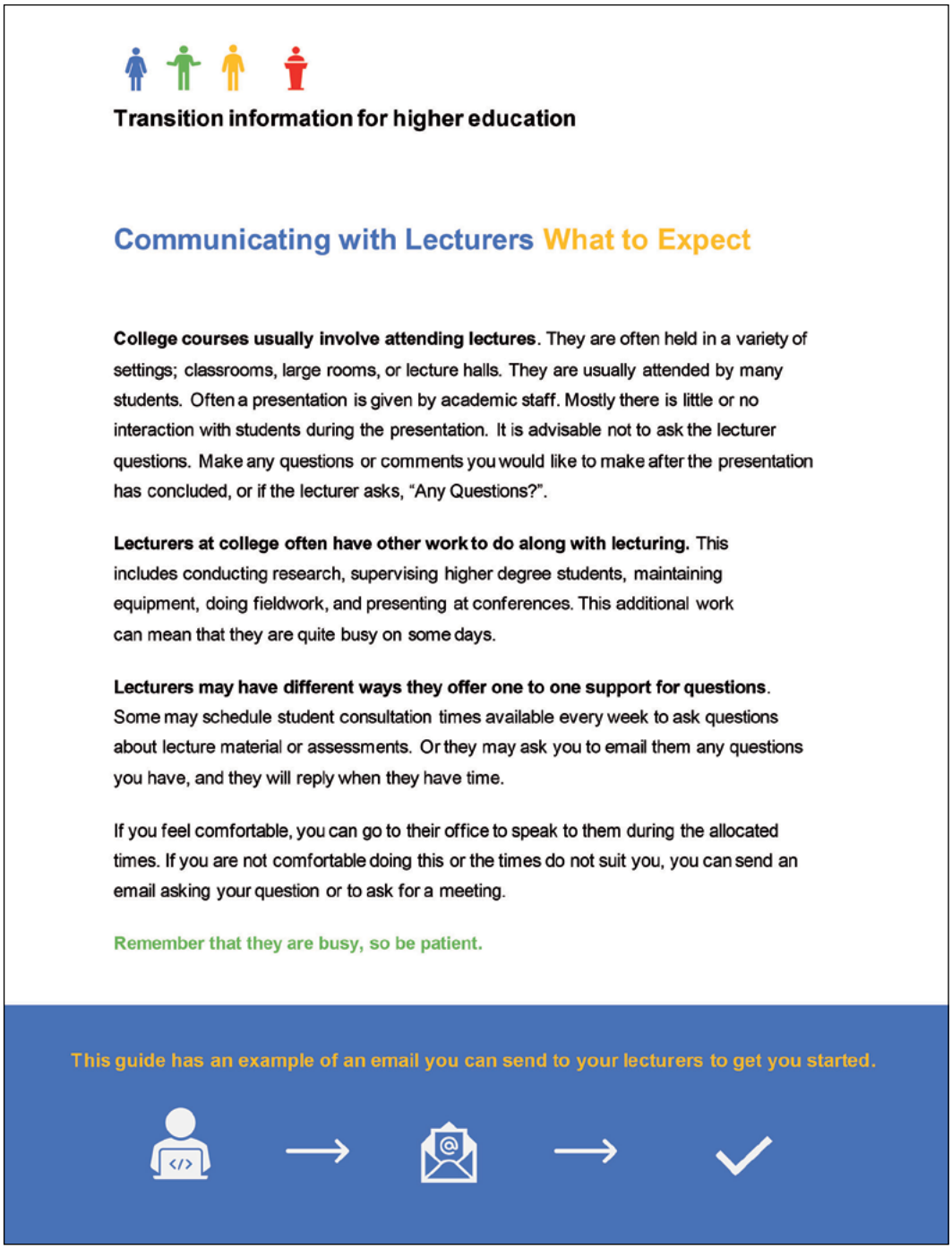
> *… there were lots of issues around not understanding systems, lots of our conversations were around clarity; what do I do, how do I access this, self-advocacy, communication came up all the time, anxiety, issues with bullying in the past, negative feelings from being in an education system and that impacting on their experience currently.* FG1 Access Practitioners

> *…the priority was just to get information on a page that was readable and met the need of the autistic students' reading style and communication style and those were my priorities*. FG1 Access Practitioners

It was agreed that the Prepare Entry Guide would be in written format – *"students with autism need things written down" (*FG1, Access Practitioners) and would provide more detail than standard MTU Cork student information leaflets, acting as a reference point that could be utilised throughout the academic year. Accessible language was used as it was felt that the sometimes "*over formalised*" (FG1, Access Practitioners) language typically used in other contexts was considered to be inappropriate for students with autism. While similar guides operational at other HEIs were looked at during the initial stages, the Prepare Entry Guide was designed to be MTU Cork specific. Surveys had been conducted the previous year with students with autism so that the student voice was at the centre of the design process:

> *I suppose just the previous year there would have been, you know, surveys – again just emphasising that the student voice was there in…it was very much there, informing the steps that were taken later on*. FG1, Access Practitioners

The "Communicating with Lecturers" section was highlighted as a key element of the Prepare Entry Guide by DSS and was included in the data collection instruments as an avenue of enquiry, as this can present challenges for students with autism:



Transition information for higher education

Communicating with Lecturers What to Expect

College courses usually involve attending lectures. They are often held in a variety of settings; classrooms, large rooms, or lecture halls. They are usually attended by many students. Often a presentation is given by academic staff. Mostly there is little or no interaction with students during the presentation. It is advisable not to ask the lecturer questions. Make any questions or comments you would like to make after the presentation has concluded, or if the lecturer asks, "Any Questions?".

Lecturers at college often have other work to do along with lecturing. This includes conducting research, supervising higher degree students, maintaining equipment, doing fieldwork, and presenting at conferences. This additional work can mean that they are quite busy on some days.

Lecturers may have different ways they offer one to one support for questions. Some may schedule student consultation times available every week to ask questions about lecture material or assessments. Or they may ask you to email them any questions you have, and they will reply when they have time.

If you feel comfortable, you can go to their office to speak to them during the allocated times. If you are not comfortable doing this or the times do not suit you, you can send an email asking your question or to ask for a meeting.

Remember that they are busy, so be patient.

This guide has an example of an email you can send to your lecturers to get you started.

Figure 3: Excerpt from the Prepare Entry Guide

Aesthetics such as colours used, formatting and content (see, for example, Fig. 3) were discussed and agreed upon to best meet the needs of students:

> *I think that the colour, the formatting and all that is really, really important – that can be the difference between somebody taking in a large percentage of the information you are trying to convey to them and zero percent – honestly.*
> FG1 Access Practitioners

> *I know the student engagements office have different leaflets as well, but I think the level of maybe detail that NAME has in the Prepare Guide is missing in anything else that is there … I think that is a good thing in the Prepare Guide – there isn't an assumption of knowledge. You have to go back to the very start and assume people don't know any of these terms, any of the context*. FG1 Access Practitioners

University can be stressful for all students; however, discomfort with change is part of the diagnostic criteria for autism (Glennon, 2001). It was noted by the team that anxiety was also an issue for some parents of students with autism, and that the Prepare Entry Guide could go some way towards alleviating that anxiety for such parents:

> *Sometimes that reference is not even – it is for the students – but it is also for the parents, you know, because they are very, very anxious about their son or daughter beginning this massive change in their life and taking this massive step. They get the message that they have to take a step back as well and that their son or daughter is going to be treated as an adult and how to negotiate a new education system in a different way and their role is kind of less involved*. FG1, Access Practitioners

> *I think parents can be very, very, very anxious about their son or daughter starting university so oftentimes you are doing that bit of handholding as well in terms of your resources or the kind of events you are running as well*.
> FG1, Access Practitioners

> *Sometimes the parents are a lot more bothered about it than the student as well*.
> FG1 Access Practitioners

3.3 Theoretical Discussions around Future Iterations

Various models of communication and design were discussed and considered during the development of the Prepare Entry Guide, many of which align with Universal Design for Learning (UDL). The team concluded that a UDL approach was best practice and should be expanded upon in future iterations:

UDL is a model of service or practice that doesn't exclude any particular groups of learners or their learning styles (Home Office, 2016). It supports models of practice where teaching and learning is dynamic, flexible, and accessible to all. Fig. 4 ahead outlines how UDL supports all students by providing options that meet all learning needs across engagement, representation, action, and expression. Given that many students do not self-identify as having autism in university, and may not engage with services, students with autism might benefit from a UDL environment, where they could also access services

that are designed to support a wide range of neurodiverse students (Gillespie-Lynch *et al.* 2017). While in the early stages of being integrated in a tangible and documented way with the piloting of the Prepare Entry Guide, the principles of UDL were at the centre of discussions around theoretical frameworks for future iterations:

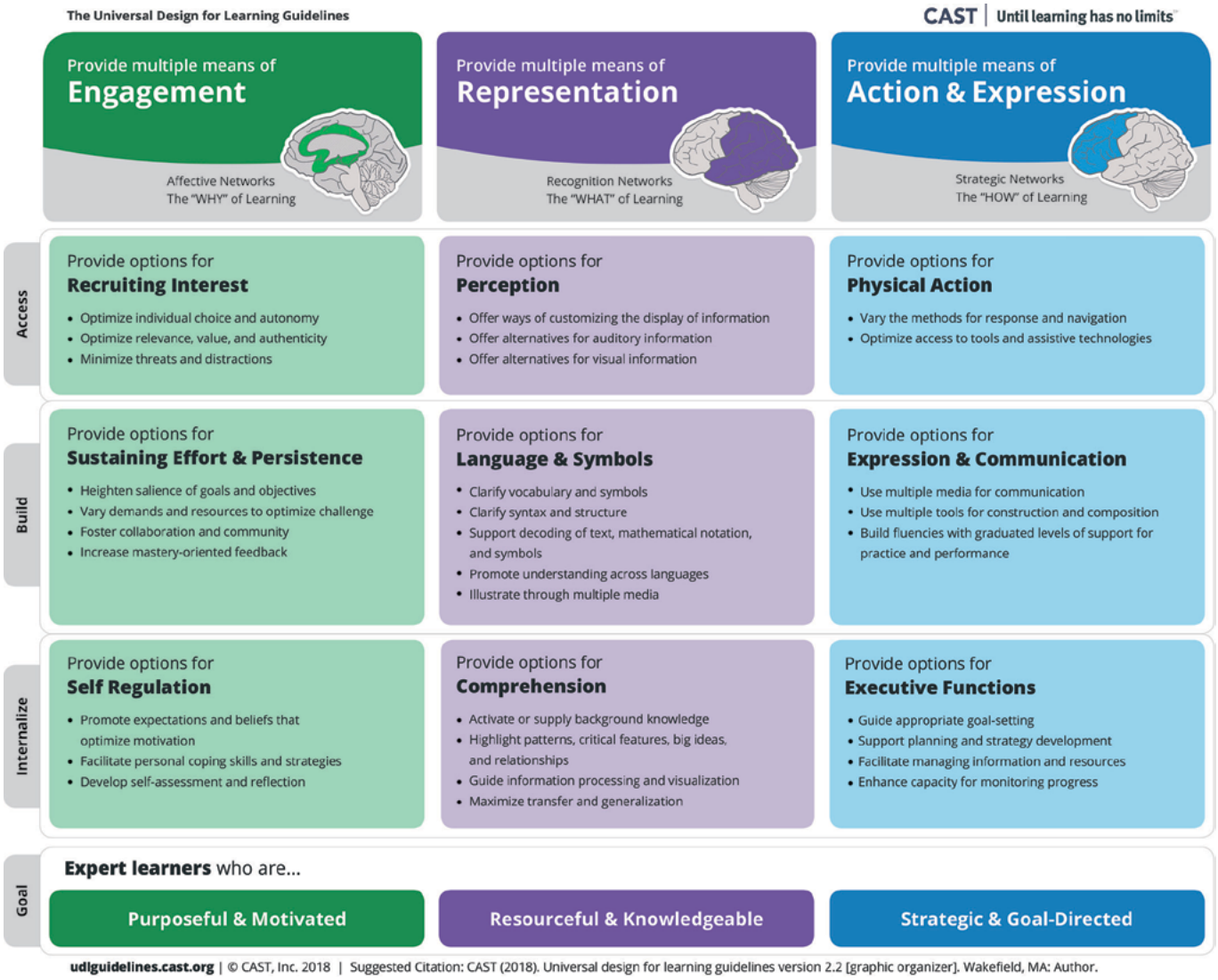


Figure 4: CAST (2018) Universal Design for Learning Guidelines (Wakefield, MA: Author)

> *So, in my mind most of the time students with autism have three primary needs around their social and communication skills: their executive functioning, organisation and planning skills and then their sensory processing.* FG1, Access Practitioners

> *I have been critically thinking about everything I do and how … can I make a universal access email and how can I make sure I write in a way that, no matter who is reading it – dyslexia, autistic, someone from a culturally diverse background – can understand exactly what I am saying … It was like an epiphany; so, I have been, like, trying to universally design my emails. Every time I write one, I am, like, how can I do this … So, I have been using that to think about everything I do to make it more accessible – sort of ping ponging between task analysis and universal design and see how we can make it fit.* FG2, Access Practitioners

UDL was described as being the "*epitome of Access*" (FG2, Access Practitioners), and in that sense, the adaptation of UDL should be conceptualised as routine in the duties and engagement of Access Practitioners:

> *I suppose, in my mind, the best way forward is to us evidence that we are living the dream and sort of showcase best practice so we can say this actually works because that is our only tool currently which is that we need to evidence that we are doing it the best way we can and that we are a gold standard Access Service and we are Universal Design in every sense so that actually people can tangibly see that this is how you do it and it is working really, really well because it keeps standing out that there are loads of ideas and concepts but, if you are not living the dream, people really find it hard to see how it works*. FG2, Access Practitioners

> *… we are very pro UDL on the DSS side so that is something … I suppose even this year has really forced us to developing video resources especially because we couldn't have a physical orientation so I suppose I think it probably was there, NAME, but not consciously because I do think things like accessible design – these all support UDL – the Universal Design approach – so that is the basis you know*.
> FG2, Access Practitioners

For students with autism, UDL was said to be imperative to supporting their needs:

> *So, for example, from a sensory processing point of view, if we are more mindful of having a universally designed environment, they won't have to manage flickery lights, environments may be less noisy or it is more acceptable that they wear headphones and I suppose it is raising that awareness that this person is not just being difficult. Actually, their capacity to function in this environment is significantly impacted by the fact that this environment is only accessible or easy to function for this group of people.* FG2, Access Practitioners

The intention to further embed UDL into future iterations of the Prepare Entry Guide was highlighted by Access Practitioners, to include further research, resourcing, and collaboration with colleagues within MTU Cork to support the work of the DSS and Access Practitioners:

> *… the whole thing [Prepare Entry Guide] could be designed much, much more effectively to include Universal Design – it is just the time and resources to do it. I think this is just "dipping the toe in the pond*. FG2, Access Practitioners)

> *I suppose looking at – we are looking at the data for students on the spectrum and the three main departments are Science, Business and Arts and Music – so maybe approaching one of them saying you have the biggest cohort of students; so I suppose it is thinking about it that way as well and maybe collaborating as a team*

> *to say actually matures, Travellers and ASD are going to come together – we are all going to work together to develop a Universal Design package with this department – and it will benefit all these groups*. FG2, Access Practitioners

> *Like in a dream scenario – if I had a magic wand – the National Disability Authority (NDA) coming with us and working collaboratively with us about our environment, our services actually consulting, how can we do a joint project with the NDA to sort of make us the dream and actually have that time to consult and reflect and apply the knowledge because I think that is the thing that is standing out*.
> FG2, Access Practitioners

A range of additional resources were consulted to inform the Prepare Entry Guide. A similar guide from the University of Tasmania was accessed to steer the format (with permission). Communication principles including design theory; adult learning principles; Guidelines for Design for Accessibility (UK Home Office, 2016) and Imagine, Design, Create[3] (Wujec, 2011) were among the evidence-based and theoretical resources identified by Access Practitioners in Focus Group 1 as informing the design process.

> *I specifically just went with the UK design principles – easy to read – not too many colours – bullet points – no clutter*. FG1, Access Practitioners

> *I was really keen to make it accessible and mindful of readability, communication and connecting and I suppose that is something I personally am very interested in. I was like there have to be guidelines on how to design for the autistic students so, again, I went on googling and I found Guidelines from Design for Accessibility that the UK Home Office uses – part of their translation of the Disability Act – and I just started – just had a go and put them together and then yeah it kind of evolved*.
> FG1, Access Practitioners

To conclude, UDL was considered to be best practice as a theoretical and evidence-based underpinning for future iterations of the Prepare Entry Guide.

3.4 Collaboration and Partnerships

An emphasis on expanding collaboration and partnerships within MTU Cork and beyond was evident in discussions around how to increase student engagement and raise the profile of the Transitions Programme for students with autism. It was noted by Access Practitioners that the growing numbers of students with additional needs raised questions about whether implementing specific supports for such cohorts was more effective than adopting a UDL ethos in practical ways across the university more generally. There was

3. See https://images.autodesk.com/adsk/files/imaginedesigncreate.pdf

agreement among the Access Practitioners of the need for "*access to be everybody's business*" (FG2, Access Practitioners):

> *I suppose if it is taken up or adopted by our academic colleagues would be a major step forward. There are some fantastic resources that are out there. Everybody – not just the academic staff but all staff – can use straightaway in terms of even just how the font on an email, the font on PowerPoint – all of that – there are great resources that are available straightaway – that somebody could make a difference straightaway*. FG2, Access Practitioners

> *I suppose if it was to be fully adopted by our academic colleagues in terms of how they teach, then I think that would be huge*. FG2, Access Practitioners

> *I think we can kind of do it on both sides which is maybe take – you can target students that we know are aware are autistic and say 'look, this will be really helpful' and take those kind of approaches to, like you said, the multi-model – figure out ways of how people could engage with them more and then also say 'look, this is useful for everybody' – which is true and kind of, like you say, normalise it.*
> FG2, Access Practitioners

Recognition was given to the fact that when collaboration and partnership between HEIs occurs, there is potential for more diverse and meaningful work to be done:

> *That is even how the workshop with UCC started.*[4] *Like NAME – the autism friendly co-ordinator – and the Universal Design lady – we are all trying to target the same thing – raise the profile of students with diversity and different needs – so it seems silly in a way that we are all doing little things and we all have different skills that we can come together and develop something – being cheesy about it – more brilliant – because we can all bring something different to the projects that we are doing*.
> FG2, Access Practitioners

While discussing the wider possibilities, Access Practitioners expressed a desire to join with the National Disability Authority[5] to share ideas and promote the work being conducted at MTU Cork Campus for students with autism.

Collaboration with post-primary schools had just been initiated, and there was optimism within the team with regard to potential outcomes:

> *We have just started that. We have introduced the topic with a school in NAME – there are four units. It was interesting – they hadn't thought about the concept of transition planning out – they transition planning in – so we have just started*

4. "Autism-friendly Communication in Higher Education – Using a Universal Design for Learning Approach" was a collaborative workshop between MTU Disability Support Service Transitions Programme and UCC Autism Friendly University Initiative. The workshop was delivered twice and was hosted by UCC.

5. http://nda.ie/

introducing that topic, how you do it and suggesting that we use the Individual Education Plan (IEP)[6] *as the transition planning document and I suppose that is where the framework that we have been sharing is the plan – your transition – and then there is the prepare, imagine, wonder, choose, plan and then actually breaking it up so that it is more accessible for people*. FG2, Access Practitioners

3.5 Challenges and Lessons Learned

A key challenge in addition to limited resources (mainly time, as demands on the DSS are plentiful and time-consuming) was identifying the students who may need to access the Transitions Programme:

So we have a bigger CAO list in August and we will get kind of information about maybe – if they declared themselves on their CAO in their DARE form about their primary disability – so if they declare their autism on that – we maybe have an idea of a certain number of students may be coming in and stuff but, yeah ...
FG2, Access Practitioners

Reflecting on the content of the Prepare Entry Guide, Access Practitioners felt that the mentorship that the Transitions Programme provides for students with autism could have been highlighted more than it was in the first iteration:

I thought I was trying to list the detail and stuff… so I think there is a lot more work that needs to go into – even like roles like mine – the mentoring role – what does that mean – how do you use this person in the context – and that idea of that knowledge translation. What is your purpose, how can I use you, what do we talk about? Small things like that – realising that we need to … I keep coming back to the communication process, understanding context and how systems work because it is very clear lots of people didn't quite understand how I could help them.
FG2 Access Practitioners

The impact of COVID-19 greatly reduced opportunities for face-to-face engagement with students, which hindered dissemination of the Prepare Entry Guide: "*I suppose it was a lot easier on campus – a lot easier – because you could be able to talk face to face with students or physically give them a resource*" (FG2, Access Practitioners). Use of email to disseminate the Prepare Entry Guide was also discussed as a somewhat flawed method of communication. It was felt by participants that an email may not capture the attention of a student, that students with autism may become overwhelmed by a lot of emails, or that some students may not have their emails up and running at the time of sending –

6. An Individual Education Plan (IEP) is a written document prepared for a named student which specifies the learning goals that are to be achieved by the student over a set period of time and the teaching strategies, resources and supports necessary to achieve those goals. See https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/final_report.pdf

however it was also noted that social media was not ideal for a student with autism in terms of engagement:

> *You have got 30 seconds to catch someone's interest and, if they don't read that email and they don't click on those, then … so I suppose that is why – I think it is really important to see – what is the hook – what will make them open it. Thinking back, we probably could have used our social media a bit more but the social media – there is a whole problem with social media actually – like the DSS students don't tend to join the social media because then it identifies them as a DSS student.*
> *FG2 Access Practitioners)*

Timing for disseminating the Prepare Entry Guide was also noted as a thinking point, with consideration given to the fact that although it would be helpful for students with autism to have the guide to hand prior to starting university, sometimes it would be difficult for them to relate the information to an environment they had not been exposed to yet:

> *I do think the earlier we have it ready, the better. I think August time, so people have a chance to start looking at this*. FG2, Access Practitioners

> *The only thing is that – what I would say – about doing too much too early is difficult because it is not context specific*. FG2, Access Practitioners

> *They are not in university yet, they don't know what their classrooms look like, they don't know what the email looks like, what campus looks like. I know you can do a certain amount of that but some of it is too subject or course specific as well – it is a fine line*. FG2, Access Practitioners

However, it was understood that the Transitions Programme had done an excellent job of disseminating the Prepare Entry Guide despite these challenges:

> *Just saying like advertising on campus would be a lot easier, like posters, drop-in information desks and all that kind of thing – using that. I think you have done really well with the limitations that have been imposed*. FG2, ad Access Practitioners

Looking ahead, some ideas that were explored and could be adopted into an initiative to prepare students with autism for their first year in higher education included using animation; video; developing an outreach model for dissemination; information evenings and potentially the introduction of student interns with autism in the design process:

> *You have done a lot of work around behind the animation because animation is very strong in the autistic community as well. Rather than focusing it on a person – obviously one character can't represent the autistic community – but can kind of take some different characteristics maybe from different students that we have met to embody a certain experience – a perspective. Somebody might recognise part of themselves in that character as well.* FG2, Access Practitioners

> *I do think that, like, myself and NAME have talked about seeing if there was some way of getting an intern or someone again who is autistic to be working much more on the project – on kind of informing that as well and also producing things – would be really invaluable, you know*. FG2, Access Practitioners

> *It nearly needs to have an outreach model framework that you keep reaching out or keep trying to make contact and communicating and then, eventually, you catch the window*. FG2, Access Practitioners

It was strongly noted in the dataset for this research that wider collaboration across the institution would be welcomed and valuable for students with autism. However, a certain amount of difficulty in achieving this was anticipated by participants:

> *I also think there needs to be room for wider collaboration throughout the whole entire institute. I suppose thinking about how do we do that because we can come together quite easily and talk about what do we want to do together and how do our projects bounce off each other but it is getting the whole, entire institute on board – that is I think a much bigger task.* FG2, Access Practitioners

3.6 Conclusion

Although email wasn't ideal due to the potential for a student with autism to become overwhelmed by an influx of emails, it seemed the most feasible option due to COVID-19 restrictions. Although it was agreed that UDL was the ideal blueprint for a guide such as the Prepare Entry Guide and other resources were discussed, the decision-making process was primarily based on useful ways of working with students with autism, with a view to integrating UDL in a more embedded manner in future iterations. Collaboration across the whole university to incorporate UDL principles to facilitate greater impact for students with autism and also partnerships with national and international organisations were identified as future aims of the Transitions Programme.

CHAPTER 4

Findings

Usefulness of the Prepare Entry Guide

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings relating to the effectiveness of the Prepare Entry Guide in preparing students with autism for their first year in higher education. Survey data from first year students at MTU Cork in addition to qualitative data obtained from interviewing four students with autism at various stages of their higher education journey is presented here. The purpose of interviewing students who were not in first year was to gather insights from those who could identify the needs of first year students with autism and assess the adequacy of the Prepare Entry Guide in meeting such needs. Interviewees self-selected. The three post first year interviewees had only been given the guide in advance of the interview, whereas the first-year interviewee had received the guide prior to beginning college.

4.2 Demographics of Research Participants

68.4% of the 19 first year student respondents were male, 16% were female and 19% identified as transgender, gender neutral, non-binary or other (see Fig. 5). All survey respondents were over the age of 18.



Figure 5: Survey data: Gender of survey participants

Qualitative interviews were held with four students, three of whom had progressed from first year to subsequent years and one who was in first year. (n=1) of these was male and (n=3) were female. All were over the age of 18.

4.3 Usage

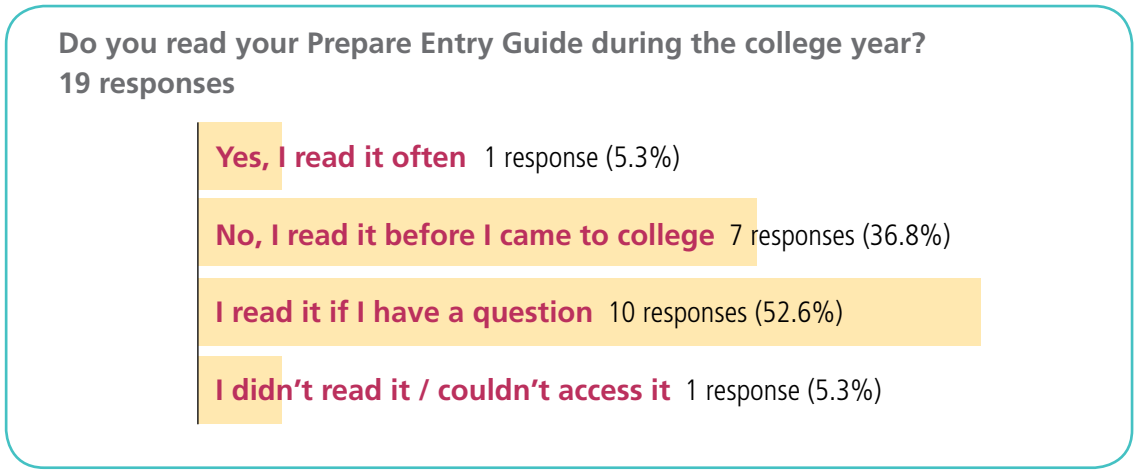


Figure 6: Survey data: Usage of the Prepare Entry Guide

Data from the survey (see Fig. 6) indicated that over half (53%) of respondents consulted the guide if they had a question, and 37% read the Prepare Entry Guide before they had come to university. Only a small percentage (approx. 5%) had not accessed or read the Prepare Entry Guide.

4.4 Usefulness

The main purpose of the Prepare Entry Guide is to prepare students with autism for transitioning to higher education. Therefore, students were asked if they felt more prepared having read the guide. In the survey data (see Fig. 7) 26% of respondents reported that the Prepare Entry Guide did prepare them for what would be easy or challenging for them in university while the majority (58%) reported that they felt the guide prepared them "a little". The remaining respondents (16%) chose the option "I'd rather not say".

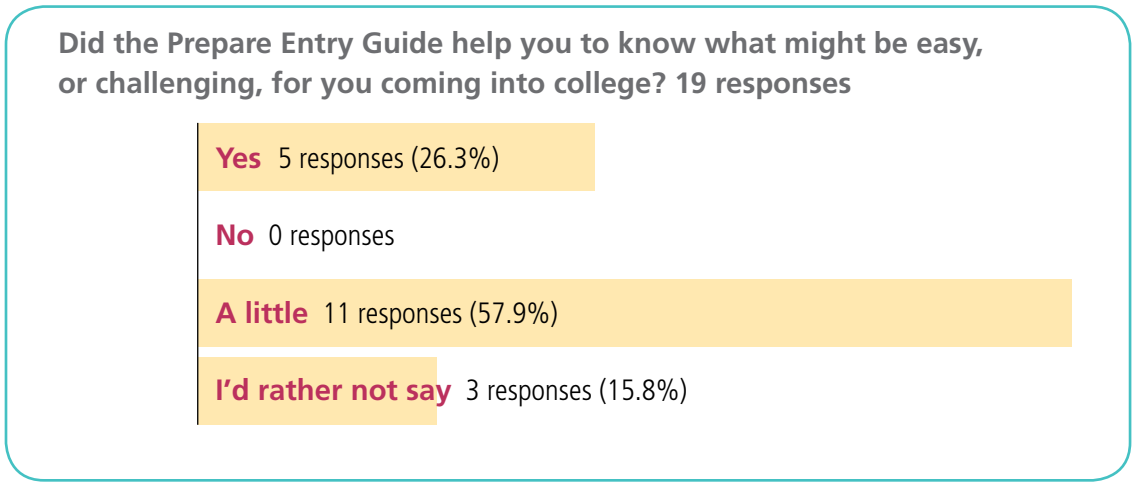


Figure 7: Survey data: Adequacy of the Prepare Entry Guide

There were more positive responses to the question about the usefulness of the guide in the qualitative interview data collected from the post first year students who reviewed the guide:

> …. *parts of it, I actually found that, I found very kind of helpful actually as to how to go about accessing supports and stuff like that*. Participant 1, Interview 1

The one first year student who self-selected for interview also gave a positive review:

> *But overall, I thought it kind of gave me a good idea of what to expect and kind of how to prepare. A lot of the preparation stuff is stuff that I probably would have done anyway – I like to over-plan things sometimes. It is pretty good. I think it was really useful for giving me peace of mind especially because, like I said, I like to over-prepare, and this gave me a lot of information without me having to worry about trying to find it myself. I think it was mostly peace of mind and trying to reassure me that it would not be as difficult as I was worried it was going to be*.
> Participant 3, Interview 3

The survey specifically asked students about their experience of the information in the guide that related to Communicating with Lecturers as this was felt by the DSS team at MTU Cork Campus to be a vital part of the guide as it is a regular mentoring topic, e.g. how to formulate an email, what to say when discussing an issue, using email as a medium to communicate in a professional/socially appropriate way.
Survey responses indicate that this page was particularly useful. The majority of survey respondents reported that the page did help with identifying what would be expected of them in university from lecturers (see Figs. 8 & 9).

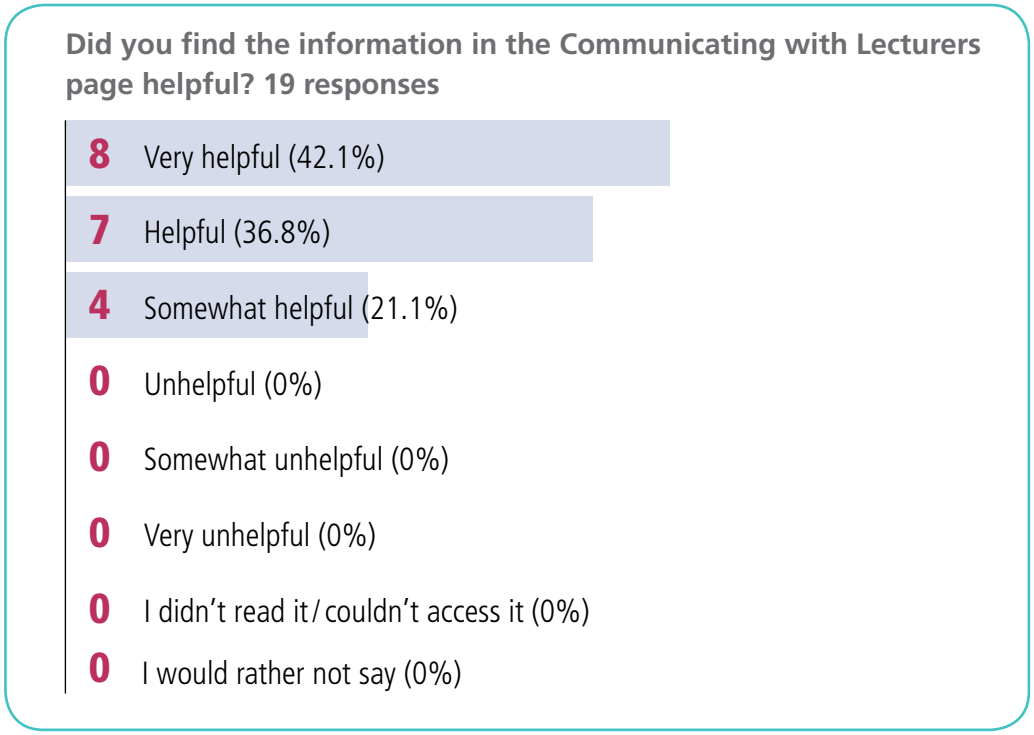


Figure 8: Survey data: Communicating with Lecturers page (helpfulness)

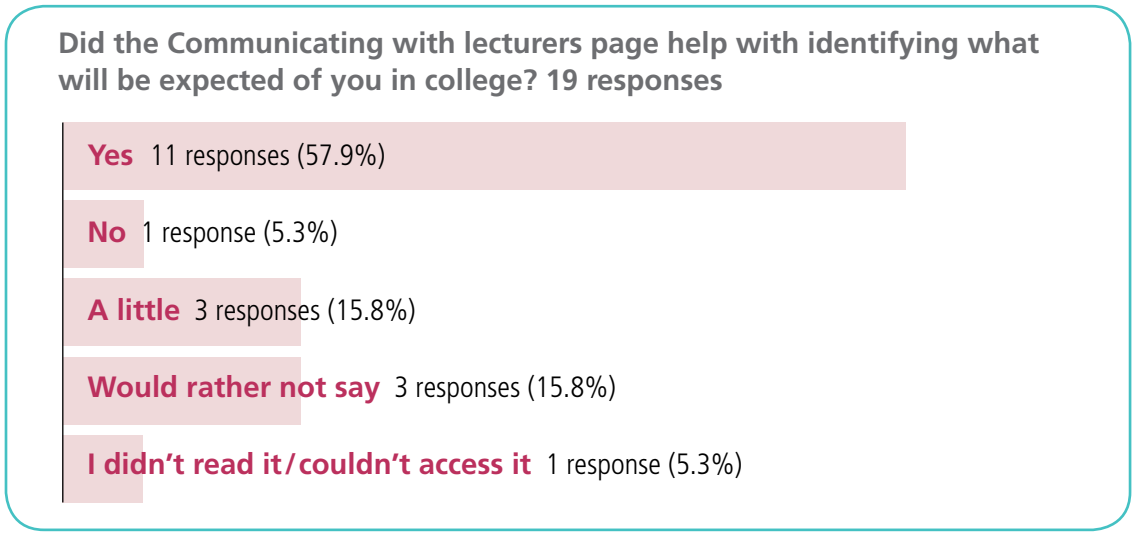


Figure 9: Survey data: Communicating with Lecturers page (expectations)

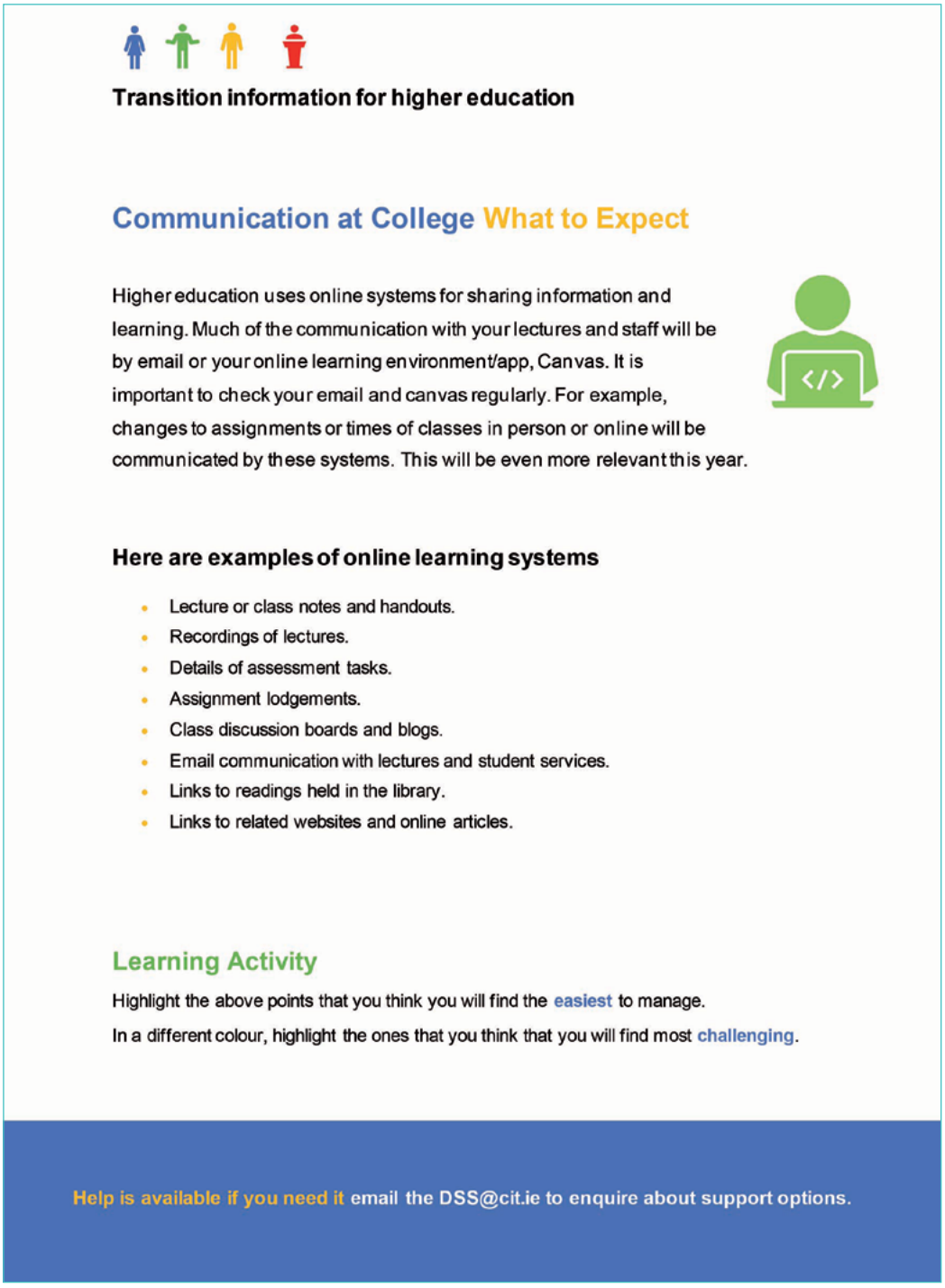
However, one interviewee gave some recommendations for improvement of this section of the guide:

> *I like that it is straightforward, and I do like that it gives a lot of information especially because it kind of covers all bases. It is like yes some have student consultation times – mine obviously do not have that as we are online. You just email everything but also I kind of get the feeling that kind of remember that they are busy – that is the most important part – because from what I gather most of my lecturers are in class teaching more than I am in class at all; so yeah I like that it has that as well at the end in a different colour to remember that they are busy because otherwise sometimes it feels like oh I did something wrong but they are not thinking about you at all. Yes, I would probably put more of an emphasis on getting to know your lecturer. I felt it was more like 'leave your lecturer alone' I felt really that section thinking back on it. Like ok your lecturer is going to be all busy so don't be bothering him. So, I feel like to put more an aspect of the lecturers being more welcoming – maybe just to review it – make it seem more welcoming.* Participant 3, Interview 3

4.5 Student Recommendations for Improvement of the Prepare Entry Guide

4.5.1 Content

As indicated by Fig. 11, provision of more information (53%) and changing the colour scheme (20%) were the two key suggestions made by respondents to improve the Prepare Entry Guide.



Transition information for higher education

Communication at College What to Expect

Higher education uses online systems for sharing information and learning. Much of the communication with your lectures and staff will be by email or your online learning environment/app, Canvas. It is important to check your email and canvas regularly. For example, changes to assignments or times of classes in person or online will be communicated by these systems. This will be even more relevant this year.

Here are examples of online learning systems

- Lecture or class notes and handouts.
- Recordings of lectures.
- Details of assessment tasks.
- Assignment lodgements.
- Class discussion boards and blogs.
- Email communication with lectures and student services.
- Links to readings held in the library.
- Links to related websites and online articles.

Learning Activity

Highlight the above points that you think you will find the easiest to manage.

In a different colour, highlight the ones that you think that you will find most challenging.

Help is available if you need it email the DSS@cit.ie to enquire about support options.

Figure 10: Excerpt from the Prepare Entry Guide

It is noteworthy however that 40% of respondents indicated for this question that they would rather not say or make comment about suggestions for improvement of the guide. A similar lack of feedback was demonstrated in another question which sought suggestions for improvement (see Fig. 12). This may suggest a certain reticence or difficulty within the sample in engaging with making recommendations:

If you could make the Prepare Entry Guide more useful for you and other students, would you:

- **Provide more information** 8 responses (53.3%)
- **Provide less information** 0 response
- **Change the layout** 1 response (6.7%)
- **Change the colour scheme** 3 responses (20%)
- **I'd rather not say** 6 responses (40%)
- **Have in a simpler text** 1 response (6.7%)

Figure 11: Survey data: Improving the efficacy of the Prepare Entry Guide

Is there anything the Prepare Entry Guide SHOULD do that it currently doesn't do? You can give details here

1 response

No, the prepare entry guide is just fine

Figure 12: Survey data re: Improvements to the Prepare Entry Guide

If you could make the Communicating with Lecturers page better and more useful, what changes would you like to see?

3 responses

Add a link to the DSS website for more information

Examples

More simpler to understand

Figure 13: Survey data re: Improvements to the Communicating with Lecturers page

Some suggestions made to improve the Prepare Entry Guide were to add a link to the DSS website, provide examples (unclear), and make it easier to understand (see Fig. 13). In the interview context, students were more forthcoming with suggestions. This may be due to the fact that most interviewees were more experienced as they were at a later stage in their degree:

> *I know it mentions as well to prepare by downloading the map but even like an internal map of the Student Centre, where the actual DSS Office is, where the Assistive Technology Lab is – because I don't think there are any maps of inside buildings – and that is actually really useful. Because you just walk in the door and like this is a lot of rooms and a lot of open space and I don't know where anything is*. Participant 3, Interview 3

> *I think it is not here, but NAME mentioned that by the Student Centre there is kind of a quieter study room that can be booked out and stuff like that. I think more information on almost like the safe spaces on campus would be … like zones that are quieter and stuff like that*. Participant 4, Interview 4

> *I've kind of struggled most with would actually have been kinda, time, time management and that kind of just getting on it* … Participant 1, Interview 1

Challenges for students with autism include navigating the physical environment and time management in independent learning. This can be experienced as a 'culture shock' (Cage and Howes, 2020). Some suggestions for improvement of the Prepare Entry Guide included additional information on mentoring; managing stress; the DSS itself and what it provides; support with socialising with peers; accessing Canvas (online learning platform), email and announcements on Canvas; self-care during stressful times; balanced information about pressure and deadlines and how to prepare for those:

> *And also, with a person on the Spectrum … we need to be honest and say 'look, you are going to have some bad days, you have to think about things like maybe if you have a report due in the week, do a quarter of it by Saturday or Sunday and then do another bit of it on Monday and then do another bit of it on Tuesday and, if it is due on Wednesday, leave one question for Wednesday morning and then submit it because you can balance out your free time and your study and you won't be as overwhelmed'*. Participant 1, Interview 1

Promoting use of the DSS was linked to normalisation of needing to access supports by one interview participant:

> *I think we need to be more realistic in like how to handle the university entry – you have to, like. And also, just another thing I have noticed too, be proud of your disability and also don't be afraid to join the DSS because it will help you, it will make life so much easier. Like, I have had people in my class who have a disability, didn't*

use the DSS and they are struggling. I tell them how great the DSS is and they are like 'no, I am just too embarrassed' – but there is nothing to be embarrassed about.
Participant 2, Interview 2

Some information around working in groups with peers was suggested by another participant:

I was just thinking as well it would actually be great to add something about working in groups because I know that every first-year course has to do a group project and presumably, they have to do other projects. Now my course is almost entirely group project based because they are preparing us for a creative career where we would be only working in teams. So maybe something about how to – not just communicate with lecturers – but also to work effectively with other students.
Participant 3, Interview 3

This finding is supported by Gillespie-Lynch et al. (2017), who found that participation in group engagement was associated with increased wellbeing and decreased anxiety in students with autism.

4.5.2 Aesthetics

People with autism are commonly seen as having visual strengths, and respond well to learning through cue cards, pictures, images, and art (Funabiki and Shiwa, 2018). Feedback from students with regard to the aesthetics and layout of the Prepare Entry Guide was overall very positive, both in the survey data (see Figs. 14 and 15 below) and in the interviews:

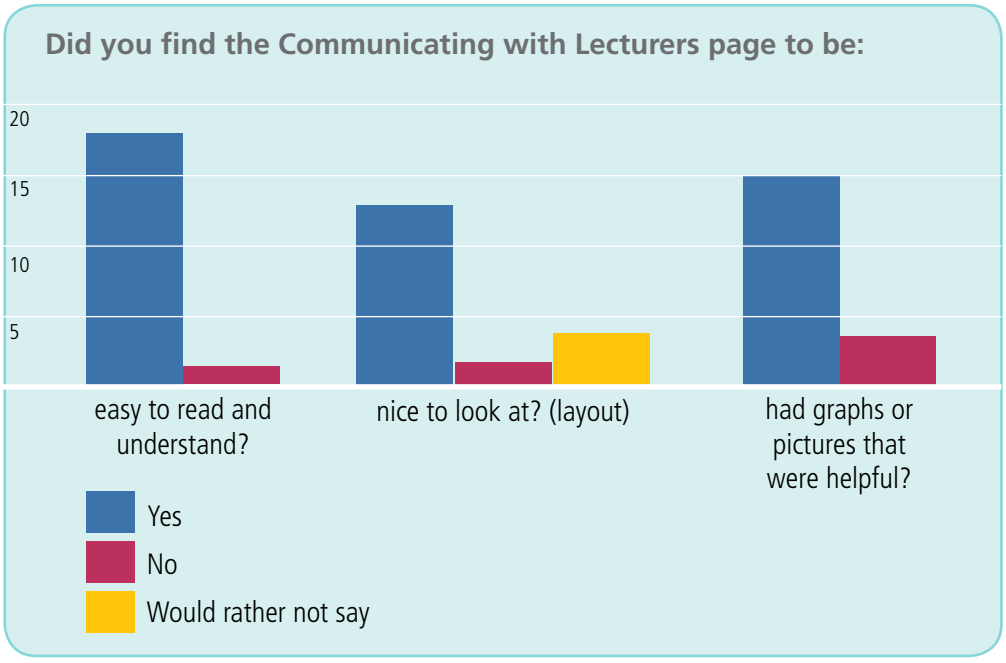


Figure 14: Survey data: Layout of Communicating with Lecturers page



If you would like anything listed in the previous question to be changed about the Prepare Entry Guide, you can give more details about that here:

1 response

I don't want anything changed thank you as I don't mind the layout as it is

Figure 15: Survey data: Layout

> *I was quite happy with it really, like. The format, the style, was perfect. I loved the below part with the blue where you basically highlighted the support or just giving a visual demonstration of what to expect. I felt that was pretty helpful – for me anyway – to gain a better understanding because I am much more a visual learner. I feel you don't want to overdo it on design. I felt it was very simple and precise. You want the information to stand out more than anything else so there weren't any images drawing from your attention. I feel it was kind of perfect because everything was like ok so basically your introduction was perfect highlighting the main topic, introduction, bullet points and then the most important thing how you had imagery down below for – what I talked about – the blue basically box – that basically demonstrates everything. So, I feel if you add more it might distract from the points you are trying to get across, I feel*. Participant 3, Interview 3)

Constructive feedback relating to assistance with finding information was obtained from the interviews. This included providing lettered tabs at the side of the guide (i.e. providing an index) and moving the indicative green logos to the top of the page:

> *Possibly if at each, I'd say, I'd say at the relevant section … to kind of have it as tabs. To actually have an index that you could have instead of going through the entire booklet, I'd say right, I just need to go to this tab to find what I'm looking for. I'd have something like that … I'd say like with Canvas. I'd go, it could be under 'C'. And then I could just go immediately to 'C' and then I might pick out that relevant text section … It's not a very large job but, you know*? Participant 1, Interview 1

Green logos were used as visual aids in the Prepare Entry Guide to highlight what the sections were about, for example a plate and cutlery to indicate information about where to eat on campus (see Fig. 16):

> *… if [the green logos] were just a little bit higher so they always showed up in the preview if that makes sense; so, then you would know even without reading the title which one you are looking for*. Participant 3, Interview 3

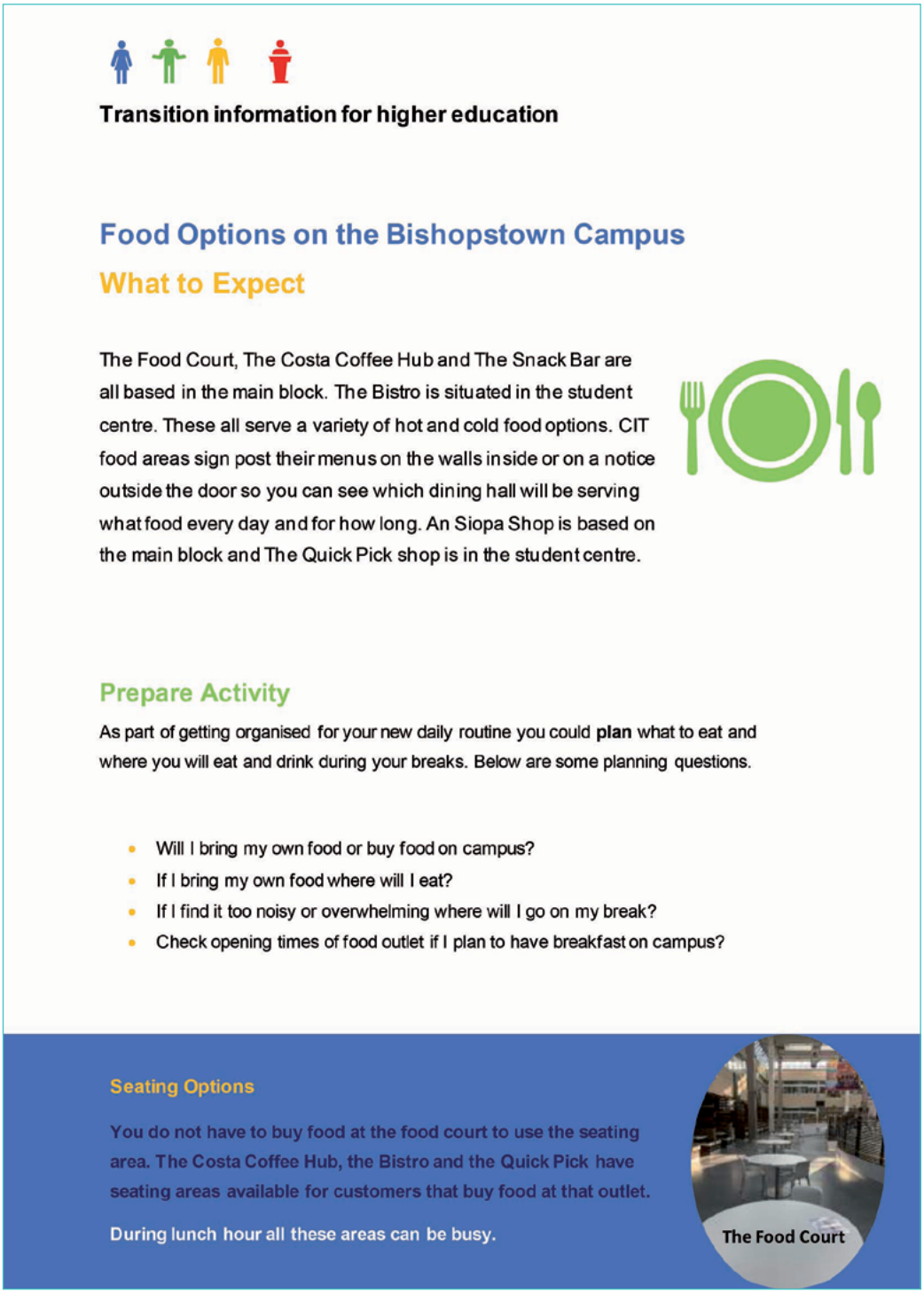


Figure 16: Example of indicative green logos in the Prepare Entry Guide

4.5.3 Dissemination

There were mixed responses in the dataset about how well the Prepare Entry Guide was disseminated. As Figure 17 indicates, a large majority of survey respondents were happy to receive their guide by email:

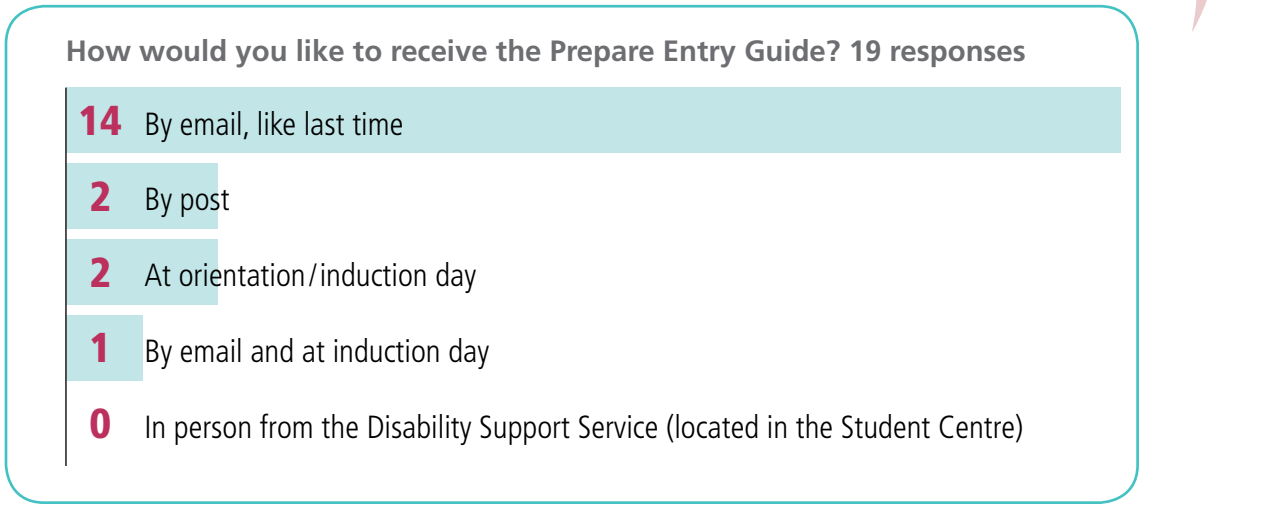
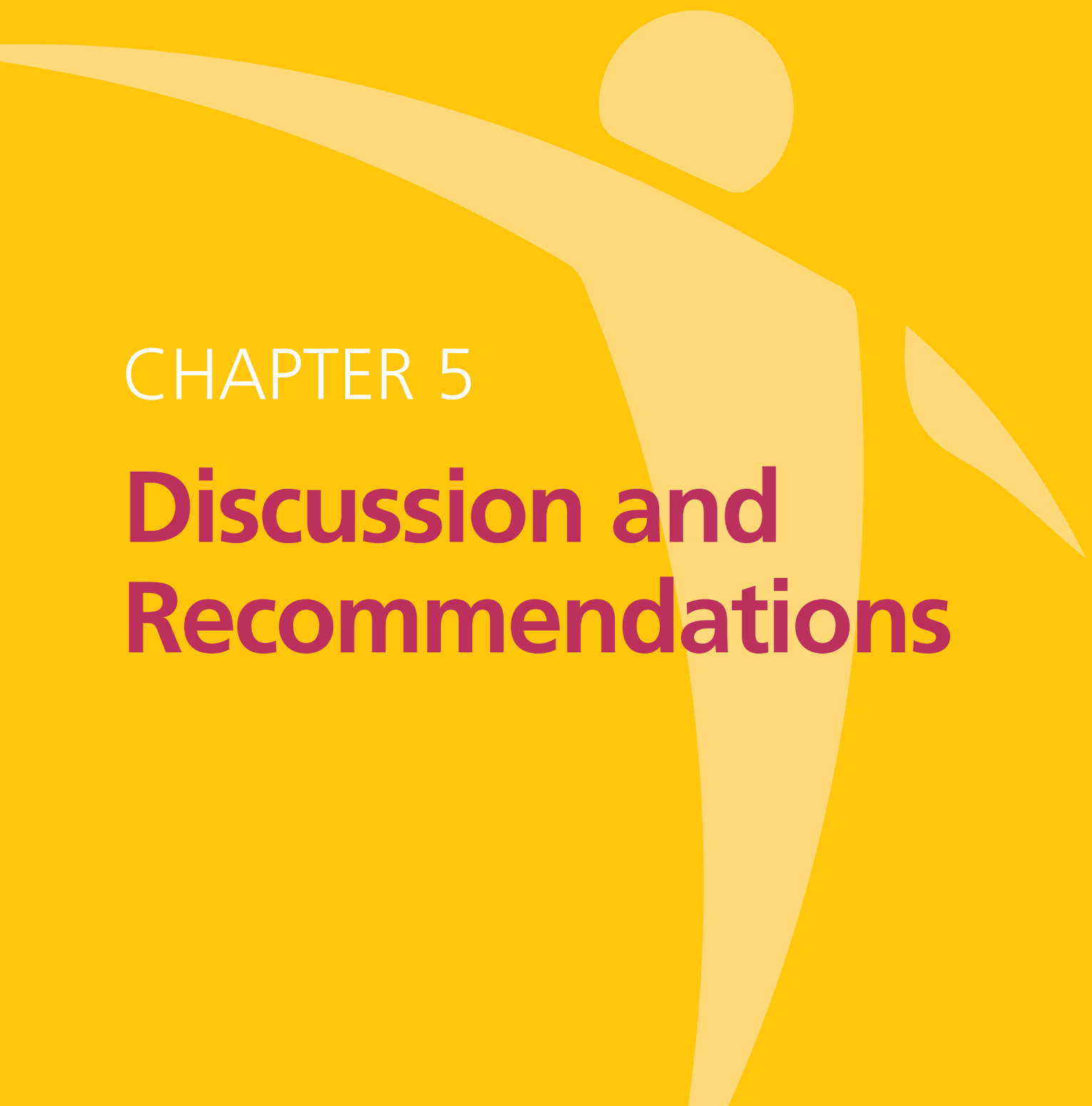


Figure 17: Survey data: Dissemination of the Prepare Entry Guide (preferences)

Certain factors prevented some students who were interviewed from receiving the Prepare Entry Guide at the appropriate time (as they begin their first year of university). One interview participant stated that she did not receive her guide as her autism diagnosis was not confirmed until December of last year. One student also suggested that the Prepare Entry Guide be disseminated in one document rather than in separate documents per topic, as currently occurs.

4.6 Conclusion

To conclude, the survey found that student usage of the Prepare Entry Guide was quite good. Two areas were under investigation in data collection with students with autism: the content of the Prepare Entry Guide and its visual aesthetics. The interviews proved to be more fruitful in garnering recommendations for improvement. In terms of content, suggestions for inclusion in the Prepare Entry Guide included additional information on mentoring; managing stress; the DSS itself and what it provides; support with socialising with peers; accessing Canvas, email, and announcements on Canvas; self-care during stressful times; balanced information about pressure and deadlines and how to prepare for those. Only minor suggestions were made in terms of changing the layout, which the majority of respondents found easy to understand



CHAPTER 5

Discussion and Recommendations

5.1 Evaluation Focus

The purpose of this report is to present the findings of an evaluation of the Prepare Entry Guide by key stakeholders including first year students, post first year students and Access Practitioners.

The Prepare Entry Guide was a pilot project, rolled out during the challenging climate of the COVID-19 pandemic and it is still considered to be under development. As part of this ongoing development and refinement of the guide, the aim of this evaluation was to identify challenges encountered, highlight opportunities for future improvements and make recommendations for the future iterations of the Prepare Entry Guide using the voice of the student with autism.

5.2 Methodology

This research was limited by the small sample size of students with autism who responded to the survey and self-selected through contact with the DSS Co-ordinator for interview. The research team utilised a person-oriented research ethic (Cascio and Racine, 2018) which underscores self-selection as key to retention of agency when considering participation or non-participation in research (Cascio, Weiss and Racine, 2021). It can be seen in the literature that difficulties with communication may hinder people with autism in participating in research (Richman, 2019; Milton, 2012). It was also noted by the team that anxiety around transitioning to university was an issue for some parents of students with autism, and that the Prepare Entry Guide could go some way towards alleviating that anxiety. However, we did not interview parents as the priorities of some parents of people with autism may differ from those of some adults with autism themselves (Perry, 2012).

5.3 Key Findings

The Value of UDL as a Design Approach

UDL is appropriate as an underpinning theory for the Prepare Entry Guide as its principles create an inclusive environment where students with diverse capabilities can learn from each other (McGuire and Scott, 2006). All students benefit from a UDL environment, not solely students with disabilities (North Carolina State University, n.d.). This is particularly useful for the cohort of students under consideration in this report as some students do not identify as autistic despite meeting diagnostic criteria or may not have received a diagnosis yet (Newman *et al.* 2011). UDL provides specific guidance for the design of instructional materials such as the Prepare Entry Guide, which includes using multiple methods of communication and expression (CAST, 2018). The United Nations Convention

on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations General Assembly, 2007) strongly encourages the research community 'to undertake or promote research' in universal design to meet the needs of people with disabilities such as autism.

UDL principles align closely with supports for students with autism, which should be flexible and cognisant of the dynamic nature of the academic strengths and weaknesses of this cohort (Keen *et al.* 2016). Transition support guides and services should be clear around what is expected, provide students with opportunities to socialise and interact, and stay connected through feedback and communication (Burgstahler and Russo-Gleicher, 2015).

The data from this evaluation indicated that while UDL principles were a systematic part of Access Practice, the Access Practitioners involved in the research highlighted the need for UDL principles to be adopted in a mainstream way across institutions and not just within Access services. However, UDL principles were yet to be documented or embedded in a concrete way in the Prepare Entry Guide piloting. This was flagged as an area for development by the team.

An emphasis on significantly expanding collaboration and partnerships within MTU Cork Campus and beyond emerged as a key theme from the dataset. It was noted by Access Practitioners that there is a need for "*access to be everybody's business*" (FG2 Access Practitioners) within higher education. This would include enhanced engagement with academic and other departments with a view to encouraging them to incorporate UDL into their curricula and approach to teaching and learning. Some studies have found that there is a perceived lack of understanding of autism in universities outside of disability services (e.g. Barnhill, 2014) whereas other research has found that knowledge of autism is to an acceptable level (e.g. Dillenburger *et al.* 2013). In either case, consistent with UDL principles, a complete UDL university environment that meets the needs of all students is warranted in addition to the provision of UDL informed specialised services (Tinto and Pusser, 2006; McGuire *et al.* 2006; Roberts *et al*. 2011). The development of specialist services for cohorts such as students with autism runs the risk of marginalising such students and could contribute to their feeling like they don't belong in the wider university space (Cage *et al.* 2019; Cage *et al.* 2018; Kelly and Barnes-Holmes, 2013).

The Usefulness of the Guide as Perceived by Students

The approach taken to the evaluation was to conceptualise participants as agents rather than research subjects (Dresser, 2016). Much emphasis has been given in recent years to giving a voice to people with autism in research through collecting data on their lived experiences (Van Schalkwyk and Dewinter, 2020; Pellicano *et al.* 2014; Milton and Bracher, 2013). This evaluation sought to avoid overshadowing the "insider expertise" (Crane *et al.* 2021; Pellicano *et al.* 2014) of students with autism and did not interview parents or other caregivers (Nichols *et al.* 2019; Beamer and Yun, 2014).

The survey data indicated a good level of usage of the Prepare Entry Guide (53%), though a key area of concern was whether students actually felt better prepared as a result of reading the guide. In response to a question which asked this, the majority of first years (58%) reported that they felt the guide prepared them "a little", while another 26% of respondents chose the option "I'd rather not say". This reticence to provide an opinion may be consistent with previous research which found that people with autism may adopt an "acquiescence to authority" that makes it difficult to assert their opinion (Fisher, 2003; Harris, 2003).

The majority of survey respondents (53%) indicated that the provision of more information was needed to improve the content of the Prepare Entry Guide. When prompted as to what type of information would be welcomed, a need for additional information on the following topics was identified: mentoring; managing stress; the DSS itself and what it provides; support with socialising with peers; accessing Canvas, email and announcements on Canvas; self-care during stressful times; and balanced information about pressure and deadlines and how to prepare for them. Calls for additional information on these topics are unsurprising given that anxiety was underscored in interviews as a factor in hindering preparedness. Difficulty self-regulating and coping with change is part of the diagnostic criteria for people with autism (Glennon, 2001). Cage and Howes (2020) identified the transition to higher education for students with autism as a "culture shock", which is characterised as an overwhelming experience, encompassing the change to independent learning and possibly to living independently. Resources which provide guidance around these challenges are thus a key requirement.

Promoting engagement with the DSS was linked to normalising the need to access supports by one interview participant, who indicated that some students with autism were embarrassed to access DSS. It is documented in the literature that people with autism may attempt to conceal their autistic traits to fit in, in this case with university peers (Tierney *et al.* 2016). To adopt a neurotypical persona is likely to be emotionally draining and can lead to significant distress and mental health problems (Cage and Troxell-Whitman, 2019; Cassidy *et al*. 2018; Cage *et al.* 2018; Hull *et al.* 2017; Bargiela *et al.* 2016).

A theme that emerged from the data was the emphasis on socialisation with peers and engagement in groupwork as matters of importance for research participants. There is a longstanding societal belief that people with autism have diminished social interest (Jaswal and Akhtar, 2019; Abrams *et al.* 2013; Chevallier *et al.* 2012; Dawson, 2008; Klin *et al.* 2003). Within the literature to support this, there are statements which detail differences in the reward circuitry of the brain which makes socialisation less pleasurable for people with autism and as a result, they may be less likely to initiate social contact (Kohls *et al.* 2012; Chevallier *et al.* 2012). This can result in an "outsider status" in universities where students with autism experience social difficulties (Cage and Howes, 2020). Notwithstanding the research that people with autism experience limited pleasure around socialisation, some participants in this research identified that they wished to receive support around making friends and socialising. Taking this into consideration, it

is recommended that initiatives to provide opportunities for socialisation with peers and emotional support around that be given some focus in future iterations of the Prepare Entry Guide.

Feedback which centred on the layout and design of the Prepare Entry Guide was largely very positive, both in the survey data and interviews. People with autism have enhanced perceptual abilities when it comes to visuals (Samson *et al.* 2012). This research found that the Prepare Entry Guide was successful in providing a visually appropriate document for Students with autism. Despite the Transitions Programme team suggesting that email was an inadequate method of disseminating the guide, most research participants reported that they would be happy to receive their guide that way again in future.

5.4 Key Learnings for Future Iterations of the Prepare Entry Guide

As already stated, the purpose of this evaluation report is to provide the Transitions Programme with feedback from students with autism and Access Practitioners in relation to the Prepare Entry Guide, in order to inform the next iteration of same. To summarise, research participants indicated that they would like the Prepare Entry Guide to:

- be emailed to them prior to beginning the academic year;
- contain more information on:
  - > mentoring services
  - > how to manage stress
  - > the DSS itself and what it provides
  - > support with socialising with peers
  - > self-care during stressful times
  - > pressure and deadlines and how to prepare for those;
- retain its current format and design, with minor "tweaks" to include an index and moving the green indicative logos to the top of the page.
- be made available in one document rather than ten separate documents.

5.5 Key Learnings for Practice

Previous literature which focused on the higher education experiences of people with autism aimed to document how universities can become more accessible (e.g. Chown, Baker-Rogers *et al*. 2017; Jansen *et al*. 2016; Thompson *et al*. 2019). The need for greater collaboration and partnership across the university so that efforts to support students with

autism were not limited to specific services, e.g. the DSS, was also noted in this research. The Prepare Entry Guide can reduce "culture shock" (Cage and Howes, 2020) by providing a realistic account and preview of the first-year experience in higher education (Lei *et al.* 2018; Toor *et al*. 2016). The literature supports what research participants in this study reported as being effective for them: clarity in guidelines, and routine and structure (Gobbo and Shmulsky, 2014; Hart *et al.* 2010). However, challenges for students with autism can include social interaction (despite a desire to interact) and sensory sensitivities (Knott and Taylor, 2014; Van Hees *et al.*, 2015). A whole university approach to these issues is warranted, as studies have found that what benefits students with autism may benefit all students (Di Pietro and Cutillo, 2008). The data from this study found that Access Practitioners identified the need for more collaboration and partnership across the entire university to address the needs of students with autism. This should include training all staff to understand autism, adapting the sensory environment (Robertson and Ne'eman, 2008) and promoting acceptance of diversity and opportunities for students with autism to socialise, to avoid an 'outsider status' (Cage and Howes, 2020; Lewis, 2017; Griffith *et al.* 2012). As previously documented (Jaswal and Akhtar, 2019), the majority of interview participants in this study were socially motivated but felt they needed more support and information around how to interact with peers. Perhaps that is outside of the remit of the Prepare Entry Guide, but consideration of autism peer support groups and the creation of a whole university approach to making students with autism 'insiders' would be beneficial (MacLeod, 2010). Focused and targeted awareness campaigns around diversity and inclusion should be strengthened within higher education institutions, to foster acceptance of neurodiverse students and to encourage engagement with DSS and other supports within autism cohorts.

Finally, it is highly recommended that after each iteration of the Prepare Entry Guide, participatory research should be conducted with key stakeholders to ensure ongoing refinement and development of the guide. As this project underscored, people with autism are important stakeholders in conversations about research design (through review of instruments) and clearly in relation to their own information and support needs (through review of the Prepare Entry Guide).

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Appendix 1

Outline of the Transitions Programme Supports

The disability transition support programme was launched at the beginning of the 2019/20 academic year. Julie O'Donovan is the MTU Cork Campus Disability Transitions Programme Co-ordinator. This new MTU Cork Campus programme provides a unique and tailored service to meet the transition needs of students who identify as being on the autism spectrum. Student support needs were noted and reviewed over the last year in three areas: pre entry, entry, and post entry services. Survey input and consultation with students, parents and Access Practitioners was also undertaken to gain a comprehensive insight into these transition needs. The primary focus of this initial three-year project was to gain a thorough understanding of ASD student needs in this phase of their education and to begin establishing tailored services to meet these learning and support needs. To begin this work, a transition mentoring service was launched. Mentoring as a support need is noted by students, parents, and Access Practitioners as a beneficial support opportunity for students as they transition to higher education.

Transition needs as a more prominent support requirement continue to be nationally discussed and reflected on by such initiatives as the Enabling Transitions projects through the PATH programmes. Internationally, the European First Year Experience Conference 2020/21 had three conference themes, one of these being "Supporting the Transition".

Summary of work completed for DSS Transitions Programme in 2019–20:

• **Post Entry Programme**: The DSS piloted a first-year transitions support service. This service involved engaging students through meetings on their campus, phone calls and email support. The pilot used a mentoring framework to guide service delivery. To support this work, a collaborative relationship has been established with Aspect (Aspect provides specialist autism support to approximately 300 adults in the Cork and Kerry area). The transition service liaises with Aspect keyworkers, occupational therapy, speech & language therapy, and team leadership to provide co-ordinated transition supports. The DSS also undertook a consultation with Alison Doyle of Caerus Education (Educational Consultant Alison has extensive experience providing and designing services for students with autism transitioning into new education environments).

• **Pre-Entry and Entry Programmes**: The pre entry work was to begin with an Easter university experience workshop under the title of DISCOVER. This element of the pre entry programme was to focus on giving students experiences of being on and interacting with the campus environment, as well as learning about opportunities to attend third level education. Thus, supporting students and families to begin the process of discovering and learning about how higher education could be part of their educational goal. In addition, students were to be guided to reflect on their strengths, challenges and needs as part of the process of educational goal setting. Sadly, this had to be cancelled and is in the process of being re-envisioned due to the COVID-19 restrictions.

• The entry programme had planned a summer experience workshop which is now being adapted to an online service. The original design also used an experiential learning and reflection framework. Therefore, the current plan is to focus on using technology and media to provide resources, information, and experiences to continue this service. The results from the parent and professional surveys are contributing to this work. Through these surveys it was noted that pre entry and entry supports that focused on detailed information and training on higher education skills support the transition to higher education.

Appendix 2

Information Sheet for Students

Purpose of this research

The purpose of this research is to evaluate the effectiveness of the Prepare Entry Guide. This guide was developed by the Disability Transitions Programme located at Munster Technological University which is part of the SOAR Project*. The guide was specifically designed for students who learn from an autism spectrum perspective. The goal of the guide is to support students with relevant information as they transition into university.

What will the research involve?

The research will involve your participation in a discussion with the researchers. You will be asked for your thoughts/feedback on the Prepare Entry Guide through a meeting with the researchers.

The researchers are Aoife Horgan and Rebekah Brennan who work on the SOAR Project. They work in the Office of Access and Participation and the School of Applied Social Studies in University College Cork (UCC).

Giving your Feedback/Advice

You will be asked to participate in an interview where you can give your feedback, thoughts and experience of reading or using the Prepare Entry Guide.

This will help in evaluating the guide and we will gain further knowledge into what works and what does not work from an autistic spectrum learning perspective.

This information will then be used to make improvements to the Prepare Entry Guide.

The interviews will take place online.

Taking Part as a Student Advisor

Being a student advisor has no other obligations and your only role is to assess the effectiveness of the Prepare Entry Guide.

Participation is voluntary.

You will be asked to sign a consent form.

You can withdraw from the research before it commences (even if you have agreed to take part) or you can stop participating after the discussions (e.g. surveys or interviews) have taken place.

Will your participation in the research be kept confidential?

Yes.

The project plans to publish the results from the research in reports and journal articles.

This is so that others can learn from this research.

If we do this, we will ensure that your identity will not appear in the final report or any publications.

Any extracts from your interview that are quoted, in any subsequent report and publications, will be entirely anonymous.

What will happen to the information that you give?

The data and information gathered will be kept confidential for the duration of the research.

It will be securely stored on password-protected computers and will only be available to the research team on the SOAR Project.

On completion of the project, data and information will be retained for a minimum of a further 10 years and then destroyed, according to policy at UCC.

What will happen to the results?

The results will inform the development of the Prepare Entry Guide for future students on the autistic spectrum.

The feedback we receive through the surveys and interviews will be used to make improvements to the Prepare Entry Guide.

Appendix 2 continued

It is also expected that the results of this research will be shared with the SOAR Southern Cluster group and will be published in a project report, in academic articles, and on the project website.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

We do not envisage any negative consequences for you in taking part; however, if any of the questions make you feel uncomfortable or you do not want to answer them, please let the researchers know.

Who has reviewed this research?

Ethical approval has been given for this research by the Social Research Ethics Committee of UCC.

Any further questions?

If you have any concerns or queries about this research, you can contact Dr Marie Leane, the Principal Investigator (PI), at m.leane@ucc.ie or you can contact the Head of the School of Applied Social Studies Prof. Cathal O'Connell at c.oconnell@ucc.ie

Appendix 3

Interview Guide Student Interviews

MTU Cork *"Prepare Entry Guide" Interview Guide*

Opening

How are you?

Thank you for your participation.

Check re: consent forms

Obtain consent for recording.

Reminders re: confidentiality; voluntarism, etc.

Use of Prepare Entry Guide

How familiar are you with the Prepare Entry Guide (prompt: read it? how many times? referred back to it more than once?)

What do you think the Prepare Entry Guide is for?

What did you use it for?

What was most helpful for you?

What role did the Prepare Entry Guide play (if any) in your transitioning to higher education?

Improving the Prepare Entry Guide – content

What did you need in terms of guidance when you were transitioning to higher education?

If you could improve the content of the Prepare Entry Guide, would you put anything new in?

Would you take anything out? What would that be?

What are the most important things that the Prepare Entry Guide should outline for a student?

If you were designing the Prepare Entry Guide, what would you like to see included?

Improving the Prepare Entry Guide – design

What are your thoughts on how the Prepare Entry Guide looks?

How easy was it to understand?

Would you make any changes to the colour scheme or layout?

Communicating with Lecturers page

How helpful was the Communicating with Lecturers page?

What would you change about this part of the Prepare Entry Guide?

What did you like about it?

Close

Was there anything that I should have asked you that I didn't?

Have you any other comments?

Any questions for me?

Thanks, and appreciations.

Appendix 4

Student Interview Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

MTU Prepare Entry Guide Evaluation Interviews

- I …… agree to participate in an interview for the Access+ project.
- The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing and I have had an opportunity to ask questions and seek clarification.
- I understand that participation is voluntary.
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the session, in which case the material will be deleted. This is in line with General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) introduced in 2018.
- I give permission for my interview with the SOAR research team to be audio-recorded.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
- I understand that anonymity will be ensured in the write-up by disguising my identity.
- I understand that disguised extracts from the research may be quoted in progress reports, academic journals and/or on the project website.
- I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for a minimum of ten years, in line with UCC policy.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Signed: …… Date: ……

PRINT NAME: ……

Appendix 5

Interview Guide MTU Cork Access Practitioners Focus Group 1

Focus Group MTU Cork – Development of the Prepare Entry Guide

Opening

Welcome

Thanks for agreeing to participate …

Check re: consent forms

Obtain consent for recording MS Teams

Reminders around confidentiality, voluntarism, etc (Focus Group)

Any questions for me before we start?

Introductions

Can you each tell me a little about your role within the service?

Developing the Prepare Entry Guide

Why was there a need for the Prepare Entry Guide?

When was this need identified?

Prior to the Prepare Entry Guide what mechanisms were in place to prepare AS students to transition, if any?

How did the process of developing the Prepare Entry Guide begin?

Why was the focus of the Prepare Entry Guide targeted at students who have a diagnosis of AS?

What steps were involved in initially developing the Prepare Entry Guide?

What were the most important elements of the design and content of the Prepare Entry Guide and why?

How did a partnership approach work in developing the Prepare Entry Guide?

What were the benefits/challenges of the partnership approach in developing the Prepare Entry Guide?

What differentiates the Prepare Entry Guide from other information available to first year students?

Design of the Prepare Entry Guide and Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

What steps were involved in designing the Prepare Entry Guide?

Can you explain to me how the UDL model is integrated into the Prepare Entry Guide?

How does this benefit students who have a diagnosis of AS?

What would be absolute best practice in applying the UDL model in this context (ideally)?

Appendix 5 continued

Dissemination of the Prepare Entry Guide

How was the Prepare Entry Guide disseminated?

Were there any challenges encountered in the dissemination of the Prepare Entry Guide?

Would you disseminate the Prepare Entry Guide in the same manner again?

Utilisation of the Prepare Entry Guide

Did any of the 40 first year students who were sent the Prepare Entry Guide engage with you regarding it?

Did you receive any feedback on the Prepare Entry Guide from the students who received it?

Did you receive any questions regarding the Prepare Entry Guide from the students it was sent to?

How do you think the Prepare Entry Guide benefited the students?

What outcomes have you seen?

How could these outcomes be improved if done again?

Prepare Entry Guide – strengths and challenges

What has worked well so far?

What improvements could be made?

What is needed to make those improvements?

What are the limitations of the Prepare Entry Guide and what would strengthen its impact and usage amongst students?

Looking ahead

What changes would you like to implement?

What supports would you like to access?

Are there any partnerships you envisage?

Close

Is there anything that I should have asked you that I didn't?

Any other comments?

Have you any questions for me?

Thanks, and appreciations.

Appendix 6

MTU Cork Access Practitioners Interview Guide Focus Group 2

Focus Group MTU Cork – Universal Design for Learning Model

Opening
Welcome
Thanks for agreeing to participate …
Check re: consent forms
Obtain consent for recording MS Teams
Reminders around confidentiality, voluntarism, etc (Focus Group)
Any questions for me before we start?

Introductions
Can you each tell me a little about your role within the service?

Knowledge of Universal Design for Learning (UDL)
Can you explain to me what your knowledge of Universal Design for Learning is?
What does it mean to you?
Where did you accrue this knowledge?

Development of the UDL model
When and how did the idea for the UDL model of practice in HE for Students with autism come to fruition?
Can you describe how it developed from there?
At what stage is your team at now with it?

How UDL applies in theory to Students with autism
Can you explain to me how the UDL model is appropriate for Students with autism?
How can the UDL model benefit such students?
What would be absolute best practice in applying the model in this context (ideally)?

How UDL applies in practice to Students with autism
Practically, what changes have been made to programme delivery?
How have these benefited the students?
What outcomes have you seen?

Experiences of applying the UDL model – strengths and challenges
What has worked well so far?
What improvements could be made?
What is needed to make those improvements?

Looking ahead
How do you see this model of practice developing within the programme?
What changes would you like to see?
What supports would you like to access?
Are there any partnerships you envisage?

Close
Is there anything that I should have asked you that I didn't?
Any other comments?
Have you any questions for me?
Thanks, and appreciations.

Appendix 7

Consent form MTU Cork Focus Group Participants

Consent Form
Professional Participants Focus Group

- I …… agree to participate in a focus group/interview for the SOAR Project.
- The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing and I have had an opportunity to ask questions and seek clarification.
- I understand that participation is voluntary.
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted. This is in line with General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) introduced in 2018.
- I give permission for my interview with the UCC Access and Participation Services research team to be audio-recorded.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
- I agree to maintain and uphold the complete confidentiality of all participants within the focus group.
- I will keep all information shared by participants during the focus group private and will not repeat or discuss outside of the focus group.
- I understand that anonymity will be ensured in the write-up by disguising my identity.
- I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in progress reports, academic journals and/or on the project website.
- I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for a minimum of ten years, in line with UCC policy.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.
- I am over the age of 18.

Signed: …… Date: ……

PRINT NAME: ……

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