

Autism Acceptance Festival



BEST COLLABORATION

DOMESTIC: THE AUTISM ACCEPTANCE FESTIVAL



IRELAND'S AUTISM CHARITY

What is the Autism Acceptance Festival?

The Autism Acceptance Festival (AAF) is a collaboration between Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) that hold or are currently engaged with the process to receive an AsIAm Autism Friendly Campus award.

Starting with just NCI and DCU in 2022, then 3 in 2023 when ATU Sligo joined, membership has grown to now comprise 6 HEIs: NCI, DCU, ATU Sligo, CCT, DkIT and NCAD.

From concept, the festival deliberately decided to move beyond 'awareness' to 'acceptance' of autism and neurodiversity in general, and so primarily addresses an ND audience, their families and friends, rather than trying to 'explain' autistic people to neurotypical people.

What does the festival celebrate?

Due to the nature of the festival's origin in higher education, most years include some item that addresses the transition to tertiary education from secondary education and/or the transition from education to work.

However, because the festival takes a 'whole person' approach to neurodiversity, it also addresses topics such as creativity, new books on the block, Autistic Doctors, being ND and LGBTQ+, town planning/architecture for sensory escape, the different experience of autistic women (most particularly late diagnosis), and many other aspects of living as a neurodivergent person in a neurotypical world.

Perhaps what the AAF celebrates is, simply, acceptance! No one needs to apologise for, explain, or defend being autistic, they can just address the issues they personally face, see what is shared by others, identify what would make life easier, make opportunity easier to grasp, and learn from each other as well as from experts (who are often also autistic) – no masking required!



Who's in charge?

The festival is programmed and resourced by a committee formed of one member from each participating HEI –

ROBERT WARD, Director of Marketing and International Development at **National College of Ireland**, instigated pursuit of Autism Friendly status at NCI, and serves on NCI's Autism Friendly Campus Committee, carrying this role forward to the Autism Acceptance Festival.

FIONA EARLEY, is the Autism Friendly University Coordinator at **Dublin City University**. **DCU** was the first HEI to receive Autism Friendly HEI status from AslAm under Fiona's watch, and she has generously shared her experience and learnings with others pursuing this designation.

ATLANTA MCGLOIN, is the Inclusion Support Tutor at **Atlantic Technological University Sligo**. **ATU Sligo** was the first Technological University to receive AslAm Autism Friendly HEI designation in 2023, and the third HEI in Ireland to do so.

ANNE HANNAN, is EDI, Careers and Alumni Officer at **CCT, Dublin**, who received their Autism Friendly HEI Award from AslAm in 2024.

GERALDINE KNEEL, is **DKIT's** Disability Officer. **Dundalk Institute of Technology** secured their Autism Friendly HEI Award in 2024.

DECLAN MARKEY, is the Outreach and Inclusion Officer for **National College of Art and Design**. NCAD is currently in active application for AslAm Autism Friendly HEI designation.

For a variety of practical and logistical reasons, the chairing of the committee and production function of the festival sits with **NCI**. This function is led by Teresa Murray, Head of Communications at NCI, with the NCI website www.ncirl.ie housing the event archive and the NCI Marketing Team generating graphics, managing event registrations and creating initial social media collateral, which is then used/localised by other HEIs.

Programming of the Festival, securing speakers and deciding budget is a collective affair, with everyone contributing. As much as possible staff and/or students representing all 6 HEIs also participate equally in the live events.

What challenges does the festival encounter?

The greatest challenge is time, as each member of the team has a full-time day job and diary coordination across 6 HEIs can take time and persistence.

Also, there are too many interesting and good ideas for a 4-day festival, a challenge that grows as the festival does.

Both these challenges are met by the sincere commitment of the team to the festival. A shared WIP and good email comms keep everyone up-to-date even when a meeting can't be made. A 'future ideas' list is maintained for ideas that can't be fully realised in the coming festival.

Where and when does the festival take place?

The festival primarily takes place online: this began as a necessity during covid restrictions but now serves to make events as accessible as possible to a national audience.

Each HEI also holds some complementary events on campus. Some of these are open to the public, some are just for that college's staff and students – including opening up classrooms to allow students watch the festival in groups.

We describe these on-campus elements as events that happen 'under the umbrella' of the festival. They are all listed on our event page and, where they are open to a wider audience, actively promoted as part of the festival.

The online events are broadcast live at lunchtime, Monday to Thursday during the festival week. They are usually recorded (if any participant does not wish to be recorded, they can veto) to increase the opportunity for engagement after the fact. The festival takes place in the second half of March, to avoid a clash with other Autism-related events in April, taking into account Easter holidays, reading weeks etc., so it is a moveable feast.

Throughout the festival (and continuing as long as necessary to share each piece), at 11am each day a piece of creative work by a student from one of the HEIs is published on social media under the hashtag #DivergentMinds

There is a prelude to the festival in the form of a #WatchParty. While non-prescriptive, we diary in a particular time on the Sunday before the live events, at which we suggest people watch a piece of long-form media that informs one of the events of the Festival. This might be a play, a documentary, a short film, or a piece of research. The #WatchParty functions to raise awareness of the Festival and to focus people for the 4 days ahead.

Mondays primarily feature an interview with the creator/researcher or an actor/participant or a panel of many who were involved in the #WatchParty video.

Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday each deal with individual topics, varying from single person presentations/interviews to panel discussions, centering autistic voices at the same time as visibly/audibly involving as many as possible of the participating HEIs. Sometimes there's not enough camera/mic to go around! But the nature of those involved means that no one is seeking the spotlight: representing as many HEIs as possible is inherently fair, but the shared goal is to strongly cover as many topics as possible.



Jody O'Neill, author of *What I (Don't) Know About Autism*

Who is the audience?

Students and staff of the participating HEIs form the main audience. Topics targeting specific demographics attract a wider and more diverse audience. A small but mighty section of the audience is parents of younger autistic children, who want to see what opportunity the future might hold.

Autism Acceptance Festival by the numbers 2025 saw

- 6 AsIAm Autism Friendly HEIs collaborate to feature
 - 11 neurodivergent creators in an online exhibition and to platform
 - 7 autistic voices, speaking to a live audience of
 - 45 about sensory decolonisation
 - 82 about autistic staff experiences in higher education
 - 34 about public and academic libraries and the autistic community
 - 65 about harnessing neurodiversity in the workplace
 - 202 people registered in total, receiving follow-up emails directed to numerous relevant resources arising from events.
 - 63,163 impressions across social media alone including
 - 646 direct engagements with posts.
 - 1 radio interview on [92.5 Phoenix FM](#)
 - 6 on-campus events including 3 events open to the public:
 - 1 ND art exhibition at NCAD
 - 1 library resources launch at ATU Sligo and
 - 1 AsIAm Employment Seminar at NCI
 - 24-27 March was the main period of activity but #DivergentMinds continued beyond those dates.
- Audience numbers continue to accumulate on event recordings, now available with other resources and links to all past events [here](#).

What does the future bring?

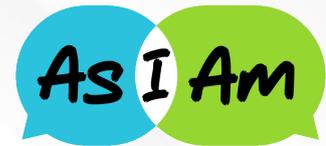
The 2026 Autism Acceptance Festival will shortly be announced. Cooperating with TG4 and Tyrone Productions, the #WatchParty will be Néara Éagsúlacht, Dearthadh Difríúil, with the Monday panel featuring some of those who participated in the documentary. The Tuesday and Wednesday will explore Disability Supports, Reasonable Accommodations and Assistive Technology at HEIs: how to access, what to expect, hearing from staff and from students who will share their own experiences. The Thursday event will cover a topic that has been on our wish list for some time, and we've finally secured a good and representative panel: communication options for non-speaking autistic people.



What makes the Autism Acceptance Festival award-worthy?

AslAm is not directly involved in the organisation of the Autism Acceptance Festival but it's fair to say it would not exist without them. As well as bringing us all together and guiding new HEIs to the festival, they offer expert advice and guidance and are always on call when we need them, often providing panellists or putting us in touch with speakers.

With AslAm's continued support, the Autism Acceptance Festival committee will continue to grow, expanding to include other HEIs. This entry is based on a time period where these 6 HEIs have worked together for some time, understand the ambitions and scope of the festival, and can confidently and equally contribute. This Autism Acceptance Festival committee has established a strong foundation on which to build whatever comes next. This entry also comprises the early adopters of AslAm's Principles of Autism Inclusion.



IRELAND'S AUTISM CHARITY

9 Principles of Autism Inclusion

1. Encourage and enable students with autism to transition into and participate in college programmes.
2. Support and build capacity to equip students with autism to meet the academic challenges of everyday college life.
3. Support and build capacity to equip students with autism to meet the social challenges of college life.
4. Seek to establish an autism friendly operational environment.
5. Seek to combat the stigma around autism and recognise the diverse experiences of those with the condition.
6. Develop understanding and relevant knowledge and skills within the college community (staff and service providers).
7. Establish channels so that students with autism can have a voice in various aspects of college life.
8. Seek to increase future employability of students with autism.
9. Build capacity throughout the institution to support autistic employees.

