



Founding a University Neurodivergent Society

A Practical Guide

by Dublin City University's Neurodivergent Society Committee 2020/21

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Why Establish a Neurodivergent Society?

Benefits to You, the Founder

People have asked me before why I set up DCU's Neurodivergent Society. In honesty, it was an impulsive decision. I knew that others had tried and failed to do the same and that if it were going to happen, someone would have to fight for it. I wanted it to happen, and so I thought, "if not me, then who? If not now, then when?".

The truth is the benefits I've reaped for having started the society are profound and far-reaching. I have integrated into an international network of new contacts working in Neurodivergent rights and education. I have gained powerful insights into myself as a leader, the innate talents I can foster into excellent skills, and the areas where I fall or need to improve. Above all else, though I have developed close friendships, I hope to maintain them for the rest of my life.

Reflecting on the decision now, I still find it hard to understand what exactly came over me. However, founding this society is the most radical act of self-love I have ever made. I would encourage everyone to embrace who they are because every step you make towards self-love is invaluable.

Congratulations on embarking on what is sure to be an incredible adventure; best of luck,

- Laoćín Brennan

Founder

Benefits to the Governing Committee

Being involved in running this kind of society can significantly deepen your college experience by forming friendships with people who genuinely care. It is a society in which being on the committee is less stressful than in other societies. Being on a committee like this can help one develop as a person, allowing society to grow with its committee and normal members. The organisation needs the committee to continue to grow, but that allows each committee member to grow as a person and find themselves and a sense of accomplishment for being involved in a society that stands for something extremely important.

- Luke Conlon

Public Relations Officer

Benefits to Members

A Place to Find Friends

Neurodivergent people may find it more difficult to socialise or fit into college life considering their unique needs and traits. The Neurodivergent Society may act as a means for these people to gel with others who have similar difficulties and can empathise entirely with this kind of circumstance. It is quite possible that by attending these events, the society members will find a wholly new group of friends, one that will last and stand them in good stead as they move through college.

The society members will meet other people who may see the world in a similar light to themselves, share compatible quirks, eccentricities, habits and hobbies. Suffice to say that all neurodivergent people see the world a bit differently and welcome others who do likewise.

Simple, Casual Activities

The activities are simple and casual for a reason - we want to get as many people as possible involved and to allow them to step straight into something, which will quickly be familiar. We believe that The members can reach society's goals through simplicity and an understanding approach that does not involve a massive step outside of an individual's comfort zones. University life will always present more challenging opportunities in various forms, but we are happy to be that "safe space".

Other societies may provide intensive environments where people can show off highly advanced skills at what they do, which is not so relevant in the neurodivergent society. We want people to contribute in small ways, trying new activities to develop a new talent where they may not have had one before and how far they take that is up to them.

A Place to Communicate in a Casual Way

We aim to provide quiet, conversational spaces where our members can communicate about any topics they like. We understand that some members may have sensory issues; thus, we keep noise levels down and ensure that everyone feels comfortable in an environment that is not too intense or overwhelming.

A Place Where You Can Share Any Problems You Are Having

The Neurodivergent Society should be an open place with an approachable committee considering that members may want to raise a personal issue or concern affecting their college life. It is entirely understandable that these issues can and will arise. Thus society ideally wants to be one of the many avenues that the student can find advice and solutions.

- Conor Marsh

Ordinary Committee Member

Benefits to Your University

Clubs and Societies within a university environment play a crucial role in the vibrancy and life of the institution. They provide opportunities for students to meet like-minded peers, offer outlets for creativity and growth, and build structures for interaction and community.

Within this context, neurodivergent students need a safe and accessible space for them to meet and grow with students who can accept them for who they are, celebrate their interests and preferences, and provide a platform to explore new avenues.

The Neurodivergent Society in DCU provides a welcoming forum where students can develop their social skills, hone their organisational and event-management skills and, collectively, develop events that raise awareness of neurodiversity in the institution.

The University has benefited hugely from the expertise of the Neurodivergent society, which acts as a sounding board for many of our initiatives within the autism-friendly university. Due to the diversity of this student society, we have access to a wide array of views that represent neurodivergent students - and have amended and tweaked our university activities as a result.

The impact of such a society is far more significant than the individual voices of students and has made the University sit up and listen to the needs of neurodivergent students on campus - it has made the University a better place for all students.

- Claire Bohan

Staff President

Benefits to Society at Large

The benefits to society that stem from having a Neurodivergent Society are broad and far-reaching. From students becoming more confident in feeling as if they have a voice and their college experience can be fully participative. This leads to feelings of acceptance that the student can carry forth into the workforce.

Neurodivergent people have the right, along with the desire, to participate in every facet of university life and life in general. Having an inclusive culture lends itself to students feeling better supported and valued, which builds confidence and self-belief that transfers into a better quality of life for neurodivergent people, with more positive interactions with society.

Showing wider society how neurodivergent people organise these societies and participate fully gives society a snapshot of what neurodivergent people can achieve. Because the Neurodivergent Society supports students in developing such skills as the ones mentioned above, social skills, event management, organisation, and participation they leave college well-adjusted and confident, promoting better mental health and outcomes.

- Adam Harris

CEO of AsIAM (Sponsor of Neurodivergent Society)

How to Get Started

The Process

Get in touch with your university's central body that oversees student engagement/clubs and societies. The requirements for what documentation, membership and committee you need vary from university to university (even within Ireland). This booklet is designed to be as broadly applicable and valuable as possible. But we suggest once you have gotten as far as beginning to recruit for your committee, you would benefit from approaching your university for an outline of the specific steps required in your institution.

This section of the booklet will talk you through the steps you take before and while recruiting for your committee. The following section outlines what roles are required on a committee. After the functions are described, we explain how we run our meetings. The following section is on promoting your society and finally some notes on what worked well and what didn't work for us in our first two years.

The Idea

Having a solid identity from the offset can help you immensely gain the support and traction needed to create a society. Knowing what your community stands for, its goals, principles, and fundamental focus is vital. Your goals are likely to be recorded formally in your constitution. We recommend that you also invest some time collecting thoughts from your committee about society's focus and from all organisation members of what principles are most important to you.

The Purpose

Over time the purpose of your Neurodivergent Society will shift and develop as the society grows. However, it is essential to have a firm idea of what you want to accomplish by setting up the community in its infancy. Get your committee together and brainstorm what you most want to achieve in your first year, then summerise them into a prioritised, numbered list.

The current Constitutional Aims and Objectives of DCU's Neurodivergent Society are:

1. To provide a community where all students are accepted, supported and encouraged to grow and develop.
2. To promote awareness and acceptance of neurodiversity as a benefit to society.
3. To present information to staff and students in DCU about the unique experience of being a neurodivergent third level student.
4. To collaborate with existing societies to create events that educate the general DCU student body about neurodiversity.
5. To encourage ongoing connections between Neurodivergent Society and other student groups in DCU and other third-level colleges.
6. To create an atmosphere that encourages members to interact and socialise with other members and other groups.

These are identical to our goals for 2019/20, but we review them every year at our general meetings to ensure we are still representing the desires of our committee.

Forming your First Committee

Finding people to support you in your goals for society is a daunting prospect at first. However, like you, some people would benefit hugely from forming such a group, and many of those people are willing to put in the time and effort required to that ends. When looking for people to involve we suggest:

- Ask friends and acquaintances to support you in your efforts.
- Create an official email for the society, and use it to form social media accounts.
- Create a poster and put it on notice boards around the college, include your society email.
- Create official social media accounts and reach out to current societies to get them shared around the college population, especially those already involved in organisations and clubs.
- Post your poster and potentially some updates on the process on your social media account, always letting people know how they can get involved.
- Link in with your disability officers and staff - ask them to spread the word and display your poster.
- Contact the students' union and your student support office about leaving your posters and contact details at the reception/helpdesk.
- Be prepared for questions and answer queries promptly and confidently.
 - Having a document where you keep important information about the society is very helpful in the early stages. Prepare answers to the following questions in your information document.
 - What does "neurodivergent" mean?
 - Have a short summary to send first and a more comprehensive answer if they have follow-up questions.
 - What is the society for?
 - Here you outline your purpose (as above). Again have a short version explaining the main aim or two of the society. Also, keep the complete official list to hand if they have further questions.
 - What events are you planning to run?
 - At this stage, you may have ideas but not be sure what ones will be popular or tenable; a great way to answer this question is to give a couple of event ideas you have and ask for their input; what would they like to see you organise?
- Always remember to thank your committee, showing an appreciation for the work they do and the time they put in not only encourages them to continue but it fosters a great team atmosphere.

What Roles are Needed on the Committee?

Chairperson - Core Position

Responsibilities

- Act as a spokesperson for the society.
- Provide direction and leadership.
- Delegate tasks appropriately
- Ensure the smooth running of the society.
- Chair committee meetings
- Represent your university favourably when requesting funding and resources from external bodies
- Oversee other committee members where necessary.
- Attend relevant training given by your student engagement team.

Required Competencies

- Passionate.
- Organised.
- Clear, Balanced Communicator.
- Reliable.
- Confident.
- Teamwork and Diplomacy.
- Marketing.
- Negotiation.
- Time Management.
- Decision Making.
- Verbal and Written Communication Skills.

Secretary - Core Position

Responsibilities

- Take the minutes at committee meetings and send them out to committee members within two days for approval before sending them out to the society members 24 hours after that.
- Keep in regular contact with your student engagement unit as well as the members of the society.
- Administration - collect post
- Update any changes to the constitution.
- Keep equipment record.
- Attend relevant training given by your student engagement team.

Required Competencies

- Time Management.
- Organisational Skills.
- Verbal and Written Communication Skills.
- IT Skills.
- Reliable.

Treasurer - Core Position

Responsibilities

- Submit Grants Application to C&S.
- Submit Sponsorship Applications.
- Maintain Accounts of all Income and Expenditure.
- Draw up Budget.
- Attend relevant training given by your student engagement team.

Required Competencies

- Trust-worthy.
- Detail-oriented.
- Organised.
- Reliable.

Public Relations Officer (PRO) - Support Position

Responsibilities

- Run the society's social media platforms; Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat.
- Create the posters used by the society.
- Work closely with the events officer to ensure all events are well publicised.

Required Competencies

- Artistic Flair.
- Active participation on social media.
- Reliable.
- Time Management.

Accessibility Officer - Support Position

Responsibilities

- Ensure the society abides by the accessibility policy of the college.
- Act as the contact for people to make requests and complaints about accessibility.

Required Competencies

- Sensitive and discreet.
- Organised.
- Reliable.

First-Year Rep - Support Position

Responsibilities

- Represent the first years at committee meetings.
- Learn about core roles on the committee and potentially run for them in the future year(s).

Required Competencies

- Reliable.
- Approachable.
- Enthusiastic.

Events Officer - Optional Position

Responsibilities

- Plan and schedule activities.
- Book Rooms.
- Work closely with the PRO and Chair to keep all members well informed about events.

Required Competencies

- Organisation skills.
- Reliable.
- Well connected and organised.

Inclusion Officer - Optional Position

Responsibilities

- Ensure the society abides by the accessibility policy of the college.
- Act as the contact for people to make requests and complaints about accessibility.

Required Competencies

- Sensitive and discreet.
- Organised.
- Reliable.

Ordinary Committee Members - Optional Position

Responsibilities

- Represent the best interest of all members of the society at committee meetings.

Required Competencies

- Enthusiastic and reliable.

(Staff) President - Optional Position

Responsibilities

- Advise the society.
- Act as a liaison between the committee and your university staff members.

Required Competencies

- Contacts in DCU.
- Insights into running campaigns and organisations.

How to Run Meetings?

First Meeting

- Have an Agenda and send it out in advance of the meeting.
- After the Attendance and Apologies, you can have a Ways of Working (WOW) session. This works by getting each member to contribute their thoughts as to how the committee should run. You can do this with post-its in person, or remotely on Jamboard, or using vevox as a word cloud.
- It is crucial to make everyone feel valued and comfortable on the committee, so having an icebreaker is helpful.

Identify Committee Focus

Once you have a committee, ensure the purpose you have come with before reflects the wants of everyone on the committee. It is critical that all members of the society committee know they can make significant changes to the running of the society and that their contributions are valid.

What is your WOW (way of working)

It's critical that you understand the needs of your team and that your team understand your needs and each other. For this reason, we suggest gathering to share ideas on what you all value as a team. Think of this as a guiding set of principles for how you expect each other to behave and show respect for the committee.

Our WOW session happened in person. We printed off a sheet that said "WOW" in comic book writing and gave each committee member a selection of markers to choose from and a bunch of sticky post-it notes. We told them to write what they consider essential to the running of the committee on the notes. We said to have one item per note and as many notes as you can think of.

We then went up to the WOW and posted our first thoughts. After about 15 minutes, the wall was flooded, our secretary did a brilliant job of summarising and categorising the notes below. Each bullet point represents one sticky note. There were five people at our first meeting.

An alternative to stick notes that will work remotely is to use JamBoard or Vevox WordCloud.

Our WOW

Teamwork

- Open Discussions
- Space for thoughts
- Continued Reliance
- Maintain Sense of Togetherness
- Please and Thank you
- Be kind
- Make sure everyone is invited to give their opinion
- Sense of Community
- Check-In among members, maybe assign partners?
- Make time to support and help other committee members as they need it
- Accessibility
- Variety of formats for minutes and agenda.

Responsibilities

- Divide tasks/jobs as evenly as possible
- When one person has a job, they can't take more on until every other person has a job.
- Fair expectations
- Reasonable Deadlines
- Clear communication of what tasks to be done by who for when.
- Clarity about what to do or who to talk to if struggling to complete a committee task.
- Planning
- Enough/Plenty of notice re events, meetings and deadlines.

Communication

- Communication
- Clear Communication
- Clear Communication
- Open Communication
- Decide what method(s) of communication work best.

Structure

- Meetings on a regular, weekly basis
- Block book meeting room if possible

Effective Meetings

Structure

Effective Meeting follows a consistent pattern. The format we used works as follows:

- Attendance and Apologies
- Accept the previous meetings minutes
- Nominate Any Other Business (AOB)
- Chair's Report
- Treasurer's Report (as applicable)
- Items for Discussion
- Summerise meeting and To-Dos
- Arrange Next Meeting
- Send out minutes for approval at the next meeting.

Guidelines for Best Practice at Meetings

Ask members if they have anything to add to the agenda ahead of time to allow all of the committee more time to consider their position on all discussion items in a meeting.

Suppose possible block book your meeting room so that you can hold a meeting at the same time and place each week/two weeks. Hold your meetings in a quiet area of your university if possible.

Avoid ambiguity; if you are delegating a task, make it clear who is responsible for completing the task. This includes being specific about what is required to complete the job and the deadline for the task to be finished.

Encourage and facilitate ongoing discussion of the topics raised in the meeting through digital means between the first and next meeting.

If someone is straying far from the meeting agenda, it is acceptable to politely ask them to return to the agenda.

Sensory Friendly guidelines:

Encourage all members to use stim toys, sunglasses, weighted blankets, headphones and other objects that will enable them to focus. We have a sensory box with stress balls, earplugs, fidget spinners and sunglasses that we bring to all of our events and meeting and allow our members to borrow and return at the end of the event.

Hold the meeting in a room with minimal distractions (passing human traffic beside windows to the room, loud noises from busy rooms beside or busy).

Promoting The Society

It is essential to focus on publicising society sooner rather than later to gain numbers to function. It is challenging to run events without numbers.

Freshers' Fair

Most universities hold an event for student groups to market themselves to prospective new members as part of the first-year orientation. It is essential to put time and effort into preparing material, answers to questions and engaging activities for this event.

- If you have a stall:
 - Have colourful posters/decorations
 - Have a little gift or info booklet for new members
 - Practice answering questions about events
 - Practice explaining what Neurodivergent means/what disabilities are included.
 - Consider having sweets
 - Consider having a sign "ask me anything for a sweet."
- If you are relying on social media alone:
 - Posters are great; videos are even better.
 - Try to be as responsive as possible.

Social media

Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter would be the best three for doing this for a society like this. Being active on social media means the society can gain opportunities that it otherwise would not like collaborating with other societies or even with other colleges or organisations in the broader community. Setting up social media accounts is quick and easy and can be done on their websites through a brief sign up form. On Facebook, you use a personal account and can create a page for the society on which committee members can post about events.

Videos

Use captions on all videos played at official society events and posted on the society page.

Alt Text

All images posted on Social Media (including Instagram & Twitter) should include Alt Text. Alt Text can be found in "Advanced Settings" on Instagram. Alt Text can be found beside the edit button in Twitter Images.

Emails

All Society Emails should have a plain text version.

CamelCase Hashtags

Hashtags should be written in CamelCase. (i.e., #ThisIsAHashtag rather than #thisisahashtag).

Traffic Light Communication System

Have stickers Red and Green indicate how comfortable a person is engaging in conversation (Red, not comfortable, green, very comfortable). If you do not have access to such stickers, you can bring stick-on labels and a red and green marker for people to write their names with.

Consent for Photography

Do not take photos or videos of anyone without their prior consent

Official Channels

If you have a staff president, they could potentially reach out to your universities marketing and student engagement teams to have you included in the orientation guides for incoming first years.

Key Learnings from Our First Few Years

Things That Worked

Quiet Hours at Our Orientation Fair

We had a stall at the fair for all clubs and societies during the orientation week for the first years. With the permission of our student engagement office, we arranged for there to be an hour each day of the fair where stalls could play no music. This significantly reduced the overwhelming noise in the hall and made everyone at our booth, including the committee members, feel more comfortable.

Having Booklets to Give Out at the Fair

Also, at the orientation fair, we had a booklet with information on what being Neurodivergent means, what support was available for all students, and specifically neurodivergent students in DCU and finally, what events we planned to run and our contact details.

Quiz About Our Society's New members

This year, some of our new members felt they were stepping into a group where everyone had already established who their friends were. This was intimidating and discouraged new people from attending events and integrating. As such, we held a "Getting to Know You" night for all of our latest members. We sent out a google form with prompts for fun facts and allowed each member to contribute funny, personal or interesting information about themselves. We then compiled a quiz about everyone in attendance. It was great fun. WE included a small section on the committee as well.

Media Representation

We are the first Neurodivergent Society in Europe; as such, we got a lot of interest from local media, RTÉ, The Irish Examiner, Near FM and DCU internal marketing conducted interviews of the committee members.

Frequency and reliability of events and meetings

It is important to give members as much notice as possible about events. If you can block book rooms in your university, we encourage you to book the same rooms for the entire semester. You will need a small space every week or

two at a specified time for your committee meetings. You will need a larger room for your events; we suggest you hold one event per week, always on the same day of the week starting at the same time. We rotated our events in our first year between afternoon tea (100% actively social), workshops (in creative expression, confident communication and self-care, all passively social) and society-requested events.

Things That Didn't Work

Too Many Events

With a small membership, we still ran a minimum of two events per week; this was discouraging for committee members as we had few or no attendees at several events.

Possibly Too Serious Marketing

We had a poster at our orientation fair stall, which had the question, "what do **you** value in the Neurodivergent Society?" and some post-it notes from anyone with a contribution or idea at the fair. Our examples were all severe but earnest. I would suggest that if you do something similar or list your values anywhere, you stress that this is a fun society.

Our Social Group chats never took off.

In retrospect, we learned the following things about society group-chats:

- We should have set it up BEFORE fresher's on whatever platform chosen by the committee.
- We didn't initiate enough or consistently advertise the events through it.

DCU Autism Friendly Project

The setting up of the Neurodivergent Society in DCU as part of a larger initiative has seen DCU make various steps towards becoming a fully autism-friendly campus. Adam Harris, the founder of autism-awareness group AsIAm, initially spearheaded the idea for the autism-friendly campus. Information was gathered through a large piece of research where current autistic students were asked about their experiences. The Autism-Friendly initiative conducted a sensory audit of DCU's three campuses, and we spoke to the general staff and student population about their understanding of autism. Following this, we created a plan of action for the initiative.

On a practical level, this led to the setting up of specific amenities to make life more comfortable for the autistic student populace. Sensory pods were set up as a place where students could find a quiet and convenient place to study or spend time silently. Staff were trained to understand autism and its challenges better. We set up guidelines to make lectures, assignments and meetings more autism inclusive.

The Neurodivergent Society in DCU is very appreciative that the university has gone to these lengths to ensure there is a genuine improvement to the college life of autistic people. We would encourage other societies to raise the issue within their universities regarding whether we could implement any minor changes on the campus to cater to neurodivergent needs and use DCU as an example where this has been done with success.

Source:

<https://www.irishtimes.com/special-reports/diversity-inclusion/case-study-dcu-s-autism-friendly-campus-1.3641112>)

Members Becoming Involved In Research And Autism Friendly Projects

Every neurodivergent student has a particular set of needs regarding studying, lectures and sitting exams. In these situations, challenges or disturbances might arise relating to students' ability to cope with their sensory environment, communication or completing tasks. The Neurodivergent Society would always encourage its members to share any small matters impacting their student life. This could extend to participating in research projects to improve knowledge of these precise needs. In DCU, we currently work closely regarding providing some feedback to the autism advocacy group, AsIAm, and DCU's Autism-Friendly Coordinator, Fiona Earley. We would encourage staff from the

more comprehensive university to use members' first-hand knowledge in whatever way they can. This is the only way to understand how to cater to diverse needs, which are not always immediately apparent, for those in Disability Support Services. We believe research through voluntary feedback is the best way to create the happiest, healthiest conditions on campus for those who fall into the bracket of Neurodivergent.

Our Contact

Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/NeurodivergentSocietyDCU/>

Twitter <https://twitter.com/NeuroDSoc>

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