

FUTURE EXPECTATIONS

A Qualitative Exploration of the
Perceptions and Expectations
of Autistic Adults Regarding
the **IMPACT** Programme

April 2024



Gheel
Autism Services



Ollscoil Chathair
Bhaile Átha Cliath
Dublin City University



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AUTHORS: Dr. Jane O’Kelly, DCU Institute of Education

Dr. Neil Kenny, DCU Institute of Education

Sophie Butler, DCU Institute of Education

Dr. Conor Scully, DCU Institute of Education

TABLE OF CONTENT

| | |
|---|----|
| Acknowledgements | 3 |
| Executive Summary | 7 |
| Language | 7 |
| Background | 7 |
| Current study | 8 |
| Key Findings | 10 |
| Recommendations | 13 |
| Overall Recommendations | 14 |
| 1. Introduction | 15 |
| 2. Research Context | 16 |
| Gheel Autism Services | 16 |
| IMPACT Programme | 16 |
| IMPACT – Supporting a Shift in Organisational Culture | 17 |
| Autism – A Developing Classification | 18 |
| Transitions to Employment – Policy in Ireland | 21 |
| Autism and Participation in Employment | 22 |
| Theoretical Framework | 24 |
| 3. Research Design | 26 |
| Ethics | 26 |
| Data Collection | 26 |
| Procedure | 27 |
| Research Design: Cohort 1 | 27 |
| Research Practice: Cohort 1 | 28 |
| Research Design Co-research Case Studies: Cohort 2 | 28 |
| Research Design: Cohort 2 | 29 |
| Research Design: Cohort 3 Frontline Staff | 29 |
| Research Practice: Cohort 3 | 29 |
| Research Design: Cohort 4 Senior Management Staff | 30 |
| Research Practice: Cohort 4 | 30 |
| Data Analysis | 30 |
| Case Study Vignette: Mary | 31 |

| | |
|---|-----------|
| 4. Research Findings | 33 |
| 4.1 Transition from compulsory education to Gheel | 33 |
| 4.1.1 Issues with school | 33 |
| 4.1.2 Aims After Finishing School | 34 |
| 4.1.3 Starting Impact | 35 |
| Gheel Findings | 35 |
| Summary | 35 |
| 4.2 Delivery of the IMPACT programme | 36 |
| 4.2.1 Peer Discussion and Social Support | 36 |
| 4.2.2 Content of the IMPACT Programme | 37 |
| 4.2.3 Assessment/Feedback of the IMPACT Programme | 38 |
| Gheel Findings | 38 |
| Summary | 39 |
| Case Study Vignette: John | 40 |
| 4.3 SUPPORTS and Barriers to Employment | 41 |
| 4.3.1 Job Application Process | 41 |
| 4.3.2 Communications with Employers | 41 |
| 4.3.3 Difficult Aspects of Workplace Culture | 42 |
| 4.3.4 Other Workplace Supports | 42 |
| 4.3.5 Personal Strategies for Success | 43 |
| Gheel Findings | 43 |
| Summary | 44 |
| Case Study Vignette: Michael | 45 |
| 4.4 Benefits of the impact programme | 46 |
| 4.4.1 Benefits for Autistic Research Participants | 46 |
| 4.4.2 Non-employment Benefits of the IMPACT Programme | 47 |
| 4.4.3 Research Participant Recommendations for the IMPACT Programme | 47 |
| 4.4.4 General Thoughts About the Future | 48 |
| Gheel Findings | 49 |
| Summary | 49 |
| Conclusion | 50 |
| Autistic Participants | 50 |
| Gheel Staff | 50 |
| 5. Discussion | 52 |
| Overview of the Impact Programme | 52 |

| | |
|---|----|
| What is the objective of the Gheel IMPACT Programme and how effective is it from the perspective of staff and other participants in achieving this objective? | 52 |
| What were the experiences and views of Autistic individuals who took part in the IMPACT Programme? | 55 |
| How do Autistic research participants feel the IMPACT Programme supported their transition to employment and future expectations? | 56 |
| What Supports and Barriers for Accessing Employment were Identified by Autistic Research Participants and What were their Recommendations for Improving Gheel's IMPACT Programme? | 58 |
| Recommendations and Preferences of Autistic Research Participants | 60 |
| 6. Recommendations | |
| Overall Recommendations | 62 |
| Impact Programme Delivery | 63 |
| IMPACT Programme Content | 64 |
| Transition Planning and Progression | 64 |
| Quality Assurance | 64 |
| Conclusion | 65 |
| References | 66 |
| APPENDICES | |
| Informed Consent (Case Study) | 75 |
| Plain Language Statement Case Study | 76 |
| Plain Language Statement – Senior Staff | 78 |
| Informed Consent – Senior Staff | 80 |
| Interview Framework – Participants | 82 |

Figures

| | |
|------------------|--|
| Figure 1: | Gheel Autism Services Commitment to Quality |
| Figure 2: | Autism Spectrum Disorder, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM 5: APA, 2013) |
| Figure 3: | Neurodevelopmental Conditions; Differences and Intersections |
| Figure 4: | Autistic SPACE FRAMEWORK (Doherty et al., 2023) |
| Figure 5: | Four Dimensions of Spatial Belonging (Wong, 2023) |
| Figure 6: | Thematic Map |
| Figure 7: | Career Ambitions |
| Figure 8: | Future Plans |

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report will present a qualitative evaluation of Gheel Autism Services **Inspiring Meaningful and Progressive Autistic Career Transitions (IMPACT)** Programme. Gheel Autism Services (referred to as Gheel from this point forward) provides residential and day supports services, outreach supports, and individualised transition supports for Autistic people. As an organisation, it aims to promote the empowerment, understanding and inclusion of Autistic people and enhance quality of life. The ethos of Gheel as an organisation is to provide neurodiversity affirming supports that focus on promoting a low-arousal and appropriate service environment for Autistic people.

The service has developed an employment support programme called IMPACT to support a holistic transition for Autistic adults to employment. The programme is designed to support this transition through in-person and online training over six weeks which provide integrated individual supports for programme participants. Coordinators of the programme also offer onsite support to managers, team leaders and staff regarding autism-informed practices or potential accommodations that assist with the transition to the workplace.

This evaluation was commissioned by Gheel and funded by an award from The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC). All researchers are from Dublin City University's Institute of Education.

Language

As researchers working in a participatory framework with Autistic individuals and the Autistic community, we are conscious of foregrounding the voices of Autistic people in this research. It is an exciting time to be involved in research and we are grateful to the research participants who gave freely of their time and viewpoints to greatly enrich the research aims and outcomes of this study. Their views and perspectives are essential in advocating for their rights and for the rights of the Autistic community. Communicating their views and experiences should inform policy makers, decision makers and impact services relevant to their lives in the wider society.

A discussion continues in Autistic settings on the use of different terminology and phrases in the language used to describe Autism and Autistic people. This discussion is ongoing and reflects the varied contexts, views and experiences of Autistic people, their families, and others. Hartman et al. (2023) explain:

The consensus is clear that the majority of the Autistic community and Autistic-led Autism organisations prefer the use of identity-first language (i.e., 'Autistic person') over person-first language (i.e., 'person with autism').

They further emphasise that when meeting or working with Autistic people for the first time that you use the language they choose to use to describe themselves. The authors of this report are using identity first language. Additionally, in recognition of the writing of autistic in different settings from different viewpoints, in this report Autistic is written with a capital 'A'.

Background

The IMPACT Programme was created and implemented in response to an identified need of Autistic adults engaged with the existing provision in Gheel Services. More specifically, the IMPACT Programme's development arose from a perceived gap in provision of autism-informed employability services for Autistic adults. Although employment advice and support are provided

by Gheel staff and caseworkers on an individual basis, the IMPACT Programme provides a focused, employment-oriented training that is linked to ongoing support for trainees, and connections to autism-informed employers.

The Gheel service module is aligned with the social model of disability, which focuses on the development of supportive environments and interpersonal relationships. However, funding and the general provision of day services in Ireland is funnelled through a medical model of disability with stratified funding being dispersed through mental health services, disability, education, social policy and limited employment services. The IMPACT Programme is funded separately from the HSE funding for the day service.

Article 23 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that: “Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment”. The World Health Organisation International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) focuses on a holistic framework that acknowledges the influence of social and environmental factors on disability (Bölte, 2023). It highlights the importance and value of Autistic individuals’ participation in society. This foregrounds the right to appropriate and accessible employment settings for Autistic individuals in Ireland. Concerningly, however, a recent report from the OECD noted that the disability employment gap in Ireland is much larger than in most other OECD countries and twice the OECD average (OECD, 2021).

Current study

This report outlines a programme of research exploring the experiences of Autistic participants who are completing or have recently completed the IMPACT Programme. This research evaluates their experiences of participating in the programme and elicits their views regarding challenges or supports to engaging in employment following completion of the IMPACT Programme. The research also explores the experiences of developing and delivering the IMPACT Programme from a cross-section of front-line and senior staff at Gheel. The analysis endeavours to capture their aims regarding the development of the IMPACT Programme, how it links with other aspects of the Gheel organisation, and what supports or barriers they perceive to further development for the Gheel IMPACT Programme.

The theoretical framework that underpinned this evaluation is the Four Dimensions of Spatial Belonging Framework developed by Wong (2023). Belonging is a complex concept that has gained significant focus in academic research and is understood here as the extent to which Autistic employees feel personally accepted, respected, and supported by others (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Cameron & Townend, 2021). Key to this understanding is the impact of space, organisation, and culture on the experience of belonging and inclusion for individuals within services and education (Wong, 2023). From this perspective, the experience of belonging is linked to the creation of a series of interlocking conceptual dimensions or spaces, therefore adopting a focus on environmental and relational factors in supporting Autistic flourishing.

Wong’s (2023) framework comprises;

- Structural Space,
- Relational Space,
- Physical Space, and
- Digital Space.

This approach will be augmented with reference to the Autistic SPACE framework developed by Autistic Doctors International (Doherty et al., 2023). The Autistic SPACE framework focused on environmental and interpersonal factors to inform the development of accessible services for Autistic individuals.

Research Aims:

- Explore the views and experiences of Autistic adults regarding the IMPACT Programme delivered by Gheel services.
- Listen to the views of participating Autistic adults regarding the support they received during the IMPACT Programme to prepare them for employment and how effective they feel it was.
- Elicit the ambitions and hopes of participating Autistic adults for their future engagements with education or employment opportunities.
- Identify the barriers or supports Autistic participants require to achieve their ambitions in education or employment roles in the future.
- Highlight the recommendations from Autistic people for supporting them towards accessing career or educational progression.

Research Questions:

- 1 What are the objectives of the Gheel IMPACT Programme and how effective is it from the perspective of staff and other research participants in achieving these objectives?
- 2 What were the experiences and views of Autistic individuals who took part in the IMPACT Programme?
- 3 How do Autistic participants feel the IMPACT Programme supported their transition to employment and future expectations?
- 4 What supports and barriers for accessing employment were identified by Autistic research participants and what were their recommendations for improving Gheel's IMPACT Programme?

Data Collection and Methodology

The research was carried out using a qualitative approach and a case study methodology to engage Autistic individuals in exploring their experiences, views, and ambitions for accessing employment or educational opportunities. In particular, the data collection tools focused on their experience and views of the IMPACT Programme and sought their suggestions for improvement of supports for seeking and staying in employment. The data collection consisted of one-on-one interviews conducted in person or online with Autistic adults engaged with Gheel or who are past participants of the IMPACT Programme; case study workshops with three past participants of IMPACT; and a focus group and interviews with Gheel staff. The research was carried out between March and July 2023.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with four cohorts of participants including:

- Autistic adults,
- Frontline Gheel staff, and
- Senior management staff,
- Autistic participatory case studies.

Autistic adults:

Sixteen Autistic adult participants self-selected for interview and were provided with the opportunity at a pre-interview meeting to state their preferences for taking part in the research. Research participants had a high level of control over their participation including the location of the meeting; meeting in person or online; having another person present; and providing written answers to questions instead of taking part in an oral interview. Seven of the sixteen participants had another person present at interview and one person submitted a written set of answers to the interview questions. All interviews lasted approximately forty minutes.

Gheel staff:

Gheel frontline staff and senior management staff also self-selected for interview with four frontline staff and seven management staff taking part in individual online interviews. One focus group was conducted with two frontline and two management staff.

Case Studies:

Three past participants of the IMPACT Programme self-selected for the case study workshops. The workshops consisted of three two-hour sessions held in person with the group to work through their experience of employment. These also explored participants attitudes and perceptions of employment for Autistic people. The workshops provided an opportunity for the participants to articulate their views from a personal perspective and contribute their experience regarding the IMPACT Programme as a support for their transition to employment. Three workshops were held in June and July 2023.

All transcripts were thematically analysed, and the findings are presented in section four of this report.

Key Findings

The findings of the current study comprised four overarching themes and seventeen sub-themes, which are presented in figure 6 within the findings of this report.

The results of the study are discussed with reference to the relevant literature and the research aims. They will be presented where appropriate with reference to Wong's (2023) 'Four dimensions of Spatial Belonging' framework which provides a theoretical frame for accessible design of inclusive services and environments.

1. What are the objectives of the Gheel IMPACT Programme and how effective is it from the perspective of staff and other research participants in achieving these objectives?

The Gheel IMPACT Programme aims to facilitate a holistic transition for Autistic adults into employment, recognising the challenges they face in various life domains such as education, employment, and living arrangements (Cage et al., 2020). Transition planning for individuals with disabilities, particularly in Ireland, is lacking, leading to disjointed experiences as they move from education to employment (Scanlon & Kamp, 2016; Doyle et al., 2017). The Gheel staff findings emphasised a nuanced understanding of the landscape of disability support services in Ireland and their recognition of **the lack of autism-informed transition and employment supports** for Autistic people post school. This transition involves adapting to new routines and environments, potentially causing anxiety, and disrupting feelings of belonging. This reality informs the rationale for the IMPACT Programme in addressing the gap in employment services.

This focus for the IMPACT Programme was particularly important given the accounts from participants regarding their previous experiences of guidance or transition planning services. The findings demonstrate a **lack of guidance in school settings** and an **absence of autism-informed guidance in mainstream school settings**. Autistic participants in this study echo the emotional impact of a perceived lack of belonging, speaking of difficulties in leaving their home and overcoming their anxiety to get to school. Others spoke of sitting in classrooms 'in the back' and being ignored. A sense of belonging is crucial for marginalized individuals, including those with disabilities, impacting engagement, confidence, mental well-being, and academic achievement (Ahn and Davis 2020).

These gaps in support services had very concrete impacts for the Autistic participants access to employment access, with many reporting they **had not previously held employment roles** for any extended duration of time. While research participants expressed the wish to follow a particular area of interest into employment and wanted to be employed, they viewed themselves as **not having knowledge or experience** of how to find and keep a job. Creating inclusive environments would support positive vocational and social outcomes for autistic individuals. Understanding the relationship between space and belonging is vital, encompassing physical workplaces, digital platforms, and social networks.

The IMPACT Programme was **perceived positively by participants**, offering tailored support and guidance for their transition into employment. This personalized approach enhanced familiarity and motivation, aiding in positive transition planning. The service model for Gheel has moved away from a medical model of disability towards a social model. Specifically, their ethos emphasises the importance of a **holistic provision of support to an individual** rather than a homogenised set of needs. Staff are also aware of the needs of Autistic adults in the community who require support to progress into education and/or employment. The staff subscribe to a service for life approach where the aim is to help the individual **build independence and autonomy** with natural support such that they won't need a service such as Gheel offers.

Research participants in the study had **varied employment and educational ambitions** which often depended on their financial status and/or familial or other supports. Structural inequalities impact the inclusion of marginalized groups into society, with Autistic individuals facing challenges in accessing employment. Despite their desire for employment opportunities, statistics show lower engagement compared to other disability groups and the general population. Reducing marginalization is essential for effective transition into employment.

2. What were the experiences and views of Autistic individuals who took part in the IMPACT Programme?

Autistic **participants value the knowledge gained from in-person training sessions** through the IMPACT Programme, the social support they experienced through peer discussion with other Autistic participants, and individualised person-centred supports from Gheel staff. The **social experiences, social networks, and interaction aspect of participating in the IMPACT Programme were identified as important by Autistic participants**.

Another important finding was the positive experiences many of the participants reported from their relationships with "key worker" staff in Gheel, or staff delivering the IMPACT Programme. Key to the structure of the Gheel services ethos is the **relationship between the support worker and the person** they are supporting. Each relationship is unique and bespoke, developing through the needs of the person and the responses from the staff. This approach

offered **predictability and flexibility** and findings show Autistic participants value the IMPACT Programme and in particular their interaction and connection with staff who run it.

The need to attend the workshops was useful for some Autistic participants who found it **gave them a focus and a routine that helped them feel more in control** of their lives. Others found that the content **alleviated anxiety** as they realised that **their experience was not unique through benchmarking experiences with others** on the programme. They also realised that **they had options in terms of seeking a career as well as a job**. Clearly, factors related to the social and relationship space are a key feature of how Autistic people experienced the IMPACT Programme or work environments.

3. How do Autistic participants feel the IMPACT Programme supported their transition to employment and future expectations?

The research participants explained how the IMPACT programme **increased their confidence and understanding of the workplace** and how to navigate it. The content on workplace culture and fit was particularly valued as it helped them focus on their ambitions for the future and feel confident in seeking a career and a workplace that suited their aspirations and needs.

Participants received **tailored advice and training**, explored workplace dynamics, and learned about communication strategies in neurotypical settings. **Individualised support** from IMPACT trainers helped participants navigate the interview process through, for example, role play and mock interviews. Such supports addressed the challenges they face in accessing employment and navigating interviews due to differences in processing social interactions. Such situations have been shown to be particularly challenging for some autistic job-seekers due to sensory challenges or differences in social presentation or expectations (Cameron and Townend, 2021).

Considerations regarding the digital space are crucial for supporting spatial belonging for autistic individuals, as preferences for online learning vary. In the current study, the Autistic participants voiced **a strong appreciation of individualised in-person support from staff** and positive outcomes for social interaction with Autistic peers during the IMPACT Programme delivery.

The programme introduced participants to concepts like workplace culture and empowered them to make informed choices regarding jobs and careers, boosting their confidence and aspirations. Participants in this study **identified mentorship and peer support as valuable additions** to the IMPACT Programme, facilitating their progression to employment.

4. What supports and barriers for accessing employment were identified by Autistic research participants and what were their recommendations for improving Gheel's IMPACT Programme?

Autistic participants identified a range of challenges they face and clearly articulated the issues with education settings and seeking / staying in employment. Processes such as **job application procedures and interviews** can be oblique to them as they are structured for neurotypical people and do not accommodate Autistic and otherwise neurodivergent understandings of the world. Participants who had held roles or employment in the past spoke of very **negative, challenging, or unsatisfactory past employment experiences**. This included negative social experiences with other staff or management they had worked with, inclusive of experiences of bullying. In addition, inappropriate or **challenging environmental and sensory issues** were identified regarding negative past employment experiences. The built environment of workplaces presents challenges, including the need for **quiet spaces and sensory rooms**.

Overwhelming demands and inflexibility were also identified, with some participants expressing a preference for part-time or more flexible work practices. The pace of the work environment may also pose difficulties for some participants, who may struggle to request accommodations due to concerns about hindering their job prospects. **Only a minority of Autistic individuals request reasonable accommodations** from employers, fearing it may affect their chances of securing preferred roles.

Participants discussed **disclosure of their Autistic status** within their daily lives and self-identity, highlighting its subjective nature and the associated **stigma and stereotyping**. Long-standing stereotypes and societal misunderstandings of autistic neurology and preferences contribute to negative experiences from an early age, through school, and into adulthood. The importance of **social support and creating an appropriate relational space** in both education and work environments was underscored by Autistic participants. The IMPACT Programme and similar providers must consider the relational space aspect in vocational preparation and pathway development.

Navigating the physical space, particularly in relation to sensory challenges and transportation, poses additional hurdles for accessing employment opportunities, especially in rural areas. **Practical planning advice on finance and transport** is needed, as some participants **fear jeopardising entitlements** by seeking full-time employment.

Recommendations

Recommendations from Autistic participants:

- A** Some research participants who had attended career sessions as part of education or training courses in the past expressed a wish for practical activities and content tailored to an individual context or situation.
- B** However, the **content on culture and understanding of 'fit'** for the person and the organisation was new to many participants. It is recommended that this aspect of the IMPACT programme be developed as research participants viewed it as empowering in two ways:
 - (i) that an Autistic person has agency to choose a job or career that is sustainable for them, and
 - (i) that at times an organisation's culture can be part of the reason that employment is not a success. It is not the Autistic persons "fault".
- C** Some research participants would like to **engage directly with employers** and learn about job cultures and settings directly from organisations.
- D** The links with employers and support to scaffold such links emerged as an important finding for the Autistic research participants. The **need for work placements and practical experience** or **'taster' work experience in workplaces** was emphasised.
- E** Some participants suggested **mentorship or dedicated supports in a workplace** as particularly valuable.

- F** Additionally, participants also expressed a **wish to meet with past participants who graduated from IMPACT** and had progressed into employment. This was suggested to potentially be inspirational to current IMPACT learners in raising their expectations and future ambitions regarding accessing employment.
- G** Participants recommended that the IMPACT Programme **provide opportunities to explore alternative routes to employment and education through apprenticeship and creative careers** as well as wider career opportunities than business or retail settings.
- H** Participants **valued the ongoing support** offered after the IMPACT Programme for job seeking and/or workplace support. It is recommended that all enrolled in IMPACT programme are made aware of the availability of this continuing post-programme support and how it can be accessed.

Overall Recommendations

The following are overall recommendations emerging from the research in terms of the context of Gheel and specifically for the IMPACT Programme:

- It is important to foreground the voice of Autistic adults on key issues and service design or delivery relevant to their lives. An acknowledgement of the complexity and diversity of Autistic experience should be foundational in informing policy and service development.
- Develop organisational processes to support the integration of IMPACT programme participants within the wider service protocol of the Gheel organisation more generally. This would facilitate a smooth transition experience for autistic adults.
- Operationalise the tailored service model to support appropriate personalised IMPACT Programme delivery for all participants:
 - Develop Individual Educational Plan (IEP) type portfolio for IMPACT Programme participants.
 - Develop 'exit interview' style questionnaire for IMPACT Programme participants to include feedback mechanisms / goal setting.
- It is suggested that Gheel use funding from Pobal or other sources to develop a network of voluntary providers and charities nationwide who are providing employment services to Autistic service users.
- This network could share experiences on successful approaches, links with employers, and participant feedback to build an Autistic-informed employment programme for neurodiverse people that could be mainstreamed, and sustainably funded in the future.
- Gheel and the IMPACT Programme should continue their outreach activities with employers while evaluating and documenting the needs of employers and Autistic job seekers to build an Autism informed employer support programme that could be mainstreamed nationwide.

1. INTRODUCTION

Gheel Autism Services provides residential supports, community outreach supports, individualised transition supports and Day Support Services for Autistic people. Gheel has developed Autism-informed models of support that ensure people supported have the opportunity to develop their skills, competencies and personal development needs in order to make a positive contribution within their local community. This research project funded by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission aims to explore the perceptions and experiences of Autistic people of the challenges they face when seeking employment. DCU researchers worked with Autistic adults in Gheel Autism Services using participatory research approaches to understand their experience of education and employment and their views of the IMPACT Programme.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (2006) states that Autistic people have the right to develop their potential, and to be supported in this. In Ireland people with disabilities are at a disadvantage and face many more barriers to accessing the same opportunities in further / higher education, training, or employment, than their non-disabled peers (Doyle et al., 2017; Gillan & Coughlan, 2010; McGuckin, Shevlin, Bell, & Devecchi, 2013). Individuals with disabilities are much more likely to be unemployed relative to the working age general population in Ireland (Watson, Banks & Lyons, 2015).

Participatory Autism Research (PAR) approaches (Pelicano, et al., 2014) were used in this study to inform design, data collection and case study creation. PAR aims to facilitate meaningful input from Autistic individuals regarding what research is conducted and how it is implemented (Long et al., 2017). PAR particularly informed the creation of case studies by Autistic research participants. These were facilitated through the participation of three Autistic adults from Gheel in a series of workshops that encouraged space for reflection, articulation and expression of their experiences of post school transitions, expectations of work or further education. These workshops explored their suggestions for necessary or useful support from workplaces, education institutions and other stakeholders in these spaces. These expressions form the basis of 3 case studies or vignettes as part of the data collection and provide a depth and richness to the presentation of the research findings. The case study's workshop approach provided both Autistic adults and researchers an opportunity to explore the research questions thoroughly and improved our approach to eliciting the voices of individuals on the Autism spectrum and ultimately permit the widest and most accessible engagement (Fletcher-Watson et al. 2018). The research was conducted on site and online with Autistic research participants and Gheel staff members using PAR approaches and a qualitative interview framework that addressed the following aims:

Overall Research Aims:

- Explore the views and experiences of Autistic adults regarding the IMPACT Programme delivered by Gheel services.
- Listen to the views of participating Autistic adults regarding the support and guidance they received during the IMPACT Programme to prepare them for employment and how effective they feel it was.
- Elicit the ambitions and hopes of participating Autistic adults for their future engagements with education or employment opportunities.

- Identify the barriers or supports Autistic research participants require to achieve their ambitions in education or employment roles in the future.
- Highlight the recommendations from Autistic people for supporting them towards accessing career or educational progression. Elicit the ambitions and hopes of participating Autistic adults for their future engagements with education or employment opportunities.

2. RESEARCH CONTEXT

Gheel Autism Services

Gheel Autism Services was founded in Dublin city in 1971 by a small group of parents of Autistic people. The name Gheel originates from the region of Geel in Belgium where since the 7th century people with disabilities were supported to live in the community and not in institutions. The Irish Saint Dymphna in the 7th century fled to Geel from Ireland and is credited with initiating this type of community living support model. The first service managed by Gheel was on the grounds of a building named St Dymphna's. Gheel champions and supports Autistic people in the greater Dublin and North Kildare region. They provide day, residential, supported living and outreach services, with the goal of maximising independence and enhancing quality of life. All programmes are tailored to recognise the neurodiversity model, and work in co-operation with Autistic people. Staff receive regular Autism-specific person-centred training, and they are equipped with the knowledge and expertise to enable each individual they support to have positive and meaningful life experiences.

Gheel's commitment as an Autism support provider is to ensure best practice, best quality, and best outcomes. The organisation aims to promote the empowerment, understanding and inclusion of people and enhance quality of life - not just through direct intervention but also through increasing capacity for advocacy and self-direction at the individual and community level (see Figure 1).

IMPACT Programme

Inspiring Meaningful and Progressive Autistic Career Transitions (IMPACT) programme is an initiative developed by Gheel that primarily focuses on career development and Autism awareness to support the participation of Autistic adults in employment across a range of settings. There are two aspects to the IMPACT Programme, the first one of which focuses on supporting Autistic people to develop skills and competencies to access employment and maintain career targets they have selected for themselves, and the second for IMPACT to work with employers and support them in developing an Autism-informed workplace. The IMPACT Programme is a holistic transition to employment initiative that Gheel has developed and provides to a spectrum of Autistic adults. The programme aims to support Autistic individuals to develop skills related to work preparation and career planning which may support their engagement with employment.

OUR COMMITMENT TO QUALITY



Figure 1: Gheel Autism Services Commitment to Quality

The second aspect of the IMPACT Programme is to work with a range of employment organisations and help them in developing a neurodiverse-aligned and supportive work culture. This is inclusive of employment placement and retention, and employer relationship guarantee building (which includes Autism Awareness Training for the employer). The IMPACT Programme offers onsite support to managers, team leaders and staff regarding Autism-informed recruitment strategies, interview supports, induction/onboarding, and transition supports into the workplace.

Another significant pillar of the IMPACT Programme focuses on employment retention for the employer and employee through developing good working partnerships and ongoing support practices when necessary. To date, the IMPACT Programme has opened employment opportunities through partnerships with several companies for example – Woodies, Lifestyle Sports, SuperValu (Musgrave), Dunnes Stores, Accenture, Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council, Odeon Cinema Group, Kerry Europe, Failte Ireland, DCU, the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC), and Business in the Community Ireland.

IMPACT – Supporting a Shift in Organisational Culture

Matching Autistic candidates to the role plays a vital part in easing the Autistic employee into and through work via a framework of support that offers a seamless transition into the orientation of working. However, in some cases, an employer may not have the operational capacity to execute this and may seek help from the IMPACT Programme to assess any gaps in support across the team, the department, and even the business. The process of support progresses across 7 steps, which are adapted depending on the needs of the applicant and or the employer:

- 1 Building Capacity for Support.
- 2 Identifying Accommodations.
- 3 Supporting an Applied Learning Approach.
- 4 Supporting Communication Strategies.
- 5 Supporting Change and Self-Management Strategies.
- 6 Guidance and Review.
- 7 Retention Supports and Ongoing Autism Awareness Training.

The placement of a candidate is seen as a partial milestone toward building a future of inclusive workplaces that are neurodiversity informed. Since its inception in 2021 the IMPACT Programme has successfully worked with over 50 applicants in their work and career journey and continues to support new applicants who have left college, dropped out of school, or who require existing support in their job to support retention. Considering that policy has caught up with the UNCRPD, employers - through no fault of their own - are lagging behind what is necessary in making the workplace a place of equitable support for the Autistic community. There is an acknowledgement that there is still a lot of work to be done on the ground where funding structures need to be reviewed and more support is required to support and educate employers in understanding and accommodating Autistic staff (Gheel, 2023).

Autism – A Developing Classification

Research into Autistic neurology has undergone a significant shift in recent years, moving from deficit-focused perspectives to embrace the neurodiversity model (Botha and Frost, 2020; Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Kapp et al., 2019; Milton, 2012; Pearson & Rose, 2021). Traditional definitions of Autism, as found in widely referenced sources such as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders DSM V (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), often portrayed Autism in terms of deficits, using pathologising language to describe Autistic individuals.

Autism Spectrum Disorder DSM 5 Definition (2013)

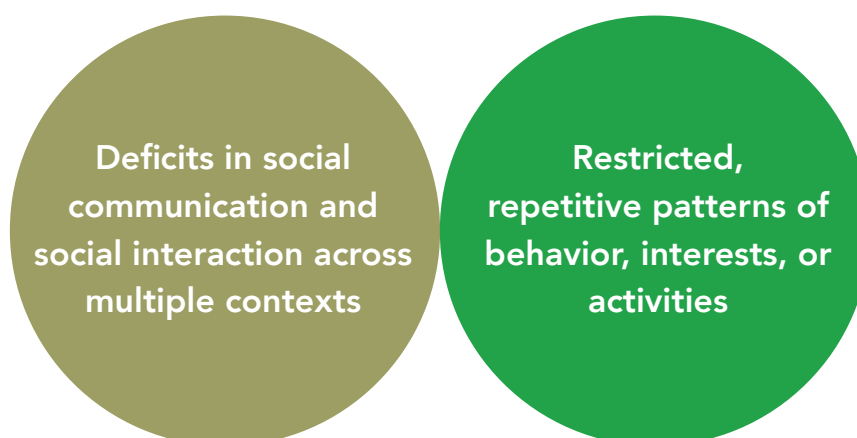


Figure 2: Autism Spectrum Disorder, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM 5: APA, 2013)

The global prevalence of Autism is increasing. According to a 2023 report from the US Centres for Disease Control (CDC), Autism is observed in 1 out of 36 surveyed 8-year-olds (Maenner et al., 2023). However, accurately determining the overall prevalence is challenging due to the evolving definition of Autism over time and the introduction of more precise diagnostic tools and aids (Nevison & Blaxill, 2017; Zylstra et al., 2014). The rising rates might be attributed to the broadening of diagnostic criteria (Saracino et al., 2010) and differences in how Autism is assessed or how prevalence rates are reported across jurisdictions. There are also differing understandings of its presentation with prevalence in the Republic of Ireland reported to be 1.5% (Department of Health, 2018), while Autism's prevalence in Northern Ireland (NI) in children is stated as being 5% (Rodgers and McCluney, 2023). The NI Census figures recorded 5.25% of 0-14 year olds have a diagnosis of Autism, compared to 0.32% of 40-64 year olds (The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), 2022). Autism is a part of the broader neurodiversity family of differences or disabilities which encompasses people with conditions or differences such as ADHD, Dyslexia and Dyspraxia, Epilepsy, Tourette's Syndrome and Dyscalculia.

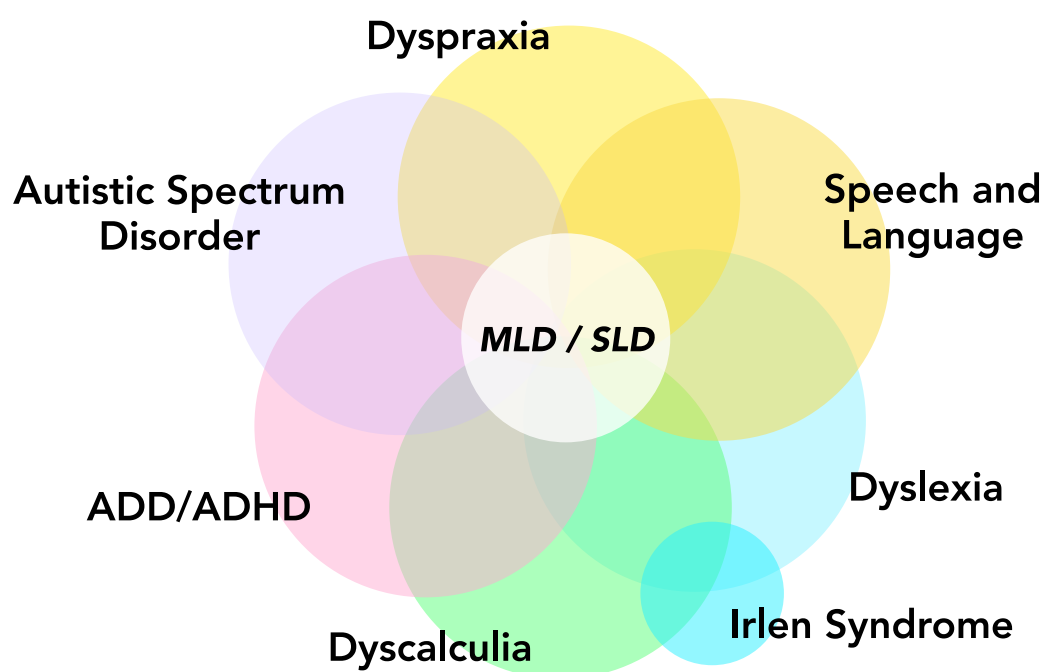


Figure 3: Neurodevelopmental Conditions; Differences and Intersections

However, the influence of Autistic researchers and theorists has led to the emergence of the neurodiversity paradigm (Botha and Frost, 2020, Bottema-Beutel et al, 2021, Kapp et al., 2019; Milton, 2012; Pearson & Rose, 2021), which is conceptualised based on four pillars (Walker, 2021; Fletcher-Watson, 2022):

- Neurodiversity is naturally occurring,
- No one neurotype is better than another,
- Neurodiversity operates like other equality and diversity dimensions, and
- Strength is in diversity itself. There is a collective value in diversity.

This paradigm shift has highlighted the importance of social networks in the process of transforming mere space into meaningful places especially in academic environments. Social networks, particularly the influence of peers, play a central role in co-creating shared meanings at universities (Mishra, 2020). Additionally, cognitive and perceptual differences in Autistic experiences have been emphasised, particularly through models like predictive coding in perception (Bervoets et al., 2021; Van de Cruys et al., 2014). According to this model, Autistic neurology integrates more prediction errors into perception, leading to a distinct way of learning from and understanding the world. Autistic individuals, therefore, tend to be more perceptually aware of the uncertainty present in the world. In contrast, neurotypical neurology filters out “non-salient” predictive errors reducing uncertainty but potentially limiting a richer understanding of the world (Bervoets et al. 2021).

Moreover, the concept of monotropism, emphasising focused attention, sensory experiences, deep focus, and flow states, has been proposed as a theory explaining differences in cognition among Autistic individuals (Murray, Lesser, and Lawson, 2005). Autistic individuals often exhibit strong interests and can achieve a state of flow during engaging activities (Tansley et al., 2021; Wood, 2021), leading to beneficial effects on well-being. This state of flow is characterised by sustained and deep concentration on specific interests or activities (Murray, 2019), aligning with the concept of flow described in positive psychology literature (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Milton, 2021).

Furthermore, the Double Empathy Problem, introduced by Milton (2012), challenges previous cognitive-based theories and suggests that social misunderstandings and communication challenges are mutual phenomena arising from the actions and expectations of all social actors, both Autistic and neurotypical, within a social environment (Milton, 2017). This bi-directional misunderstanding in social engagement involves comprehension breakdowns on the part of all participants, irrespective of their neurotype. Research supports the presence of bi-directional communication disjunctions in social interactions involving mixed neurotype communicator groups, highlighting the distinct challenges faced by Autistic individuals in connecting and creating social relationships with neurotypical individuals (Crompton et al., 2020a). Interestingly, Autistic individuals do not encounter the same difficulties in connection and social relationships when interacting with other Autistic individuals compared to interactions with neurotypical individuals (Crompton et al., 2020b).

While perspectives aligned with the neurodiversity paradigm advocate for embracing diverse experiences within Autistic neurology, societal attitudes towards Autistic individuals often change at a slow pace. Deep-rooted stereotypes and a historical inclination to focus on deficits in diagnosis and service provision can lead to misunderstandings of Autistic neurology and preferences (McVey et al., 2023). Consequently, many Autistic adults, especially those without co-occurring intellectual disability, remain undiagnosed, resulting in barriers to accessing support services, employment opportunities, and income sources. These challenges have significant implications for quality of life, contributing to poorer physical and mental health (O’Neill & Kenny, 2023), higher rates of co-occurring conditions (Doherty et al., 2023), and elevated suicide rates, which are seven times higher across various Autistic profiles. Additionally, there is up to a 40-fold increase in mortality due to co-occurring neurological conditions like epilepsy (Hirvikoski et al., 2016).

To address these issues, there is a growing call for a paradigm shift in behaviour and service provision for Autistic individuals, including changes in language and awareness (McVey et al., 2023). This shift necessitates moving away from the perspective that regards conventional “physical and mental health” as the sole determinant of Autistic flourishing. Instead, there is an emphasis on adopting a broader concept of “well-being” (Doherty et al., 2023; Fusar-Poli et al., 2020; Pellicano & Heyworth, 2023). This perspective aligns with the World Health Organization’s International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF), which offers a holistic framework recognizing the influence of social and environmental factors on disability development, in addition to individual health conditions and their impact (Bölte, 2023). Such an approach underscores the importance of supporting the active participation and engagement of Autistic individuals within civil society, respecting their neurological differences and experiences, and empowering their voices in guiding policy development and service provision (Doherty et al., 2023; Kenny et al., 2023; Pellicano & Heyworth, 2023). Heterogeneity among Autistic people leads to additional educational and employment access complexities (Green et al., 2018).

Transitions to Employment – Policy in Ireland

In Ireland, neurodivergent people with intellectual disabilities have traditionally left school and mostly transitioned into non-education or employment settings, such as HSE-funded adult day services (Scanlon & Doyle, 2021). This has had the unintended result of leading to ongoing social exclusion for these people and societally low expectations and a poor acquisition of skills to support employability within their communities (Scanlon & Doyle, 2018). The Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities (CES), mandated by the Government of Ireland in 2015, is designed to empower individuals with disabilities who have the skills and support to engage in appropriate employment opportunities. Historically, this strategy aims to overcome barriers to employment resulting from insufficient education and skills, low expectations, and the potential loss of disability payments. Of particular importance within the strategy is the concept of transition, encompassing essential elements such as support systems, service coordination, and assistance for employers, all of which are integral to facilitating a seamless process. However, recent research indicates a lack of formal transition planning to aid individuals with disabilities as they transition from education or training to employment in Ireland (Scanlon & Kamp, 2016). Additionally, this process appears disjointed, especially as individuals move from compulsory education to further or higher education or the workforce (Doyle et al., 2017).

Attainment of employment is often used a key metric or indicator in the assessment of quality-of-life assessment and social participation, with the absence of paid job opportunities potentially leading to social isolation, diminished health, and reduced job satisfaction in later years, especially for individuals lacking access to work experience (Baldwin et al., 2014; Waddell & Burton, 2006). In the Irish context, employment rates for individuals with disabilities aged 20 to 64 are significantly lower at 49.7%, compared to 82.3% for those without disabilities (Scanlon & Doyle, 2021). Among individuals with intellectual disabilities, the employment rate is remarkably low, standing at 17.3% (National Disability Authority, 2019). While there is clear evidence that people with disabilities are more likely to face unemployment, disrupted employment, or underemployment (Baldwin et al., 2014; Scanlon & Doyle, 2018), those who engage in part-time employment or possess work experience, especially in paid vocational roles, are 35% more likely to secure employment (Cameron & Townend, 2021).

The ongoing participation, inclusion, and support of Autistic people and adults, or those with

disabilities, within the workforce face a range of obstacles which stem from negative attitudes and social stigma. The low expectations do not necessarily imply any negative intent, but are rather often tied to underestimated abilities and doubts regarding the capability of these job seekers to obtain and sustain employment (Scanlon & Doyle, 2021). In response, these low expectations and associated low levels of participation has resulted in cautious attitudes among employers, who might feel unequipped to provide supported employment, and among families, who might hesitate to explore economically uncertain options beyond adult day services (Baldwin et al., 2014). Considering these facts, it becomes evident that substantial efforts are necessary to support people with intellectual disabilities and Autism in accessing equal opportunities as their peers during their transition from education to higher education and the workforce.

Autism and Participation in Employment

The youth unemployment rate in the Republic of Ireland was 11% in 2023 (CSO, 2023). Historically high levels of educational attainment and progression across the population (CSO, 2023) has led to a competitive post-school transition environment and employment sector (Scanlon & Doyle, 2018, 2021). Approximately 16% of Autistic adults are engaged in full-time employment, and 32% participate in some form of paid work, in contrast to 47% of other disability groups and 80% of the general adult population (National Autistic Society, 2016). Despite these statistics, it is evident that the majority of Autistic adults desire employment opportunities (Baldwin et al., 2014; Bennett & Dukes, 2013; Wilczynski et al., 2013). Employment offers significant advantages, such as enhanced independence, the development of social connections, the chance to contribute to society, and an overall improved quality of life (Roux et al., 2013). The literature foregrounds the importance of space being made for participation and inclusion in civil society within recognised roles or identities for Autistic adults in a similar manner to the increasing emphasis on inclusive provision for Autistic children within school's settings (Kenny et al., 2023; Shevlin & Banks, 2021).

Recent research that explored factors which can support the observed lower levels of participation in both post-secondary education and employment explored found peer support and mentorship provision had observable impacts on levels of successful engagement in employment (Cameron & Townend, 2021). Specifically, it was found that 48% of Autistic job seekers who were supported by specialist mentors found paid employment (full-time or part-time), demonstrating a 16% increase in paid employment between those who received mentoring support and those who did not (Cameron & Townend, 2021). However, the same authors note that employment is a choice for any individual, but not all Autistic people may be seeking full-time employment. There also needs to be holistic consideration regarding wider quality of life factors and supportive alignment between each individual and forms or durations of employment.

One key factor regarding decisions to pursue employment and participate in particular forms or durations of employment relate to social factors, including the act of disclosing one's Autism status and the process of Autistic self-identification (Pearson & Rose, 2021; Romualdez et al., 2021). Disclosing one's Autism diagnosis is a deeply personal choice, and once made, it cannot be retracted, necessitating thoughtful consideration (Cameron & Townend, 2021). The reasons behind disclosure vary among Autistic individuals and may be influenced by societal attitudes and past life experiences (O'Neill & Kenny, 2023; Romualdez et al., 2021). The topic of disclosure is intricately tied to the issue of stigma (Pearson & Rose, 2021; Romualdez et

al., 2021) and many Autistic individuals choose not to disclose their diagnosis due to the fear of facing discrimination (Cameron & Townend, 2021). Unfortunately, there still exist numerous negative stereotypes and biases associated with an “invisible” disability (Johnson & Joshi, 2014). Past experiences of stigma, particularly during their school years, may lead Autistic individuals to opt for non-disclosure (McLeod et al., 2019).

Moreover, revealing an Autism diagnosis can lead to both positive and negative stereotyping, where individuals make generalisations that can be either positive or negative but are harmful because they may not be accurate. This unpredictable outcome further complicates the decision-making process for Autistic individuals (Heasman & Gillespie, 2019). Autistic adults who choose to disclose must delicately balance raising awareness and fostering understanding while avoiding harmful stereotypes. For example, Ameri et al (2018) conducted a study involving fictitious cover letters and résumés sent to real employers. Some cover letters disclosed a varying disability (such as Autism, spinal injury, for example) while others had no disclosure. The findings revealed that applicants who disclosed a disability in their cover letters received 26% fewer expressions of interest compared to those who did not disclose. Notably, there was no significant difference observed between the differing disability conditions (Ameri et al., 2018). Findings such as these clearly show the real-world implications of persisting stigma or discrimination (Scanlon & Doyle, 2018). Any supported employment initiatives focusing on Autistic adults will also likely need to consider levels of awareness and positive social factors within employment settings being targeted for work placements (Cameron & Townend, 2021).

In addition, there are also significant barriers to entry into nearly all employment roles which can pose significant challenges specifically to Autistic job-seekers. Among these various challenges the standard interview process stands out as particularly daunting for Autistic people (Cameron & Townend, 2021). During interviews, many Autistic individuals struggle to navigate the particularly specific and abnormal aspect of the interview social dynamic, often finding the need to perform or consider how to present themselves unpleasant or difficult to understand. Additionally, predicting the questions asked and understanding the responses employers anticipate can be challenging (Baldwin et al., 2014). Given the differences in how Autistic individuals experience their sensorial and social environment (Botha & Frost, 2020) relative to their non-Autistic counterparts, the social interaction process can be open to misinterpretation and misunderstanding (Baldwin et al., 2014). For example, many Autistic job candidates frequently answer interview questions in a direct and sincere manner, potentially deviating from responses expected by interviewers (Cameron & Townend, 2021). This may contribute to the bi-directional miscommunication proposed by Milton (2012) in the Double Empathy Problem, with Autistic people having been shown to be more likely to be negatively perceived by their non-Autistic peers (Sasson & Morrison, 2019). Overall, interviews are often a challenging assessment approach for Autistic job seekers (Cameron & Townend, 2021).

There is evidence that when Autistic people succeed in accessing employment roles, they are more likely to change jobs more frequently and are less likely to progress into management or senior roles (Baldwin et al., 2014). If Autistic job seekers tend to evolve uneven job histories, including periods of unemployment and underemployment, this may lead to a vicious cycle of them being placed repeatedly into entry-level jobs (Baldwin et al., 2014). Clearly, there are a range of factors influencing the success of Autistic people in, firstly, attaining employment roles and then progressing to their satisfaction within the roles they do attain.

Theoretical Framework

The existing literature strongly suggests that any approach to support access or participation for Autistic people within employment will need to adopt a holistic approach which considers the voice and priorities of the Autistic community (Dwyer et al., 2023; Gormley et al., 2023). In addition, the influence of a range of intersecting variables or influences will need to be considered in providing support in an effective manner which supports the individual profile of strengths and supports of the particular job seeker.

Doherty et al., (2023) referenced the term “Autistic SPACE,” initially introduced in 1992 (Sinclair, 2005), in developing their own framework to support access and participation for Autistic individuals within medical services. The term originally denoted locations and occasions where the requirements of Autistic individuals were given precedence (Doherty et al., 2023). The framework developed, called Autistic Space (Doherty et al., 2023) was intended as an accessible framework to facilitate equitable service design and support increased access to clinical services and care at all points for Autistic individuals. The acronym ‘SPACE’ was used to encompass five core Autistic needs: Sensory needs, Predictability, Acceptance, Communication, and Empathy (see figure 2 for visual representation).

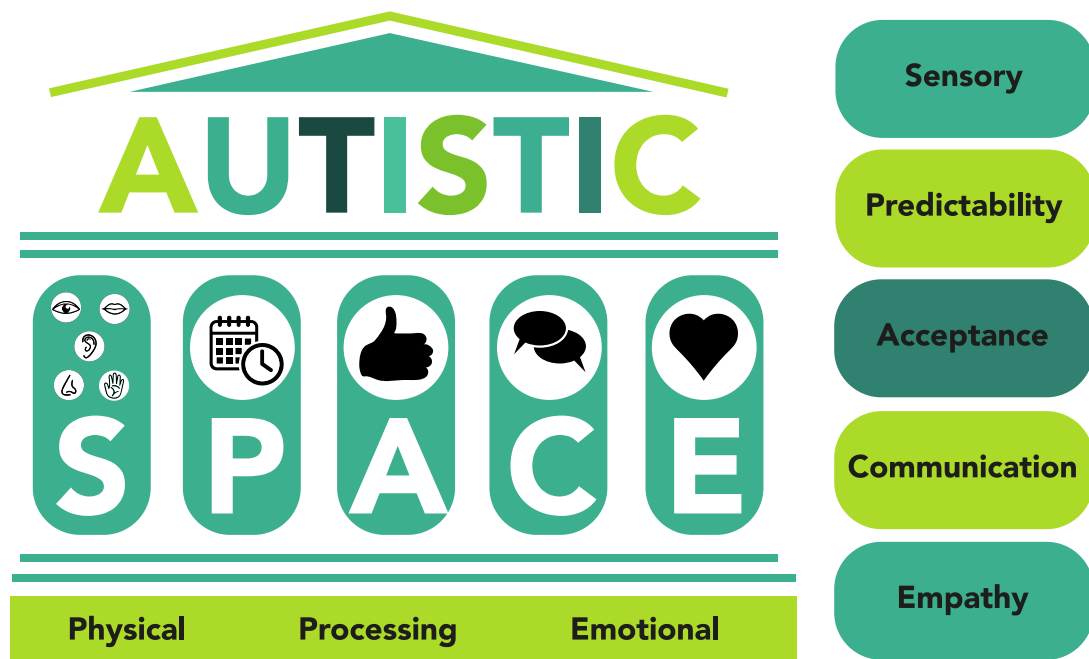


Figure 4: Autistic SPACE FRAMEWORK (Doherty et al., 2023)

While the aim of the Autistic SPACE framework was to develop greater understanding of Autistic experience across healthcare and medical systems, a greater focus on space as a context for supporting greater participation, agency and belonging is a key consideration when promoting inclusion in employment contexts (Dwyer et al., 2023; Wong, 2023). Autistic employees belonging is understood as the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, and supported by others (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Cameron & Townend, 2021). Belonging is a complex concept that has received considerable attention in higher education research. It is influenced by multiple and intersecting factors, such as individual characteristics, institutional practices, and social contexts. As Temple (2018) makes clear, improving a physical

environment may improve sensory and access experiences, but does not necessarily translate to better social spaces.

The focus should primarily be on social networks/interactions and the establishment of social capital. In this regard, social networks, particularly the influence of peers, are pivotal in shaping shared meanings within employment settings (O'Neill & Kenny, 2023; Romualdez et al., 2021). Social support networks within social circles can impact or bolster engagement with employment and sense of belonging (Mishra, 2020).

The relationship between space and belonging is complex, encompassing physical and campus spaces, digital spaces, social networks and cultural practices within education or work settings (Ellis & Goodyear, 2016). Digital spaces, such as online work environments and social media platforms, can also contribute to employee belonging or disconnection and alienation (Mallman et al., 2021). Space is not neutral but operates in explicit and implicit ways that reflect structural inequalities of power and privilege. Soja's (2010) theory of spatial justice proposes that spatial dimensions can support or hinder the participation and engagement of employees from diverse backgrounds. Clearly, understanding the interplay between these factors is crucial for creating inclusive and supportive environments that promote positive employment and social outcomes for Autistic workers (Elias & White, 2018).

Wong (2023) proposes spatial belonging as a framework for understanding how to support student belonging within diverse higher education spaces. This comprises four interconnected dimensions: Physical, Digital, relational, and structural.

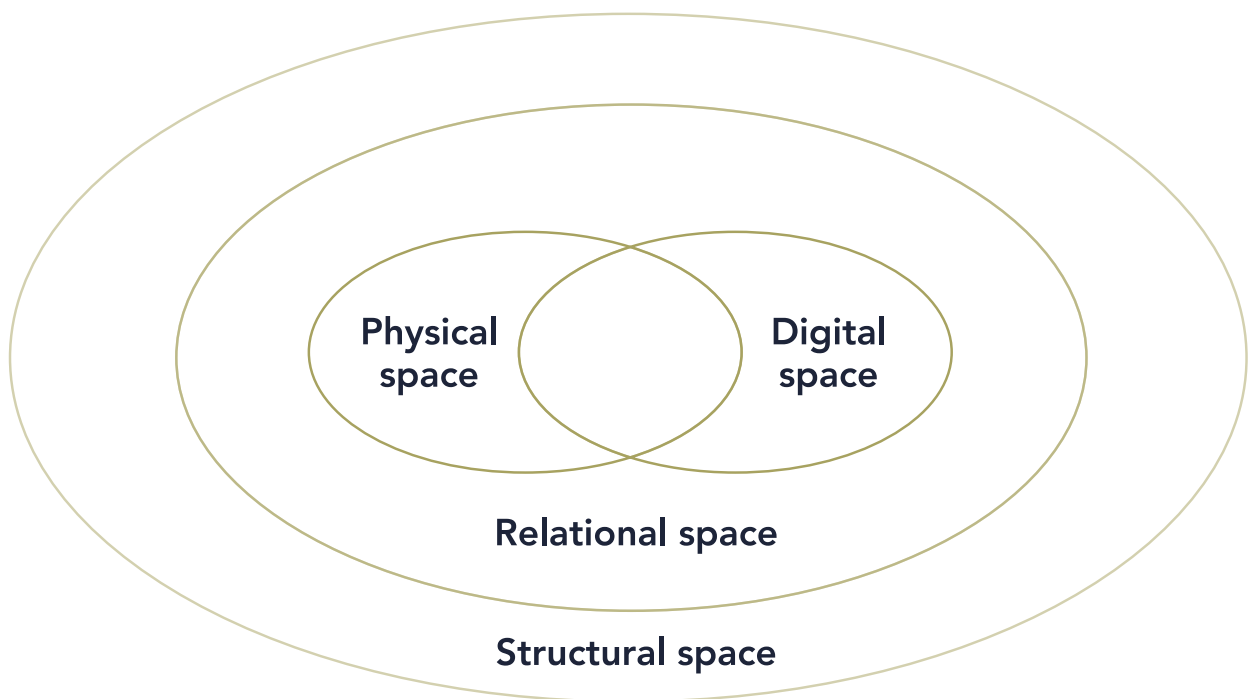


Figure 5: Four Dimensions of Spatial Belonging (Wong, 2023)

Physical Space- refers to the material and tangible aspects of reality (buildings and objects) which provide a setting for individuals to develop belonging / non-belonging through sensory lived experiences. The planning and layout of working spaces can be exclusionary and even hostile to some employees.

Digital Space - The rise of the digital space has a profound effect on remote worker engagement and belonging. This can support access/participation for some but may also operate as a barrier to exclude others, particularly socially.

Relational Space - The relational dimension of spatial belonging refers to the quality of relationship between people, especially peers and social networks, which can have a positive, negative or indifferent effect on employee belonging. However, staff need to be reflective about their relationships and connections with workspaces and its environment, in addition to people.

Structural Space: Work and education spaces are formed and structured through external and internal policies, permeated by different historical and political ideologies. This can result in different lived experiences, even for the same space, for individuals from diverse and particularly underrepresented backgrounds.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

The qualitative research study employed a range of flexible differentiated approaches to engage Autistic individuals in exploring their views and ambitions for accessing employment or educational opportunities. The research explored their views regarding barriers to achieving their ambitions and their recommendations for supporting Autistic individuals to access employment or education.

Ethics

The research team applied for ethical approval from the DCU Research Ethics Committee and received full approval. Sample ethical documents including Plain Language Statements, Informed Consent and the interview question frameworks are available in the Appendices. In addition, the research team took care in partnership with Gheel to accommodate and support individual preferences for dates and times, locations, communication modes and individual needs during the data collection phases.

Data Collection

Phase 1:

The study aimed to explore the views and experiences of Autistic adults regarding the IMPACT programme offered by Gheel services. In addition, the study aimed to explore the perceptions and expectations of Autistic adults on their transition to post-school settings and their expectations or ambitions regarding accessing employment and/or educational opportunities. The study aimed to identify barriers they perceive to their pursuing or attaining their ambitions and their recommendations for how Autistic individuals can be supported.

Participants:

There were four separate cohorts of research participants who took part in a range of different data collection methods:

- Cohort 1: Autistic adults
- Cohort 2 : Autistic adults (case studies)
- Cohort 3: Frontline Gheel staff members working with Autistic adults
- Cohort 4: Senior management staff at Gheel services

Procedure

In order to answer the proposed questions, the research study used a qualitative approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Creswell, 2007) with the data collection methodology rooted in a participatory paradigm (Cargo & Mercer, 2008). The data collection process was differentiated to match the profiles of the different participant cohorts and facilitated through prior engagement with Gheel services as gatekeepers who provided information regarding research participants profiles and preferred communication approaches.

Research Design: Cohort 1

Research involving Autistic individuals must take into account common needs, for example their right to have their voices heard, as well as individual needs, such as specific accommodations required to communicate effectively (Fayette & Bond 2018; Fletcher-Watson et al., 2018). Focus groups were offered to Autistic adults to explore their views/impressions regarding the IMPACT Programme and regarding their future employment ambitions (n = 30).

Some Autistic adults prefer to participate in interviews rather than focus groups. Preliminary interviews were adapted using flexible interview approaches to ensure they are appropriate for each interviewee. Each Autistic person was met twice. During the first meeting participants were provided with the interview schedule. The interview took place at the second meeting, at a time and location convenient to the participant. The researchers offered multiple modes of communication to participants engaging in the semi structured interviews (examples offered include; verbal, script, messaging services, telephone interview etc.), thus allowing each research participant to fully engage and elicit their views in a manner appropriate to their individual strengths and communication preferences. The interviews were approximately 60 minutes or less in duration and break cards were offered to participants if they wished to take a break at any point during the interview.

With permission interviews were audio recorded and audio recordings anonymised while being transcribed (verbatim). Participants were made aware of these aspects of the research during the first meeting prior to the interview process. Both interviews and focus groups were conducted using a framework of questions:

- Experience of Gheel services IMPACT Programme and their perceptions regarding individualised supports across transitions
- Their experiences of transition programmes from post-compulsory education
- Impacts on self-esteem/self-efficacy and attitudes towards employment and the future
- Experience of employment where relevant
- Suggestions for supports and accommodations for successful employment

Research Practice: Cohort 1

In practice, all but one of the sample cohort of Autistic research participants chose individual interviews as their preferred mode of communication with one Autistic research participant opting to provide answers to the interview questions through writing. The interviews were carried out by a researcher at Gheel service settings and conducted face to face. Some participants (7) chose to have a Gheel staff member present to support them during the interview.

| Participants | Mode | Supported |
|----------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|
| 16 x Autistic adults | Interview face to face | 7 supported by Gheel staff |
| | 1 x written answers | |

Research Design Co-research Case Studies: Cohort 2

Three Autistic research participants were invited to take part as co-researchers in the development of participatory case studies on their engagement with the IMPACT Programme, their experiences of the transition to employment, and their views of the barriers they face during this transition. Research participants were invited to participate in a series of workshops which would focus on teaching them a range of participatory research activities and reflective practices. These workshops aimed to teach participants to collect personalised reflective data on their own experiences, views, and attitudes.

These workshops were designed using a number of steps outlined below:

Step One: This step involves introducing research participants and their keyworker/guardians to the lead researcher. The researcher introduces participants to the equipment (voice recorder, cameras, & resources), outlining the key steps of the process and the various activities that will be used during workshops. Participants have the opportunity to ask any questions regarding the research. Participants are introduced to reflective writing/voice recording as a way of capturing their views or experiences while taking part in the workshops. They are each given a designated reflective notebook for writing reflections during, after or at other times regarding the activities covered in the workshops. As an alternative, they can choose to use a dictaphone to record verbal reflections on their experiences rather than write them. It is explained that they will be given opportunities at the end of each workshop to write/record their reflections. It is also explained that these reflections/ recordings may be included within their personal participatory case studies.

Step Two: This step involves participants being taught about methods of exploring views or feelings using arts based participatory methods. As an example, they will also participate in a small group workshop on the topic 'my feelings about the IMPACT Programme' which involves a draw and tell activity based on the 'Me at school' (Goodall, 2018). Participants will be offered the opportunity to orally describe their drawings. This can be an enlightening and informative way to seek the perspectives and feelings of Autistic people (Goodall, 2020).

Step Three: This step involves participation in a small group workshop focusing on the future employment aspirations or views. An active group workshop will initially commence with a facilitated brainstorm of ideas regarding work settings. They will then be supported in a participatory arts-based activity entitled “my ideal job” where they will draw themselves in their ideal employment role. Participants will use an internet image search to potential jobs, which they will then rank using a diamond ranking task. Participants will then hold a group discussion where they will discuss/ explain both the drawing of their ideal job and the rationale behind their choices in the diamond ranking task (Goodall, 2018). During this workshop participants will focus on identifying supports and barriers they face in successfully managing the transition to employment/achieving their employment ambitions.

Research Design: Cohort 2

Three research participants volunteered to take part in case study workshops. The number of workshops was reduced to three in order to facilitate consistent attendance. Research participants recruited for the workshops had been interviewed previously as part of Cohort 1. Three workshops were held in subsequent weeks on the Gheel premises. Due to a range of issues including transport difficulties and timing misunderstandings, there were some challenges with the group dimension of the discussions. The first workshop focused on life stories of the participants utilising a drawing activity called the River of Life (Korthagen, 2004). The second workshop addressed previous employment experiences of participants and career ambitions for the future. The third workshop addressed their views of challenges and support for employment.

Research Design: Cohort 3 Frontline Staff

It was intended that two focus groups would be conducted with Gheel Autism Services staff who work with adults. These would focus on their perspectives on their views regarding the IMPACT Programme and the transition process for Autistic individuals to employment. There would also be a focus on potential supports and improvements that could be provided to Autistic adults (by Gheel Autism Services, employers and by State services). The challenges or barriers faced by Autistic individuals regarding this transition were addressed.

Research Practice: Cohort 3

Frontline staff were invited to a focus group or interview but in practice all frontline staff expressed a preference for interview. All interviews were carried out on Zoom software. Interviews lasted one hour and were audio recorded only. The audio recording was anonymised and transcribed.

| Participants | Mode | Duration |
|--------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| 2 x frontline staff | Interview on Zoom | 1 hour x interview |
| 2 x management frontline staff | Focus group on Zoom | 1 hour |

Research Design: Cohort 4 Senior Management Staff

Management staff were invited to Interview as Cohort 4: Senior management staff at Gheel Services.

Research Practice: Cohort 4

Two senior management staff were interviewed using Zoom software to ascertain their views and understanding of the IMPACT Programme. One additional senior manager from a service organisation linked to Gheel was also interviewed for context setting and understanding of the wider disability services landscape. Two staff involved in the IMPACT Programme were also interviewed using Zoom software.

| Participants | Mode | Duration |
|-------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| 2 x Senior Managers | Interview on Zoom | 1 hour x interview |
| 2 x Management staff | Focus group on Zoom | 1 hour x focus group |
| 2 x IMPACT staff | Interview on Zoom | 1 hour x interview |
| 1 x Linked organisation | Interview on Zoom | 1 hour x interview |

Data Analysis

All qualitative data was thematically analysed using Braun & Clarke's (2012) framework before being triangulated (Bryman, 2007) to address the outlined research questions. Relevant themes that emerged were discussed with reference to the research questions and the outcomes of the review of relevant literature (see Figure 5: Thematic Map).

| 1 Transaction from compulsory education to Gheel | 2 Delivery of the IMPACT programme | 3 Supports and barriers to employment | 4 Benefits of the IMPACT programme |
|--|---|--|---|
| <p>1.1 Issues with school</p> <p>1.2 Aims after finishing school</p> <p>1.3 Need or alternative routes to employment</p> <p>1.4 Starting IMPACT</p> <p><i>Gheel Findings</i></p> | <p>2.1 Peer discussion and social supports</p> <p>2.2 Content of IMPACT</p> <p>2.3 Assessment / Feedback of IMPACT</p> <p><i>Gheel Findings</i></p> | <p>3.1 Job application process</p> <p>3.2 Communications with employers</p> <p>3.3 Difficult aspects of workplace cultures</p> <p>3.4 Other workplace supports</p> <p>3.5 Personal strategies for success</p> <p><i>Gheel Findings</i></p> | <p>4.1 Benefits of the IMPACT programme</p> <p>4.2 Non-employment related benefits of IMPACT</p> <p>4.3 Participant recommendations for IMPACT</p> <p>4.4 General thoughts about the future</p> <p>4.5 Benefits to staff</p> <p><i>Gheel Findings</i></p> |

Figure 6: Thematic Map

The next section will present the findings from research participants who have attended and completed the IMPACT Programme, and relevant Gheel staff who work on the IMPACT Programme, support Autistic adults and are in management positions in the organisation. The findings describe the experiences of those participating in the Programme and their views regarding challenges or supports to finding, securing and navigating employment. Findings from Gheel staff are presented at the end of each thematic section.

Case Study Vignette: Mary



Mary has a positive world view but is realistic about the way the world works. She spends time on social media and gaming sites, and like many young people is active online. She has seen the discourse on the internet that is negative and feeds into divisive societal debate that can be upsetting for Autistic and non-Autistic people and yet she believes in the goodness of people: *"I think that people are mostly good.... I believe Autistic people have certain perspectives into social stuff that are better [than neurotypical people], I feel [this is] because [of] the rejection of social norms, I think this is because those norms suck"*. She thinks that Autistic people share a view that doesn't see the world through rigid boundaries: *"a lot of people think of Autistic people as rigid, but they're not. They're the most expressive freeform people you'll ever meet in your life"*.

She says that in her experience Autistic people form 'pods' of people around them. She speaks of negative experiences in school from people in authority and how that affected her. She talks of navigating the world from family to school to education and how that can form who you are: *"you pull your hand back, so you don't get bitten"*. She emphasises how hard it is to talk to people *"who view me only as like a surface level of myself."*

She is cynical about the transactional nature of a 'job' and has a critical view of the demands of capitalism, but she is clearheaded about employers and employment as a means to an end: *"They're holding your livelihood above your head. And they're like, do this or else. And I think a lot of Autistic people are really averse to that. They don't want to be in a situation where they're being threatened at all times, because they'll feel threatened and they'll recognize it. And that will cause burnout"*.

She also understands the need to take a minimum wage job to further personal ambitions. For her, the career is the destination: *"A career is a goal in life. It's a meaning to living. It's a reason to wake up in the morning"*. She appreciates the IMPACT Programme and its advice on seeking employment and especially valued the one-to-one training and advice: *"getting people real skills that really apply - like a one-on-one interview thing- like real practice is what will actually get you there"*. She acknowledges the support from Gheel that prepared and encouraged her to follow her dream career.

She appreciates the people in Gheel for their person-centred approach: *"They're very free in their understanding and like they know that Autistic people are all different and they recognize that, they respect that. And they want to work with you in a way that they think will work"*.

She saw through her experience of the IMPACT Programme the challenge of understanding individual life journeys and individual goals. She suggests that career supports for Autistic people need to be 'freeform', to adapt to each person and also recognises the challenges of such support: *"it's an expensive thing to support Autistic people, because what they need is understanding. Yeah, and understanding is expensive, has a price tag on it"*.

Her understanding of capitalism prompts her to recommend the IMPACT Programme to leverage the need for companies to demonstrate their stated commitments to diversity, inclusion and supporting communities. She puts it up to them: *"you say you want to support Autistic people, okay, then support Autistic people. And then in with our IMPACT Programme, give someone a job, or, or give someone the opportunity for a job"*.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

Findings from research participants of the IMPACT Programme demonstrated a range of views and experiences of the Impact Programme under four themes: Transition from Post-Compulsory Education to Gheel, Delivery of the IMPACT Programme; Supports and Barriers to Employment; Benefits of the IMPACT Programme.

Findings from Gheel staff are presented under each theme and as part of the summary of each set of findings.

4.1 Transition from compulsory education to Gheel

4.1.1 Issues with school

Closer links with post-primary schools and how guidance prepares Autistic individuals for the post-school work was also identified as an important aspect of further development for Gheel services. This was due to negative experiences of social inclusion and stigma that many Autistic individuals brought with them when they commenced with Gheel programmes. Some Autistic participants pointed out how school was **unable to cater to them** as someone with Autism, speaking at length about their **negative experiences in secondary school**:

"most of the people in the group had Autism, and, a lot of them had almost like, horror stories about, how teachers were so cruel to them, and not understanding of their, disability, whether [because] they're really high energy, and, the teachers are kind of annoyed by that" (P7) or in workplaces: "Well, when I was in, like secondary school, or even the workplaces I was in, there was actually nothing that I was aware of anyway in-place to help Autistic people 'cos at the time, I didn't think this Autistic thing applied to me at all anyway, so, you know?" (P5).

Research participants emphasised the impact that this lack of care or support had on them: *"having severe anxiety about something can be, kind of crippling, like you just don't want to get out of bed, you just don't want to leave the house, and it's like it comes from a genuine fear, and, not having that accommodated, like, you get kind of, gloomy about it" (P7).* The lack of support or awareness of how to support Autistic people in schools or early work settings often led to low levels of engagement for them, and low levels of motivation or educational attainment.

"I only did, 5th year, I didn't have too much support, like, I did, you know, put a good amount of my own time in trying to study for things, but I was just a bit directionless, maybe not studying in the right places, or, you know, being aware of my concentration, if what I'm doing is beneficial" (P15). Another participant spoke about losing respect for teachers as a consequence of their experience: *"Like talking about teachers, if I don't respect someone [unless] if someone earned my respect, or if someone has done something to specifically lose my respect, I won't care what they have to say, I won't care about them" (P7).*

In addition, some Autistic research participants also discussed **how schools can be improved** for Autistic people: *"I think a lot of them at the end of day, they want to help people and they want to help kids, and so I think, rather than some big awareness thing, where there's posters, and they're like, 'Oh hey, Autistic people exist!' Teachers need to be trained, and specifically taught how to teach Autistic people, how to work with Autistic people, how to recognise when someone is having difficulties, and how to reach out to them because that was completely absent in all of my schooling" (P7).* Another participant spoke of the medication he was taking

which left him unable to participate in class without anyone noticing: *"I took them before I went to school, and about 10 o'clock that day, I was in the classroom, it was like I was stoned, and I was, like sitting in the back, and I was just asleep, and I wasn't paying attention to the class board, at that stage, it was every single day, for the whole year"* (P16).

4.1.2 Aims After Finishing School

All research participants spoke about what they wanted to do once they finished school. These aims tend to align with specific interests and foci of each individual and also build on their abilities or talents that were highlighted in school. These were usually specific **employment aspirations**: *"What I wanted to finish school, I always wanted to have a workshop down towards Tullow or Carlow"* (P16) or educational aims: *"I just wanted to be like a bookkeeper, in general, yeah...because, I was brilliant in maths in school, but I also was very good, at tech, it's like business studies, in school so"* (P6).

Research participants discussed how the job application process can be difficult for Autistic people, either because of the **application process itself**: *"Going for job interviews, it affects, it affects absolutely every single thing, and it's like, any single time an Autistic person has to deal with any of those things, it's like, it's like neuro-typical people have this like, quick, easy path, and we have to fill out all the forms... it's just like, ohhhh.... It's so hard"* (P4) or because they personally **lack confidence**: *"No, the only, the only barriers would be, would be slight confidence issues like, you know, self-esteem issues"* (P5). Participants explained how important it is for there to be **alternative routes to employment**, other than entering college and completing a degree. They particularly mentioned the necessity of having **trade schools**, so that people can learn a skill without having to go to university: *"it would have been just like, since like, back in secondary school, teachers were kind of very college oriented, just kind of, like a brief mention of, well, if you don't want to do college, here are these trades or something else you can do... I would have liked a bit of a talk, like about, like possible options a person could have"* (P2).



Figure 7: Career Ambitions

4.1.3 Starting IMPACT

Autistic Research participants spoke about their reasons for undertaking the IMPACT Programme. The most commonly cited answers were that they were **not working**: *"Well I'd been out of work for a little while, and I'm currently searching for, wanting [to get] back into the working environment still, as soon as is remotely possible"* (P5) or wanted to **learn specific skills** to help them find a job: *"...yeah, but, but the main reason I really joined the IMPACT Programme was to learn how to write a CV"* (P3). Several participants also spoke about how they received **encouragement from Gheel staff** to participate: *"...what really spurred me into getting into the IMPACT programme was [IMPACT Trainers] self-promotion"* (P3).

Autistic Research participants spoke about their mental state upon starting the programme. Many research participants discussed feeling **anxious or apprehensive**: *"I was kind of a bit nervous, 'cos I wasn't fully sure what the programme was about"* (P12), while some were **excited or optimistic**: *"I guess I was, excited to meet people, the other people who were starting it, and, find out, what kind of, what it was all about"* (P14).

Gheel Findings

Gheel are aware of the need for supported transition with this process starting earlier in the second level school system with guidance as a key component. Closer links with post-primary schools and how guidance prepares individuals for the post-school work was also identified as an important aspect of further development for Gheel. This was due to negative experiences of social inclusion and stigma that many Autistic individuals brought with them when they commenced with Gheel programmes. Staff described the need for **supported transition** from school such that Gheel staff can *"...be engaging with people to support them with transitions, we should be doing that, two years before they leave school. ...so when the time comes, you're ready to rock and roll, rather than the way it is now where you just jump from the Department of Education into the Department of Health"* (SSIInt1). They could also provide schools with advice and support regarding individualised support for Autistic adults in preparation for their next steps following school completion.

Summary

Research participants' experience with compulsory education were overwhelmingly negative with clear recognition that teachers and school systems had low awareness of Autism or the needs of Autistic people. Many research participants spoke of following their interests or what they considered to be their best abilities either into education or self-employment as well as particular careers. Participants started the IMPACT Programme for a range of reasons including the need to find a job, learn specific skills for job seeking and also as a result of encouragement from Gheel staff.

4.2 Delivery of the IMPACT programme

4.2.1 Peer Discussion and Social Support

Research participants spoke about how they enjoyed the experience of meeting new people and engaging in teamwork as part of their experience with the IMPACT Programme: *"I know that's such a key straight answer but, I **enjoyed being with other Autistic people**, and I enjoyed seeing how other people are getting on there"* (P2).

In terms of **social support research** participants reported from their experiences of the IMPACT Programme, the most commonly mentioned factor was **help or guidance from Gheel staff**: *"I guess, my caseworker, she's pretty amazing! I was really worried about it, and she kind of talked me through it, and what would be in the programme, and kind of calmed me down about it, so I would be more comfortable"* (P7).

Research participants also spoke positively about the **in-person nature** of the IMPACT Programme as encouraging them to go, as they enjoyed seeing other students on the course. They spoke about how they enjoyed the experience of meeting new people: *"I guess it was good to get out and meet new people and learn new things"* (P14) and *"just like meeting new people, as soon as I met them, I was alright"* (P16). Participants spoke in positive terms about the staff who ran the IMPACT Programme: *"I enjoyed it thoroughly, I liked the way it was done, but I think that is, mainly thanks to the person who ran it"* (P7).

Other participants had difficulties with the social elements in that **meeting new people was difficult or overwhelming**, or that there were aspects of the group dynamic that impeded their enjoyment of the programme: *"...you're meeting new people and you're coming in to a new place, it's kinda, it's kinda, it is a bit nerve-racking"* (P1). These difficulties were linked to individualised preferences or challenges: *"it's not really, to do with the IMPACT Programme directly, but, a lot of people get triggered by what I call 'mouth noises' so, say you had someone, sitting down there...munching on a gigantic baguette, and it was all like, toasted and everything, you'd hear that crunch, and then all, and that is a tiny bit of a **sensory overload** for some people. ASD is full of sensory overloads to be honest with you. Now, in fairness they keep the environment as neutral as possible"* (P3).

Research participants enjoyed the **discussion approach**: *"I think, having the open dialogue, like, talking to people I think is the, is just, the best way for me to, retain information, care about information, and so, like for example I think if, I did it online, I don't think I would have gotten out of it, what I did, being in person. I felt like that was an important thing of it, and I don't think I would have gotten stuff from it, had it been online"* (P7). This sentiment was echoed by others who did not enjoy online communication: *"I wouldn't be one to use the, like the group chat stuff online"* (P8). Others found the discussion elements more difficult to manage: *"things just went off into a tangent, it would go completely off topic and I'd just zone out and then I wouldn't be able to concentrate for the rest of the day because my senses would be all over the place. I'd be overwhelmed with the amount of information that I've just been bombarded with..."* (P3).

4.2.2 Content of the IMPACT Programme

Many Autistic research participants spoke in detail about how they enjoyed learning about different workplaces and finding a workplace that could suit their needs: *"The first few sessions were all about, like, different job types, what you can expect in a job, you can request what sort of like, role you'd like, like if you want concise strict rules, or if you want to be able to do your own thing, and, to know that, and to know that I can apply that, that was very useful"* (P3).

Research participants appreciated the information on workplace cultures: *"..having more of an idea of what a workplace is, what it's like, you know, what happens, kind of, in that way"* (P15) and *"Assessing it on a, on a bit by bit basis, and kind of going, well you start actually, the process actually kind of, going through that, you're like, ok, like, this is definitely not a job I want to do, this is definitely, that is something I would definitely like to do"* (P4).

Some research participants particularly enjoyed the entrepreneurship content (P6, P14, P10) with *"The one that kind of stood out for me was, there was a part of the course where we learnt about entrepreneurship"* (P6). Many also enjoyed the videos: *"the videos that people are talking, they got the job that wasn't, was for them, but it wasn't, so they picked other jobs"* (P9) and found them helpful though others pointed out *"there were questions in the videos, but, they weren't our questions"* and would prefer to ask a speaker directly: *"So a speaker, whether they come to the Gheel office, or we go somewhere to, listen to someone, or, I feel like it would help"* (P7).

Research participants also made some negative comments about the content of the IMPACT Programme, for example saying that the content was dull, or that they did not find it relevant to their personal situation: *"I did enjoy it now, but like, it just keeps going back to what I said I already done it, so, it wasn't too much, to really take from it, besides like, one or two key, features."* (P8).

Many research participants stated that they wished to learn more about what happens when they are actually employed (as opposed to the job application process): *"The only thing I probably would add is, we didn't get the employment rights or nothing like that?"* (P16).

Some research participants also wish that the IMPACT Programme contained more practical content to help them with the application process, for example a mock interview. One research participant linked role play to the need for conflict negotiation: *"I think role play would be good, 'cos you never know again, in situations, work, and like let's say, a boy would try to sabotage you, or the manager would try to sabotage you, like you need to be aware"* (P1). Another aspect of interest to some research participants was support in negotiating accommodations: *"I think negotiating is another one. Role play and negotiations on accommodations: schedule accommodations, environmental accommodations, all that"* (P1).

Other research participants had specific needs and were disappointed when they weren't addressed through the modules: *"Really expected the IMPACT Programme would be, maybe like, a whole bunch of like one of those group interviews, you get a couple of people in, and then interview, and, honestly it was nothing like that, it was just a whole bunch of lectures and, and information on different companies, and, I was sitting there [thinking] most of this is pretty, self-explanatory"* (P3).

Many research participants expressed particular wishes for activities that would help with their confidence and workplace knowledge: *“have a list of, probably, jobs, that might, match, or jobs that, I suppose, as I mentioned as being, quite, Autism friendly”* (P13) or if a company representative could come in and talk with them: *“if I know a company is prepared to, at least, start a dialogue, or accommodate in whatever way they can, that, gives me a lot of hope; and even if it was just one, place that shows that, that they can accommodate”* (P7).

Some research participants spoke about **other programmes (similar to IMPACT)** that they had been involved in before. These were usually spoken about as being less helpful to them than the IMPACT Programme was: *“I know, I did one like it before in Roslyn, it was like a career seeking thing, didn’t really help, but, you know, I had a lot more confidence with Gheel anyway”* (P15), the IMPACT Programme staff being mentioned as particularly effective.

4.2.3 Assessment/Feedback of the IMPACT Programme

As well as the suggestions for different types of content and activities, some research participants also desired more support to help them participate for example more one-to-one support during (or after) the programme. *“Yeah, I’m trying to think of it though, one sec. They could really like, do a 1:1 thing like, once a month, or something similar”* (P8). This continuing ongoing support as well as the subjective, holistic support was a consistent aspect of participants enjoyment of the programme and the wish for such support to be an integrated part of transition to employment.

Participants also suggested that *“I think maybe the only thing I would have added to it is.. some people from previous IMPACT Programmes talking”* (P2) and several participants suggested including job placements as part of the IMPACT Programme: *“link-ins with any workplace, because, workplaces that say they’re committing to being Autism friendly, like, talk is a lot, or talk is one thing, and then, genuinely showing you care, is another, and, to know that a specific company might be able to accommodate better for you, because my difficulties would be to do with going in every day and anxiety about stuff like some big project or something like that, that might cause me anxiety and make me burnt out and not want to come in”* (P7). These findings suggest that linking in with employers and knowing a workplace was or could be supportive was key to helping research participants overcome anxiety and apprehension around taking up employment.

Gheel Findings

The IMPACT Programme designer emphasised an approach that was founded on the person-centred and individualised vision that informs the Gheel organisation as a whole. It was pointed out that service users come from a variety of different backgrounds and with differing experiences. However, staff saw two common categories of entrants into the IMPACT Programme: *“I kinda see it as two-fold, people who have very specific areas of interest and are already maybe studying something in an area or have experience maybe employment wise in an area, and then people who are looking to come at it from a low base of knowing they want employment but don’t really know much about it”* (FG). IMPACT research participants identified the elements that appealed to them most in terms of social aspects; staff; specific aspects of workplace content and particular strategies.

Each participant undergoes a needs assessment when they join Gheel. The knowledge of what participants want informs participant experience of the IMPACT Programme and staff experience of delivery. Staff findings show that the delivery of the programme is individualised and tailored to Autistic preferences as much as possible. The trainer is **responsive to the Autistic learner's communication and individual processing needs** by including them in the teaching and learning approaches: *"we don't just give a presentation. It has to be bespoke, it has to be customised, because you're dealing with people that take [in] information very differently"* (SSInt2). Staff had an **expectation that learners would view** the IMPACT Programme as being similar to programmes they may have done in the past but worked to ensure that the individual preferences, interests or needs of participants were acknowledged and addressed during the programme. It is clear that the trainers are **consistently seeking feedback** from the learners through formative discussions, questions and answers and a questionnaire at the end of the programme: *"we consult with the guys as we're going through the process, you know, because that continues at the end, you know, it keeps going on"* (SSInt2). Some of the points raised by Autistic research participants have been anticipated and recognised with plans underway to address issues: *what we're trying to develop, now, is to create more peer-to-peer mentorship.... What I'd like to do is... bring in other candidates from the IMPACT Programme who now are working to present on their own experience, their own little journey, through the IMPACT Programme [and] what it means to them?"* (SSInt2).

Summary

Overall research participants enjoyed the IMPACT Programme in particular the social aspects and discussion. Some research participants expressed nervousness at the beginning but subsequently enjoyed participating in group discussions that helped them retain information as well as build confidence in social groups. There were individual preferences expressed around sensory issues and difficulties with the lack of focus when group discussion topics moved into less relevant tangential areas. Some research participants had taken part in employability programmes or inputs before the IMPACT Programme and commented that the content was familiar. Subsequently, they pointed out that they particularly appreciated the staff support and encouragement and found the group discussion beneficial. Individual preferences were a factor in individual perceptions of online activities and or video inputs. Research participants expressed an interest in Autistic guest speakers from the world of work to be physically present to talk and answer questions. It was also suggested that visits from previous participants from the IMPACT Programme would be useful. Some research participants suggested that specific content on Autistic friendly workplaces or employers as well as inputs from employers in particular sectors/ career areas would be helpful. Overall research participants particularly enjoyed content on different types of careers while stating an interest in information on a wider range of career opportunities (trades, creative arts). Content on workplace cultures and entrepreneurship were particularly interesting to many research participants who also expressed an interest in role playing interviews, job application processes and scenarios that require negotiation skills.

Case Study Vignette: John



John is a young man who lives independently and has been working for some years in retail and through work placements in further education and training courses. He has worked with builders and older workers in construction. He has a 'can do' attitude and believes that you need to "crack on" and "do what needs to be done".

He has completed courses in FET at level 5 and 6 and has explored apprenticeship programmes. He is a hard worker and enjoys physical labour that keeps him busy and fit. He will do a hard day's work but at the end of the day wants to down tools and relax. He does not want a job that requires him to work long hours or weekends. He worked in retail for over a year in a job that was meant to be part-time. The reality was that once you were in the job, management would increase the hours and there was a clear message that you would lose your job or be disadvantaged if you did not do the requested additional hours.

John has strong views from his experience of education and working. He is now looking for a parttime job but finds he is competing with young people and students. He suggests a 'triage' type thing for 'kids' who live at home and don't have rent to pay. He suggests a lower wage and hours as they are seeking experience and he is seeking employment to support himself.

He enjoyed construction where you “start early, finish early” and physical work where you “can’t go wrong with clear tasks, from the neck down”. He stresses the importance of clear instructions so “you don’t think about it”. He is clear about what he wants from a job: “a hard day’s work requires compensation”. The IMPACT Programme was useful but not as relevant to him as he was already working. He doesn’t find job searches difficult to do but is thwarted by the lack of part time jobs. The support of the IMPACT trainers was key as they worked with him one on one to develop his interview skills and build his confidence. He doesn’t like online training but felt that the interview preparation was very useful - real life experiences, training through scenarios and role play are helpful. He recounted his experience in retail: “staff were nice, pay was good - hours and customers were terrible”. He is his own advocate.

4.3 SUPPORTS and Barriers to Employment

4.3.1 Job Application Process

Many research participants spoke about the difficulties they have accessing the job market, often due to the stringent **work experience requirements**, even for entry level positions: *“I’ve, now obviously I’ve already, had this conversation with [IMPACT Trainer] and all that, and I’ve looked into several options so, it’s like, if I want to go into gaming, there’s certainly internships but you need to have, you need to have like coding, right? I can code, but even then, game making is a very, very competitive environment”* (P3).

Some pointed out that a **long period of unemployment** can act as a barrier: *“I’m out of that class, that course in college, it’s a year and a half now so obviously the sooner you get into it [employment], the better, you know”* (P5). Although IMPACT helped others feel better about the future: *“cos, right now I’m not in work, and I’m not in education, although I’m like, working towards getting into, ‘cos like the IMPACT is a stepping-stone for me to get back into education, but, I feel like, yeah, I feel better about stuff”* (P7).

Others spoke of challenges with the **application process**: *“Fill this in, fill this in, fill this in and tick this box, answer that question and go through all those pinpoints of applications, but his take on the Civil Service applications is [that] the application itself is a test!”* (P13).

The **Interview process** was also a difficulty: *“most of the time it’s not even, you’re not even being rejected offhand for like any, any real reason, but, but that was the problem when you were going to any of these, any of these, any of these meetings; just that they were trying to like, they’d be giving you like, these basic assessments and like, trying to pin into these basic, like categories”* (P4). Many participants referenced the need for awareness and accommodations in these situations: *“I think it is important that teachers and employers don’t put too much pressure on Autistic people and take the time to explain things properly”* (P10).

4.3.2 Communications with Employers

Some Autistic research participants also reflected on this aspect of their learning, indicating an awareness of the need for positive and open communication with their colleagues or employers following participation in the IMPACT Programme: *“...you just have to like, see what, works for those people and make sure that they’re doing their job well, they’re satisfied, and that they’re not, getting lost, being left behind, it’s always one to like, put like, find out*

what they work best at" (P1). This can be through **regular meetings** with their employer, or the benefits of having a **mentor** in the workplace: *"If you had someone assigned, that is going to be there, to like, I don't know, psychologically just help you, or be like, 'alright, it's time for lunch, do you want to go back and have lunch with me?'"* (P3).

4.3.3 Difficult Aspects of Workplace Culture

Research participants appreciated the information on workplace cultures: *"..having more of an idea of what a workplace is, what it's like, you know, what happens, kind of, in that way"* (P15) and *"Assessing it on a, on a bit by bit basis, and kind of going, well you start actually, the process actually kind of, going through that, you're like, ok, like, this is definitely not a job I want to do, this is definitely, that is something I would definitely like to do"* (P4).

Some Autistic research participants spoke about aspects of workplace culture that are challenging for Autistic people. Many of these comments related to the **social dynamics** of workplaces: *"I'd say another kind of, barrier is, kind of, social connection in a job, place, like Accenture I kind of found a bit easier, Accenture was, 200 people in the building, so I would kind of, sometimes, occasionally talk with one or two people, not that often, but currently I'm in a building of 9 people, and I just kind of, it's very hard to just find a conversation"* (P2), and the fact that Autism is a disability which is both **hidden and misunderstood** by many people: *"I've said before... the barriers are people, the difficulties Autistic people face, like, it's not like you go outside and there's like, pitfall traps for Autistic people, it's every difficulty an Autistic person faces is because of something a neuro-divergent person does or says, or people have trouble understanding the needs of Autistic people, they have trouble believing Autistic people because Autism is a disability that's on the inside and it's something you don't wear on your skin"* (P7).

Another Autistic research participant discussed their experiences of being bullied by a more experienced and senior colleague:

He was bullying, but you can't go down to the Dun Laoghaire, and say, you're getting bullied by, an employee, because they'll try fix the problem you can't fix, I know it's not right, but you can't fix a lad's been in the job 40 years, he's not going to change his ways, he's stuck in his ways, like you know? All you have to do is resolve it, and, and then, I think it was [IMPACT Trainer] helped me go, what to do and what not to do, in the job, like, you know, and that was a big time help (P16).

One research participant summed up the challenges he has observed: *"I think the problem with like, the workplace, it's too like, extroverted, in a way, they try and like, put some people say, they try and make them more like, extrovert, which, some people are just very, naturally introverted"* (P1).

4.3.4 Other Workplace Supports

In addition to emphasising the importance of communication, research participants also mentioned several other accommodations that could be made to help them in the workplace. These suggestions most frequently relate to **mitigating how sensorily overwhelming** workplaces can be: *"Be understanding! Autistic people have needs unlike, people with physical disabilities where, like, we don't need a ramp built for wheelchairs, we don't need, things bought, we just, we don't need like, well some people might like, say*

like a laptop might help an Autistic person, right?" (P7), for example by providing people with **quiet rooms** where they can relax: "Yeah, and they can go somewhere, like, they can't really go somewhere to calm down, but they like go to a room, in the environment, in the workplace, so it's just, relaxed, like it is, get a sensory room like you know what I mean? It's ok to go there like, you know?" (P16). Another research participant pointed out that health issues can become a problem: "I think, with Autism, I probably wasn't as bodily aware, wasn't as bodily aware, so I didn't necessarily look after my health" (P13).

4.3.5 Personal Strategies for Success

Research participants also spoke in general terms about strategies that they have adopted to help them succeed in life (not just in the workplace). These strategies could be **practical** (e.g., using apps to help them with time management): "it's so easy to get distracted, so easy these days to get distracted, 'cos you have your phone, you have, food and all that, lots of distractions, but always, keep, have a time manager, like, Apps for like time management, very important" (P1) or more **holistic** (e.g., emphasising how important it is for them to maintain a good social life in order to benefit their mental health): "I need socialising in me life, know what I mean? I can't be, alone, for too long, 'cos I get depressed, know what I mean? So like, anybody, like, not even me, like, anybody can get depressed" (P8).

Gheel Finding

The IMPACT Programme is working to **develop understanding** in terms of benefits to the employer and the employee: "Whatever happened, if it is a misunderstanding, you recruited somebody because you saw something great in them, and that didn't change, just situations around it changed, so what can we do to reasonably accommodate so that we can get back to that point of a great relationship potential?" (SSInt4). The Autistic person may not be supported in the workplace and cannot **demonstrate their strengths**. The people in the IMPACT Programme work with the participants to assess what is happening and help the person in understanding either: "that's not where your skills lie? If you need time to process, ok, well let's, look then, at an environment, where we can...use the actual good skills then that you have and fit you in that (FSInt2) or if a person is placed in nursing: "there are certain, what we call 'reasonable accommodations' that are not being, adhered to" (FSInt2). It is emphasised that IMPACT only gets involved with employers if the service user wants it but there is an intention through IMPACT to **involve employers in three ways**: firstly as a destination for future career planning as learning partners to support Autistic individuals enrolled on the IMPACT Programme, and as potential mentors for Autistic people who are interested in a specific career. Firstly, some employers work with the IMPACT Programmes "as the next destination for someone that is looking to progress their career into paid employment". This allows the individual to gain experiences and skills in working with others to support them in attaining further roles with that employer or similar companies.

Secondly, some employers offer work taster opportunities or experiences which can give Autistic people enrolled on the IMPACT Programme more information or experiences in a range of settings. These employers act as "learning partners, where some of the guys that we support can visit, just to get a feel for, they might come in and do a piece of work with the lads, about their workplace and what was involved and what the culture was like, to maybe offering work experience or placements".

Finally, Gheel works with a range of employers collaboratively to support the mentorship or provision of advice to Autistic job candidates. The IMPACT Programme staff will work together with potential employees: *"if you say, identified, media for example, as an area that you wanted your career, to develop a career in, then we try and link in with someone from that field to act as a mentor for the person"* (FG).

It was emphasised that employers are interested: *"in many cases we're pushing an open door. Employers are extremely willing to work with us, we're getting a lot of calls now, in, not just like, phone calls from employers, especially in the last couple of weeks which is Autism Acceptance Week, you know, oh please come out and do a piece for us! We want to talk about neurodiversity in the workplace"* (FG). These relationships can build into fruitful partnerships.

Summary

The findings show that research participants have varied experiences of the workplace - some have little or no job experience and others have had negative experiences in the workplace in terms of communicating with employers and/or social dynamics. It can be difficult for participants to communicate and express their need for accommodations which can then in turn be misunderstood by employers. Research participants noted particular difficulties in the social dynamics of workplaces and expressed their appreciation of the knowledge of workplace culture that they gained through the IMPACT Programme. Some research participants stated that they employ different strategies for navigating the workplace and society including time management apps, seeking out social opportunities and trying to maintain good mental health. Gheel staff note that there is a shift in attitudes in the wider workplace and societal context around Autism and neurodiversity although it is not clear where this shift originates. IMPACT staff are working with a range of employers on developing different roles that can accommodate participant needs in terms of work experience, taster programmes and mentorship programmes.

Case Study Vignette: Michael



Michael is an artist, highly articulate and verbose. He has been self-employed for many years and works as an Autism advocate. He spoke of how *"I danced myself out of the womb"* and how it became clear, as a middle child, that he was different from his siblings in development. He was assessed early and obtained support from occupational therapists and others. He became passionate about reading and writing from an early age and was assessed as gifted in logical reasoning and verbal ability. School was difficult from a social perspective and he was isolated.

Michael has been involved in activism, has run arts spaces and published poetry. He has spoken of the challenges of interviewing for jobs where you respond to questions appropriately and clearly and then towards the end, the interviewers ask the knowing question *"is there anything else you want to tell us?"* This is his experience of the way employees probe their perception of him.

He has worked for many types of organisations and taken part in government initiatives such as Jobbridge. He points out that these initiatives and programmes are created by predominantly neurotypical people and reflect society. *"it's not just the way you perceive the world, but you're also perceiving a world that has a human mind that is actually reflecting back your values and that'll come down to bureaucracy or getting health care or any of these things"*. In his experience this presentation of the world affects every single thing: *"Open that door, open that door, but for a lot of Autistic people inter-acting with almost any, even the most elementary level of our world is like double-dutch, it doesn't make any intuitive sense and then we get into this whole thing because we're a neurological minority, you feel that when most people around you are telling you - you're wrong, that you don't understand what you're talking about - you're inclined to believe them"*.

He speaks about his perception of the government view of families of Autistic people, *"to be the full-time support workers for, Autistic people or neurodivergent people, and what they don't understand is that if your family's life is all about looking after your basic needs and it's not about actually knowing you as a person...then that gets neglected, your relationships become adversarial, and like you're not pulling your weight"*. He talks about the help he eventually got when completing examinations in school. He had been failing subjects because assessors couldn't read his handwriting. When someone offered him the chance to use a tape recorder, it changed everything: *"when I was given that setting to work on a tape-recorder, and not have to worry about my handwriting, and when it was clear the answers I was giving all my marks went up, got an A in Honours English went from 25% like, I improved my grade like 4 times"*.

4.4 Benefits of the impact programme

4.4.1 Benefits for Autistic Research Participants

Research participants were positive about the effect of participating in the IMPACT Programme on their lives. The effects of the Programme could be grouped into three categories: getting a job, performing better in their job, and helping them prepare for a job. Research participants benefited from the training and support through the IMPACT Programme in their search for employment either by helping them with the **job application process** or by teaching them **what workplaces they were likely to find suitable**: *"I mean, it probably has in small ways that I haven't noticed and, you know, like, obviously, probably helped getting a job"* (P14). In particular the content on culture and fit for workplaces helped focus participants: *"I've become a lot more selective when looking for a job because depending on location and workplace culture there are some companies I'd avoid because of what I heard and how the work in that environment would not suit me as an individual"* (P1).

Other research participants felt that the fact that they were attending the IMPACT Programme helped them to **prepare for the commitment of a job**: *"OK I have to actually get ready on time, and, figure out where I'm going, and, not be excessively optimistic about what I can do, in a certain span of time...get up early, don't have too fancy a breakfast or anything, just, get in, on time, and obviously, executive functioning is a, consideration for a lot of people on the spectrum, so, get ready for that"* (P13). The IMPACT Programme helped with planning and time management for many participants: *"I'd say better planning really, in my end, 'cos I mean, I usually I end up, in a pretty good spot, like, the bus is there, 'cos there's like, I can just walk up and get like the bus from Dublin in no time, and Sallins train station in no time, I think it's just you have to wake up, and know, the time you're going to get up at, breakfast, shower and all that, then, that, it's a, a lot of planning on that one"* (P1).

Several research participants also discussed how the programme helped them **perform better in their current job** often by helping them to negotiate accommodations with their employer. Taking part in the IMPACT Programme helped them to see the reality of some workplaces that Autistic people can be: *"overwhelmed, and then we just, can't bear it, and just quit, or whatever, as happens, but then on the, then on the other hand, you're, you're,*

highly gifted people who are just being put in work situations that are just not suitable for them at all" (P4). Research participants appreciated the advice and knowledge that helped them address specific issues in their workplace: *"Kind of like listening, and, basically just listening and taking the jobs one at a time, and don't overthink the jobs, as much, not like, over work, pile on top"* (P7).

Some participants **felt inspired by the programme** and changed their view over the weeks: *"I was, sort of like, I'll admit it, I was lazy, and I didn't want to do much, and then, after that, at a certain stage, a couple of sessions in, I was like, alright I've decided, I'm going to crack down on what I want to do, something with animals or games, or something like that, and I want to focus on it, I'm going to apply to different, even like, pet store jobs, I've been applying to..."* (P3). Another participant who found socialising difficult stated that participating in the programme had *'brought them out of themselves'* *"Oh, a hundred percent! Yeah, it's mad it is, it's just constant socialising, just gets you out there, for me, at least, that's what worked for me"* (P8).

4.4.2 Non-employment Benefits of the IMPACT Programme

Most research participants also discussed how the IMPACT Programme helped their life in ways unrelated to employment, for example by giving them a routine: *"So previously I was like, agoraphobic, didn't want to leave the house, didn't want to go outside, I've been trying to, go out more, and convince myself to do things more, and I feel like Gheel's been a huge help, 'cos they meet, every week, with me, and even getting out of the house, once a week, at least, it gives you a sense of routine that makes you feel, kind of, better. And, I feel like I'm kind of getting more control of my life again"* (P7).

Another research participant spoke of realising what workplace or career worked or didn't work for them: *"I realised, retail does not suit me at all.... a very fast-paced environment is not good for me, it's just it's like I kinda like taking my time with stuff, and being to, do this in a certain amount of time is very like, stressful because it's just like, I'm used to focusing on one task at a time"* (P1).

4.4.3 Research Participant Recommendations for the IMPACT Programme

Research participants recommended additional supports that could be useful including the need for employers to check in with staff: *"have like a job review and see what the issue is and explain the issues, what the issues are, and then, help them get them better, because like, they're not going to, they're not going to know, unless you give them like a job review"* (P1). Research participants highlighted Autistic people can sometimes tend to overwork: *"you don't want to disappoint people, so you make yourself available all the time, but then to a certain degree, like, it becomes a validation thing, 'cos for a lot of Autistic people, they don't feel like they're making tangible connections with people, unless they're actually doing something, like concrete"* (P4). Sometimes research participants can also struggle with authority: *"if I don't respect someone, if someone hasn't kind of, earned my respect, or has done something to specifically lose my respect, I won't care what they have to say, I won't care about them, and as much as like, in a job, you just have to..."* (P7). Research participants also expressed their appreciation to Gheel staff for their check ins with them while in employment: *"they kind of give you like supports outside of there, that are kind of useful, like they have, like, somebody who checks on how I'm doing like, each week, or each 2 weeks"* (P2).

Another suggestion was hands on experience of specific workplaces: “would you like to work, would you think you might like to work in a, like, in a place like this? And would you like to see like what that looks like, talk to people. But then also even with a particular emphasis say on, companies that have a high uptake of like, neurodivergent people.” (P4).

Research participants also suggested practical tools to support preparation for employment including financial planning and transport planning. For some participants, transport was particularly challenging: “I’m awfully impatient when it comes to public transport, so, I’d sit there and I’d be like, ‘arg, logistically, this is a nightmare to get into this place, I wish like’, which, in fairness I am looking into it, I wish I could learn how to drive...” (P3) and “to go to, somewhere you hadn’t been before that was kind of, out of the way, because it’s multiple buses for me, to get there, when you don’t know where you’re going or what you’ll be doing, transport can be.. terrible” (P7).

4.4.4 General Thoughts About the Future

Research participants also discussed the future in general terms, specifically how they felt about it. Many research participants were **optimistic about the future** and how they see their lives taking shape: “You know, like that, so, I can really experiment and, you know, looking into what I want to be doing, like, I am happy in my job for now, I know like, you never know what can happen in the future, for, like now, it’s definitely there and I’d have enough experience to you know, get a very similar job anyway”(P15).

Research participants discussed their goals for the future. These goals were often related to **employment or education** (such as the desire to get a specific job or enrol in a degree): “I have been thinking recently, about what, can I find a job, what, what are slacking jobs, what’s a good job that’s very easy, but also, pays well, and I think the Civil Service the answer all the time” (P13) but also had to do with issues such as securing an **improved housing situation**: “Well this is down the line, know what I mean, like, at the moment I have a lovely gaff, know what I mean? Like, I’m going to be in there for a good 10 years at least, and then I’m going to see if I can move out of it and get a two storey” (P8).

Research participants were positive about achieving their goals: “Just, yeah, try and get a CV, try, I can’t think what it is! Try to, you know, you know, reach my potential basically as a ?? and see, whether it is good for me, you know” (P6) and excited about achieving independent and financial stability: “The most exciting thing about the future? Well that’s just hopefully having the, the financial stability I would say! I don’t want to say ‘money’ ‘cos money, money’s obvious, but, I also like having enough money I can live, move out the house, and to have a car, and build a very good resumé, that sort of thing, it’s simplistic but, you know, life is, once you have your goals figured out” (P1).

learn-to-read-and-write
don't-walk-to-work-too-much
learning-maths
excited-to-get-a-job
Planning-for-the-future
financial-stability
get-a-home

Figure 8: Future Plans

Gheel findings

Frontline staff reiterate that a **lack of confidence is an obstacle** for participants : *“they have zero confidence, and they don’t feel like they belong to society, so they feel separate from it, - I want the job, but that’s not for me, that’s for other people - and they also feel, they probably lack a lot of just general life experience, just general connecting with people”* (FSInt2). Many of the Autistic people entered the programme were noted by Gheel frontline staff to feel unable to participate in employment and community, with some blaming their Autistic status for this exclusion. *“Some of the people we support there’s a separationwhen we’re trying tell them that they’re ok as they are, and the guys we work with have huge potential, they’re like, ‘yeah, but that’s easy for you, you’re a neuro-typical!’”* (FSInt2).

Staff have noted that the **main focus on employability for participants is getting the job**: *“it can be diminishing for people if they’re making applications and they’re going to interviews and maybe they’re not getting the jobs, or maybe they’re not hearing back, and that can really push people’s self-confidence down, and it’s kind of our job then to make them a little bit more resilient, build up their resilience in getting rejected”* (SSInt3). The IMPACT Programme addresses job seeking, job preparation and supports staying in employment. The reasons for a lack of retention are addressed with the individual participant by IMPACT staff: *“Sometimes it could be going back over people’s policies with them, going back over their contracts, sometimes people get contracts and they just sign them and they shoot them off, and then things that are happening, and then they’re like, why is this happening?”* (SSInt3).

The IMPACT Programme works with the Autistic person to **deconstruct difficult experiences in employment** that the Autistic people they work with reported. These were reported to be, unfortunately, common. Findings showed the knowledge that Gheel staff have of participants and the understanding they have of the **impact of negative experiences**. Many offered brief case studies of participants to illustrate the damaging effects of some workplaces: *“she went out and got herself a job in a vets, and I think the culture within that place, for whatever reason, was somewhere along the lines of toxic, or just it wasn’t a great place, and it has just crippled her confidence.....she hasn’t gone back into the workforce since...she hasn’t got a job a since, and it’s nearly just over a year ago now”* (FG).

Summary

Research participants felt the IMPACT Programme benefitted them in a range of ways including finding a job, preparing for a job and providing knowledge and skills for staying in a job. Attending the IMPACT Programme helped many research participants to develop planning and time management skills and routines. Meetings and discussing topics with peers helped them to develop social skills and learn that others were experiencing similar difficulties. Participants reported a change in thinking and a more optimistic view of the future and realisations that they could take control of their lives and ownership of their career journey. Gheel staff also recognise that the IMPACT Programme is of benefit to the service in terms of progression routes for Autistic adults and a support to transition staff and caseworkers in exploring progression routes with individuals.

Conclusion

Autistic Participants

The positive outcomes described by research participants from their participation in the IMPACT Programme contrasted sharply with Autistic research participants' reported experiences during primary and post-primary education, which were overwhelmingly negative. They were very clear that their teachers and school systems had low awareness of Autism or the needs of Autistic people. Closer links with schools and a better system for supporting transitions for incoming Autistic services users on their entry into Gheel services was identified as an essential future development.

In a similar manner, Autistic research participants also reported varied experiences of the workplace prior to entry into the IMPACT Programme. Indeed, while some have little or no job experience, others had negative experiences in the workplace in terms of communicating with employers and/or social dynamics. Participants noted particular difficulties in the social dynamics of workplaces and expressed their appreciation of the knowledge of workplace culture that they gained through the IMPACT Programme. The knowledge that a workplace might not suit them through no fault of their own but due to the culture, pace or ethos was a revelation for some and increased their confidence and understanding of how they might obtain employment that was sustainable for them.

Research participants felt the IMPACT Programme benefitted them in a range of ways including finding a job, preparing for a job and providing knowledge and skills for staying in a job. They reported development of planning, time management and social skills which contributed towards a more optimistic view of the future. A consistent theme in the research findings was the participants' appreciation of the staff within Gheel who are viewed as a particular benefit and support. The ongoing support for participants seeking employment and in employment is recognised and appreciated. They also reported a greater sense of control of ability to plan for their future and a cautious optimism about the greater awareness of Autism and supportive discourse from employers.

Gheel Staff

Gheel staff note that there is a shift in attitudes in the wider workplace and societal context around Autism and neurodiversity and staff are working with a range of employers on developing different roles that can accommodate participants' needs in terms of work experience, taster programmes and mentorship programmes.

The **changing of belief systems or a funding structure is key** for expanding the programme beyond Gheel: *"internally if it's going to exist within a Gheel provision office support package, we'd love for it to have funding outside of the disability sector, so that people don't have to go through that process in order to get access to the programme - that can really only happen from, either grant funding or from [a] private investor and we will always retain the not for profit status"* (SSInt4).

The **scaling up of the IMPACT Programme** is an aspiration but also a challenge: *"What we're talking about is kind of national, and it's outside of our scope and our ability and, probably it's outside, we have to be honest, it's something that we would like, somebody else, who does*

this well, to take it on - If we were able to be involved in the induction and the underpinning concepts because that's what I think is really, the successful factor to it" (SSint4).

The **capacity for scale** outside of the IMPACT Programme trainers within Gheel was addressed internally, externally and for the individual service user: *"We're creating that capacity across the organisation so we're self-sustaining, we can do that. That's going to be a challenge, like anything else, and that's just really, economies of scale" (FG).* The reaction from employers to the IMPACT Programme is encouraging: *"I mean what we do in Gheel, or the core of what we do is bright and we have the longevity to do it. What astounds me is the motivation that's across the different regions. And not just transition, but also having the conversation now company-wide around employment, it's there! People are, they're a bit fearful, but they want to change, they want to make it happen across the board" (FG).*

5. DISCUSSION

Overview of the Impact Programme

The current report outlined the results of research exploring the experiences of Autistic participants who are completing or have recently completed the IMPACT Programme. This research explored their experiences of participating in the programme and recruited their views regarding challenges or supports to engaging in employment following completion of the IMPACT Programme. The evaluation also explored the views of staff engaged in the delivery of the IMPACT Programme and their views regarding the strengths or challenges they faced in developing and delivering the IMPACT Programme.

The research will also explore the experiences of developing, delivering and reviewing the IMPACT Programme from across a cross-section of front-line and senior staff at Gheel. This analysis will aim to capture their aims regarding the development of the IMPACT Programme, how it links with other aspects of the Gheel organisation, and what supports or barriers they perceive to further development for the Gheel IMPACT Programme.

The overarching research aims of the study were:

- Explore the views and experiences of Autistic adults regarding the IMPACT Programme delivered by Gheel services.
- Listen to the views of participating Autistic adults regarding the support and guidance they received during the IMPACT Programme to prepare them for employment and how effective they feel it was.
- Explore the ambitions and hopes of participating Autistic adults for their future engagements with education or employment opportunities?
- Identify the barriers or supports Autistic participants require to achieve their ambitions in education or employment roles in the future.
- Highlight the recommendations from Autistic people for supporting them towards accessing career or educational progression.

The results of the study are discussed with reference to the relevant literature and the research aims. They will be presented where appropriate with reference to Wong's (2023) 'Four dimensions of Spatial Belonging' framework which provides a theoretical frame for accessible design of inclusive services and environments. The framework comprises Structural Space, Relational Space, Physical Space and Digital Space. Key to this understanding is the impact of space, organisation and culture on the experience of belonging and inclusion for individuals within services and education (Wong, 2023).

What is the objective of the Gheel IMPACT Programme and how effective is it from the perspective of staff and other participants in achieving this objective?

The objective of the Gheel IMPACT Programme is to support a holistic transition for Autistic adults to employment. This objective is key as transitions have been shown to be particularly challenging for some Autistic individuals across a range of domains, such as from education

to post-school settings, transitions between employment settings, and changes in living settings (Cage et al., 2020). Research indicates a lack of formal transition planning to aid individuals with disabilities as they transition from education or training to employment in Ireland (Scanlon & Kamp, 2016). Additionally, this process appears disjointed, especially as individuals move from compulsory education to further or higher education or the workforce (Doyle et al., 2017). In addition, transition implies changes to existing routines and movements away from familiar environments and relationship to a new setting, potentially disrupting experiences of belonging and causing anxiety.

Belonging is a complex concept that has gained significant focus in academic research, as highlighted by Wong (2023) and Thomas (2012). It's particularly important for the integration and success of marginalised individuals, including those from disabled or neurodivergent groups. Belonging affects various aspects of a person's life, including engagement, self-confidence, mental wellbeing, and academic achievement (Ahn and Davis 2020). The relationship between space and belonging is crucial and complex, especially when considering the participation of Autistic people in employment and vocational training. This dynamic encompasses more than just the physical workplace or training environment. It extends to digital platforms, social networks, and the cultural practices within vocational and employment settings. Understanding how these factors interact is essential for creating inclusive and supportive work and training environments. Such environments are instrumental in promoting positive vocational and social outcomes for Autistic people, enhancing their integration, job satisfaction, and overall success in their professional journeys.

The findings from participants in this study showed that they viewed the IMPACT Programme as being supportive of their transition into employment. This was inclusive of accessible access to information on workplace culture, experiences and expectations, links to opportunities to sample workplace settings and provision of practical advice and training on specific processes and practices in job application procedures. Importantly, in contrast to prior experiences of guidance services in school-aged setting, the participants found to advice and supports to be individualized and tailored to their needs and perspectives. A key finding was that engagement with the IMPACT Programme supported familiarity and motivation to engage with employment opportunities and supported positive transition planning for the Autistic adults.

Wong (2023) points out that the shared space in which we navigate society is not neutral but can be seen to operate in "explicit and implicit ways that reflect structural inequalities of power and privilege". The structural space aspect of the Wong framework references the impact of the structure and organisation of a range of societal institutions and how they impact on the sense of belonging and participation among people from marginalised backgrounds. Past research suggests approximately 16% of Autistic individuals are engaged in full-time employment, and 32% participate in some form of paid work, in contrast to 47% of other disability groups and 80% of the general adult population (National Autistic Society, 2016). Despite these statistics, it is evident that the majority of Autistic adults desire employment opportunities (Baldwin et al., 2014; Bennett & Dukes, 2013; Wilczynski et al., 2013). Reducing marginalization and exclusion from employment settings is a key objective in supporting effective transition to employment for Autistic adults.

The General Comment 4 on Article 24 of the UNCRPD (United Nations 2016, para. 11) asserts, 'integration does not automatically guarantee the transition from segregation to inclusion'. The Comment states that inclusion involves a process of systematic reform with changes and modifications to teaching methods, content, approaches, structures, and strategies in education to provide all students with a participatory learning experience and environment that corresponds to their preferences and requirements (p4). One of the key society structures that needs to be considered in supporting the flourishing and participation of Autistic people within programmes such as Gheel's IMPACT Programme is school aged provision.

The experience of the participants in this study and the views of Gheel staff of the provision of transition supports from school to post compulsory setting aligns with the view of the National Federation of Voluntary Service Providers submission on the Draft Initial State Report under the UNCRPD (2021) that points out a lack of a joined-up approach to work and employment. The gap in provision leaves Autistic adults and people with intellectual disabilities outside of the approaches outlined in the Draft Initial State Report (p.22). The challenges for Autistic people in terms of positive and supported transitions begin in formal education with a lack of understanding of the Autistic experience and a lack of guidance support specifically in special schools but also as part of the already limited guidance provision in compulsory education.

Participants in this study echo the emotional impact of a lack of belonging, speaking of difficulties of leaving their home and overcoming their anxiety to get to school, with others speaking of sitting in classrooms 'in the back' and being ignored. Research participants described their experience of formal schooling in terms of constraint and overwhelming sensory environments. They felt that the teachers did not know, understand or accommodate Autistic people. The perceived rejection from teachers and/or peers can impact a person's sense of belonging in a compulsory education system that is generalised for the neurotypical majority. The intersection of space and affective outcomes for individuals is captured well by the title of "inclusion is a feeling, not a place" (Goodall, 2020). The twelve Autistic young people (aged 11-17) in his research defined inclusion "as belonging, being valued and wanted as a person by teachers, of fairness and of being afforded the necessary support to access and thrive in education" (p.1304).

The ambitions and hopes of Autistic participants in the IMPACT Programme can be influenced and informed by the negative experiences of compulsory education and the lack of support and/or guidance that they experienced through their formative years. It is clear from the findings that many of the participants acknowledge their Autistic preferences and need for accommodations and found the IMPACT Programme beneficial in terms of benchmarking with other Autistic people, understanding their own agency in selecting and engaging with an employer that has a culture and ethos that is appropriate for their needs; and building their confidence in their own strengths and the opportunities that are available to them.

Many of the participants in this study had attended third level or further education. The issue of transition pertains to Autistic students in higher education where research has shown that Autistic students found the transition to third level difficult, with "low social and organisational identification and poorer academic experiences as factors contributing to non-completion" (Cage et al., 2020). Factors that can support the success of Autistic students experience of university include perseverance and determination (Ward and Webster, 2018), passion for a

topic and powers of observation (Van Hees et al., 2015) but Van Hees et al. stress the need for the university to recognise the challenges for Autistic students with social interaction and sensory difficulties that can affect interactions in certain environments.

Allen and Coney (2018) found that Autistic students leaving university currently face a substantial employment gap as compared to non-disabled students. They state that Autistic students or graduates have the lowest employment prospects when compared to other disability groups. The National Federation of Voluntary Service Providers submission on the Draft Initial State Report under the UNCRPD (2021) states that the National Access Plan, designed to ensure that the student body in post-secondary education is reflective of Irish society, excludes data on Autism and intellectual disabilities and does not set targets for these groups.

What were the experiences and views of Autistic individuals who took part in the IMPACT Programme?

The Autistic research participants particularly valued the individualised support of Gheel staff and the IMPACT Programme trainers. There is an appreciation of the accommodations and understanding that is implicit in the relationships between Gheel staff and the Autistic adults who use the service. Autistic adults enjoyed the opportunities to discuss shared topics of interest with Autistic peers in a social space and hearing from Autistic speakers on their work experiences.

The individualised and personal relational space created between the Autistic participants and IMPACT Programme staff was a key aspect of the IMPACT Programme. The creation of a responsive and engaging social environment was deeply appreciated by the Autistic research participants. Clearly, the social and relationship space is a key feature of how Autistic people experienced the IMPACT Programme or work environment. Another important finding in the current findings was the positive experiences many of the participants reported from their positive relationships with “key worker” staff in Gheel, or staff delivering the IMPACT Programme. This again emphasises the importance of creating a relational space that supports a sense of belonging (Wong, 2023) and inclusion (Goodall, 2020) for Autistic people when designing effective services.

Milton et al (2012) suggests a ‘double empathy problem’, where the complexities of social interaction between Autistic and non-Autistic people are a result of both sets of people being unable to understand each other or mutually relate. The accounts within the current study, both from Gheel Staff and from the Autistic participants themselves reported very negative and difficult social experiences in past work or educational settings. This included experiences of bullying, exploitation or negative comments. This “mismatch of salience” (Milton, 2017) leads to “bi-directional miscommunication” within social interactions and undermines the development of relationships and trust (Milton, 2012). Negative assumptions and understandings of Autistic people were also reported. These experiences clearly negatively impact the Autistic people involved. They also served as a barrier to accessing work placements and motivation to take part in work settings.

The participating Autistic adults also greatly appreciated the opportunities to develop social relationships and engage with peers also enrolled within the IMPACT Programme. The

experiences of Autistic research participants reported in the current study with regard to their enjoyment of social interaction through discussion and group work with their Autistic peers on the IMPACT Programme was a key positive for a majority in the findings. This echoes the finding by Crompton et al. (2020b) that Autistic individuals don't encounter the same difficulties when interacting with other Autistic individuals, leading to significant positive affective and relationship benefits which mitigated the negative impact of minority stress due to their Autistic status (Botha & Frost, 2018).

The programme is bespoke and tailored to the individual where possible, aligning with existing Gheel services and progressing support for the individual from the training room to the employment setting. This approach supports the development of social relationships and familiarity with a range of employment spaces, supporting participant motivation and engagement. The IMPACT Programme provides career preparation and employment support to Autistic participants. The content of the programme while not new to some participants underpins a supportive relationship between staff and participants that provides a safe and inclusive space for sharing experiences, discussing job and career contexts, structures, cultures and opportunities, identifying individual preferences and accommodations and addressing requests for support and advice relating to individual needs and ambitions.

Findings demonstrate that the programme benefits for participants include an increase in confidence through social interactions and benchmarking with peers and staff; focus and routine for participants as part of Gheel's service that addresses progression routes from Gheel to employment or supported work experience; and increasing understanding of the culture of employers and how employment works. Findings also show that although some research participants benefitted from individualised consultations with regard to interview role play and supports, these were arranged depending on need rather than as part of the generalised content. There is a body of knowledge already compiled through research, consultations and reports on services and programmes nationwide and a growing awareness of Autism and Autistic people through the neurodiversity movement and the voice of Autistic people in their own research, consultations and inputs to public life.

How do Autistic research participants feel the IMPACT Programme supported their transition to employment and future expectations?

The research participants explained how the programme increased their confidence and understanding of the workplace and how to navigate it. The content on workplace culture and fit was particularly valued as it helped them focus on their ambitions for the future and feel confident in seeking a career and a workplace that suited their aspirations and needs. The IMPACT Programme helped participants find a job, prepare for a job and also assisted them in job retention. They learned how to navigate the job application process, received tailored advice and training, explored the workplace setting and widened their knowledge of how autistic and other neurodivergent people can communicate and negotiate in a neurotypical setting.

The individualised support from IMPACT trainers for research participants in this study was a key enabler for some Autistic participants to develop skills and understanding of the interview process in a safe, respectful space through role play, scenarios and mock interviews. Researchers

emphasise that Autistic people process the world in a way that is different to non-Autistic people (Wing, 1991) but have to undergo the assessment through interview for employment using the exact same criteria and methods as non-Autistic jobseekers (Marco et al., 2011). The sensory intrusion regarding individual preferences of others in a social space - Autistic or non-Autistic - are still impactful depending on the level of sensory sensitivities at the time. Pertemps (2019) found that the anxiety that all jobseekers face at interview is magnified for an Autistic individual with the specific tasks of small talk, the challenge of processing quick and often 'rapid-fire' questioning, literal use of language that is unpredictable and the difficulty processing facial expressions and body language often proving overwhelming or incomprehensible to the Autistic jobseeker (Cameron and Townend, 2021, p.43).

There is a perception that Autistic people prefer online learning and are comfortable with the online space, which would suggest considerations regarding the digital space are key to supporting Spatial Belonging (Wong, 2023) for Autistic people. The online space can be efficient and pragmatic for training, education, and communication and useful for those who know how to navigate it and troubleshoot issues. It is also a social space that is preferable for some but can introduce intersectional challenges for Autistic adults including learning difficulties, digital literacy, access to equipment and physical space for ease of interaction. Ultimately due to the individual preferences of participants certain modes of communication can be enabling or create a barrier depending on the relationship, context and circumstance. Preferences for online modes of communication can depend on the age of the person although Hülür & Macdonald (2020) found that older adults tend to be less comfortable with online methods and instead prefer face-to-face, letters and phone communication, it is not clear whether the same is true for Autistic adults of similar age and experience as "Autistic people may be more enthusiastic adopters of alternative methods" (Howard and Sedgewick, 2021, p.2266). Soja's theory of spatial justice (2010) points out that spatial dimensions can hinder or support the participation and engagement of employees from diverse backgrounds. The interactions between instructor and student are key and essential for explaining and clarifying the online content and processes. This indicates the importance of an intersectional understanding of how modes of service provision align with the demographic characteristics of the services users the programme is being designed to support. In the current study, the Autistic participants voiced a strong appreciation of individualised in-person support from staff and positive outcomes for social interaction with Autistic peers during the IMPACT Programme delivery.

The content on workplace culture and the empowering idea of choice for Autistic job seekers in terms of jobs and career was new to many of the research participants in this study. The IMPACT Programme as a training course also gave focus to many participants for their day-to-day activities planning and travelling to Gheel, taking part in the programme and the transformative impact of the activities that increased their confidence and aspirations for the future. The research participants expressed a positive view of the future and a recognition that a workplace can be Autism informed and accommodate neurodiversity.

The individualised training and advice on applications and interviews as well as IMPACT staff advocacy and outreach to employers is welcomed and appreciated. In McMahon et al (2020) study of employability in Autism, they found that employer factors - the employer's knowledge of Autism and their response to Autistic candidates in a socially desirable manner impacts the perceived employability of job candidates. They emphasised that it is the characteristics of

the employer, not the characteristics of the job candidate, that influenced their employability. Additionally, employers who are more positive about Autistic characteristics are also more cautious about how they affect job performance (McMahon, et al. 2020, p. 149) (Consequently, Autism informed training should focus on the employer not the job candidate. The IMPACT Programme is successfully engaging in outreach activities with employers to support Autistic adults in employment, seeking employment and Autism informed practices. Staff report a shift in attitudes among employers requesting knowledge and support from Autistic people and services.

The use of mentors and peer support in the post-secondary and employment transition can lead to successful engagement in employment (Cameron and Townend, 2021). Their research found that nearly half of Autistic job seekers (48%) who were supported by specialist mentors obtained paid employment, which was a 16% increase in paid employment between those who received mentoring and those who didn't. Participants in this study also identified the use of mentors and peer to peer supports as well as a dedicated person or role in an employment setting as useful additions to the IMPACT Programme and their progression to employment.

What Supports and Barriers for Accessing Employment were Identified by Autistic Research Participants and What were their Recommendations for Improving Gheel's IMPACT Programme?

Autistic research participants identified a range of barriers to employment including the job application process, a lack of experience of the workplace and negative experiences of working. The negative experiences were described as occurring as a result of communication difficulties, social dynamics, sensory issues and in some cases overwhelming and unpredictable demands in retail settings, one of the most common areas where job vacancies occur. The research findings emphasise the importance of social support and the development of an appropriate relational space within both the education and work settings.

Autistic people have described Autism as 'value-neutral, akin to height, skin colour, and handedness, asserting that any value attributed is that of society rather than of Autism itself. It is not a disease or a disorder' (Botha et al, 2022 p.436). As outlined by Milton's (2012) proposed 'double empathy problem', many Autistic individuals experience challenges within social interactions with their majority non-Autistic colleagues which can impact the development of relationships and trust (Milton, 2012). Consequently, it is understandable that difficulties can arise between Autistic and non-Autistic people in social settings within education and employment settings. The finding by Crompton et al. (2020b) that Autistic individuals don't encounter the same difficulties when interacting with other Autistic individuals echoes the experiences of most research participants reported in the current study with regard to their enjoyment of social interaction through discussion and group work with their Autistic peers on the IMPACT Programme. There were a small number of participants who did not enjoy group settings due to sensory issues which affected their ability to participate. Also interesting in the current findings was the positive experiences many of the participants reported from their positive relationships with "key worker" staff in Gheel, or staff delivering the IMPACT programme.

McVey et al., (2023) emphasise the impact of long-standing stereotypes and a historical inclination for broader society to focus on deficits in diagnosis and service provision which

leads to misunderstandings of Autistic neurology and preferences. These misunderstandings can contribute to negative experiences for Autistic people from an early age through formal education and adolescence and on to post-secondary progression routes such as university and employment. Participants in this study spoke of negative experiences in school including a lack of support or understanding from teachers and bullying from peers. Milton's (2022, p.1902) re-visiting of the Double Empathy Problem ten years on reiterates the need in society for understanding and rapport-building without the assumption that Autistic people and their social deficits need normative remediation. Many of the participants in the current study also report very negative social experiences in prior work settings, which impacted their motivation to seek future employment or roles. The relational space aspect of vocational preparation and development of pathways to access employment is a key consideration for the IMPACT Programme and other providers.

Research participants spoke about disclosure in different ways as part of their daily lives and also as part of their self-identity. They did not specifically name it as a challenge but highlighted it as part of their individual experiences as an Autistic person navigating society. Cameron (2018) points out that disclosure of Autism is a deeply personal decision to make and once made this public information cannot be taken back. The decision to disclose is highly subjective and can vary depending on past experiences and societal attitudes (O'Neill and Kenny, 2023). The disclosure of Autism is directly linked to stereotyping and stigma for many Autistic individuals (Pearson and Rose, 2021) and participants in this study related experiences of people speaking more loudly and slowly to them and noticeably changing their disposition towards them once they had disclosed. This expression of stereotyping and generalisations can be both negative and positive in intention but are rarely accurate. Scanlon and Doyle (2021) found that these generalisations can support low expectations which don't necessarily imply any negative intent but are often tied to underestimated abilities and doubts about Autistic individuals' capability to obtain and sustain employment.

The navigation of physical space from a sensory viewpoint was highlighted in the study as part of the challenges of the workplace. Getting to Gheel and the use of public transport was also difficult for many with the physical and mental demands of planning for unpredictable and sensorily overwhelming public transport contributing to the difficulty of overcoming anxiety and leaving the home. The Pobal evaluation of the ABILITY Programme 2019/2020 reported that organisations working with people with disabilities encountered challenges due to the lack of transport in rural areas and limited transport in large urban areas. These challenges limited the capacity of people engaging with employment opportunities and added complexity to some organisation's efforts to provide employment (2020, p.35). In this study, the need for practical planning advice on finance and transport was expressed by research participants. The immediacy for the need for employment was linked in part for some participants with the relative security of disability payments or supportive home environments. Some participants have access to disability payments and additional support such as rent allowance, medical cards and free transport that may be impacted by full-time work? According to the Pobal evaluation the 'feeling of jeopardising entitlements which are in many cases hard-won' (p.35) by trying to access employment can be concerning for them and their families. For other participants who are living independently, the need for financial stability from a job is more pressing than the need for a career.

The participants in this study spoke of the challenge of navigating the built environment of a workplace with the scale and size of the building linked to the number of people that also needed to be navigated. The need for a quiet space or sensory room to 'calm down' was important. The recognition of the 'pace' of an environment indicated a disconnect for some participants with the culture and process of working. The difficulty in asking for accommodations or knowing what the accommodations could be requires a complex negotiation process of social and cultural norms in the workplace. The AsIAM report Autism in the Workplace: Creating Opportunity for Autistic People (2021) found that "just 20% of Autistic people requested a Reasonable Accommodation from an employer and 42% of Autistic people believed that requesting Reasonable Accommodation would hinder their prospects of finding their preferred role."

Recommendations and Preferences of Autistic Research Participants

Research participants expressed a preference for face-to-face inputs from employers and in particular, Autism informed employers. Participants also asked for inputs from past participants of the IMPACT Programme who could share their experiences of employment. The videos of Autistic speakers and other online content and activities were welcomed by many Autistic research participants on the IMPACT Programme, but the overall wish was for Autistic role models and speakers to come to the sessions and speak face to face with participants. Howard and Sedgewick's (2021) research into preferred communication modes of Autistic adults found that participants preferred email when communicating with customer service, accessing services, and communicating about specific topics. They preferred face to face and email when communicating with family and friends, in employment and in education. If the person is known, then there is a preference for face-to-face, but this is dependent upon how close and accepting the relationship is.

Research participants appreciated the practical elements of the programme and suggested 'taster' work experience in workplaces and practical training in financial planning, transport planning and processes like interviews, meetings and information connected to employment such as signing contracts, employment rights and procedures. Their lack of experience and/or key knowledge of how employment works in practice and their rights and responsibilities as an employee can be directly related to their feelings of exclusion in compulsory schooling, their experience of Autism informed practices in education and/or employment and a lack of care shown to their transition and progression options. The Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities 2015-2024 (2019) acknowledges research from Wehman, Revell and Brooke (2003) that demonstrates that people with disabilities who take part in work experience during their school years, especially paid work, have a significantly higher employment rate. The Strategy recognises that outcomes from the UK 'Getting a Life' project show that a focus on career planning and employment needs to start in the first year of post primary school (p.15). The PASTE report recommendations for a supported transition model puts the individual at age 15 in the centre of the process and recommends that they are assisted in making an informed choice about the future within natural circles of support in their communities guided by a career's facilitator (2018, p.49).

The Comprehensive Employment Strategy in Priority 5 states that there will be provision of 'coordinated and seamless support' and yet the support for Autistic adults is not provided

through the HSE funded services, and mainstream employment services are not Autistic informed. Additionally, members of the National Federation of Voluntary Service Providers report that the Employability's service is unintentionally discriminatory towards people with Autism as the assessment model does not accommodate the challenges that Autistic individuals can face including difficulties with social interaction, communication, environmental sensitivities. The preferences of Autistic participants for employment in this study were subjective and varied relating to individual preferences for autonomy, the ability to work part-time to accommodate personal preferences and in one case an unwillingness to work in a capitalist society and employment that did not fit with personal values.

Participants also requested information on alternative routes to employment through creative careers and/or apprenticeship. The content on the culture of organisations was new to many participants who found it empowering to learn that they could have agency over the choice of job or career that aligns with their interests or ambitions; and that sometimes an unsuccessful employment experience is due to the lack of fit between a person's values and the organisations operations. Equally the inputs on entrepreneurship were also welcomed as novel and relevant routes to financial and personal independence.

The observed lack of knowledge and understanding of employment as a job or a career and the lack of experience in the workplace can be in part traced through a consistent gap in provision of transition and progression planning for people with disabilities. The PASTE study states that students in special schools are directed to the HSE Training and Occupational Support Service, a service provided to people with disabilities aged from 18 – 65 years. This service exists to "identify and plan for people who need an adult HSE funded day service" (2018, p.10). The need for a plan for people with disabilities who wish to engage with further education or employment is unmet. A recent literature review by the National Disability Authority (NDA) found that:

The level of disability competence amongst guidance professionals is unknown. This includes knowledge amongst guidance professionals of the post-school pathways available for learners with disabilities. Currently, it is unclear what the required level of disability competency amongst those who deliver career guidance should be (2023, p.6).

Scanlon and Kamp (2016) found that there is a lack of formal transition planning to assist people with disabilities progress from compulsory education to further education and training or employment and where there is a process, it appears disjointed (Doyle et al., 2017). Guidance services in second level schools which are primarily focused on progression to post-compulsory education through the Points system and the CAO, vary from school to school and tend not to be tailored to individual needs or Autistic students. The NDA review of the literature shows that using career guidance tools and strategies that are strength-based and focus on the positive attributes of learners with disabilities is optimal and the review acknowledges the benefits of a universal design for learning approach (2023, p.7). There is scope for creativity and flexibility in the mode of delivery of guidance and transition support. Lombardi et al., (2020) in their study of delivering a career readiness programme online for students with disabilities suggest a blended learning approach in general education settings may be more flexible and "meet the needs of students with disabilities ensuring they receive the same career readiness opportunities as their non-disabled peers" (p.154).

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are overall recommendations emerging from the research. Limitations of this research include the small scale of the research sample and the specific focus on one employment programme. Recommendations are provided in terms of the context of Gheel and specifically for the IMPACT Programme:

Recommendations from Autistic participants:

- A** Some research participants who had attended career sessions as part of education or training courses in the past **expressed a wish for practical activities** and content tailored to an individual context or situation.
- B** However, the **content on culture and understanding of 'fit'** for the person and the organisation was new to many participants. It is recommended that this aspect of the IMPACT programme be developed as research participants viewed it as empowering in two ways:
 - (i) that an Autistic person has agency to choose a job or career that is sustainable for them and
 - (i) that at times an organisation's culture can be part of the reason that employment is not a success.
- C** Some research participants would like to **engage directly with employers** and learn about job cultures and settings directly from organisations.
- D** The links with employers and support to scaffold such links emerged as an important finding for the Autistic research participants. The **need for work placements and practical experience** was expressed or **'taster' work experience in workplaces**.
- E** Some participants suggesting **mentorship or dedicated supports in a workplace** as particularly valuable.
- F** Additionally, participants also expressed a **wish to meet with past participants from IMPACT** who had progressed into employment. This was suggested potentially be inspirational to current IMPACT learners in raising their expectations and future ambitions regarding accessing employment.
- G** Participants recommended that the IMPACT Programme **provide opportunities to explore alternative routes to employment and education through apprenticeship and creative careers** as well as wider career opportunities than business or retail settings.
- H** Participants **valued the ongoing support** offered after the IMPACT Programme for job seeking and/or workplace support. It is recommended that all enrolled in IMPACT programme are made aware of the availability of this continuing post-programme support and how it can be accessed.

Overall Recommendations

The following are overall recommendations emerging from the research in terms of the context of Gheel and specifically for the IMPACT Programme:

- It is important to foreground the voice of Autistic adults on key issues and service design or delivery relevant to their lives. An acknowledgement of the complexity and diversity of Autistic experience should be foundational in informing policy and service development.
- Develop organisational processes to support integration of IMPACT programme participants within the wider service protocol of the Gheel organisation more generally to facilitate a smooth transition experience for autistic adults:
- Operationalise the individualised and tailored service module to support appropriate personalised IMPACT Programme delivery for all participants:
 - Develop Individual Educational Plan (IEP) type portfolio for IMPACT Programme participants.
 - Develop 'exit interview' style questionnaire for IMPACT Programme participants to include feedback mechanisms / goal setting.
- It is suggested that Gheel use funding from Pobal or other sources to develop a network of voluntary providers and charities nationwide who are providing employment services to Autistic service users.
- This network could share experiences on successful approaches, links with employers, participant feedback to build an Autism informed employment programme for neurodiverse people that could be mainstreamed, and sustainably funded in the future.
- Gheel and the IMPACT Programme should continue their outreach activities with employers while evaluating and documenting the needs of employers and Autistic job seekers to build an Autism informed employer support programme that could be mainstreamed nationwide.

The following recommendations are granular and relate to suggested changes to the IMPACT Programme in response to findings from research participants:

IMPACT Programme Delivery

- Provide continuous professional development for IMPACT trainer on teaching/training strategies.
- Consider interaction / roles of caseworkers and transition team in IMPACT progression routes.
- Supplement IMPACT trainer role with agreed and formalised 'support interactions' with Gheel staff linked to IMPACT progression routes.
- Facilitate guest external speakers to meet participants face to face.
- Facilitate previous IMPACT participants as in-person speakers
- Facilitate opportunities for participants to meet employers open to neurodiversity.
- Provide opportunities for role play for job application processes / interviews.
- Provide role play activities or scenarios for negotiation skills.

- Design and implement needs analysis of participants' career interests and ambitions.
- Anticipation of different employment experiences (linked to needs analysis).
- Seek input from participants regarding efficacy and relevance of the IMPACT Programme content and delivery.
- Develop formative and summative evaluation protocols to ensure currency of the IMPACT Programme content.

IMPACT Programme Content

- Broaden content to include range of careers including trades and creative industries.
- Provide information on employee rights.
- Provide practical supports on financial planning or transport planning.
- Support participants to undertake relevant and individualised job search activities linked to progression routes.

Transition Planning and Progression

IMPACT Participants

- Develop Individual Educational Plan (IEP) type portfolio for IMPACT Programme participants.
- Develop 'exit interview' style questionnaire for IMPACT Programme participants to include feedback mechanisms / goal setting.

Links with Employers

- Develop protocol for formative evaluation and documentation of interactions with employers.
- Explore need for formalised partnerships with employers including Memorandum of Understandings or agreed protocols.

Quality Assurance

IMPACT Participants

- Develop integrated protocols for participants in Gheel services with regard to IMPACT Programme transition planning.
- Develop clear information leaflet for participants

Staff

- Develop protocols/procedures for internal use with frontline staff.
- Consult and clarify roles of caseworkers and transition team with regard to the IMPACT Programme.
- Establish clear lines of communication of roles and responsibilities to all staff linked to the IMPACT Programme.
- Circulate protocols and procedures to all staff linked to the IMPACT Programme.

Future development IMPACT

- Work placements (flexible but formalised protocol for service user and employer).
- Internships / work experience (flexible but formalised protocol for service user and employer).
- Facilitate opportunities for IMPACT Participants to access Mentors for employment.
- Planning for varied needs of future cohorts such as school leavers.

Conclusion

The narrative of our society values and praises confidence and independence in individuals and requires people to engage in education and/or employment to live successful and independent lives. Autistic people are navigating a society and an employment market that is neurotypical in design and process with an invisible disability that is not well understood, acknowledged, or accommodated.

The IMPACT Programme is Autism informed and, as such, works with participants to understand individual preferences for communication, sensory environments, and duration of sessions. The programme is designed to accommodate Autistic people and is tailored to the individual person. The success of the programme for the participants is primarily due to these accommodations and to the acknowledgement and response to individual need. The IMPACT Programme as part of Gheel is also designed to support individuals to progress and transition out of Gheel into employment. This approach may sometime be in tension with funding models or expectations from external bodies, such as the HSE.

There are signs of change in the Irish State's acknowledgement and response to the rights and needs of disabled people. The Minister for Social Protection has announced a new programme called 'Workability: Inclusive Pathways to Employment Programme' as a new employment focused programme which aims to support disabled people to enter education and employment (Department of Social Protection, 2023). The programme commenced in January 2024 with grants available to 52 applicants who reached the qualifying threshold to access the funding of €200,000 and is administered by Pobal. The increasing voice of Autistic people in research practice and in consultation processes for government policy and funding is encouraging. However, the slow pace of change in addressing structural deficits that have been researched, reported and expressed through a range of reports and consultative processes over the last number of years needs to be acknowledged.

What is clear from this research report is that Gheel has developed an employment programme that Autistic participants felt was effective in providing them with social, emotional and vocational training and support. The participants view this as increasing their understanding, knowledge and disposition towards employment, accessing a job and as a career. The IMPACT Programme staff is also increasing its outreach activities to employers and organisations who are interested in employing and supporting Autistic staff.

The key challenge facing such programmes is the sustainability of funding and resourcing for an individualised person-centred employment service within an organisation that is faced with a scaling up of need from Autistic people. In Ireland voluntary bodies and the charity sector provides a range of services to disabled people funded by the government through a competitive process. Each service is competing for funding on a per capita basis often dependent on the geographical location of the service. While the services have organically grown or developed additional capability to respond to the needs of service users, these programmes and initiatives, although often very successful and valuable to service users, are run in isolation and/or semi-integration with other community initiatives bound together through personal contacts and shared visions of social justice. The autonomy of service providers is limited by systems and structures that segregate provision while national policy and legislation, including the signing up of Ireland to the CRPD, is promoting inclusion and integration.

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APPENDICES

Informed Consent (Case Study)

RESEARCH PROJECT

Future Expectations: A qualitative research study exploring the perceptions and expectations of Autistic adults regarding employment and education prospects

| | |
|--|--|
| I have had this project explained to me. | |
| I understand that I will be invited to take part in three workshops. | |
| I understand that I will meet a researcher(s) to talk and express my views about my career or education ambitions and what would help or support me. | |
| I understand that I will be asked to take part in arts-based activities or discussions at the workshops. | |
| The workshops will take place in a place of my choice. I can bring somebody with me if I want to. | |
| I understand that I may be talking about my opinions or expressing my views by myself or in a group with other people. | |
| I am happy to have my views and opinions and reflections included in the research. | |
| I can take a break when I need to. | |
| I would be happy to talk to another person if I have any concerns. | |
| I can stop taking part in the interview or this workshop at any time if I want to. | |

I agree to take part in this project:

Name: _____

Witness: _____

Date: _____

Plain Language Statement Case Study

Future Expectations: A qualitative research study exploring the perceptions and expectations of Autistic adults regarding employment and education prospects

Principal Investigators:

Dr. Neil Kenny, School of Inclusive and Special Education: **Email:** Neil.Kenny@dcu.ie

Dr. Jane O'Kelly, School of Policy and Practice: **Email:** jane.okelly@dcu.ie

Sophie Butler, Institute of Education, St. Patrick's Campus Drumcondra: Dublin City University

What are the Aims of the Project?

This study aims to explore the perceptions and experiences of Autistic people and members of staff at Gheel services regarding the challenges Autistic people face when seeking employment and access to further education. In addition, researchers will work with Autistic adults in Gheel Autism Services using participatory research approaches to explore their experience of participating in the IMPACT programme.

What are the Objectives of the Project?

The evaluation will involve collecting qualitative data from the range of stakeholders across a sample of Autistic adults engaged with the IMPACT programme, graduates of the programme, and Gheel staff. The objectives of this study are to;

- Flexibly use a range qualitative research approaches to engage Autistic individuals of to explore their views and ambitions for accessing employment or educational ambitions
- Explore their views and experiences of participating Autistic adults regarding their transition to post-school life;
- Identify what they view as barriers to their achieving their ambitions and;
- Request their recommendations for how Autistic individuals could be supported to access employment or educational opportunities;
- Work collaboratively with Autistic individuals to develop case studies of personal experiences relevant to this project, and;
- Produce a research report outlining the findings of this study.

Who is funding the Project?

This research project is funded by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission.

What do you want me to do?

ThisYou will be invited to attend and participate in an interview at the Gheel services premises for about 30-60 minutes. The interview will be conducted by a member of the research team and will be recorded using a Dictaphone or voice recorder application. We would like your consent to participate in the interview.

What do you want me to do?

You will be invited to take part in three workshops (2 hours x 3) to explore your experience of the Impact Programme and your views on employment for Autistic adults.

Is there any risk involved in my participation in this Research Study (if greater than that encountered in everyday life)

There are no potential risks to any participants in this study.

How will I benefit (directly or indirectly) from participation?

The insights gained from this group will have the potential to inform a more inclusive approach to workplace neurodiversity across supported and non-supported employment settings. This in turn, may have a direct and/or indirect impact on the experiences of Autistic adults seeking employment. Thus, participation in the project will enable them to have a voice about their experiences with the IMPACT programme and their views regarding support or barriers for their preparation for future employment.

Will my identity be kept confidential?

Participant confidentiality is an important issue during data collection. Participant's identity and other personal information will not be revealed, published or used in other studies. While all participants will be advised at the outset of the focus group to maintain confidentiality, there may be limits in confidentiality due to the group nature of group focus group interviews and workshops.

What happens to the data?

The data will be stored in a secure locked cabinet in the School of Inclusive and Special Education in the Institute of Education in Drumcondra and saved in a password protected computer. Data will be kept for a maximum of 5 years following the date of the publication of the research. The principal investigator will be responsible for the security of the data. The data will be shredded by the principal investigator after 5 years.

Is your participation in the project Voluntary?

Participation in this research project is completely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time.

If participants have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, please contact:

The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000

Plain Language Statement - Senior Staff

Future Expectations: A qualitative research study exploring the perceptions and expectations of Autistic adults regarding employment and education prospects

Principal Investigators:

Dr. Neil Kenny, School of Inclusive and Special Education: **Email:** Neil.Kenny@dcu.ie

Dr. Jane O'Kelly, School of Policy and Practice: **Email:** jane.okelly@dcu.ie

Sophie Butler, Institute of Education, St. Patrick's Campus Drumcondra: Dublin City University

What is this study about?

This qualitative research study will employ a range of flexible differentiated approaches to engage Autistic individuals currently or previously enrolled in Gheel services IMPACT programme and Gheel staff members and other stakeholders regarding their views and ambitions for accessing employment in the future. This research will also explore their views regarding how to effectively support Autistic individuals to access employment or educational opportunities and the barriers they face to achieving their ambitions.

What are the Aims of the Project?

This study aims to explore the perceptions and experiences of Autistic people and members of staff at Gheel services and other stakeholders regarding the challenges Autistic people face when seeking employment and access to further education. In addition, researchers will work with Autistic adults in Gheel Autism Services using participatory research approaches to explore their experience of participating in the IMPACT programme.

What are the Objectives of the Project?

The evaluation will involve collecting qualitative data from the range of stakeholders across a sample of Autistic adults engaged with the IMPACT programme, graduates of the programme, and Gheel staff. The objectives of this study are to;

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Is there any risk involved in my participation in this Research Study (if greater than that encountered in everyday life)

There are no potential risks to any participants in this study.

How will I benefit (directly or indirectly) from participation?

As outlined above the aims and objectives of this project are to evaluate the IMPACT programme from the perspectives of current or past enrolees in the programme and Gheel staff members. The insights gained from this group will have the potential to inform a more inclusive approach to workplace neurodiversity across supported and non-supported employment settings. This in turn, may have a direct and/or indirect impact on the experiences of Autistic adults seeking employment. Thus, participation in the project will enable them to have a voice about their experiences with the IMPACT programme and their views regarding support or barriers for their preparation for future employment.

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Participant confidentiality is an important issue during data collection. Participant's identity and other personal information will not be revealed, published or used in other studies.

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Is your participation in the project Voluntary?

Participation in this research project is completely voluntary and you may withdraw from the focus group at any time.

If participants have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, please contact:

The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000

Informed Consent - Senior Staff

RESEARCH PROJECT

Future Expectations: A qualitative research study exploring the perceptions and expectations of Autistic adults regarding employment and education prospects

Principal Investigators:

Dr. Neil Kenny, School of Inclusive and Special Education: **Email:** Neil.Kenny@dcu.ie

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Is your participation in the project Voluntary?

Participation in this research project is completely voluntary and you may withdraw from the focus group at any time.

Please complete the following (Circle Yes or No for each question)

I have read the Plain Language Statement (or had it read to me) Yes/No

I understand the information that has been provided Yes/No

I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study Yes/No

I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions Yes/No

I understand that I will be required to participate in an interview Yes/No

I understand that the interview will be recorded Yes/No

Signature _____

Witness _____

Date _____

If participants have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, please contact:

The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000

Interview Framework – Autistic Participants

Future Expectations: A qualitative research study exploring the perceptions and expectations of Autistic adults regarding their experience of the IMPACT programme and education and education prospects post school

A researcher will be asking you the following questions during your interview

- 1 Welcome
- 2 An overview of the Topic
- 3 Ground Rules
- 4 Opening Question

Guiding Topic Framework and corresponding questions

| Topic Area | Guiding Questions |
|--|---|
| Topic 1: Experience of the IMPACT Programme | <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Why did you decide to join the IMPACT programme? <i>why?</i>- How did you feel about starting the programme? <i>Why did you feel that way?</i>- Did starting feel like you expected? <i>Can you give me an example?</i>- How would you have been supported in preparing for the programme?- Did you enjoy the activities on the IMPACT programme?- Did you like the content of the IMPACT programme?- What do you think of the IMPACT programme? <i>Why? Can you give me an example?</i>- What did you like the best? <i>Why?</i>- What did you not like? <i>Why?</i> |

| | |
|---|---|
| <p>Topic 2: Your view of the IMPACT programme now you have finished it</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How has the IMPACT programme affected you? <i>Can you give me an example?</i> - What aspect of the programme do you feel was most important for you? Why do you think it is important? - What is the most important thing you have learned? - How has this changed or had an effect on your life? - Do you think the IMPACT programme should change? Why? - Do What aspects do you feel should be changed about the IMPACT programme ? Why do you say this? - Are there things that should be added to the IMPACT Programme? What are they? |
| <p>Topic 3: Transitions and preparation for the future</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have your ideas for the future changed from being in the IMPACT programme? - Why do you think this change has happened? What were the factors that changed it? - Did the IMPACT programme help you to work through your ambitions? - Are you more clear on what you would like to do? Are you clear on the steps you need to take? - How do you feel about this? |
| <p>Topic 4: Expectations for the future</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What did you want to do when you finished school? - What would you like to do now - education or employment or something else? - What is most exciting about the future for you? - Have you got questions about your future choices that the IMPACT programme didn't answer? What are those questions? |

Topic 5: Support, barriers and recommendations

- What helped you take part in the IMPACT programme and made it easier for you? Why do you say this?
- What made taking part in the IMPACT programme harder? How did it make things harder for you? Why did it do this?
- What might help make these things easier?
- What could be taken away to make the programme better?
- Are there other supports that would be useful for you? e.g. goal setting, decision making, knowledge of supports
- Are you aware of any barriers to you doing what you want to do? Can you name any?
- Would you like additional help to decide your future? What kind of help would that be?
- Do you have any ideas on how to help people after school to decide on their future? Something additional to the IMPACT programme?
- Is there anything schools or workplaces could do to help Autistic people?



**Coimisiún na hÉireann
um Chearta an Duine
agus Comhionannas**
Irish Human Rights and
Equality Commission

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