

Supporting Neurodivergent Students as They Navigate Intimate Relationships and Consent in Higher Educational Institutions (HEI)

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Abstract

This study investigates the experiences of neurodivergent students as they navigate intimate relationships and consent within Irish HEIs, with a focus on identifying the supports they perceive as necessary to promote inclusion, well-being, and safety. Grounded in a social justice paradigm and guided by the principle of “nothing about us without us,” the research adopts a participatory action research (PAR) approach, positioning neurodivergent students as both participants and co-researchers. Qualitative data was generated through focus groups. Data were analysed using thematic analysis, informed by Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Theory and Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, to capture the complex interaction between individual, institutional, and societal factors. Findings reveal that current consent education and relationship supports within HEIs are often rooted in neurotypical assumptions. Additionally, they rely heavily on implicit social norms, verbal instruction, and one-off workshops that do not adequately meet neurodivergent students’ needs. Participants highlighted the impact of masking, sensory sensitivities, difficulties interpreting social cues, and the added complexities faced by students with intersecting identities, including those who identify as LGBTQI+. The study underscores the need for sequential, explicit, skills-based, and neuro-affirmative approaches to consent and relationship education.

The study concludes with evidence-informed considerations for HEIs, advocating for the adoption of Universal Design for Learning principles, the inclusion of neurodivergent voices in programme design, enhanced staff training, and the development of accessible, inclusive supports that promote authentic participation, belonging, and holistic student development.

Index Terms

Social-Justice; Participatory; Assumptions; Masking; Neuro-Affirmative