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UNESCO Chair in
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CHILD AND FAMILY RESEARCH CENTRE

**RETHINK
IRELAND**

Our
Social
Innovation
Fund



Institute for
Lifecourse and Society

Enabling an inclusive and equitable quality education for all,

THROUGH THE IMPLEMENTATION
OF A NEW, EVIDENCE-BASED MODEL
ON EDUCATIONAL PROGRESSION
AND TRANSFORMATION

FINDINGS FROM
AN EVALUATION OF
**RETHINK IRELAND'S
EDUCATION FUND**

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About Rethink Ireland

Rethink Ireland is a national organisation which supports high-quality social innovation projects through cash grants and provides business support for its awardees. The purpose of Rethink Ireland is 'to make Ireland a better and more equal place through social innovation'. Rethink Ireland works in partnership with companies, foundations, trusts and individuals committed to tackling pressing issues in Ireland, predominantly in the fields of education, health, social enterprise, equality, and green transition. Rethink Ireland provides grants, supports and access to networks for awardees to thrive and even to spread their innovative solutions across the country. Funds raised by Rethink Ireland are matched by the Department of Rural and Community Development and from the Dormant Accounts Fund. More recently Rethink Ireland has received match funding from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth and the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection.

Rethink Ireland grants will ultimately contribute to a more equal Ireland where every person can have access to quality health and education.

About the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre

The UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre (UCFRC) is part of the Institute for Lifecourse and Society at the National University of Ireland Galway. It was founded in 2007, through support from The Atlantic Philanthropies, Ireland and the Health Service Executive (HSE). With a base in the School of Political Science and Sociology, the mission of the Centre is to help create the conditions for excellent policies, services and practices that improve the lives of children, youth and families through research, education and service development. The UCFRC has an extensive network of relationships and research collaborations internationally and is widely recognised for its core expertise in the areas of Family Support and Youth Development.

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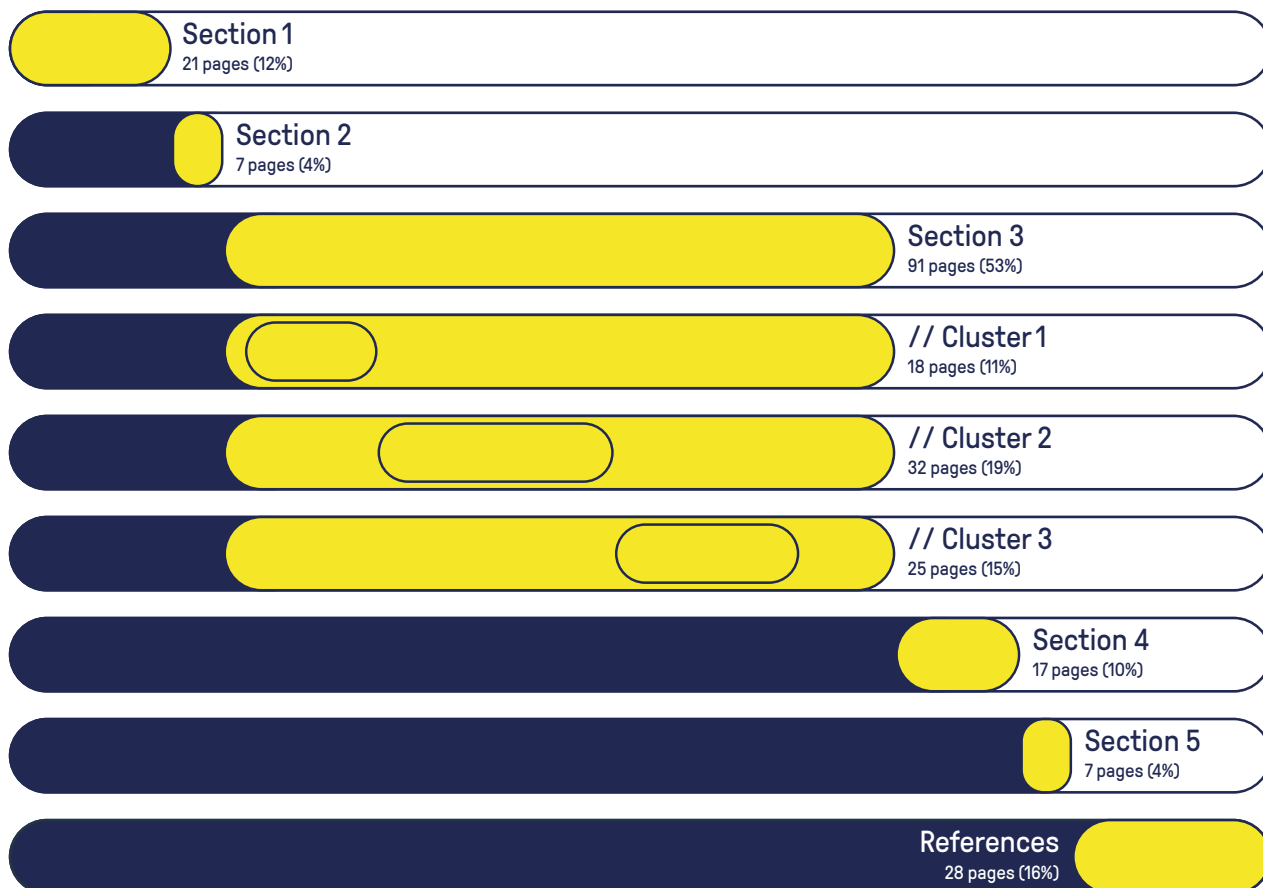
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Visual breakdown of this report’s contents



INTRODUCTION

01

1.1 Evidence on Educational Inequality to Inform Policy and Practice

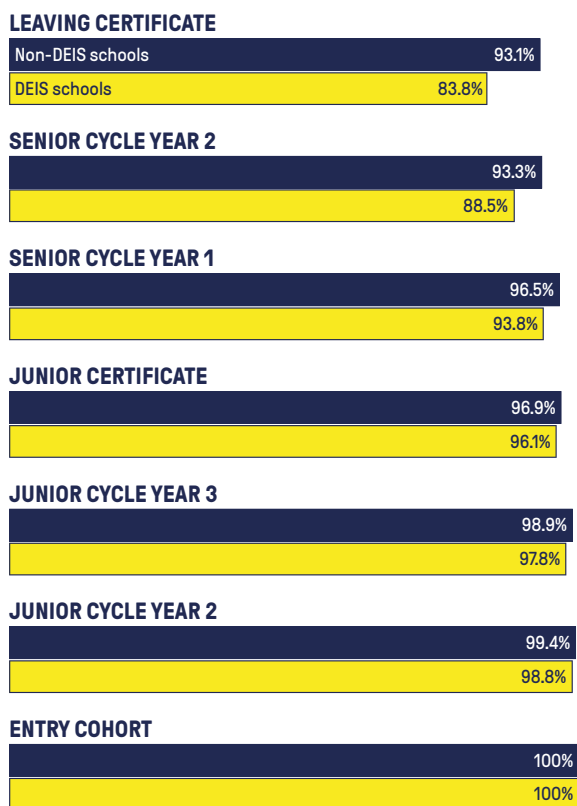
This document presents the findings from a major national three-year research and evaluation study conducted on Rethink Ireland's *Education Fund* (2017–2020), by the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre (UCFRC) at NUI Galway. The report concludes by presenting a new evidence-based model, describing *Educational Progression and Transformation* for learners across the Education Fund, who are experiencing educational inequality. As well as being of interest to social innovators, social science researchers and the general public, this model and related findings are designed to speak to two specific sectors. First, they speak to frontline projects both here and internationally, similar to those in the Education Fund, which support those experiencing educational inequality and which are open to learning about 'what works' in providing *spaces* and *faces* that enable educational progression and transformation. Second, the findings speak to policymakers with responsibility for children and young people, and their education. Our model explores how the vision set out in the UN's Education 2030 Sustainable Development Goal 4, on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all, can be moved forward through a deeper and more nuanced approach to the needs of the learners catered for within the Education Fund.

The remainder of this section is divided into five parts. **Section 1.2** picks up on the SDG 4 and explores this aspiration in the context of current trends in relation to educational inequality in Ireland. **Section 1.3** describes Rethink Ireland and the concept of social innovation which underpins its mission. **Section 1.4** introduces the Education Fund, its awardees, and how the fund relates to the National Framework of Qualifications, and the Gamechanger Dialogue, which was central to the fund. **Section 1.5** offers a synopsis of the high-level findings which can be gleaned from this three-year evaluation while **Section 1.6** explains the forthcoming order of the report.

1.2 Educational Inequality and the Aspiration for Inclusive Education in Ireland

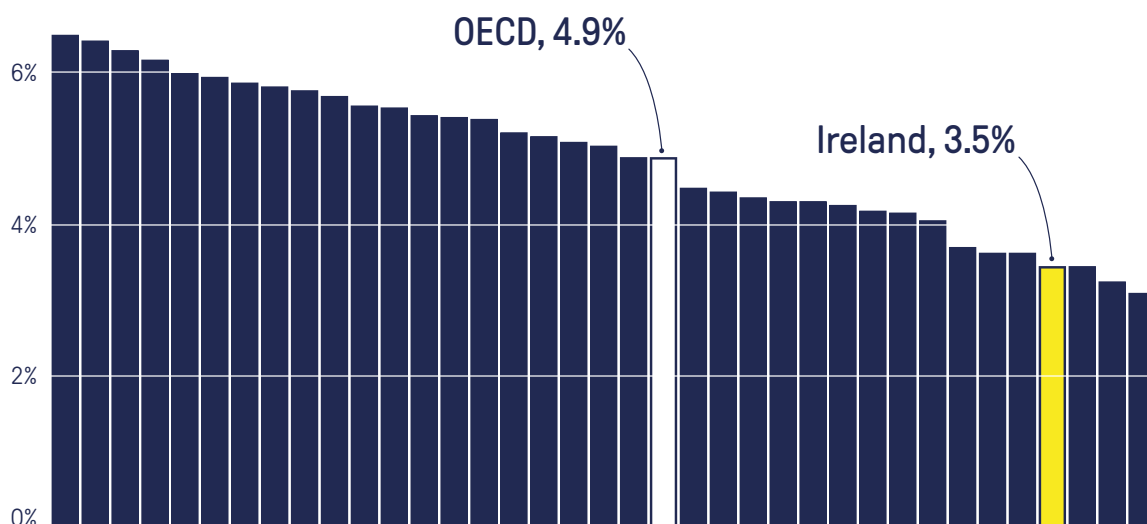
The UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted in 2015 by 150 countries, setting a 15-year plan to achieve the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. The education goal, SDG 4, aims '*to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*' (UNESCO, 2018). This universal and collective aspiration requires strong commitment from governments to act towards this goal. In pursuit of the goal, Ireland has introduced the National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development in Ireland 2014–2020: Education for Sustainability, and launched the Action Plan for Education 2016–2019. These were informed by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Ireland performs strongly in relation to SDG 4 relative to other EU countries and the rate of early school leaving has significantly decreased since 2011 (Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, 2018: 37). The Delivering of Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) Plan was launched in 2005 and remains the key Irish policy instrument (DEIS Plan 2017) for addressing educational disadvantage (ibid., 2018: 38). However, despite the Government's commitments to inclusive and equitable education, educational inequality perseveres in the Irish education system. Except for Youthreach, which is a state-provided programme of 'second chance' education, the area of alternative education is not explicitly defined and mentioned in the Irish education system. Even though Youthreach supports a number of students in their progression in education, it does not cater for all. Programmes such as those presented in this report perform an important role in bridging this gap. To date, there is a lack of systematic information on the types and numbers of alternative programmes of education in Ireland.

Figure 1.1 – Retention rates for DEIS and non-DEIS schools broken down by milestone (2013 cohort)



Educational inequality¹ is a persistent feature in the Irish education system (Cahill, 2020); students from different socioeconomic backgrounds attain different educational outcomes. Students from affluent, white Irish families remain prevalent in the most selective higher education courses (i.e., medicine, finance and engineering)² (Lynch, 2020). While Ireland has a high post-primary school completion rate, with 92.3% of students completing the Senior Cycle in 2018 or 2019 (DES, 2020), school completion rates in schools serving areas of acute economic disadvantage are statistically and significantly lower than in schools serving more affluent populations (Houses of Oireachtas, 2019). Ireland has one of the lowest levels of investment in education among OECD countries. In comparison with the OECD average of investing 5% of GDP in education³, Ireland invested 3.5% in primary, secondary and third-level education in 2016 (OECD, 2020). Indicators such as child poverty show a consistent level of social and economic inequality in Ireland. Children’s life chances remain disproportionately affected by their

Figure 1.2 – Total expenditure on educational institutions as a percentage of GDP across OECD countries (2017)

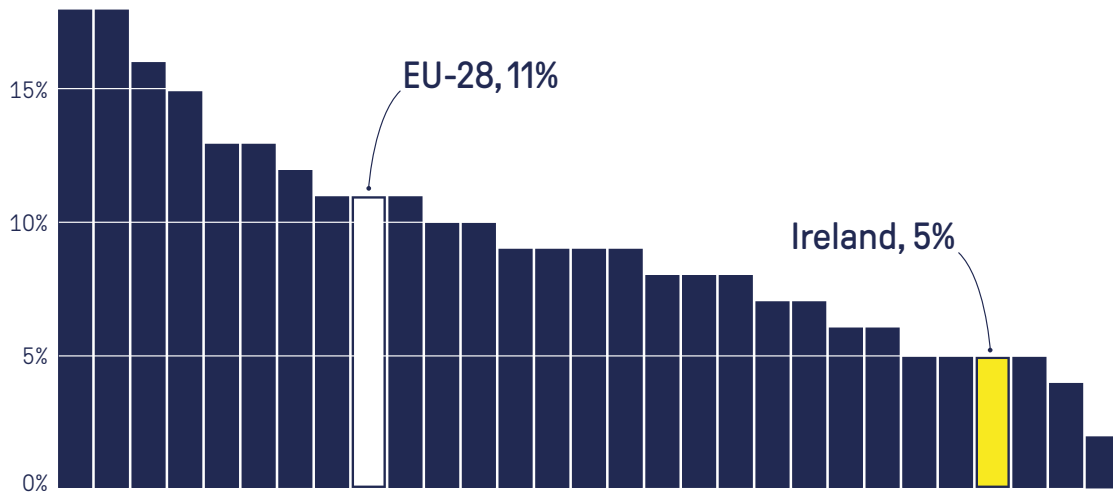


1 As argued by Lynch (2020), the term ‘disadvantage/d is used to classify schools where poorer working class (and increasingly ethnic minorities) attend – and to describe students themselves’. As such, the term does not contribute to a discussion about the wealth and power differentials between classes that create inequalities in educational outcomes.

2 The impact of the intersection of race and class requires making white visible as an intersecting category of privilege.

3 When public spending on education is calculated as a percentage of Modified Gross National Income (GNI*), it accounts for 6.1% of GNI* in 2015 (CSO, 2017).

Figure 1.3 – Early school leavers as a percentage of persons aged 18-24 across EU member states (2018)

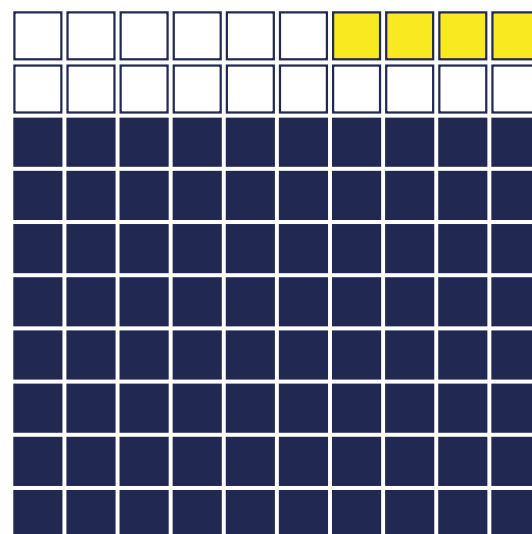


families’ social and financial positions (Barnardos, 2009: 4). Child poverty rates doubled during the recession years. In 2019, 8.1% of children lived in consistent poverty, and 15.3% of children were at risk of poverty (CSO, 2019). Child homelessness also hugely increased in the last few years, with almost one-third of people in emergency accommodation being a child (Focus Ireland, 2020). These children continue facing inequalities of both opportunity and educational outcome.

School completion rates have increased significantly in the last few years in Ireland⁴. However, those who have left school early have become more marginalised and experience a high complexity of challenges and needs (Smyth et al., 2019). Individuals without recognised qualifications have reduced life chances (Feeley (Lohan), 2014) and experience challenges in the areas of mental health and general wellbeing, engagement with work or education, and possible involvement with the judicial system (Smyth et al., 2019). Early school leavers are three times more likely to be unemployed than people aged 18–24 who are not early school leavers (CSO, 2019), while those who are employed face insecure, low-skilled and poorly paid employment.

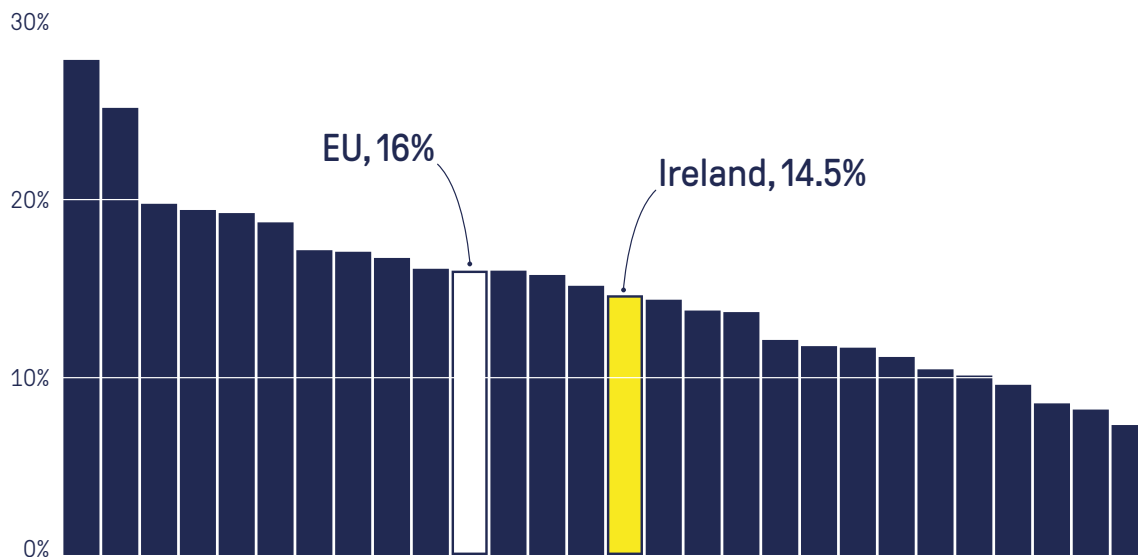
Data from 2019 (Eurostat, 2019) shows that Ireland had the fourteenth-highest rate in the EU of youth aged 20–34 who are neither in education or training, nor in employment. O’ Mahony’s study (in Smyth et al., 2019: 24) revealed that four-fifths of prisoners left school before they were 16 years old with only 4% of prisoners having completed their Leaving Certificate.

Figure 1.4 – Proportion of prisoners in Ireland who left school before 16 years old (blue) and who left having finished Leaving Certificate (yellow)



⁴ 4,500 young people drop out of school before completing Junior Cert each year (Houses of Oireachtas, 2019).

Figure 1.5 – Proportion of persons aged 18-24 across EU member states who are not in employment nor education and training (2019)



Despite the introduction of significant policy measures to overcome educational inequalities (i.e., the DEIS Programme; curricular interventions such as the Junior Certificate Schools Programme and the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme; and schemes such as HEAR and DARE⁵), socioeconomic background remains the core determining factor of educational and social inequality (Cahill, 2020). While there are recognised positive changes in connection with the DEIS Programme, there is still an identified gap in educational outcomes between DEIS and non-DEIS schools. Even though the gap in retention rates between DEIS and non-DEIS schools has almost halved since 2001, there is still a clear difference in retention rates. This was 9.3% for the 2013 cohort (DEIS, 2020). As pointed out by O’Sullivan (Houses of Oireachtas, 2019), there is a recognised improvement in the areas of literacy and numeracy in DEIS schools. However, this improvement has been recognised in all schools in Ireland. O’Sullivan (Houses of Oireachtas, 2019) recommended a more prescriptive approach to the delivery of activities to DEIS students,

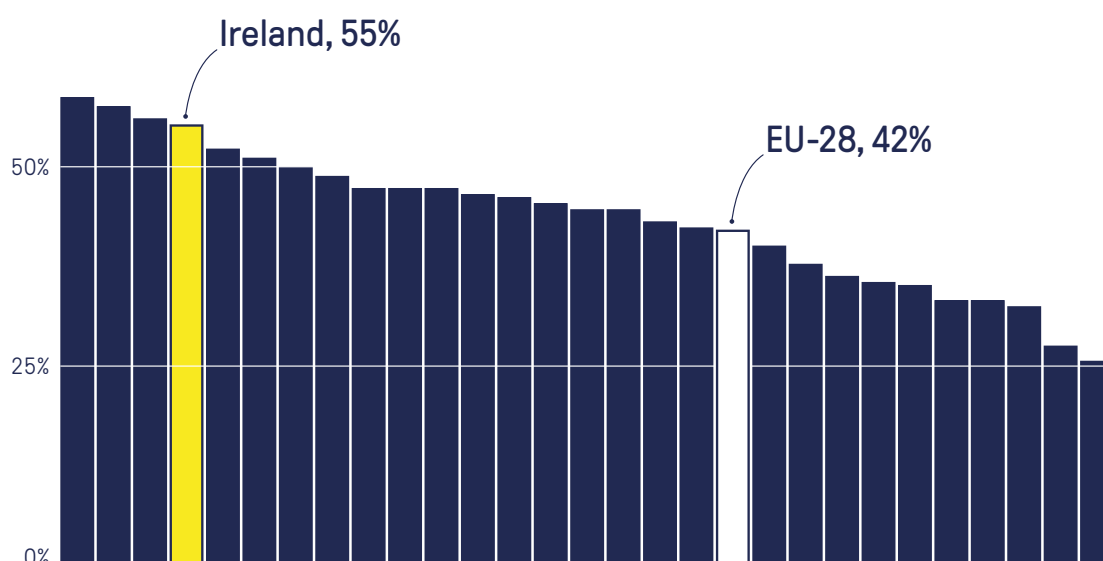
including academic support, mentoring and college awareness activities to reduce differences in educational outcomes. Other actions, such as supporting students’ wellbeing⁶ and changing their attitudes, building their aspirations, and paying attention to school climate, should be introduced to narrow the attainment gap between DEIS and non-DEIS schools.

Ireland’s rate of participation in third-level education is the fourth highest in the EU with an attainment rate of 55% in 2019 (CSO, 2020). A ratio of 4.9 students from disadvantaged areas to 10 students from affluent areas attend third-level institutions (this rate varies across institutions) (O’Shea, 2020). There is a vast discrepancy in the numbers progressing to further and higher education between students from affluent areas and students from socioeconomically marginalised areas. There is an enormous disparity in the numbers across social class, ethnicity and nationality (Kennedy and Smith, 2018).

⁵ HEAR stands for Higher Education Access Route and DARE stands for Disability Access Route to Education.

⁶ The Department of Education published the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2018–2023) to support schools and centres for education in the area of wellbeing.

Figure 1.6 – Proportion of persons aged 30-34 across EU member states who have a third level qualification (2019)

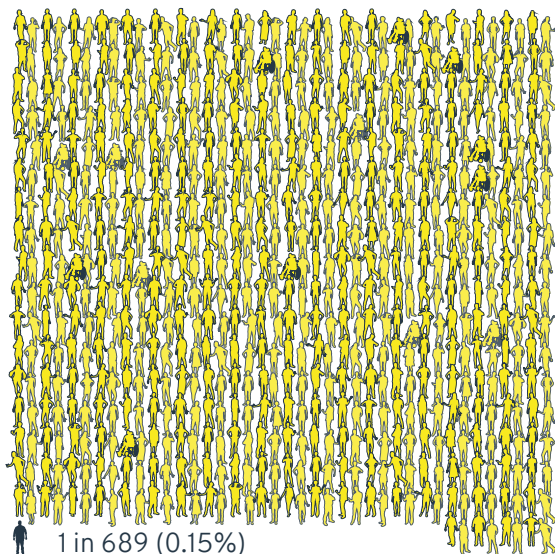


Specific developments are now clearly identifiable with respect to support for special education in schools. A trajectory of developing more inclusive models of education has been a feature of initiatives across the education system over a sustained period. Indicators of success here include increasing the number of students with special educational needs enrolling in mainstream post-primary schools. There is also significantly enhanced investment in direct support for schools, including additional special educational needs teachers, special needs assistants, and emotional and behavioural disorder units. A much more cohesive, unified model for how special education support is provided in all schools has been introduced (Circulars 14/2017 and 13/2017). The Education for Persons with Special Education Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 and the Disability Act 2005 continue to provide grounds for an independent assessment of a student’s special educational needs, followed by an individual education plan and provision of supports. As a result, more students went through independent assessment, and the numbers of students with special educational needs in mainstream schools have visibly increased (McConkey et al., 2016). An increase of 50% in total expenditure has been recognised in special needs education since 2011. Significant spending of over €2 billion (or over 20% of the total educational budget) was secured in 2021 to provide additional support for children

with special educational needs (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2021). There was also a significant increase in special needs assistant (SNA) posts in this period: from 10,575 in 2011 to over 18,000 in September 2021. The number of special classes across the country has increased by almost 167%: from 548 in 2011 to over 2,000 in September 2021. There has also been a significant increase in the number of special education teachers since 2011, to 13,765 in 2021 (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2021).

Despite notable progress in special education, students with disabilities and special educational needs face more barriers when engaging in school and are at greater risk of poor educational outcomes (Watson et al., 2017). Students with significant or complex educational needs have a greater chance of being excluded from mainstream schools, and they are more likely to be educated in special schools or special classes within mainstream schools (McConkey et al., 2016). Even though Ireland has one of the lowest rates of early school leaving in the EU, it has higher-than-average rates of early school leaving for people with disabilities (27.8% versus the EU average of 23.6%). In Ireland the school-leaving gap between people with and without disabilities is one of the widest in the EU (22.5% versus the EU average of 12.6%) (Ireland Country Report, 2019).

Figure 1.7 – Proportion of persons registered in a third-level institution with intellectual disabilities and whom used two or more-day services (2017)



The Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) was introduced to widen the access of students with disabilities to third-level education (Aston, 2019). However, the numbers of students with intellectual disabilities in third-level education remain low. Only 84 out of 57,872 people with intellectual disabilities who used two or more day services were registered in a third-level institution in 2017 (NIDD, 2017)⁷. While third-level institutions value inclusive education, the sustainability of programmes for students with intellectual disabilities proves a problem in terms of the level of state funding. This has meant that alternative sources of funding, including donations, are required to augment support (Aston, 2019). Since 2014, the number of programmes for people with intellectual disabilities provided by third-level institutions decreased from 16 to 10.

Interventions designed to address educational inequality in Ireland have focused on reforming the experiences of school-goers and the provision of resources at the school level. Arguably, however, there has been less focus on the structural inequalities that have caused diverse outcomes among students (Cahill,

2020). It is important to note that specific policy interventions, such as the DEIS programme, curricular interventions in education (e.g., Junior Certificate Schools Programme, the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme), and the allocation of additional teaching resources to schools catering for a higher concentration of learners at risk of educational disadvantage have had positive impact on some areas of educational inequality. This funding has impacted some areas of educational inequality positively (e.g., improvements in retention rates in DEIS schools and a reduced gap in literacy and numeracy rates between DEIS and non-DEIS schools) (Cahill, 2020). However, in areas with high concentrations of low-income households experiencing significant and persistent levels of poverty, low/truncated success in terms of education outcomes continues to be the norm. While policy interventions contribute to some positive outcomes and opportunities for young people, they continue to have limited success in addressing the roots of poverty and the negative impact of poor educational outcomes on the life chances of clearly identifiable groups.

Nevertheless, Lynch (2020) points out that the principles governing Irish education policy follow the idea of equality of opportunity, based on individual merit. This approach tends to focus on fairness in competition, where educational success is equally open to all students. While policies introduced to address the persistence of educational inequality have seen some positive impact, Cahill (2020) shows how class discrimination is hidden in Irish education policy and practice. Even though school league tables are not supported by state policy, detailed annual league tables, published by the media, track how post-primary schools fare in progressing to higher education. O’Sullivan (in Houses of Oireachtas, 2019) recognises the intersectional nature of educational inequalities in Ireland, suggesting that different factors (e.g., gender, social class, migration, homelessness and SEN) should be considered when creating policies

⁷ The number of students with intellectual disabilities involved in further education and training is much higher. In 2019, 2,821 students enrolled in further education and training reported having an intellectual disability (Dulee – Kinsolving and Guerin, 2020b).

to combat disparities in education. O’Sullivan (in Houses of Oireachtas, 2019) suggests that policy and practice need to consider different levels of disadvantage by developing and providing services at the level of individual. Most importantly, wider life circumstances and conditions need to be addressed first to eradicate inequalities in education. To conclude in Lynch’s (2020) words, a radical shift in thinking about equality is required and ‘replacing [of] the idea of equality of opportunity with equality of condition’.

1.3 Rethink Ireland and Social Innovation

Rethink Ireland⁸ was officially launched by former Taoiseach Enda Kenny in 2016. Its aim is to stimulate philanthropy and fill a gap in funding innovation for the non-profit sector. Its mission is to provide growth capital and supports to the best social innovations in Ireland, enabling them to scale and maximise their impact, and in doing so, address persistent social problems. Each euro Rethink Ireland raises in philanthropy is matched by the Department of Rural and Community Development and from the Dormant Accounts Fund. More recently Rethink Ireland has received matched funding from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth and the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. To date, it has raised €65m in funding, creating over 25 funds in areas such as health, education, equality and

more, to support over 200 social innovations. With its support, these social innovations have reached 300,000 people and supported over 800 people into employment. In 2020, it was awarded €5m in funding by the Irish Government to create an Innovation Fund, supporting charities responding to the Covid-19 crisis. Rethink Ireland is also mentioned in the 2020 Programme for Government ‘Our Shared Future’.

The concept of social innovation is by no means limited to the field of education. Research conducted using social innovation as a platform can be described as diverse and interdisciplinary. Social innovation has been used in fields such as territorial and urban development, sociology, public administration, social entrepreneurship, history, economics, social psychology, management, social movements, creativity, political science, communication technologies, environmental sciences, and human services (Surikova et al. 2015). Social innovation and education as a concept is often discussed within the context of how it benefits the economy, omitting the valuable ways in which it breaks down social barriers that hinder achievement.

Social innovation focuses on the active involvement of citizens in the generation of public value (Singaraju, 2016). It can be best described as a means of developing new ideas, services and models to better address social issues. It invites input from public and private actors, including civil society, to improve social services (European

Figure 1.8 – Summary of some of the key achievements of Rethink Ireland



⁸ Previously known as Social Innovation Fund Ireland (SIFI).

Commission, 2011). Davies and Simon (2012) suggest that social innovations are new solutions that simultaneously meet a social need and lead to new or improved capabilities and relationships and better use of assets and resources. In other words, social innovations are both good for society and enhance society's capacity to act. Using social innovation principles in education is a prime example of this. It is where communities and state agencies have the potential to positively impact learners and schools have the potential to bring about transformative change in societies.

The European Commission (2011) and Bonifacio (2014) explain three key approaches to social innovation. The first refers to the social demand approach, which responds to social demands that traditionally are not addressed by the markets or existing social institutions such as the education and health departments. This approach seeks to direct socially innovative initiatives for vulnerable group in society. The second approach is described as the societal challenge approach or the reformist approach. This focuses on the innovations for a society as a whole through the integration of the social, economic and environmental contexts. Such an approach aims to target innovation to society as a whole by changing society as a whole. The third approach is called the systematic change approach or the empowering approach. This approach is the most complex and to an extent includes the first two approaches. The approach involves a process or organisational development and changes in the relationships shared between stakeholders and institutions. This process of societal reform provides a more participative arena where empowerment and learning are sources and outcomes of wellbeing (Bonifacio, 2014: 153–154).

According to Surikova et al. (2015: 237), the interaction between social innovation and education is multi-directional. Social innovation for education is concerned with the development of new solutions and methods of learning such as forms, tools, approaches, paradigms, practice, systems and policies among others. These modified ways of learning and teaching have the potential to provide greater support, quality

and transformative developments in the field of education, training and learning. When examining the link between social innovation and education in the reverse direction, the influence education has on social innovation can be regarded as a vital tool to materialise social innovation. Education develops the skill sets, competencies, attitudes and personalities needed for making social innovation a reality. Institutions such as schools and colleges are key social innovation actors, drivers and facilitators. According to the European Commission (2011) and Mancabelli (2012), education is regarded as a powerful manufacturer of human and social capital, which provides an important context for developing social innovation. For both directions it is important that learning is promoted as a means of developing infrastructure for social innovation and this will involve changing minds and practices.

Kedmenec (2019) suggests that social innovation is the development and implementation of new ideas via products, services and new models of working with the goal of meeting social needs. It is also asserted that social innovation has the potential to increase the entrepreneurial aspirations of school children through new ways of learning (ibid). Designing a social learning approach in the education curriculum assists learners to adjust their attitudes and behaviour towards societal problems and supports them in creating social innovation. This type of learning focuses on the transformation of cognitive structure and behaviour for human development and can develop a more shared knowledge between the students and society as a whole (Kumari et al., 2019).

Much of the literature on social innovation and its application to education is focused on the adoption of great ICT methodologies of teaching and further promotion of educational entrepreneurialism. Nicholls et al. (2015) focused on different dimensions of recurring innovative features that can easily be applied to most areas of public policy including that of education. One dimension examines how effective innovations are and how they address users. Within this dimension services are less about filling gaps in provision and more oriented

towards establishing the kind of relationships that reduce the dependency of users by opening up new opportunities for them or enhancing their skills. Also within this dimension, approaches to avoid stigmatisation are employed. Often initiatives targeted at marginalised communities, such as workforce and educational supports for disadvantaged students, seek to overtly focus on individuals, with the result that the stigma can sometimes outweigh the benefits. When using socially innovative approaches, the supports tend to be regarded as more empowering where the service users see the advantages.

Conrad (2015: 8) also suggests that social innovation requires transdisciplinarity for working across and beyond the disciplinary divides of education, social work, public health, design, environmental studies, development studies, human ecology, business, political science, law and sociology. It could be argued that all of the pressing social issues of today, whether related to long-term housing policy, poverty, health, security, diversity or environmental sustainability, affect education. In this sense social innovation in education can occur in formal educational settings such as schools, in informal community-based settings, and in virtual settings, creating an increased ecological direction. It is suggested that there is much room for innovation within our current out-dated educational model. Scholars have been addressing the need for educational paradigm change for some time. For Conrad (2015), social innovation is not there to merely stimulate the economic development of society but as a means of moving towards community-based education where partnerships between learners and society which encourage more active citizenship can be built.

The concept of social innovation and its relationship with education is presented as one of economic benefit to industry and one that challenges the ways in which industrial practices facilitate lifelong learning. Shapiro (2007) suggests that the body of literature linking social innovation and education sees innovation as a major driver for economic growth and wealth creation. This new form of knowledge production led to new forms of

interaction, such as ‘co-operative innovation networks’: between the science and education systems (Shapiro focuses on further and higher education), the economic systems (industry), and the political systems (government). Consequently, this leads to changes in market structure, new organisations of infrastructure, new qualifications of employers, new social institutions, and new patterns of consumption (Shapiro, 2007: 17). Literature on innovation systems tends to conclude that education and training institutions have an important role to play in contributing to innovation, and there are arguments brought forward that such effects are highly context dependent. As Bainbridge (2003) points out, barriers to lifelong learning, and more broadly speaking to an innovation culture, may exist not only within the education and training systems, but also in the associated sub-systems, labour market policies, industry policies, and work organisation practices (Bainbridge 2003, cited in Shapiro, 2007).

While presenting only the main themes with regard to the links between social innovation and education, it is clear that when examining the social benefits of social innovation, the body of literature is small whereas the major focus is on the ways in which business capitalises on social innovation. These two conflicting paradigms may be at odds with each other as a result of how social innovation is defined or may simply present the flexibility of the application of social innovation.

1.4 Rethink Ireland’s Education Fund and the Gamechanger Programme

Recognising the persistence of educational inequality and disadvantage in Irish society, Rethink Ireland introduced the Education Fund in late 2017 as a way to confront this complex issue. Education and related qualifications determine to a large extent the life chances of people. Those who leave education without qualifications are often hindered in their ability to find well-paying jobs and as a result are more at risk of poverty. Rethink Ireland now counts education as one of its five strategic areas for investment. Following in the footsteps of the Education Fund, Rethink

Figure 1.9 – Timeline view of significant legislation and policy developments



Ireland opened two further Education Funds, namely the Youth Funds (2018) and the Children and Youth Fund (2019) (both of which will be part of a composite evaluation due out in 2023 by the team involved in this report). In 2020, Rethink Ireland opened an additional Education Innovation Fund focused on education transitions and tackling the poverty created by disadvantage in education.

The Education Fund was open to projects focused on improving educational outcomes for those experiencing educational disadvantage, and which specifically supported learners to progress from Levels 3–6 on the National Framework of Qualifications⁹ (NFQ – see Figure 1.1). The focus for each of these levels is as follows (NFQ, 2020):

Level 3 - The Junior Certificate is an award given to students who have successfully completed examinations from the junior cycle, which is the first three years of secondary education. The Junior Certificate may lead to progression to a programme leading to the Leaving Certificate or to a programme leading to a Level 4 Certificate, or at a higher level.

Levels 4 & 5 - The Leaving Certificate is the final course in the Irish secondary school system. It takes a minimum of two years preparation, but an optional Transition Year means that for some students it takes place three years after the Junior Certificate Examination. This award may lead to progression to a programme leading to a further education and training award at Level 5 or at a higher level or to a higher-education and training award at Level 6 or higher.

Level 6 has two levels – Advanced Certificate and Higher Certificate. The Higher Certificate is normally awarded after completion of a programme of two years duration (120 ECTS credits). Entry to these programmes is generally for school leavers and those with equivalent qualifications. An Advanced Certificate award enables learners to develop a comprehensive range of skills, which may be vocationally specific and/or of a general supervisory nature and require detailed theoretical understanding. Modules include advanced vocational/occupational skills, enabling certificate holders to work independently or progress to higher education and training. The majority of certificate/module holders at Level 6 take up positions of employment, some of whom may be self-employed.

The Education Fund’s definition of educational disadvantage is something that arises from living in a disadvantaged area, socioeconomic disadvantage, experiencing mental health or other health issues, or disability. Rethink Ireland’s goal via the Education Fund aimed to improve access to third-level education for students affected by disability or disadvantage, through improved educational attainment at Levels 3–6 on the NFQ.

Following a rigorous selection process, ten¹⁰ projects were chosen as recipients of the Education Fund Award. Eight are based in Dublin and two in Cork. Of these, seven completed the programme and evaluation. The name of each project, their location, their participant group and a short description of their work are provided in Table 1.1 below. A more complete description of each project is contained in Appendix 1.

⁹ Throughout this report, NFQ and QQI are used interchangeably. Established in 2003, the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) is a 10-level, single national entity through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other. Underpinned by quality assurance principles, the Irish NFQ describes qualifications in the Irish education and training system and sets out what each qualification says about what learners know, understand and are able to do. It also sets out qualification pathways from one NFQ level to the next. Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) is responsible for developing, promoting and maintaining the Irish NFQ.

¹⁰ Of the ten projects that started in the Education Fund, PETE, Speedpak and Churchfield Community Trust exited the fund along the way and so are not included in this final report.

Figure 1.10 – Qualifications on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)

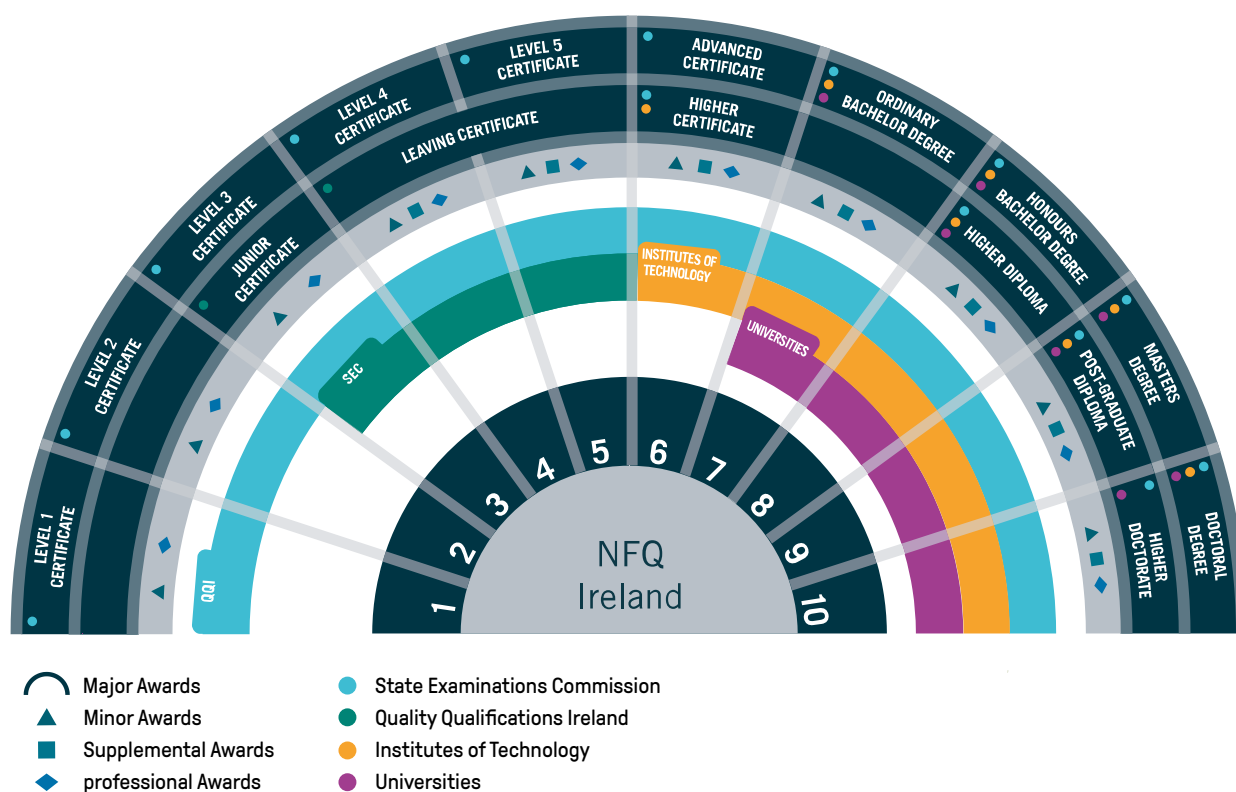


Table 1.1 – Details of the seven projects funded under Rethink Education Fund

| PROJECT/ AWARDEE | ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE BASE | PARTICIPANT GROUP | DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT |
|------------------|----------------------------|-------------------|---|
| An Cosán VCC | Dublin | 18+ | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> An Cosán VCC seeks to empower women and men from disadvantaged communities across Ireland. It provides an entry model of higher education and blended learning, face-to-face workshops, technology workshops, live virtual classes, offline individual and group work, collaborative peer learning, and communities of practice. The programme partners with a wide range of community education organisations at local, regional and national level. |
| Aspire2 | Dublin | 13–18 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aspire2 aims to increase DEIS school students' prospects of completing the Leaving Cert and progressing to third-level education and apprenticeships. The project provides students with group mentoring and work experience placement. The programme established a collaborative partnership with several academic institutions around Ireland (i.e., UCD, CIT, UCC, TCD and IT Tallaght). |

| PROJECT/AWARDEE | ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE BASE | PARTICIPANT GROUP | DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT |
|--|----------------------------|-------------------|--|
| Cork Life Centre | Cork | 12–18 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The Cork Life Centre’s vision is to provide a unique alternative environment for education for children and young people who have disengaged or are at risk of disengaging from mainstream education. ▪ It provides an alternative one-to-one and small group learning environment with wraparound support and outreach service. ▪ The Centre established links and relationships with numerous agencies and services in Cork City across the areas of business, academia and health, and with local community groups. |
| Citywise Fast Track Academy | Dublin | 15–19 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Citywise Fast Track Academy’s vision is focused on improving communities through youth education by using a whole-person approach. ▪ The project focuses on developing social, behavioural and academic skills and the conditions necessary to increase the number of young people transitioning to higher-level education. ▪ It collaborates with IT Tallaght and other agencies in the community. |
| iScoil | Dublin | 13–16 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ iScoil provides innovative flexible online and blended learning for early school leavers. This model provides a safe environment where young people can achieve meaningful accreditation, and can re-engage with education and access further education, training or employment opportunities. ▪ Personalised and online modalities of intervention are provided to each student based on their needs, interests and abilities. ▪ iScoil works in partnership with local agencies and youth services nationally. |
| Trinity Access 21 | Dublin | 13–18 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Trinity Access 21 (TA21) aims to transform the Irish education system and aspires to an education system that supports every young person in reaching their full academic potential. ▪ Trinity Access 21 provides DEIS schools (and schools where progression to higher education is low) with student and teacher training. Trinity Access 21 is grounded within three core principles: Mentoring, Pathways to College and Leadership in Learning. Students are provided with one-to-one and group mentoring programmes, group work and team-based workshops. ▪ The project works in partnership with schools, communities, other educational organisations and businesses. |
| Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities (TCPID) | Dublin | 19–25 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ TCPID’s mission is to enable people with an intellectual disability to develop their potential through a combination of lifelong learning and professional training. ▪ The Centre provides learners with a high-quality higher-education programme, mentoring, work experience and career guidance. ▪ Key partners of the programme come from business, including companies and banks (e.g., Abbott, CPL and Bank of Ireland). |

Each awardee received a cash grant and a place on Rethink Ireland's Gamechanger Programme.

1.4.1 The Gamechanger Programme

The overarching goal of the Gamechanger Programme was to bring together a group of selected disruptive innovators and:

- Create a sense of community and a common vision for the sector and system which needs change.
- Underpin this journey with core business and leadership capacity building with an emphasis on execution along the way.

The three-year programme was executive-level management training, using a workshop format, and was delivered in close collaboration with the academic evaluation team, strategic consultants and communication experts. The creation of a positive group dynamic, transformative experiences and peer-to-peer learning resulted in the setting of ambitious project goals and the realisation among awardees of their potential as real game changers individually and as a collective.

The following workshops were provided by Rethink Ireland:

- Year 1 '**Planning for impact**' – Strategic planning and developing a vision: theory of change, business plan, implementation plan
- Year 2 '**Telling your story for impact**' – Communication strategy and demonstration of impact and co-creation of a showcase
- Year 3 '**Changing the game**' – Tapping collective leadership capacity and co-creation of targeted system change.

The core practices central to all workshops were:

- Transformative learning experiences rather than didactic learning
- Ensuring that all workshops were linked together – a journey rather than individual blocks

- The '11th project': what can the projects achieve as a community of change-makers?
- Peer presentations in 'Tedtalk style' and peer feedback
- Mindfulness/wellbeing breaks
- Continuous feedback from progress and learning from the evaluation
- Ensuring an innovative methodology based on a playful approach, emphasis on the collective power of change.

1.4.2 The Gamechanger Dialogue

Recognising the need for collaborative efforts to tackle educational disadvantage, Rethink Ireland worked with partners on a process to advance dialogue and focus action. The result was the Gamechanger Dialogue. It was conceived and created within the Rethink Ireland Education Fund, in partnership with the Teaching Council of Ireland, the National Association for Principals and Deputy Principals, and Trinity College Dublin.

From 8–10 May 2019 around 70 education innovators, stakeholders and policymakers gathered at the Burren College of Art in Ballyvaughan, County Clare to address a range of critical issues in the existing education system. The aim of the event was to build enduring strategic relationships that are centred around precise actions, and to share solutions to tackle systemic blockages and urgent problems that Ireland's education system is currently facing.

The organisers set out to promote collaboration and inspire changes in the education system through four vehicles:

1. Showcasing to delegates a wide range of innovative solutions to social exclusion in education by inviting the Education Fund grantee projects to present on their work.
2. Developing stakeholder comprehension and sensitivity to what is happening at the margins of society by hearing directly from projects and young people.
3. Building relationships between participants in order to explore possibilities for systemic improvements.

- Supporting participants to work together in order to develop concrete actions to drive positive changes in the education system.

The event created a renewed and more collective focus on three areas in particular: the need for recognition of the alternative education sector, the importance of new learning approaches and mentoring supports to encourage disadvantaged students to engage with further education, and the extraordinarily positive impact of young adult learners with intellectual disability with a third-level degree on their immediate communities and workplaces. The gathering also clearly demonstrated the need for cross-sectoral leadership and a shared vision for change among the innovators and institutional stakeholders.

1.5 Brief Executive Summary

Notwithstanding the fact that this report is accompanied by a standalone *Executive Summary* (see www.childandfamilyresearch.ie), this section offers a *mini* executive summary, before getting into the full detail of the study from Section 2 onwards.

1.5.1 Background to the process of evaluation

The overarching aim of the evaluation of the Education Fund was *‘to investigate the extent to which practices and processes utilised by awardees can serve as models of excellence in*

overcoming inequality in education’. As will be explained in Section 2, the Evaluation Framework combined and optimised best practice from evaluation theory with practical learning gleaned from the combined knowledge and expertise of the evaluation team. The evaluation was specifically designed to collate and synthesise information relating to the combined social impact of the awardee projects within the Education Fund. This was done using a cluster approach. Therefore, the evaluation did not conduct a micro-level evaluation of each awardee project. The Evaluation Framework used a mixed-methods research design incorporating both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Qualitative inquiry including methods such as focus group interviews and photovoice real-time data collection were used to explore the experience of participants and other stakeholders with the awardee projects. A Social Return on Investment framework (SROI) was introduced to explore the social impact of the projects. Other methodologies used were a cross-sectional quantitative study and a focused literature review (see Figure 2.2 below for specific details).

The Education Fund was the first of Rethink Ireland’s funds to incorporate a formal academic evaluation. Subsequently, it introduced two new interrelated funds, namely the Youth Fund (2018–2021) and the Children and Youth Fund (2019–2022). One of Rethink Ireland’s primary end goals upon the completion of a total of five years of evaluation across these three funds by

CLUSTER 01

**Lifelong learning/
social inclusion**
contains two projects and has a focus on enabling participants to experience social inclusion by supporting their educational progression through lifelong learning opportunities.

CLUSTER 02

**Curriculum reform/
diverse pathways to
adulthood**
contains three projects and focuses on curriculum reform and supporting participants to engage in diverse pathways to adulthood.

CLUSTER 03

**Alternative centres of
education/based outside
mainstream schools**
contains two projects and provides participants with alternative modes of education which are outside the mainstream system.

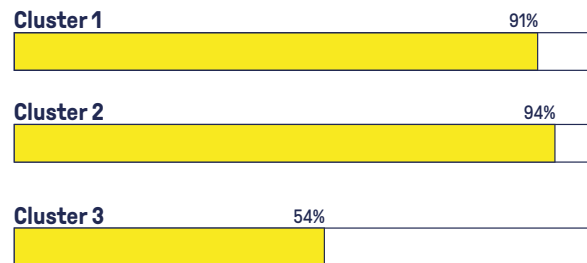
2023, will be to have supported the creation of a raft of social impact data that can inform the development of smart public policy and inspired public leadership (see Figure 2.3). Therefore, the evaluation of the Education Fund is foundational to Rethink Ireland’s achieving this goal.

Given that the evaluation was specifically designed to have a macro focus and thus to collate learning from projects categorised into specific thematic clusters (see Figure 2.2 on the Evaluation Framework), three clusters of projects were subsequently created (see Figure 3.1):

As shown in Table 3.1, the evaluators posed seven core questions to the awardee projects in each cluster (see Table 3.1), namely:

1. What’s the problem being addressed by this cluster?
2. How well and for whom did this cluster support educational progression?
3. How is educational progression understood by key stakeholders in this cluster?
4. Who benefits from these projects and what would have happened to learners without access to them?
5. What was the lived experience of learners in this cluster around Covid-19?
6. What are the similarities and differences between projects in the cluster?
7. What is the social value of the outcomes created by the activities in each individual project?

Figure 1.11 – The average progression rates of learners completing a QQI level qualification by cluster



1.5.2 Key findings and recommendations

The Education Fund was open to projects focused on improving educational outcomes for those experiencing educational disadvantage and which specifically supported learners to progress from Level 3 to 6 on the NFQ. The following are the core findings of the evaluation:

1) Progression Rate in Education: The average progression rates of learners completing a QQI level qualification in their respective cluster varied from 91% in Cluster 1 to 94% in Cluster 2 and 54% in Cluster 3 (so far)¹¹, between January 2018 and July 2020. This shows that in the majority of cases, learners in these projects had significant success in progressing their education.

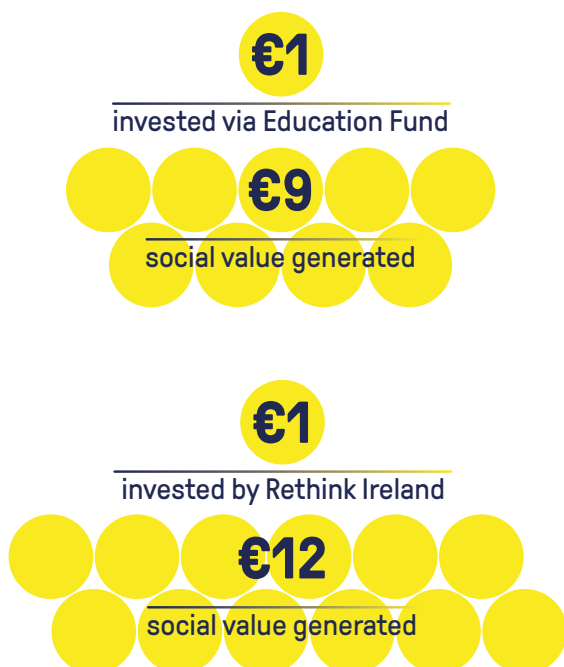
2) Social Return on Investment (SROI): A second core finding came from the application of an SROI study with the projects. SROI proved a useful framework to show how to manage and improve social impact. A SROI framework was introduced to explore the perceived social value for participants of the outcomes they achieved as a result of being involved in their respective projects. SROI is an internationally recognised and accredited framework for measuring and accounting the social value¹² of project activities as perceived by key stakeholders. SROI is much more than a number – its purpose is to assess the social value of the outcomes created for participants by these activities, rather than just a monetary value for the activities as in cost-benefit-type studies (The SROI Network, 2012: 8).

¹¹ Many participants from Cork Life Centre were still enrolled but had not completed the programme at the time of the data collection process. Additionally, 65% of participants from iScoil had fully completed and 20% had partially completed the programme. This suggests that the final progression rate of students in Cluster 3 is higher than calculated.

¹² Value refers to the benefits, changes and actions that happen as a result of actions and activities, which go beyond the purely economic or monetary value (Social Value UK).

One of the findings of the SROI study related to the nature of the interventions offered to participants across the fund. Self-confidence (described also as self-efficacy, self-esteem, etc.) was recognised as a common outcome valued by both projects and participants. A larger list of outcomes was recognised by the projects, but some of those, for example coping skills and resilience, seem to be less relevant to participants. Awardee projects did not see some areas of personal development as essential, such as increased independence and maturity, more positive future outlook and study skills. The SROI has, therefore, allowed projects to use this evidence to reflect on how best to do more good for their participants, by tailoring their interventions appropriately. Aggregated across the awardee projects the two outcomes most valued by participants were ‘increased independence (maturity)’ and ‘more positive future outlook’.

Figure 1.12 – The social return on investment (SROI)



A Social Return on Investment (SROI) ratio provides an overall comparison of resources and the social value they create. The calculation includes all the inputs required for an activity. Rethink Ireland funds rarely support 100% of project costs; and often the proportion of project costs supported within a fund varies from award to award. Within a complex structure of a fund like this there are, therefore, different ways to present and understand the SROI ratio. Here we present two helpful versions showing:

- the overall comparison of all the costs for Awardee Projects in the Education Fund;
- the proportion directly supported by the Education Fund investment.

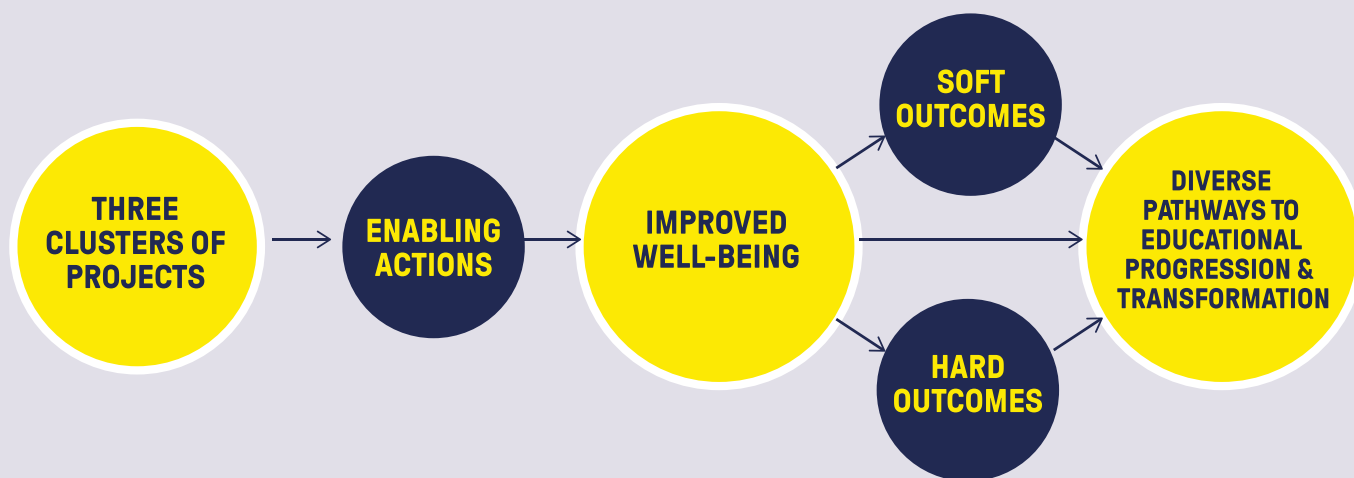
We found that the total social value generated for project beneficiaries was just over €68m, with a total cost of €7,790,285 for the seven Awardee Projects over three years. The return on investment ratio is in a range around 1:9, meaning that for every euro invested in these seven Awardee Projects, €9 of social value was created.

Some 55% of the social value was directly created by the Education Fund investment of €4,302,479 through Rethink Ireland. The return on investment ratio for Rethink Ireland’s investment is in a range around 1:12, meaning that for every euro invested in these seven Awardee Projects, €12 of social value was created.

In interpreting these SROI results, a number of points are important to consider:

Avidson et al. (2010: 6) point out that even though it uses monetary terms, the SROI ratio does not express financial value as such, but should be seen as a comprehensive way of expressing the ‘currency of social value’. This currency needs to be read with qualitative evidence based on stakeholder inquiry. The SROI process has shown that participants of all projects experienced positive change as a result of being involved with their projects and experienced an increase in independence (maturity), developed a more positive future outlook, had increased self-confidence and better communication and social skills. Therefore, the value of these changes as valued by participants is what the total social value of €68m represents.

Figure 1.13 – Model of educational progression and transformation



The total return on investment so far refers to the value that projects created for their participants exclusively. This sum does not include the projects' value for other stakeholders (for example, parents and teachers).

The SROI analysis revealed the differences between projects, specifically connected to the cost per person and the value created per person. As revealed in this particular SROI analysis, projects with higher numbers of participants have lower unit costs, but they do not necessarily have higher social returns. Further analysis is required to explore the reasons for such differences between the projects which will be considered in future research.

It is important to contextualise the SROI findings, in the knowledge that the projects cater for different populations of young people with varying levels of need, from the most basic to more complex. Therefore, some projects are more costly to run than others, and because of these innate differences between projects, direct comparison of social value figures is inappropriate.

3) Developing a Model of Educational Progression and Transformation

As the overarching aim of the evaluation was to *'investigate the extent to which practices and processes could serve as models of excellence in overcoming inequality in education'*, in Section 4 of the full report we set out our new evidence-based model on *Educational Progression and Transformation*¹³. This enables us to look inside the 'black box' of how these projects support their learners. This model shows how the projects developed and implemented innovative approaches (called 'actions') to address various areas of the five strategic goals in the Action Plan 2016–2019.

We found that progression is of course about participants moving along Levels 3 to 6 of the QQI framework of qualifications and achieving 'hard outcomes'. However, our model shows that it is also about their personal transformation and development of their 'soft outcomes', like increased independence (maturity), increased self-confidence, and increased more positive future outlook. Our new evidence-based model,

¹³ Our model is built on three elements:

- firstly, on the evidence gleaned from the evaluation as presented in Chapter 3;
- secondly, on evidence from the published literature on what best supports those experiencing educational inequality to progress through use of an alternative approach, and
- thirdly, on relevant current Irish government policy directives, namely the Action Plan for Education 2016–2019 (incorporating the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the specific sustainable development goal (No. 4) on education) and the Department's Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2018–2023).

as shown in Figure 3.1, recognises that awardee projects provide critical and enabling actions for their participants in both of these domain areas and ultimately address better wellbeing for participants.

The intersection of the findings of this evaluation with the Department of Education's Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice creates a significant opportunity for our Model of Educational Progression and Transformation to further aid practitioners in the alternative-education space as well as to build capacity in the formal system on what works when trying to achieve a mutually reinforcing circle between student wellbeing and soft and hard outcomes for students. The thinking behind Rethink Ireland's establishing the Education Fund in the first place was to explore the practices and processes found to be beneficial when addressing educational inequality. We now have a chance to build on the principles of social innovation used by Rethink Ireland to establish the fund, and to develop an approach where the learning from this three-year evaluation can begin to inform systems change.

Based on the findings of our research, we offer a set of micro recommendations for practice (x 8) as well as more macro, high-level considerations for policymakers, primarily for the Department of Education but also for other relevant departments.

Evidence-based Recommendations for Practice

Based on the *critical enabling* actions identified and discussed in our report (Section 4), which describe how Education Fund projects support the educational progression and transformation of their learners, we suggest the following evidence-based recommendations be considered by other projects working with students experiencing educational disadvantage, both nationally and internationally. Projects can use these recommendations as pointers to assess their own practice, with a view to doing '*more good*'.

1) Wellbeing

- Establish a friendly, less formal and non-judgemental environment allowing students to feel safe and welcomed.
- Begin supported learning by establishing caring, less hierarchical relationships between project workers and learners, which can provide opportunities for developing trust.
- Develop a holistic wraparound approach together with students, families and other community partners to be followed when working with students who experience mental health, behavioural or other emotional challenges.
- Work together with students experiencing educational disadvantage to provide activities and practices focused on student wellbeing. Establish a stronger link with community organisations to provide different supports to students (e.g., physical activities, mindfulness programmes, formal and informal types of supports).
- Provide a designated study space for students from disadvantaged communities to help them develop a study routine and work ethic.

2) Critical skills, knowledge and competencies

- Involve students in a range of formal and informal activities (organised in cooperation with formal and informal education providers) to expose students to a variety of experiences, practical skills and theoretical knowledge.
- Use different methodologies and approaches to pursue students' interests and passions.
- Incorporate IT skills as part of employability skills into the curriculum of programmes that work with people with intellectual disabilities and learners from other disadvantaged backgrounds.

3) Greater subject choice

- Introduce a range of subjects to encourage students' interest and curiosity (e.g., STEM, coding, robotics, but also humanities and social science) for students experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage and people with intellectual disabilities.
- Assist students' personal and social development; introduce art courses, such as drama or poetry, in programmes working with people with intellectual disabilities.

4) Information technology

- Use blended and online learning when working with adult learners and/or learners who experience mental health issues. Consider personal needs and preferences of each student when implementing such programmes.
- Consider issues around connectivity, usability, access and the digital divide when introducing such programmes.

5) Progress and access

- Focus on the development of soft outcomes, including self-confidence; independence; future outlook; and social, communication, employability and study skills to support students' wellbeing and educational progression. One of the key pieces of learning from this evaluation is that it is important to research what learners value most in project activities.
- Focus on the activities and practices (e.g., mentoring) that support students' progression to third-level education.
- Establish a positive culture of progression by applying critical actions, including role models, mentorship, stronger links with universities, and links with families, broader communities and government to change expectations around educational progression.

6) Learning experience

- Introduce student-centred and supported learning and encourage student engagement and interest in learning to develop them as independent and competent learners.

- Provide flexible and gradual approaches to learning, considering students' needs and strengths.
- Introduce gradual and flexible options for progression, such as modular, non-accredited and accredited courses for adult learners.
- Introduce a 'learning-to-learn' approach to engage adult learners and students from marginalised backgrounds in the learning process.

7) Informed career choices

- Introduce a practice-oriented approach to career guidance in cooperating with external stakeholders (e.g., community partners, businesses, civil society organisations, universities, etc.).
- Provide a range of activities, such as organising visits to university Open Days and joint activities with universities (e.g., subject-specific programmes, summer schools, etc.) to give learners opportunities to experience how specific studies and employment look in practice.
- Provide suitable mentorship to support career guidance work.
- Provide mentorship for people with intellectual disabilities and other learners from disadvantaged backgrounds when offering placements with businesses and other avenues of work.

8) Support local communities

- Introduce interagency work and cooperation with other statutory and non-statutory agencies to ensure all supports and opportunities are available to learners experiencing educational disadvantage.
- Locate third-level programmes for people with intellectual disabilities in the centre of the campus, to ensure visibility, diversity and inclusion of these learners in university life.

The intersection of the findings from this evaluation with the Department of Education's Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice creates a significant opportunity for our Model of Educational Progression and Transformation to further aid practitioners in the alternative education space as well as to build capacity in the formal system on what works when trying to achieve a mutually reinforcing circle between student wellbeing and their soft and hard outcomes. The thinking behind Rethink Ireland establishing the Education Fund in the first place was to explore the practices and processes found to be beneficial when addressing educational inequality. We now have a chance to build on the principles of social innovation used by Rethink Ireland to establish the fund, and develop an approach where the learning from this three-year evaluation can begin to inform systems change.

We conclude the report with a set of micro recommendations for practice (x 8) as well as more macro, high-level considerations for policymakers, primarily for the Department of Education but also for other relevant departments (Sections 5.2 and 5.3). In terms of recommendations for policy, we are proposing the following:

1. Develop a cross departmental strategy on tackling educational disadvantage, – this cannot be solved by the education department alone. We need to tackle the social and economic inequalities facing children, young people and their families, using learning on what works from this study on alternative educational provision.

2. The Department of Education and Skills should formally recognise Alternative Education provision as educational providers in their own right and fund them in the same way as the formal education system. This should be done following a mapping exercise on service gaps with the view to increasing numbers should demand outweigh provision.

3. Create a forum for mainstream and alternative education providers to exchange evidence-based knowledge and experiences so as support all learners and address educational inequality head-on.

4. Organise a showcase where the learning about actions and processes used by the awardee projects to tackle education inequality can be shared with mainstream and alternative education providers and with broader society.

1.6 Layout of the Report

The remainder of this report consists of the following sections: Section 2 focuses on the co-development and implementation of a fit-for-purpose Evaluation Framework for the Education Fund. Section 3 presents the findings emerging from the implementation of that Evaluation Framework over the last three years with awardees. Section 4 uses the data presented in Section 3 to introduce a new, evidence-based model on Educational Progression and Transformation. Section 5 brings the report to a close by offering some reflections by the evaluation team on the last three years of work.

**THE EVALUATION
FRAMEWORK**

02

2.1 Aim and Objectives of the Evaluation

One of Rethink Ireland's core conclusions coming from their work with awardee projects across a range of funds is that *'... while there are many not for profits in Ireland innovating in different sectors, the collection of outcome data and implementation of outcome measurement tools are not widely adopted. The definition and measurement of social impact is vital in order to fund the scaling process and to progress genuine social change'* (Rethink Ireland, 2018: 2).

To begin to address these shortcomings, the overarching aim of the evaluation of the Education Fund was *'to investigate the extent to which practices and processes utilised by awardees can serve as models of excellence in overcoming inequality in education'*. To address this aim, the objectives of the evaluation were as follows:

1. To provide awardees with the data necessary for the appraisal of their organisation or programme.
2. To trace the benefit for learners of being involved in awardee projects as well as their progression towards achieving a QQI Levels 3–6 qualification.
3. To identify successful models, practices and processes for scale or replication from among awardees.
4. To offer suggestions for policy changes needed to address long-term educational inequality.

2.2 Co-developing an Evaluation Framework for the Education Fund

In our response to the request for tenders for this evaluation, rather than using an off-the-shelf evaluation methodology, we proposed co-developing a fit-for-purpose evidence-based Evaluation Framework. Therefore, after a series of initial workshops with the awardees in November 2017 and February 2018, we signed off on the final Evaluation Framework in May 2018. While it took six months to develop and achieve consensus on the final framework, the process enabled us to get to know the awardees, gain their trust, and listen and respond to their queries about the evaluation. Ethical approval was sought from the Research Ethics Committee at the National University of Ireland, Galway.

A visual summary of the Evaluation Framework is set out in Figure 2.2 below. It combines and optimises best practice from evaluation theory with practical learning gleaned from the combined knowledge and expertise of the evaluation team. The following considerations underpinned its development:

- **Co-developed with all parties** – As noted, the Evaluation Framework was co-developed by the evaluators, Rethink Ireland and the awardees of the Education Fund.
- **Framed as a learning evaluation** – One of the key points emphasised with awardees from the outset and underpinned by Rethink Ireland's philosophy, was that the evaluation and its outcomes were ultimately there to help each awardee learn more about their current practice and explore any necessary improvements. This strengths-based 'learning evaluation' was never designed to be used in a deficits or judgemental fashion.
- **Cluster-based macro evaluation** – The evaluation was specifically designed to collate and synthesise information relating to the combined social impact of the awardee projects within the fund. This was done using a cluster approach. The evaluation did not conduct a micro-level evaluation of each awardee project.

• **Guided by a socio-ecological approach** – Our Evaluation Framework is guided by a broader socio-ecological approach. As well as assessing the role each project had in the lives of participants, we were also interested in seeing participants in their micro systems of family, friends and community. Using the adapted socio-ecological approach, shown in Figure 2.1, as a guide, the complexity of the pathways to overcoming inequality in education was addressed.

Figure 2.1 – Socio-ecological approach as a guide for the evaluation (Dolan et al., 2006)



• **Answering core questions:** The Evaluation Framework includes particular methodological choices and approaches designed to find answers to seven core questions – What works for participants in awardee projects? How well does it work for participants? How long does it work for participants? For whom does it work? In what settings does it work? It works compared with what? Why does it work?

As illustrated in Figure 2.2 below, the several elements to the Evaluation Framework spanned the three years of the process and have been specifically designed to address the overarching aim of the evaluation. A short commentary is provided below on these elements with a more detailed explanation being offered in the relevant sections later in this report.

Firstly, the entire framework was underpinned by a developmental evaluation approach. The term developmental evaluation was coined to cover situations in which formative or summative evaluations were not deemed appropriate to fit the purpose of the innovative programmes being evaluated (Dickson and Saunders, 2014). This form of evaluation is being put in place to support innovations in complex and dynamic settings, such as those in the Education Fund. The primary focus is on adaptive learning and providing real-time feedback and generating learning to inform project development (Dozois, Langlois and Blanchet-Cohen, 2010).

Secondly, to provide a contextual base for the Education Fund, a detailed review of the academic literature pertaining to youth education, educational inequality and alternative education, as well as relevant Irish policy and legislation, was undertaken. Additionally, we concentrated on building a knowledge base around systems change and its relationship to social innovation by looking at best practice nationally and internationally.

Thirdly, one of the earliest tasks we undertook was to develop an understanding of each project in the fund. This involved collating information on their aims, visions, objectives and collaborations with other stakeholders, and type of activities offered. These project models served as the basis for creating thematic clusters of projects later, by placing those with a similar focus into the same cluster. As the evaluation had a macro focus, the clusters provided the mechanism from where we laid the foundations to distil the key learning.

Fourthly, projects within each cluster level were evaluated using three core strategies. A participant progression tracker was developed to track the numbers registering, completing or dropping out of the respective programmes.

A real-time data collection methodology called photovoice was also used with a sample of participants from across the three clusters. Photovoice is a community-based participatory action research (PAR) method (Liebenberg, 2018). The primary objectives of using photovoice were: for participants to identify, record and reflect on their lived experiences around a particular topic; to promote critical dialogue; and to reach policymakers to enact social change in the relevant area. The final part of the cluster-level evaluation was the application of a Social Return on Investment approach with projects. This internationally accredited framework incorporated both qualitative and quantitative strands and allowed us to identify the most valued outcomes for participants. This information is invaluable for projects in terms of supporting them to review and refine their delivery, based on best-available evidence.

Fifthly, using all of the constituent evaluation information and returning to address the overarching aim of the study, this report concludes by presenting a new evidence-based model, describing *Educational Progression and Transformation* for learners across the Education Fund who are experiencing educational inequality. This will be of interest to social innovators, social science researchers and the general public, but specifically to similar projects not involved in the Youth Funds but that want to learn more about what works, as well as for policymakers responsible for youth education.

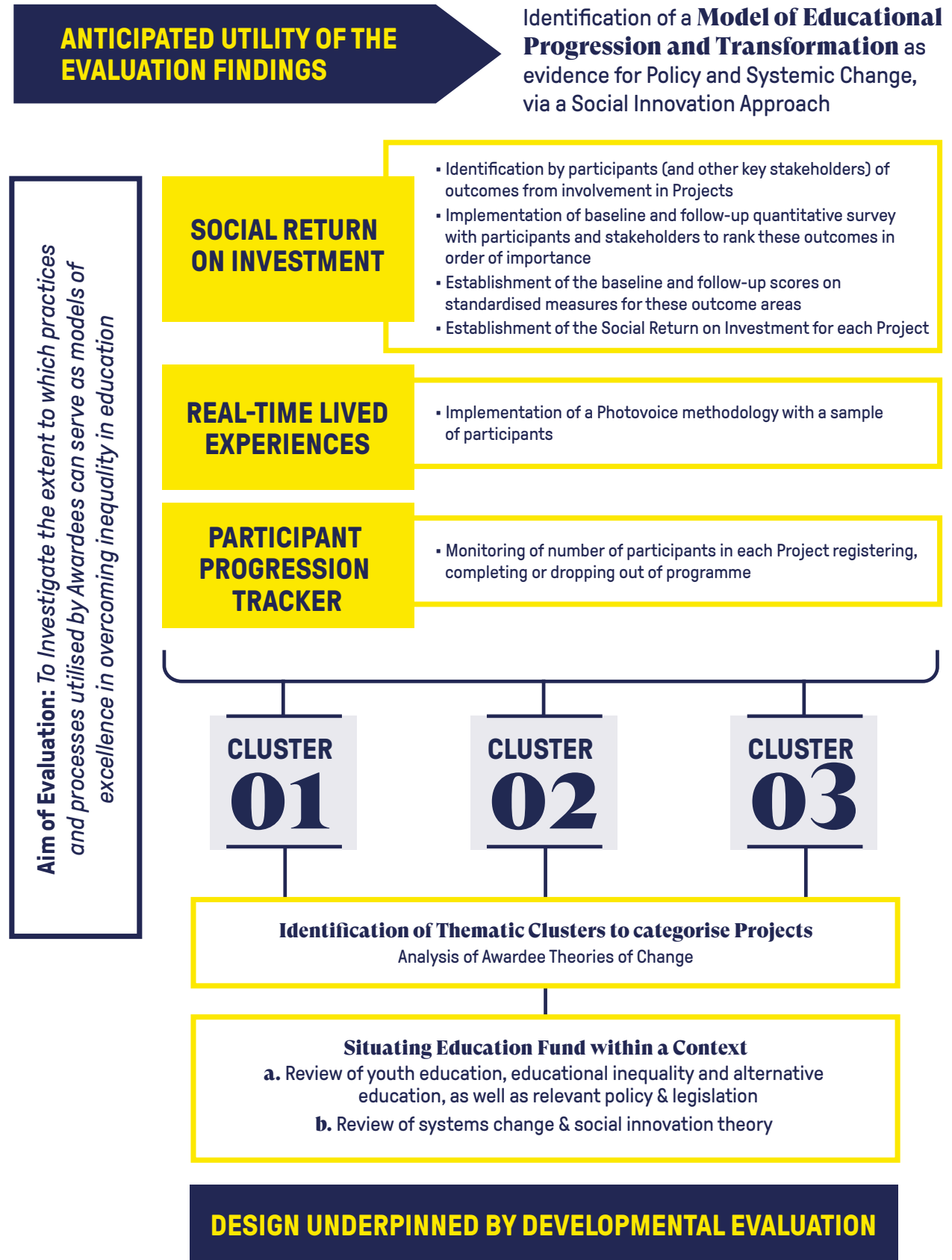
2.3 A Foundational Evaluation and Establishing a Pathway to Collective Impact

The Education Fund (2017–2020) was the first of Rethink Ireland’s Funds to incorporate a formal academic evaluation. By taking this step, Rethink Ireland has in fact made history. Bringing together a set of disparate projects, each with a common interest in some element of education inequality, supporting them with the Gamechanger Programme and encouraging them through a rigorous cluster-based foundational academic evaluation, is a first in the history of the state.

Since the introduction of that Fund, Rethink Ireland has introduced two new interrelated funds, namely the Youth Funds (2018–2021) and the Children and Youth Fund (2019–2022). Both of these funds have expanded on the Education Fund by including a focus on youth mental health. Both new funds were designed to support projects addressing the most prevalent issues within education and mental health for children and young people in Ireland today. Recognising the need for continued formal independent evaluation, Rethink Ireland appointed the current authors as evaluators of the two new funds, following a public tendering process.

One of Rethink Ireland’s primary end goals upon the completion of a total of five years of evaluation across these three funds by 2023 will be to have supported the creation of a raft of social impact data that can inform the development of smart public policy and inspired public leadership (see Figure 2.3). Therefore, as the Education Fund comes to a close, creating an approach to collating the cross-cutting themes emerging from the three evaluations is a key priority for Rethink Ireland and the evaluators. Connecting this approach to the policy priorities of the key government departments (DCYA, DoH and DES) and developing a dissemination and communications strategy is key.

Figure 2.2 – Evaluation Framework co-developed for the Education Fund



Alongside this work, Rethink Ireland, the evaluators and awardees have committed to working collaboratively with key national and international change-makers to create a platform and the conditions necessary for advancing systems change, based on the data emerging from the evaluations and best practice. Achieving Rethink Ireland’s ultimate goal of systems change is an immense, but far from impossible task. In applying an ecological process model to systems change, Peirson et al. (2011: 319) make the following point:

Strategies for studying and advancing systems transformation require an understanding of the reasons for change, an orientation to the envisioned state, sensitivity to the historical and contemporary context, and attentiveness to the enactment of interdependence, resources and adaptation within the system over time. Approaching systems change with sound theory and strategic action plans may be the difference between potentially misguided leaps of faith or kneejerk reactions and proceeding with stable confident steps along a visible path (Lewin, 1951). If it matters where you end up, then it matters how you get there. Without sound theory to guide change, systems are at risk of drifting along without direction or destination.

Figure 2.3 - Pathway to Collective Impact based on evidence from the three Rethink Ireland Funds

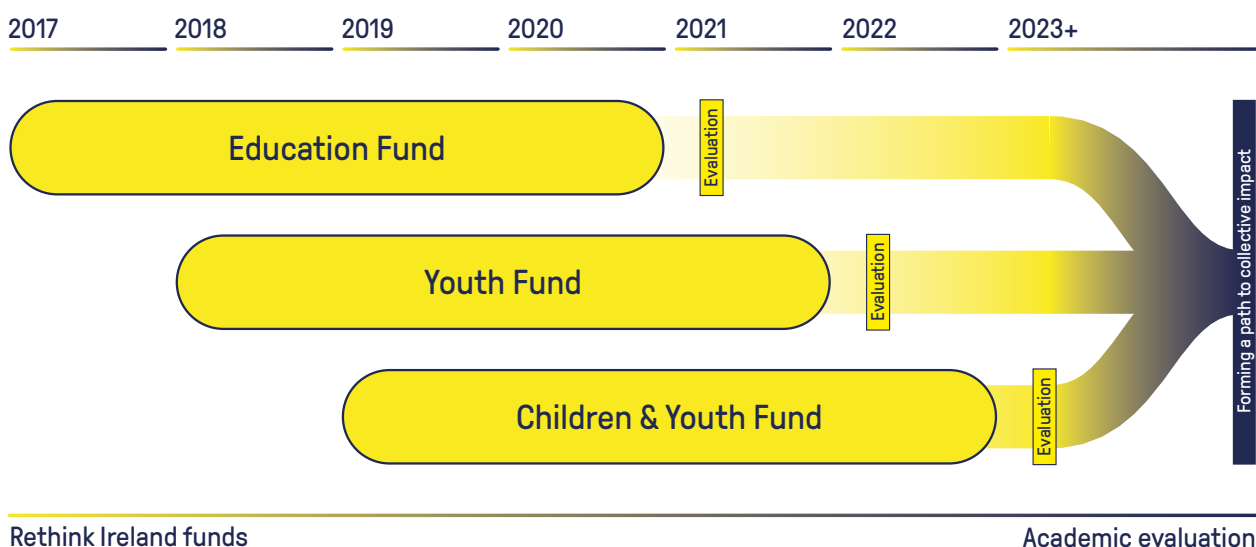
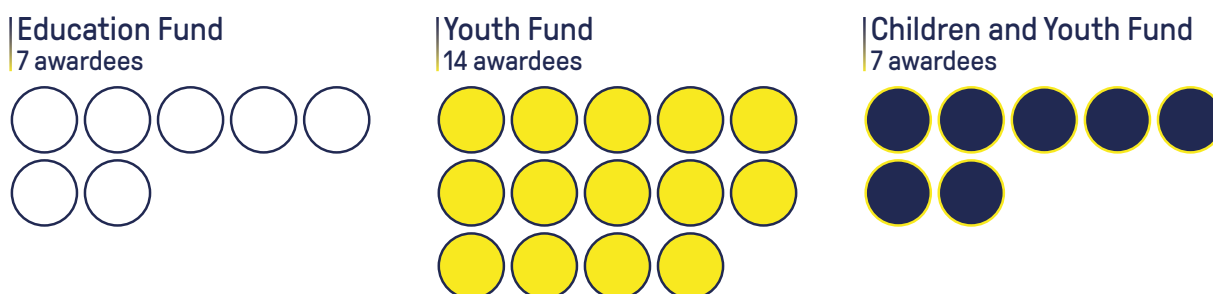


Figure 2.4 – The Rethink Ireland awardees by fund type



No single group, organisation or entity can develop the sound theoretical base and strategic action plans needed to guide systems change; instead, all interested parties need to work together and engage in a *collective impact approach*, a term coined in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, one of the world’s leading voices on the interplay between social innovation and systems change. As noted by Hanleybrown et al. (2012), the most successful initiatives undertaken using this approach share *five* key conditions that distinguish collective impact from other forms of collaboration. As shown in Table 2.1, these include a common agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication and backbone support. The commitment by Rethink Ireland to three academic evaluations is a major first step on this path to collective impact.

By the time of publication of the final evaluation report (Children and Youth Funds) in quarter one of 2023, Rethink Ireland, along with the combined 28 awardees (Education Fund (7), Youth Funds (14) and Children and Youth Funds (7)), the evaluators and all other allied stakeholders, will have completed the most diverse and significant social impact study ever undertaken in Ireland. However, the momentum of this movement cannot and should not be allowed to stop there. Systems change is a long and detailed process that needs a continual flow of rich impact data. Therefore, another key priority for Rethink Ireland and the evaluators will be to work collaboratively with government departments in securing new research funding, whether through the Irish Research Council or UK or European sources.

Table 2.1 – Conditions of collective impact (Hanleybrown et al., 2012)

| THE FIVE CONDITIONS OF COLLECTIVE IMPACT | |
|--|---|
| Common Agenda | All participants have a shared vision for change including a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving it through agreed upon actions. |
| Shared Measurement | Collecting data and measuring results consistently across all participants ensures efforts remain aligned and participants hold each other accountable. |
| Mutually Reinforcing Activities | Participant activities must be differentiated while still being coordinated through a mutually reinforcing plan of action. |
| Continuous Communication | Consistent and open communication is needed across the many players to build trust, assure mutual objectives, and create common motivation. |
| Backbone Support | Creating and managing collective impact requires a separate organization(s) with staff and a specific set of skills to serve as the backbone for the entire initiative and coordinate participating organizations and agencies. |

**CORE FINDINGS
FROM THE EVALUATION
– AN INTEGRATED
CLUSTERED APPROACH**

03

3.1 Creating Clusters of Projects

As introduced in Section 2, the overarching aim of the evaluation was *‘to investigate the extent to which practices and process utilised by awardees can serve as models of excellence in overcoming inequality in education’*. As the evaluation was specifically designed to have a macro focus and thus collate learning from projects categorised into specific thematic clusters (see Figure 2.2 on the Evaluation Framework), one of the first tasks undertaken by the evaluation team was the creation of those clusters. The process involved matching projects across five core elements, namely vision, aims and objectives, project activities,¹⁴ participants’ ages and positionality in relation to the mainstream education system. Three clusters of projects emerged as shown in Figure 3.1. A full explanation of the various combinations and permutations for the formation of these clusters is provided in Appendix 2.

Cluster 1 contains two projects with a focus on enabling participants to experience social inclusion by supporting their educational progression through lifelong learning opportunities.

Cluster 2 contains three projects and focuses on curriculum reform and supporting participants engage in diverse pathways to adulthood.

Cluster 3 contains two projects and provides alternative modes of education which are outside the mainstream system.

3.2 Guiding the Presentation of the Core Findings against Key Questions

The overall focus of Section 3 is to specifically address **Objective 2** of the evaluation, which set out *‘to trace the benefit for learners of being involved in awardee projects as well as their progression towards achieving a QQI Levels 3–6 qualification’*. **Objective 3** (identifying successful models for scale or replication) and **Objective 4** (suggesting any necessary policy changes) are the central focus of Section 4 and are answered by building on the information presented here.

For each cluster, five core questions are used to structure and integrate the data and in doing so specifically address Objective 2. The details of these questions and the exact focus of each are presented in Table 3.1.

Figure 3.1 - Outcome of the Clustering Process



¹⁴ Other data, based on participation, referral process, type of intervention, theory, methods, and manual intervention, was provided by the projects. Due to insufficient information provided in these sections, this data was not analysed.

Table 3.1. - Framework designed to focus the presentation of the key findings

| KEY QUESTION BEING ASKED | FOCUS OF SECTION | LOCATION OF SUB-SECTION FOR EACH CLUSTER |
|--|--|---|
| 1. What’s the problem being addressed by this cluster? | Each project within the cluster is introduced and then contextualised by naming the specific area of educational inequality it addresses. | Cluster 1 – Section 3.3.1 Cluster 2 – Section 3.4.1 Cluster 3 – Section 3.5.1 |
| 2. How well and for whom did this Cluster support educational progression? | The central focus of Objective 2 is to track the number of participants progressing on Levels 3–6 on the NFQ. This section presents data on the hard outcomes, that is, the numbers engaging with, completing and dropping out, and breaks the data down by gender and age. | Cluster 1 – Section 3.3.2 Cluster 2 – Section 3.4.2 Cluster 3 – Section 3.5.2 |
| 3. How is educational progression understood by key stakeholders in this Cluster? | The meaning of academic progression as perceived by both internal and external stakeholders involved in the projects within the cluster is examined. | Cluster 1 – Section 3.3.3 Cluster 2 – Section 3.4.3 Cluster 3 – Section 3.5.3 |
| 4. Who benefits from these projects and what would have happened to learners without access to them? | This section examines how life would look for learners and their families if they did not have access to their respective project. This process benchmarks the value of the work done by projects in a cluster. | Cluster 1 – Section 3.3.4 Cluster 2 – Section 3.4.4 Cluster 3 – Section 3.5.4 |
| 5. What was the lived experience of learners in this cluster around Covid-19? | This section documents the ‘lived experience’ of a sample of participants from across the projects, using both traditional and online photovoice data, with a particular emphasis on their experiences during the first Covid-19 lockdown from March 2020. | Cluster 1 – Section 3.3.5 Cluster 2 – Section 3.4.5 Cluster 3 – Section 3.5.5 |
| 6. What are the similarities and differences between projects in the cluster? | A brief summary of the similarities and differences between the projects within each cluster is provided here. | Cluster 1 – Section 3.3.6 Cluster 2 – Section 3.4.6 Cluster 3 – Section 3.5.6 |
| 7. What is the social value of the outcomes created by the activities in each individual project? | This section describes the results of the implementation of a Social Return on Investment study with individual projects. It specifically addresses the outcomes achieved by participants as a result of being involved in their respective projects which they most valued. | Section 3.6 |

3.3 Cluster 1: Lifelong Learning/Social Inclusion

This section introduces two projects from Cluster 1: Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities (TCPID) and An Cosán VCC.

3.3.1 What's the problem being addressed by this cluster?

Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities (TCPID) is based within the School of Education at Trinity College Dublin and was established four years ago. TCPID aims to address the educational disadvantages experienced by people with intellectual disabilities by providing an opportunity to participate in a higher-education programme. The Certificate in Arts, Science and Inclusive Practice is a two-year programme accredited at QQI Level 5. The programme aims to enhance the capacity of this group of people to participate fully in society as independent adults. Key activities of the TCPID programme involve course work, work experience, mentoring, career guidance and links to further progression avenues.

The Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) was introduced to widen the access rate of students with disabilities to Third Level education (Aston, 2019). However, the numbers of students with intellectual disabilities remain low. Only 84 out of 57,872 people with intellectual disabilities who used two or more-day services were registered at third level education in 2017 (NIDD, 2017)¹⁵. Those who are involved in these programmes report the lack of support provided by their respective colleges. Despite all these challenges, higher education remains an important place to provide opportunities and avenues of knowledge for people with intellectual disabilities. As argued by Aston (2019), more comprehensive cooperation between the Inclusive National Higher Education Forum (INHEF), the Department of Education, Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and broader

educational community needs to develop to enhance Third level options for people with intellectual disabilities in future.

An Cosán is a community education centre which was established over thirty years ago in Tallaght West, Dublin. The Virtual Community College VCC was set up to scale the work of An Cosán. The aim of An Cosán VCC is to empower adults from disadvantaged communities across Ireland to achieve their educational potential and contribute to social change in their communities. The programme targets young adults (age 18–30) living in isolated and disadvantaged communities who are not in employment, education or training. Key activities of the programme include an entry-level model of higher education through a selection of programmes and introductory courses; a blended model of online learning, including live online classes, face-to-face workshops, mentoring and online resources, all at a pace that suits the learner; induction day; virtual classroom; and supports (eMentors, tutors, technology experts and guidance, and bursaries for learners unable to pay).

The lifelong learning annual average participation rate in Ireland for 2019 was 12.6% which is slightly above the EU average of 11.3% (SLMRU, 2019). Approximately 33,000 people engage in independent community education programmes annually (Dulee – Kinsolving & Guerin, 2020a). Only a very small percentage of these learners can access higher education in a community education context. The Action Plan for Education (2016–2019) aimed to increase the participation rate to 10%. However, as argued by AONTAS (2016), this needs to involve widening participation to include people from underrepresented groups who benefit most from lifelong learning. Ireland has a high level of adult illiteracy and early school leaving. Based on the assessment of 6000 people aged 16–65, the survey from 2012 shows that 25.6% of Irish adults score low in numeracy and 17.9% of Irish adults score low in literacy (CSO, 2013).

¹⁵ The number of students with intellectual disabilities involved in further education and training is much higher. In 2019, 2,821 students enrolled in further education and training reported having an intellectual disability (Dulee – Kinsolving and Guerin, 2020b).

3.3.2 How well and for whom did this cluster support educational progression?

The key focus of the evaluation of the Rethink Ireland Education Fund was to measure progression from QQI Level 3–6 for the respective awardee projects.

TCPID provides a two-year QQI Level 5 Programme to students with intellectual disabilities between the ages of 19 and 25 years old. In total, 30 students were registered on the programme between January 2018 and June 2020; 13 between January 2018 and December 2018; 17 between January 2019 and December 2019; and 16 between January 2020 and July 2020. On average, 53% of students were male and 47% were female. A total of 97% of students completed the programme in this period and continued to the following destinations: 57% started in part-time employment, 14.3% got full-time jobs, 14.3% continued with another course outside of mainstream education, and 14.3% continued with third-level education. All students were Irish. The programme provides mentorship to all students. Table 3.2 shows this and other information for the TCPID programme.

An Cosán VCC was established four years ago to provide QQI Level 6 and QQI Level 7 education for adult learners between the ages of 21 and 73. In total, 298 students, 73% female and 27% male, enrolled in the programme between January 2018 and July 2020. In this same period, 86% of students completed the accredited programme and 10% completed the non-accredited programme. 4% of students dropped out of the programme. Those who completed the programme were awarded QQI Level 6 accreditation; another 36 students progressed to QQI Level 7 and 19 of them earned a Degree in Applied Addiction Studies and Community Development. Approximately two-thirds (70.8%) of learners are Irish and one-third (29.2%) of learners belong to other ethnic groups. After completing the programme, 47% of students continued with third-level education, and based on anecdotal data, some entered employment. An Cosán VCC provides mentoring to their students through a mentor panel and one-to-one mentoring.

Figure 3.2 – The characteristics, progression and outcomes of participants from Cluster 1 awardee project, TCPID

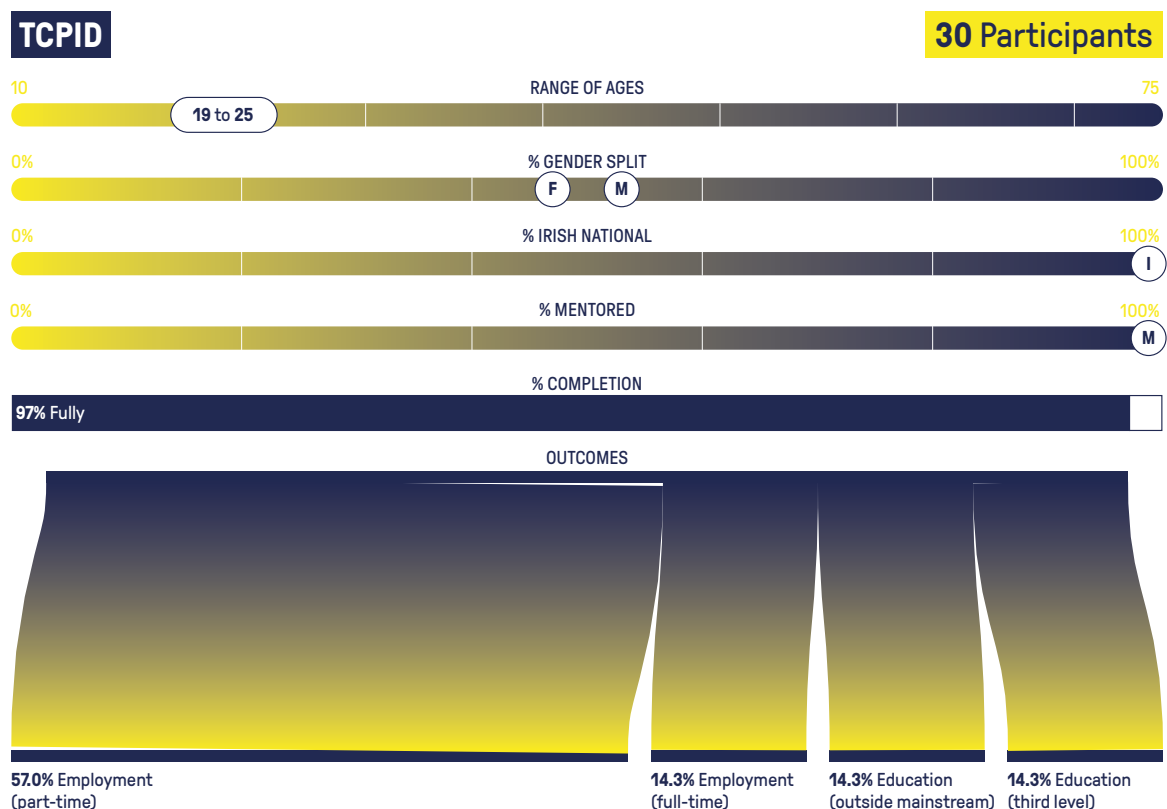


Figure 3.3 – The characteristics, progression and outcomes of participants from Cluster 1 awardee project, An Cosán VCC

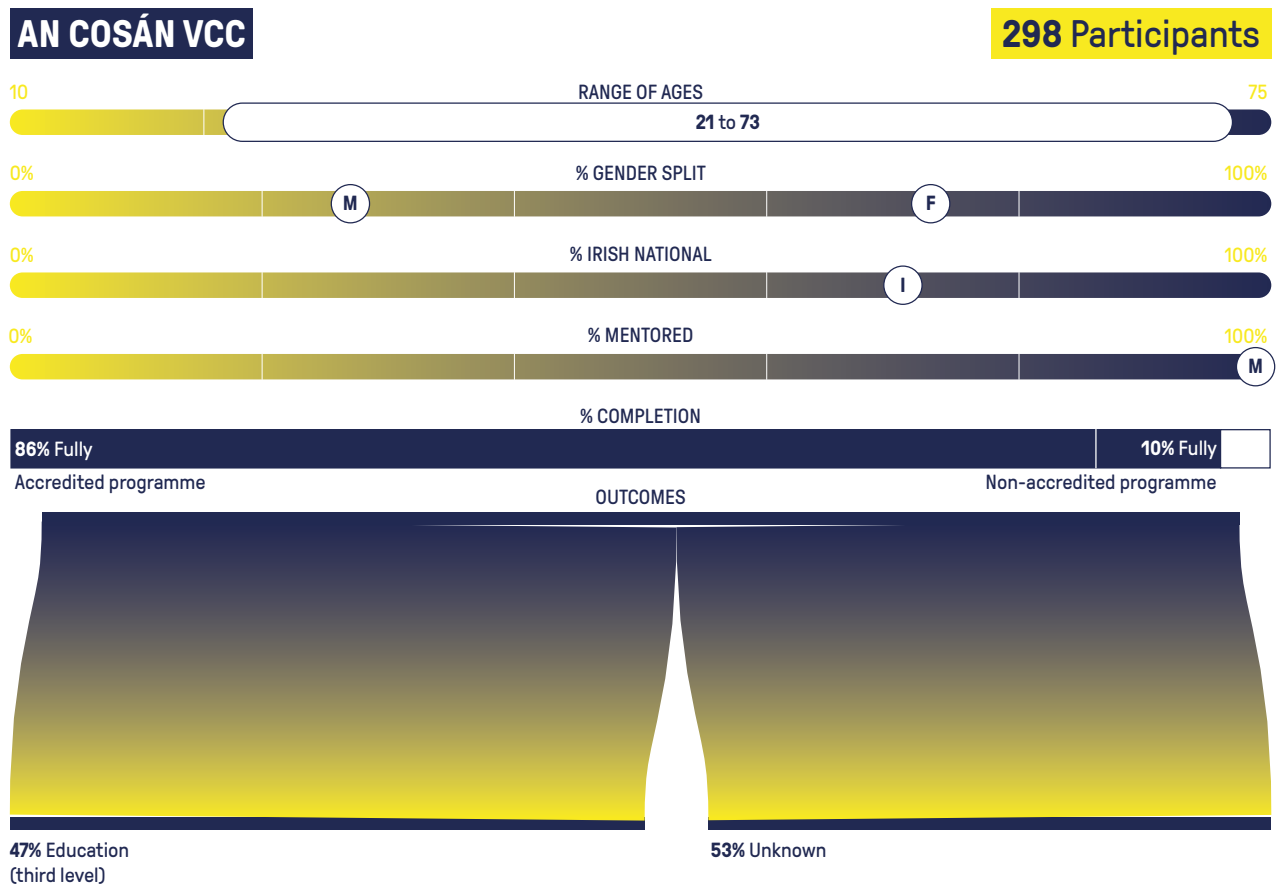


Table 3.2 – Details of hard outcomes for this cluster

| QUESTIONS | TRINITY CENTRE FOR PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES (TCPID) | AN COSÁN VCC |
|---|--|-----------------------------|
| How long is your programme in operation (in months and years)? | 4 years | 4 years |
| How long is the programme of activity you deliver, for which you received the SIFI (Rethink Ireland) funding? | More than one academic year | More than one academic year |
| Age range of participants you are working with | 19–25 years old | 21–73 years old |
| Referral to the programme | Self-referral | Self-referral |

| QUESTIONS | TRINITY CENTRE FOR PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES (TCPID) | AN COSÁN VCC |
|--|--|--|
| If referred OUT of the programme, where they are referred to | No referrals out of programme | No referrals out of programme |
| Formally registered participants between January 2018 and 31st December 2018 (per month) | 13 per academic year (Male: 6; Female: 7) | 12 per month (Male: 4; Female: 8) |
| Formally registered participants between January 2019 and 31st December 2019 (per month) | 17 per academic year (Male: 8; Female: 9) | 15 per month (Male: 3; Female: 12) |
| Formally registered participants between January 2020 and 31st July 2020 (per month) | 16 per academic year (Male: 9; Female: 7) | 12 per month (Male: 3; Female: 9) |
| On average, what percentage of participants completed the programme from Jan 2018–July 2020 | 96.7% | 86% |
| What level of accreditation did they achieve? | QQI Level 5 | QQI Level 6. 19 learners further progressed to achieve QQI Level 7 |
| On average what percentage of participants formally registered from Jan 2018–Jul 2020 are Male | 53.33% (15) | 27% (81) |
| On average what percentage of participants formally registered from Jan 2018–Jul 2020 are Female | 46.7% (14) | 73% (217) |
| Any other accreditation? | No | 36 participants progressed to QQI Level 7 of which 19 achieved a Degree in Applied Addiction Studies and Community Development |

| QUESTIONS | TRINITY CENTRE FOR PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES (TCPID) | AN COSÁN VCC |
|--|--|---|
| What did participants do after completion of the programme? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Continue with another course or programme outside of mainstream education (14.3%) - Continue with third-level education (14.3%) - Start in part-time employment (57%) - Start in full-time employment (14.3%) | <p>Examining the 298 participants on the programme from Jan 2018–July 2020:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Continuation in third-level education (47%). - Enter employment (data unavailable). <p>Examining the 83 participants for the period Jan–July 2020:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Progression to NFQ Level 7 (43%) - Continuation in third-level education at NFQ Level 6 (34%). |
| Average percentage of formally registered participants who partially completed the programme | 3% (Male: 1% and Female: 2%) | 10% achieved a Certificate of Participation (Male: 4.7% and Female: 5.3%) |
| Average percentage of the overall number of formally registered participants who dropped out early in the period Jan 2018–Jul 2020 | 0 | 4% Total of 14% did not achieve an accredited award. |
| Waiting List Average per annum | No | No |
| Nationality of participants (Jan 2018–July 2020) | Irish: 30 | Irish: 211 (70.8%) |
| Ethnic or cultural minority groups (Jan 2018–July 2020) | 0 | Other ethnic groups: 87 (29.2%) |
| Mentoring | <p>Yes</p> <p>All (100%) participants receive mentoring (53% male and 47% female)</p> | <p>Yes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Higher-Education Tutor, Educational Technology Moderator, Access Officer available on request. - Volunteer mentor panel facilitated and one-to-one mentoring offered on request. - Peer study groups facilitated. |

3.3.3 How is educational progression understood by key stakeholders in this cluster?

TCPID and An Cosán VCC provide access to adult education with their focus on different types of learners: young adults with intellectual disabilities and under-represented groups of adults. The meaning of progression in education for students in these two projects shows the following two patterns. The following aspects have been identified from the data as a way to provide meaning around progression for students of TCPID:

- 1) Opportunities to access a third-level programme;
- 2) Exposure to a range of information and study material makes students more independent;
- 3) The importance of work placement and mentoring;
- 4) Changing the work culture in businesses;
- 5) Employment opportunities.

Four interrelated elements within the An Cosán VCC programme were recognised as central to educational progression from the accounts of students and external stakeholders of the programme:

- 1) Lifelong learning as a second chance and upskilling education;
- 2) A blended, flexible and a student-centred approach to learning;
- 3) A gradual progression to education;
- 4) Further pathways to education and employment.

Differences in addressing these two groups of students by the two projects makes their pathways to education and employment diverse. While the narratives on progression are presented separately for each project, it will become evident that social inclusion serves as a common thread between both.

Pathways to independence: Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities

TCPID provides young adults with intellectual disabilities an opportunity to further their education. The programme based in Trinity College Dublin positions students at the core of the learning experience. One of the parents explained that having an opportunity to go to college was a strong incentive for her son. A chance to attend the programme provided him with an equal opportunity and put him on par with his siblings.

I would say all the things that P had said, but my son actually said, I want to go to Trinity like my brother and sister; actually, my brother went to NUIG, but his sister went to Trinity. I want to go to college too, so that was a very strong incentive and a motivating, I want to be like everybody else and you know, an achiever. So, I think that was strong from his point of view, and myself and my late husband's point of view, it was strongly that education is core.

(Parents, TCPID, Focus Group)

Students described their engagement with the programme by mentioning various modules and activities they were involved in during the first and second year of the programme. Learning about information technology, computers and printers, or how to send emails was recognised as necessary. Students most favoured drama classes with many saying that they would like to continue with this module in the second year. The programme exposed them to other topics, such as human rights, occupational therapy, sports, sign language and arts. A practical experience with the campus, finding their way around, or being exposed to mentorship was recognised as valuable.

I found it good. I learned a lot. I learned about computers, I learned about emails, I learned about acting and different stuff. I really enjoyed it because it's a really good course to do and it is a two-year course, and I'm enjoying it. And the first year is really good [...]. I did drama. I did my presentation on the virus, a PowerPoint presentation on the virus. Poetry, OT, human rights, expressive art, exploring the arts, sports for a few months and recreation for a few months. Language and society, that was a bit tough, and sign language was a little bit tough for me. Sign language was tough.

(Students, TCPID, Focus Group)

Well, for me, when I started, I didn't know my way around Trinity. But after a while, I got used to it, I got used to the rooms, what rooms to go to after – knowing after a while, you know? I am the first child in my entire family to go to Trinity College, which was an amazing experience for me. And I got to become a student mentor to the first-year students.

(Students, TCPID, Focus Group)

Being involved in an accredited education programme and getting familiar with different areas of learning serves as a stepping-stone towards students' future independence. Students become more informed about other areas of life and learn how to operate more independently. Taking a bus to get to the college and finding a way around the city equipped them with the belief in their ability to do things. Parents, specifically, have recognised this as a significant and essential positive change in their children's lives.

So really, I suppose the fact that somebody started a course like this and had high expectations of somebody with an intellectual disability is brilliant ... It's all different stuff. It's literacy, technology, all that themselves you know the way, and they love it. So just great to see people expecting something of people with an intellectual disability and not thinking, just having a vision for themselves. That's what they need; they probably wouldn't be able for level 5, maybe level 4 but it gives them that, he's just strengthened in what he can do so we would try a lot of places, but we say to S you start now, and you can go on the bus tonight, and he'll say, great. What they get out of being independent, they do not really want you, do you know the way.

(Parents, TCPID, Focus Group)

In the second year of their study, TCPID organises a work placement for students with corporate businesses. This is an essential step towards students' employment experience in which they can further develop their skills. Study participants talked about the social elements of the placement, which involved having lunches with their colleagues and meeting new people. They felt more independent by getting to work on their own and doing tasks independently. For many, this was an opportunity to familiarise themselves with work and learn new things.

Great. OK. I really enjoyed my work placement. I was put in different departments every week while I was there. I really enjoyed global drug development, and I enjoyed having lunch with some of my co-workers, and I found out new ways to do pupils emails.

(Students, TCPID, Focus Group)

Mentoring based on a buddy system proved to be essential for students' integration in the workplace. Working in a business world where the pace is fast requires setting a clear structure and routine. Providing training, defining their roles and knowing more about students' needs and strengths was essential in supporting students at these placements. As discussed by mentors, a positive relationship between a mentor and mentee helped to ease the transition. A buddy system was introduced by some companies to provide training and care to students. Business mentors recognised the importance of knowing students personally, responding to their needs and building on their strengths in the process. Finding mentors can be challenging due to work overload and a lack of experience in working with people with intellectual disabilities.

They are not treated any differently, they are treated like any new hire into the firm, but I suppose what is important is that we do need a little bit of information regarding (placement students). So, it is just about what the key is, is Trinity being able to provide us with that understanding of how, again we all have our own needs and especially with someone with intellectual disability for a lot of people, you know, we are not used to working with people with intellectual disabilities, so we need a helping hand in order to make sure that when they are working with us that we keep them safe. And for some of them having the same desk every week so we can't just we all have a spot and do different desks every day, that is something that for each of our five Trinity students we know doesn't work.

(Business Mentors, TCPID, Focus Group)

I think what else is crucial is the buddy. So, we have identified a number of buddies within the business, I would be a buddy for L., and they actually make or break their time with us. So, it is someone who actually helps them integrate and orientate them into the business and takes the time to get to know them and to understand their likes and their loathes, what they love to do and what they don't do. And if there is anything, if they are sick or whatever the situation, that their buddy is someone that they know is always there for them. And that they can really connect in.

(Business Mentors, TCPID, Focus Group)

When students know what to expect from the working place, they become confident and enthusiastic about their work. The work ethic, professionalism and eagerness to do the job were present in the accounts of business mentors when talking about their mentees. Placement students showed a great capacity to perform different tasks, like working with computers, making presentations and sorting the post.

She'd say am I getting this right and she'd explain it, and you'd be like you just explained that better than I did. She was really good. When we weren't overly busy instead of her sitting there doing nothing because you'd be conscious of her not doing anything, we got her to do post. Everybody hates doing the post, nobody wants to be sitting there doing the post, and she'd sit there smiling away to herself doing the post, and I went over one day, and I was like, you really look like you're enjoying that, and she was like, every time I write an address because she could be writing it to the Cayman Islands or to somewhere in the States or Australia or whatever, she was like I'm travelling the world. I was sitting here looking at her going, oh my God.

(Business Mentors, TCPID, Focus Group)

Both parents and business mentors agreed that TCPID students gain a high level of autonomy through the study programme and their placement experience. The TCPID Team complete significant advance planning and preparation with each business partner before the start of every graduate internship to ensure maximum success. While most TCPID graduate internships are for a period of three months, these are often extended further if there is a longer-term role available within the company. Where an internship is not extended, the TCPID Team look to secure further internship opportunities to build on the hugely valuable experience gained. The development of key employment skills within a workplace environment is facilitated by the mentor or mentors within each business and ongoing support is provided to the mentors and the graduates by the TCPID.

Parents discussed positive aspects of placement. Opening working paths to students is crucial as these venues were traditionally inaccessible to people with intellectual disabilities. Normalising and opening the places to a diverse group of people is a step towards a more inclusive workplace. Parents suggested providing a more comprehensive range of options for students by expanding cooperation to other areas of work, such as arts. Students with diverse interests could get access to additional work venues corresponding to their interests.

I like the whole corporate side; I like the fact that you have the corporate side for our children because maybe in the past they would have been excluded from that part of the world. It opens up; it's one of the reasons we were attracted to the course here as well was because of that, watching all of that. I've worked myself in the corporate world and just a few of my connections, my old colleagues are now involved in TCPID as in taking in students, a couple of my friends are involved.

(Parents, TCPID, Focus Group)

Maybe the Abbey could take somebody on placement because they would be big enough maybe to absorb that and then maybe the Arts Council would fund the Abbey to do that and I did a bit of research on that, and I talked to a few of the strategic directors in the Arts Council, and they said go ahead. The main point is that I've just been concurring what previous people have said is that if you're doing the arts as well, then there should, it's not all about corporate placements.

(Parents, TCPID, Focus Group)

Businesses with a fast-paced workplace reported back about the positive impact of TCPID students on their work culture as they made the work process more cooperative. Business mentors talked about introducing Friday coffees after getting students on placement and not stressing out over work challenges as much anymore. The businesses hugely recognised the personal contribution of students to changing the culture of these working environments. A different outlook on life, their cheerful personalities and positive outlook were recognised as primary contributors to change. Students introduced diverse ways of thinking and doing things, which led businesses to reflect on their own work culture.

I know two or three people have said, we're putting the team forward because of the way you took N into the team and how everyone just gelled together as a team. Everybody was her mentor, and I felt for the six months that she was there we all kind of stepped back slightly and kind of thought what am I getting stressed out about this for, why am I upset about this. There was a little more awareness and nearly coming around to their way of thinking and trying to be, because she was such a happy, bubbly person most of the time and she always had a positive outlook on life and I think we kind of took that, we felt that and we could feel us switching ... I think the team really, it just really stood to them. You could see them all going around with smiles on their faces and like that, not realising they were doing it but for somebody else to call it out.

(Business Mentors, TCPID, Focus Group)

These positive examples show that students with intellectual disabilities contribute hugely to the area of work. However, as explained by the representative of one business partner, there is scope for expanding the placement opportunities. The numbers are still relatively low, and, according to her could be doubled. The placement opportunity does not benefit students only – it greatly changes the companies themselves. The transformation thus can work two ways: affecting students with intellectual disabilities and the businesses.

And I suppose one opportunity is they need to expand their current offering; it is to a tiny cohort. I think the need is definitely there. I think they have nine per year, but it would be looking at extending that to 18, doubling it, because I just think it transforms, not only their lives but changes the company's lives for the better.

(Business Mentor 1, TCPID, Interview)

As clearly stated by business mentors, the principles of inclusive businesses need to be more strongly translated into practice by ensuring enough training for people with intellectual disabilities. Most importantly, the number of posts needs to increase, and diversity needs to be integrated into all businesses.

But there are probably a finite number of jobs that I can see us being able to facilitate. Hence, it needs to be every employer at some stage, you know, being able to make that transition and my other challenge going into this was finding people like you guys in the room who want to give it, because if you're in the first year. You're training to be an accountant or a consultant; it takes time. You're sitting there going, it's pressurised, I've got a lot to do, and it doesn't happen without people giving that extra bit of effort because it would be very easy to leave it to somebody else to do it.

(Business Mentors, TCPID, Focus Group)

Pathways to further education: The story of An Cosán VCC

Interviewees recognised lifelong learning as central to progressing education as a second-chance or upskilling option. An Cosán VCC was presented as a second-chance education opportunity in participants' stories; they mentioned that they had no formal education before engaging with the project. Due to lack of interest or students' life circumstances, they left school early when younger. This thread is recognised explicitly in accounts of students from socioeconomically disadvantaged areas and lone parents. The opportunities offered by the programme gives students an understanding that their education paths are not fixed but can be shaped by new educational chances. As mentioned by some, An Cosán VCC is a chance to access formal education at a later stage of their life.

I myself, I would have left school with no formal certificates, I didn't have a Junior Cert, I didn't have a Leaving Cert, and now I am more than halfway through my second year of a degree. So, it is absolutely fantastic for me. I just find the experience amazing.

(Students, An Cosán VCC, Focus Group 1)

Lifelong learning is also understood as an opportunity to upskill and further students' education. Students involved in community development work can familiarise themselves with theoretical and evidence-based knowledge in the area of community development. Having access to information and the most current knowledge in their area of work is recognised as a critical aspect of students' professional development. A former student and external stakeholder of An Cosán discussed the relevance of the programme to her professional development.

I found it very good, a great opportunity to reflect and engage in discussion, which in the workplace one doesn't get those opportunities really very often. And also, to update me on the literature and the research that was out there on community leadership. [...] And I think they value that part of it, and I suppose to answer your question it puts people on a path of more lifelong learning and professional development that they may have had no exposure to if they didn't get that opportunity.

(Stakeholder 5, An Cosán VCC, Interview)

Blended learning, which was identified as another key element of the programme, allows students to flexibly engage with the programme without compromising their family and work life. Students can access study material in their own time and attend lectures online. They can borrow laptops from An Cosán if needed. Students specifically mentioned that the project accommodates their needs and puts students at the centre of learning. It respects the busyness of their lives

and approaches each student's living situation individually. One participant compared An Cosán VCC with a traditional college and explained that the project allows them to follow their own pace of study and considers their living circumstances and needs. Even though the course with the initial group of students finished, blended learning helped them to continue with the programme by joining other groups of students. This study participant compared their experience with traditional college and made a remark that the project tries to fit the course around their lives.

I was fortunate enough; I had missed two modules I think last year so the fact that it is online, and it is blended I am not restricted to staying with the Wexford group, that I was able to link in with a group from Wicklow and a group from Galway and catch up with those modules. So, I was able to do say two modules at the one time, and that afforded me to stay online with the rest of the class going forward. So, unlike the typical college setting, which I found quite rigid, that is probably one of the reasons it wouldn't have suited me, that things happen in life and especially in the community it does allow for the dips, and that was very important to be able to plug in those gaps when you miss something as opposed to having to repeat. And sometimes there you might just give up; it just seems like too much work. But I would call it nice and fluid and fitted in lots of ways.

(Students, An Cosán VCC, Focus Group 2)

An ethos of care based on a wraparound approach is central to the education provided by An Cosán VCC. Students struggling with assignments or other academic challenges are getting personal support and the learner is put at the centre of their learning. The course content is tailored to their interest and needs. Checking on students' wellbeing and their engagement with the study work is a daily practice embedded in An Cosán's work. As mentioned by an external stakeholder, a community development worker provides wraparound support to all students involved in An Cosán's programme.

The other element that helps it here is we have a very good community development worker, a fabulous worker, and so there is personal support given to people. So, someone might come in upset about something, and they get a bit of attention, they get a bit of (support) then they are able to focus on their work. Or that might be followed up on afterwards. Or if someone drops out for a week or two, they are followed up on to say is there anything we can do? How can we help you with that? And that wraparound care, that has made it successful.

(Stakeholder 1, An Cosán VCC, Interview)

The third core element seen as central to the programme is a gradual, step-by-step approach of progression to education. This is built around offering different opportunities for learners and based on recognising students' readiness for entering various stages of education. Students can enrol on one module only, to unaccredited or accredited courses. A gradual progression from unaccredited to accredited programmes allows students to explore their study interests and complete education at their own pace and time. Standalone modules and unaccredited courses are introduced to students to help them meet other people and familiarise themselves with the study areas. As mentioned by several study participants, these courses are often used as steppingstones to degree programmes.

They (An Cosán) have built a pathway in line naturally with their own name; they have built a pathway of progression opportunities for learners. So, if you engage with somebody at the outset with a minor or special purpose award and you build on that to bring them to a full award, a major award, and you build block by block, stage by stage, that is really where the power of this is happening. Because very often the third level is focused on, as we know, entry routes looking at degrees from the very outset. Whereas the beauty of the An Cosán particularly is that they have recognised that not everybody is ready, willing or able to start at degree level. So, they have looked at sort of very nice modules like Level 6 'learning to learn' module, an introductory to the third level, so an access model and empowering the learner through doing that, building their confidence to help them to realise that yes you can do this, you can do this.

(Stakeholder 3, An Cosán VCC, Interview)

Accredited courses are considered necessary by some study participants. Based on the experience of external stakeholders, accreditation opens employment opportunities for students in the area of community development. This also makes An Cosán's programme different from other mainly unaccredited community development programmes.

I think the fact that the courses are accredited is significant for people. People would have done different kinds of community development type courses, but they wouldn't be accredited by a third-level institution.

(Stakeholder 2, An Cosán VCC, Interview)

Reflecting and thinking about the future is embedded in the learning process at An Cosán VCC. Students are asked about their hopes for the future when they join the project. This helps them recognise which study options and courses suit them the best. Students become creators of their

own educational and career paths. Some study participants mentioned that they got a part- or full-time job as a result of their engagement with the programme. An interesting observation based on the study participants' accounts is that students develop hopes and aspirations about future employment after seeing that other students get involved in new employment opportunities.

Because I thought I had a degree maybe after, I have my papers I could get a job with it, but when I started with An Cosán the first thing I noticed about them is a very good method they were using is to ask you direct questions like what are your hopes for the future? They ask you questions like that, are you thinking, you sit back and think okay... So, then I also realised that I need to do a course in community development because I had it in mind before leaving the room but because of questions like that, questions about my future, questions about what next and I had to make decisions like that. So, it has prompted me to take up another course, so it is a very lovely initiative.

(Students, An Cosán VCC, Focus Group 1)

Three people in the last year who are participating in the programme here with me have been able to gain employment in the area that they are studying. So, it has been absolutely fantastic.

(Students, An Cosán VCC, Focus Group 1)

3.3.4 Who benefits from these projects and what would have happened to learners without access to them?

This section outlines some examples of what would happen to students if they were not taking part in either TCPID or An Cosán VCC. The information, which is based on primary data and secondary sources (e.g., academic articles and reports), was collated to present typical progression paths for people with intellectual disabilities and adult learners from under-represented groups.

CASE STUDY ONE

TRINITY CENTRE FOR PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES (TCPID)

Widening access to higher education for people with intellectual disabilities has been recognised as central for their independence and general wellbeing (Aston, 2019). Several third-level institutions in Ireland provide people with intellectual disabilities with opportunities to explore a broader range of post-school options and equip them with a better understanding of themselves and the world they live in (O' Kelly, 2019). As reported by Aston (2019), the courses focus strongly on personal development and autonomy, financial management, health and wellbeing, advocacy and human rights. Students develop work-related skills through computer and technology skills and gain employment skills, such as writing CVs or interview skills. It has been reported that those students can become more empowered, and their lives have been transformed as a result of their engagement with these courses (MacNeill, 2020). A TCPID student, Mei Lin, said that she developed an awareness of dreaming big and achieving more since being engaged in the course (MacNeill, 2020). However, the lack of state funding and reliance on unstable philanthropic and charitable donations makes these programmes unsustainable and makes it difficult for them to survive. The number of courses for people with intellectual disabilities provided through third-level institutions has decreased from 16 to 10 since 2014 (Aston, 2019). Research shows that due to lack of opportunities to pursue education, young people with intellectual disabilities face challenges in finding meaningful employment due to low levels of numeracy and literacy, and lack self-confidence and understanding of workplace procedures (McGlinchey et al., 2013 in Aston, 2019: 6).

Providing meaningful employment and internships has been recognised as central for enabling people with intellectual disabilities to lead independent lives and for their social inclusion and economic welfare (Watson et al., 2017). The Ability Programme¹⁶ provides funding to local, regional and national projects in Ireland that focus on bringing people with disabilities between the ages of 15-29 closer to the labour market. A range of person-centred approaches are used at this programme to assist young people to identify and follow progression routes based on both their potential and their needs. However, as shown by the ESRI report (Watson et al., 2017), having a disability reduces the odds of moving to employment by 30%. These chances are much lower for people with intellectual disabilities. Despite various policy documents recognising the need for employment opportunities, the primary funding model remains focused on a traditional 'care-based' approach (MacNeill, 2020). Most people end up in adult day centres and sheltered workshops run by community organisations (O'Kelly, 2019). These services are mainly organised through the Health Service Executive (HSE), and as pointed out by May-Simera (2018), these centres keep people with intellectual disabilities segregated from their communities. They are involved in boring, routine tasks. Some 23,583 people with intellectual disabilities attended full-time day-service provision in 2017 (NIDD, 2017), which indicates that most people with intellectual disabilities continue to attend day services rather than being engaged in meaningful jobs (May-Simera, 2018). These pathways were traditionally developed to allow the limited inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in society without considering their needs and interests, based on assumptions that people with intellectual disabilities cannot be involved in 'normal jobs' (ibid. p. 292). They remain

¹⁶ The Ability Programme has an overall budget of up to €16 Million from 2018 – 2021 and it is co-financed by the European Social Fund and the Department of Social Protection. The Programme is administered by Pobal.

isolated and excluded by attending segregated services. As argued by Aston (2019), offering only one pathway to the future is neither just nor appropriate (p. 3). However, it is important to acknowledge that based on HIQA standards and expectations, the work of adult day-service providers is informed by a person-centred planning process with a focus on maximising community engagement of service users.

Despite some systemic attempts to provide inclusive education, employment opportunities remain scarce. Employment opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities are low, with most facing unemployment or underemployment after completing compulsory schooling. According to figures provided by the National Intellectual Disability Database, only 281 persons with intellectual disabilities were independently involved in employment in 2016 (May-Simera, 2018). Dependence on social transfers and increased risk of poverty and material deprivation has affected people with disability to a greater extent than adults without disability (Watson, 2017). This is particularly pertinent for people with intellectual disabilities, who are much more reliant on social welfare than their peers are. The ESRI report (Watson et al., 2017) shows that people with intellectual disabilities find transitioning into work particularly challenging and among all types of people with disability, this population faces the lowest chances of entry to employment.

Anecdotal data shows that many young people who do not continue with employment and education return to the traditional provision of care or day centres. As a result, there is a recognised regression in their behaviour and wellbeing (MacNeill, 2020). Cultural perceptions and attitudes towards people with intellectual disabilities are still led by views about their limited abilities and low expectations. Some third-level programmes try to develop structured employment pathways for their graduates; however, more sustainable models need to be developed in future.



CASE STUDY TWO

AN COSÁN VCC

The profile of students who participated in the focus groups shows that they can be categorised into three groups of learners: students from direct provision centres, lone parents and socioeconomically disadvantaged students. Their accounts provide a better understanding of the role of An Cosán in their lives.

Students with asylum-seeking status considered the programmes provided by An Cosán as an upskilling chance and an important stepping-stone towards inclusion in Irish society. They have limited opportunities to pursue their education, and due to their status, they have limited access to work¹⁷ and social life. Study participants mentioned that An Cosán gives them a chance to rebuild and provide meaning to their lives.

Some of our lives are crashed and An Cosán can support us to help us to construct our lives once again. And I mean I can't repeat but what I would say is it has been very supportive and has given us a different meaning to our lives. When you get a certificate, because not so many colleges around here would accept an application from asylum seekers but An Cosán (does). So, it is a backbone of what we are doing, and we are grateful.

(Students, An Cosán VCC, Focus Group 1)

Accounts of lone parents show that these learners face economic challenges and social exclusion. The course provided them with a chance to meet new people, which proved to be essential for those who are getting with a fresh start in life. An Cosán VCC offers them access to affordable and flexible education.

Well from my experience I was, well I have two daughters, and one of my daughters is registered blind, so I was very much as a lone parent, I don't like to use the word stuck at home, but I really was, she was very dependent on me. I had recently separated, so we literally had left everything we knew, we had gone to the local women's refuge for four months, so my confidence at that stage was completely at rock bottom. I was literally starting a fresh path, and with An Cosán it was more than just the education. I think it was nearly a psychological support; it's kind of given you a belief in yourself.

(Students, An Cosán VCC, Focus Group 2)

Students from disadvantaged areas experience lower rates of access to third-level education. Some older adults left school early and had a negative experience with schooling. They had no formal education and were involved in low-skill jobs and exposed to lower income and poverty. As explained by an external stakeholder, due to socioeconomic disadvantage, these students face more health and care-related challenges in their lives.

I guess working with the cohort that we work with so people from a background experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage there is always a lot of different things that can come up and a lot of obstacles obviously that people face when it comes to engaging in further education or training or unemployment. So, there are things that will come up on a daily basis that we couldn't account for so people could be dealing with mental health issues, with social anxiety, having to care for family members, things like that.

(Stakeholder 2, An Cosán VCC, Interview)

¹⁷ With effect from 30th June 2018 and in compliance with the EU Reception Conditions Directive (2013/33/EU), applicants seeking international protection who are awaiting a first-instance decision on their status for nine months or longer can apply for access to the labour market and can avail of the Department's Public Employment Services on a voluntary walk-in basis.

3.3.5 What were the lived experiences of learners in this cluster around Covid-19?

Students of Trinity Centre with People with Intellectual Disabilities and An Cosán VCC were invited to be part of the online photovoice, to help understand their lived experiences during Covid-19. However, no participant from either project opted to contribute. Nevertheless, students from TCPID were involved in a focus group discussion around the same period, which aimed to explore students' experiences with the project¹⁸. As these conversations happened in the middle of the first lockdown (March 2020), the students discussed their experiences with TCPID during the pandemic. The key findings to emerge were as follows:

1. TCPID activities moved online during the pandemic;
2. Difficulties experienced during remote studying;
3. Missing friends and placement activities.

TCPID activities moved online during the pandemic

TCPID students mentioned that their learning experience changed as a result of the pandemic. Online learning replaced face-to-face interaction with teachers and students. Both the pandemic and online learning came as a surprise. Even though the adaptation was hard, students got used to the new way of studying and communicating.

Like I didn't expect to be at home all the time. I didn't expect like to be doing classes on Zoom. But I kind of had to like to adapt to doing all our presentations on Zoom.

(Students, TCPID, Focus Group)

Difficulties experienced during remote studying

Studying remotely was described as a new way of working. Study participants mentioned that all communication and work presentation was moved online. Despite getting used to the new ways of learning, they said that they experienced challenges with internet connection and lacking space. They found these new circumstances difficult, but manageable.

I suppose like it's difficult to find somewhere to be able to, like to check that the internet is working and you have to like see if you can get a room where you have yourself in it, have no one else walking in and out of it all the time. And yeah, like it's weird. It's difficult. But you have to like to adapt to it then you kind of just figure that out and keep going.

(Students, TCPID, Focus Group)

Missing friends and work placement

Missing face-to-face conversations with friends was discussed by most study participants. Not being able to talk, laugh and socialise with them outside of the college or meeting friends from rehab care centres was the main issue for many. However, apps like Zoom helped them to stay connected and to find new ways of conversing and relating.

Yeah, I miss my friends too, but we use like Zoom and we'd go on House Party on our phones. Like we still like communicate with each other. So, we've that like connection.

(Students, TCPID, Focus Group)

¹⁸ Data collection with An Cosán's students finished before the pandemic and there was no data specifically focused on Covid-19 available for this awardee project.

I miss my work experience because like I got on with so many people there and then this felt really weird like not going to Dublin, not going on the Luas and going in to see them every Friday.

(Students, TCPID, Focus Group)

Not seeing my friends at the moment. Face to face contact with my friends. I miss that face to face talking to my friends outside college. I'm part of a day centre in Dun Laoghaire in rehab care and I miss my guys, they all got cancelled, everything got shut down, all the shops closing. Stuck indoors for a month. I'm dying to see my friends again when I'm able to.

(Students, TCPID, Focus Group)

3.3.6 Similarities and differences in Cluster 1

Similarities:

- ✓ Both projects in Cluster 1 provide opportunities for adult education.
- ✓ A common finding is that *progression in education is an individual and ecological concept – a result of systemic opportunities and available resources for progression.*
- ✓ Both projects focus on social inclusion of their participants through education.
- ✓ Both programmes provide mentoring to their students.

Differences:

- ✓ An Cosán VCC is a blended learning national programme, while TCPID is a university-based programme.
- ✓ TCPID caters for young adults with intellectual disabilities, while An Cosán VCC provides community education to adults from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- ✓ An Cosán VCC offers variety in the length of the programme – from one module to QQI

Level 6 and Level 7, while TCPID runs a two-year QQI Level 5 programme.

- ✓ The TCPID completion rate is very high, with 97% of students finishing the programme between January 2018 and July 2020. After the completion of the programme, students continue with further education or employment.
- ✓ The An Cosán VCC completion rate is high, with 86% of students finishing the programme between January 2018 and July 2020. Over 40% of students continue with further education after completing the programme, while, based on anecdotal data, some find employment.
- ✓ One-third of students enrolled at An Cosán VCC belong to various cultural and ethnic backgrounds, while all TCPID students are Irish nationals.
- ✓ Based on specific challenges and systemic responses to these challenges, two types of progression to education and employment are recognised between projects in Cluster 1.

The story of the progression of TCPID students revolves around opportunities to access education, engagement with courses and acquisition of knowledge, all of which contribute to the development of soft outcomes, and independence for students. Work placement with TCPID business partners is at the centre of this programme, supporting students in getting work experience. Placement experiences prove to be transformative for both TCPID students and businesses. Key actions used by the programme are:

- ✓ A student-centred and supported approach to learning.
- ✓ Focus on development of soft skills and competencies (e.g., independence).
- ✓ Mentorship with business partners.

An Cosán VCC is lifelong learning or second-chance, upskilling education for adult learners. Essential practices and actions used by this programme are:

- ✓ Blended and flexible studies.
- ✓ Student-centred, supported learning.
- ✓ The project provides gradual learning, including module, accredited and non-accredited education.

TCPID key messages about studying during the pandemic are:

- ✓ The programme continues online.
- ✓ Students adapt to online learning but recognise challenges around connectivity and lack of space to study at home.
- ✓ Students miss friends and placements.

3.4 Cluster 2: Curriculum Reform/ Diverse Pathways to Adulthood

Cluster 2 consists of three projects, namely Aspire2, Fast Track Academy and Trinity Access 21, all of which focus their work on curriculum reform and advocating for diverse pathways to adulthood. All three projects provide study supports to young people: Aspire2 works with young people aged 16–23 years, Fast Track Academy engages with people aged 15–19 years and Trinity Access 21 caters for people aged 13–18 years.

3.4.1 What's the problem being addressed by this cluster?

Fast Track Academy was set up in collaboration between IT Tallaght and Citywise Education in 2017 to improve the numbers of students in west Tallaght progressing to third level. Its vision is focused on improving communities through youth education by using a whole-person approach focused on academic support and personal development of young people. Students are referred to the programme by schools, youth organisations, community-based support services and self-referral. The project provides educational supports to senior year students at second level and targeted supports to students to progress and complete their education. Fast Track Academy organises classes in Leaving Cert subjects, career talks and preparatory courses for younger students to prepare them to enrol in the Fast Track Academy. They also provide teaching, mentoring, career

guidance and work placement to support students' decisions about progression to further education, apprenticeship or employment. The programme is delivered over two years.

Aspire2 was established six years ago as part of the DPS¹⁹ Corporate Social Responsibility Strategy. Their vision is to redress the systemic inequality in the Irish education system by supporting students who live in areas of educational disadvantage to increase their prospects of completing the Leaving Cert and progressing to third-level and other forms of further education. Aspire2 provides financial support to six DEIS schools (three in Dublin and three in Cork City) for a number of initiatives designed to improve educational progression outcomes (e.g., extra tuition, personal development workshops, after-study hubs, or exposure to experiences outside the school curriculum, such as a trip to the theatre). The programme also provides training and mentoring from DPS employees, work placements, youth advisory panels, and parent forums. The programme is delivered across three years.

Trinity Access 21 aims to transform the Irish education system in partnership with schools, communities, other education organisations, and businesses, so that every student can reach their full educational potential. The programme has been in operation for 27 years. Currently, more than 40 activities ranging from a day to several months are delivered to students in 23 schools in Dublin to help increase the participation rate of students from under-represented groups at third level. In addition to this, the programme provides continuing professional development for teachers from the abovementioned 23 schools and another 10 Network schools in the broader Dublin area. The support and training for students and teachers develop around three core practices: pathways to college, mentoring and leadership in learning.

Ireland is among the European countries with the highest level of intergenerational transmission of educational disadvantage (Smyth et al., 2019). Progression to third-level education remains low in disadvantaged areas. More than half of young people in Ireland aged 15–34 obtain third-level education; however, there is a vast disparity in

19 DPS group is a global consulting, engineering and construction management company, serving high-tech industries around the world.

these numbers across social class, ethnicity and nationality (Kennedy and Smith, 2018). In 2013 only 14% of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds participated in third-level education (Hannon et al., 2017). In terms of ratio, 4.9 students from disadvantaged areas to every 10 students from affluent areas (this rate varies across institutions) attend third-level institutions (O'Shea, 2020).

Literature shows that young people from disadvantaged areas have poorer educational outcomes. Even though the DEIS school programme contributes to more positive outcomes for learners, educational inequality remains, resulting in lower reading and numeracy skills in young people attending DEIS schools. Only 33% of students from DEIS schools take the higher-level mathematics paper in comparison with 61% of students from non-DEIS schools (Weir and Kavanagh, 2018). Literature (Byrne et al., 2010; Ledwith and Reilly, 2013; Darmody et al., 2014; Ledwith, 2017) shows there are significantly more non-Irish national than Irish national students enrolled in DEIS schools.

The OECD PISA 2018 report shows relatively less inequality in Ireland compared to other OECD countries. For example, Ireland has one of the smallest percentages of low performers in reading among socioeconomically disadvantaged students. However, this is not the experience of all young people. The OECD (2017) report shows that disparities in unemployment levels by education level are greater in Ireland than in other countries, arguing that the upper secondary level of education is a requirement for successful integration into the labour market (Smyth et al., 2019: 72). Early school leaving is more prevalent in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. Early school leavers are three times more likely to be unemployed than another person aged 18-24 who is not an early school leaver (CSO, 2019). Those who are employed face insecure, low-skilled and poorly paid employment. They report higher levels of anxiety and depression and have a higher mortality rate. They are also more likely to be involved in the juvenile or adult justice system (Smyth et al., 2019: 18).

3.4.2 How well and for whom did this cluster support educational progression?

Fast Track Academy provided study support to 423 students between January 2018 and July 2020. Of these, 46% were male and 54% were female. Specifically, there were 138 students (69 male and 69 female) registered in the programme between January 2018 and July 2018; 135 (67 male and 68 female) between September 2018 and July 2019; and 150 students (81 male and 69 female) between September 2019 and July 2020. Fast Track Academy provides educational support to senior students at the second level (QQI Level 4 and 5) and organises classes in Leaving Cert subjects to complete and progress students' education. As shown in Table 3.3, 90% of the students completed the programme, while 10% (6% male and 4% female) partially completed the programme. Most of the students who completed the programme continued with third-level education (80%), 10% started with vocational training, and 10% commenced full-time employment. The project uses a waiting list method at the later stage of the programme, and usually there are 5 to 10 students on the waiting list. All students receive mentorship with 30.3% of those being male and 69.7% female. The project does not gather information about the nationality of their students.

For Aspire2, 601 students (182 male and 419 female) joined up between January 2018 and July 2020. A total of 99% completed the programme: 69.8% were female, and 30.2% were male. Students attending Aspire2 are involved in a range of study support activities (e.g., extra tuition), mentoring with DPS employees, and personal development workshops, which enable their progression to QQI Levels 4 and 5. In addition to supporting students to accredited qualification, the programme provides Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) students with certificates after completing various workshops,

The data available for 430 Leaving Certificate students²⁰ shows that 39.6% of students continue with further education, 26% continue with third-level education, 21.7% start apprenticeships, and 12.7% get involved in other opportunities. Aspire2 keeps no record of the numbers around student

demographics (e.g., nationality). There is no waiting list in place for this project.

Trinity Access 21 provided 8200 direct student engagements between January and December 2018, another 8200 between January and December 2019, and 3200 between January and July 2020. The Trinity Access 21 model involves three core practices: pathways to college, mentorship and leadership in learning. More than 40 different activities have been designed along the lines of these three practices to support student progression in post-second-level education. The data shows (see Table 3.3) that 90–95% of students completed the programme in the period. Between 5% and 10% of students dropped out of the programme. Based on Trinity Access 21 survey data from 2019, 87% of students progressed to post-secondary education. The data from 2020 show that 67% of students progressed to QQI Level 7 or 8. Based on survey data from 2019 (N=3863), 70% of students in schools linked to Trinity Access 21 received mentorship. Schools working with Trinity Access 21 receive awards as part of the Trinity Access 21 School of Distinction Programme. Some students receive certificates on the completion of their programmes. The project does not gather

demographic information on its participants systematically, including gender and nationality. However, based on a Trinity Access 21 survey data (N=3863) from 2019, 40% of those involved were male and 60% were female. This same survey shows that approximately 60% of students were Irish, while around 30% declared as non-Irish, belonging to other cultural and ethnic groups. The project has a waiting list for schools, with ten schools currently on it.

Trinity Access 21 has delivered a one-year postgraduate programme for teachers for the last ten years. Teachers from 23 schools and another ten Network schools participate in the programme and receive a QQI Level 9 Postgraduate Certificate on completion of the programme. For the periods January–December 2018 and January–December 2019, there were 600 teacher engagements each year. This number was slightly lower between January 2020 and July 2020: 560 direct teacher engagements were documented in this period. Teachers who participate in workshops receive only certificates of participation, which can be used towards their discretionary CPD allowance. After completion of the programme, many teachers pursue a Master’s or PhD studies.

Figure 3.4 – The characteristics, progression and outcomes of participants from Cluster 2 awardee project, Fast Track Academy

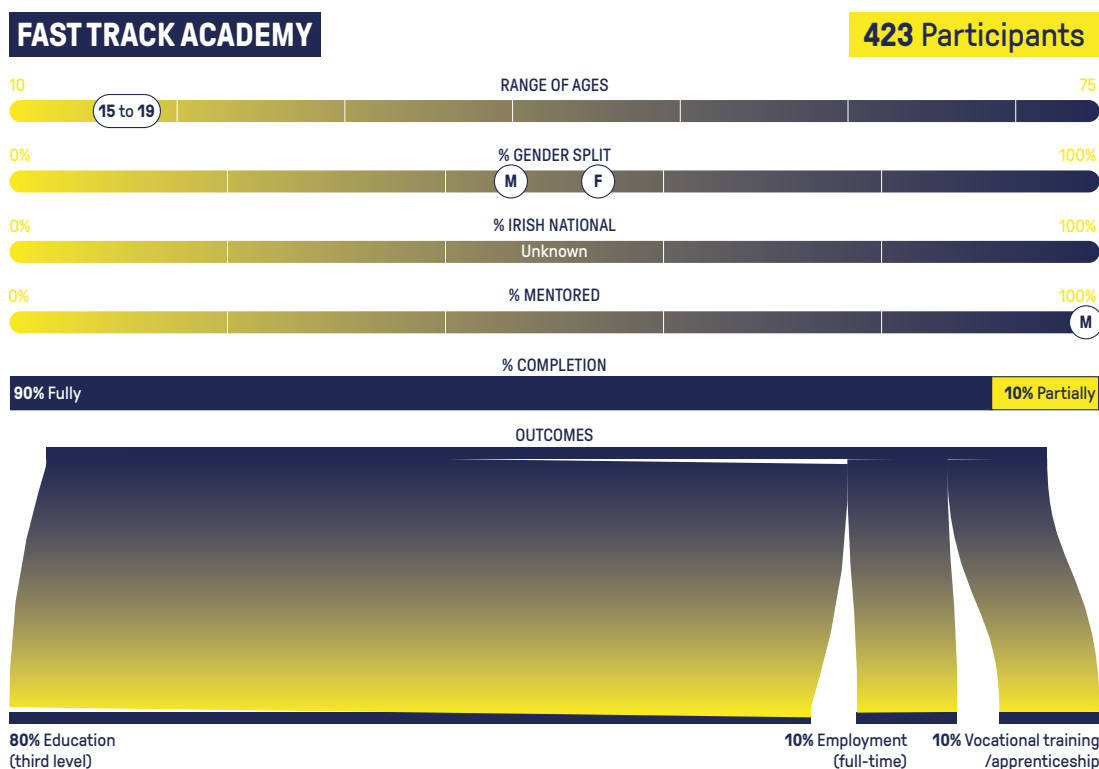


Figure 3.5 – The characteristics, progression and outcomes of participants from Cluster 2 awardee project, Aspire2

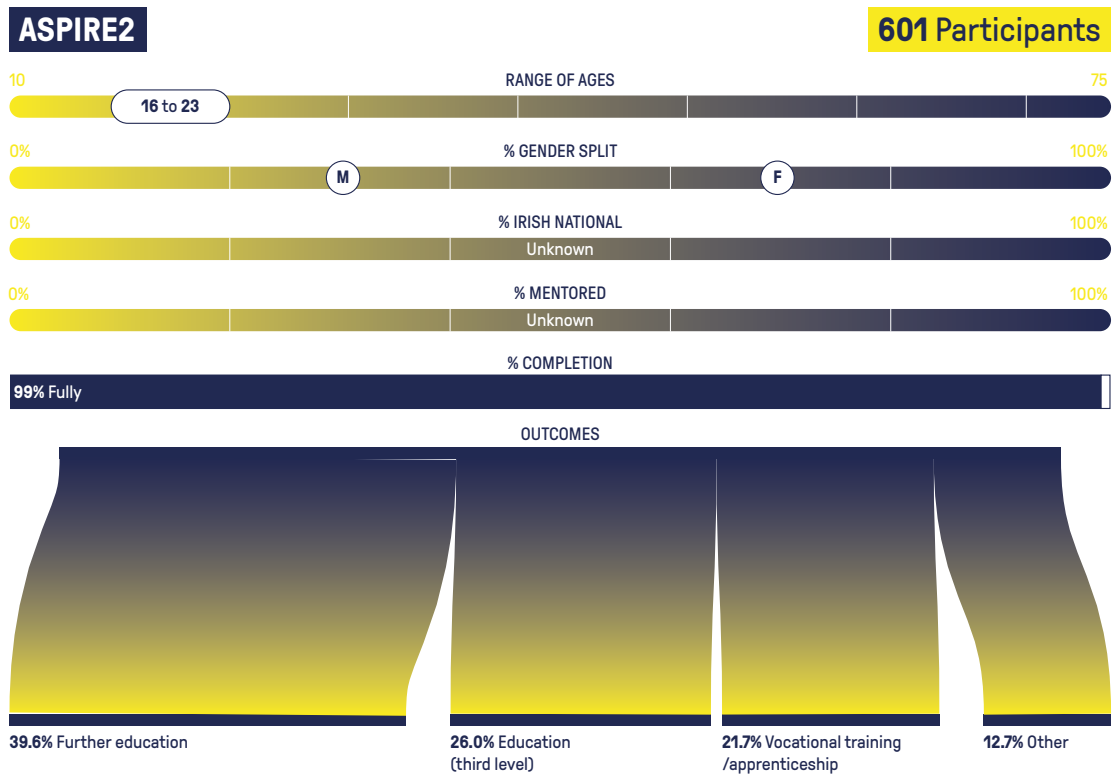


Figure 3.6 – The characteristics, progression and outcomes of participants from Cluster 2 awardee project, Trinity Access 21

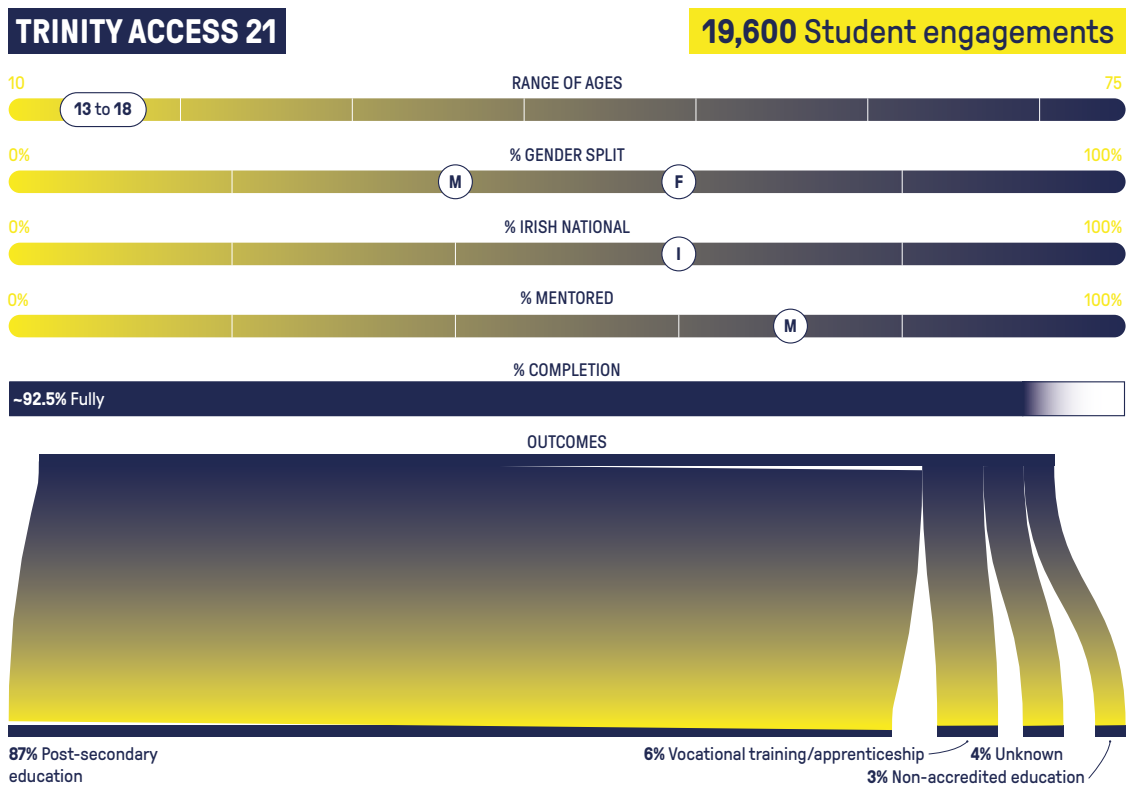


Table 3.3 – Details of hard outcomes for this cluster

| QUESTIONS | ASPIRE2 | THE FAST TRACK ACADEMY | TRINITY ACCESS 21 – STUDENTS | TRINITY ACCESS 21 – TEACHERS |
|--|-----------------------------------|--|---|--|
| How long is your programme in operation (in months and years)? | 6 years | 3 years | 27 years | 10 years |
| How long is the programme of activity you deliver, for which you received the SIFI (Rethink Ireland) funding? | 3 years | More than one academic year | The programme begins when the students are in second year and continues each year. One academic year: a range of activities are provided to students ranging from 1 day to several months. | The PG Certificate is 1 year in duration but it can be extended to 2 years and a Master’s in Education can be completed. |
| Age range of participants you are working with | 16–23 years old | 15–19 years old | 13–18 years old | 23 years and older |
| Referral to the programme | Self-referral | School referral; Community-based supportive service; Self-referral; Youth organisation | Students from 23 schools in Dublin participate in the programme | Teachers from 23 schools and another 10 Network schools participate in the programme |
| If referred OUT of the programme, where they are referred to | No referrals out of the programme | No referrals out of the programme | No referrals out of the programme | |
| Formally registered participants between January 2018 and 31st December 2018 (per month) | 601 (182 male and 419 female) | 138 Jan–July (Male: 69; Female: 69) 135 Sep–Dec (Male: 67; Female: 68) | 8200 direct student engagements Based on survey data from 2019 (N=3863): 40% male and 60% female | 600 direct teacher engagements per year |

| QUESTIONS | ASPIRE2 | THE FASTTRACK ACADEMY | TRINITY ACCESS 21 – STUDENTS | TRINITY ACCESS 21 – TEACHERS |
|---|-------------------------------|--|---|---|
| Formally registered participants between January 2019 and 31st December 2019 (per month) | 601 (182 male and 419 female) | 135 Jan–July (Male: 67; Female: 68) 150 Sept–Dec (Male: 81; Female: 69) | 8200 based on survey data from 2019 (N=3863): 40% male and 60% female | 600 direct teacher engagements per year |
| Formally registered participants between January 2020 and 31st July 2020 (per month) | 601 (182 male and 419 female) | 150 (Male: 81 and Female: 69) | 3200 direct student engagements (Gender data is not collected – a cross-sectional sample from TA 21 survey (N=1003) showed 32% of those who took the survey were male and 68% were female) | 560 direct teacher engagements |
| On average, what percentage of participants completed the programme from Jan 2018–July 2020 | 99% | 90% | 90–95% | / |
| What level of accreditation did they achieve? | QQI Level 4 and 5 | QQI Level 4 and 5 | QQI Level 4 and 5 | QQI 9 Postgraduate Certificate |
| On average what percentage of participants formally registered from Jan 2018–Jul 2020 are male? | 180 (30%) | 46% | The data is not gathered | The data is not gathered |
| On average what percentage of participants formally registered from Jan 2018–Jul 2020 are female? | 69% (415) | 54% | The data is not gathered | The data is not gathered |

| QUESTIONS | ASPIRE2 | THE FASTTRACK ACADEMY | TRINITY ACCESS 21 – STUDENTS | TRINITY ACCESS 21 – TEACHERS |
|--|--|--|--|---|
| Any other accreditation? | Yes Certs for completing various workshops in LCA | No | School receives awards as part of TA 21 School of Distinction Programme. Some student programmes provide participants with certificates of completion. | Teachers participating in workshops receive certificates of participation to be used towards their discretionary CPD allowance. |
| What did participants do after completion of the programme? | The data is available for 430 Leaving Cert students, while there is no record available for 171 LCA students: - Continue with third-level education (26%) - Continue with apprenticeship (21.7%) - Further education (39.6%) Other (12.7%) | - Continue with vocational training (10%) Start in full-time employment (10%) | Based on survey data from 2019, 87% of students' progress to post-secondary education: - 46% progressed to QQI Level 7 or 8. 2020 data shows that 67% have progressed to Level 7 or 8. -32% progressed to QQI Level 5 or 6 -Apprenticeship (6%) -Non-accredited education or course (3%) | Many PG Cert have progressed to pursue an MSc or PhD. Others have enjoyed career progression to management or secondment positions. |
| The average percentage of formally registered participants who partially completed the programme | 1% (0.33% male and 0.67% female) | 10% (6% male and 4% female) | N/A | |
| The average percentage of the overall number of formally registered participants who dropped out early in the period Jan 2018– Jul 2020 | 1% (0.33% Male and 0.67% female) | 0% | 5–10% (gender data is not collected) | |

| QUESTIONS | ASPIRE2 | THE FASTTRACK ACADEMY | TRINITY ACCESS 21 – STUDENTS | TRINITY ACCESS 21 – TEACHERS |
|--|--|--|--|------------------------------|
| Waiting List Average per annum | No | No (not at present, the waiting list is normally used in later months and generally has 5–10 students on the list) | Yes (schools are put on a waiting list; currently there are ten schools on a waiting list) | No |
| Nationality of participants (Jan 2018–July 2020) | N/a | This information is not internally collected | Based on survey data from 2019 (N=3863), 60% of students were Irish | |
| Ethnic or cultural minority groups (Jan 2018–July 2020) | N/a | This information is not internally collected | Irish Traveller: 1% Any other white background: 7.3% Black or Black Irish: 5% African: 4.6% Any other Black background: 2% Asian or Asian Irish: 3.4% Chinese: 0.6% Any other Asian background 8.3% | |
| Mentoring | Yes All (100%) participants receive mentoring (30.3% male and 69.7% female) | Yes All (100%) participants (46% male and 54% female) | Yes Based on survey data from 2019 (N=3863), 70% of students in Trinity Access linked schools received mentorship: Of this, 47% are male and 53% female | No |

3.4.3 How is educational progression understood by key stakeholders in this cluster?

This section explores the meaning of academic progression as perceived by both internal and external stakeholders involved in the three projects in Cluster 2. The data presented here gives a helicopter view of progression to education across the three awardee projects. The following factors were identified as central for understanding the meaning of progression in this cluster of projects:

- a) Education in Ireland as a middle-class system;
- b) Changing the culture of education in schools and communities;
- c) Changing the perspective and mentality of students;
- d) Mentoring and tasters to show pathways to the future.

Working with socioeconomically and geographically marginalised young people is a common denominator of the three projects. DEIS post-primary schools promote and support transitions to further and higher-level education; however, the rates of students from DEIS schools progressing to third-level education are lower in comparison with non-DEIS schools. As discussed by the Fast Track volunteers, in less-affluent areas education is still perceived as something reserved for those who are better off and live in more affluent areas. The idea of social class and social positionality is strongly present in participants' accounts. As explained by Aspire2 mentors, many students come from families facing unemployment, and low levels of education, and these students find it hard to relate to the idea of further education.

Through Citywise I got a scholarship to Rockbrook school, it's a private school in Rathfarnham, and it was two different worlds. I'd be getting on the bus in Jobstown and arriving at the school up in the mountains, a lovely scenic place, and most of my friends then would have been from middle-class areas, and nothing separated us, myself and my friends, other than the fact that I was born where I was born, and he was born where he was born. It was just different cultures and attitudes in those areas. There wasn't a culture of education, third-level education, further education when I was growing up or maybe when my parents were growing up here

(Volunteers, Fast Track Academy, Focus Group)

Yeah, and I think a lot of these kids, they're coming from backgrounds where some of their parents maybe haven't worked in years so education, even doing the Leaving Cert is maybe aspirational to a lot of them.

(Mentors, Aspire2, Focus Group)

A representative of TU Dublin (Tallaght) discussed how education as a process and outcome serves the Irish middle-class. The rules, procedures, expectations and essentially the knowledge and language used in connection with progression in education are designed and adapted to schools from affluent areas. A division between the *haves* and *have-nots* in relation to progression determines students' progression in education.

I have visited an awful lot of the schools in the regions over the years and I am impressed by two things, the dedication of the teachers and the parents but they don't seem to be playing the system as well as the middle-class schools in terms of grinds and points and awareness. One thing that shocks me is there are three levels of maths for Leaving Cert, honours, pass and something called the foundation. There are a way higher proportion of kids from the poorer Tallaght areas doing foundation maths. And foundation maths should be a constant across all social groups; it shouldn't just be something you do just because you are from a poor area.

(Community Partner 1, Fast Track Academy, Interview)

Changing the culture around progression in education is one of the key findings in this data. Attitudes of local schools and teachers have changed lately, which, according to the study participants, has had an impact on ways of teaching and instilling ambition and hope in students. The link between the work of the projects and changing attitudes in schools and wider communities is recognised by the study participants. For example, the Fast Track Academy provides study support and a learning environment in which students can develop their ambition and desire to continue with education. They create a space in which students' ambition is nurtured and not seen as an embarrassment.

They are more comfortable with their ambition and their desire to succeed because they are in an educational centre and they are talking about college and progressing [...] Because there are individuals where it would be seen as maybe an embarrassment to want to go on and progress and go to college, depending on the group.

(Community Partner 2, Fast Track Academy, Interview)

projects have recognised the need to make cultural shifts sustainable and naturally embedded in schools. Aspire2 aims to focus on supporting the self-sufficiency and sustainability of schools as an integral part of their future work. As explained by the primary coordinator of Aspire2, the idea is to establish a school alumni system and to build the culture of progression within the schools. Creating patterns to further education through positive role models and peer mentoring and sustaining the practices of positive cultural change has been lacking in these schools. Comparatively, Trinity Access 21 has a more extended history of working with schools. The programme has been delivered to both students and teachers by considering the importance of changing the ways of teaching and learning. As examined by the staff members of Trinity Access 21, a whole-school approach to cultural change was needed to experience change. Activities provided by the programme, such as mentoring or visiting colleges, are part of this process; however, they do not happen in isolation but as a result of changing relationships between students, teachers and parents.

We are going to work with the schools for the next five years to support them to become more sustainable in terms of strengthening their alumni to really build on that cultural progression inside the school. [...] What we know isn't happening, and should be happening, is that those schools are not accessing the student alumni who are going on to further education and third level in a way that they could. To sustain cultures of progression students need to see that their peers from the schools that they attend are actually progressing to further education and third level and the schools are not tapping into those young people to bring them back [...] if the focus isn't on sustainability and looking at how to mind that and nurture that and grow it over the next couple of years all of that learning could potentially be lost, and all of those successes could be potentially lost.

(Coordinator, Aspire2, Interview)

If you look at how we would traditionally have worked, we do a programme in a school, kids come in and that's very beneficial but what's different is within that theory of change mindset, you've got the pillars but it's around trying to have a deep-rooted cultural impact in a school. So, it's not oh we taught them mentoring – tick. We showed them what it was like to go to college – tick. It's actually like when we physically go into the school if you were to look at the school and try and examine it from a cultural perspective, how do you see the markers of this project, what is it that you see and you see a cultural shift. You see kids' artwork around college being explored, you see them doing projects to support and develop their school, you see teachers having conversations with kids that aren't about their academics but are about other things. You see more parents coming in, you know.

(Staff, Trinity Access 21, Focus Group)

A cultural change requires a chance of thinking on a personal and broader systemic level. As explained above, a trickle-down approach to change includes communities, families, schools and students. Teachers discussed the narrative shift about more inclusive colleges recognising the strengths in a diversity of students and the contributions that they make in their communities and society. The importance of society recognising the role and the potential of these young people is central to this change.

We're trying to flip the thinking of society really, you know. I get annoyed and angry when I hear isn't it great that they got into college. I'm actually like, no, it's great the college got them because they're amazing young people and it's to change that narrative and say, no, actually, the college is lucky that they have you and we tell the kids that from day one. Even when the kids are going for interviews for the foundation courses in Trinity or Maynooth and stuff, we say to them they'll be lucky if they get you not, you'll be lucky if you get in because that's the truth.

(Teachers, Trinity Access 21, Focus Group 3)

Changing the perspective and mentality of their schools and wider communities as a result of the project activities is recognised by study participants. Developing awareness about options and opportunities that they have regardless of the school they attend makes students believe that they can achieve more. As a result of the support, students raise their bar and work harder towards the Leaving Cert exams.

I'm in my 4th year here at this stage, and one thing I've noticed is as the term goes on, it seems the students raise their own bar, and they raise their own objectives. I know when I start, the first question I really ask is are you doing higher or lower level and I can tell you, I'm in my 4th year and every student that's been through my classes has done a higher level.

(Volunteers, Fast Track Academy, Focus Group)

It's the mindset of oh you go to this particular school so that means you can't do things like. [...] We've been known as a DEIS school, so it was kind of like a label on us whereas they kind of with the support and stuff and the funding that they're giving us, it makes me feel like I'm not just someone that goes to a DEIS school. I can go to college. I can do things that I want to do because of the Aspire2 programme [...] It was different to have that completely different perspective on it.

(Students, Aspire2, Focus Group 4)

I think it's pretty positive like, because I think a lot of students feel that when they come into say disadvantaged schools or whatever you want to call them, DEIS schools, they have this feeling that oh no, college isn't for me, people around my area or my background don't go to college and I think for me that was kind of my interpretation when I started off in school, and then I think once the Trinity Access programme came into my life, they kind of proved me wrong that no wait, people like you are allowed to go to college and that everyone should be given equal opportunities and I think it's just having those skills and motivation to be able to just get there in the end as I did.

(Youth Advisory Board, Trinity Access 21, Focus Group)

Study participants specifically emphasised the role of mentoring in showing diverse pathways to adulthood. Current and former students of the Fast Track Academy and Aspire2 explained that the mentoring from business partners (i.e., Salesforce and DPS) provided them with an opportunity to relate to someone else's pathways to education and employment. As explained by both groups of students, a mentor who comes from outside of their families or schools helped them to imagine different routes to the future. Mentors opened the space for a discussion about what students would like to proceed with after secondary school.

People like Salesforce come in and do mentoring with the students. They sit down one to one with you and ask you what you are about and what you want to do after school, what ya like and don't like with your homework or your study and with your classes as well after school. We are split into groups and when we are in groups we talk, so we are sitting around the table talking about careers and stuff.

(Students, Fast Track Academy, Focus Group 3)

When you were in school you would speak to your parents and you would speak to your teacher – they are the only two grown-ups that you speak to. With the mentoring sessions, it was someone who wasn't our parents that wanted the best for us, that wasn't our teachers that wanted good grades, so it looked good on them. It was someone who didn't care what grades we got and didn't care what we did after school, just wanted to help some young kids to figure out what they wanted to be [...] But all these adults believed in us to do it more than our teachers and our parents, there were other adults that thought we could do it.

(Alumni, Aspire2, Focus Group)

Different types of mentoring, including peer mentoring, academic mentoring and community mentoring, have been introduced in the Trinity Access 21 schools. Peer mentoring has been introduced to share experiences from older to younger students about progression to further education. Younger students tend to identify better with older peers, while the conversation is more open. As explained by the teachers, peers' experiences make younger students think that their dreams and wishes can become real. In comparison, academic mentoring is provided by teachers to open a conversation about pathways after secondary school. These conversations help students thinking about the future to consider options which they may never have thought about. These conversations can have a wider influence, bringing ideas about the future to families who had never had such discussions before.

The students love when they have students that used to go to the school and they have them come back in and tell them oh look where I am now, and I've been doing this course that I've always dreamt about doing and that makes it more real for the kids in the class. Like oh yeah, they did it, I can do it too kind of culture, but it makes it more real for them that their dreams can become a reality because we've got the students that have left school and gone on to do courses coming back. So, it shows them that there is that opportunity for everyone and it gives them that sense of hope and just more awareness of college as the going culture in the school.

(Teachers, Trinity Access 21, Focus Group 3)

The first year that it was set up, I was a mentor to a group of 2nd years and within the group, there was a Traveller girl, there was a student with learning difficulties, and then there was a high-achieving kind of student. The conversation around progression and where they were going for one or two of the students, it had never been had before and then says with another student, they had this conversation at home and they already knew what they were going to be, a doctor or whatever. But I think like you said, opening up the conversation and getting them to think outside the box and even outside their culture is amazing. For them to go home then and bring that conversation home as well, I've noticed a change even in the way they would see their futures now as regards the more disadvantaged student that I worked with. So, I think yeah, just opening up the conversation and the mentoring.

(Teachers, Trinity Access 21, Focus Group 1)

Showing Pathways to Colleges is one of the key priorities of the three projects. They all organise trips to Open Days at the surrounding universities and provide students with an opportunity to look at the campuses and familiarise themselves with

the university programmes. For many, this is a first encounter with the third-level institutions. Trinity Access 21 is the only programme in this cluster that is based at the university, and they introduced a range of programmes and activities as tasters for future students. For example, students discussed how programmes such as Pathways to Law or Pathways to Business helped them to get a taste about these studies. They helped them in taking an informed decision about their future course.

They get a broad spectrum, almost like a taster of different kinds of disciplines across the Programme as well. So, they can sample and get a taste of what they might want to do as an undergrad and that is incredibly important.

(Youth Advisory Board, Trinity Access 21, Focus Group)

I think it also gives an insight into maybe what we don't want to do in college, like for the likes of Pathways to Law. Initially, I went in to see if that would be something I'd be interested in but coming out of it I decided that I wouldn't really be interested in doing law

(Students, Trinity Access 21, Focus Group 1).

As a result of the activities mentioned above and changes, students are more informed about their pathways to the future. All three projects are recognised for their role in supporting students in a variety of paths to adulthood. For example, parents discussed how the Fast Track Academy supported their children in making informed decisions about progression after second level. One of the parents mentioned that the discussions held at the Fast Track Academy helped their son in deciding to do an apprenticeship. A member of the Aspire2 Alumni group said that the project encouraged students to go to the college or continue with any other educational option. This message is apparent in the accounts of Trinity Access study participants,

which also claim that Trinity Access 21 helped them to realise that there is a future pathway available for every student.

It led to an electrical apprenticeship for my eldest son, who completed his Leaving Cert in June. So, he's happy out working, sometimes college isn't for kids. He was up in arms about whether to go to college or do the apprenticeship, and he decided through Fast Track that he was going to do the apprenticeship [...] My son came back from here and what he was told about here that he wasn't told about in his school. So, there are things they find out here that they wouldn't find out in school, so it's just an extra help.

(Parents, Fast Track Academy, Focus Group)

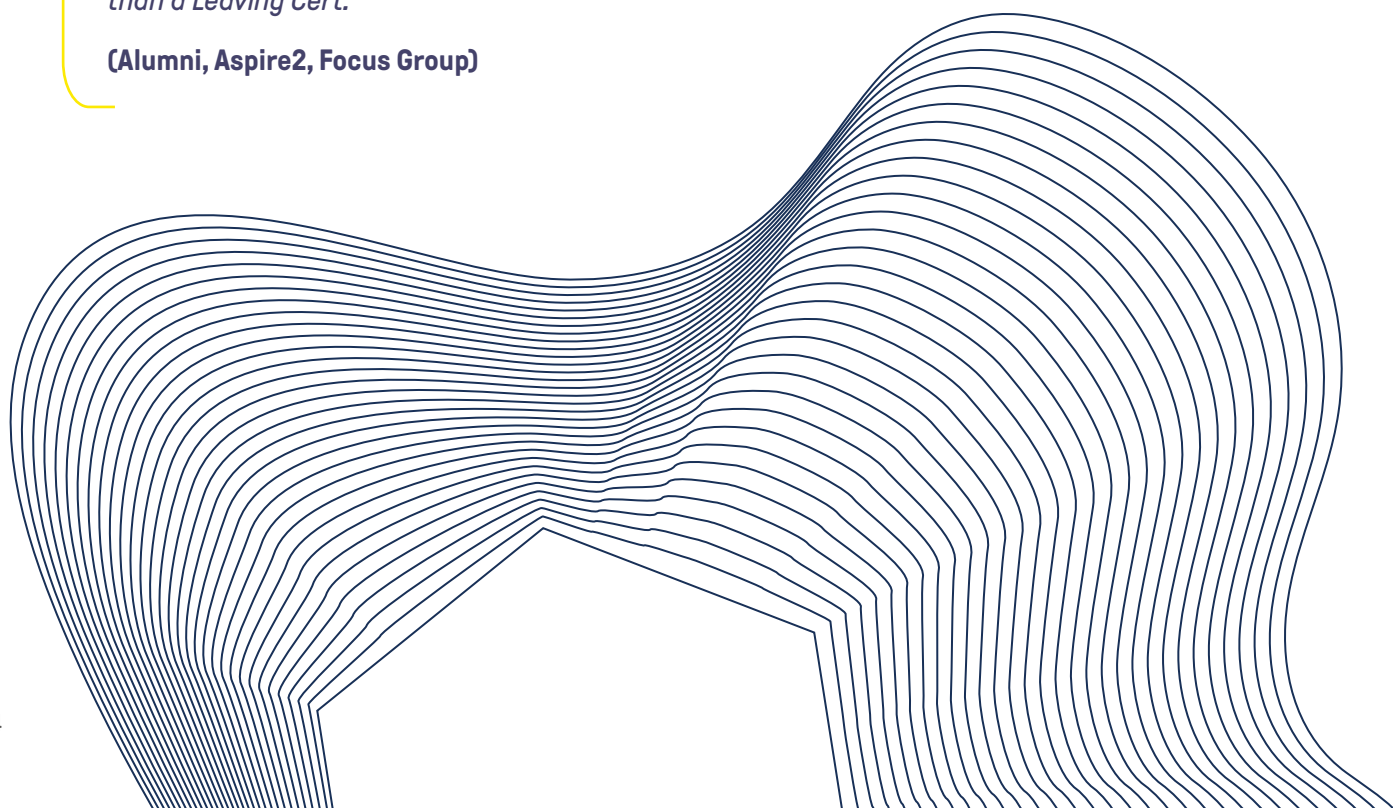
And it was kind of they told us just because I am from the area, I am not going to finish school and join the unemployment line like everyone else in my area does. I can go to college if I want, if I work for it, I will get it. There is no point in not working for it because you think you won't. You will never know unless you try to get it. So, they encouraged everyone to apply for college in my year and loads of people, even if it was a PLC, they still did something, they have something higher than a Leaving Cert.

(Alumni, Aspire2, Focus Group)

I think their whole message is to get more students into college and not even necessarily college, but like courses to get them to do something after school for their education because like you said, there's a whole range of different activities and some of them, like none of us have even taken part in. Like there's loads of them but all of them kind of have the same goal, like to get you somewhere after school whether that be into college, into an apprenticeship, into a course. Personally, I think it's to show that there's something after school for everybody and I think that they really do get that message across in all of their programmes.

(Students, Trinity Access 21, Focus Group 3)

Some student participants mentioned that the programmes focus too much on the progression to third-level, while not all students are interested in it. More information on other options, such as apprenticeship or employment, was needed. Also, a need to be exposed to such information earlier was mentioned by fifth-year students of Aspire2. Their accounts show that students needed earlier visits to campuses and conversations about post-Leaving Cert opportunities.



3.4.4 Who benefits from these projects and what would have happened to learners without access to them?

Based on qualitative accounts of internal and external stakeholders, this section draws out the key findings on what is the perceived benefit of these projects and what would have happened to learners without them.

The progression of the Fast Track Academy participants is usually examined against the backdrop of the community socioeconomic profile. Most of the young people come from Tallaght, straddling Network 6 and Network 7²¹, including areas of Brookfield, Fettercairn, Jobstown and Killinarden. According to the Pobal Deprivation Index (2016), most of these areas are classified as very disadvantaged. Killinarden, for example, is ranked lowest on the deprivation index for areas under the remit of the Local Education Training Board (DDLETB, 2018). Depending on the school, progression to third level in Blanchardstown ranges from the highest with 75% progression to the lowest with 38% progression. As discussed by a member of the Fast Track Academy, the percentage of students going to third level in west Tallaght is between 17% and 20%. A former student and a volunteer on the project explained that he is one of a few from his generation of students who continue with third level.

So, in west Tallaght as a whole, the percentage of students going on to the third level is 17–20% so we're trying to increase that by providing this facility for students from the local schools and helping them achieve finish their education, the second level at least and hopefully go on to the third level if that's what they want to do.

(Staff, Fast Track Academy, Focus Group)

I think that's like, I had to prepare Fast Track last year, and it's the idea of saying the single digit of people going to college, whereas when I'm in school, and I'm the only person from my school going to UCD, a few that are going to Trinity, but other than that it's barely any progression

(Volunteers, Fast Track Academy, Focus Group)

An interesting insight about progression to third level was provided by a member of the Youth Advisory Board of the Trinity Access 21. Being involved in the project activities helped him to explore what he wants to do after secondary school and provided him with tools to make an informed decision about future pathways. This account shows how important these activities and guidance are for young people who may not be exposed to a culture and conversation about further education in their schools, families or communities.

I think just in general, if TA 21 didn't come into my life in secondary school I wouldn't be talking to anyone here anyway. I wouldn't probably be in college and I probably might be even in a course that I don't want to do, and I think just TA 21 really helped me figure out what I want to do in life, and they gave me the skills to do that.

(Youth Advisory Board, Trinity Access 21, Focus Group)

A staff member of the Fast Track Academy recounted a story about his experience with third-level education in comparison with his friend who did not join the Fast Track Academy. A lack of awareness about the mere existence of Trinity College shows how differently this level of education is perceived by young people living in the disadvantaged outskirts of Dublin.

21 Child and Family Support Networks (CFSN) areas are Children and Young People's Service Committee (CYPSC) areas.

In my own experience of being involved in Fast Track Academy, one of the starkest anecdotes I tell is of my friend from my local area. He was never involved in Citywise. When I told him that I was going to Trinity for college, he asked me where that was. It really struck a chord with me because we often got off the bus just outside Trinity when we would head into town. In Citywise it was so normal to talk about college but outside of it, some people don't have the experiences need to spark the conversations, even when you pass it on the bus.

(Staff, Fast Track Academy, Email Correspondence)

A member of the Aspire2 Advisory Board reported higher progression rates in their linking schools. Study support provided by the programme, such as grinds, helps students to improve their grades and as a result, their opportunities in further education are increased. Members of the Alumni of Aspire2 mentioned that without the support provided by the project their options after second level would be limited.

At the end of every year, we would ask the schools to give us a report in terms of student destination. So, what we see happening is that the number of students who are accessing further education, for example, PLC, or third-level course is increasing. So, we do see that is actually improving the numbers of students who are going onto third-level education.

(Advisory Board Member 1, Aspire2, Interview)

It gives you more opportunities than when you finish school; you are after getting the better grade, so you have more choices in colleges and college courses, so it is bettering everybody, like every aspect of the student's life then.

(Alumni, Aspire2, Focus Group)

The Aspire2 Alumni members emphasised the importance of taking the higher-level subjects. Their accounts show that many students need additional study support to pass subjects on a higher level. Students from DEIS schools often do not have these resources; therefore, study support (e.g., paid grinds) provided by Aspire2 provided an opportunity to pass exams at such levels and improve their Leaving Cert results. A reliance on grinds in the competitive education system was noted by a member of the Aspire2 Advisory Board also. Accessing paid grinds helps students to enter the education system, which would otherwise be reserved for well-off students.

They paid for us to go to a higher-level maths tutoring class out near Dundrum, there were only four or five students, but again it costs a fair bit of money, it also cost the transport out to the grinds, and they were just so helpful, they helped us get our heads around some of the stuff that was needed for the Leaving Cert [...] Because some subjects are so complicated and you don't even know that you do not understand it yet, you just think oh I will get it, but you don't know that, you have no chance of understanding it.

(Alumni, Aspire2, Focus Group)

Often in DEIS schools when the teachers would have high expectations for their students, but they have seen that I don't like using the word competition, but you compete with a lot of the more, schools in the richer areas, for a simple word [...] You see a number of students who really need, if they got that extra support that it would make the difference in their grades and it would increase their grade and hope ultimately that they would be able to access the course that they were planning to do.

(Advisory Board Member 2, Aspire2, Interview)

Early school leaving is more prevalent in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. Early school leavers are three to four times more likely to be unemployed; they are more likely to experience health problems and suffer from mental illness (Barnardos, 2009: 7). When they are employed, their jobs are more precarious and poorly paid. As explained by the school liaison officer, Citywise can serve as a second-chance educational option for students who drop out of school. It gives them a chance to find their way back to education. At the same time, it serves as a socialisation venue in the community, which lacks safe public places. Fast Track Academy provides such space for young people of different cultural and social backgrounds.

Particularly former students that have dropped out and just ask the parents. They would give the parent a ring because sometimes getting through to parents, like my role now are parents; it is not necessarily kids anymore if I can get the parents to get on board with City Wise and maybe offer that to the kids, that might be a way of the kids getting involved. So that is one thing. There is a situation there where kids are going through, let's put it this way, they were making bad personal choices regarding what they were doing.

(Community Partner, Fast Track Academy, Interview)

And it is not just the non-national students, but for them, in particular, that can be a bit more restricted maybe in terms of being allowed out and things like that. We find it tends to be a great kind of social thing for some of them, particularly the African students.

(Community Partner, Fast Track Academy, Interview)

Different stakeholders discussed the meaning of education and the role of the Fast Track Academy in facilitating educational opportunities for young people. Parents' views show that they associate better educational outcomes with better lifestyle options and a way out of poverty.

I think as well for the girls in the area, and I'm not putting the area down, my daughter's in 6th year now and there's been a few teenage pregnancies in our school, as in from 14 and up, and she keeps looking at them now kind of going, I don't want that. I want to go travelling and I want to be living the life and I want a nice car and they're stuck rearing kids now so to see her doing that. They want to go travelling, they want much better for themselves instead of being stuck in this little loophole that you see around here. They're all leaving school; ah I'll get social welfare. Social welfare is going to pay for my house whereas this group of kids now are all, I'm going out to work for what I want. I want to go and have this and it's great to see.

(Parents, Fast Track Academy, Focus Group)

Trinity Access 21 provides an opportunity to access third-level education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. A Trustee of the project said that the project instils a belief in its participants that they can continue with education and have a different future. It gives them options to move out of low-paid jobs and change their lifestyle.

This is Access to a university for people who would never have had a belief that this was possible. It is absolutely life changing. When you look at the comparison between the children whose parents have been unemployed, who come from a very disadvantaged background, that child, without an intervention, which enables them to get themselves educated, it is just chalk and cheese. And the biggest single thing that the Trinity Access programme does is it enables people to realise their full potential. [...] People realise that there are more possibilities to life for a 15- or 16-year-old than stacking shelves in Dunne's or Tesco's, which would have been probably what they would have done if they hadn't seen the opportunity to take advantage of the educational opportunity.

(Trustee, Trinity Access 21, Interview)

3.4.5 What were the lived experiences of learners in this cluster around Covid-19?

Study participants from two awardee projects from Cluster 2, Aspire2 and Fast Track Academy, shared a snapshot of their lived experiences with the two projects. Aspire2 participated in the original, photovoice version of the study design, while study participants of Fast Track Academy contributed their photos, drawings and video material in the equivalent version of photovoice online.

Findings from Aspire2

Photovoice is a community-based participatory action research (PAR) method, which provides a voice to marginalised groups usually excluded from the political arena (Sutton-Brown, 2014; Liebenberg, 2018). The evaluation team designed an information pack (see Appendix 3) to guide participants through the photovoice process and organised a preliminary workshop on the ethics and the use of disposable cameras with study

participants of Aspire2. A researcher met with the students at the premises of their local school in North Cork City in mid-February 2020 and ran an hour-long workshop with five young people. Students were shown how to use a disposable camera; informed about ethical issues around the use of cameras (i.e., not taking photos of people's faces), and given brief instructions about the research topic. After a week the cameras and films were returned to the school coordinator and collected by the researcher.

The researcher contacted study participants and organised online interviews to discuss the photos. Three out of five students agreed to discuss their photos on Zoom. Interviews lasting between 45 and 60 minutes were held with each participant. A standardised set of questions called PHOTO was used to discuss the photos²². A set of questions on study participants' lived experiences with Covid-19 and the work of Aspire2 during the first lockdown were also discussed at the interviews. The data was transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. The researcher verified the data with all study participants by organising an online focus group discussion. The data gathered through photovoice presents the students' lived experiences before the pandemic, while the interview data focused on Covid-19 and is used to show their experiences during the lockdown.

²² Five questions are used to trigger the discussion: 'Describe your picture.' 'What is happening in your picture?' 'Why did you take a picture of this?' 'What does this picture tell us about your life?' 'How can this picture provide opportunities for us to improve life?'

Photovoice experiences before Covid-19

The participants' gaze took us on a journey to North Cork City where one of the DEIS secondary schools is based. Photographs represent the students' experiences with the school and the broader community. Educational supports provided by Aspire2 are a common thread to these experiences. The following four themes emerged from the data:

- 1) Access to equal opportunities;
- 2) Access to the Tomar – study room;
- 3) Study support; and
- 4) Mental Health.

Access to equal opportunities

Educational opportunities and equal access to education are at the centre of the study participants' stories. They discussed disadvantage and equal access to opportunities as DEIS school students. Equal access to study supports, such as grinds, are, according to the study participants, pivotal for students' progression to further education and are more accessible to students from non-DEIS and private schools. The financial support provided by Aspire2 served as a chance to be on a par with their non-DEIS counterparts.

We are a DEIS school, there is more pressure on us to do better and to try and get the points because we wouldn't have the same opportunities as someone going to a private school or anything like that whereas with the help of DPS we're after being given that opportunity now to be the same and to have an opportunity to go to college and get our points just like any other private school or fee-paying school would be.

(Students, Aspire2, Focus Group)

An image of equality, capturing the differences between the 'haves and have-nots', is presented by the photo below. A shadow of two friends of different size was taken by Participant 3 to represent inequalities in the community.

Some people have a better advantage whether it's going to a better school or being in a better area, but it can also represent that even if there is that inequality between the 2 people that they're still seen as equals to each other [...] In a lot of areas because due to the inequality, other people think that they're better than someone even though we're all people in retrospect.

(Study Participant 3, Aspire2, Interview)



Shadows

We are not always equal someone will always have it better but if you try your best that's all that matters.

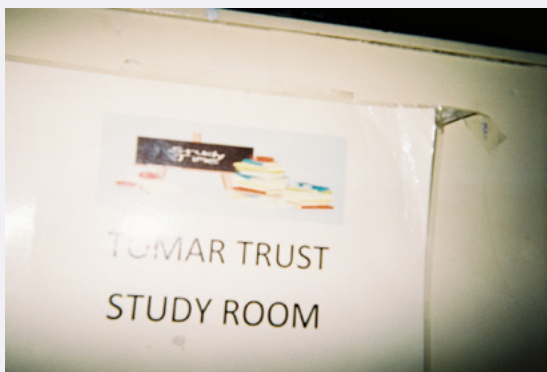
Access to the Tomar study room

The Tomar study room appears on several of the sixth-year students' pictures. This is a place where they found peace to focus on their schoolwork and spent most of their time in the last year of school. The room was used for other purposes also, specifically for socialisation with their classmates. Here they caught up on their daily lives over lunch or a cup of tea. The room was equipped with some basic kitchen appliances for

heating food or making tea. Making an analogy to one of the key works of Virginia Woolf (1929), *A room of one's own* was required to enable the process of thinking and studying.

It is a good place to just sit down and actually focus on the work. That room gave students with siblings and noisy homes an opportunity to get their work done and then be able to go home and not have to worry about distractions or anything like that. DPS (Aspire2) really helped with the financing of that.

(Study Participants, Aspire2, Focus Group)

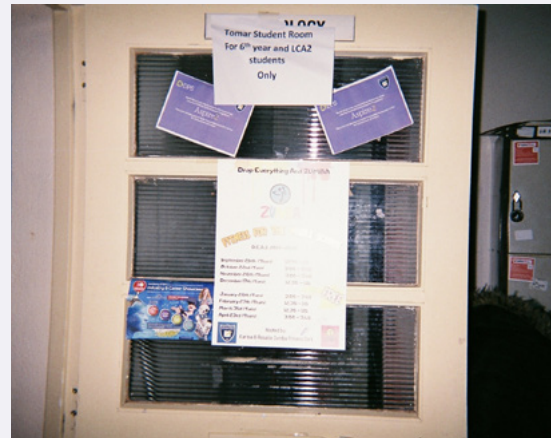


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(Study Participants, Aspire2, Focus Group)

Study participants discussed the importance of having access to a quiet room especially for students from larger families. Those students would not have access to their own room and would find it hard to concentrate. In the Tomar room, students completed their homework

and got study support if needed. Students could avail of study support financed by Aspire2 (e.g., grinds), which were delivered in this room.



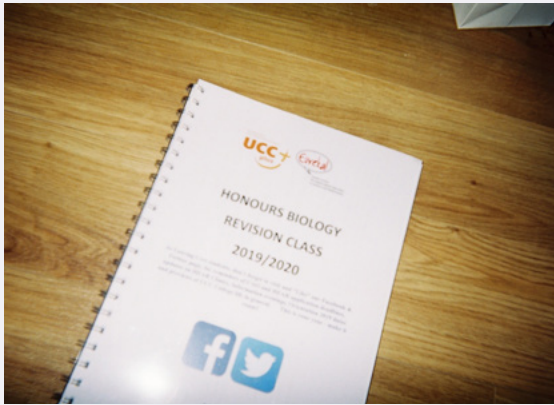
Study support

Aspire2 provided financial support to the school and students decided to allocate the money to study activities. Study support in the form of grinds was provided by teachers or external partners. Aspire2 also financed online study support, such as Study Clicks. Revising study material through exam papers, videos and notes helped students to improve their grades.

Teachers helped to revise the study material after school. Sometimes external support was provided to assist students in learning in specific subjects. For example, Biology grinds were run by University College Cork. These resources helped students to learn how to study and respond to exam questions accurately.



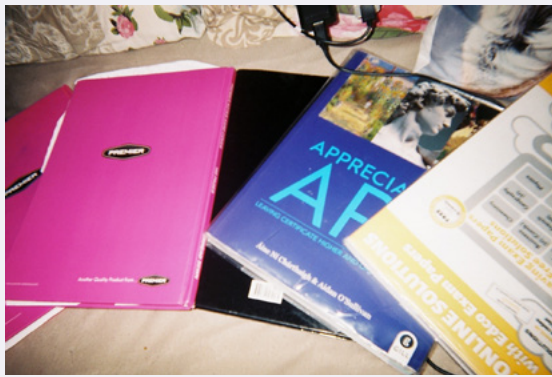
Participant 1, Aspire2



Participant 2, Aspire2

The Aspire2 programme when they gave us money we used some of that to pay for grinds outside of school as well so UCC was running Biology grinds and there were so many places available to our school so we used money towards that and I just took a picture of the booklet that they gave us, like it's all the notes that we would have needed for our Leaving Cert higher and ordinary, just all put into that booklet so it was much easier then because our book in school is very thick and some of the notes there's a lot more in it whereas the booklet that UCC gave us is just all the very detailed points that we'd need.

(Participant 2, Aspire2, Interview)



Participant 3, Aspire2

I guess in terms of the grinds and the study clicks connecting back to the mental health as well, it really does help people who are struggling either with people learning or they work better on their own at home. It provided students with an opportunity to catch up if they were either having a struggle in classes or if they just needed to catch up due to sick days or something like that. It was a very good resource for them to have.

(Study participants, Aspire2, Focus Group)

Study trips was a sub-theme recognised in participants' photos connected to educational support. Various travel activities ranging from visiting local businesses to school excursions to university Open Days were mentioned by study participants. These trips helped students to relate information that they learned at school to practical examples. University Open Days equipped students with key information that they required to decide about their future pathways to education.

Achievements in education were discussed together with wellbeing and mental health. Study support was recognised as key in helping students to manage stress and anxiety connected to exams and grades.

Mental Health

The topic of mental health was extensively discussed by study participants. The topic was explored through the importance of physical and psychological wellbeing. Two sub-topics emerged from the data: a) Zumba classes, and b) learning how to mind oneself. Students explained that mental health is more important than education; the latter is hugely dependent on one's ability to mind themselves and cope positively with stress and anxiety linked to the school.

Students used a part of the funding provided by Aspire2 to finance Zumba classes organised once a month for all students in the school. Zumba was a break away from studying and school routine when students could dance, sing, laugh and have fun. Students were provided with special

PE uniforms, which they used during the Zumba classes. Having a break from a rigid daily routine was described as the time when students lived in the moment and were not stressed. Zumba kept them physically active and proved to be important particularly for those students who were not academically driven.



'Zumba class helps even with mental health because we get very tired easily of a rigid 9-4 school day variety inside the school day motivation push through school work'

(Participant 1, Aspire2)



'positive in my life...take for granted...not everyone having access to it [...] relaxes, calms [...] it's family time spent together... improve mental health maybe, taking time for yourself.'

(Participant 1, Aspire2)



'So every month, once a month, we would have a Zumba day for the whole school and it was kind of nice to have everyone together laughing and just enjoying the moment and especially for the 6th years, it was a bit of a break to dance off the stresses that we had'

(Participant 2, Aspire2)



'A lot of things in my life have happened in this park, both good and bad, which I treasure as very close memories. The park has helped me a lot of times, especially if I was stressed where I would just go and sit down for a bit, look at the trees and stay in a calm environment.'

(Participant 3, Aspire2)

During the pandemic for Aspire2 Students

Study participants discussed their experiences with Aspire2 and the school in supporting their learning during the pandemic. Linked to the previous key findings, these are the topics that emerged in connection to education during Covid-19:

- 1) Cancellation of the Leaving Certificate;
- 2) Support provided by Aspire2 goes online;
- 3) Schoolwork;
- 4) Missing face-to-face contacts with friends, teachers and Aspire2



Tarot cards

Life is not always in balance and people are not always supportive but if you look around you will find what you need to succeed.

(Participant 3, Aspire2)

Leaving Cert

Two study participants from 6th year discussed the cancellation of Leaving Cert exams due to the pandemic. They compared their experiences before the lockdown when they were busy at school and stressing out about the Leaving Cert. The decision to cancel the Leaving Cert and replacing it with predicted grades made students question the importance of the exam and the associated pressure that comes with it. They

mentioned the stress that is put on students from the early stages of secondary school, while this method of examination seemed pointless.

Well, I think looking after yourself is more important than education because when I went into 6th year, I could feel the stress starting already like at the start of 6th year and I know there were another few girls in my year that would have felt that way too. I could just feel the build-up of it and I was like, this isn't right either because at the end of the day, yes I know the Leaving Cert is important but it's only a piece of paper and it doesn't define me or anyone else.

(Participant 2, Aspire2, Interview)

Right now I suppose it's very different to my life because at that time it was after our pre-Leaving Cert, we had finished and that was quite a stressful time I suppose. This was only taken a few weeks before we actually came out of school for the lockdown, so it's very different to what it is now.

(Participant 1, Aspire2, Interview)

Support provided by Aspire2 goes online

Study participants explained that Aspire2 continued with their work by providing Aspire2-related activities and study support online. Aspire2 coordinators were checking up regularly on their students and provided access to mindfulness-related courses (i.e., meditation). Different activities, such as quizzes and alumni group discussions, were run in this period. Before the decision about cancelling the Leaving Cert was taken, Aspire2 provided online access to study support and other useful resources to the 6th-year students. Fifth-year students continued using Study Clicks.

DPS have been holding like, there was some meditation kind of headspace that they do on 2 days sometimes during the week so I joined one of those. I also joined a separate meeting to discuss what we've been doing, they were trying to discuss the alumni group. I know they also hold quizzes every week or two so they do and they always text in, we've separate group chats with Project Staff and they talk to us and they ask us how we're getting on and they share, they have a Facebook group together and they share all the supports and all the alumni are there if we wanted tutoring.

(Participant 1, Aspire2, Interview)

DPS also still funded the resources like Study Clicks, the website for the exam papers, which students are free to use at their leisure when they're at home so everybody managed to get that extra bit of study in that they mightn't have got in during the last few months of the year.

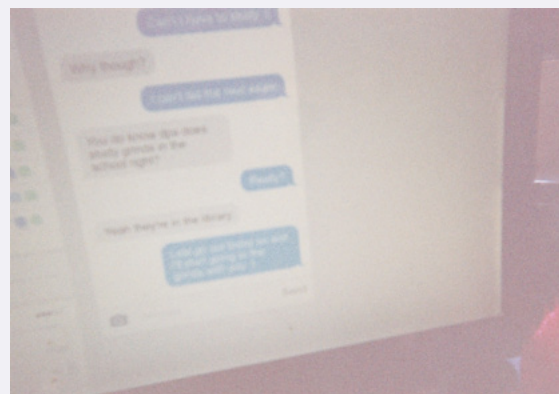
(Participant 3, Aspire2, Interview)

Schoolwork

The school and teachers provided extensive support to students during the pandemic. Teachers organised online classes on a daily or weekly basis. They took the time to explain the learning material and regularly checked with students about their wellbeing. Challenges around learning online, including issues around attendance, weak internet connection and limited ways of delivering the study material were recognised in these accounts. Lack of daily school routine and prolonged stays indoors resulted in decreased motivation for schoolwork and increased levels of stress among students.

Sometimes the connections might have been bad so you might have to repeat something to a teacher or they might have to repeat something to you. Not everyone was on a call at the same time because some students didn't have great reception. So it was very different and towards the end, I kind of did get a bit stressed and I was like I can't deal with this anymore because it wasn't the same as being in school, and being able to say to a teacher I don't understand this, can you go through it with me.

(Participant 2, Aspire2, Interview)



This picture tells a lot about my life because I myself find it hard to study on my own or learn things when I'm at home, especially in the past few months where we had to take notes at home. Like if I were to tell you that what I remembered from the notes we took, I would not be able to remember a single thing from the last 3 months.

(Participant 3, Aspire2)

Missing face-to-face contacts with friends, teachers and Aspire2

Friends, teachers and activities provided by Aspire2 were what study participants missed most during the pandemic. Meeting friends face to face, doing things together and catching up on a normal day was impossible during the lockdown. Even though teachers were checking on students online, the physical contact was missed. The restriction of movement prevented students to attend regular activities provided by Aspire2, including outings, such as bowling.

I just wish I could go out all the time and see friends and family members and going out with DPS like we used to take trips out and they brought us bowling and things and it was lovely.

(Participant 1, Aspire2, Interview)

I suppose friends really and I did miss the teachers because we did have a very good and strong relationship with our teachers.

(Participant 2, Aspire2, Interview)

I think one thing I really missed about DPS was the meetings that we would go to which was with the Aspire2 programme that they also funded I think which was where they would take us in and we would have these tutors and they would give us helpful experience or even chat with us.

(Participant 2, Aspire2, Interview)

Findings from the Fast Track Academy

Four study participants aged 16–18 years who were involved with the Fast Track Academy for two to four years participated in the online photovoice. They used a range of materials, including photos, drawings, videos and internet images, to portray their experiences with the project before and during the pandemic. Their images and findings are presented in a continuum before and during the pandemic.

Before the pandemic

The Fast Track Academy programme is delivered by Citywise Education in Tallaght, Dublin to support young people's journeys in education. A common understanding of the role of the Fast Track Academy in supporting students was recognised in the data. Key findings are:

- 1) A place to study and socialise;
- 2) A combination of study and personal development support;
- 3) Mentoring.

A place to study and socialise

The Fast Track Academy provides study support to students together with other personal development activities at the premises of Citywise Education. Students have access to quiet and safe study space. Those without a quiet room to study at home find peace and develop a study routine through their engagement with the Fast Track Academy. The project offers a social space for young people from local neighbourhoods. Photos show that students formed new friendships and gained a variety of social experiences through the project (see below).

A combination of study and personal development support

The Fast Track Academy provided study support to students to help them prepare for Junior and Leaving Cert exams. Grinds were delivered daily by the project, helping students to improve their grades. The Fast Track Academy also

supported students in pursuing their interests and passions. A strengths-based approach to learning and developing resonated strongly from the study participants' material, including photos from study competitions (e.g., Lego League competition) or art projects.

Being a part of Fast Track Academy allows you to make friends and meet new people from different places/schools. Fast Track allowed me to come out of my shell and mix with new people, Before Fast Track Academy, I was an introvert when it came to talking to people. I gained confidence and became an extrovert since joining it. Without Fast Track, I wouldn't have grown as a person or met so many people.

(Participant 2, 18 years old, 4 years with the Fast Track Academy)

Mentoring

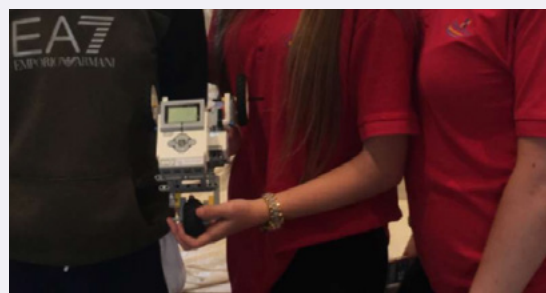
Mentorship with businesses, such as Salesforce, helped students preparing for future employment.



The Fast Track Academy provides a quiet place to study with supervision and grinds to help me revise and prepare for my Junior Cert exams. There is also mentorship with people from Salesforce to prepare us to get a job after leaving school.

I'm really interested in learning and doing well in exams. I'm interested in my future life when I will finish school.

(Participant 1, 16 years old, 2 years with the Fast Track Academy)



This is a picture from a Lego league competition that I took part in through Citywise and the Fast Track Academy. Without Fast Track Academy, I wouldn't have achieved my goals for exams. They helped me realise I had an interest in robotics and computer science and I have met some of my best friends through the programme that I wouldn't know otherwise.

(Participant 3, 17 years old, 4 years with the Fast Track Academy)

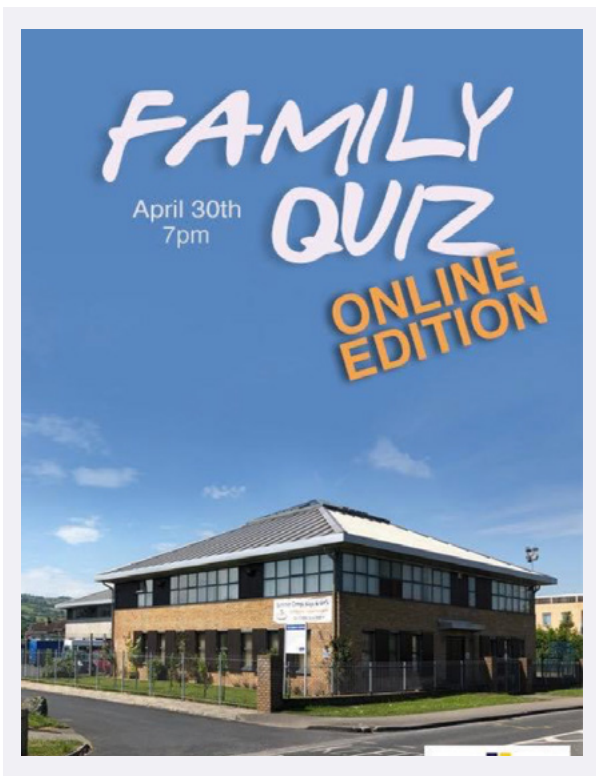
During the pandemic for Fast Track Academy Students

The study participants showed and discussed how Covid-19 influenced their experience with Fast Track Academy. Two key themes arose from the data:

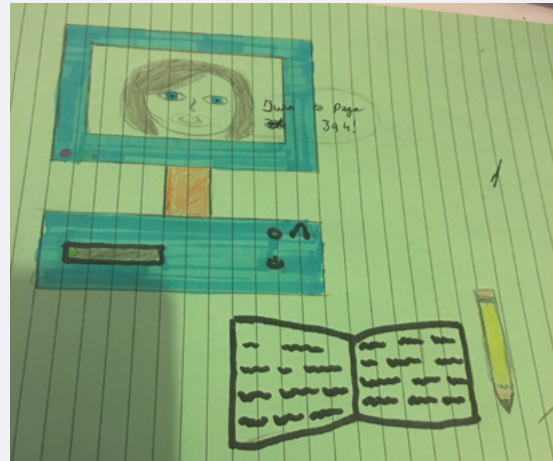
- 1) Support continues online;
- 2) Missing face-to-face interactions with friends and having a quiet study place.

Support continues online

Tutors continued to support students online. They regularly checked on students through Zoom calls. The Fast Track Academy organised various activities online, such as weekly quizzes. These activities 'kept young people busy and helped them release stress from online learning'. As reported by the study participants, online activities and communication helped them to stay linked with the Fast Track Academy.

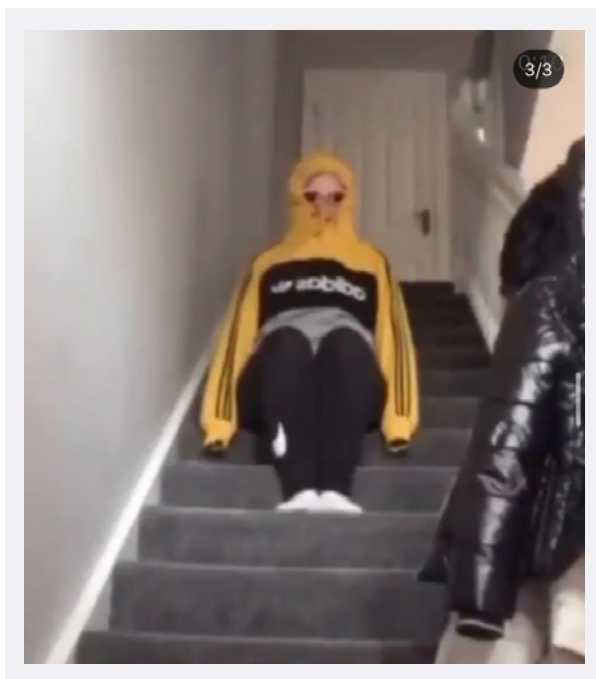


The Fast Track Academy continued working online, but the lack of face-to-face interaction with the tutors made the study experience more difficult. As shown by one study participant, she spent less time studying when staying at home.



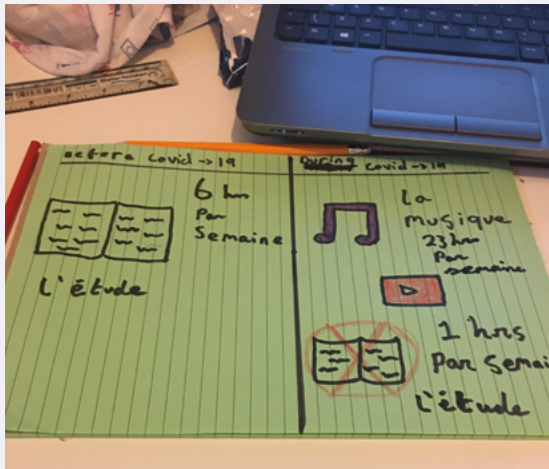
The drawing I uploaded was of a teacher teaching grinds through a laptop/computer. It shows that they were helping during Covid-19 when Citywise was closed. They still provided classes and continued supporting us to learn and reach our maximum potential. These photos show that I'm a hard worker and I was dedicated to my studies at home.

(Participant 2, 18 years old, 4 years with the Fast Track Academy)



These are pictures of the Zoom quiz and a TikTok challenge I took part in. They are things that I enjoyed doing. They kept me busy and helped relieve a bit of the stress from the pressure of online learning.

(Participant 3, 17 years old, 4 years with the Fast Track Academy)



This picture shows the contrast between my weekly schoolwork before and during Covid-19. It shows how my time was managed and focused on studying before when I was and when I wasn't in the Programme. It shows how much I love music – it takes a lot of space in my life.

(Participant 2, 18 years old, 4 years with the Fast Track Academy)



I can't talk to people that I would talk to regularly about the study or see how they're getting on. I can't see people or help people that I normally would.

(Participant 1, 16 years old, 2 years with the Fast Track Academy)

Missing face-to-face interactions with friends and not having a quiet study space

The lockdown restrictions prevented students from studying at Fast Track Academy. They reported experiencing busy homes and lack of a space to study. Many friendships were formed in this project and the lockdown prevented young people meeting face to face. However, a new way of relating was not depicted as negative only. One study participant explained that keeping in touch online encouraged her to participate and engage differently. She formed new friendships as a result: 'It encouraged me to participate a lot more. They are now some of my closest friends.'

(Participant 3, 17 years old, 4 years with the Fast Track Academy)



This picture is about two really good friends. Not being a part of Citywise at the moment doesn't allow us to see our friends or interact with other people. It shows that friends are very important to me and that I love interacting with different people.

(Participant 2, 18 years old, 4 years with the Fast Track Academy)



These were before the pandemic when I started doing my mural project. My programme really assisted me in doing this project at the start. I am an artistic and creative person.

(Participant 4, 17 years old, 2.5 years with the Fast Track Academy)



It's just me painting. My connection with the project had changed in the sense that I could only come in a few times a week to do the project. For me consistency is important else you'll make room for procrastination.

(Participant 4, 17 years old, 2.5 years with the Fast Track Academy)

Findings from Trinity Access 21

This part presents some illustrative data that Trinity Access 21 gathered from evaluation surveys from Students after they had completed their programme, and that the UCFRC evaluation team collected from the focus groups with students and teachers. It shows how the programme adapted its activities during the pandemic. The key themes from the data are:

1. Trinity Access 21 programmes continue online;
2. Virtual place as a space of innovation;
3. Trinity Access 21 helps to bridge the digital divide.

Trinity Access 21 programmes continue online

The Trinity Access 21 team adapted their programmes to online delivery to continue supporting students during the pandemic. Some programmes moved online entirely, for example, Code Plus Blurb, a programme which introduces female students to coding and computer science; the Bridge to College Programme, which aims to enable students to become confident learners through the use of technology and teamwork; and the Pathways to Law programme, which exposes young learners to topics and experiences from the area of law. Even though the adaptation could not always match face-to-face learning expectations, Trinity Access 21 reported students successfully adapting to new ways of virtual learning. For example, activities which required teamwork with other learners were particularly successfully implemented.

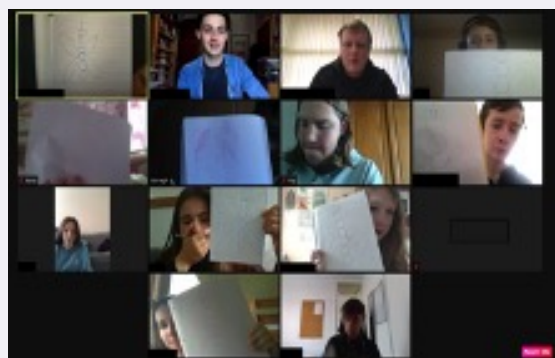
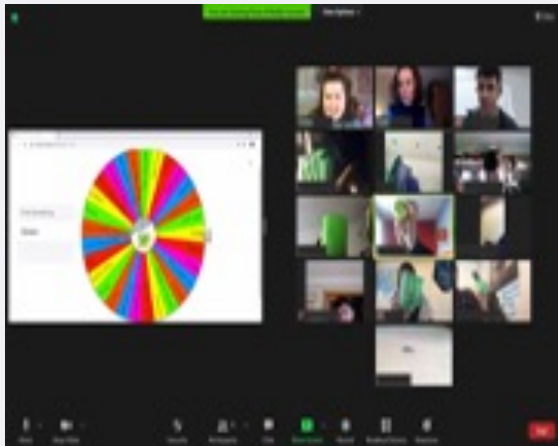


Photo 1 and 2: Students participating at the Bridge to College Programme (Trinity Access 21)

Virtual world as a space of innovation

Trinity Access 21 adapted its work to online delivery. Virtual programmes were redesigned and adapted to online learning. Trinity Access 21 reported teachers and tutors taking innovative measures, such as designing programmes for entirely online delivery, to ensure that programmes were delivered successfully and that students gained positive and efficient learning experiences. Holding sessions on Zoom, such as maths grinds, proved to be more positive than expected and allowed a significant number of students to participate in these sessions. A regular yearly visit to Trinity College Dublin was replaced with a virtual campus tour. Student Ambassadors from Trinity Access 21 who usually show students around the campus adapted to a virtual experience by creating video content and engaging in live question-and-answer sessions over Zoom. One of the students described how

the Pathways to Law programme incorporated exposure of students to various speakers and interactive sessions:

There was like pathways to law school during the summer and it just switched to virtual. There were loads of other options that students were studying as well like film, chemistry and other subjects like that. I mean of course it was different because it was online, like you couldn't physically see everyone, but they (TA 21) tried to make it as if there was no screen between us. They set up a proper timetable and they had specific classes for different groups. For example, I was in the law one so in the morning there would be a talk from someone, maybe someone that was involved with TAP (TA 21) and then we'd move on to our modules and we'd spend the rest of the day doing something like baking or tie-dyeing or something like that. They tried to make it as interactive as they could.

(Participants, Trinity Access 21, Focus Group 1)



Photo 3: Drimnagh Castle Secondary School Students attending virtual campus tour (Trinity Access 21)

Trinity Access 21 also led other activities online, such as the annual Summer School and European Languages and Cultures Festival. Both events involved innovative approaches to teaching and learning, reflecting the needs of students working

online. For example, each student received their student pack (baking kits, tie-dye kits, pencils, pens and notebooks) before starting the summer school. The programme prepared an orientation session in which all students were welcomed and introduced, and students logged in daily for three types of sessions: welcome, a module and a social session. All these activities ensured student retention. The creative side of technology was also used at the European Languages and Cultures Festival, which brought together 80 under-represented Transition Year students on a virtual inter-railing tour around Europe. Zoom tours from various European locations were live-streamed each day, combined with multiple other activities.

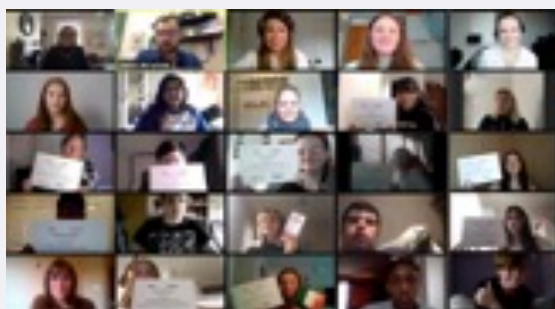
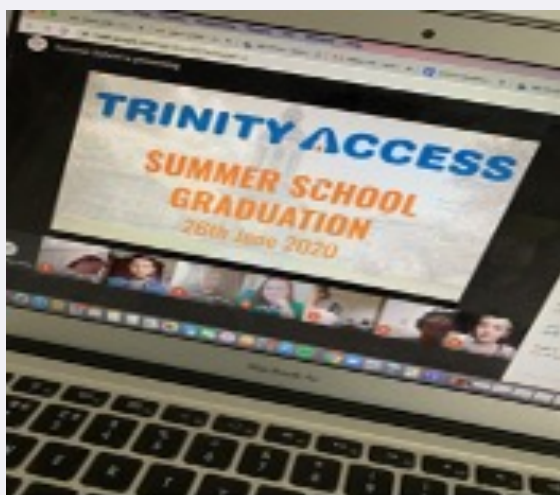


Photo 4 and 5: Students attending the annual Summer School and European Languages and Cultures Festival (Trinity Access 21)

Trinity Access 21 helps to bridge the digital divide

The evaluation team conducted focus groups with teachers from the Trinity Access 21-linked schools in September and October 2020. Some teachers mentioned that the digital divide presented a considerable challenge for many students. For example, some families and their children did not have access to computers, which made online schooling difficult. The programme provided many students with the devices to ensure that students' engagement with learning and schools continued. A few teachers expressed their worries about learning online, specifically for students from areas with a weak Wi-Fi connection. One of them said that moving online might contribute to further marginalisation of those who are already marginalised. This teacher emphasised a need for spokespeople for technologically disadvantaged students.

I surveyed all of our students through their parents to see who had access to devices, and a third of our students had no device in their house other than their mobile phones. They were able to access on their mobile phone but it was very limited and then there were others who chose to continue on their phones but to have the 'Tech2Students' devices help from Trinity was just, it had such a significant impact. There were students who weren't at all able to work at home and then suddenly delivering a device to their home meant that they could be fully engaged and they did, their engagement improved as soon as they had a device in front of them.

(Teachers, Trinity Access 21, Focus group 2)

I would have loved more spokespeople for the disadvantage that technology actually caused for our most marginalised, not a lot, but our most marginalised groups. And also how parents would use the technology, there's such a contrast in homes where you know, some homes adapted beautifully to this. Other homes, it just created more disconnect and it did need, for all the talk of it going well, it very much needed an adult at home to check in with their teenagers and check in they were doing it right and again, coming back to marginalisation, you know, who is the adult and that's where we did a lot of mentoring with it but I suppose that was just one of the feelings I had. I felt a little bit at sea to be honest.

(Teachers, Trinity Access 21, Focus Group 3)

3.4.6 Similarities and differences in Cluster 2

Projects in Cluster 2 (Curriculum Reform/ Pathways to Adulthood) provide educational support to students from socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. All three projects use the following actions to support students:

- ✓ A one-to-one student-centred approach to learning.
- ✓ Mentoring.
- ✓ Provision of informal activities to enrich students' experiences with life and learning.

Similarities:

- ✓ As shown by the above data, the three projects have varying impact on changing school culture in the communities in which they operate. They help to actively change schools to support students' aspirations and ambitions towards progression to third-level education and employment. Trinity Access 21 has the most extended history of working with schools and uses a targeted approach to changing school culture. They use three core practices in their work: pathways to college, mentoring, and leadership and learning. Aspire2 has been

developing its own approach to changing school culture. Recently, they acknowledged the importance of schools taking ownership over the Aspire2 supportive approaches to work with students. They plan to support the sustainability of schools and work more closely with parents in future. The Fast Track Academy works closely with schools but does not use a targeted approach in this work. They promote the Fast Track Academy in local schools and schools recognise changes in students attending the programme. School-based stakeholders reported higher aspirations and ambition in students of the programme. According to the stakeholders, this fact has changed the schools' approach to supporting these students in accomplishing their ambitions.

- ✓ On average, the completion rate of the three programmes was over 90% between January 2018 and July 2020.
- ✓ The three projects work in ethnically diverse communities, but none of the projects collects information on student nationality. Some information in this area is provided by Trinity Access 21. Based on a large-scale survey conducted by Trinity Access 21 in 2019, 60% of respondents were Irish.

Differences:

- ✓ Aspire2 and Trinity Access 21 operate in mainstream schools, while Fast Track Academy is delivered by Citywise Education centre.
- ✓ Aspire2 operates in Dublin and Cork, while Trinity Access 21 and the Fast Track Academy work with students in the broader Dublin area.
- ✓ Different types of stakeholders founded each of the three projects: Aspire2 was founded by DPS Business, Trinity Access 21 by Trinity College Dublin, and the Fast Track Academy by community organisation Citywise Education.
- ✓ Trinity Access 21 provides support and training to both students and teachers, while Aspire2 and the Fast Track Academy provides it to students only. Aspire2 and Trinity Access 21 reported a higher representation

of female students on their programmes (Aspire2: 70% and Trinity Access 21: 60% female students). The Fast Track Academy reports an equal mix of female (54%) and male (46%) students.

Illustrative data collected from participants of the Fast Track Academy and Aspire2 show similarities in projects supporting students before and during Covid-19:

Before the pandemic:

- ✓ Aspire2 and the Fast Track Academy provided students with access to a quiet study room.
- ✓ Both the Aspire2 and the Fast Track Academy projects provided study and personal development support to students.

During the pandemic:

- ✓ Aspire2, the Fast Track Academy and Trinity Access 21 moved study support and other activities for students online.
- ✓ Aspire2 and the Fast Track Academy students reported missing friends and face-to-face interactions with friends, teachers and staff members of the projects.

Differences recognised in the photovoice data are:

- ✓ One of the key findings in Aspire2 data was the importance of mental health for study participants. Aspire2 provides access to programmes such as Zumba and mindfulness to support students' mental and physical wellbeing.
- ✓ Study participants of Aspire2 discussed the impact of Covid-19 in relation to the cancellation of the Leaving Cert exam and questioned the importance of it for their future life.
- ✓ Aspire2 students also discussed the negative impact of Covid-19 on their motivation and schoolwork. They recognised strong support provided by teachers during the lockdown.

Study participants of the Fast Track Academy discussed the importance of mentoring for their future progression to employment.

- ✓ Trinity Access 21 data shows how virtual space provides opportunities for innovation in teaching and learning.
- ✓ Trinity Access 21 provides IT devices (e.g., computers) to schools to help bridge the digital divide.

3.5 Cluster 3: Alternative Centres of Education/Based Outside of the Mainstream Schools

As summarised in Table 3.4 below, the cluster 'Alternative Education' consists of two awardees: the Cork Life Centre and iScoil.

3.5.1 What's the problem being addressed by this cluster?

The Cork Life Centre provides alternative education for young people between the ages of 12 and 18 years who for various reasons have not thrived or coped in mainstream education. The Centre provides individual tuition to students in Junior and Leaving Certificate subjects and prepares them for the State Examinations.

iScoil is an alternative online community which provides accredited education to young people between 13 and 16 years of age who have been out of mainstream education for six months or more. It is a last-chance resort for learners of this age. Students who face several vulnerabilities and who for various reasons cannot attend mainstream schools are referred to iScoil by Tusla. Both programmes are well established: Cork Life Centre for 20 years and iScoil for 10 years. Cork Life Centre provides accredited programmes at QQI Levels 3–5, and iScoil provides accredited programmes at QQI Level 3 and 4.

The number of early school leavers has significantly decreased in the last few years in Ireland; the rates of early leaving are lower than average for the EU27 countries. A report published by the Department of Education and Skills shows that in 2019, 91.2% of students who started in first year eventually sat the Leaving Certificate exams (DES, 2020). A rapid decrease in early school leaving over the last decade means that those who have left early are becoming more marginalised and presenting with greater levels of needs. Smyth et al. (2019: 205) shows an alarming

Figure 3.7 – Reasons for leaving or being removed from school

Continuous Suspensions >> 32%

Mental Health >> 29%

Expulsion >> 10%

Bullying >> 10%

Learning Needs Not Met >> 6%

Hospitalisation >> 6%

Addiction >> 4%

Picture 1: Reasons for leaving mainstream school early, Cork Life Centre (2018)

increase in mental health, emotional problems and learning difficulties among early school leavers taking part in the Youthreach programmes. Based on a study focused on early school leaving in Carlow (Irish Examiner, 2020), a significant gap in the provision of emotional counselling support for young people has been recognised as one of the critical reasons for students leaving school early.

In 2018, 73% of students in Cork Life Centre were identified with one or more diagnosis or a special educational need (e.g., behavioural, social, emotional or learning need). The data provided by Cork Life Centre for their 2018 cohort (Figure 3.2) shows that 32% of learners were continuously suspended from mainstream schools, showing the complexities of the term ‘early school leavers’. Suspension is recognised as one of the key reasons for young people not attending mainstream schools, indicating that young people are asked to leave rather than leaving school voluntarily. The second most common reason for leaving mainstream school early is mental health (29%)²³.

All young people referred to iScoil from Tusla’s Education Support Service have been out of mainstream education for at least 6 months and are at significant risk of social exclusion and lack of opportunity. Prior to referral, several interventions at school level had been attempted, and in all cases re-engagement with school has not worked. Tusla educational welfare officers engage with each family and young person and in many cases psychological and psychiatric interventions are in place.

Of the 220 students in iScoil from January 2018 to June 2020, many had mental health issues, general health issues, behavioural issues, learning disabilities, and complex family situations. Most young people were dealing with a multitude of challenges and diagnoses. Information provided by Educational Welfare Officers at the time of referral showed the following:

23 There is a statutory provision in the Education Act to appeal a decision of a school to suspend a child.

Figure 3.8 – The extent of challenges and diagnoses experienced by students in iScoil (January 2018 to June 2020)

Anxiety >> 56%

School-phobia >> 46%

Behavioural Problems >> 41%

Diagnosed Learning Disability >> 40%

Social-phobia >> 33%

Medical Diagnoses >> 24%

3.5.2 How well and for whom did this cluster support educational progression?

In total there were 92 students registered in Cork Life Centre in the period between January 2018 and July 2020. Two-thirds were male (69%) and one-third (31%) were female students. On average, 54 students join the Centre at each registration period. A total of 150 young people are put on a waiting list each year. Some 43% of students from Cork Life Centre completed the programme from January 2018 and July 2020²⁴ and received the following accreditation:

- 31 completed QQI Level 3 (24 male and 7 female);
- 31 completed QQI Level 4 (24 male and 7 female);
- 31 received Junior Cert (24 male and 7 female);
- 37 were accredited with Leaving Cert (22 male and 15 female).

A total of 7% of students dropped out of the programme in this period, 66% male and 34% female. Cork Life Centre does not refer students out of the programme, but arranges referrals to support organisations while students are

part of the programme if needed (e.g. Tusla, mental health support services, drug treatment services). Some 95.7% of registered students are Irish (N=88) and only a small percentage (4.3%) (N=4) are of other nationality and/or cultural minority background. All participants receive mentoring.

Out of 220 students registered in iScoil, 65% completed the programme from January 2018 and July 2020 and a further 20% with 1–5 Level 3 QQI certification. Out of all registered students, 62% were male and 38% female. On average, 73 students per year are registered with iScoil, but a significant number of students do not get a place on the programme. For example, 100 Tusla referrals were turned down in 2019/2020. In total 219 students (135 males and 84 females) completed QQI Level 3 and one male student completed QQI Level 4. Along with QQI accreditation students also receive iScoil certificates at appropriate milestones, including CSFirst, Accenture Skills to Succeed and Accenture Skills Academy. Some 15% of students dropped out of the programme, of these 62% were male and 38% female. The gender disparity shows that young males are particularly affected, while the fact that there are no referrals out of

²⁴ The remaining students will complete their programmes over the next years.

the programme suggests a lack of support and intervention for those learners. Up to July 2020, 35% of learners had partially completed the programme (61% male and 39% female). Students registered to the programme are predominantly Irish (approx. 93%). A total of 10.5% of learners declare themselves members of ethnic or cultural minority groups. iScoil provides mentoring to all its students.

Despite being similar in their focus, the two projects cater to slightly different profiles of students. Most of the students in Cork Life Centre accomplish QQI Level 4 or QQI Level 5 accreditation and continue with third-level

education. Students are referred to the project by schools, Tusla, community-based support services, mental health support services, and youth organisations, or by self-referral. Cork Life Centre can refer students out of the programme to Tusla, mental health support services, Youthreach, and community training workshops. In comparison, most iScoil students accomplish QQI Level 3 accreditation with nearly two-thirds of them continuing with further education, training or employment. Tusla is the only referral point used by iScoil, which indicates that iScoil is the last-chance opportunity for those students to access education. There is no referral out of this programme.

Figure 3.9 – The characteristics, progression and outcomes of participants from Cluster 3 awardee project, Cork Life Centre

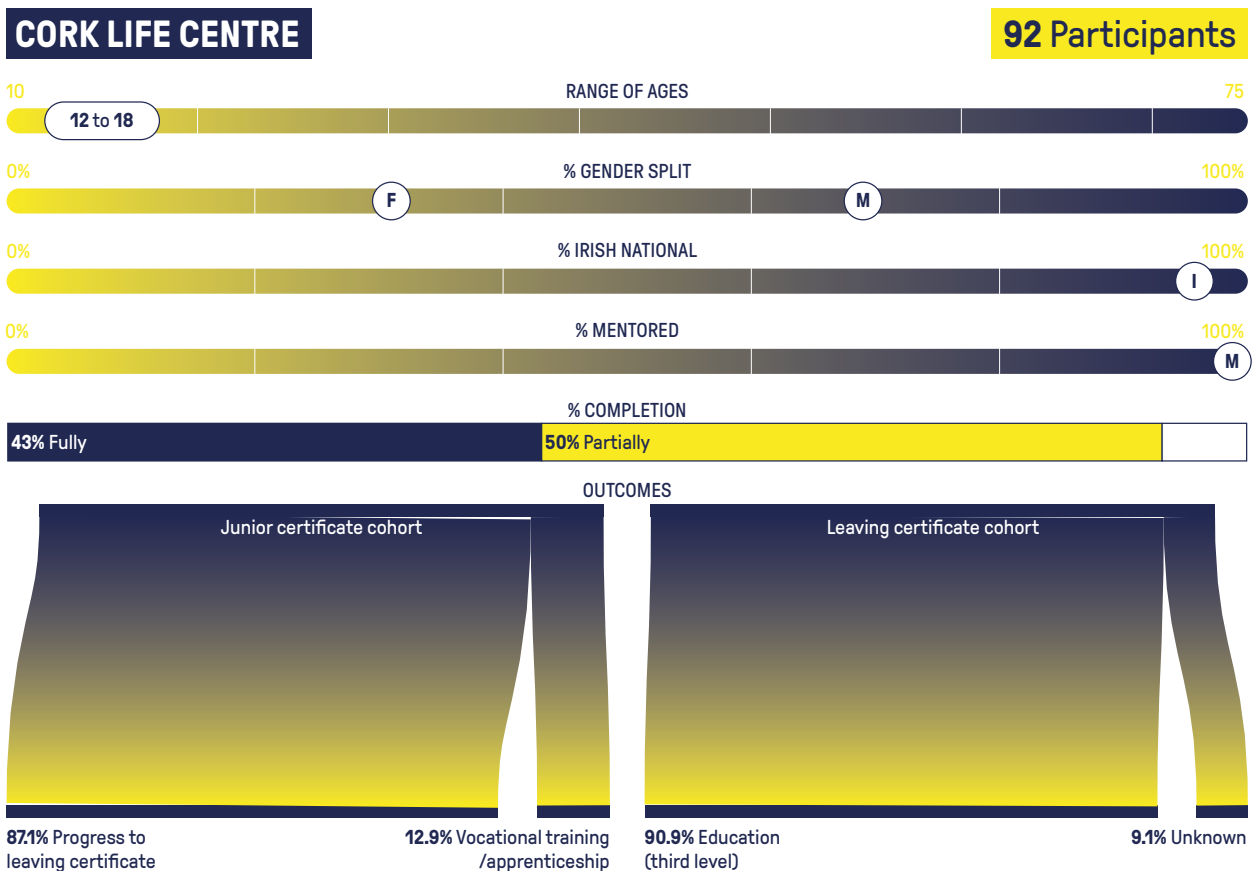


Figure 3.10 – The characteristics, progression and outcomes of participants from Cluster 3 awardee project, iScoil

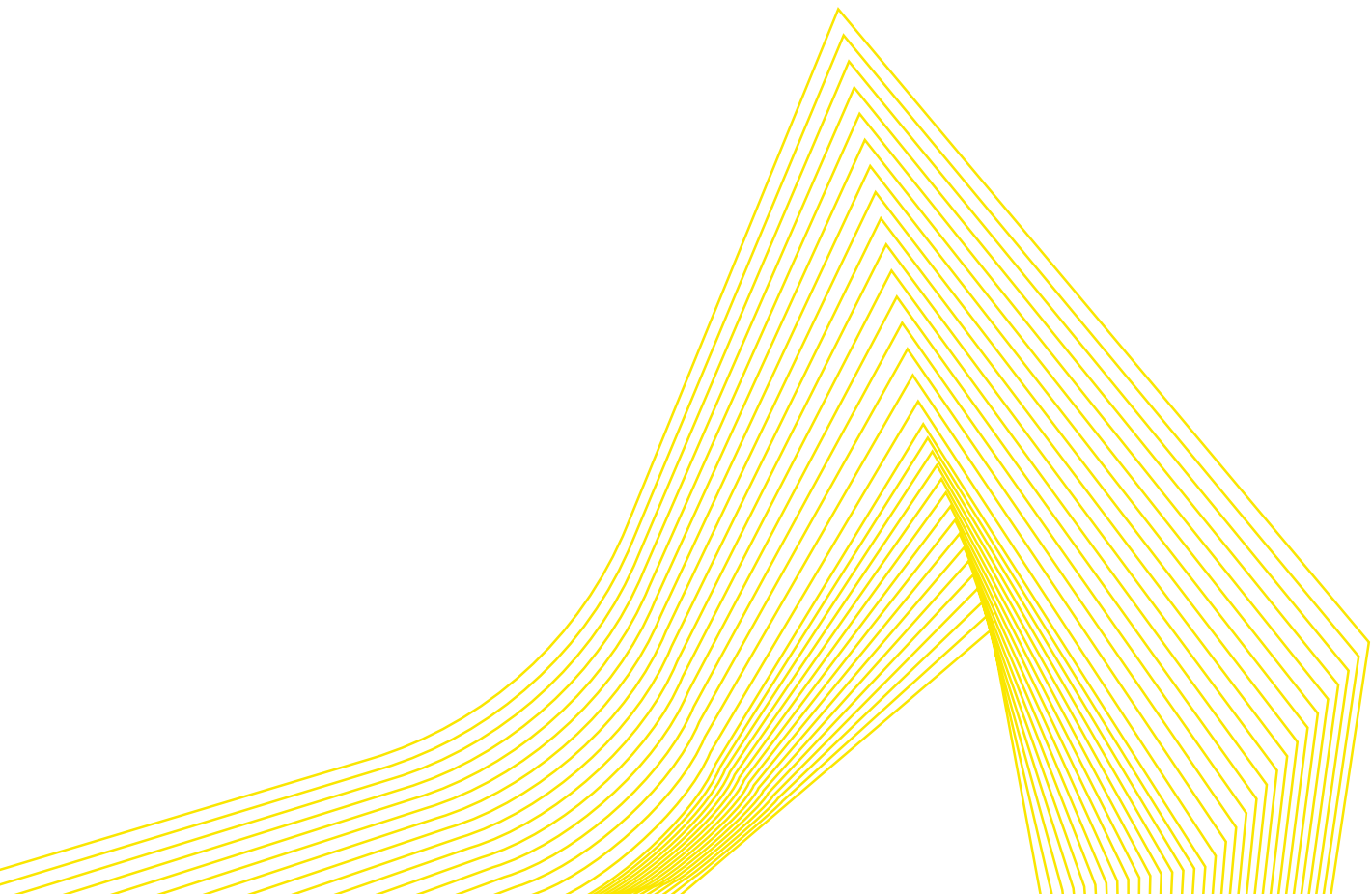
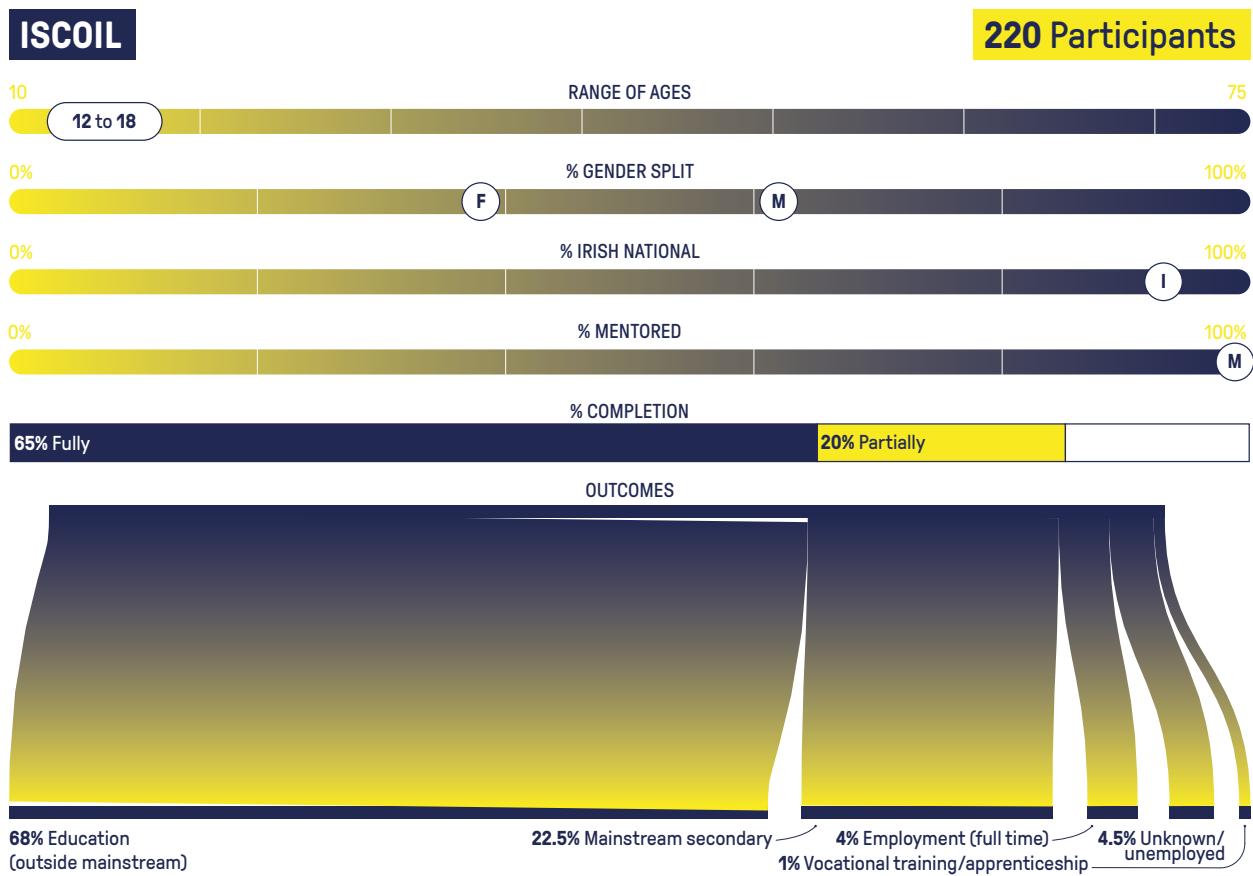


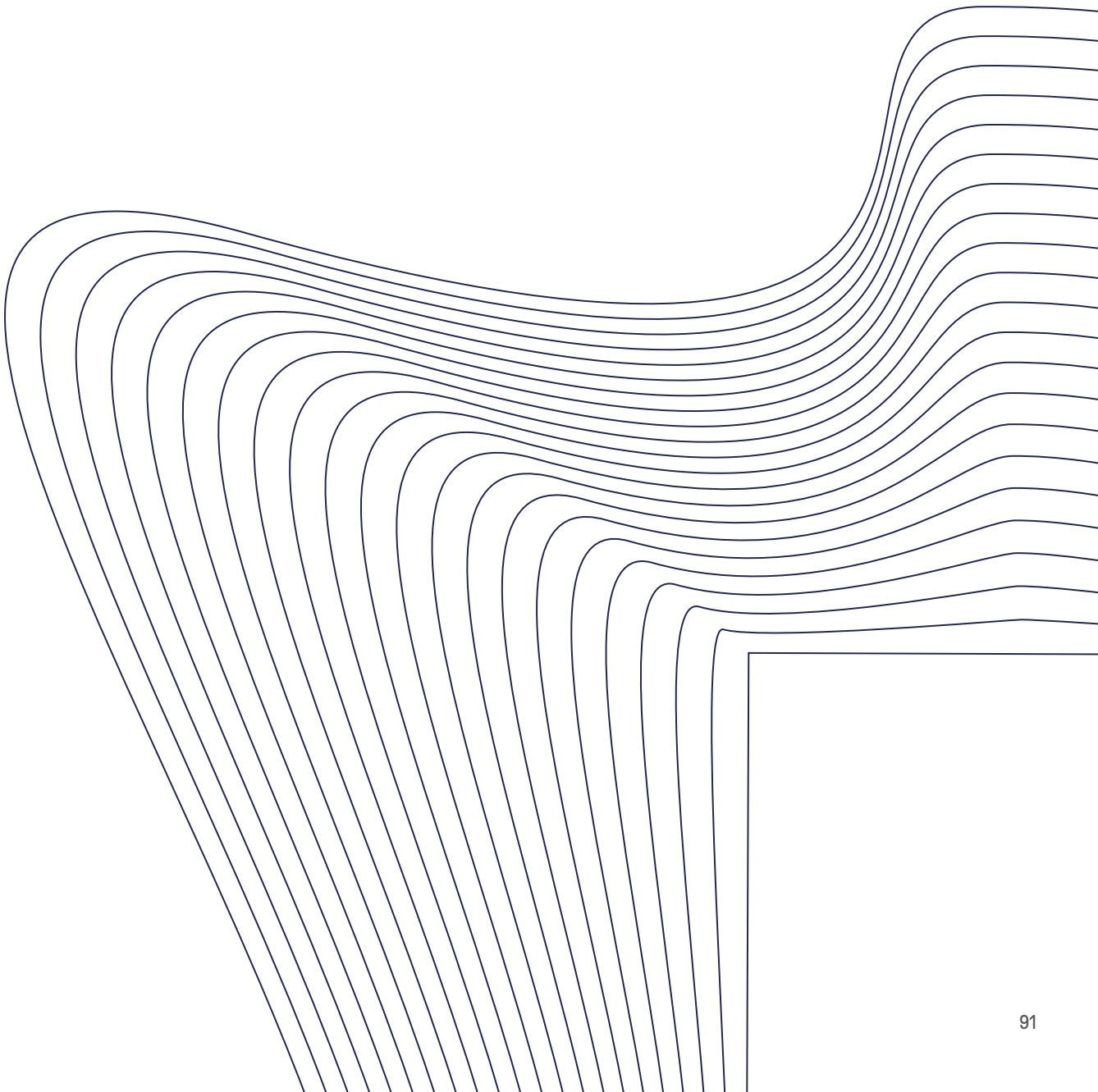
Table 3.4 – Details of hard outcomes for this cluster

| QUESTIONS | CORK LIFE CENTRE | ISCOIL |
|--|---|--|
| On average, what percentage of participants completed the programme from Jan 2018–July 2020? | 43% (Junior Cert and Leaving Cert. Remaining students will complete these programmes over the next number of years) | 65% with a further 20% with partial QQI certification |
| On average what percentage of participants formally registered from Jan 2018–Jul 2020 are Female? | 31% QQI Level 3 (7) QQI Level 4 (7) Junior Cert (7) Leaving Cert (15) | 38% QQI Level 3 (84) |
| On average what percentage of participants formally registered from Jan 2018–Jul 2020 are Male? | 69% QQI Level 3 (24). QQI Level 4 (24) Junior Cert (24) Leaving Cert (22) | 62% QQI Level 3 (135) QQI Level 4 (1) |
| The average percentage of formally registered participants who partially completed the programme | N/A | 35% (61% male and 39% female) |
| The average percentage of the overall number of formally registered participants who dropped out early in the period Jan 2018–Jul 2020 | 7% (66% male and 34% female) | 15% (62% male and 38% female) |
| How long is the programme of activity you deliver, for which you received the SIFI (Rethink Ireland) funding? | More than one academic year; student placements can vary from 1–5 academic years | Length is not fixed; it varies from student to student |

| QUESTIONS | CORK LIFE CENTRE | ISCOIL |
|--|---|---|
| Referral to the programme | School referral TESS Tusla (Social Work) Community-based support service Self-referral Mental health support services Youth organisations | Tusla |
| If referred OUT of the programme, where they are referred to | No referrals out of the programme. However, Cork Life Centre refers students for support on specific issues (e.g. mental health) while they are part of the programme (e.g. TESS, Tusla, mental health support services, drug treatment services) | No referrals out of the programme. Student Support Coordinators help students to progress to further education and training |
| Total number of registered participants between January 2018 and July 2020 Formally registered participants between January 2018 and 31st December 2018 (per month) | 92 Jan 2018–Aug 2018: 50 full-time (40 male and 10 female) Sept 2018–Dec 2018: 53 full-time (32 male and 21 female) | 220 74 full-time students (48 male and 26 female) |
| Formally registered participants between January 2019 and 31st December 2019 (per month) | Jan 2019–Aug 2019 (56 full-time–35 male and 21 female) Sept 2019–Dec 2019 (56 full-time – 34 male and 22 female) | 77 full-time students (49 male and 28 female) |
| Formally registered participants between January 2020 and 31st July 2020 (per month) | 55 full-time (33 male and 22 female) | 69 full-time students (39 male and 30 female) |
| What level of accreditation did they achieve? | Level 3 Level 4 Junior and Leaving Cert (Level 3, 4 and 5) | Level 3 Level 4 |

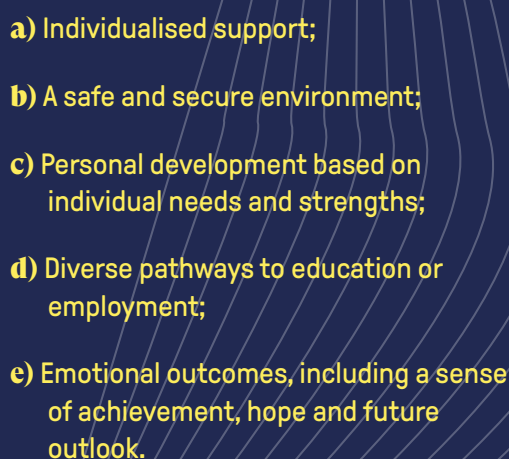
| QUESTIONS | CORK LIFE CENTRE | ISCOIL |
|---|--|---|
| Any other accreditation | No | Yes Along with QQI Levels 3 and 4, students get iScoil certs at appropriate milestones. Some students choose to work on the following and get certification on completion: CSFirst, Accenture Skills to Succeed and Accenture Skills Academy |
| What did participants do after the completion of the programme? | <p>Junior Cert:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Progressed into Leaving Cert programme within Life Centre 87.1% -Continued with vocational training e.g. Youthreach, CTC 12.9% <p>Leaving Cert:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Continue with third-level education 90.9% -Dealing with issues in personal life 9.1% | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Return to mainstream secondary education (22.5%) -Continue with another course outside of mainstream education (68%) -Continue with vocational training (1%) -Start in full-time employment (4%) -Face unemployment (4.5%) |
| Waiting list average per annum | Yes (150 per annum) | 100 referrals from Tusla were not accepted to iScoil in 2019/2020 |
| Nationality of participants (Jan 2018–July 2020) | <p>Irish: 88</p> <p>Dutch: 2</p> <p>Lithuanian: 1</p> <p>American: 1</p> | <p>Irish: 188</p> <p>Latvian: 1</p> <p>Swedish: 2</p> <p>English: 2</p> <p>Syrian: 2</p> <p>Congolese: 2</p> |

| QUESTIONS | CORK LIFE CENTRE | ISCOIL |
|--|--|---|
| Ethnic or cultural minority groups (Jan 2018–July 2020) | Irish Traveller: 2 Other White: 3 Other Black: 1 Mixed: 2 | Irish Traveller: 14 Roma: 1 Any Other White Background: 6 African: 2 |
| Mentoring | Yes All (100%) participants receive mentoring (64% male and 36% female) | Yes All (100%) participants receive mentoring (62% male and 38% female) |



3.5.3 How is educational progression understood by key stakeholders in this cluster?

Progression cannot be quantified only by reference to the QQI framework but must also be understood in terms of an individual, lifelong journey. As explained in detail below, progression in this cluster is associated with the following issues:

- 
- a) Individualised support;
 - b) A safe and secure environment;
 - c) Personal development based on individual needs and strengths;
 - d) Diverse pathways to education or employment;
 - e) Emotional outcomes, including a sense of achievement, hope and future outlook.

Data from internal and external stakeholders including participants reveals a complex picture of the meaning of student progression in the alternative education cluster.

Following national policy directions in educational progression, both awardees in this cluster recognise the importance of delivering accredited programmes to their students. An accreditation earned after the programmes is an opportunity for students to reintegrate with mainstream or another type of education and/or employment. Education welfare officers (iScoil) discussed the relevance of accreditation for students' future engagement in education. As mentioned by most, iScoil serves as both the last-chance and a springboard for an individual's access to education. Other stakeholders speaking on behalf of Cork Life Centre recognised the role of the Centre in supporting and enabling students towards their learning aspirations. As mentioned by a representative of Meitheal Mara, the progression rates of young people attending the programme are positive due to support and

individual work that the Centre does with their students. As a result, young people continue further, many of them with third-level education.

Some young people, I have seen them return to mainstream education as well, which is fantastic. And they may even go on and get their Leaving Cert. Some of them go on through Youthreach or the Newbridge Training Centre and they are furthering their QQI level qualification.

(Education Welfare Officer 1, iScoil, Interview)

I know that their progression rates are very positive. For example, the two young people here are in college, so they have accessed third-level education. I know that a big part of what they do is making third-level education aspirational for the young people they work with, young people who it would never have been the case before who would have been sidelined out of that discussion. So, I do know they have significant progression be it into employment or further education and training.

(Meitheal Mara, Cork Life Centre, Interview)

For various reasons, many students from Cork Life Centre and iScoil experienced low levels of engagement and attendance in mainstream schools. As reported by stakeholders, being set in an alternative education setting contributes to better attendance rates. A Tusla manager provided an example of a student who became very engaged with learning after finding her place in Cork Life Centre. A similar observation was shared by an education welfare officer who explained that students who traditionally were not engaging with mainstream schools regularly attended classes and did their work at iScoil.

I remember one child from county Cork who we couldn't get to go anywhere but she would get on the bus in the depths of last winter and she would make her way up to that school (Cork Life Centre) no matter what. She was there every day no matter what the weather. And I think that was testimony to what she found, obviously something there that gave her something and she was willing to attend no matter what the obstacles were. Whereas in every other sphere of her life, you know, we'd be chasing after her to try and get her to do things or she was not engaging with us, but she engaged with them.

(Tusla, Cork Life Centre, Interview)

Because first of all they actually attend the programme, they attend the iScoil. Certainly, in my case the vast majority of them when they get on the iScoil programme, doing it individually or doing a group, they will attend and do the programme. Whereas in school there were either high levels of non-attendance, non-engagement and I suppose some of them would have been at risk of going down the legal route of having maybe to prosecute parents.

(Education Welfare Officer 1, iScoil, Interview)

The role of individualised charts in measuring progression was discussed by iScoil students. They explained that these charts serve as a guide to their learning. The learning plan is updated daily and is adapted to students' personal needs, which allows them to complete tasks in their own time. Students found them useful as they keep them stimulated and focused. An education welfare officer also recognised the importance of regular reporting and monitoring of individuals' progress. She compared iScoil with home tuition explaining that iScoil provides a structured environment in which the progress of students is monitored and reported weekly.

At the end of the programme, students get an accredited qualification or certificate, which provides them with an opportunity for further engagement with education. Well, you can slow it down, but you have to complete all of them fully, but you can ask for more than the other one, there are tasks in the subjects. You have to complete all the tasks to complete the subjects and you have a progression chart and all this to show your progression. You can check how far you are in the course and how much you need to complete it.

(Students, iScoil, Focus Group 3)

And I suppose it is unlike home tuition, it has been continuously monitored and accredited, the students get a certificate at the end of it and can progress further whereas with home tuition it depends on the teacher and what subjects are available to teach [...] Well, they get the weekly progress report and things as well so that is positive and that is an external progress report so that is good for them to monitor and see where they are at and for the parents...

(Education Welfare Officer 4, iScoil, Interview)

As discussed by most participants, students' progression in education should not be looked on in isolation, but in wider individual and social contexts. The Director of Cork Life Centre described progression as a journey which should be measured in terms of personal positive development and change. Students' circumstances and wider community conditions need to be considered first to enable learning. According to the Director, providing a safe space, food and support is a prerequisite for young people's engagement with learning. He believes that education and learning need to be approached and valued beyond passing exams and need to take into consideration issues such as self-care and improving a young person's life.

For the Department, passing exams is successful. For me, being successful is about the journey. How the kids were. How are they now? Sometimes the Centre is a success if kids feel safe here if they feel that they belong here. If kids are hungry and they're fed here, if kids are alive at the end of the year. All of those come before exams, for me. Because, if we can deal with those issues that the kids have, then it's a lot easier for them to be able to study, to move forward, you know, think about it as an adult if you've something going on in your head, you know if it's at home if you're worried about a friend if you're worried about a parent if you have financial problems, whatever the problems are, how do you work? And these kids are going through that unless we deal with those issues, they're not going to do as well as they could have done.

(Director, Cork Life Centre, Interview)

The importance of a safe and secure environment for developing one's potential and educational progression was emphasised by a Tusla manager. Progressing and achieving educationally is, in his view, tightly linked with the provision of conditions which enable learning. He used an example of a young person who due to various reasons did not fit in the mainstream school and was not able to show his potential. Cork Life Centre, as a smaller, secure and safe environment, provided an opportunity and the conditions for enhancing learning in this young person.

He is attending, he has done his Junior Cert, he is staying on there again, he is continuing beyond his Junior Cert. He is safe, he is secure, and he has achieved his potential. Because this young boy, he has loads of potential, and that is the thing about it, all children have the potential for different things but very often in the mainstream setting for different reasons, family circumstances, school circumstances, individual circumstances of the children and sometimes issues between the child and the school they are not achieving their potential.

(Tusla, Cork Life Centre, Interview)

Other stakeholders further elaborate this view. For example, an education welfare officer spoke on behalf of iScoil and said that for some young people re-engaging with education and building relationships outside their home environment is a success. According to her, progression is not a static point and needs to be viewed in terms of lifelong learning. This view is echoed by another education welfare officer who explained that re-engagement with iScoil provides structure and routine in a young person's life. This should count as progress in its own right considering the personal development of a young person.

I don't know what the statistics are in completion of iScoil but I think that in terms of lifelong learning, even if children are not completing all of their awards and it is still not a failure if they are engaging with the curriculum in any, as opposed to not engaging at all. And also, while it is online there is a tutor there, someone the children know, that there is someone concerned about their education, checking in with them, they have a relationship outside of their family home. I think that is probably a significant relationship too.

(Education Welfare Officer 5, iScoil, Interview)

So, whether they go on into education or not and that sometimes happens, it doesn't always happen, but it means that they are used to getting up and having a structure and achieving something.

(Education Welfare Officer 1, iScoil, Interview)

Staff members of Cork Life Centre further elaborated the idea of progression as a lifelong journey. They explained that the goal of progression in education is to live a good life. Everyone should follow their pathway towards this goal according to their own needs and strengths. Using standardised exams and measures to capture one's progress thus may not correspond with what a young person values as a success.

It's even the fact that we want them to have good lives. We don't care what they do or where they do it as long as they're living good lives. And as long as they feel fulfilled and successful because, you know, fulfilment and successes, that's their perception and we don't get to judge whether they are successful or not by our standards, if they are living good lives, nothing else matters to us.

(Staff, Cork Life Centre, Focus Group 2)

The pedagogical and learning approaches used by the two projects encompass ideas of progression being an individual journey and meeting students where they are at and not where the project is at. Several interviewees discussed the role of a holistic, wraparound approach to personal development as crucial in enabling students' progression. A combination of factors including a safe environment, in which a student is approached as a whole person with their strengths and needs, is recognised as key.

I would be familiar from somewhat of a distance with the kind of impact that they have in providing a very safe learning environment for young people where the learning is all very supported in a very holistic way. It is not just the formal education, it is actually providing an environment which is welcoming, safe, that meets young people where they are, that really its success is in creating a learning environment that is really consistent with respect for the rights of young people as individual learners. So it is that holistic, seeing the whole person, not just the education piece that they are there to learn but actually providing that supportive environment and supporting young people in whatever ways are required to enable them as learners.

(Lecturer University College Cork, Cork Life Centre, Interview)

Personal development is seen as an integral part of their education also. Students are primarily approached as individuals with a range of strengths and needs. A stakeholder from Jigsaw explained that Cork Life Centre's approach to education incorporates the personal development of each student by recognising and working on their strengths. As pointed out by the Director of Cork Life Centre, discovering and following students' passion is key to supporting and engaging students with learning. The importance of passion in learning was recognised also by one of the parents, who explained that by using a tailored approach to learning, iScoil helped their son to progress in learning and explore his future pathways.

I would say, the work that the Director and the Deputy Director, and their team do not only in the pure education piece but also in the personal development piece, in the communication piece and in supporting young people to identify their strengths. I think that is their impact.

(Jigsaw, Cork Life Centre, Interview)

I think the big thing for me is passion. With some kids, you can find a passion very quickly. Some have it buried; you have to go mining for it. But that's our job; we have to find out what's going [...] what that child wants to do what have they a spark for. And that's no different to adults, you know, I mean, I often say, the kids know that here, right, so some of my staff here, when staff come in, I say: 'What's your degree in?' and they'd say: 'Oh, English and German', and I say: 'What do you like?' 'History' – teach History.

(Director, Cork Life Centre, Interview)

He is doing so much aviation work and we were just doing engine work there and he could do it with his eyes closed, he loves it so much. He's laughing and he is joking, lot of learning through videos and things like that. He is just excited about life and we are all excited about the future now and he will be very successful, he will make it on his own road, his own path, and a different road to other people but he will make it. But it is with thanks to iScoil. So, it has done more for us than just education, it is life changing for us all.

(Parent 2, iScoil, Interview)

Based on the above understandings of educational progression, the two centres advocate for diverse pathways to education and/or employment. Staff members from Cork Life Centre expressed their opinion about third level not fitting all students and the importance of presenting learners with alternative options to education and employment. The importance of other pathways which provide equally good, but different, options to college were emphasised. This has been recognised as important by some parents from iScoil also. As pointed out by one of them, iScoil engages learners and their families in a discussion about students' future wishes and options and prepares them for taking further steps into education and/or employment.

There are so many more options and I would have loved to have known about all these options when I went to school it was you do your Leaving Cert., you go to college, or get out of my house kind of thing, you know like that sort of thing, but we're very open to [...] we'll seek out and find things that are more appropriate for certain students, because college only suits 30% or something like that, of the students that come through, so, just to let them know that you know, just because you're not going to college doesn't mean that you're going to end up on the dole, or not doing this, or not doing that, let's just give them as many options as possible, rather than just steer them in one direction.

(Staff, Cork Life Centre, Focus Group 1)

Now he is doing QQI Level 4, it is like a pilot scheme, so he was lucky enough to get to do that. But there is very much, not an emphasis, but built into it is a lot of talk about your future and what you might like to do for your future and what possibilities, and can we test it with maybe a go at this or a go at that? And that is a whole conversation that wouldn't we had otherwise. So, it definitely provides for a conversation about the future of this young person, which is again in most cases you kind of think that is gone, you kind of think, oh God what is the future now? So, it not only brings up the subject, but you start to make some baby steps because it is offering the chance to explore whether it is careers or some courses and it might bring you just further along the line towards that point. So, I think that is very valuable and I can see that clearly now. So it is that whole conversation about what might happen next.

(Parent 4, iScoil, Interview)

Staff members and community workers talked about the importance of emotional outcomes, such as developing a sense of achievement, hope and future outlook for their learners. Like previous research (Plows et al., 2017), these outcomes are recognised as necessary before reaching academic outcomes. Developing a sense of achievement and belief that they can reach higher is key for these students to progress in further (third-level) education and develop their plans for the future.

I think a lot of them don't have the belief that they're going to actually go on to the third level, and those that choose to do so, that they are slightly taken aback by the fact that they are encouraged to try and then actually do achieve it, and go off into the world, into this system that they never felt they had the chance or the opportunity or the ability to reach. So, for that particular [...] it's not everybody [...] for those ones that actually never thought that they could move into the third level, they have a very solid base from which to start.

(Staff, Cork Life Centre, Focus Group 1)

So, it's completely new, it's so empowering. It gives them the power to be in control of their future, the future is not gloomy and uncertain and scary or anything like that. There is a future there because this allowed it to happen. This is not the end.

(Support Workers, iScoil, Focus Group)

3.5.4 Who benefits from these projects and what would have happened to learners without access to them?

This section aims to examine how life would look for students and their families without the two projects. Based on secondary sources, the outcomes for early school leavers in areas of mental health and wellbeing, employment and crime are outlined first. A case study for each project was developed next to show what trajectories students would follow without the presence of Cork Life Centre and iScoil.

Evidence shows that early school leaving harms various areas of learners' lives, including mental health and general wellbeing, engagement with work or education, and possible involvement with the judicial system. Early school leaving has a detrimental impact on an individual's health and wellbeing. Studies show that early school leavers experience higher levels of depression, anxiety and mortality, and report lower levels of health

(Smyth et al., 2019). The *Education at a glance* report, focusing on Ireland (OECD, 2018), shows that the gap in depression rates between those with no upper secondary education and those with upper secondary education or beyond is one of the highest in Europe.

It has been established that a minimum education level is a requirement for successful integration in the labour market in Ireland. Early school leavers are three times more likely to be unemployed than other people aged 18–24 who are not early school leavers (CSO, 2019), while those who are employed face insecure, low-skilled and poorly paid employment. The data from 2019 (Eurostat, 2019) shows that Ireland had the fourteenth highest rate in the EU of youth aged 20 - 34 who are neither in education and training nor in employment. This population is also the most vulnerable in times of recession, when the unemployment rates of early school leavers can be between 12% and 33% higher than among tertiary graduates (Smyth et al., 2019: 21). Over half of young people who completed school continue with training or further education in comparison with 10% of early school leavers (Smyth et al., 2019: 20).

Young people who do not have access to alternative routes to education have higher chances of ending up in detention. A report published by the Oberstown Children Detention Campus in 2019 shows that 57% of young people were not engaged in education prior to detention (Oberstown Children Detention Campus, 2019). This data corresponds with other research indicating the link between early school leaving and first convictions and/or a more significant number of convictions. O'Mahony's study (in Smyth et al., 2019: 24) revealed that four-fifths of prisoners left school before they were 16 years old with only 4% of prisoners having finished at Leaving Certificate level.

CASE STUDY 1

CORK LIFE CENTRE

Based on findings retrieved from qualitative data, it has been established that young people who are not involved in any education after leaving school early face more chances of experiencing severe vulnerabilities. For example, a Tusla manager pointed to a direct link between limited opportunities for engagement with alternative routes of education and suspension of students from mainstream schooling. Decisions made on a school-system level have a detrimental effect on young people's lives, contributing to various types of vulnerabilities, such as homelessness, criminal offences or sexual vulnerability.

The mainstream education system would have them confirmed as lost causes and either suspend them or expel them. And then we know from the care system that once a child loses that structure in the day, they become very vulnerable and susceptible to influences, drug-taking, sexual vulnerability, homeless vulnerability, criminal vulnerabilities and it really fast-tracks the decline [...] And if it weren't for the Life Centre they would be on the streets, getting into trouble and costing the state and their families all sorts of grief.

(Tusla, Cork Life Centre, Interview)

Students' accounts perhaps present most accurately what would happen to them if they were not involved in Cork Life Centre. From their current engagement with Cork Life Centre, they reflect on what would happen to them if they were not a part of it. Their accounts are accompanied by the views of education welfare officers saying that there are very scarce options available to students who are not engaged in mainstream schooling. The data indicate two issues connected with school suspension: 1) schools' rigid response to student behavioural challenges, and 2) a lack of alternative options for engagement in education, leading to intensified vulnerabilities for young people:

Because like there is lots of kids who have made mistakes but if they come here, they can start over but if they go to care they can't start over because they get thrown out on the streets when they turn 18 and if they go to prison, they can't start over, they have already got a criminal record.

(Students, Cork Life Centre, Focus Group 1)

And if you are excluded from mainstream your options are very limited depending on your age. If you are under 16, we are lucky we have the Life Centre; we have got Cork Training Centre and St. Kevin's. If you are 16 there are these options but for the younger child, the options are limited because if you are expelled from one school the other schools aren't really rushing out to welcome you in.

(Education Welfare Officer 1, Cork Life Centre, Interview)

The best thing that my mam said about the Life Centre is that it saved my life. If I didn't come in here, if I didn't have the support that they were giving me I wouldn't be here today.

(Students, Cork Life Centre, Focus Group 2)

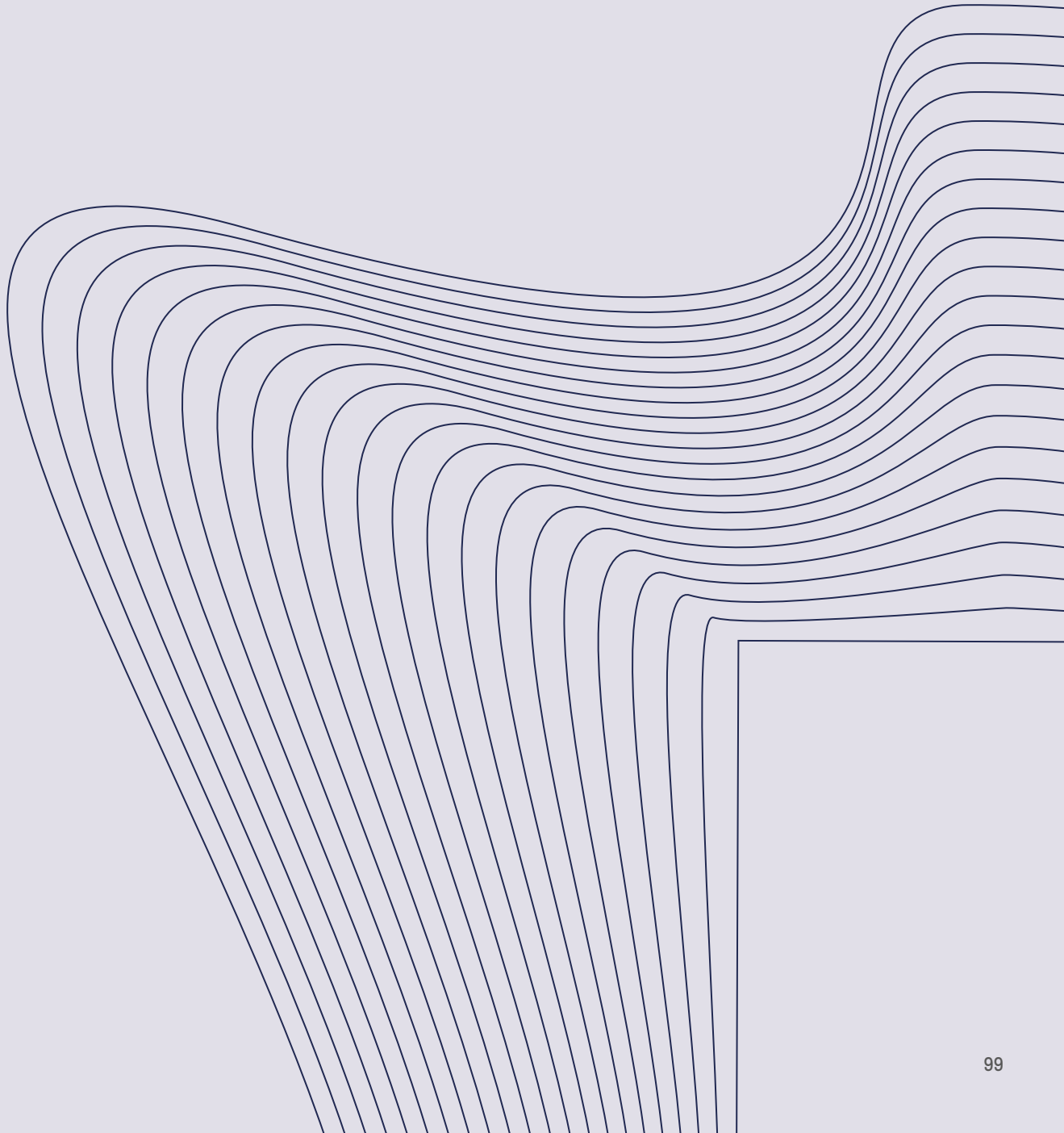
Parents' accounts show that the lack of educational options outside of mainstream schooling presents a considerable burden for families. As discussed by one of the parents, home tuition becomes a reality for many. This option may work for some learners, but it can also lead to increased social isolation or intensified vulnerabilities in young people. As presented in the quotes below, the lack of educational support presents an immense challenge for parents as home educators and families as such.

We registered for home schooling because we didn't feel we had any other option, I tried working with him for a month or two, but it was impossible, his anxiety was off the wall and there was just no way he was going to do anything. So literally for three years, he was at home. The first year he never went outside the door I would say. For most of those three years, he suffered from anxiety so badly that he wouldn't even go outside. Then a bit of peer pressure came on him and people saying, but you have to have a Leaving Cert. People don't understand even about home schooling.

(Parents, Cork Life Centre, Focus Group 1)

I always come from a kind of a parents' point of view, because before I was here, my son was here, so, I think they definitely save a lot of kids from either going down the wrong road, or from themselves, so, yeah, I think they help an awful lot of families and keep families together, it's not just about the school, so I think that's a big thing for me.

(Staff, Cork Life Centre, Focus Group 2)



CASE STUDY 2

iSCOIL

Based on the information provided by education welfare officers (Tusla), trajectories of young people who are not involved in mainstream schooling are limited. Returning to schools is always considered as their first option; however, this is not a viable option for young people not attending a school for a long period or those facing complex vulnerabilities.

Home tuition is the first option that education welfare officers would avail of. Issues around eligibility to get home tuition were emphasised indicating that young people need to be assessed and go through a psychological assessment first. As pointed out by an Education Welfare Officer, not all young people receive a mental health diagnosis and so are not entitled to home tuition. This option can be used for a short period with an expectation that young people will return to mainstream school. However, returning to mainstream schooling does not work for all young people, exposing them to limited or no options in progressing with qualified education.

I would love to see more places coming on board for the home-based iScoil because there is no other option. Like if young people aren't entitled to home tuition, if they don't have a mental health diagnosis, we can't get them home tuition.

(Education Welfare Officer 2, iScoil, Interview)

If a child has no school place, they can get home tuition for the first time but then their second application the parents are expected to apply for other school places and if they don't get it, they are expected on the second application or the third to put in a Section 29 appeal to the Department of Education and Skills based on the refusal to enrol. If you have parents with limited capacity and in quite chaotic houses, or maybe they don't want to send their child to that school and they are happy for the home tuition to build them up, so that can be complicated.

(Education Welfare Officer 4, iScoil, Interview)

Home tuition is challenging for many families, particularly for those parents who cannot do home schooling. They need to source teachers themselves and as home tuition is a short-term measure, no qualification is attached to it.

There are hundreds of children not in school and my son was out of school for two years. I had to give up my job to be with him for the two years and unofficially home school him so he would have some form of education because he did not fit into a mainstream school, a special school, his anxiety was too high to cope.

(Parent 2, iScoil, Interview)

What it did was from a place of being out of regular school, now granted we had home schooling here for 1st year, home tuition it is called, but again those teachers are hard to find and the department guidelines are very strict. So that the day ends at 6:00 and most home tuition teachers, all of them in fact, really are still in the school system. So, a teacher was finishing at 4:00, having to travel then to a pupil's house, which could take to 5:00 and then cut off at 6:00. So, while we did have that for half of the 1st year it just wasn't enough to get stuck in, to get back.

(Parent 4, iScoil, Interview)

Youthreach is another option that education welfare officers explore for those young people who are not in mainstream schools. This option works for learners who can physically join local Youthreach centres and are under 16. Some eligible learners can also get a space with the National Learning Network. Young people who experience high levels of anxiety and are not able to leave their homes cannot avail of these options.

iScoil is considered the last option that education welfare officers would avail of and it is used only when every other avenue has been explored already. iScoil does not have enough places for all referrals, so they have to make a judgement on whom to take in. iScoil stated that they had to turn down 100 referrals in 2019/2020. If a young person is not accepted through the first referral, education welfare officers make a stronger case for a second one.

Education welfare officers report that those young people who do not get a place with iScoil or home tuition have no chance to be involved in the education system. They stay mainly at home doing nothing. This situation deepens the vulnerabilities of young people who are already vulnerable. A staff member of iScoil explained that they receive regular calls from parents looking for a place with iScoil. She mentions a call from a mother of a 15-year-old son who was not in a mainstream school for the last 6 months looking for alternative options. The mother exhausted all

options asking for support from the local principal and education welfare officer. The son does not have a Junior Certificate and his mother felt that the system let her son down. As mentioned by the staff member, this is an example of a caring parent who wants education for her child. There are also cases in which parents do not care about their child's education. When families are not present, there is no chance for these children to become engaged with education. This is a form of state neglect, as pointed out by one of the parents interviewed in this research:

There is nothing in place for an anxious child, a child who suffers from crippling anxiety, there is nothing, absolutely nothing. And the country is failing our children and these children have become invisible children and they just go unnoticed and they are forgotten.

(Parent 2, iScoil, Interview)

How long-term disengagement from education influences young people and families was discussed by parents. They expressed their worries about their children not getting any education by staying at home, which makes them feel worthless. The burden on families taking sole responsibility for educating these children has an impact on relationships and the wellbeing of all family members.

It has made such a difference, we were so worried about her and this has just been brilliant, knowing that she is doing something at home, that she is engaging with people and that she is involved in doing something and she is not feeling worthless at home. Because she was starting to feel that way because she has got an older sister who is in school and doing really well, she is in Leaving Cert now, and this is kind of, they can kind of talk to each other now, how did your school day go? She doesn't feel as isolated and it has just been fantastic for her, for myself and my husband to know that she is doing something.

(Parent 5, iScoil, Interview)

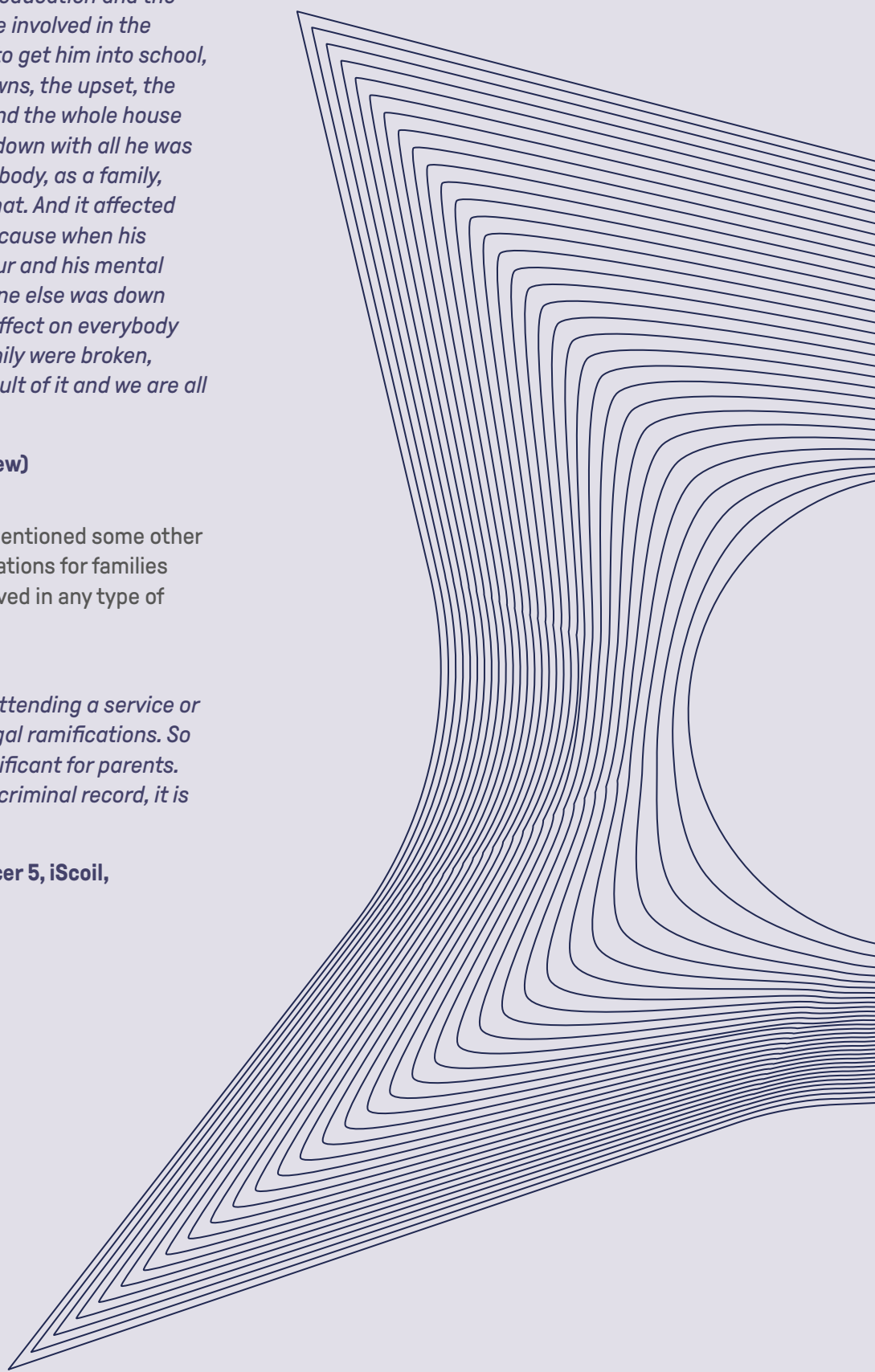
And myself and my two children live with my parents so as a family unit, yes because my parents would sit and look at my son suffer for all the years with his education and the school and they would be involved in the whole process of trying to get him into school, dealing with the meltdowns, the upset, the frustration, the anger. And the whole house would be turned upside down with all he was suffering from. So, everybody, as a family, we were all involved in that. And it affected absolutely everybody because when his behaviour and his humour and his mental health was down everyone else was down because it has a ripple effect on everybody [...] So yes, my entire family were broken, mentally broken as a result of it and we are all just so proud of him.

(Parent 2, iScoil, Interview)

Education welfare officers mentioned some other issues, such as legal ramifications for families whose children are not involved in any type of education.

So, while the child isn't attending a service or a school there can be legal ramifications. So that would be really significant for parents. The outcome could be a criminal record, it is very serious.

(Education Welfare Officer 5, iScoil, Interview)



3.5.5 What were the lived experiences of learners in this cluster around Covid-19?

As part of the online photovoice, one study participant from Cork Life Centre and two study participants from iScoil contributed their drawings, pictures and a recorded song to share their experiences with the two projects before and during Covid-19. The findings from the two projects cannot be clearly divided into the categories 'before the pandemic' and 'during the pandemic', and are presented as one set of findings per project.

Cork Life Centre Data

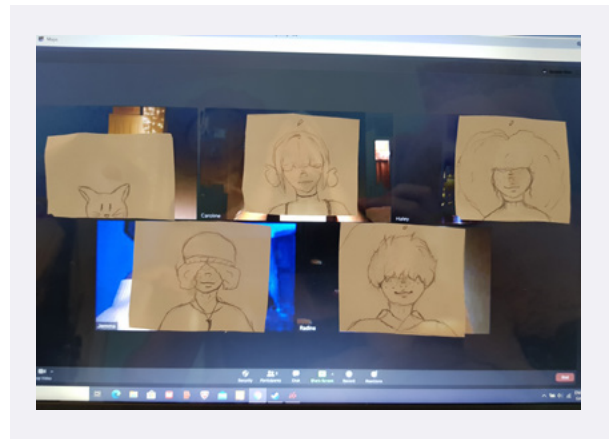
A female participant aged 15 has been involved in the Cork Life Centre for the last three years. Her drawings reveal her personal experience and the supports provided by the Centre. Key topics arising from this data are:

- 1) Mental health and support;
- 2) Support continued during the pandemic;
- 3) Missing Friends and staff of the Centre.

Mental health and support

The study participant shared three images portraying a struggle with self-acceptance and

the role of Cork Life Centre in supporting them in the healing process. The drawings portray stages of recovery, including forgiving oneself, a belief in healing, and final recovery (accepting oneself again).



Support continues during the pandemic

Staff members of Cork Life Centre continued providing support to students during the pandemic. Zoom chats were organised to catch up with classmates and staff. The staff provided regular support through emails and phone calls also. As mentioned by the study participant, online support could not replace face-to-face interaction, but it helped her not to fall back into old habits.



The difference in the portraits shows the growth in my confidence since I started attending the Life Centre. The Centre has supported me in my path to accepting myself again after years of self-hatred. (Participant 1, 15, 3 years with Cork Life Centre)

A Zoom call with classmates and staff. We don't get to see each other in person, but we all still get to chat and catch up over zoom.

(Participant 1, 15 years old, 3 years with Cork Life Centre)

In the pandemic, you're left alone with your thoughts 24/7 and that makes it easy to fall back into old habits. The staff at the centre know this and check up on us all the time to see how we're doing. This makes living in quarantine so much easier.

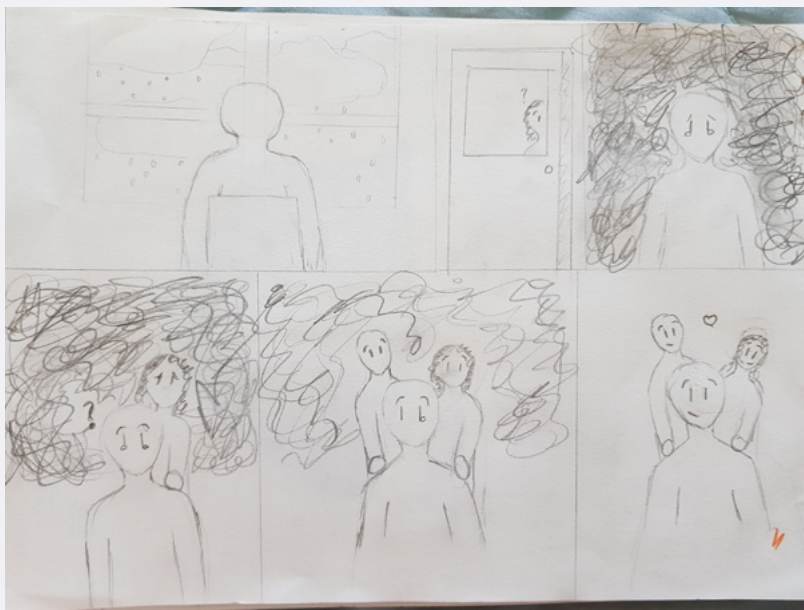
(Participant 1, 15 years old, 3 years with Cork Life Centre)

Missing friends and staff members of the Centre

Missing friends and staff members are at the centre of these drawings. The closure of the Centre resulted in limited interaction with other students and staff, which proved to be difficult for someone facing challenges with mental health.

The only thing keeping me going though the quarantine is knowing that soon enough I'll be able to see all my friends again [...] I miss being able to actually see the staff and my friends every morning.

(Participant 1, 15 years old, 3 years with Cork Life Centre)



iScoil Data

One 14-year-old male (engaged with iScoil for 9 months) and one 14-year-old female (engaged with iScoil for one year) contributed their photos and a recorded song to this research. Their contributions were different from the material received from study participants in the other awardee projects as they mainly presented participants' interests and passions. The male participant has a huge interest in photography and racing cars. The female study participant has a strong love for music and singing and struggles with anxiety. By reading their material, two emerging themes connected with iScoil emerged from the data:

- 1) iScoil supports students in pursuing their interests;
- 2) Adapting to a new normal during Covid-19.

iScoil supports students in pursuing their interests

The photos of both participants show personal interests that they have pursued since being involved with iScoil. Photos from the male participant reveal his passion for cars and photography. The photos include images of cars from car events around Ireland and his friend's car. Photos from the female participant portray animals and music. The project on animals was part of her study work for iScoil and shows her creativity in using different materials and approaches to finishing the project during the lockdown.



Some photos I took at certain events and one photo of my friend's car, the other one is of my RC car. It shows that I could actually go outside to take pictures. It shows that I like cars. I like attending car events in Ireland. I miss going to car events.

(Participant 1, 14 years old, 9 months with iScoil)



I had to take my photographs in my garden during the lockdown, as events were cancelled. They reflect that my only alternative was to photograph my remote-control car. They show my dedication to photography and cars.

(Participant 1, 14 years old, 9 months with iScoil)



This was a project on animals, I had difficulty sourcing materials as the shops were all closed, I had to use a large envelope from the post office as it was one of the essential shops open, the other materials were items around the house. I had no access to a printer, so I had to use old magazine cut-outs, this project was very enjoyable. These pictures show how I used basic material.

(Participant 2, 14 years old, a year with iScoil)

Adapting to a new normal in the time of Covid-19

Both study participants showed how they adapted to life under the pandemic. The male participant pursued his passion for photography by refocusing his gaze on the garden of his home. The female participant recorded a cover of John Lennon's song *Imagine*, which helped her reflect on her current life. She felt at ease entering shops, as they were quiet and empty. She found life during the pandemic easier. Life has been less busy and more peaceful, which helped her manage issues with the anxiety better.

Imagine
(By John Lennon)

*Imagine there's no heaven
It's easy if you try
No hell below us
Above us only sky
Imagine all the people living for today
Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too
Imagine all the people living life in peace, you
You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will be as one
Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man
Imagine all the people sharing all the world, you
You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will be as one*

This is a song I recorded during the pandemic I was able to continue singing during the crisis. I love music. My life actually improved during Covid-19 as I suffer from anxiety and being able to access the shops while they are quiet and was a dream. I like how empty the shops are and how organised the queues are.

(Participant 2, 14 years old, a year with iScoil)

3.5.6 Similarities and differences in Cluster 3

Similarities between the projects:

- ✓ More male students (Cork Life Centre: 69% and iScoil: 62%) on average have been registered with both programmes since January 2018.
- ✓ Both projects mainly provide for young people of Irish nationality (over 95% in both cases). iScoil provides support to a few students of ethnic and cultural minority background, specifically of Irish Traveller background (N=14).
- ✓ The two projects capture a shared understanding of progression. Progression is understood in terms of a lifelong personal journey. Diverse pathways to education or employment based on students' interests, needs and passions are advocated by both projects.
- ✓ The following actions are used by the projects to support students' journeys in education and life:
 - A safe, secure and informal learning environment.
 - Holistic, individualised support.
 - Personal development focused on students' needs and strengths.
 - A student-centred and tailored approach to learning.
- ✓ Despite accreditation being recognised as necessary by the programmes, other aspects of progress, including re-engaging with the learning structures and routines or just 'showing up' is progress for some learners.
- ✓ Emotional rather than purely hard outcomes, such as enabling a sense of achievement, hope for the future and self-confidence, were recognised as key factors supporting individual personal and educational progression.

Differences across the projects:

- ✓ iScoil is a national programme, while Cork Life Centre is a community-based programme.
- ✓ The projects cater for a similar age group of students, with a recognised difference: iScoil specifically focuses on young people aged 13–16 (Junior Cert), while Cork Life Centre works with a broader age range of students aged 12–18 years (Junior and Leaving Cert). This is a critical distinction, showing that enrolment of iScoil students is mainly to QQI Level 3 (a QQI Level 4 Programme has been piloted just recently) while Cork Life Centre focuses their work on student progression to Junior Cert and Leaving Cert, QQI Levels 3, 4 and 5.
- ✓ Due to the length and structure of the two programmes, the completion rate for the two projects is different. A total of 43% of Cork Life Centre students and 65% of iScoil students completed and 20% of them partially completed the programmes between January 2018 and July 2020. iScoil's programme facilitates enrolment from one module to the whole accredited programme. Cork Life Centre delivers its programme over more than one academic year, which means that many of the registered students had not completed the programme by July 2020.
- ✓ An essential difference between the two projects is the mechanism of referral to the programme. Cork Life Centre mentioned several referral options (e.g., Tusla Education & Support Service (TESS), self-referral, schools, mental health services, youth organisations and schools). By contrast, Tusla is the only point of referral for iScoil students. Learners who do not get a place at iScoil or who drop out have no other option for engagement with formal education. 15% of students drop out of the programme every year.
- ✓ Photovoice data showed that Cork Life Centre provided mental health support to the study participant. This support continued remotely during the pandemic.

However, the study participant recognised the limitations of such support and mentioned that she missed friends and staff during the lockdown.

- ✓ Photos and drawings shared by iScoil participants show that the project supports students in pursuing their interests. An interesting finding in connection with the pandemic was that students discussed the adaptation to a ‘new normal’. One study participant mentioned that the lockdown was positive for her, as life has been less busy. This helped her manage her anxiety better.

3.6 Results from the Implementation of a Social Return on Investment Framework

3.6.1 Implementing an SROI framework with awardees

A Social Return on Investment (SROI) framework, as part of Rethink Ireland's Impact Management Framework, was introduced to explore the social value for participants of the outcomes they achieved as a result of being involved in their respective projects. SROI is an internationally recognised and accredited framework for measuring and accounting for the social value²⁵ of project activities as perceived by key stakeholders. The resulting SROI ratio is much more than a number – its purpose is to assess the social value of the outcomes created for participants by these activities, rather than just a monetary value for the activities as with cost/benefit type studies (The SROI Network, 2012: 8). SROI can be used to manage and improve social impact as achieved by projects, and so was chosen as a framework in this evaluation given the inherent importance of this concept to Rethink Ireland's Education Fund.

Policymakers and frontline service providers, both in Ireland and internationally, are currently seeking wider and alternative forms of identifying costs and benefits of their activities (Jones, Windle & Tudor, 2018). Most public, private and

third-sector organisations have a pretty good idea of the cost of what they do. They can track the number of users, contacts or customers. Many can provide some evidence that these activities lead to some sort of change, but very few can explain clearly why all this matters. What would happen if they did not exist? What is the real value of what they do? (Social Value UK). This framework holds organisations accountable for the work they do but also ensures that resources are invested for the benefit of the participants and the common good. This is the value of using an SROI approach.

SROI is a principles-based framework with the following being those main principles:

- **Involve stakeholders** – Inform decisions on what gets measured, and how this is measured and valued in an account of social value by involving stakeholders.
- **Understand what changes** – Articulate how change is created and evaluate this through evidence gathered, recognising positive and negative changes as well as those that are intended and unintended.
- **Value the things that matter** – Recognise stakeholders' values when making decisions about allocating resources between different options. Value refers to the relative importance of different outcomes. It is informed by stakeholders' preferences.
- **Include only what is material** – Determine what information and evidence must be included in the accounts to give a true and fair picture, such that stakeholders can draw reasonable conclusions about impact.
- **Do not over-claim** – Only claim the value that activities are responsible for creating.
- **Be transparent** – Demonstrate the basis on which the analysis may be considered accurate and honest and show that it will be reported to, and discussed with, stakeholders.
- **Verify the result** – Ensure appropriate independent assurance.

²⁵ Value refers to the benefits, changes and actions that happen as a result of actions and activities, which go beyond the purely economic or monetary value (Social Value UK, Social Value International).

The SROI framework uses a mixed-methods approach²⁶, using qualitative and quantitative research methods to provide a story about change. Organisations can use findings to identify their strengths and continue to support and generate ‘more good’. SROI also identifies potential weaknesses or areas where projects can improve to generate more positive social change. SROI *‘is much more than just a number. It is a story about change, on which to base decisions, that includes case studies and qualitative, quantitative and financial information’* (Nicholls et al., 2012: 8).

An evaluative SROI format was used in this evaluation, meaning that the SROI study was conducted retrospectively by exploring whether activities provided by awardees for participants contributed to the intended outcomes set by each awardee. This section shows how the SROI framework was applied to the Education Fund projects by presenting the following:

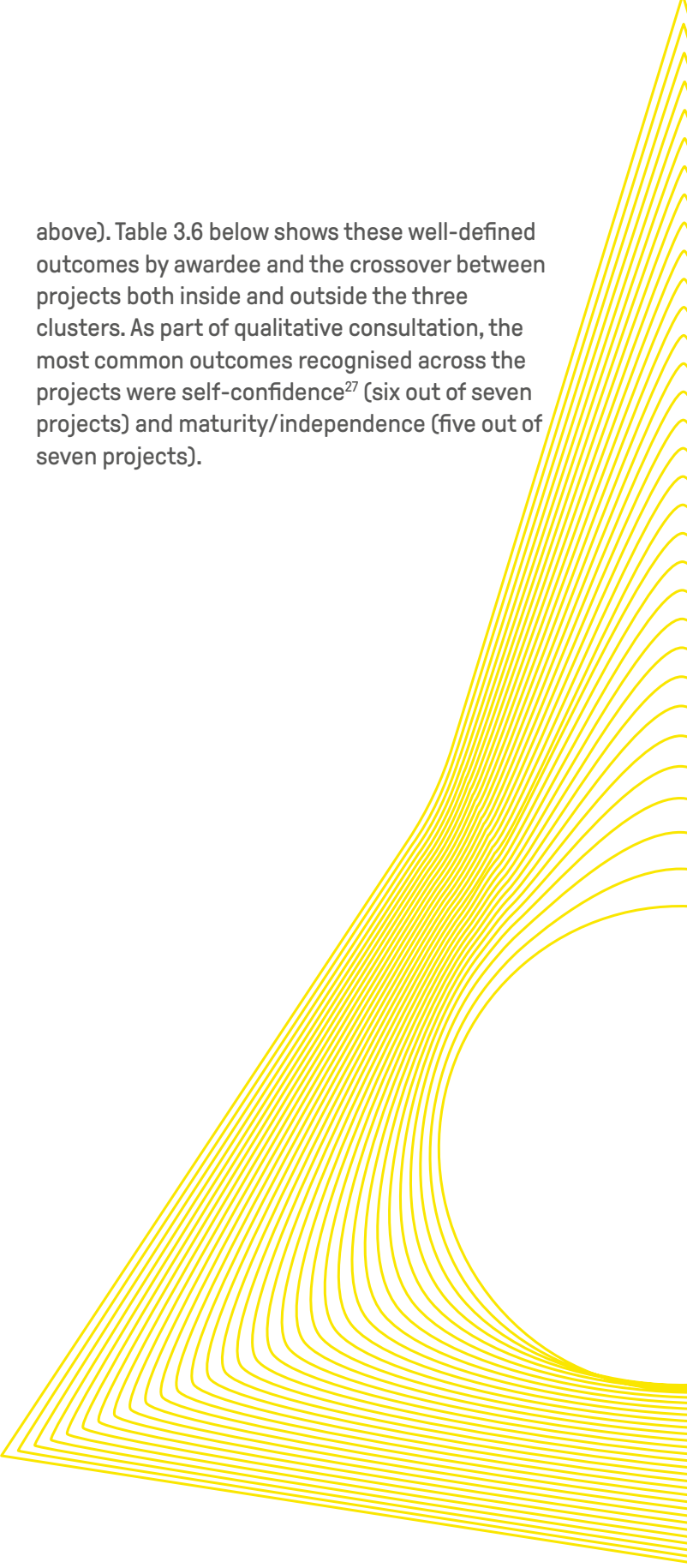
- a) Comparing the soft skills outcomes identified by managers of the awardee projects with the outcomes identified and most valued by participants during the SROI study and;
- b) Reporting baseline findings from the implementation of the SROI study for seven projects in the Education Funds.

Table 3.5 provides a short summary of the process involved in the implementation of the SROI methodology.

The evaluation team conducted 21 focus groups with participants in seven awardee projects. On average, each project organised consultations with three groups of participants. A grounded approach to analysis focusing on the idea of change was used to analyse the data and develop the chain of events for each outcome.

In total, 17 well-defined outcomes were identified across the three clusters of projects (see step 4

above). Table 3.6 below shows these well-defined outcomes by awardee and the crossover between projects both inside and outside the three clusters. As part of qualitative consultation, the most common outcomes recognised across the projects were self-confidence²⁷ (six out of seven projects) and maturity/independence (five out of seven projects).



²⁶ The description here does not contain a detailed explanation of the principles or of every step of the SROI process. For details of the principles and process, why they are important, and a worked example, please refer to the SROI Guide (Social Value UK, 2009, 2012).

²⁷ Even though self-confidence was not recognised as a well-defined outcome for iScoil during the qualitative consultation, the evaluation team introduced it as a control outcome to the project's quantitative survey. The results from the survey showed that iScoil's participants experienced a positive change in their self-confidence due to iScoil activities.

Table 3.5 – Summary of the implementation process of the SROI study with awardees

| STEPS | | PROCESS |
|-------|--|---|
| 1 | Duration of the activities in the scope | This SROI analysis consists of the evaluation of three years' delivery of the activity from 1st of January 2017 to January 2020. |
| 2 | Input/Scope | This SROI focused on both the Rethink Ireland Grant and any other funding received by projects and related activities. |
| 3 | Stakeholders | To create baseline data in this phase of the evaluation, qualitative consultations with stakeholders included a wider variety of project beneficiaries including project participants, parents, staff, volunteers, business partners, policymakers, Youth Advisory Board and alumni. However, the SROI in this report is focused exclusively on project participants. ²⁸ A total of 21 focus groups across the three clusters are included in the analysis. |
| 4 | Qualitative Data | <p>Qualitative data (focus groups and interviews) was analysed based on the guidelines provided by SROI to identify 'well-defined outcomes'.</p> <p>All 'well-defined outcomes' originate from a 'chain of events' that can be tracked to identify other outcomes that lead to these in a chain of causality. These chains were identified first by one member of the research team. A second member of the team also completed the analysis. Both sets of data were compared and contrasted until a consensus was reached, and the well-defined outcomes were defined, labelled, tested for materiality and subsequently included in the SROI.</p> |
| 5 | Quantitative Data | A standardised measure was identified for each well-defined outcome. Participants were then invited to complete an online survey focusing on ranking the well-defined outcomes in order of importance, and provide a self-report of their current levels for each of these outcomes. These outcomes were measured using validated scales ²⁹ . |

28 The evaluation team collected qualitative data which awardee projects wanted to include in the SROI process from all stakeholders. As part of the agreement with Rethink Ireland, survey data was gathered with study participants only and their data is presented in this evaluation report. Each awardee project will receive well-defined outcomes relating to all stakeholders involved, in an individualised awardee level SROI report.

29 Due to time constraints during the pandemic, there was no data based on self-reporting scales gathered from TCPID and Trinity Access 21 participants.

While the aim of SROI is to assist projects individually, there are some recognised commonalities obvious from within the clusters. Thinking about the nature of each cluster of projects, namely social inclusion, pathways to adulthood/curriculum reform, and alternative education centres, there were direct differences between clusters and commonalities within awardees in each cluster. For example, increased self-confidence and a sense of belonging are the two soft outcomes recognised in the social inclusion cluster. Self-confidence, improved study skills and increased independence/maturity are key soft outcomes shared in Cluster 2, pathways to adulthood. Two projects in Cluster 3 (alternative centres of education/based outside of mainstream schools) share one well-defined outcome: emotion regulation. Another interesting observation is that a sense of achievement was a recognised outcome across the three clusters of projects.

3.6.2 Soft skills outcomes versus SROI well-defined outcomes

As part of early work with the awardee projects in the Education Fund, the evaluation team developed a soft skills questionnaire based on a request from projects. They were of the opinion that they often needed to first of all bolster participants' soft skills prior to supporting their progression towards a QQI Level 3–6 qualification. Project coordinators shared a list of soft skills they believed participants gained as a result of their activities. The evaluation team compared the lists across the projects and used the common skills identified in a soft skills questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed around three areas of skills: 1) personal skills (coping and resilience; self-esteem and wellbeing); 2) social inclusion skills (belonging and engagement; support and mentoring); and 3) social employment skills (benefits of the programmes).

As shown in Table 3.7 below, there is a recognised difference between what the project staff defined as outcomes central for them versus the well-defined outcomes, which came from participants via the SROI process. The comparison between

soft skills and well-defined outcomes shows that some outcomes suggested by the projects matched what participants value most, while in other cases there is a recognised mismatch between the two. **Self-confidence (described also as self-efficacy, self-esteem, etc.) was mainly recognised as a common outcome valued by both projects and participants.** A larger list of outcomes was recognised by the projects though some of those seem to be less relevant to participants. The soft skills questionnaire captured coping and resilience, which were considered less important by participants (two out of seven projects). The list of outcomes in Table 3.7 reveals some discrepancies between the areas of personal development that projects identified as relevant for participants and the feedback from participants themselves on the areas that were essential to them. For example, participants from five out of seven projects recognised increased independence and maturity as an important change as a result of their engagement with project activities. Sense of achievement and study skills were another two well-defined outcomes recognised as important by the participants. However, it should be noted that the projects' and participants' lists of outcomes may not differ too significantly. The wording used by the two may sound different, yet they may refer to the same set of outcomes. For example, transferable skills as defined by projects can be translated as employability skills by participants.

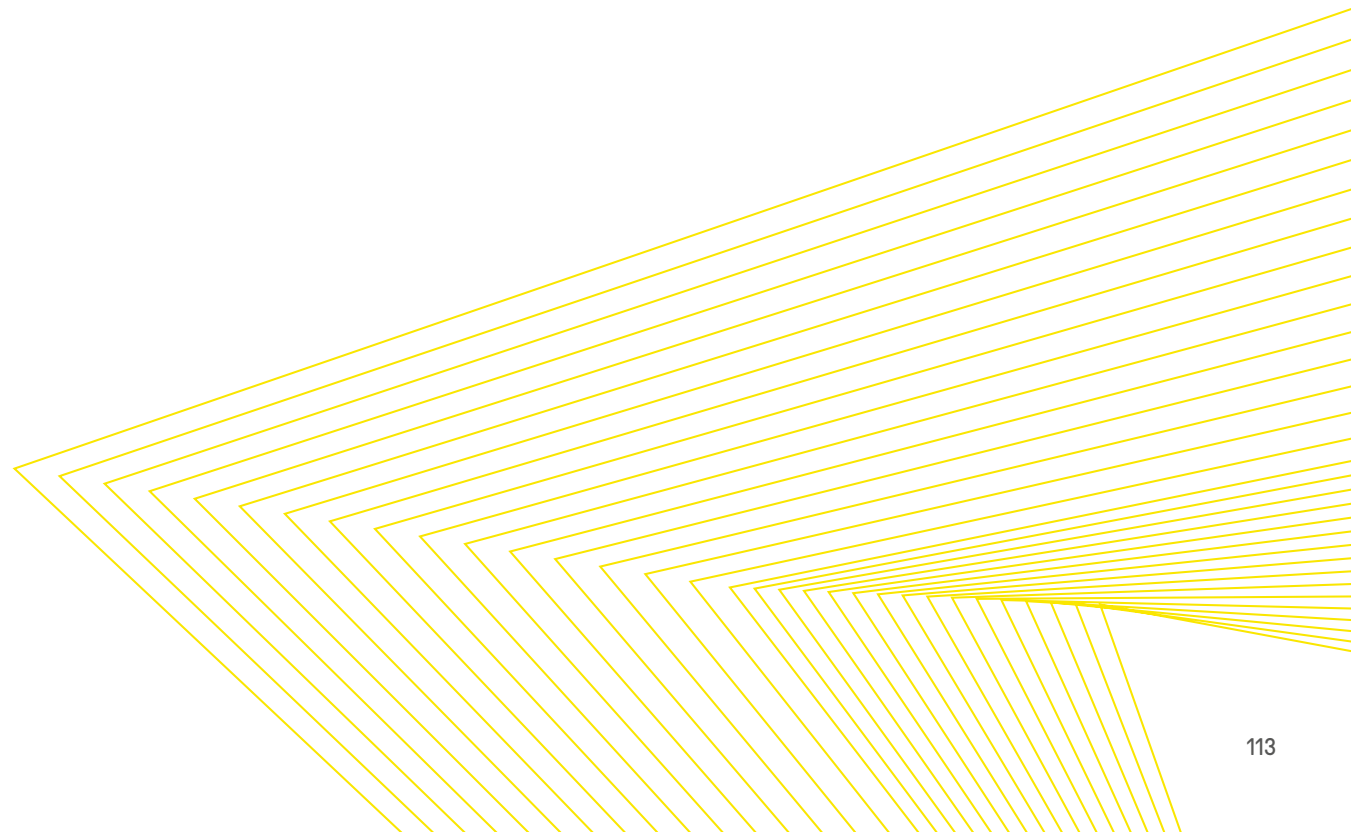
These findings are really important as projects can now interrogate their existing theory of change and plan their approach to ensure that the outcomes most valued by participants are front and centre. Projects also need to make informed decisions regarding these differences to ensure that their services are targeted at the needs and interests of participants, to maximise the benefits for them and to ensure maximum value is achieved, with participants at the heart of the projects.

Table 3.6 – Range of well-defined outcomes identified by participants across the Education Fund projects as organised by cluster

| NAME OF CLUSTER | CLUSTER 1: | | CLUSTER 2: | | | CLUSTER 3: | |
|-------------------------------|--|--|---|--------------------|-------------------|---|--------|
| | LIFELONG LEARNING/ SOCIAL INCLUSION | | CURRICULUM REFORM/DIVERSE PATHWAYS TO ADULTHOOD | | | ALTERNATIVE CENTRES OF EDUCATION/BASED OUTSIDE OF MAIN- STREAM SCHOOLS | |
| NAME OF AWARDEE PROJECT | An Cosán VCC | Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities (TCPID) | Aspire2 | Fast Track Academy | Trinity Access 21 | Cork Life Centre | iScoil |
| AGE PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS | 18+ | 19–25 | 13–18 | 15–19 | 13–18 | 12–18 | 13–16 |
| SELF-CONFIDENCE | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| CULTURAL AWARENESS | ✓ | | | | | | |
| FUTURE OUTLOOK | ✓ | | | | ✓ | | |
| POSITIVE BELONGING /INCLUSION | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | | | |
| SOCIAL ISOLATION | ✓ | | | | | | ✓ |
| STUDY SKILLS | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| EMPATHY | | | ✓ | | | ✓ | |
| MATURITY/ INDEPENDENCE | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| IMPROVED FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS | | | ✓ | | | ✓ | |
| EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS | | ✓ | | ✓ | | | |
| SENSE OF ACHIEVEMENT | | ✓ | | ✓ | | | ✓ |
| RESILIENCE | | ✓ | | | | ✓ | |
| SOCIAL SKILLS | | ✓ | | | ✓ | | |
| LEADERSHIP SKILLS | | | | ✓ | | | |
| EMOTION REGULATION | | | | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| SENSE OF PRIDE | | | | | | | ✓ |
| COMMUNICATION SKILLS | | | | | ✓ | ✓ | |

Table 3.7 – Comparison of soft skills (as recognised by project management and staff) with well-defined outcomes (as recognised by participants) presented by awardee and cluster

| CLUSTER | PROJECT | TOP SOFT SKILLS IDENTIFIED BY EACH AWARDEE | SROI WELL-DEFINED OUTCOMES |
|---|--|--|---|
| Cluster 1: Lifelong learning/social inclusion | Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities (TCPID) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Quality-of-life measures good for TCPID cohort ▪ Increased confidence ▪ Social skills ▪ Love of learning, interest in knowledge ▪ Reciprocity or capacity to give back to community ▪ Development of so-called transferable skills ▪ Participation in society as independent adults ▪ Engage successfully with employment opportunities ▪ Development of wide range of skills to access employment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sense of achievement ▪ Sense of belonging ▪ Employability skills ▪ Maturity/independence ▪ Resilience ▪ Self-confidence ▪ Social skills |
| | An Cosán VCC | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Self-efficacy ▪ Problem-solving ▪ Critical thinking ▪ Empowered adults ▪ Collaborative learning ▪ Communication skills | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sense of belonging ▪ Cultural awareness ▪ Positive outlook ▪ Self-confidence ▪ Social isolation |



| CLUSTER | PROJECT | TOP SOFT SKILLS IDENTIFIED BY EACH AWARDEE | SROI WELL-DEFINED OUTCOMES |
|---|--------------------|---|---|
| Cluster 2: Curriculum reform/diverse pathways to adulthood | Aspire2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Confidence ▪ Personal development ▪ Social civic understanding of the world ▪ Self-motivation ▪ Willing to step outside comfort zone ▪ Commitment to be involved outside of school context ▪ Goal setting ▪ Planning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Empathy ▪ Family relationships ▪ Maturity ▪ Self-confidence ▪ Study skills |
| | Fast Track Academy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Personal development ▪ Empathy ▪ Leadership ▪ Coping skills ▪ Social capital ▪ Public-speaking capacity ▪ Fundraising ▪ Interacting with the public ▪ Confidence ▪ Social and academic skills | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sense of achievement ▪ Sense of belonging ▪ Employability skills ▪ Leadership skills ▪ Maturity ▪ Self-confidence ▪ Study skills |
| | Trinity Access 21 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Teamwork ▪ Communication and problem-solving ▪ Confidence ▪ Making the best choices for themselves | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Communication skills ▪ Future outlook ▪ Maturity ▪ Self-confidence ▪ Social skills ▪ Study skills |
| Cluster 3: Alternative centres of education/ based outside of mainstream schools | Cork Life Centre | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Managing behaviour ▪ Managing anxiety ▪ Can build/maintain relationship ▪ Self-esteem ▪ Feeling of support ▪ Feeling of belonging ▪ Empowerment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Communication skills ▪ Emotion regulation ▪ Empathy ▪ Family relationships ▪ Maturity ▪ Resilience ▪ Self-confidence |
| | iScoil | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Positive attitude to education ▪ Self-confidence ▪ Self-efficacy ▪ Self-esteem | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Emotion regulation ▪ Pride ▪ Social isolation ▪ Sense of achievement |

3.6.3 Baseline findings from the SROI well-defined outcomes

As described in Step 5 of the SROI process above, the research team then developed an online survey for participants, specific to each project, based on these well-defined outcomes. The purpose of the survey was to ask participants to self-report on their current levels for each of these outcomes, using a set of standardised measures specific to each.

Table 3.8 below lists the outcome areas, the name and source of the scales used, the meaning intended for the scales, the average population score for each scale, and the scores achieved by participants across each cluster in each scale.

This first measurement provides the baseline or comparison point from where participant outcomes can be tracked over time. This is the last report for the Education Fund and awardee projects will be given these questionnaires as part of their SROI toolkit with a suggestion as to how they can use them in their future work. It is interesting to note some patterns in the mean scores of research participants compared with the average scores in the other studies. For example, research participants reported higher mean scores in areas such as study skills, positive sense of belonging and leadership skills. Lower scores than average were recognised in connection to outcomes such as family functioning, resilience and self-confidence.

Table 3.8 – Well-defined outcomes measured using standardised scales – Baseline Data

| OUTCOME ³⁰ | SCALE SOURCE | SCALE MEANING | COMPARISON SAMPLE | CLUSTER SCORE RANGE |
|-----------------------------|--|---|---|---|
| Belonging | General Belongingness Scale (Malone, Pillow & Osman, 2012) | Higher scores indicate a stronger tendency to Belongingness. | Demirtas et al., (2017) Turkish high school students. Mean: 36.12 SD: 6.59 | Social inclusion Mean: 49.7 Pathways to adulthood Mean: 49.05 |
| Communication skills | Life Skills Measure (Redmond, 2013) | Higher scores mean more life skills (decision-making, critical thinking, communication skills, goal setting, teamwork and problem-solving). | Redmond (2013) Irish adolescent sample. Mean: 101.25 SD: 98.36 | Alternative education: 96 |
| Cultural awareness | Intercultural Sensitivity Scale Short Form (Wang & Zhou, 2016) | Higher scores indicate a higher level of intercultural sensitivity. | Wang & Zhou (2016) Mean age: 20.24 Mean and SD: not reported | Social inclusion: 42.6 |

³⁰ The outcome of 'Achievement' was measured using the Contextual Achievement Motivation Survey (CAMS) Smith (2015). However, the research team could not calculate the scores given the absence from the literature of the necessary scoring mechanism.

| OUTCOME³⁰ | SCALE SOURCE | SCALE MEANING | COMPARISON SAMPLE | CLUSTER SCORE RANGE |
|-----------------------------|---|---|---|---|
| Emotion regulation | Short Adolescent Self-Regulatory Inventory (Moilanen, 2007) 27 item version | Higher scores indicate higher self-regulatory behaviour and lower scores indicate lower self-regulatory behaviour | Moilanen (2007) Mean age: 13.79 Mean and SD: not reported | Alternative education: Mean range: 83.42–83.94 |
| Empathy | Basic Empathy Scale (Joliffe & Farrington, 2006) | An overall score of 20 or below indicates deficit in empathy, the maximum score of 100 indicates a high level of empathy. | Joliffe & Farrington (2006) Mean age: 14.8 Males mean: 64.3 SD: 9.8 Females mean: 75.3; SD: 8.3 | Pathways to adulthood: 61.14. Alternative education: 65.13 |
| Employability | Career and Talent Development Self-Efficacy (CTD-SES) (Yuen et al., 2010) | Higher overall score indicates more career development and self-efficacy. | Yuen et al. (2010) Hong Kong adolescents; Mean age: 13.82 Mean and SD: not reported | Pathways to adulthood: 86.58 |
| Family functioning | Scale One: Brief Family Relationship Scale (Fok et al., 2014) | Family functioning overall score. | (Furlong et al., 2017) Irish families Mean: 38 SD: not reported | Alternative education: 32.6 |
| | Scale Two: The Revised Family Communication Pattern Instrument (Koerner and Fitzpatrick, 2002) | | Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2002) Mean and SD: not reported | Pathways to adulthood: 81.38 |
| Future outlook | Future Outlook Inventory (Cauffman and Woodard, 1999) | Higher scores indicate a higher degree of future consideration and planning. | Mean and SD: not reported | Social Inclusion: 40 |

| OUTCOME ³⁰ | SCALE SOURCE | SCALE MEANING | COMPARISON SAMPLE | CLUSTER SCORE RANGE |
|--------------------------------|---|---|--|---|
| Leadership | Leadership Skills (Redmond, 2013) | The scale looks at opportunities to be a leader, ability to motivate others, self-control, conflict resolution, expectations of the self and self-reflection. | Redmond (2013) Irish adolescents Mean: 41.69 SD: not reported | Pathways to adulthood: 46.21 |
| Maturity (Independence) | Emotional Maturity Scale of (Singh & Bhargava, 1990). | The higher the score on the scale, the greater the degree of emotional immaturity and vice-versa. The possible score range is from 48 – 240. | Ishfaq & Kamal (2018) Pakistani adolescents Mean age: 16.82 Mean: 95.24 SD: 25.08 | Pathways to adulthood: Mean range: 154.5 - 163.81 Alternative education: 134.56 |
| Pride | Dispositional Positive Emotions Scale (DPES) Pride Subscale (Shiota et al., 2006) | Higher scores indicate greater pride. | Dixson, Anderson & Keltner (2018) Undergraduate American students Mean: 5.03 SD: not reported | Alternative education: 5.812 |
| Resilience | Child and Youth Resilience Measure (Ungar & Liebenberg, 2009) | Higher scores indicate higher resilience. | Liebenberg, Ungar & Van de Vijver (2012) Canada adolescents Mean: 108.60 SD: 18.66 | Alternative education: 95.75 |
| Self-confidence | Warwick – Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS) (Stewart-Brown & Janmohamed, 2008) | Mental wellbeing (includes one item on self-confidence). | Stewart-Brown S. & Janmohamed (2008) Scotland 16–24 years Mean: 51.7 SD: 2.2 | Social inclusion: 49.8 Pathways to adulthood: Mean range: 43.5 - 47.07 Alternative education: Mean range: 43.19 - 42.09 |

| OUTCOME ³⁰ | SCALE SOURCE | SCALE MEANING | COMPARISON SAMPLE | CLUSTER SCORE RANGE |
|-------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|--|--|
| Social isolation | UCLA Loneliness Scale Version 3 (Russell, 1996) | Higher values mean more loneliness. | Russell (1996) College students Mean: 40.08 SD: 9.50 | Social Inclusion: 42.77 Alternative education: 47 |
| Study skills | Approaches and Study Skills Inventory for Students (ASSIST) – short version (Entwistle, McCune and Tait, 2006/ updated version 2013) | | Bälter et al. (2013) Mean age: 23.6 Mean range: 21–22.6 SD range: 3.7–4 | Pathways to adulthood: Mean range: 42.08 – 47.8 |

3.6.4 Identifying and valuing participants' most important outcomes

The final step involved developing an online survey for participants in order to test, quantify and value the outcomes already identified. In this analysis, the SROI principle of participants' involvement was prioritised. Participants' direct involvement began with the qualitative consultation (see Section 3.6.2) allowing well-defined outcomes to be identified. The next step saw participants being directly involved in establishing how much they valued the recognised well-defined outcomes. To do this, a consistent and comparable quantitative scale was developed, and participants were asked about the importance of each outcome for them. Values attached to outcomes are based on primary data as recognised by participants.

Based on self-confidence as a common well-defined outcome across the projects, an Irish anchor or financial proxy was developed for the SROI calculations. This anchor or financial proxy was developed for Ireland specifically, as the use of international measures of value applied to other contexts may not be accurate descriptions of the economic and lived experience of a country. To increase and contextualise the value, national and native measures should be developed and

used. The Irish Anchor therefore is a symbolic representation of the value of wellbeing in Ireland which acts as an unique comparison value from which other activities and outcomes can be valued. Financial proxies, the Irish one and any other, however, are approximate or symbolic values in monetary terms where definite financial values are not possible to obtain, which is the case for many of the outcomes and activities being accounted for in SROI. Having a single anchor as a reference point, however, increases the fairness in the way value is calculated for all activities, outcomes and services within Ireland and makes them comparable within this context. Even though a rigorous methodology was followed to calculate this Irish anchor, it is still a symbolic measure of value and can be used with confidence, taking this caveat into consideration.

The method used to develop an Irish anchor was based on a technique known as wellbeing valuation (Valuation Techniques for Social Cost-Benefit Analysis, DWP 2011), using population life satisfaction data).

The National Psychological Wellbeing and Distress Survey (NPWDS) carried out by the Health Research Board (Ireland) with a representative sample made up of 2,711 participants over 18 years of age was used as a base for the Irish

anchor. This survey corresponded with the general nature of the Rethink Ireland Education Fund as the survey evaluates wellbeing. In that study, self-confidence was found to be one of the key individual contributors to wellbeing and so was directly applicable to the SROI study with the Education Fund, as self-confidence had emerged as a well-defined outcome. Multivariate regression analysis was carried out. The model was found to be significant, explaining 40.5% of the variance in quality of life. In cooperation with Tim Goodspeed (Morethanoutputs), the evaluation team performed the overall calculation of self-confidence as an Irish anchor. This calculation included the following steps:

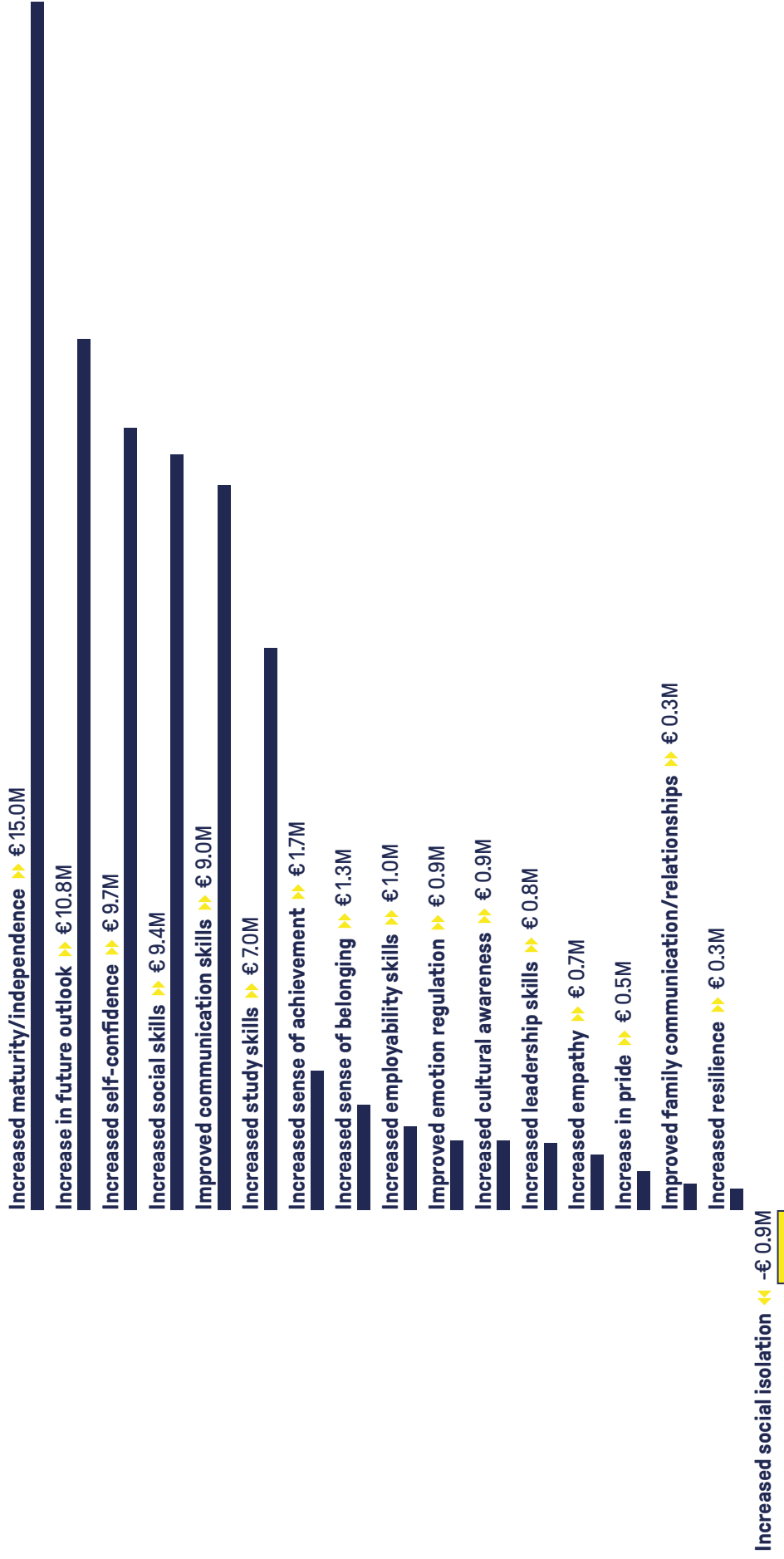
- The average household income in Ireland was used as a base for this calculation. The household income of €43,552 from 2019 was applied, which corresponded with the Education Fund evaluation timeline (CSO, 2019).
- Due to the lack of an Irish coefficient of lottery versus income effect on life satisfaction, the UK's coefficient was selected (Fujiwara, 2014). This value is 1.103.
- Self-confidence was selected as the anchor variable of interest. The Beta value for self-confidence in the regression was 0.217 (the Beta value consists of the degree of change in the outcome variable for every 1 unit of change in the predictor variable).
- The following formula was used to calculate the Irish anchor: $43,552 - e[\ln(43,552) - (0.217/1.103)] = 7,778$.

Therefore, we found that the value of self-confidence as an Irish anchor is €7,778. This is a national average, based on the sample in the NPWDS data. This figure represents the increased amount of income someone would need in a year in order to get the same increase in their happiness, wellbeing or quality of life that they experienced as a result of increased confidence.

Once the quantitative SROI data was collected, the quantity, value and causality were combined to calculate the total value of each outcome for participants³¹. Quantitative aggregation was used to recognise the most important outcomes across the Education Fund. As a result, we found that participants considered six outcomes as the most important. Participants ranked increased maturity/independence as the top outcome. This outcome was positioned 39% above the second-highest ranked outcome, more positive future outlook. Increased self-confidence, increased social skills, and improved communication skills are the other three well-defined outcomes ranked highly by participants. The gaps between these three well-defined outcomes were very close (3% to 4% respectively), showing less certainty in positioning these outcomes. Study skills are the sixth most crucial outcome recognised by participants, followed by other less significant outcomes.

31 The total value of well-defined outcomes per awardee project shows the ranking for each well-defined outcome by combining quantity, value and causality. Quantity refers to the number of participants who identified the change in each outcome. Participants were asked to rank each well-defined outcome according to its importance for them. Finally, they were asked how much of the change they experienced in each outcome was down to the awardee project, and if they thought some or all of the change would have happened without it.

Figure 3.11 – Total calculated value for each outcome category for participants across all projects



3.6.5 Monetising social outcomes and levelling the playing field

Monetary value, or presenting value in monetary terms, including the profit or loss of delivering products and activities, the salary and tax contributions from a job, or GDP, is most measured and accounted for, and the most established definition of success in Western societies.

Most organisations have a good insight into the cost aspect of running their programmes and activities through their annual and management accounts and budget reports. Usually, they also have experience with counting what they do with these resources by, for example, tracking the number of their participants. This can help them to provide some evidence that their programme activities lead to some sort of change, although only some organisations can explain clearly why all this matters and what would happen if they did not exist.

Due to the focus on financial value, many important outcomes and results provided by organisations are unnoticed as they cannot be easily quantified and monetised. For example, monetising social outcomes can be challenging as it proves to be difficult to ascribe value to outcomes representing different aspects of subjective wellbeing (e.g. self-confidence). As part of the SROI process, social changes are translated into monetary values to put them on a more level playing field with those changes and outcomes that can be easily monetised.

SROI is a principles-based framework for accounting of social value. It aims to reduce inequalities by including the value of changes in people's lives into our decision-making management information, which is achieved by presenting them in numbers alongside the other numbers that we use when making decisions. This is therefore more of a principle to produce these numbers that represent the lived experience of people in our accounts and management information, than an imperative to get the numbers precisely right. Measuring the impact of organisations and their activities on those things that matter is what is important to this framework. The principles are based around accountability and improvement. The things that

are measured must be:

- the changes in the lived experience of those we have impact on, as described by them; and
- valued by them from their perspective (what is it worth to them);

in order to:

- include what's important to them in the numbers we use to make decisions; and therefore,
- improve activities to create more of (or maximise) those things that are important to them.

Confidence and assurance in the numbers in this report should come from these principles, specifically ensuring that the numbers represent beneficiaries' stories. Confidence in using these numbers should not come from the precise figures.

Translating changes in people's lives into monetary values does not make these numbers absolute, objective or more scientific than their qualitative accounts about the change. Like many figures in financial accounts and economics that we use for decisions, the figures in this report are good enough indications of value to use in making decisions, however, they are not absolute, objective or precise.

The reader has to be careful not to make premature conclusions that we can reduce something like a person's independence to a number. At the same time, a person's independence should be, and needs to be, counted for something. The numbers in this report represent real people, their experiences with changes in their lives, and how important those changes were for them. Therefore, the translation of those changes into numbers to show the monetary value represents only a part of this story.

3.6.6 Calculating the Total Social Value for the Education Fund

Based on the Irish anchor value, SROI value maps were then completed for each awardee project. The overall total social value created so far for participants of the Education Fund was calculated³² followed by the total social value of the overall Education Fund.

A Social Return on Investment (SROI) ratio provides an overall comparison of resources and the social value they create. The calculation includes all the inputs required for an activity. Rethink Ireland funds rarely support 100% of project costs, and often the proportion of project costs supported within a fund varies from award to award. Within a complex structure of a fund like this there are, therefore, different ways to present and understand the SROI ratio. Here we present two helpful versions showing:

- The overall comparison of all the costs for awardee projects in the Education Fund;
- The proportion directly supported by the Education Fund investment.

We found that the total social value generated for project beneficiaries was just over €68m, with a total cost of €7,790,285 for the seven awardee projects over three years. The return on investment ratio is in a range around 1:9, meaning that for every euro invested in these seven awardee projects, €9 of social value was created.

Some 55% of the social value was directly created by the Education Fund investment of €4,302,479 through Rethink Ireland. The return on investment ratio for Rethink Ireland's investment is in a range around 1:12, meaning that for every euro invested in these seven awardee projects, €12 of social value was created.

In interpreting these SROI results, a number of points are important to consider:

- Arvidson et al. (2010: 6) point out that even though it uses monetary terms, the SROI ratio does not express financial value as such, but

should be seen as a comprehensive way of expressing the 'currency of social value'. This currency needs to be read with qualitative evidence based on stakeholder inquiry. The SROI process has shown that participants of all projects experienced positive change as a result of being involved with their projects, and experienced an increase in independence (maturity), developed a more positive future outlook, had increased self-confidence, and enhanced communication and social skills. Therefore, the value of these changes as valued by participants is what the total social value of €68m represents.

- The total return on investment *so far* refers to the value that projects created for their participants exclusively. This sum does not include the projects' value for other stakeholders (for example, parents and teachers).
- The SROI analysis revealed the differences between projects, specifically in connection to the cost per person and the value created per person. As revealed in this particular SROI analysis, projects with higher numbers of participants have lower unit costs, but they do not necessarily have higher social returns. A further analysis is required to explore the reasons for such differences between the projects which will be considered in the future research.
- It is important to contextualise the SROI findings, in the knowledge that the projects cater for different populations of young people with varying levels of need, from the most basic to more complex. Therefore, some projects are more costly to run than others and because of these innate differences between projects, direct comparison of social value figures is inappropriate.

³² The individual social value as created by each awardee project is intentionally not provided in this report, so as to avoid direct comparison of projects, which is ultimately not possible given their differences in focus, practice, size and duration. Rather, this figure has been provided to each awardee project via an individualised SROI report, enabling them to explore how they can do use this information and do more good for their participants.

**BUILDING A MODEL OF
EDUCATIONAL PROGRESSION
AND TRANSFORMATION**

04

4.1 Educational Progression Is About More Than Just ‘Hard Outcomes’

Recognising the persistence of educational inequality and disadvantage in Irish society, Rethink Ireland introduced the Education Fund as a way to confront this complex and persistent issue. The Education Fund was open to projects focused on improving educational outcomes for those experiencing educational disadvantage, and which specifically supported learners to progress from Levels 3–6 on the National Framework of Qualifications. As was explained in Section 3 earlier, given that the evaluation was specifically designed to have a macro focus and thus collate learning from projects categorised into specific thematic clusters (see Figure 2.2 on the Evaluation Framework), three clusters were subsequently created. *Cluster 1* (Lifelong learning/social inclusion) contains two projects and has a focus on enabling participants to experience social inclusion by supporting their educational progression through lifelong learning opportunities. *Cluster 2* (Curriculum reform/diverse pathways to adulthood) contains three projects and focuses on curriculum reform and supporting participants to engage in diverse pathways to adulthood. *Cluster 3* (Alternative centres of education/based outside mainstream schools) contains two projects and provides participants with alternative modes of education which are outside the mainstream system. As reported, the average progression rates of learners completing a QQI level qualification in their respective cluster varied from 91% in Cluster 1 to 94% in Cluster 2 and 54% in Cluster 3, between January 2018 and July 2020.

A simplistic analysis could quite easily, yet mistakenly, identify from these figures, projects deemed to be best at supporting learners to progress. However, as the data in Section 3 has already shown, these hard outcomes on educational progression need to be viewed within the broader context of the personal transformation of each learner. In other words, the concept of educational progression is highly nuanced across the three clusters and certainly involves more than just the receipt of a formal QQI parchment at the end of a learning

process. Therefore, as well as the projects aiding the educational progression of learners, the data revealed practices and processes used by projects which helped them ‘*act as enabling spaces in which students can form meaningful and respectful relationships and control over their lives*’ (Te Riele, 2014, p. 29).

The overarching aim of the evaluation was to ‘investigate the extent to which these practices and processes could serve as models of excellence in overcoming inequality in education’. Therefore, this section builds a new evidence-based model on Educational Progression and Transformation, enabling us to look inside the ‘black box’ of how these projects support their learners. The model serves two primary audiences:

- a) Other projects working with those who experience educational disadvantage in Ireland and internationally that need help around what works; and
- b) Irish education policymakers who have responsibility for enacting the Action Plan for Education (2016–2019), which includes addressing the needs of the participants in the projects of the three clusters, and for achieving the aim of SDG4, which is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and to promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

This model shows how the projects developed and implemented innovative approaches (named ‘actions’) to address various areas of the five strategic Goals in the Action Plan 2016–2019.

4.2 Building Our Model of Educational Progression and Transformation

Our model is built on three elements:

- 1) firstly, on the evidence gleaned from the evaluation as presented in Chapter 3;
- 2) secondly, on evidence from the published literature³³ on what best supports those experiencing education inequality to progress using an alternative approach, and
- 3) thirdly, on relevant current Irish government policy directives, namely the Action Plan for Education 2016–2019³⁴ (incorporating the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the specific sustainable development goal (No. 4) on education) and the Department’s Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2018–2023).

Let’s start by looking at the evidence from the published literature, followed by the Action Plan for Education.

4.2.1 ‘Key actions’, alternative approaches and pedagogies that support educational progression and transformation

While alternative education remains a contested term, there is agreement that alternative education, with its innovative curriculum and flexible programmes of study corresponding with students’ interests and needs, develops as a response to gaps in state-provided mainstream education (Sliwka, 2008: 93). According to Raywid (1999), alternative education programmes focus on: changing the school (popular innovations); changing the student (last-chance and remedial

schools); or changing the education system. The *Youth at Risk*-type provisions attempt to change students’ behaviour and are also recognised as last-chance, remedial-focused programmes. The aim of these programmes is for a student to return to mainstream education after successful completion of the programme (Raywid, 1994). The *Learning Choice* approach addresses the need for schools to change and embrace the students’ need for different learning environments and structural changes in mainstream schools (Tierney, 2018: 23). This approach recognises several factors in students’ disengagement from learning, including low socioeconomic status, family situation, social and gender issues, cultural and ethnic barriers, mental health issues, and learning difficulties (McGregor et al., 2015).

The onus on changing the education system itself has been recently recognised. As shown in the first report from this evaluation (Kovačič et al., 2019), student-led and student-centred approaches and pedagogies have been recently adopted by mainstream schools in, for example, Germany, Alberta (Canada), Singapore and Finland (Morgan, 2014; Sliwka and Yee, 2015; Lee et al., 2016). A broader focus on education in which a partnership between teachers and students is at the core was the primary aim of reform of the education system in Alberta (Sliwka and Yee, 2015: 181). As recognised by Portuguese researchers (Nada et al., 2018), alternative approaches and pedagogies focusing on students’ needs and complex trajectories could be adapted by mainstream schools to support students’ progression in education. Germany’s alternative education builds on concepts of student choice and agency, active engagement in learning, and diversity as a resource for learning. The notion of diversity in education in opposition to the concept of homogeneity was recognised as essential for the future development of mainstream schools. Initiatives such as this resulted in a changing policy context in some states, and introduced the

33 The end-of-year-1 evaluation report on the Education Fund contained an extensive section on ‘alternative education’ – see <http://www.childandfamilyresearch.ie/cfrc/publications/policyreports/>

34 The Evaluation Team acknowledges other policy initiatives crucial for understanding the Model of Educational Progression and Transformation. Specifically, it considers the importance of the succeeding Action Plan 2019–2021 and the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018–2023.

idea of a new type of school based on principles addressing achievement, equity, wellbeing, and a focus on personal and cooperative learning (Sliwka and Yee, 2015).

As recognised by Davies, Lamb and Doecke (cited in Te Riele, 2014, p. 29), attention to students' wellbeing is one of the key strategies used in alternative education settings. Kitty Te Riele (2014) recognises *key actions* that alternative education provision uses to support students' wellbeing in Australia. She lists six actions which make these education settings successful: 1) create meaningful learning opportunities, 2) provide significant support for learning, 3) build genuine and caring relationships, 4) provide practical support for living, 5) engage with community and 6) carry out reflection and innovation (p. 54). Relationships grounded in mutual respect and trust make students feel like adults and equals. Developing positive and beneficial relationships between staff and students and providing care to students in the context of learning is vital. Respectful, genuine and caring relationships between students and teachers are crucial for the success of alternative education programmes (Te Riele, 2014, p. 29). A favourable climate does not resonate from individual relationships only, but is embedded in the whole institutional culture, providing a safe, welcoming and supportive place. These actions support the development of personal and social outcomes in students.

Other international evidence (Raywid, 1994; Aron, 2006; Thomson and Pennacchia, 2014; McCluskey and Mills, 2018; Pennacchia and Thomson, 2018; Tierney, 2018; Yoon and Kim, 2018) was gathered to highlight the key actions underpinning the work in alternative education provision. Findings across these studies show five characteristics, namely 1) small-scale, informal and less bureaucratic education provision; 2) one-to-one interactions between teachers and students; 3) a flexible and student-centred curriculum; 4) a focus on students' personal, professional and emotional development; 5) duration of the programme and curriculum offerings.

Referring back to the key findings from the end-of-year-1 evaluation report on this Education Fund (Kovačič et al., 2019), the following five actions were identified as key by participants and as central to their success: 1) alternative ways of learning; 2) one-to-one relationships with mentors; 3) a focus on developing personal development skills; 4) caring and supportive relationships with staff and other participants; and 5) projects being 'sanctuaries', that is, less structured and more informal and flexible.

These actions, together with other opportunities provided by the projects (for more see Section 3 above), are crucial in supporting students' progression in education.

4.2.2 The links between current education policy directives and the Model of Educational Progression and Transformation

The Action Plan for Education 2016–2019

The Irish Government's Action Plan for Education 2016–2019 serves as a policy aspiration and a way to interpret and situate the findings of this evaluation. The Action Plan for Education was launched in 2016 with a vision to make *'the Irish education and training service the best in Europe by 2026'* (DES, 2016). This policy document was informed by the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (see Appendix 4). The Plan is based on the principle of improving education for each learner, specifically those who are affected by disadvantage or have special needs. The policy aspiration behind this document is to be best at:

- Harnessing education to break down barriers for groups at risk of exclusion.
- Delivering a learning experience to the highest international standards.
- Equipping learners of all ages and capacities to participate and succeed in a changing world.
- Allowing Ireland to be a leader across a broad range of fields: scientific, cultural, enterprise and public service (DES, 2016).

The Plan recognises the need to ensure the highest standard in leadership, management, quality frameworks, teaching methods and training, and to promote innovation and excellence by mainstreaming successful approaches (DES, 2016, p. 2). The Action Plan has five goals, each supported by sets of strategic activities. The goals are designed to:

- 1) Improve the learning experience and the success of learners.
- 2) Improve the progress of learners at risk of educational disadvantage or learners with special educational needs.
- 3) Help those delivering education services to continually improve.
- 4) Build stronger bridges between education and the wider community.
- 5) Improve national planning and support services.

Appendix 5 summarises the five goals and the strategic activities for each goal.

Education Action Plan Statement of Strategy 2019–2021

Our Model of Educational Progression and Transformation specifically addresses the objectives of the five Goals from the Action Plan 2016–2019 as this policy plan corresponds with the timelines of the Rethink Ireland Education Fund. In 2019, the Department of Education released the Action Plan Statement of Strategy 2019–2021, with five key Goals:

- 1) Shape a responsive education and training system that meets the needs and raises the aspirations of all learners.
- 2) Advance the progress of learners at risk of educational disadvantage and learners with special educational needs in order to support them to achieve their potential.
- 3) Equip education and training providers with the skills and support to provide a quality learning experience.
- 4) Intensify the relationships between education and the wider community, society and the economy.
- 5) Lead in the delivery of strategic direction and supportive systems in partnership with key stakeholders in education and training.

These strategic goals are built on the legacy of the Action Plan 2016–2019; however, there is a change in tone from the previous Statement of Strategy, with an emphasis now on enabling people to achieve their potential (DES, 2019). The main vision of this Action Plan is to focus on providing a quality learning system which empowers learners to make better choices (DES, 2019: 3). The values guiding this Action Plan are: the learner is placed at the centre of education strategy and policy development, and learning is

valued as a public good ‘in light of its core role in the development, cohesion and wellbeing of an inclusive society’ (ibid.: 4). The evaluation team believes that the key clusters and the overall actions of the Education Fund can inform and serve as a guide in implementing the Action Plan 2019–2021.

The Department of Education has focused on creating a robust wellbeing policy for education, launching the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2018–2023). The Action Plan 2016–2019 was (among other strategies and initiatives) informed by the Wellbeing Policy Statement and its ideas also inform our Model of Educational Progression and Transformation. Key ideas from the Wellbeing Strategy are presented next.

Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018–2023 (Revised October 2019)

The Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018–2023 was introduced to support schools and centres for education in wellbeing promotion. The wellbeing policy suggests that what is ‘most beneficial in the promotion of wellbeing in education is to adopt a preventative, whole-school approach that is multi-component and evidence-informed’ (DES, 2018: 1). Key principles guiding this policy are: children’s and young people’s wellbeing needs and their best interests are of the utmost importance; equitable, fair and inclusive access to opportunities to develop wellbeing; the use of evidence-informed practice; outcomes focused; and partnership and collaboration with other departments and agencies as wellbeing of children is a shared responsibility.

In line with the Junior Cycle Wellbeing Guidelines (NCCA, 2017), the wellbeing policy and framework is built around four core components:

- Culture and environment
- Curriculum (teaching and learning)
- Policy and planning
- Relationships and partnerships (DES, 2018: 15).

The following indicators of success are recognised as broad outcomes that schools and centres for education should accomplish (DES: 2018: 21):

Culture & Environment:

- Children, young people and staff experience a sense of belonging and feel safe, connected and supported.
- Systems are in place so that the voice of the child/young person, teacher and parent are heard and lead to improvements in school culture and ethos.

Curriculum (Teaching & Learning):

- Children and young people experience positive, high-quality teaching, learning and assessment, which provide opportunities for success for all.
- Children and young people access curricular activities to promote their physical, social and emotional competence to enhance their overall wellbeing.

Policy & Planning:

- Schools and centres for education use a Self-Evaluation Wellbeing Promotion Process to develop, implement and review wellbeing promotion.
- Schools and centres for education incorporate wellbeing promotion into whole-school policies and practices.

Relationships & Partnerships:

- Children and young people, their parents and other external partners are actively involved in wellbeing promotion within the school community.
- All adults in schools and centres for education have an increased awareness of the importance of wellbeing promotion, including listening to children and young people, and signposting them to internal or external pathways for support when needed (p. 21).

4.3 Applying the Model of Educational Progression and Transformation to the Clusters

Taking Te Riele's (2014) concept of 'actions' and combining them with the goals and strategic activities from the Action Plan for Education incorporating SDG No. 4, we introduce a new, custom-built, evidence-based model on Educational Progression and Transformation. The application of this model to the data collected across each of the three clusters identifies and explores the '*critical actions*' used by Education Fund awardees that focus on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. This model shows how the projects developed and implemented innovative approaches (actions) to address inequalities in education, which speak directly to the five strategic Goals in the Action Plan 2016–2019. The process allows us then to offer micro recommendations for practice along with macro considerations for policymakers in Section 5.

4.3.1 Applying the Model to Cluster 1

Table 4.1 offers a reminder of the focus of Cluster 1 and the names of the projects involved (see column 2). Goals 1, 2 & 4 from the Action Plan are of particular relevance to this cluster and are shown in column 3. The 'strategic activities' from the Action Plan are shown in column 4 and are used to structure the 'actions' which have emerged from the evaluation data, guided by Te Riele's (2014) work and deemed necessary to support participants with their educational progression and transformation.

Goal 1: Improving the learning experience and the success of learners

Cluster 1 actions address some activities and objectives of Goal 1 (Improve the learning experience and the success of learners) of the Action Plan 2016–2019. Based on the findings, this part suggests critical actions that can inform the implementation of Goal 1 objectives, specifically: wellbeing; critical skills, knowledge and competencies; and information technology.

Wellbeing:

Findings in the first and this final evaluation reports show that awardee projects provide safe, calm and non-judgemental learning space for adult learners who may have a negative experience with previous education or lack of opportunities in education. Study participants emphasised issues around safety, calmness and informal environment for their engagement with their studies. In some cases, they compared their projects with families and 'smells of scones' to emphasise the importance of secure and friendly space for their emotional engagement with the programmes (for more see Rethink Ireland (SIFI) Report 1, Vignette section). Supported learning and addressing students' personal needs was another action recognised as a crucial link between students' wellbeing and educational progression. Adult learners coming from under-represented groups face several life challenges and, in most cases, education needs to fit into their already-busy lives. Addressing students' needs requires projects to provide different types of support and assistance on the students' educational journeys. Findings show that flexibility around the submission of student work, using compensation and blended learning methods, and supporting students by appointing an occupational therapist or community worker to provide emotional and appraisal support are recognised as key for students' engagement with studies and for their wellbeing.

Critical skills, knowledge and competencies:

Awardee projects use a holistic approach to learning by focusing on personal development and life skills as part of students' education. As shown in the SROI part (see Section 3.6), projects assist students in developing several outcomes and skills (e.g. independence, future outlook, social skills, communication skills, study skills, etc.). The actions that projects use to assist students in developing these skills are incorporated into the projects' curricula and daily work. Working on students' strengths and needs is at the core of these actions.

Table 4.1 – Cluster 1 ‘Emerging Actions’ underpinned by Action Plan Goals and Strategic Actions

| COLUMN 1 | COLUMN 2 | COLUMN 3 | COLUMN 4 | COLUMN 5 |
|-------------------------|---|---|---|--|
| Cluster 1 | Lifelong learning/ Social inclusion | Action Plan 2016–2019 Goals | Action Plan 2016–2019: Objectives and actions of each goal corresponding with the objectives of Cluster 1 | Cluster 1 Actions (guided by Te Riele, 2014) addressing Action Plan Goals, objectives and actions |
| Focus of Cluster | Social inclusion, Adult learners and People with intellectual disabilities | Goal 1: Improve the learning experience and the success of learners | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Wellbeing - Critical skills, knowledge and competencies - Greater subject choice - Information technology | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Providing a safe, calm and non-judgemental learning space/ supported learning - Caring and supportive relationships with staff and other participants - Focus on personal development and development of life skills - Exposure to a wide range of subjects and opportunities to change subject area - Student-centred, technologically informed learning and blended learning opportunities |
| Name of Projects | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - An Cosán, - Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities (TCPID) | Goal 2: Improve the progress of learners at risk of educational disadvantage or learners with special educational needs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Participation in and access to third-level education - Learning experience - Progress and access | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Opportunities to access third-level education for adults from disadvantaged areas and people with intellectual disabilities - Student-centred and student needs-based approach to learning - Reducing the participation gap in third-level education |
| | | Goal 4: Build stronger bridges between education and the wider community | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support local communities - Lifelong learning - Informed career choices - Entrepreneurship, creativity and innovative research | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strengthening partnership with communities - Providing programmes in the area of adult education and social inclusion for young adults with intellectual disabilities - Mentorship, reflective practice - Strengthening partnership with businesses |

Information technology:

Technologically informed and blended learning is incorporated in the work of the awardee projects. TCPID students talked about technological upskilling (i.e., using computers, knowing how to send emails, working with MS Office and operating scanners or photocopiers) being at the core of their employability skills. Blended learning is at the heart of the work of An Cosán VCC. Findings show that students value blended learning as it provides them with flexibility and allows them to attend classes with people from across Ireland. Adult learners mentioned that blended learning enables them to balance family and education and made third-level studies more accessible. Despite positive aspects of blended learning, students mentioned challenges around connectivity and isolation. Technical assistance is recognised as necessary, especially in the early stages of engagement with the education programme. Students also believed that combining face-to-face and online learning was important.

Goal 2: Improve the progress of learners at risk of educational disadvantage or learners with special educational needs

The recognised areas of focus on actions for Goal 2 applicable to Cluster 1 activities are 1) participation and access to third-level education; 2) learning experience; and 3) progress and access.

Participation and access to third-level education:

An Cosán VCC and TCPID programmes are widening access to third level for adult learners who have been traditionally excluded from college education: adults from disadvantaged areas and people with intellectual disabilities. An Cosán VCC enables these opportunities through community education by delivering single modules and accredited and non-accredited education programmes. The programme provides scholarships to several students and uses blended learning to provide access to adult learners as widely as possible. TCPID operates at the premises of Trinity College Dublin and widens access to the college to young adults with intellectual disabilities. The positioning of the programme in the core of the campus life is key to

addressing issues around diversity and inclusion concerning disability, specifically intellectual disability.

Learning experience:

A student-centred and student needs-based approach to learning has been used by both programmes. Findings show that this approach helps students to recognise their strengths and enables a gradual approach to learning (for more see Rethink Ireland (SIFI) Report 1, Vignette section). An Cosán VCC consciously seeks to create an alternative, welcoming space. Hospitality, providing 'a place of heart and home', is integral to their ethos. An Cosán VCC aims to offer a safe, friendly and encouraging environment where all students feel welcome, while also ensuring a professional service so that students are confident their interests are reliably managed. The learning environment is based on a technologically enhanced model of community education and adult learning, which builds on foundational concepts and practises inclusion, participation, capacity building, and social action. Group-work activities and discussions are used to introduce students to one another, the course tutor and moderator, the course content, and the virtual learning environment. Group dialogue, discussion and creative activities are used to foster students' relationships, participative learning, and group-work skills. TCPID applies several courses, such as human rights, drama, sign language and film studies, to help students explore different ways of learning and combines these areas of knowledge with more traditionally recognised understandings. The importance of drama was explicitly discussed by students, who mentioned that this course allowed them to experience different roles and insights into people's lives.

Progress and access:

As shown in Table 4.1 above, in total, both programmes provided access to education to adults in the period January 2018–July 2020. As shown earlier, pathways to access and progression need to be approached in the broader environments within which students live. For example, young learners with intellectual disabilities face personal and structural

challenges on their pathways to adulthood. Findings show that TCPID enhances independence in students by providing information and courses tailored according to their needs and interests. As explained in other parts of this discussion, An Cosán VCC provides gradual, student-focused progression pathways to education and employment. The programme offers different types of modules and courses (single module, non-accredited and accredited courses) to engage students in education. Strong links with communities provide students with opportunities to explore topics of community development, meet new people and get involved in local initiatives as volunteers, interns or employees.

Goal 4: Build stronger bridges between education and the wider community

Several Cluster 1 actions can be used to address four actions in Goal 4: 1) support local communities; 2) lifelong learning; 3) informed career choices; and 4) entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation.

Support local communities:

Community education is at the centre of neighbourhoods and serves as a link between students and communities. As shown by An Cosán VCC, strengthening the partnership with community stakeholders can be used as a step towards inclusion for students. Working closely with community partners makes students more aware of community needs also.

Lifelong learning:

Both programmes, TCPID and An Cosán VCC, provide education in the area of adult education by explicitly addressing issues around social inclusion. TCPID caters for young adults with intellectual disabilities and provides for them one of the few opportunities available in Ireland to attend third-level education. An Cosán VCC provides adult education to marginalised and disadvantaged adults, including asylum seekers, socioeconomically disadvantaged adults and lone parents. Findings show that lifelong learning is hugely linked with social inclusion and available opportunities. As mentioned by study participants, asylum seekers have minimal opportunities for education, which is a crucial

stepping-stone to other avenues, such as employment.

Informed career choices:

TCPID provides placement opportunities in year 2, which students considered one of the most valuable aspects of the programme. Mentoring provided at the placement supports students in their transition to employment. When they are supported, they become an invaluable part of work settings. Mentors mentioned that students perform tasks with enthusiasm and show a high level of dedication and professionalism towards work. When included in jobs, they positively affect businesses and business culture. However, as recognised by most mentors, opportunities for temporary employment for people with intellectual disabilities are still scarce, which requires further action in terms of policy and practice. An Cosán uses reflective practice as a tool in guiding students' decisions about courses and future pathways. Students are taught to become owners of their progression through reflective practice, which allows them to reflect on their wishes and future directions.

Entrepreneurship, Creativity and Innovation:

Working closely with business partners proved to be an innovative and effective way to support inclusion and acceptance of people with intellectual disabilities in the area of employment. As mentors have mentioned, students on work placement brought in different thinking and different ways to approach work life, and so transformed the work culture in busy business environments.

4.3.2 Applying the Model to Cluster 2

Table 4.2 offers a reminder of the focus of Cluster 2 and the names of the projects involved (see column 2). Goals 1, 2 & 4 from the Action Plan are of particular relevance to this cluster and are shown in column 3. The 'strategic activities' from the Action Plan are shown in column 4 and are used to structure the 'actions' which have emerged from the evaluation data, guided by Te Riele's (2014) work and deemed to be necessary to support participants with their educational progression and transformation.

Table 4.2 – Cluster 2 ‘Emerging Actions’ underpinned by Action Plan Goals and Strategic Actions

| CLUSTER 2 | Curriculum reform/ Pathways to adulthood | Action Plan 2016–2019 Goals | Action plan 2016–2019: Objectives and actions of each goal corresponding with the objectives of Cluster 2 | Cluster 2 actions (guided by Te Riele, 2014) addressing Action Plan Goals, objectives and actions |
|-------------------------|--|---|--|---|
| Focus of Cluster | Curriculum reform, Diverse pathways to adulthood | Goal 1: Improve the learning experience and the success of learners | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Wellbeing - Critical skills, knowledge and competencies - Greater subject choice | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A holistic approach to learning: personal and academic development - A focus on developing life and transferable skills (soft outcomes) - A range of activities, tasters, programmes and summer schools |
| Name of Projects | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Aspire2 - Fast Track Academy - Trinity Access 21 | Goal 2: Improve the progress of learners at risk of educational disadvantage or learners with special educational needs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Participation in and access to third-level education - Learning experience - Progress and access | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Widening access to third-level education for students from socioeconomically disadvantaged areas - Student-centred approach: students become agents of their education - Increased numbers of students going to third level - Recognising diverse pathways to further education and employment |
| | | Goal 4: Build stronger bridges between education and the wider community | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Informed career choices | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mentoring, showing pathways, role models |

Goal 1: Improve the learning experience and the success of learners

Actions used by the awardee projects in Cluster 2 correspond with three objectives of Goal 1, namely wellbeing; critical skills, knowledge and competencies; and greater subject choice.

Wellbeing:

A holistic approach to learning focusing on the personal and academic development of their participants is the key action used by the awardee projects in Cluster 2. Findings show that the projects provide different types of support to students to enhance their wellbeing, generally educational support and wellbeing support. Photovoice stories illustrate the role of the projects in providing study support, such

as tutorials and grinds, to students. Students considered study support crucial for their progression in education, but also as a means of relieving anxiety and stress. An important aspect of support for students was having access to a study room. A study room was depicted as a quiet place where students could concentrate and do their work. This is an important finding in the area of student wellbeing, knowing that participants from larger families in disadvantaged communities do not have room to study. For example, illustrative data from online photovoice shows that students struggled with lack of learning space during the pandemic. Awardee projects also provide participants with access to mindfulness or other activities such as Zumba, helping to ease stress. Students who participated in these activities (for more see Photovoice, Aspire2) explained that learning how to mind oneself is equally if not more important than succeeding in education.

Critical skills, knowledge and competencies:

A focus on developing life skills and soft outcomes, ranging from self-confidence to study, social, leadership and communication skills, to future outlook and empathy, is one of the critical actions used by the three awardee projects. As shown in the SROI section (Section 3.6 above), these skills and outcomes are what students value most in projects. For example, members of the Youth Advisory Board (Trinity Access 21, Focus group) mentioned that self-confidence and study skills that they developed through TA 21 activities helped them to transition to third-level education successfully. Certain skills and competencies, such as belief in oneself, sense of hope and achievement, are critical for students from DEIS schools to progress in education. A key action that Cluster 2 projects use in this regard is bolstering and supporting development skills by providing several activities and opportunities to students to see beyond their immediate local settings (for more see next: Greater subject choice).

Greater subject choice:

The three projects are not set in mainstream schools but provide informal activities in the schools or at their premises. The range of activities, including STEM, robotics, programmes

such as Pathways to Law, Pathways to Economics and Pathways to Journalism, and summer schools serve as a taster. Exploring different subject areas contribute to students' curiosity and interest, and also helps them to become independent learners. Combining formal education with informal activities provided by external projects (such as these in Cluster 2) can contribute to greater subject choice. In addition, students can make informed decisions about their future pathways by seeing how subject areas operate in practice (for more, see the section on career guidance below).

Goal 2: Improve the progress of learners at risk of educational disadvantage or learners with special educational needs

Actions used in Cluster 2 projects can address three objectives of Goal 2 in the Action Plan 2016–2019: participation in and access to third-level education; learning experience; and progress and access.

Participation in and access to third-level education:

All three projects in Cluster 2 focus their work in the area of widening access to third-level education for students from DEIS schools/ disadvantaged areas. As shown earlier, these projects significantly contribute to broader access for students from socioeconomically disadvantaged areas to college. The participant tracker information shows that more than 70% continue with third-level education after engaging with these projects. However, as further elaborated in the career guidance section, other student preferences in connection to future paths to adulthood need to be considered as equally valid by policy and practice.

Learning experience:

A student-centred approach to learning by focusing on students' strengths and needs is incorporated into the work of the three awardee projects. One-to-one study support is provided to participants by volunteers and tutors with the idea that students become agents of their learning. Study participants reported less formal and less hierarchical relationships with tutors, volunteers and project staff. Mentoring

is embedded in the learning experience of these projects. Different types of mentoring, by employing mentors from outside the schools, contribute to richer learning experiences. Mentoring proves to be particularly important in connection with career guidance (for more see below).

Progress and access:

As shown in the discussion of participation and access, the three projects contribute to higher numbers of students from disadvantaged areas accessing third-level education. To understand the projects' work in this area, it is essential to look at how they understand the idea of progression. As shown in Section 3, progression needs to be approached as an ecological concept, considering the role of students, their families, communities and society in the process. Study participants mentioned that a cultural shift on all these levels is required to support a diversity of students attending college. Students who do not have family experience with university need to be supported and adequately informed about what university education entails. As reported in the findings, students from DEIS schools have a lack of expectation regarding college. As discussed by the study participants, a whole-school approach to cultural change is needed to change the culture of progression. Projects use activities such as role models, peer mentoring and visiting colleges. These changes do not happen in isolation but are the result of changing relationships between students, teachers and parents. Last, the diversity of students and their contribution needs to be recognised by universities, which need to become more inclusive by providing more places to students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Goal 4: Build stronger bridges between education and the wider community

Informed career choices:

Findings show that the Cluster 2 awardee projects have an essential role in helping participants make informed career choices. Mentorship is used to show students diverse pathways to further education and employment. Business mentors present their own experiences with transition to adulthood to students, and make the process practical and real. They also help students with searching for information about different education programmes or to develop skills such as writing a CV. Findings also show that different types of mentoring, including peer or academic mentoring, is used by projects (e.g., Trinity Access 21) to address the issue of future choices from different perspectives. Mentorship, which is a crucial action used by the awardee projects in Cluster 2, helps students make informed decisions about their future pathways and also prepares them for the idea that making a mistake or changing one's mind is part of life. Projects provide other activities and support to help students prepare for future career choices. For example, Aspire2 organises visits to university Open Days and Trinity Access 21 provides several activities and programmes at the campus, serving as teasers for future decisions. In cooperation with local businesses, Fast Track Academy provides business mentorship opportunities for students.

4.3.3 Applying the Model to Cluster 3

Table 4.3 offers a reminder of the focus of Cluster 3 and the names of the projects involved (see column 2). Goals 1, 2 & 4 from the Action Plan are of particular relevance to this cluster and are shown in column 3. The 'strategic activities' from the Action Plan are shown in column 4 and are used to structure the 'actions' which have emerged from the evaluation data, guided by Te Riele's (2014) work and deemed to be necessary to support participants with their educational progression and transformation.

Table 4.3 – Cluster 3 ‘Emerging Actions’ underpinned by Action Plan Goals and Strategic Actions

| Cluster 3 | Alternative centres of education/ based outside of mainstream schools | Action Plan 2016–2019 Goals | Action plan 2016–2019: Objectives and actions of each goal corresponding with the objectives of Cluster 3 | Cluster 3 actions (guided by Te Riele, 2014) addressing Action Plan Goals, objectives and actions |
|-------------------------|--|---|--|---|
| Focus of Cluster | Alternative provision of education for young people who do not fit in mainstream schools | Goal 1: Improve the learning experience and the success of learners | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Wellbeing - Critical skills, knowledge and competencies - Information technology | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Holistic, wraparound approach to personal development - Student-specific support, exposing students to curricular and non-formal activities - Blended learning to support students with anxiety and mental health issues |
| Name of Projects | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cork Life Centre - iScoil | Goal 2: Improve the progress of learners at risk of educational disadvantage or learners with special educational needs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Participation in and access to third-level education - Learning experience - Progress and access | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Opportunities to access third-level education for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds - A student-centred and tailored approach to learning; students’ strengths and passion - Progression as a lifelong journey |
| | | Goal 4: Build stronger bridges between education and the wider community | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support local communities - Parents & learners - Informed career choices | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Working in partnership with communities through collaboration with community organisations - Alternative provision of education outside of mainstream school (safe and secure environment) - The importance of presenting learners with alternative options to education and employment |

Goal 1: Improve the learning experience and the success of learners

Wellbeing:

Cluster 3 projects work with young people who do not fit in mainstream schools. As shown in Section 3 earlier, students attending alternative provision face a complexity of issues, including mental health, anxiety, school and social phobia and learning disability. It is important to emphasise that other problems such as bullying and continuous suspension are recognised as a cause for students not attending mainstream schools. A combination of personal issues and school responses has a profound impact on students' wellbeing. Findings in this evaluation show that two awardee projects use a holistic, wraparound approach to personal development to support students' wellbeing and their progression in education. This approach puts a young person at the centre and addresses students' needs by working together with young people's families or guardians. Findings in this evaluation show that both projects work closely with other community organisations, i.e., community support workers, education welfare officers, and community organisations such as Jigsaw and Meitheal Mara to support young students. The discussion on SROI above (Section 3.6) shows what students value most resulting from the projects' activities. Soft outcomes such as increased self-confidence, future outlook, social skills, communication skills and study skills show how actions used by projects contribute to students' wellbeing.

Critical skills, knowledge and competencies:

As suggested in the Action Plan 2016–2019, the role of all levels of education and training in developing essential skills, knowledge and competencies needs to be recognised. Cluster 3 projects combine a few approaches to build students' skills, knowledge and competencies by following the national curriculum and providing non-formal activities. The programmes offer courses and tutorials for students to progress to QQI Levels 3 and 4. However, students are encouraged to develop their passions and follow those areas of knowledge they are most interested in. As shown in the photovoice piece, students are supported in pursuing their interests, such as photography and cars, or drawing and singing. The two projects work

closely with communities. They involve other stakeholders in the learning process to show students how to develop more practical skills (such as woodwork, mechanics or gardening). They also provide opportunities for community involvement and attending international events, such as volunteering in a local community or abroad, or attending summer schools. Study participants reported the development of crucial skills and competencies, such as communication and social skills, maturity and independence.

Information technology:

The importance of information technology when working with the most vulnerable students has been recognised by iScoil. Blended and online approaches to learning have done particularly well with students who experience social phobia and high levels of anxiety. As reported by some parents, online learning was the only opportunity for their children to get involved in education. It is important to note that some students may experience social isolation as a result of this type of learning; therefore, it needs to be considered what type of students are the best fit for online learning. For example, the data shows that students liked to learn online in community centres where they could also meet their friends. For students who were not able to leave the house due to anxiety or social phobia, online learning at home was a preferred and the only viable option.

Goal 2: Improve the progress of learners at risk of educational disadvantage or learners with special educational needs

Participation in and access to third-level education:

One of the projects in Cluster 3, Cork Life Centre, provides Leaving Cert support to their students. The data shows that approximately 90% of their 6th-year students continue with third-level education, which indicates that students who were not suited to mainstream schooling continue with further, high-level education. Tutors in the Centre are volunteers from different educational backgrounds, who provide one-to-one study guidance to students.

Learning experience:

As stated in the Action Plan 2016–2019, the government *'will expand the range of education and training programmes to meet better*

the needs of key target groups including the unemployed and early school leavers'. (DES, 2016: 27). The work of the awardee projects in Cluster 3 shows that such programmes already exist and stronger cooperation with these and other similar programmes should be established first. In connection to access to such programmes, it is crucial to look at the environment in which the programmes operate and how they differ from mainstream schools. The data shows that students valued these settings as being informal, safe and family-like. Access to education is still not provided equally to all students in Ireland, as shown in the example of iScoil. As mentioned in Section 3, students who drop out from iScoil have no further option to engage in formal education. As described by one education welfare officer, they are neglected by the state. Projects in Cluster 3 use a student-centred and tailored approach to learning to make the learning experience as suited to students as possible. iScoil develops learning plans for students, who can engage with studies according to their abilities. Cork Life Centre provides opportunities for students to pursue their passions, for example, supporting a student in developing their comics.

Progress and access:

Findings show that the idea of progression in Cluster 3 is understood as an ecological and lifelong journey. Progression needs to be approached as part of the broader 'environment [of the student] by considering students' needs, resources and opportunities'. SROI research showed that students value actions – such as student-focused and supportive learning – which are focused on both personal and academic development of students and used to support personal development. Soft outcomes, which students also call 'life skills', are valued as much as (if not more than) academic knowledge. Most importantly, the data shows a strong correlation between soft and hard outcomes, suggesting that educational progression strongly depends on students' belief in themselves, sense of achievement, pride and belonging to the school community.

Goal 4: Build stronger bridges between education and the wider community

Support local communities:

Both projects are at the centre of their local communities and have established strong links with community partners. The relationship works as a two-way street: the projects provide space for community activities at their premises, and students attend events at local projects.

Parents & learners (greater choice of school type):

Providing parents and learners with a stronger voice at school level is another policy commitment recognised in the Action Plan 2016–2019. In light of this, it is essential to consider the voices of parents and learners in relation to alternative provision also. Students and parents involved in the Cluster 3 projects talked about the importance of the alternative provision of education for students' personal and academic development. Many discussed these settings as friendlier and safer than mainstream schools and as their preferred choice of education.

Informed career choices:

An important message gathered from the data on Cluster 3 projects is that students need to be informed about different pathways to education and employment corresponding to their abilities, needs and passions. Findings show that third level should not be recognised and promoted as the only option of progression – students should be able to explore and inform themselves about other equally valuable options. Parents emphasised that it is vital that their children get involved in something that is meaningful for them, which will allow them to lead 'a good life'. The actions used by the projects show that mentoring and engagement with a wide range of activities (as mentioned above) helps students in making decisions about future pathways.

4.4 Conclusion

The application of our Model of Educational Progression and Transformation, underpinned by current policy, identified the 'critical actions' used by Education Fund awardees in their work with participants. Table 4.4 lists the full set of critical actions, categorised by the key Goals and activities of the Action Plan for Education 2016–2019.

Section 5 brings the report to a conclusion by offering recommendations for both policy and practice.

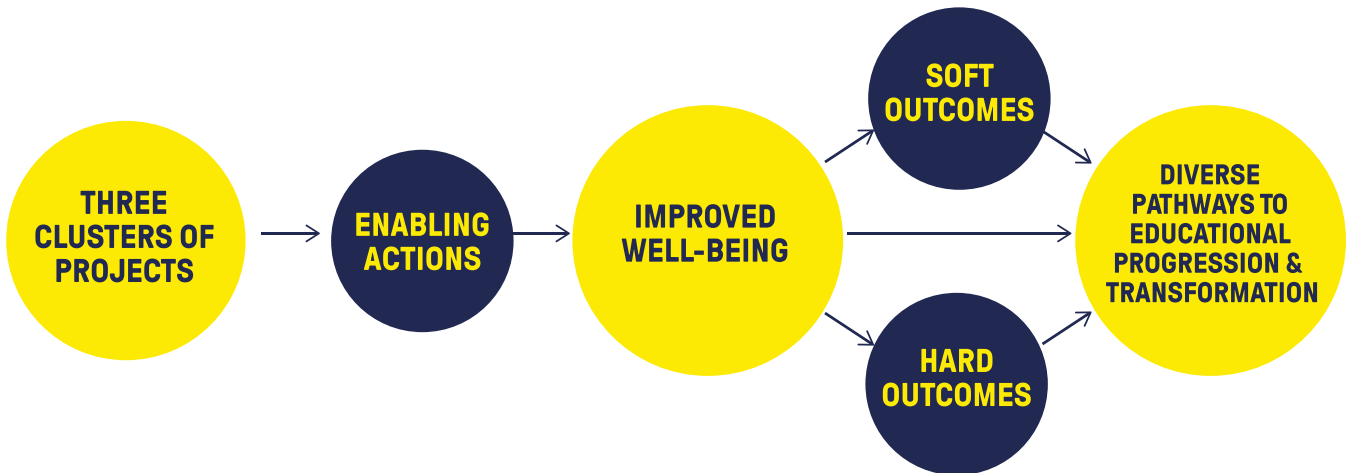
Table 4.4 – Cross-Cutting Critical Actions from the Three Clusters

| ACTION PLAN GOALS | ACTION PLAN OBJECTIVES AND ACTIONS | ACTIONS (INFORMED BY TE RIELE, 2014) TAKEN ACROSS THE CLUSTERS |
|---|---|---|
| GOAL 1: Improve the learning experience and the success of learners | Wellbeing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Providing safe, calm and non-judgemental space - A quiet study room - A holistic wraparound approach to learning - Supported learning: caring and supportive relationships at the core of learning |
| | Critical skills, knowledge and competencies | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Focus on personal development and development of life skills (soft outcomes) |
| | Greater subject choice | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A range of subjects and activities available from formal and informal education providers (curricular and non-curricular activities) |
| | Information technology | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Technologically informed and blended learning |
| GOAL 2: Improve the progress of learners at risk of educational disadvantage or learners with special educational needs | Participation and access to third-level education | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Widening access to third-level education for disadvantaged students (socioeconomic disadvantage, mental health issues and people with intellectual disabilities) |
| | Learning experience | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A student-centred and student needs-led approach to learning |
| | Progress and access | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Progress as a lifelong journey - Progress and access as an individual and social concept - Increased number of students going to third level |
| GOAL 4: Build stronger bridges between education and the wider community | Support local communities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strengthening partnership with local communities |
| | Parents and learners | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Alternative provision centres as a choice outside of mainstream education |
| | Lifelong learning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Programmes in the area of adult education and educational and social inclusion for people with intellectual disabilities |
| | Informed career choices | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recognising diverse pathways to further education and employment - Mentoring, showing pathways, role models, reflective practice |
| | Entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation research | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strengthening partnership with businesses |

RECOMMENDATIONS AND OVERALL CONCLUSIONS

05

Figure 5.1 – Model of educational progression and transformation



5.1 Education and Wellbeing?

In Section 4 above we introduced a new evidence-based Model of Educational Progression and Transformation. Taking Te Riele's (2014) concept of 'actions' and combining them with the goals and strategic activities from the Action Plan for Education, which incorporates SDG No. 4, we identified and explored critical *enabling actions* used by projects from across the three clusters in supporting their participants to progress with their education. Of critical importance is the evidence that this progression is as much about participants' personal transformation and development, like developing a sense of belonging, greater self-esteem and increased confidence ('soft outcomes') as it is about participants moving along Levels 3 to 6 of the QQI framework of qualifications and achieving 'hard outcomes' (see Figure 5.1). We now know how awardee projects provide critical and enabling actions for their participants in both of these domain areas.

This brings us full circle in our thinking about what all of this information means. In particular, we need to return to the Department of Education's Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2018–2013). As noted earlier, the key focus of this Statement and Framework

is 'to ensure that the experiences of children and young people from the early years and throughout their primary and post-primary education will be one that enhances, promotes, values and nurtures their wellbeing' (DES: 2018:5). What is at the heart of this statement is the realisation that schools and centres of education are not just about formal education – instead they play a vital role in the promotion of wellbeing, which the Statement and Framework recognises is achieved through students being supported to fulfil their potential in *academic, physical, mental, emotional and spiritual domains*. In other words, Ireland is now espousing an educational system where different pathways to educational progression – whether as experienced by students under the umbrella of awardee projects like those in the Education Fund or students in the formal system – need to be understood through the *prism of wellbeing* first and foremost. This is a welcome, yet challenging, change to the traditional system of formal education.

The intersection of the findings from this evaluation with the Department of Education's Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice creates a significant opportunity for our Model of Educational Progression and Transformation to further aid practitioners in the alternative education space as well as to build

capacity in the formal system on what works in trying to achieve student wellbeing (see Figure 5.1 and reference to wellbeing) via soft and hard outcomes. The thinking behind Rethink Ireland establishing the Education Fund in the first place was to explore the practices and processes found to be beneficial when addressing educational inequality. We now have a chance to build on the principles of social innovation used by Rethink Ireland to establish the fund, and develop an approach where the learning from this three-year evaluation can begin to inform systems change.

Therefore, the remainder of this section has two primary aims. Firstly, it offers a set of micro recommendations for practice as well as macro, high-level considerations for policymakers, primarily at the Department of Education and Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science but also at other relevant departments (Sections 5.2 and 5.3), all rooted in data emergent from this three-year study. Secondly, it offers some overall conclusions on the learning gleaned from the evaluation of Rethink Ireland's Education Fund (Section 5.4)

5.2 Recommendations for Practice

Based on the *critical enabling actions* identified and discussed in Section 4, which describe how Rethink Ireland's Education Fund awardee projects support the educational progression and transformation of their learners, we suggest the following evidence-based recommendations be considered by other projects working with students experiencing educational disadvantage, both nationally and internationally. Projects can use these recommendations as pointers to assess their own practice, with a view to doing 'more good'.

1) Wellbeing

- Establish a friendly, less formal and non-judgemental environment enabling students to feel safe and welcomed.
- Begin supported learning by establishing caring, less hierarchical relationships between project workers and learners, which can provide opportunities for developing trust.

- Develop a holistic wraparound approach together with students, families and other community partners to be followed when working with students who experience mental health, behavioural or other emotional challenges.
- Work together with students experiencing educational disadvantage to provide activities and practices focused on student wellbeing. Establish a stronger link with community organisations to provide different supports to students (e.g., physical activities, mindfulness programmes, formal and informal types of supports).
- Provide a designated study space for students from disadvantaged communities to help them develop a study routine and work ethic.

2) Critical skills, knowledge and competencies

- Involve students in a range of formal and informal activities (organised in cooperation with formal and informal education providers) to expose students to a variety of experiences, practical skills and theoretical knowledge.
- Use different methodologies and approaches to pursue students' interests and passions.
- Incorporate IT skills as part of employability skills into the curriculum of programmes that work with people with intellectual disabilities and learners from other disadvantaged backgrounds.

3) Greater subject choice

- Introduce a range of subjects to encourage students' interest and curiosity (e.g., STEM, coding, robotics, but also humanities and social science) for students experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage and people with intellectual disabilities.
- Assist students' personal and social development; introduce art courses, such as drama or poetry, in programmes working with people with intellectual disabilities.

4) Information technology

- Use blended and online learning when working with adult learners and/or learners who experience mental health issues. Consider personal needs and preferences of each student when implementing such programmes.
- Consider issues around connectivity, usability, access and the digital divide when introducing such programmes.

5) Progress and access

- Focus on the development of soft outcomes, including self-confidence; independence; future outlook; and social, communication, employability and study skills to support students' wellbeing and educational progression. One of the key pieces of learning from this evaluation is that it is important to research what learners value most in project activities.
- Focus on the activities and practices (e.g., mentoring) that support students' progression to third-level education.
- Establish a positive culture of progression by applying critical actions, including role models, mentorship, stronger links with universities, and links with families, broader communities and government to change expectations around educational progression.

6) Learning experience

- Introduce student-centred and supported learning and encourage student engagement and interest in learning to develop them as independent and competent learners.
- Provide flexible and gradual approaches to learning, considering students' needs and strengths.
- Introduce gradual and flexible options for progression, such as modular, non-accredited and accredited courses for adult learners.
- Introduce 'learning-to-learn' approach to engage adult learners and students from marginalised backgrounds in the learning process.

7) Informed career choices

- Introduce a practice-oriented approach to career guidance in co-operation with external stakeholders (e.g., community partners, businesses, civil society organisations, universities, etc.).
- Provide a range of activities, such as organising visits to university Open Days and joint activities with universities (e.g., subject-specific programmes, summer schools, etc.) to give learners opportunities to experience how specific studies and employment look in practice.
- Provide suitable mentorship to support career guidance work.
- Provide mentorship for people with intellectual disabilities and other learners from disadvantaged backgrounds when offering placements with businesses and other avenues of work.

8) Support local communities

- Introduce interagency work and cooperation with other statutory and non-statutory agencies to ensure all supports and opportunities are available to learners experiencing educational disadvantage.
- Locate third-level programmes for people with intellectual disabilities in the centre of the campus, to ensure visibility, diversity and inclusion of these learners in university life.

5.3 Recommendations for National Policy Makers

The overarching aim of the evaluation was to *'investigate the extent to which these practices and processes could serve as models of excellence in overcoming inequality in education'*. As suggested above, the intersection of the findings from this evaluation with the Department of Education's Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice creates a significant opportunity for our Model of Educational Progression and Transformation to help build capacity in both the alternative and formal education systems on what works when trying to achieve student wellbeing via soft and hard

outcomes. This section offers a focused set of macro, high-level considerations for policymakers.

We make the following recommendations:

- 1.** Develop a cross departmental strategy on tackling educational disadvantage, – this cannot be solved by the education department alone. We need to tackle the social and economic inequalities facing children, young people and their families, using learning on what works from this study on alternative educational provision.
- 2.** The Department of Education and Skills should formally recognise Alternative Education provision as educational providers in their own right and fund them in the same way as the formal education system. This should be done following a mapping exercise on service gaps with the view to increasing numbers should demand outweigh provision.
- 3.** Create a forum for mainstream and alternative education providers to exchange evidence-based knowledge and experiences so as support all learners and address educational inequality head-on.
- 4.** Organise a showcase where the learning about actions and processes used by the awardee projects to tackle education inequality can be shared with mainstream and alternative education providers and with broader society.

5.4 Concluding Comments

Over three years ago, we set out in partnership with Rethink Ireland and the awardees in the Education Fund *‘to investigate the extent to which practices and processes utilised by awardees can serve as models of excellence in overcoming inequality in education’*. We have provided evidence of what works via the introduction of a new evidence-based Model of Educational Progression and Transformation and have indicated how we see this being implemented in practice and policy.

However, there is one final contextual factor that took us all by surprise – Covid-19 – which was never supposed to be part of this process. Covid-19 has presented an unprecedented challenge globally, and it had a significant effect on education. School closures forced schools, students and families to adapt to a new way of schooling and learning. In a short period, all involved parties had to upskill their digital competencies using a *‘learning by doing’* approach (Mohan et al., 2020). Primary and secondary schools and universities in Ireland closed on 12 March 2020 and remained closed until 1 September 2020 to mitigate community transmission of the virus. Educational settings experienced another closure starting at the time of the Christmas break. A phased reopening of post-primary education commenced on 22 February 2021 for special classes only. Primary and secondary schools reopened in the period from 1 March 2021 to 12 April 2021. The response of schools and teachers to the closure were mixed due to the diverse provision of technology in schools (Hall et al., 2020).

Changes in teachers’ work during the school closure were documented by several studies. Teachers have adapted to online teaching by adjusting the ‘traditional’ face-to-face classroom to teaching online. More student-centred online activities, such as applying knowledge in practice tasks, organising peer review or using collaborative learning, seem to have been less used by teachers at this time. Developing these activities requires specific pedagogical, content and technological knowledge and skills (Hall et al., 2020: 5).

School closures have had a negative effect, particularly on disadvantaged students, and have resulted in widening existing inequalities in education and skills in Ireland (Doyle, 2020). Students and families from low-income backgrounds, students from DEIS schools, students with special educational needs and students studying English as a foreign language were significantly affected (Mohan et al., 2020: x). Mohan et al. (2020) show that Junior and Leaving Cert students from DEIS schools were affected by school closure, reporting lack of motivation and engagement and regression in learning and wellbeing. Devitt et al. (2020) report that teachers in DEIS schools were almost three times more likely to report low engagement from students than those from non-DEIS schools. This study also shows that DEIS students are more likely to have experienced lack of interest, lack of support and lack of access to IT devices in their homes (ibid, p. 1).

The effect of the pandemic on mental health and wellbeing as a result of school closure is also documented in research. Schools are not only learning environments, but also safe spaces for students who experience disruptive home environments. Young people reported being concerned about the loss of contact with friends, loss of structure and supports, and potential loss of a 'safe' place for those living in dangerous home environments (Youngminds, 2020). The Department of Education worked with the Department of Social Protection, education partners and TUSLA Education Support Service to ensure that schools could continue to facilitate school meals during school closure periods. McCoy et al. (2020) show that schools tried to foster a sense of school community online to ensure relational closeness despite physical separation.

The digital divide has been recognised as one of the key concerns connected to online learning in Ireland. A clear divide between technology haves and have-nots, and issues around access to digital education for all, have been recognised in this pandemic (Hall et al., 2020). Schools in areas with lower broadband availability and schools in regions of lower household income reported

slower internet speed (Mohan et al., 2020). Issues around connectivity were also acknowledged in rural areas, as well as issues with intermittent Wi-Fi services. Education can also be limited for students who do not have access to the internet, a computer or a place to study; this represents a challenge for teachers and education systems to develop support materials for students from low-income backgrounds (Van Lackner and Parolin, 2020).

Hall et al. (2020) argue that the digital user divide requires as much attention as the digital divide. Technology skills, knowledge of how to use technology in the best and most effective way, and access to it, are crucial for online teaching and learning. Teachers and schools require support and training in using technology (Hall et al., 2020). There is a recognised gap in engagement with online learning between students from middle-class and working-class homes. Cullinane and Montacute (in Mohan et al., 2020) reported that students from working-class homes engaged with online learning at less than half the rate of that for middle-class students, and also spent less time learning. It has also been established that parents with higher education spend more time supporting students' work at home. Hall et al. (2020) show that parents with lower education in Ireland were less likely to use online resources, such as educational apps, or to refer to educational television programmes such as the Home School Hub provided by RTÉ.

The upshot of Covid-enforced change is that it has provided frontline educators, policymakers, and learners and their families with an opportunity to reimagine what education can be. If there can be any positive from the last year, it must be this fact. As evaluators, we believe that the endeavour of all involved in Rethink Ireland's Education Fund over the last three years has created a strong evidence-based footing for the system to respond in a more proficient way to the needs of those most educationally marginalised in our society.

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APPENDIX 1

Description of Awardee Projects in the Education Fund

This section provides an overview of the ten project models, focusing on the names of grantees, the projects' visions and missions, evidence of the need for the projects, and project summaries.

PROJECT NO. 1

TRINITY ACCESS 21

Grantee Name

Trinity Development and Alumni, TCD

Vision and Mission

Trinity Access 21 (TA21) aims to transform the Irish education system, in partnership with schools, communities, other education organisations, and businesses, so that every student can reach their full educational potential. It aspires to an education system that supports every young person in reaching their full academic potential.

Evidence of the Need for this Project

Research indicates that student underperformance at second level can be attributed to long-term processes of educational disadvantage. This reduces the number of students from these types of backgrounds who go on to third level. Barriers often include long-term and multi-generational disengagement from education, and traditional school systems and processes that can prove unsuitable to students. The lack of formal and informal information and advice and of role models for students is also limiting.

Project Summary

Trinity Access 21 is targeting post-primary school students in schools with low levels of progression to third level. Students are provided with one-to-one mentoring, group work and team-based workshops. In addition to the student focus, the initiative is providing continuing professional development for teachers and assisting with school development, with a view to instigating systemic change. Recruitment of schools is on a voluntary basis. Key collaborators of the

programme are Trinity's School of Education, Bridge 21 and the Trinity Access Programme. In project phase 2, they intend to work with new partners – Dublin City Council, Tipperary Education and Training Board, Laois–Offaly Education and Training Board, and Tralee Institute of Technology – to implement the model in rural and urban settings.

The project aims to engage the whole school in a change of culture, moving to an active learning approach and empowering the students as learners. They follow four core principles or activities to achieve that:

- **Pathways to College** provides information on college courses and options to students so that they can make the best choice for themselves.
- **Mentoring** with a current college student, people from local business, or community groups from a comparable background is provided to young people to bond with and draw inspiration from the mentor.
- **Leadership through Service** is an activity based on student-led group projects focused on improving the school or local community. This activity gives students the chance to take up a leadership role in social initiatives.
- **Continuing Professional Development** provides teachers with 21st-century Teaching and Learning Practices that empower them to use a more active and collaborative approach in the classroom, while incorporating technology into their lessons. Teachers are supported to become facilitators in the classroom, empowering the students to take ownership of their own learning.

PROJECT NO. 2

SPEEDPAK ENHANCED SKILLS TRAINEESHIP (SPEEDPAK)

Grantee Name

Speedpak CLG trading as Speedpak Group, Speedpak Contracts Services and Shamrock Rosettes.

Vision and Mission

Speedpak Group's vision is to build its trading business to provide industry work experience and training opportunities to long-term unemployed people, transforming their lives through employment and greater job resilience. The Traineeship Mission is to match local long-term unemployed talent with quality career opportunities by enabling long-term unemployed people to access industry-led training, leading to a National Traineeship.

Evidence of the Need for this Project

It is estimated that in Ireland there are 15,000 young people who are not involved in education or employment. In 2017 the unemployment rate under 25 years was 11.3% (twice the overall employment rate of 6.8%). Young males represent 60% of those unemployed. The unemployment rate is particularly high in north Dublin, where the need for an employment-focused programme is apparent.

Project Summary

This traineeship is a new development for Speedpak Group (subsequently referred to as Speedpak) and is based on market research for future recruitment needs and the skills required for obtaining semi-skilled work in a specific industry sector. It follows a successful pilot programme run by Speedpak, which was evaluated between 2016 and 2017. This traineeship is a unique collaboration between the state, industry, community and philanthropy to match long-term unemployed talent with available jobs. This Manufacturing, Supply Chain and Customer Service Logistics traineeship is jointly developed by programme partners Coláiste Dhúlaigh College of Further Education, Speedpak and Industry Cluster. Speedpak is the lead industry partner and primary recruiter, houses the formal training,

provides job coaching and mentoring, supports the programme's coordination, and provides industry placement and follow-up.

The traineeship programme combines formal accredited training and work experience where the participant develops the job-seeking, work and industry skills required to progress to employment. The programme is targeted at young people who are Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) and other long-term unemployed people. A tailored recruitment strategy is designed to reach out to this cohort living in the community. Referrals of NEET young people and other unemployed people are sourced through programme partners, Coláiste Dhúlaigh, and community partners including the Northside Partnership local development company and other community organisations (e.g., Community Training Centre, colleges of further education), Intreo, and through Speedpak's recruitment campaigns (flyers, Facebook, website, in person in local shopping centres). All applicants are invited to an information session in Speedpak comprising a short presentation about the programme and a tour of Speedpak. They are then interviewed by representatives of Speedpak and Coláiste Dhúlaigh, to identify applicants who will benefit most from the traineeship. This 30-week programme comprises a one-week induction and orientation, formal learning, and two periods (4 and 8 weeks) of industry placements.

The traineeship provides individuals with low educational and commercial experience with a nationally recognised traineeship certification, comprising accredited training at QQI Levels 4 and 5, and industry-level skills certification, including Forklift Licence, to enable them to target job opportunities available in a specific sector. Key activities of the programme include work experience and work on personal development – motivation, self-confidence, qualifications, and preparing for employment (updated CV, individual learning and career plan and goals, one-to-one job coaching).

PROJECT NO. 3

ISCOIL

Grantee Name

iScoil

Vision and Mission

iScoil envisages that every young person has access to an innovative and flexible model of education. Its mission is to provide an inclusive response to address educational disadvantage.

Evidence of the Need for this Project

In 2011, 58,175 students completed and 1,466 did not complete the Junior Certificate. A 1% reduction of the average early school leaving rate would provide the EU economy with 500,000 additional qualified young people (EU 2020 Agenda). iScoil has received numerous requests from local youth services and agencies to set up blended learning centres in their community or area. Tusla referrals increase year on year, and iScoil can only accept approximately 40% of home referrals.

Project Summary

The iScoil blended learning model works to provide a safe environment where young people can re-engage with education, achieve recognised certification (QQI Levels 3 and 4) and access further education, training, and employment opportunities. Young people aged 13–16 years who are out of mainstream education for at least six months are referred to iScoil from Tusla.

The needs and circumstance of each student are considered to allow the development of an educational programme that provides a safe and encouraging place to learn. The holistic approach of iScoil's blended learning model allows students the opportunity to re-engage with learning in a positive way. The focus of the programme is not limited to accreditation but focuses on the personal development of each student and their progression route to further education and training. iScoil works in partnership with local agencies and youth services nationally to provide blended learning opportunities for young early

school leavers. One-to-one and online modalities of intervention are provided to each student based on their needs, interests and abilities.

The main characteristics of the programme are:

- Student-centred approach
- Project-based learning
- Individual education plans
- Partnership approach
- Agile learning design
- Innovative use of emerging technology
- Collaborative support and open communication
- Flexible and adaptable learning plans and choices
- Formative feedback and portfolio assessment
- Interest-led and accessible content
- Multiple modes of submission and assessment.

PROJECT NO. 4

CORK LIFE CENTRE

Grantee Name:

Cork Life Centre

Vision and Mission

The Cork Life Centre's vision is to provide a unique and alternative environment for education where students and staff are both learners and teachers. Its mission is to build an open and safe community space between students and staff through respect, compassion and equality, and to support and empower young people to build better futures.

Evidence of the Need for this Project

Based on Department of Education figures, 88 in 1000 young people in Ireland do not complete their secondary education. For students in DEIS schools this figure rises to 200 in 1000. Of the 2011 secondary school entry cohort, 91.2% sat the Leaving Cert exams in 2014 or 2015. The average retention rate for DEIS schools in the same period and cohort was 85% (DES Report Retention Rate of Pupils in Second-Level Schools 2011 Entry Cohort, 2018). Research shows that there are different reasons why young people do not complete secondary education, including anxiety and mental health issues, and school absence.

Project Summary

At the core of Cork Life Centre's ethos is the desire to place the student's voice at the centre, by following the idea that each day is a new day, and a student is not labelled by their previous behaviour or experiences. A holistic approach is followed that focuses on both social and personal development and academic education. Due to the needs and backgrounds of the students, the centre is built on an ethos of trust and implemented through the 'Servol' model. Children and young people aged 12–18 years who have disengaged or are at risk of disengaging from mainstream education, and students who experience educational disadvantage, participate in the programme. Students are referred to the programme by education welfare officers, parents

and other agencies (CAMHS, Tusla, Drug Treatment Services, and similar). Once a student is referred, the Cork Life Centre ensures that the student wants to attend the programme voluntarily; it does not accept students through coerced referral.

One-to-one tutoring is offered to students particularly at junior cycle. This is in tandem with providing students with access to their peers and opportunities to build social skills and be part of a community. Students are offered the possibility of engaging in one-to-one counselling and therapeutic work in the centre. Cork Life Centre established links with numerous agencies and services in Cork City across the areas of business, academia and health, and with local community groups.

Cork Life Centre provides one-to-one and small group teaching and tutoring to Junior Cert and Leaving Cert students. It provides not only educational supports but a wraparound service encompassing support, outreach and referral network into other appropriate services (mental health, probation and other services). Key activities are: 1) learning and teaching; 2) mentoring; 3) programmes for social and personal development; 4) outreach; 5) advocacy; and 6) therapeutic work.

PROJECT NO. 5

CHURCHFIELD COMMUNITY TRUST

Grantee Name

Churchfield Community Trust

Vision and Mission

Churchfield Community Trust's mission is to develop a caring community with young men and women in Churchfield and the surrounding areas.

Evidence of the Need for this Project

There are significant challenges present in the local area in the context of substance misuse addiction in Churchfield:

- trans-generational unemployment presents a significant challenge
- low educational attainment because of early school leaving is significant.

Churchfield Community Trust as a community-based organisation liaises with the Probation Service and post-release agencies for reintegration in communities of origin.

Project Summary

Churchfield Community Trust follows the principles and core values of the 'Servol' model in its work. It focuses on building relationships and fostering open, honest and direct communication by using therapy. At the core of Churchfield Community Trust work are acceptance, respect, instilling a belief that life can be different, and promoting self-awareness and responsibility. The target group are people aged 18–35 who have experienced alcohol and substance misuse. Participants are referred to Churchfield Community Trust through Probation Services in Cork or self-referral. The service provides one-to-one counselling and group-work interventions to participants. It has established links with a range of agencies, services and academic institutions, including University College Cork, Probation Service, HSE, Cork Foyer, IASIO, Drug Task Force, Focus Ireland and Cork City Council.

Key activities organised by Churchfield Community Trust are:

- **In-House Programme:** This programme provides participants with an opportunity to continue with QQI Levels 3 and 4 of education. They can choose between three types of programmes: horticulture, communications and woodcraft.
- **Outreach Programme:** Participants can avail of different types of supports through this programme, including literacy, study skills, sexual health briefing, money advice, alcohol/substance, and offending behaviour programmes.
- **Community Enterprise:** Progression to work-based training in the context of work placement in the Garden Cafe, at Compass Crafts workshops and Gearraí an Eaðaig Horticulture initiative. The focus here is on mentoring through experiential learning and preparation for the workplace or continuing adult education.

Churchfield Community Trust also supports external individual learning that may enhance students' employment opportunities (e.g., health and safety training, occupational first aid). It also provides career guidance and CV preparation advice.

PROJECT NO. 6

TRINITY CENTRE FOR PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES (TCPID)

Grantee Name

Trinity Development and Alumni, TCD

Vision and Mission

The core mission of the Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities (TCPID) is to address the educational disadvantages experienced by people with intellectual disabilities by providing a high-quality higher-education programme designed to enhance the capacity of this group of people to participate fully in society as independent adults.

Evidence of the need for this Project

Statistics shows there are 194,779 people with an intellectual disability in Ireland (Census, 2011). A total of 16% of people with disabilities aged 15–49 had completed education no higher than primary level, compared with 5% of the general population in this age group. Furthermore, learners with intellectual disabilities are not deemed eligible for local authority grants for fees or maintenance. TCPID fills this gap by providing QQI Level 5 education to people with intellectual disability and has an enrolment of 10–15 learners per academic year.

Project Summary

TCPID aims to promote the inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in education and society. Its mission is to enable people with an intellectual disability to develop their potential through a combination of high-quality research, dissemination of new knowledge, lifelong learning, and professional training. The Centre provides people who have intellectual disabilities with the opportunity to participate in a higher-education programme designed to enhance their capacity to participate fully in society as independent adults. Prospective students apply individually for acceptance to the TCPID, with a supporting application from their school and evidence of disability documents. Occupational therapy groups and individual work are also included in the programme. The Centre provides learners with

mentoring, work experience and career guidance. Key partners of the programme come from business, including companies and banks (e.g., Abbott, CPL and Bank of Ireland).

Key activities of TCPID revolve around the following areas:

- **Course work:** Enable students to study across six interdisciplinary themes which help them develop different learning skills: Research Methods, Applied Science, Technology and Maths, Business and Marketing, Advocacy and Rights and Culture, and Fine Arts and Languages.
- **Work experience:** Enable people with intellectual disabilities to successfully engage with employment opportunities through work placements and subsequent employment.
- **Links to further progression avenues:** Provide models of good practice in establishing viable transition pathways to employment or further education.
- **Mentoring:** Facilitate the development of a mentoring programme with partner employers to ensure sustainability and provision of appropriate support to people with intellectual disabilities in the workplace.
- **Career guidance:** Enable people with intellectual disabilities to make informed decisions about their future trajectory (further education or employment) with the support of knowledgeable professionals (OT service established).

PROJECT NO. 7

PREPARATION FOR EDUCATION TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMME (PETE)

Grantee Name

Focus Ireland

Vision and Mission

PETE's mission is to sustain exits from homelessness by supporting people to engage in mainstream education, training or employment and providing them with an opportunity to earn an income.

Evidence of the Need for this Project

The national assessment of social housing need (Focus Ireland, 2017) finds that nearly 7 in 10 of those in need are people who are unemployed or lone parents; 4 in 10 of those on the list were reliant on Rent Supplement to pay their rent. Of families in need of emergency accommodation in Dublin, at least 3 in 4 are either unemployed or full-time lone parents reliant on social welfare income. Less than a fifth of families presenting to homeless services are in part-time work, and only 5% are in full-time work.³⁵ Affordability is clearly a critical issue in avoiding homelessness, and access to a sufficient income is essential to sustaining that exit.

Project Summary

Focus Ireland's (FI) Preparation for Education, Training and Employment (PETE) programme helps people who have been homeless, or are at risk of homelessness, to engage with training and education so that they are able to get paid employment, making their exit from homelessness more sustainable. The PETE programme is geared both to preventing homelessness and supporting those who have been homeless to achieve sustainable, independent living. PETE does not aim to replicate existing services, but to provide vulnerable and disadvantaged groups with the flexibility and support to successfully progress from the crisis of homelessness to the stability of paid work and a place to call home.

To achieve its aims, PETE cooperates with numerous agencies and services across the areas of training and education, employment, 'flanking' and housing. To mention some: Tusla, Pobal, Education and Training Boards, Solas, Intreo, and Peter McVerry Trust. PETE's participants are currently homeless or identified as being at risk of homelessness. The service provides them with one-to-one support and participation in mainstream training. People can self-refer to the programme or can be appointed by other stakeholders who have working relationships with Focus Ireland.

PETE aims to support participants to build the confidence and skills to overcome personal challenges, so that they can live independently and have a place to call home. Key aspects of the PETE core model are:

- individualised plan
- appropriate training and supports
- accredited training
- flexibility.

Participants can access the service at multiple entry points, and their trajectories are not necessarily linear: they are tailored to meet the individual needs of each user.

³⁵ Focus Ireland (2017) Insights into Family Homelessness no.10. www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/research/.ff

PROJECT NO. 8

AN COSÁN VCC

Grantee Name

The Shanty Educational project Ltd.

Vision and Mission

An Cosán's vision is to help create a society free from all forms of poverty and inequality, rich in resources where young adults have access to the education they need to enhance their wellbeing and to achieve their full potential. For this purpose, it is crucial to create partnerships with existing local education centres, which provide amenities and recruit and support learners.

Evidence of the Need for this Project

Research shows that educational attainment is a powerful predictor of adult life opportunity. For example, a lone parent educated to third level will earn 40% more than someone without a degree. Approximately 33,000 people engage in independent community education programmes annually (Dulee – Kinsolving, A. & Guerin, S., 2020a). Only a very small percentage of these learners can access higher education in a community education context, with 81% of learners reporting not completing the Leaving Cert. This indicates that a blended model of online learning can provide wider access to education in community settings. At present, An Cosán Virtual Community College VCC is the first programme in Ireland that provides higher-education access options utilising a blended model of online learning and working with the community.

Project Summary

An Cosán VCC seeks to empower women and men from disadvantaged communities across Ireland to achieve their educational potential and contribute to social change in their communities through a social action model of holistic community education using 21st-century learning technologies. Each learner's individual needs and assets are different, and the programme aims to create a 360-degree support scaffolding. An Cosán VCC is targeting young adults (age 18–30) living in isolated and disadvantaged communities

who are not in employment, education or training. Key activities of the programme include an entry-level model of higher education through a selection of programmes and introductory courses; a blended model of online learning, including live online classes, face-to-face workshops, mentoring, and online resources, all at a pace that suits the learner; induction day; virtual classroom; and supports (eMentors, tutors, technology experts and guidance, and bursaries for learners unable to pay). Modalities of intervention include face-to-face workshops, technology workshops, live virtual classes, offline individual and group work, collaborative peer-learning, and communities of practice.

An Cosán VCC is a linked partner of the Institute of Technology Carlow (IT Carlow). As a Designated Awarding Body (DAB), all awards are made by the Institute of Technology Carlow. An Cosán VCC enjoys enduring partnerships with community organisations across Ireland to support learners to access blended online learning programmes. Community partners include:

- Community and youth organisations
- Community partnership organisations (IACTO, AONTAS)
- Educational providers (Community Training Centres, Youthreach, ETBs)
- Access officers at third-level institutions, and adult guidance service providers
- Department of Social Protection.

The Community Partner Lead at An Cosán, as well as area-specific outreach coordinators (e.g., Youth Outreach Coordinator), manage the referral process to An Cosán's blended higher-education programmes.

PROJECT NO. 9

ASPIRE2

Grantee Name

Aspire2 Dream Limited Company

Vision and Evidence of the Need for this Project

The vision of the Aspire2 programme is to redress the systemic inequality in the Irish education system. This vision is pursued by supporting students who live in areas of educational disadvantage to increase their prospects of completing the Leaving Cert and progressing to third-level education and other forms of further education, including apprenticeships.

Research and national statistics show that young people who live in areas of educational disadvantage are less likely to proceed to further education or apprenticeship. Aspire2 aims to engage with these young people and support them during the Leaving Cert year to increase their chances of attending third-level education and other forms of training, including apprenticeships.

Project Summary

Aspire2 is a programme which was established by the DPS company in 2015 as part of its Corporate Social Responsibility strategy. Its main aim is to support second-level students in completing their second-level education and making informed decisions about their future education and career pathways. Students aged 16–18 from four disadvantaged schools (two from Mayfield, Cork, and two from Ballyfermot, Dublin) and two additional schools (one from Crumlin, Dublin and one from Faranree, Cork) are involved in the Aspire2 programme. Students voluntarily join the programme through schools following introduction from DPS and Aspire2. Aspire2 provides students with group mentoring and work experience placement. Aspire2 has established a collaborative partnership with UCD, CIT, UCC, TCD and IT Tallaght.

Key activities provided by Aspire2 are:

- Participating schools can use **the financial support** for a wide range of initiatives designed to improve educational progression outcomes. These can include extra tuition, personal development workshops and after-study hubs, or exposure for students to experiences outside the school curriculum, such as a trip to the theatre.
- **Student mentoring** sessions give students an opportunity to be mentored throughout the Leaving Cert. Topics covered are career advice, study plans, goal setting, motivation and similar. A mentoring handbook has been developed by the Aspire2 manager to guide new mentors on child protection, access routes and other topics. The model is based on group mentoring: there are two mentors available for five students.
- **Student work experience** is provided during holidays for students so that they can gain life skills.
- **Youth advisory panels** were introduced to ensure that students get the right supports in preparation for their Leaving Cert. They meet with the project manager eight times a year.
- **Parent forums** in Dublin and Cork actively engage parents in their child's education. Parents are trained to facilitate educational workshops with other parents to disseminate information on access routes, CAO, supporting their child through the Leaving Cert, etc.).

PROJECT NO. 10

FAST TRACK ACADEMY

Grantee Name

Citywise Education

Vision and Mission

Fast Track Academy aims to address the barriers arising due to social disadvantage that lead to low levels of educational attainment. Its vision is focused on improving communities through youth education by using a whole-person approach focused on academic support and personal development of young people.

Evidence of the Need for this Project

Participation rates in higher education in Tallaght are 29%, compared to an average in Dublin of 47%. Studies show that programmes (such as Fast Track Academy) which support students' motivation to learn and personal development are often missing from their educational experience.

Project Summary

The project incorporates social and academic skills as well as skills in adapting the behaviours and conditions necessary to increase the number of young people completing second level and transitioning to higher-level education. The programme is available for fifth-year and sixth-year students in Tallaght aged 15–19. Students are referred to the programme by participating schools and are involved in one-to-one mentoring and group work. The programme cooperates with other agencies in the community, such as IT Tallaght.

The Fast Track programme revolves around the following activities:

- It provides **information** to students to make them aware of the wide variety of options available to them. It provides teaching, mentoring, career guidance, and work placements to support decision-making. These ongoing supports are positioned to convince students of the value of education and develop good personal work habits.
- Fast Track organises additional classes in **Leaving Cert subjects**.
- **Career talks** are organised to help students with CAO decisions. They meet professionals from a wide range of backgrounds, and group sessions are delivered monthly by volunteers.
- **Volunteer role models:** People from the locality act as volunteers and role models for young people. Currently there are 70 active volunteers, including teachers, retired teachers, past students, local business leaders, and similar.
- **Preparatory courses** for younger students in numeracy, literacy, STEM subjects, and personal development to prepare them to enrol in the Fast Track Academy when they turn 15 years of age.

APPENDIX 2

Details of Cluster Formation

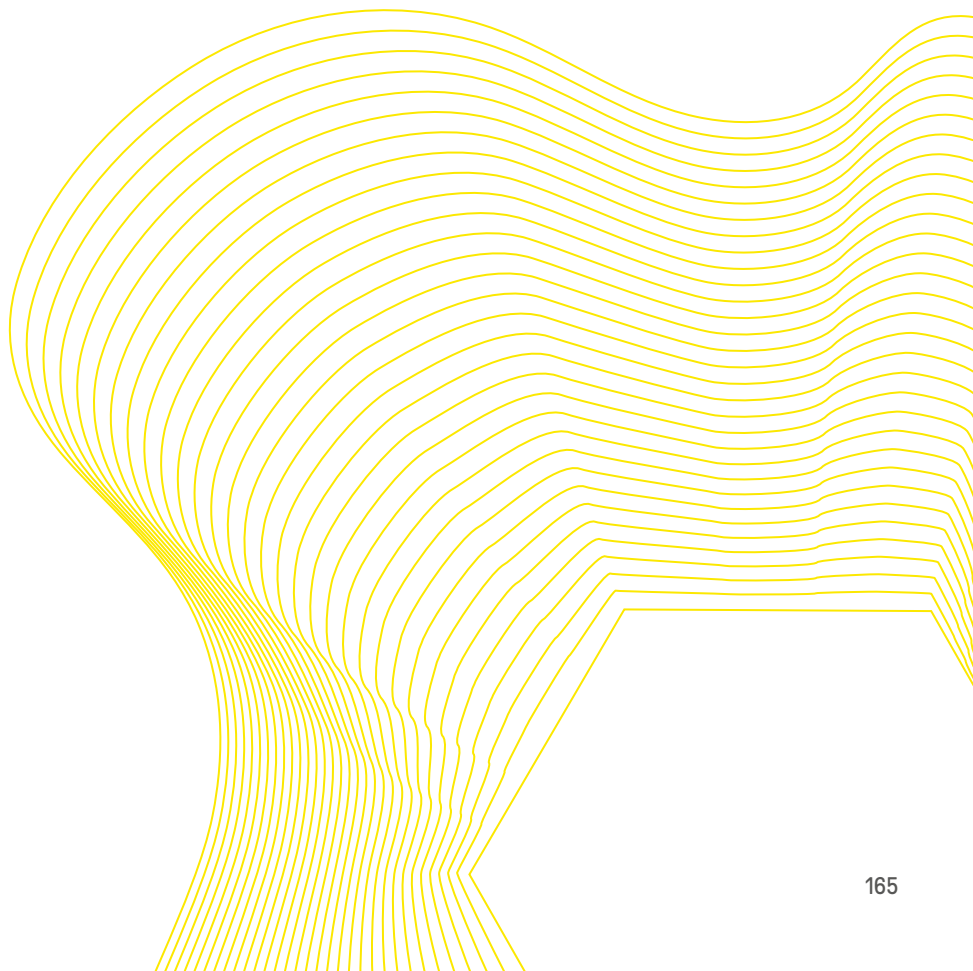
This section provides an overview of the ten project models, focusing on the names of grantees, the projects' visions and missions, evidence of the need for the projects, and project summaries.

Table A2 – Categories developed in the documentary analysis

| PROJECTS | EVENTUAL CLUSTER | VISION | AIMS/ OBJECTIVES | PROJECT ACTIVITIES | PARTICIPANTS' AGE | POSITIONALITY |
|---|--|--|---|--|--|---|
| Trinity Access 21 | Cluster 2: Curriculum reform/ diverse pathways to adulthood: Trinity Access 21, Aspire2 and Fast Track Academy | Category 2: Reaching full educational potential: Trinity Access 21, Cork Life Centre, An Cosán VCC | Category 2: Supported transition to adulthood: Fast Track Academy, Aspire2, Trinity Access 21 | Category 1: Mentoring/ Pathways to Adulthood: Trinity Access 21, Aspire2, Fast Track Academy, and Cork Life Centre | Category 1: Young people secondary school: Trinity Access 21, Fast Track Academy, Aspire2, iScoil, Cork Life Centre | Category 2: Based inside schools (curricular reform, pathways to adulthood): Trinity Access 21, Aspire2, Fast Track |
| An Cosán VCC | Cluster 1 Lifelong learning/ social inclusion: PETE, TCPID, Speedpak, and An Cosán VCC | Category 2: Reaching full educational potential: Trinity Access 21, Cork Life Centre, An Cosán VCC | Category 3: Social inclusion and independent living: PETE, TCPID, Speedpak, An Cosán VCC | Category 2: Training, support and social inclusion: PETE, Speedpak, iScoil, An Cosán VCC, TCPID | Category 2: Adults: PETE, Speedpak, An Cosán VCC, TCPID | Category 1: Social inclusion/ lifelong learning: PETE, TCPID, Speedpak, An Cosán VCC |
| Preparation for Education, Training and Employment (PETE) | Cluster 1: Lifelong learning/ social inclusion: PETE, TCPID, Speedpak, and An Cosán VCC | Category 3: Inclusion in employment/ community and development of skills: PETE, Speedpak, TCPID | Category 3: Social inclusion and independent living: PETE, TCPID, Speedpak, An Cosán VCC, Community Trust | Category 2: Training, support, and social inclusion: PETE, Speedpak, iScoil, An Cosán VCC, TCPID | Category 2: Adults: PETE, Speedpak, An Cosán VCC, TCPID | Category 1: Social inclusion/ lifelong learning: PETE, TCPID, Speedpak, An Cosán VCC |

| PROJECTS | EVENTUAL CLUSTER | VISION | AIMS/ OBJECTIVES | PROJECT ACTIVITIES | PARTICIPANTS' AGE | POSITIONALITY |
|--|--|---|--|---|---|--|
| Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities (TCPID) | Cluster 1: Lifelong learning/ social inclusion: PETE, TCPID, Speedpak and An Cosán VCC | Category 3: Inclusion in employment/ community and development of skills: PETE, Speedpak, TCPID | Category 3: Social inclusion and independent living: PETE, TCPID, Speedpak, An Cosán VCC | Category 2: Training, support, and social inclusion: PETE, Speedpak, iScoil, An Cosán VCC, TCPID | Category 2: Adults: PETE, Speedpak, An Cosán VCC, TCPID | Category 1: Social inclusion/ lifelong learning: PETE, TCPID, Speedpak, An Cosán VCC |
| Aspire2 | Cluster 2: Curriculum reform/ diverse pathways to adulthood: Trinity Access 21, Aspire2, and Fast Track Academy | Category 1: Systemic educational inequality: Aspire2, Fast Track Academy, iScoil | Category 2: Supported transition to adulthood: Fast Track Academy, Aspire2, Trinity Access 21 | Category 1: Mentoring/ Pathways to Adulthood: Trinity Access 21, Aspire2, Fast Track Academy, and Cork Life Centre | Category 1: Young people secondary school: Trinity Access 21, Fast Track Academy, Aspire2, iScoil, Cork Life Centre | Category 2: Based inside schools (curricular reform, pathways to adulthood): Trinity Access 21, Aspire2, Fast Track |
| Fast Track Academy | Cluster 2: Curriculum reform/ diverse pathways to adulthood: Trinity Access 21, Aspire2, and Fast Track Academy | Category 1: Systemic educational inequality: Aspire2, Fast Track Academy, iScoil | Category 2: Supported transition to adulthood: Fast Track Academy, Aspire2, Trinity Access 21 | Category 1: Mentoring/ Pathways to Adulthood: Trinity Access 21, Aspire2, Fast Track Academy, and Cork Life Centre | Category 1: Young people secondary school: Trinity Access 21, Fast Track Academy, Aspire2, iScoil, Cork Life Centre | Category 2: Based inside schools (curricular reform, pathways to adulthood): Trinity Access 21, Aspire2, Fast Track |
| Cork Life Centre | Cluster 3: Alternative centre of education/ based outside of mainstream schools: Cork Life Centre and iScoil | Category 2: Reaching full educational potential: Trinity Access 21, Cork Life Centre, An Cosán VCC | Category 1: Holistic student-centred approach: Cork Life Centre and iScoil | Category 1: Mentoring/ Pathways to Adulthood: Trinity Access 21, Aspire2, Fast Track Academy and Cork Life Centre | Category 1: Young people secondary school: Trinity Access 21, Fast Track Academy, Aspire2, iScoil, Cork Life Centre | Category 3: Positioned outside the mainstream system (alternative education centres): Cork Life Centre, iScoil |

| PROJECTS | EVENTUAL CLUSTER | VISION | AIMS/ OBJECTIVES | PROJECT ACTIVITIES | PARTICIPANTS' AGE | POSITIONALITY |
|---|--|--|--|--|--|---|
| Speedpak Enhanced Skills Traineeship (Speedpak) | Cluster 1: Lifelong learning/ social inclusion: PETE, TCPID, Speedpak and An Cosán VCC | Category 3: Inclusion in employment/ community and development of skills: PETE, Speedpak, TCPID | Category 3: Social inclusion and independent living: PETE, TCPID, Speedpak, An Cosán VCC | Category 2: Training, support, and social inclusion: PETE, Speedpak, iScoil, An Cosán VCC, TCPID | Category 2: Adults: PETE, Speedpak, An Cosán VCC, TCPID | Category 1: Social inclusion/ lifelong learning: PETE, TCPID, Speedpak, An Cosán VCC |
| iScoil | Cluster 3: Alternative centre of education/ based outside of mainstream schools: Cork Life Centre and iScoil | Category 1: Systemic educational inequality: Aspire2, Fast Track Academy, iScoil | Category 1: Holistic student-centred approach: Cork Life Centre and iScoil | Category 2: Training, support and social inclusion: PETE, Speedpak, iScoil, An Cosán VCC, TCPID | Category 1: Young people secondary school: Trinity Access 21, Fast Track Academy, Aspire2, iScoil, Cork Life Centre | Category 3: Positioned outside the mainstream system (Alternative education centres): Cork Life Centre, iScoil |



APPENDIX 3

Photovoice Pack for Participants

Photovoice – Introduction

What is this project about?

We would like to invite you to take photographs that show your experience with your project specifically, we would like you to:

- Take photographs showing what is positive in your life;
- Take photographs showing what is challenging in your life;
- Take photographs showing what the project means to you;
- In what ways (if any) the project has supported you so far.
- Take photographs that will show what has changed for you (if anything)?

How to use a disposable camera?

Disposable cameras were used a lot in the past and they may look a bit strange to you. We promise that they are pretty cool though!

- We prepared a short guide to show you how to use a camera (please check the other document given to you in the information pack).
- You can practice your photographic skills by using the 'sample camera' provided by the instructor.
- There is a film inserted in this camera. You can make 27 photographs with this camera.

Where can the photographs be taken?

The photographs can be taken at home, in school, in the local neighbourhood, any other venues you think can be linked with your experience being involved in your project.

What type of photos can I take?

Take photos of places, objects, and/or something that represents other people.

When taking photos of other people focus on their backs, hands, shadows, but avoid taking photos of their faces. You may like taking photos of people in movement or action (i.e. walking, jumping, running); their clothing (i.e. shoes, clothes); body gestures (i.e. hands or legs posture), and similar.

These are some examples of photographs taken by the research team at NUIG based on a topic: **'Take photographs showing what is positive at your work'**



'We spend a lot of time at work. Working in a friendly environment makes a difference!'



'This statue reminds us that people and their stories are essential for our understanding of the world. In the Little Prince's words: "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye."'

How many photographs can I take and when can I start?

The photos can be taken across the 7 days (Please include weekends and working days): Starting today: 12th March, 2020. We would like to ask you to take between 10 and 27 pictures.

What will happen after taking the photos?

We would like to ask you to return the camera with the film (do not take a film out of the camera) to the project coordinator. They will make sure that cameras and films are safely delivered to our team. We will print the photographs and arrange another date to discuss them with you.

APPENDIX 4

2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is an inter-governmental commitment and a plan of action referring to 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) agreed by representatives of 150 countries in 2015. The 17 SDGs are integrated and balance the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development by calling for action from all countries. While the Agenda 2030 is not legally binding, states are expected to design national frameworks to address these 17 goals – Ireland has introduced the Sustainable Development Goals National Implementation Plan 2018–2020.

The 17 SDGs are interconnected and, in many ways, complement each other; however, for this

section, SDG 4 focusing on quality education is looked in detail. Education is put at the centre of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The main aim of SDG4 is to ‘ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’, and it is made up of seven targets and three means of implementation of the seven targets. The underlying principles of SDG 4 are: 1) education is a fundamental human right and enabling right (universal access to inclusive and equitable quality education and learning); 2) education is a public good; and 3) gender equality is inextricably linked to the right to education for all. Table A4 below shows key outcome targets and the focus of those targets.

Table A4 – 7 Targets of SDG4 and the focus of these targets

| THE 2030 AGENDA: SDG 4 TARGETS | THE FOCUS OF THE TARGETS |
|--|---|
| Target 4.1: By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes | 1. Universal primary and secondary education: - The provision of 12 years of free, publicly funded, inclusive, equitable, quality primary and secondary education. |
| Target 4.2: By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education | 2. Early childhood development and universal pre-primary education - The provision of at least one year of free and compulsory quality pre-primary education delivered by well-trained educators |
| Target 4.3: By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university | 3. Equal access to technical/vocational and higher education - Reduction in the barriers to skills development and technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and provision of lifelong learning opportunities for youth and adults. - The provision of progressively free tertiary education. |

| THE 2030 AGENDA: SDG 4 TARGETS | THE FOCUS OF THE TARGETS |
|---|--|
| <p>Target 4.4: By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship</p> | <p>4. Relevant skills for decent work</p> <p>Access: Equitable access to TVET needs to be expanded while quality is ensured. Learning opportunities should be increased and diversified, using a wide range of education and training modalities.</p> <p>Skills acquisition: Beyond work-specific skills, emphasis must be placed on developing high-level cognitive and non-cognitive/transferable skills, such as problem-solving, critical thinking, creativity, teamwork, communication skills and conflict resolution.</p> |
| <p>Target 4.5: By 2030. Eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations</p> | <p>Gender equality and inclusion</p> <p>Inclusion and equity: All people, irrespective of sex, age, race, colour, ethnicity, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property or birth, as well as persons with disabilities, migrants, indigenous peoples, and children and youth, especially those in vulnerable situations or other status, should have access to inclusive, equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities.</p> <p>Gender equality: All girls and boys, women and men, should have equal opportunity to enjoy education of high quality, achieve at equal levels and enjoy equal benefits from education.</p> |
| <p>Target 4.6: By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy</p> | <p>Universal Literacy: All young people and adults across the world should have achieved relevant and recognised proficiency levels in functional literacy and numeracy skills that are equivalent to levels achieved at successful completion of basic education.</p> |
| <p>Target 4.7: By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development</p> | <p>Education for sustainable development and global citizenship: It is vital to give a central place to strengthening education's contribution to the fulfilment of human rights, peace and responsible citizenship from local to global level, gender equality, sustainable development and health.</p> <p>Global challenges can be met through education for sustainable development and global citizenship education, which includes peace and human rights education, as well as intercultural education and education for international understanding.</p> |

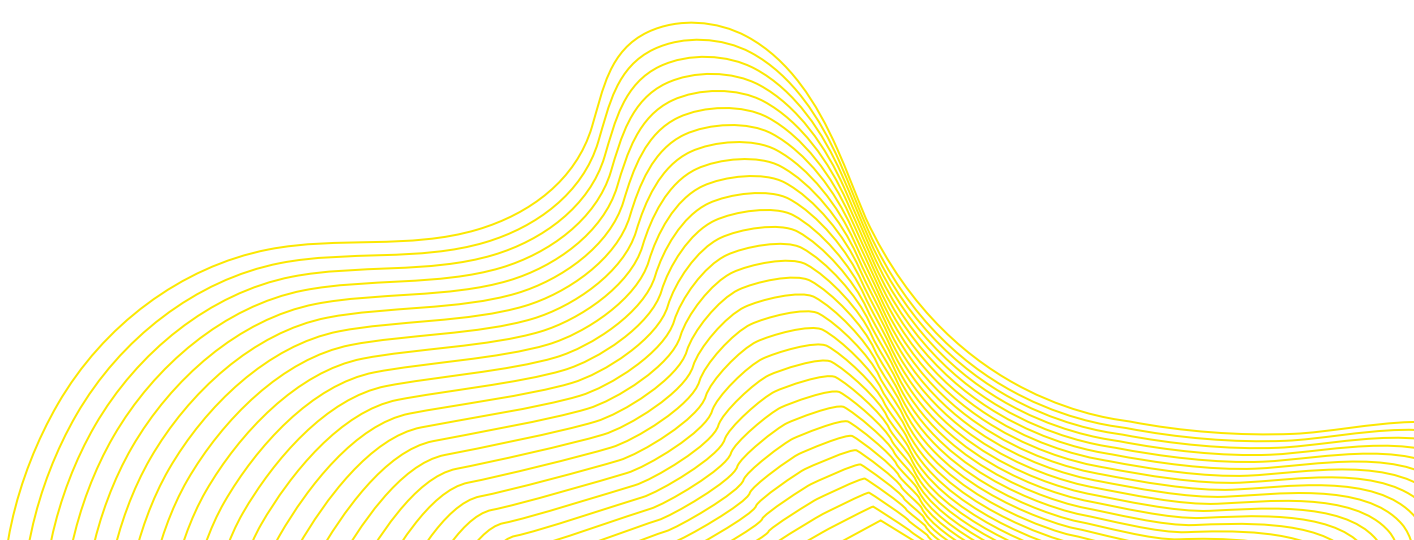
Means of implementations of SDG 4 include three targets: 1) effective learning environments (build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all); 2) scholarships (expand the number of scholarship available to developing countries); and 3) teachers and educators (increase the supply of qualified teachers).

APPENDIX 5

Action Plan for Education

– Five Goals and the Strategic Activities for Each Goal

| ACTION PLAN 5 GOALS 2019 | STRATEGIC ACTIVITIES PER GOAL |
|---|---|
| <p>Goal 1: Improve the learning experience and the success of learners</p> | <p>-Wellbeing: Fostering the personal development, health and wellbeing of learners and the wider school community helps to ensure that our children and young people develop resilience, have respect for diversity, learn to create and maintain supportive relationships and become active and responsible citizens in society.</p> <p>-Critical skills, knowledge and competencies: The National Skills Strategy recognises the role of all levels of education and training in developing critical skills, knowledge and competences.</p> <p>-Greater subject choice: Increasing subject choice for students is important for student motivation and engagement and for ensuring curriculum development continues to respond to the changing needs of learners, society and the economy.</p> <p>-Transitions: A new grading system and common points scheme will be implemented from 2017 as part of improvements to the transition from second-level to higher education. Further work continues on the broader Transitions Reform agenda. One of the key areas being examined is broadening undergraduate entry.</p> <p>-Information technology: A key objective is to create a ‘step-change’ in the use of ICT in teaching, learning and assessment, at all levels of the education and training system, so that learners are equipped with the skills to live in an increasingly digitally connected world. Actions include investment in infrastructure including high-speed broadband for primary schools, professional development for teachers and lecturers, increased technology-enhanced and blended learning opportunities.</p> <p>-Languages: The implementation of revised curricula at primary level and the rollout of the Foreign Languages in Education Strategy will support increased levels of participation and competence in language learning.</p> |



| ACTION PLAN 5 GOALS 2019 | STRATEGIC ACTIVITIES PER GOAL |
|--|---|
| <p>Goal 2: Improve the progress of learners at risk of educational disadvantage and learners with special educational needs</p> | <p>-Designated DEIS schools: Our main policy initiative to combat educational disadvantage, DEIS, is currently under review and we are seeking to incorporate best practice into a new programme.</p> <p>-Participation and access to third-level education: Improving access by under-represented groups was referred to in the report of the Expert Group on Future Funding for Higher Education (2016), and the Department is also considering these findings in its work on access. In this way, progress to higher education should become more representative of the population in general.</p> <p>-Learners with special educational needs (SEN): The Department’s psychological service, NEPS, while supporting the development of the academic, social and emotional competence of all students, prioritises its support for students at risk of educational disadvantage and those with special educational needs.</p> <p>-Learning experience: We will expand the range of education and training programmes to better meet the needs of key target groups including the unemployed and early school leavers.</p> <p>-Progress and access: We will improve the participation, including participation in inclusive mainstream settings, and progress of children with special educational needs across the whole education system, and develop better whole-school approaches.</p> |
| <p>Goal 3: Help those delivering education services to continuously improve</p> | <p>-Early Years Quality: The Department will support the Department of Children and Youth Affairs to improve the quality of early years provision. The implementation of Aistear & Síolta, the early years curricular and quality frameworks, will be supported with training for mentors and trainers and upskilling of the workforce.</p> <p>-Excellence, innovation & autonomy for schools: Improve quality, promote innovation & excellence and increase autonomy in schools. Continuous improvement in schools will be supported through a new quality framework for external inspection and school self-improvement. A planned programme of external evaluation will be rolled out across the school sector with a range of new inspection models. All of these models will be focused on inspection for improvement: they will identify existing strengths in schools, they will challenge schools to reach the standards set out in Looking at Our School 2016, the new quality framework for schools, and they will provide sound advice for improvement.</p> <p>-Access to support services for school leaders & teachers.</p> <p>-Teaching methods Quality and Accountability of FET and HE: Implementation of professional development frameworks across the further education and training and higher-education sectors is a key priority to ensure that teachers and lecturers continue to develop the right skills to support learners. A Programme Learner Support Service will provide data on outcomes and course impact across the further education and training sector and support planning and prioritisation of course provision.</p> <p>-Develop the continuum of teacher education: Workforce planning will be strengthened with improved planning of teacher supply. Teacher education and induction will continue to be reformed to support excellence and peer-learning and peer-exchange. School leadership supports will be expanded with a new mentoring programme for newly appointed school principals and a professional coaching service for serving principals to support 400 principals per year. A new post-graduate qualification will be rolled out for aspiring school leaders, supporting teachers as lifelong learners.</p> |

| ACTION PLAN 5 GOALS 2019 | STRATEGIC ACTIVITIES PER GOAL |
|--|---|
| <p>Goal 4: Build stronger bridges between education and the wider community</p> | <p>-Support local communities: Schools are at the heart of their communities and are more successful the more they can collaborate with other organisations within the community. We will explore opportunities for the use of school buildings for afterschool care and out-of-hours use to support local communities and make people's lives better.</p> <p>-Parents & learners: Parents and students are key stakeholders in the teaching and learning process. We will develop a Parents and Learners Charter to give parents and students a stronger voice at school level. We will legislate for school admissions to make enrolment easier for children and their parents. We will support the establishment of 400 multi- and non-denominational schools to give greater choice in the type of school available. We will revise protocols to ensure no small school closes against the wishes of parents and facilitate amalgamations where desirable.</p> <p>-Meet national & regional skills needs: Following on from the publication of the National Skills Strategy 2025, we will establish the National Skills Council and drive the development of the regional skills fora, two key infrastructure developments to address skills needs nationally and regionally. We will gather data from employers and graduates to evaluate performance and outcomes and inform policy and programme development.</p> <p>-Lifelong learning: We will work with further education and training and higher-education providers to provide a broader range of flexible opportunities for learners and to support an increase in lifelong learning. As unemployment falls, we need to shift our focus to developing the skills of those who are in work, focusing particularly on those with lower skills. This will create opportunities for second-chance learners to upskill and re-skill. The distribution of money from the National Training Fund will reflect this.</p> <p>-Informed career choices: We will work with education and training providers, parents, employers and students themselves to make sure they are ready for the world of work and can make well-informed career choices. There will be a greater focus on work placements in schools, further education and training and higher education as a key part of the learning experience. We will review guidance and careers information for school-goers and adult learners including learning from best practice overseas.</p> <p>-Entrepreneurship.</p> <p>-Creativity and Innovation Research: We will create a stronger focus on Entrepreneurship, Creativity and Innovation across the education and training system. A new Entrepreneurship Education Policy Statement will be produced along with guidelines for schools.</p> |
| <p>Goal 5: Improve national planning and support services</p> | <p>-Ensuring adoption of best practice:</p> <p>-Strategic direction & delivery of results: We aim to provide leadership and direction for improvements across the system to provide better outcomes for all learners. We recognise the value of whole-of-system reforms that will, over time, provide improvements in achievement, with improvements at each level reinforcing the strength of the overall system of education and training.</p> <p>-Appropriate quality infrastructure: Over 60,000 additional permanent school places will be delivered by 2021, over 300 extensions to existing schools, and 14 new schools will be built in areas of very strong demographic demand.</p> <p>-Shared services & ICT for improved services.</p> |

