An Cosán

Igniting Community-Based Higher Education

An evaluation of the Certificate in Personal and Professional Development award offered by An Cosán as a Linked Provider of the South East Technological University.

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The authors of this report are Dr. Thomas Murray and Dr. Rebekah Brennan. The authors are responsible for the choice and presentation of views expressed in this report and for opinions expressed herein, which are not necessarily those of An Cosán and do not commit the organisation.

An Cosán is a critical player in Community Education, delivering powerful and innovative community-based learning both in Tallaght West and in other communities nationwide to meet the needs of individuals at different stages of the learning pathway. Since 1986 An Cosán has sought to use the power of transformative education to end the injustice of poverty by offering accredited and non-accredited courses in Foundation, Further Education, and Higher Education, using both face-to-face and online delivery.

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Contents

Executive Summary

An Cosán's vision is for a world where all people can access education to achieve their full potential. Its mission is 'to empower women and children left furthest behind through learning, leadership and enterprise' (An Cosán, 2023). An Cosán works primarily with marginalised women and children, lone parents, early school leavers, the long-term unemployed, people on low incomes, people using addiction services, members of the Irish Traveller community, people seeking international protection, migrant groups, former prisoners, and older adults. This work is underpinned and informed by An Cosán's commitment to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN DESA, 2023), particularly those relating to quality education, gender equality, and human rights.

In the context of enhancing responsiveness to the future world of work and lifelong learning, An Cosán partnered with the South East Technological University (SETU) on the Higher Education Pathway for Non-Traditional Learners (HEPNTL) project. This project is supported by the Higher Education Authority under its Higher Education System Innovation and Transformation Call (2018). The present report, *Igniting Community-Based Higher Education,* documents research into the Certificate in Personal and Professional Development (PPD). The report addresses the following research questions:

1. **How does the Certificate satisfy equality of access to Higher Education criteria?**
2. **What are the Certificate's progression, retention, and completion rates?**
3. **What factors or actions facilitated students' personal and professional development?**
4. **What may need to be developed or improved in future?**

The research generates statistics on student progression, retention, and completion rates. It outlines learner experiences of the programme, its development within the structures of An Cosán and SETU's Linked Provision, and its positioning within a changing world of work and lifelong learning. The report concludes with a set of recommendations arising.

Adult Learners and Higher Education in a Changing World

Humanity faces serious challenges in the 21st century, including those resulting from climate crisis, social inequality, as well as technological and demographic change. Collaboration between community and university has an important role to play in addressing these challenges. Education across the tertiary system supports personal development and well-being, underpins social cohesion, active citizenship, and full participation in a democratic society, as well as fosters capacities to engage in meaningful employment with positive implications for social inclusion, social mobility, and sustainable development.

An Cosán and SETU designed the HEPNTL project to respond to the specific needs of non-traditional adult learners unable to access Higher Education because of diverse inequalities and complex life situations. The project is future-focussed and further informed by analysis of relevant social and policy contexts. These policy frameworks include but are not limited to: (i) Social Inclusion; (ii) Enhancing Equity of Access, Participation, and Success in Higher Education; (iii) The Future of Work; (iv) Digital Transition; (v) Health and Well-being; (vi) Migration, Diversity, and Intercultural Understanding; as well as (vii) Active Citizenship and Sustainable Development.

A New Higher Education Pathway for Non-Traditional Learners

The HEPNTL project's aims are to:

1. **Create a new, innovative Higher Education pathway for mature students experiencing socio-economic disadvantage: a flexible, distance, and e-learning award, delivered by An Cosán as a Linked Provider of SETU.**
2. **Develop awardees of the Certificate in Personal and Professional Development equipped with core, transversal academic competences to enable them to adapt to the future world of work and lifelong learning.**
3. **Document organisational experience and learning for wider dissemination and impact**.

The Certificate in Personal and Professional Development is a one-year, accredited (NFQ Level 6) community-based Higher Education programme. The Certificate offers entry into Higher Education for mature students experiencing socio-economic disadvantage. The Certificate is a flexible, distance, and e-learning award, delivered by An Cosán as a Linked Provider of the South East Technological University. The Certificate's educational aim is to develop awardees who are equipped with sufficient core academic competences and transferrable skills to enable them to adapt successfully to the future world of work and lifelong learning. Round one of Certificate delivery commenced in October 2020 and concluded in October 2021. Round two commenced in November 2021 and concluded in December 2022.

Table I. Certificate in Personal and Professional Development. Component Modules.

Certificate in Personal and Professional Development (NFQ Level 6)	ECTS	Available as Minor Award
Foundations of Adult Learning	10	Yes
Learning to Collaborate	10	Yes
Communications	10	Yes
Critical and Ethical Thinking in a Changing World	10	Yes
Introduction to Research	5	No
Essential IT Applications in a Changing World	5	No
Unpacking Everyday Maths	5	No
Enabling Wellbeing	5	No

Researching the Adult Learner Experience

Research was conducted into student experiences of the Certificate in Personal and Professional Development. This mixed-methods study uses both qualitative and quantitative research methods. It adopts a participatory research approach through use of Photovoice.

Table II. Summary of Research Data

Data	No. of Adult Learner Participants
Anonymised Learner Records	51
Large-N survey of An Cosán Higher Education Learners and Alumni *	61
Focus Group Evaluations (x 2)	15
Photovoice Workshops (x 4)	11

* 61 responses from 161 invitees. 38% response rate.

Table III reports the number of students that participated in the Certificate in Personal and Professional Development and in its component Minor Awards as well as their progression through the National Framework of Qualifications.

Table III. Certificate in Personal and Professional Development. Participation and Completion.

Participant in	Total No. of Students	Achieved Full Certificate Award	Achieved Component Minor Award	Incomplete
Certificate in Personal and Professional Development (60 ECTS)	38	20	11	7
Component Minor Award (10 ECTS)	8		8	
	46 *	**20**	**19**	**7**

*5 learners withdrew prior to the commencement of teaching delivery.

An Cosán Higher Education: Learner Profile

- 50 students registered to the Certificate in Personal and Professional Development and/or its component awards over the project's duration.
- 70% of the students who registered for the Certificate were women.
- 70% of all students to register were over 30 years of age at the outset of the programme.
- Students joined the online classroom from 11 different counties in Ireland.
- 25% of the students who registered for the Certificate were born outside of Ireland.

Among current Linked Provision learners:

- 55% reported being in paid employment while 32% are currently seeking employment.
- 58% reported engaging in the unpaid domestic work and care of others, one third of whom reported engaging in this work on average more than 35 hrs per week.
- 71% reported engaging in community, civic, or voluntary activity in the previous four weeks.

Q.1 Equality of Access to Higher Education Criteria

- The Certificate attracted adult learners from all priority populations named within national policy on equality of access to Higher Education. These included socio-economically disadvantaged students, first-time mature students, students with disabilities, as well as students from the Irish Traveller community.
- 31 (62%) were first time mature student entrants into Higher Education. This included 16 students (32%) who had completed a Major Award at QQI Level 5 prior to registering to the Certificate in Personal and Professional Development.

Q.2 Retention, Completion and Progression

- 39 learners, 85% of registered participants, successfully achieved an accredited award: Certificate (60 ECTS) or Minor Award (min. 10 ECTS) between 2020 and 2022.
- 7 learners (15% of registered participants) did not complete either the full Certificate or a component minor award.
- The above compares favourably with mainstream Higher Education provision in Ireland, which had a completion rate of 75% for full-time undergraduate students who started a Level 6, 7 or 8 major award in 2016/2017.
- A minimum of 10 participants (25%) progressed to further study within An Cosán and SETU in the 2022/23 Academic Year.

It was not possible to conduct post-programme analysis of Certificate learners' progression within the research project timeframe. The experience of the wider Linked Provision learner population may be taken as indicative:

- 23 survey respondents had completed their Higher Education programme at An Cosán.
- 43% reported entering full or part-time employment.
- 35% reported progressing to Honours Degree or Master's level academic programmes.
- 30% reported participating in civic/community work (unpaid) or domestic/care work (unpaid).

Q.3 Personal and Professional Development: Facilitating Factors and Interventions

- 97% of research participants agreed that their An Cosán HE programme helped with their personal development.
- 83% agreed that their An Cosán HE programme helped with their professional development.
- The primary enabling factor identified was **part-time scheduling** with 83% of survey respondents claiming they would not have been able to attend if their programme had been a full-time course.
- Wraparound supports ensured learners could participate. The most important wraparound supports identified by research participants were **funding** and **one-to-one tutor support**.
- In terms of the programme learning environment, 78% of research participants underlined educators' use of **a mix of video, audio, and reading materials** as a vital learning facilitator.
- Other leading facilitators identified by over 60% of participants include: encouragement to be an **independent, self-directed learner**; use of **continuous assessment**; supportive tutor **feedback**; and the **flipped classroom**.

Q.4 Future Development

- Participants recommended enhanced '**guidance'** and '**networking'** opportunities to facilitate their next steps into the labour market, university, or the community sector.
- 34% of respondents reported interest in applying to a Higher Certificate in Personal and Professional Development award, 36% would not be interested in applying, while 30% did not know.

While these statistics provide some insight into the Certificate and its impact, the report's qualitative findings enhance numeric measurement with the rich insight of learner voice.

Summary of Recommendations

An Cosán and SETU Lifelong Learning now share an evidence-based model to inform how adult learners experiencing diverse inequalities can be supported and motivated to access, participate, and succeed in third level education. The recommendations arising may be summarised as follows:

1. **It is recommended that An Cosán and SETU collaborate to celebrate and publicise the Linked Provision's existing strengths and success in widening participation in Higher Education and, in the context of wider Higher Education system innovation and transformation, to advocate for this Community-Based Higher Education model's recognition and wider replication.**
2. **It is recommended that An Cosán and SETU collaborate with relevant stakeholders to advocate for the allocation of public resources to part-time, flexible learning and to priority group access and participation in Higher Education.**
3. **It is recommended that resources are ringfenced as much as possible to continue the development and delivery of An Cosán's wraparound supports. Every effort should be maintained across An Cosán and SETU to ensure that these innovative, important, and relevant supports are protected and maintained in future.**
4. **It is recommended that resources are ringfenced in as much as possible to continue the development and delivery of transformative learning at An Cosán. Every effort should be maintained across An Cosán and SETU to ensure that this innovative, important, and relevant model of pedagogy is protected and maintained in future.**
5. **It is recommended that the findings of this report and the Van Aswegan report (2023) form the basis of a strategic project to develop a Level 8 BA Degree programme in Community Development. Learners' personal and professional development may be enhanced through provision of career guidance and networking opportunities.**
6. **It is recommended that An Cosán and SETU give special consideration to and make provision for participatory action research as part of future programme evaluations.**

The report's recommendations are informed by the Higher Education Authority's call for 'system innovation and transformation' and speak directly to the future development of community-based Higher Education pathways in Ireland.

1 Introduction

The road is where I am, and where it goes is something I am just open to discovering.
Neltah

In 2018, An Cosán and the South East Technological University (SETU) answered the Higher Education Authority's call for Higher Education System Innovation and Transformation. Both organisations collaborated to create the Higher Education Pathway for Non-Traditional Learners (HEPNTL) project. The project aimed to create a new, innovative Higher Education pathway for mature students experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, a flexible, distance, and e-learning award, delivered by An Cosán as a Linked Provider of SETU. Through a new Certificate in Personal and Professional Development, awardees would develop core, transversal competences to enable them to adapt to the future world of work and lifelong learning. The project further aimed to document this experience for wider dissemination and impact.

The present report aims to document and share An Cosán's learning from the project and from programme delivery. The report's findings will inform the Linked Provision's current practice and future programme delivery. The present case study in community-based Higher Education is significant. It demonstrates that genuine partnership between community and university is essential to centring the needs of marginalised adult learners. This model of collaboration is of clear relevance to all stakeholders seeking to achieve a unified educational system centred on the needs of adult learners and on the principle of educational equality for all. The following chapter outlines An Cosán and SETU's collaboration to date and provides an overview of the HEPNTL project and its origins.

An Cosán

An Cosán (Irish: 'The Pathway') is a unique community education organisation, working in the heart of the communities of Tallaght in West Dublin, Ireland. Its mission is 'to empower women and children left furthest behind through learning, leadership and enterprise' (An Cosán, 2023). An Cosán offers people diverse programmes in early childhood education and care, parenting, community, further and higher education. In recent years, An Cosán has moved online to foster digital inclusion, sharing its adult community education ethos beyond its home in Tallaght with communities across Ireland.

An Cosán's educational pathways are underpinned by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly those relating to quality education, gender equality, and human rights (UN DESA, 2023). Its 'one generation solution' proposes that the most effective way to end intergenerational poverty is to focus resources on those women and children who are 'furthest behind'. Educating a mother empowers a whole family, and ultimately enables families to break the cycle of poverty (An Cosán, 2023). Founded in 1986 by Ann Louise Gilligan and Katherine Zappone, An Cosán has more than 35 years' experience in using the power of transformative education to end the injustice of poverty. A Linked Provider of SETU (formerly IT Carlow) since 2008, An Cosán is now a national leader in Community-Based Higher Education.

South East Technological University

SETU is the first technological university in South East Ireland (SETU, 2023). SETU serves more than 18,000 students through its campuses across counties Carlow, Waterford, and Wexford as well as through its presence in Kilkenny and Wicklow. Through exceptional learning and collaboration, SETU aims to transform the ambitions of learners, researchers, and businesses across the southeast and beyond.

SETU's Faculty of Lifelong Learning is one of the largest providers of part-time learning in the Irish Higher Education sector (Flynn, Collins, and Malone, 2022). Comprised of over 5,000 lifelong learners annually, the SETU Faculty of Lifelong Learning is committed to providing high quality learning opportunities for all. Public engagement is fundamental to its work and embedded within its strategic principles. This ensures that course provision is closely linked to all aspects of regional and national development via a strong higher education-industry-government-public environment relationship. This continues to inform and shape all provision for lifelong learners' benefit, so that they can enjoy a successful and sustainable career and high quality of life.

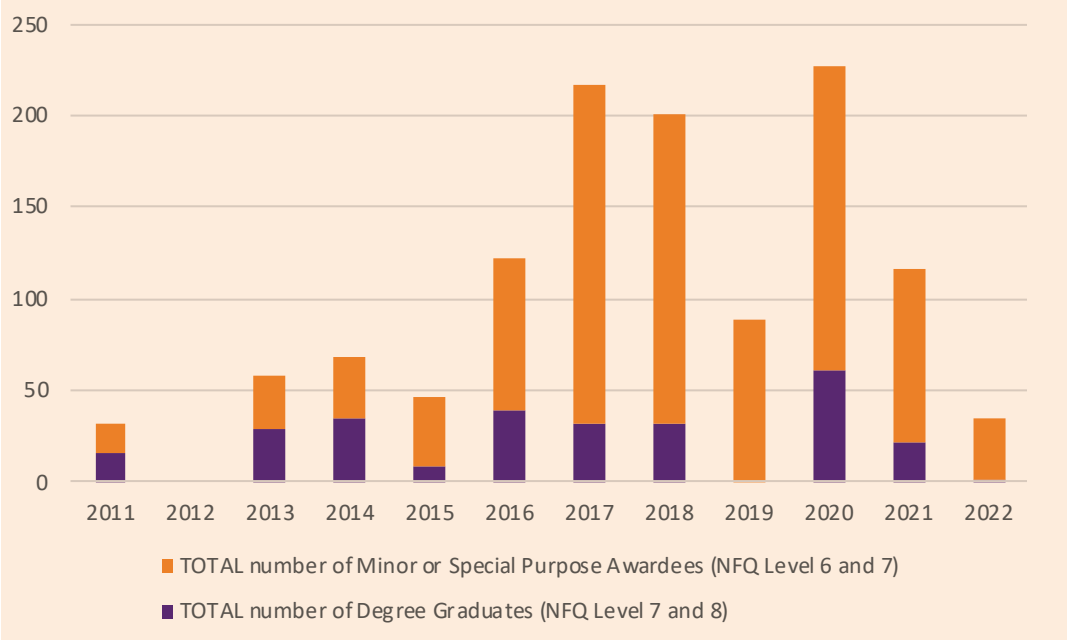
An Cosán and SETU: Linked Provision

> *'An Cosán is an example of an inclusive, caring, outreaching entity, providing high level relevant qualifications. An Cosán has internal processes that are very rigorous and robust; it has a high level of organisation, and an exemplary level of care for students and their learning, with up-to-date expertise. An Cosán is a lead player on a global stage.'*
>
> - Prof. Ted Fleming, 2021 Programmatic Review Report

SETU is the 'Designated Awarding Body' for An Cosán (See Qualifications and Quality Assurance Act 2012). An Cosán and SETU collaborate to deliver jointly Linked Programmes to suitably qualified students recruited by An Cosán. Under the Linked Provision arrangement, An Cosán delivers professional development BA Degree programmes grounded in a holistic, adult community education teaching and learning philosophy. Delivery conforms to the normal academic standards, quality assurance standards, and values of SETU while respecting the academic traditions of both An Cosán and SETU.

In 2008, An Cosán, responding to community need in Tallaght, sought a third level partnership to facilitate an accredited progression pathway for local adult learners. This resulted in an initial collaboration with IT Carlow to offer the BA Degree in Leadership and Community Development (NFQ Level 7), and the BA Degree in Applied Addiction Studies and Community Development (NFQ Level 7). In 2014, An Cosán piloted the Virtual Community College. This online model of adult community education broadened third level participation in disadvantaged communities across Ireland. To date, 272 non-traditional learners have graduated with a BA Degree level award while 1,017 learners have achieved an accredited minor or special purpose award (Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1. An Cosán and SETU Linked Provision Higher Level Awards Summary 2008 to 2022.



Notes [1] The no. of Minor and SPA awardees identifies the no. of individuals who exited with this award only (i.e. the individuals were not registered to a BA Degree programme) [2] The year of award refers to the date of the award ceremony.

Today, An Cosán's third level student body comprises of c. 120 adult learners annually, drawn from those 'priority groups' most under-represented in traditional university settings (See Ireland, DFHERIS, 2022a). Through Linked Provision, An Cosán and SETU engage and welcome the most marginalised of adult learners into third level education, putting 'those farthest behind first' (UN DESA, 2023). An Cosán's Higher Education learners include socio-economically disadvantaged students, lone parents, students with asylum seeker status, students with disabilities, and Irish Travellers. Linked Provision offers progression pathways to first-time mature student entrants into Higher Education and to Further Education award holders. Some 75% of Higher Education participants are women.

Community-Based Higher Education

An Cosan's work in and with marginalised communities around Ireland demonstrates how adult learners experiencing inequality can be supported and motivated to access, engage, and succeed in third level education. While there are diverse models of widening participation in Higher Education, Fitzsimons and Magrath (2017) identify three primary modes of delivery for foundational Certificates: (i) programmes delivered in partnership with Further Education (FE); (ii) programmes delivered in partnership across Higher Education (HE) providers; and (iii) programmes delivered by individual HE providers alone. An Cosán and SETU's Linked Provision offers an innovative, fourth mode of programme delivery: (iv) programmes delivered in partnership with Adult Community Education (ACE) providers.

Several factors distinguish Linked Provision from traditional, on-campus programmes at Higher Education Institutes. Firstly, delivery of blended awards occurs directly to adult learners online and in their local community centre. An Cosán offers Access, Further, and Higher Education in one location, through one organisation. In doing so, Linked Provision meets the recognised need for education providers in Ireland 'to start local', 'to involve communities in creating their own future in education', and 'to create clear pathways between the different education levels' (Ireland, DES, 2015, p. 1). Clear, accessible pathways at An Cosán motivate inclusion, participation, and success as adult learners can see and meet with learners on other courses at different levels. This facilitates peer learning and role-modelling while establishing progression to higher levels of learning as a shared norm.

Linked Provision is further distinguished as a mode of programme delivery insofar as An Cosán offers adult learners a holistic model of wraparound support. An Cosán recognises that many adult learners distrust formal, mainstream education and consciously seeks to create an alternative, welcoming space. Hospitality, providing 'a place of heart and home', is integral to An Cosán's ethos (See Gilligan and Zappone, 2006). An Cosán offers wraparound, holistic supports to address the barriers commonly experienced in communities challenging disadvantage. These include childcare, counselling, hardware provision and digital skills support, one-to-one tutoring, one-to-one mentoring, and accommodation of learning challenges. The resulting diversity of An Cosán's learning community is a real strength, facilitating novel opportunities for peer learning and cross-cultural awareness.

Thirdly, to accommodate diverse adult learners with significant responsibilities and demands on their time, provision is highly flexible. Linked Provision centres on the provision of part-time awards. Learners can take component modules as accredited minor awards, gradually building up the credits necessary to obtain a major award. This flexibility enables learners to build self-confidence, digital skills, and lifelong learning practice before subsequently progressing to Certificate or to Degree level. An Cosán also offers enhanced flexibility through blended learning, combining face-to-face workshops, online live lectures, and offline activities and assignments. Learners can access their Virtual Learning Environment, learning materials, and class recordings around their own schedule and at a pace that suits them.

Finally, Linked Provision programmes are delivered by An Cosán's experienced team of community educators rather than Higher Education Institute faculty. Teaching delivery is grounded in the dialogic, collaborative, and highly participatory principles and practices associated with the discipline of adult education (See Fleming, 2021; Connolly, 2008; Freire, 1996; hooks, 1994). In the classroom, tutors and learners value adult learners' life experience. They do so while engaging a level of critical, academic challenge appropriate to third level education. Importantly, continuous assessment is prioritised over final examinations. Holistic, adult community education explicitly and intentionally supports adult learners' personal, academic, and professional development.

Community-Based Higher Education: Evidencing Impact

An Cosán and SETU's collaboration has been successful in promoting lifelong learning and social inclusion. The benefits of lifelong learning are well documented (UIL, 2022; Fleming, 2021). Education supports personal development and well-being, underpinning social trust, active citizenship, and full participation in a democratic society, as well as fostering capacities to engage in meaningful employment with positive implications for social inclusion and social mobility. Specific benefits attach to Higher Education. In Ireland, those who attain an educational award at NFQ Levels 6 and 7 are more likely to enter employment, earn a higher income, and enjoy increased life expectancy (Social Justice Ireland, 2023; Central Statistics Office 2023b; Fitzgerald et al, 2013). Individual achievement in Higher Education sets an intergenerational precedent and facilitates families exiting

poverty and breaking down cycles of disadvantage (An Cosán, 2023).

Moreover, by expanding access to third level education in communities experiencing educational inequality, Linked Provision contributes to local community development and to enhancing the broader community and voluntary sector at a national level. Linked Provision facilitates An Cosán's delivery of the BA Degree in Applied Addiction Studies and Community Development (NFQ Level 7) and the BA Degree in Leadership and Community Development (NFQ Level 7). In addition to extending and enhancing capacity for lifelong learning, these programmes aim to develop reflective practitioners with the relevant knowledge, competencies, and skills to make a professional contribution to public, health, and community services at a local, national, or international level. Linked Provision's positive impact in communities in Tallaght and throughout Ireland is evident in successive reviews and evaluations.

Research into An Cosán and SETU's Higher Education pathway demonstrates its success in supporting non-traditional learners to progress through the National Framework of Qualifications (Kovačič et al., 2020). The research also demonstrates An Cosán learners' development of increased independence, maturity, self-confidence, and a more positive outlook on the future (Kovačič et al., 2020). Positive outcomes for individual learners have far-reaching benefits for wider society. By meeting and collaborating with diverse participants from across Ireland, An Cosán learners have reported gaining social capital, access to professional opportunities, and enhanced capacity to promote social inclusion and human rights in their local community (Murray, 2022). A recent Social Return on Investment (SROI) study found that for every euro of investment in An Cosán Virtual Community College, there was 5.1 times as much social value created (Kovačič, Forkan, and Goodspeed, 2022). The HEPNTL project offered An Cosán and SETU an opportunity to build on this positive experience of collaboration, to innovate, and to deepen organisational learning.

Higher Education System Innovation and Transformation

The Higher Education Pathways for Non-Traditional Learners project originated in SETU (then Institute of Technology Carlow) and An Cosán answering the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and its 2018 call for 'System Innovation and Transformation'. The aims of this HEA programme were: (1) To support innovative and transformative proposals from institutions or groups of institutions with potential application and impact across the higher education system; and (2) To align innovation and transformation with National strategic objectives and the Key System Objectives for the higher education system (See Table 1.1). The areas prioritised for the Innovation and Transformation Call were: the support of innovation, transformation and quality improvement in teaching and student learning outcomes; innovation and transformation in flexible, distance and e-learning opportunities and programmes; the support of student retention and progression both at individual, and institutional level and through inter-institutional, sectoral and inter-sectoral collaboration; and, finally, measures to support Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in the Higher Education Sector.

Table 1.1 Key System Objectives for the Higher Education System 2018 -2020 (HEA, 2018).

Objective 1: Providing a strong talent pipeline combining knowledge, skills & employability which responds effectively to the needs of our enterprise, public service and community sectors, both nationally and regionally, and maintains Irish leadership in Europe for skill availability.
Objective 2: Creating rich opportunities for national and international engagement which enhances the learning environment and delivers a strong bridge to enterprise and the wider community.
Objective 3: Excellent research, development innovation and transformation that has relevance, growing engagement with external partners and impact for the economy and society and strengthens our standing to become an Innovation and Transformation Leader in Europe.
Objective 4: Significantly improves the equality of opportunity through Education and Training and recruits a student body that reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population.
Objective 5: Demonstrates consistent improvement in the quality of the learning environment with a close eye to international best practice through a strong focus on quality & academic excellence.
Objective 6: Demonstrates consistent improvement in governance, leadership, and operational excellence.

The HEA received and evaluated a total of 34 eligible applications. 22 applications were recommended for funding. The IT Carlow and An Cosán project, "Higher Education Pathway for Non-Traditional Learners: Flexible, Blended Learning, Competence and Community Education Based", was awarded funding of €355,269.

Project Aims and Overview

The Higher Education Pathway for Non-Traditional Learners project aims to:

1. **Create a new, innovative Higher Education pathway for non-traditional learners by drawing on international best practice in flexible learning, technology enhanced community education, and competence-based learning.**
2. **Develop awardees (of The Certificate in Personal and Professional Development) who are equipped with sufficient core academic competences and transferrable skills to enable them to adapt to the future world of work and lifelong learning.**
3. **Document organisational experience and learning for wider dissemination and impact.**

SETU and An Cosán designed the HEPNTL project to respond to the specific needs of non-traditional adult learners experiencing diverse, complex inequalities and, consequently, unable to access Higher Education. The project, its aims and rationale are future-focused and informed by analysis of relevant social concerns and policy contexts. These frameworks include but are not limited to: (i) Education for Social Inclusion; (ii) Enhancing Equity of Access, Participation, and Success in Higher Education; (iii) The Future of Work; (iv) Digital Transition; (v) Health and Well-being; (vi) Diversity and Intercultural Understanding; and (vii) Active Citizenship and Sustainable Development.

The Certificate's educational aim is to develop awardees who are equipped with the transversal competences required to enable them to adapt to and to shape the future world of work and lifelong learning. In a transformative learning environment, An Cosán learners are supported to develop as robust, independent members of society that can take charge of their own lives; that enjoy increased motivation for learning and development; and that enjoy an enhanced quality of relationship to academic institutions and to the job market (See Elsborg and Pedersen, 2013). These new capabilities are underpinned by formal knowledge, by informal learning, and by a mix of 'hard' and 'soft' skills developed during the Certificate.

Project Overview

Table 1.2 Timeline of the Higher Education Pathways for Non-Traditional Learners project.

Date	Event
December, 2018	Award under HEA Call.
2019	Design of Certificate in Personal and Professional Development.
January, 2020	Accreditation of Certificate with IT Carlow secured.
November, 2020	Round 1 of Certificate delivery begins to c. 24 learners.
September, 2021	Project Advisory Group formed. Data Collection begins.
October, 2021	Round 1 of Certificate delivery concludes.
November, 2021	Round 2 of Certificate delivery begins to c. 24 learners.
September, 2022	Award Ceremony.
October, 2022	Round 2 of Certificate delivery concludes.
November, 2022	International Community Seminar. Research Dissemination.
December, 2022	Completion of Research Outputs.
June, 2023	Award Ceremony. Photovoice Exhibition.

The Higher Education Pathway for Non-Traditional Learners project occurred between 2019 and 2022 (Table 1.2). Pre-delivery activities centred on programme design and participant recruitment. In early 2020, An Cosán secured the accreditation of a new Certificate in Personal and Professional Development (NFQ Level 6, 60 ECTS) with IT Carlow. The Certificate offers entry into HE for mature students experiencing socio-economic disadvantage. It is a flexible, distance, and e-learning award, delivered by An Cosán part-time over one year with 130 contact hours. Its component modules are listed in Table 1.3 below. The first delivery of the Certificate to c. 24 adult learners started in November 2020 and concluded in October 2021. The second round of delivery to a new cohort of c. 24 adult learners started in November 2021 and concluded in October 2022.

Table 1.3 Certificate in Personal and Professional Development. Component Modules.

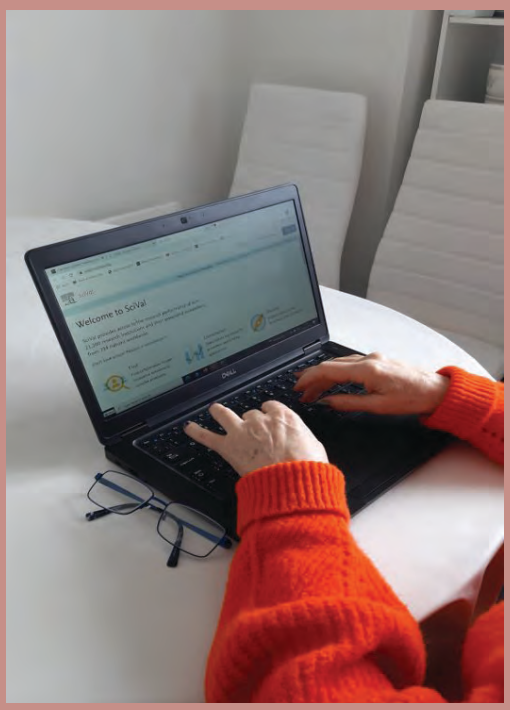
Certificate in Personal and Professional Development (NFQ Level 6)	ECTS	Available as Minor Award
Foundations of Adult Learning	10	Yes
Learning to Collaborate	10	Yes
Communications	10	Yes
Critical and Ethical Thinking in a Changing World	10	Yes
Introduction to Research	5	No
Essential IT Applications in a Changing World	5	No
Unpacking Everyday Maths	5	No
Enabling Wellbeing	5	No

Educational research occurred from October 2021 onwards. An international Project Advisory Group enhanced the research process and offered new consideration of international practice in adult community education. Data collection involved compilation of student records, a large-n survey, focus group evaluation workshops and an innovative Photovoice project. Data analysis and write up occurred from July 2022 onwards. The public dissemination of project learning took the form of a two-day International Community Seminar on Rethinking Higher Education Pathways in November 2022 and a Photovoice Exhibition in June 2023.

Structure of the Report

The Report outlines the educational research findings and organisational learning generated during the delivery of the Certificate in Personal and Professional Development. The work falls into nine chapters. Chapter 1 is a general introduction. Chapter 2 outlines the research project, key questions for inquiry, as well as methodological considerations related to data collection and analysis. Chapter 3 situates the HEPNTL project in the context of wider social concerns and policy landscapes related to the future of lifelong learning in a rapidly changing world. Chapter 4 details all activities undertaken by An Cosán to deliver the HEPNTL project and the new Certificate in Personal and Professional Development. The report then details the research findings. Chapter 5 provides an overview of An Cosán learners' profile, retention, and progression, focussing on their complex starting points, challenges, and motivations. Chapter 6 documents the learner experience of the Certificate in Personal and Professional Development, outlining the positive outcomes of participation reported by participants. Chapter 7 presents learners' perspectives on how these outcomes were generated and sustained, exploring the questions 'What Works?' and 'What's Missing?' Chapter 8 provides an overall evaluation of the programme. Chapter 9 concludes the report with a set of recommendations arising.

2 Researching Higher Education in the Community



It's hard to express the glory when you finish: 'Hey! Happy days! Hallelujah!'
Fred

The provision of robust data and evidence-based evaluation is vital to all stakeholders seeking to ensure non-traditional adult learners can access, engage, and succeed across the tertiary system of education. Beyond programme delivery, the HEPNTL project offered An Cosán and SETU a critical opportunity for sustained research and development.

The present chapter outlines the HEPNTL project's research aims and objectives in more depth. It describes the central questions for inquiry as well as the ethical and methodological considerations related to data collection and analysis.

Aims and Objectives

The overarching aim of the present research is 'to document organisational experience and learning for wider dissemination and impact'. Within this overarching aim, five specific objectives were pursued:

1. **Review the design, delivery, and impact of the Certificate in Personal and Professional Development with all stakeholders on an ongoing basis.**
2. **Identify improvements to the existing model of community-based Higher Education at An Cosán, including flexible provision, wraparound support, and transformative education.**
3. **Identify future programme development needs at An Cosán, including the development of accredited progression pathways for Certificate awardees.**
4. **Establish international thinking partnerships with experts in the academic, personal, and professional development of non-traditional adult learners.**
5. **Answer the Higher Education Authority's Innovation and Transformation programme call for the replication and scaling of innovative practice across the Higher Education sector.**

Research Questions

The report addresses the following research questions:

1. **How does the Certificate satisfy equality of access to Higher Education criteria?**
2. **What are the Certificate's progression, retention, and completion rates?**
3. **What factors or actions facilitated students' personal and professional development?**
4. **What may need to be developed or improved in future?**

Materials and Methods

Research was conducted into student experiences of the Certificate in Personal and Professional Development. This mixed-methods study uses both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Quantitative research findings are drawn from two sources: content analysis of anonymised student records (n=52) and voluntary participation in an online survey for past and present learners undertaking community-based Higher Education at An Cosán (n=61 responses of a possible 161, resulting in a 38% response rate). Qualitative findings are derived from two sources: the contributions of Certificate participants to two reflective evaluation focus groups (n= 15) as well as their contributions to four qualitative Photovoice workshops (n=11).

An independent consultant facilitated the evaluation workshops. These workshops took place on the online platform MS Teams and in person, were each 90 minutes in duration and were recorded and transcribed (Fitzgerald, 2022). Photovoice workshops took place on MS Teams also, were each 60 minutes in duration and were audio recorded. Audio recordings were transcribed by an external transcriber who signed a confidentiality agreement and once transcribed were destroyed securely.

Table 2.1 Summary of Research Data

Data	No. of Adult Learner Participants
Anonymised Learner Records	51
Large-N Survey of An Cosán Higher Education learners and alumni *	61
Focus Group Evaluations (x 2)	15
Photovoice Workshops (x 4)	11

* 61 responses from 161 invitees. 38% response rate.

Data collection generated raw data on learners' participation and progress, combining both quantitative statistical data through survey responses and qualitative data on student opinion of the programme and its impact. The key research questions that informed the collection of this data were designed to gather information on indicators of success and of opportunities for programme development. During thematic analysis, the report authors coded the data using NVivo software and organised it according to the following emergent themes: (1) 'Starting Points'. Learners' Complex Lives, Challenges and Motivations; (2) 'What Impact?' Certificate Impact on Self, Education, Work, and Community; (3) 'What Works?' Facilitators and inhibitors identified by research participants; and (4) 'What's missing?' Proposed new facilitators identified by research participants. Coding was cross checked for validity by the authors. All raw data was stored in secure password protected folders on encrypted laptops only accessible to the authors.

Photovoice: Process and Dialogue

> **'This is an unexpected and great way of helping me to do more reflection… I had the photos, but they never really had that much meaning, as much meaning as they did today. Using tools that we don't ordinarily use, I guess, it always brings out something else…This is a great way of looking at the course. I learned a lot!'**
>
> An Cosán Learner and Research Participant.

In keeping with an adult community education ethos, the research process matters (See Highlander 2023). The report authors chose a creative, collaborative, and dialogic form of inquiry that we believed adult learners would find both educative and enjoyable: Photovoice. Over one year, the research team invited participants in communities across Ireland to take photos that, symbolically or literally, reflected their journey into and through Higher Education. Participants were then invited to share and discuss their photos together. Four photovoice workshops took place online in 2021 and 2022. In a safe, supportive, and non-judgemental space, participants were invited to reflect on their experience of participating in the Certificate. Relevant themes for discussion included: 'my past, present and future learning', 'valuing our lives and our learning', 'love, care and solidarity', as well as 'our next steps into the future world of work and lifelong learning'. The research team recorded and transcribed participant discussions.

Participatory visual research methods such as photovoice are 'rooted in a desire to decrease social and cultural power differentials in the research process' (Hegarty, 2016, p. 297). Photographs are meaningful. They are also familiar, accessible, and unthreatening. In community education contexts, some adult learners may find it difficult to express their own voices, experiences, ideas, dreams, and ambitions. Photovoice methods address these silences by centring images rather than text to better facilitate discussion of 'life situations' (See Freire, 2010, p. 57). The images that participants presented undoubtedly facilitated and enhanced the sharing, questioning, and making of meaning. Finally, to validate and celebrate adult learners' achievements, a public exhibition of the

learners' photographic contributions and an accompanying booklet, *The Whirlwind and the Path*, was organised to take place upon the project's conclusion (Murray, Brennan, and Kutub, 2023).

Research Scope and Limitations

The primary limitations of this research are as follows. Firstly, Covid 19 resulted in significant, unanticipated delays to all aspects of project and programme delivery. Research and evaluation proper began in October 2021. Secondly, in the context of Covid disruption, a baseline indicator survey for entrants to the Certificate in Personal and Professional Development was not feasible within the project timeframe. Student application forms provide data on participant starting points, challenges, and motivations. Thirdly, to ensure a representative sample size and to access relevant information on participants' next steps, the survey was extended to all Higher Education learners at An Cosán. This included alumni from the Degree programme classes of 2020 and 2021. To preserve participant anonymity, the survey information made available to researchers was not award specific. This means that while the survey information yields insight into community-based Higher Education pathways generally, it does not indicate whether student experience or decision-making differed according to their Degree or Certificate pathway. Finally, for reasons of feasibility, the report is limited to understanding the learner experience. It is important to note that the report's recommendations derive primarily from this learner-centred understanding. The report authors did not interview any members of staff of either An Cosán or SETU involved in programme delivery. A recent evaluation of An Cosán's adult community education programme (Williams, 2021) and a specific environmental analysis of Certificate in Personal and Professional Development programmes (Van Aswegan, 2023) draw on relevant stakeholder interviews and complement the present analysis.

Research Ethics

All research with human subjects conducted for this project was regulated by the standard policies and quality assurance processes governing the dignity and respect of all Linked Provision adult learners at An Cosán. All research follows the code of ethics for social researchers established by the Sociological Association of Ireland and by the British Educational Research Guidelines. Five core principles of ethics underpinned the research process: anonymity; confidentiality; the safety of participants; informed consent and freedom to withdraw. The research is further grounded in the ethical practices associated with community education based around participants' dignity, respect, and empowerment. Every effort was made to uphold a strong ethical obligation to the participants and a commitment to social justice.

The researchers conducted their inquiry in an ethically robust manner that was mindful of the potential vulnerability of those participating. Participants received a full account of the research project, its aims, and methods of data collection, storage, and usage. For the consultation and focus group strands, participants were provided with the information sheet and consent form ahead of the session. The researchers also talked the participants through the information sheet and consent form on the day of the focus group or consultation. All participants provided informed verbal and written consent to partake in research. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage if they so wished. The researchers also took steps to ensure that supports to participants were available following completion of research activities.

Special attention was paid to confidentiality and compliance with relevant Data Protection legislation throughout the entire research process. No IP addresses were collected during survey data collection. Signed consent forms and the visual recordings were saved in a secure folder only accessible by the researcher. During the transcription process, the data was anonymised to ensure that no participant could be identified from the content of their focus group or interview. All data will be retained securely and in confidence until completion of all research outputs, whereupon all visual and audio records of interviews and focus groups will be destroyed.

To demonstrate the value of the HEPNTL project and its accompanying research, the following chapter makes the case for its development using major trends impacting Ireland and the wider world today.

3 Adult Learners in a Changing World

There was always this other little branch, the academic side, that never grew.
Tanya

An Cosán designed the HEPNTL project to respond to the specific needs of non-traditional adult learners experiencing diverse, complex inequalities and, consequently, unable to access HE. Close analysis of relevant social transformations and changing policy contexts informed the project's design and development.

The present chapter locates the project within this wider landscape and demonstrates its responsiveness to and anticipation of major trends impacting Ireland and the wider world today. While the issues emerging in diverse countries are varied with regional and national specificities, the most pressing global challenges pertain broadly to climate, demography, health, citizenship, technology, and employment (UIL, 2022, pp. 22-35, 37). In each case, the trend is outlined, related opportunities and risks identified, and relevant policy frameworks highlighted. The role of the HEPNTL project is then highlighted with a focus on its benefits to adult learners and wider society. The analysis underlines the project's rationale, future-focus, and ongoing value for wider Higher Education system innovation and transformation.

Social Inclusion

Recent governments' stated policy is to make Ireland one of the most socially inclusive States in the EU and to reduce the national consistent poverty rate to 2% or less of the population by 2025 (Ireland, DSP, 2020). Currently, 5.3% of people are living in consistent poverty, up from 4.0% in 2021. Moreover, 13.1% of the population are at risk-of poverty, up from 11.6% in 2021 (CSO EU-SILC, 2023). Aggregate statistics hide the extent and intersectional nature of social exclusion. Women comprise the majority of those living in poverty in Ireland and globally. Single parent households, predominantly women-led, generally have the highest consistent poverty, relative poverty, and enforced deprivation rates (CSO EU-SILC, 2023). Beyond statistics, poverty brings with it important relational and symbolic struggles, including those associated with 'lack of voice, respect and self-esteem, isolation and humiliation' (Lister in Dukelow and Considine, 2017, p. 203).

An Cosán's long-standing recognition of the role of education in social inclusion informed the HEPNTL's conception and design. Through the Certificate programme, the project aimed to foster non-traditional learners' capacities to engage in meaningful education and employment pathways with positive implications for their social inclusion and social mobility. The provision of a Higher Education award (rather than an unaccredited or Further Education award) clearly matters in this regard. In addition to the enjoyment of participation, autonomous learning, and critical challenge at third level, achieving an accredited Higher Education award generates wider social recognition as well as important psychological and self-esteem benefits for the individual. In material terms, those who achieve a Higher Education award, particularly educational attainment at NFQ Levels 6 and 7, are more likely to enter employment, earn a higher income, and enjoy increased quality of life (Social Justice Ireland 2023, Central Statistics Office 2023, Fitzgerald et al 2013).

Ireland ranks third in the OECD for the rate of third level education attainment, at 54% compared to the average of 41% (OECD, 2022). Increasing educational attainment has important implications for Ireland's labour market, including new requirements for QQI accreditation for roles which previously did not require them and higher qualification levels for specific positions. Those who have not previously had the opportunity to undertake Higher Education are at increased risk of poverty and social exclusion, particularly in terms of their diminished capacity to gain meaningful employment. This will negatively impact those individuals and their families, as well as our communities, economy, and society.

Enhancing Equity of Access, Participation, and Success in Higher Education

Exclusion from third level access, participation, and success is one of the primary challenges facing society today. In the context of rapid economic, social, and demographic change, an inclusive third level education system is a prerequisite for adaptability, social cohesion, and human development. European Union policies in education and training emphasise equity and inclusion (European Commission 2022; Ireland, DFHERIS, 2022a, p. 37). However, these policies have typically increased participation by socio-economic groups that had already traditionally accessed Higher Education provision, rather than 'a widening; that is, drawing in of those who

had not' (Fleming *et al*. 2017, p. 48). Third level student populations remain unrepresentative of wider society (European Commission, 2022).

Lifelong learning participation rates in Ireland remain low. In the case of mature student participation in Higher Education, especially in the case of marginalised priority groups, participation rates are low and consistently fall short of national policy objectives. In 2019/20, 7.1% of full-time new Higher Education entrants were mature students compared with 13% in 2012/13 and below the National Action Plan target of 16% (DFHERIS, 2022a, 2022). For priority groups such as students from the Irish Traveller community, students from disadvantaged areas and first-time mature students, HE participation rates remain 'too low' (Ireland, DFHERIS, 2022a, p.5). Only 10% of students in HE come from disadvantaged areas (DFHERIS, 2022a, p.5). The resulting inequalities in third level access, participation and success are stark. The Dublin postal districts with the two highest participation rates (Dublin 6 at 99% and Dublin 4 at 84%) are two of the city's most affluent areas. In contrast, the districts with the lowest participation rates (Dublin 17 at 15% and Dublin 10 at 16%) are among the city's most deprived areas (Considine and Dukelow, 2017, p.268). As Minister Simon Harris TD acknowledges, 'the data points to the scale of the challenge to grow participation by underrepresented groups in higher education' (Ireland, DFHERIS, 2022a, p.4).

The barriers standing between those most marginalised in our communities and Higher Education are well documented (Indecon, 2021; Fleming *et al*. 2017). Financial cost is viewed as the single greatest barrier to participation by mature students. Other barriers include family responsibilities, job commitments, timing of study, and distance. Those in priority groups report higher barriers than other respondents. Traditional provision is often inaccessible due to the mode of delivery, location, and timing. It is often inflexible with a required pace of completion. Nor does it necessarily recognise or value the prior formal, informal, and non-formal learning of mature learners effectively. Finally, somewhat less visible barriers to participation include adult learners' uncertain confidence and self-esteem, particularly following past negative experiences of mainstream education. Given the extent to which mature students cite financial costs, family, and work pressures as barriers, the option of part-time and flexible learning appears particularly relevant to widening participation (Indecon, 2021, p. vii). Flexibility may be understood here in two senses. Firstly, flexibility involves 'making changes that allow students access to education in locations and modes and at times of their own rather than institutions' choosing' (Indecon, 2021, p. vii). Secondly, flexibility refers to 'the mechanisms that challenge prevailing constructions of what constitutes knowledge at Higher Education level and the means by which knowledge can be acquired and demonstrated' (Indecon, 2021, p. vii). This may involve, for example, the recognition of prior learning.

Success in Higher Education inevitably involves more than access, progression, and completion rates. It also encompasses the quality of education available to every learner to enhance their capacity to flourish in and to contribute to society (NFETLHE, 2023). Adopting a minimalist focus on retention, it is worth noting that across Europe, the average rates of retention in Higher Education are approximately 70 per cent (Fleming *et a*l., 2017, p. 262). Within Irish HE, an estimated average of 25 per cent drop out from September of first year to near the end of second year (Fleming *et al*., 2017, p. 266). The most recent figures support this estimate. Mainstream provision in Ireland had a completion rate of 75% for full-time undergraduate students who started a Level 6, 7 or 8 major award in 2016/2017 (HEA 2023a). Notably, those parts of the Higher Education sector with the largest proportions of disadvantaged and mature students, programmes at Levels 6 and 7 in the former Institutes of Technology, have the least success in retaining them. Non-progression rates on those programmes are more than 3 times higher than those in Level 8 university programmes (Ireland, EGFFHE, 2015, p. 39).

The HEPNTL project responds to the above considerations of priority group access, participation, and success in innovative ways. An Cosán incorporates enhanced outreach to facilitate access among mature and priority group students. SETU partners with An Cosán and An Cosán in turn frequently partners with a wider network of some 200 community partners. By creating locally accessible Higher Education, the former facilitates entry by priority learners in the surrounding Tallaght communities, the latter learners in communities across Ireland. An Cosán provides wraparound supports to address a range of learner concerns, including financial costs. Importantly, the HEPNTL project incorporates enhanced flexibility by offering flexible, part-time provision. The Certificate includes blended (online and in-person) provision to suit learner needs. The short-cycle nature of the programme - over one year in the case of the full award or three months in the case of accredited minor awards - provides a low risk, non-intimidating starting point. Moreover, An Cosán offers flexibility in the construction of knowledge such

that adult learners' prior learning and experience are valued, and the classroom frequently becomes a site for the co-construction of knowledge. This transformative learning environment is informed by the discipline of adult education (See Fleming, 2021).

The Future of Work

Our understanding of work has evolved rapidly in the last decade with the transformation of the traditional office and the creation of new roles for jobs that previously did not exist. Future jobs and the skills they will require are difficult to predict. What remains key is the individual's capacity to adapt and progress using knowledge, skills, and competences that translate to different settings: 'Today's graduates need to be open to learning, and to become flexible, adaptable, and comfortable with change' (IBEC, 2018, p.7). In the context of rapid labour market transformation, workers are increasingly likely to transition in a non-linear fashion between the labour market and education, participating in learning programmes while working or returning to education to prepare for a career change (UIL, 2022: 26). Current and future work environments require individuals to engage in lifelong learning for both personal and professional development: learning for life, well-being, and the pursuit of knowledge as well as upskilling and retraining for employment. It further necessitates graduates who have developed core, transversal competences for lifelong learning as well as discipline or occupation-specific competences.

The HEPNTL project is informed by the imperative for education providers to respond effectively to the needs of adult learners in a rapidly changing world. The Certificate in Personal and Professional Development is designed to support marginalised adults to develop as independent, self-directed learners, capable of working in an autonomous way and of assuming responsibility in collaborative contexts. Learners are supported to develop transversal knowledge, skills, and competencies for professional environments. Component modules such as 'Foundations of Adult Learning', 'Learning to Collaborate', and 'Communications' explicitly address these needs. Throughout the Certificate, learners are further supported to develop research and writing skills, quantitative reasoning, contextual/intercultural understanding, and digital literacy.

Digital Transition

The Covid-19 pandemic upended traditional educational provision and workplace activity, forcing whole industries and sectors to move online. While the integration of ICT proceeded and increased across society, it further revealed the digital inequalities that reflect existing social inequalities across class, gender, race, and age, among others. Some 40% of adults in Europe lack basic digital skills (UIL, 2022, p.24). Marginalised and vulnerable groups experience multiple intersecting disadvantages that limit learning opportunities offered through digital technology and the internet. Unequal digital agency among the most socio-economically excluded in our society has far reaching effects for the well-being of individuals, communities, economies, and democracy.

The HEPNTL project responds to the digitalisation of Irish society, the imperative of digital inclusion, and the importance of developing individuals' digital agency as citizens, workers, and lifelong learners (European Commission, 2020). An Cosán addresses digital inclusion through the provision of online learning as a mode of programme delivery. It also offers specialised wraparound support to enable learners to participate in same, including hardware provision and digital literacy training, notably through a tailored 'Digital Stepping Stones' assessment tool. The Certificate curriculum engages the broad categories of digital skills for life and work identified in the UN SDGs. These are: basic functional skills for accessing and engaging with digital technologies; generic digital skills for using digital technologies in meaningful and beneficial ways; and higher-level skills for using digital technology for empowerment and transformation (UIL, 2017). One of the component modules, 'IT Applications in a Changing World', explicitly enables learners to engage in digital skills learning for personal and professional development.

Health and Well-being

The issue of health and well-being is of considerable and growing importance. At international level, there is

growing concern that policy and policy-makers place too great an emphasis on macro-economic statistics such as GDP and not enough on the everyday experience of people (OECD, 2023). This tends to be coupled with a tendency to see people as potential economic assets rather than as rounded human beings. In response, the OECD Well-being Framework incorporates both the 'harder' dimensions of income and wealth, work and job quality, housing, health, knowledge and skills and environmental quality as well as the 'softer', more qualitative dimensions such as subjective well-being, safety, work-life balance, social connections, and civic engagement. These tendencies and tensions are evident in the field of adult education today (Fitzsimons, 2018). Equally, while education can support personal development and well-being, a high and growing proportion of learners across the tertiary system cite mental health issues (SOLAS, 2021, p. 47). Recognising these developments, the Department of Education has launched a wellbeing framework, focussing primarily on well-being for learners in educational surroundings (Ireland, DES, 2019).

Participation in learning has been found to lead to improved health behaviours and attitudes, higher life expectancy and a reduction in lifestyle diseases, with a commensurate reduction in healthcare costs (UIL, 2022, p. 32). New learning environments foster not only the cognitive development of the individual but also their social, physical, mental, and emotional development. Furthermore, with a focus on social and emotional learning for learners' self-esteem, community-based learning for health and well-being can encourage more active citizenship as well as inclusion.

An Cosán addresses individual well-being through the provision of wraparound supports, notably professional counselling services, and through the creation of a community-based, peer learning environment. The Certificate in Personal and Professional Development explicitly addresses learners' well-being. One of the component modules 'Enabling Well-Being' invites learners to reflect on and develop skills for well-being in both personal and professional environments.

Migration, Diversity, and Intercultural Understanding

The 2022 Census highlighted that some 20% of residents in the country were not born in Ireland, contributing to a much more diverse society than had been the case a quarter of a century previously (CSO, 2023c). This level of diversity is likely to increase further in the coming years and is driven by significant inward migration both from EU countries and from other parts of the world. The greater level of diversity brings very significant benefits to Irish society, in terms of a wide range of skills, values and other ways of thinking. All immigrant groups have different needs from a social, economic, and educational perspective. Some migrants may also be traumatised by previous life experiences.

Among the most marginalised of migrant groups are international protection applicants, many of whom currently reside in Direct Provision. Beyond legal restrictions on full access to the labour market, the institutionalisation of asylum seekers in DP creates a career gap for people seeking employment after receiving their status as a refugee. Furthermore, long periods of inactivity undermine people's well-being and mental health, damaging their self-esteem and self-efficacy, as well as confidence in their own abilities (MASI, 2019). In these circumstances, IPAs' access to relevant education, training, work experience, and networking opportunities is vital.

Participation in Lifelong Learning has been demonstrated to promote social cohesion, cultural understanding, and tolerance of diversity (UIL, 2022, pp. 28-29). The Certificate in Personal and Professional Development draws on this understanding and similarly seeks to enhance intercultural understanding and tolerance of diversity. All component modules are designed with a view to representing diversity in the curriculum and to considering issues associated with diversity and global citizenship in personal and professional contexts. Moreover, An Cosán offers diverse groups of adult learners the opportunity to share life experience, to work together, and to engage in solving common problems together in a peer learning environment. Tutors' facilitation of participatory, dialogic classrooms enables students to adopt multiple and 'other' perspectives. It further enables adult learners to bring non-formal and informal prior learning from diverse locations and educational systems into new conversations for mutual learning.

Active Citizenship and Sustainable Development

The world today faces linked economic, social, and ecological crises. Sustainable development – considered holistically in terms of economic activity, social inclusion, cultural expression, and environmental protection – relies on democratic participation by civil society and by informed and active citizens (UIL, 2022, p. 33). Citizenship competence has been defined as involving an understanding of common social values and a differentiated view of major historical developments at local, national, and global levels. It further refers to critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and an involvement in civic activities and decision-making at all levels of government. Global and active citizenship builds fundamentally on respect for human rights and includes 'support for social and cultural diversity, gender equality and social cohesion, sustainable lifestyles, promotion of culture of peace and non-violence, a readiness to respect the privacy of others, and to take responsibility for the environment' (European Commission, 2019, p.12).

The possibilities of genuine citizenship face multiple obstacles, including pervasive inequalities of power, resources, and recognition. More recently, the spread of disinformation has prompted denial of climate breakdown, vaccine science, and the root causes of poverty and migration flows (UIL, 2022, p. 33). Nevertheless, by supporting the creation of learning communities at a local level, Lifelong Learning initiatives can help adult learners foster citizenship competences and address shared challenges together. Indeed, learning communities can offer a means of managing and resolving conflict and disinformation through mediation and dialogue, raising awareness about the causes of socio-economic issues, and shaping public attitudes (UIL, 2022, pp. 28-29). Learning in local communities reinforces social cohesion and can improve quality of life for all members of society (UIL, 2022, p. 145).

The Certificate in Personal and Professional Development draws on this understanding of Lifelong Learning and similarly seeks to enable citizenship competences. All component modules are designed with a view to representing global citizenship in the curriculum and to considering issues associated with global citizenship in personal and professional contexts. One of the component modules 'Critical and Ethical Thinking in a Changing World' explicitly enables learners to reflect on and develop skills for critical literacy and active citizenship. More generally, the HEPNTL project supports individual personal development and well-being, which in turn underpins individuals' capacities for social trust, active citizenship, and full participation in a democratic society.

Table 3.1 Policy Frameworks informing HEPNTL project

- European Commission, 2022. Towards equity and inclusion in higher education in Europe: Eurydice report.
- European Commission, 2020. Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027: Resetting education and training for the digital age.
- European Commission, 2019. Key competences for lifelong learning.
- Ireland, Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2019. Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice.
- Ireland, DES, 2015. National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education, 2015-2019.
- Ireland, Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), 2022. National Access Plan: A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education, 2022-2028.
- Ireland, DFHERIS, 2022. Progressing a Unified Tertiary System for Learning, Skills and Knowledge: Public Consultation Report.
- Ireland, DFHERIS, 2022. Second National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development - ESD to 2030.
- Ireland, Department of Rural and Community Development, 2019. Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities: 2019-2024.
- Ireland, Department of Social Protection, 2020. Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020 - 2025: Ambition, Goals and Commitments.
- United Nations, 2015. Sustainable Development Agenda to 2030

Towards a New Higher Education Pathway for Non-Traditional Learners

Lifelong learning clearly facilitates a wide range of benefits. It supports personal development and well-being, underpins social cohesion, active citizenship, and full participation in a democratic society, as well as fosters capacities to engage in meaningful employment with positive implications for social inclusion, social mobility, and sustainable development. Cognisant of wider social transformations and policy frameworks, An Cosán identified a specific need to provide a meaningfully accessible, flexible, and quality assured Higher Education pathway. This pathway would aim to:

- Address barriers to Higher Education directly by offering holistic, wraparound support services and by facilitating inclusive, transformative learning.
- Respond to requirements for flexibility in terms of timing, location, and modes of delivery, including capacity to enable participants to vary the pace of their learning over time.
- Enable learners to build on the further education they have completed.
- Recognise the prior formal, informal, and nonformal learning of participants.
- Build participants' self-confidence and capacity to become independent, adaptable, and self-directed lifelong learners.
- Embed digital literacies in both the curriculum and in the mode of delivery.
- Support return to learning throughout life to enable reskilling, upskilling, and refocusing for life and work, and the effective transitioning to different stages of the life cycle.

To address these diverse and urgent needs, An Cosán partnered with SETU on the Higher Education Pathway for Non-Traditional Learners project. The delivery of the HEPNTL project is outlined in the following chapter.

4 Delivering a new Higher Education pathway

It's people that push me, motivate me, inspire me to do what I have to do.
Mi Cielo

The Higher Education Pathway for Non-Traditional Learners project consisted of four primary work packages delivered between 2019 and 2023. The four work packages may be summarised as follows:

1. **Design, accreditation, and delivery of the Certificate in Personal and Professional Development to 60 learners**
2. **Design, development, preparation, and accreditation of a Higher Certificate / Degree Level pathway in Personal and Professional Development**
3. **Completion of an Action Research Project with the support of a Project Advisory Council to document organisational experience and learning for wider dissemination and impact**
4. **Dissemination of project learnings through conference events and research publications.**

The present chapter addresses the history and development of each work package. It describes the design and delivery of the Certificate in Personal and Professional Development and the subsequent design of the Higher Certificate. It also outlines the educational research phase and the project's concluding dissemination stages. The chapter locates these activities within the project's wider challenges, notably those occasioned by the Covid-19 pandemic. The chapter ends by considering the project's positive impact on the Linked Provision as a whole, outlining the positive synergies and benefits for the collaboration that it helped to bring about.

Table 4.1 Timeline of the Higher Education Pathways for Non-Traditional Learners project.

Date	Event
December, 2018	Award under HEA Call
2019	Design of Certificate in Personal and Professional Development
January, 2020	Accreditation of Certificate with IT Carlow secured
November, 2020	Round 1 of Certificate delivery begins to c. 24 learners
September, 2021	Project Advisory Group formed. Data Collection begins
October, 2021	Round 1 of Certificate delivery concludes
November, 2021	Round 2 of Certificate delivery begins to c. 24 learners
September, 2022	Award Ceremony
October, 2022	Round 2 of Certificate delivery concludes
November, 2022	International Community Seminar. Research Dissemination
December, 2022	Completion of Research Outputs
June, 2023	Award Ceremony. Photovoice Exhibition

Project Work Packages

Package 1. Certificate Design and Delivery

Phase one or pre-delivery activities centred on programme design and participant recruitment. In early 2020, An Cosán secured the accreditation of a new Certificate in Personal and Professional Development (NFQ Level 6, 60 ECTS) with SETU (then IT Carlow). The Certificate in Personal and Professional Development is a one-year, accredited (NFQ Level 6) community-based higher education programme. The Certificate offers entry into higher education for mature students experiencing socio-economic disadvantage. The Certificate is a flexible, distance, and e-learning award, delivered by An Cosán as a Linked Provider of South East Technological University. The Certificate is delivered part-time over one year with 130 contact hours. Its component modules are listed in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2 Certificate in Personal and Professional Development. Component Modules.

Certificate in Personal and Professional Development (NFQ Level 6)	ECTS	Available as Minor Award
Foundations of Adult Learning	10	Yes
Learning to Collaborate	10	Yes
Communications	10	Yes
Critical and Ethical Thinking in a Changing World	10	Yes
Introduction to Research	5	No
Essential IT Applications in a Changing World	5	No
Unpacking Everyday Maths	5	No
Enabling Wellbeing	5	No

Several essential activities occurred prior to programme delivery. These activities included recruitment and training of staff as well as curriculum and VLE (Virtual Learning Environment) development. An Cosán promoted the new Certificate through online advertising and online open days, notwithstanding Covid 19's disruption of capacity to work directly with community partners and local learners. An Cosán further implemented an enhanced applications and admissions process. This ensured the Certificate attracted adult learners from all priority groups named within national policy on equality of access to Higher Education.

Project funding covered student participation on the Certificate. While the course was therefore free, incoming learners paid a registration fee of 200 euro only. This charge helped to ensure a minimum level of applicant commitment prior to starting. This approach is based on An Cosán's prior experience of low learner retention on courses free of charge. Registration fees were waived entirely where need was demonstrated.

An Cosán's Higher Education team delivered the first iteration of the 'Certificate in Personal and Professional Development' (NFQ Level 6) with 24 adult learners, commencing in November 2020 and concluding in October 2021. Round two of teaching delivery to an additional 24 adult learners commenced in November 2021 and concluded in December 2022. The Certificate was delivered through a mix of face-to-face workshops and online classes. All module resources were archived for future use. The HE teaching team were strongly influenced by the philosophies of education associated with the discipline of adult education and with best practice in online learning. Classes were highly participatory, collaborative, and dialogic. Over the course of one year, students developed and demonstrated transversal competences required for personal development, future undergraduate studies, as well as for advancement in professional environments including sustainable employment.

Throughout the delivery of the Certificate, An Cosán facilitated learners' accessing a range of wraparound holistic support services. These included financial support, Early Years' education and care, digital support, and one-to-one tutoring, mentoring, and counselling. The Higher Education team also delivered additional academic skills workshops.

An Cosán collaborated with SETU in overseeing the running and quality assurance of our Linked Provision. An Cosán facilitated 'learner voice' through enabling class representatives from the Certificate to participate in Programme Board meetings. An Cosán facilitated Certificate participants' access to SETU's Department of Lifelong Learning, Library, and Student Support services. This included additional career guidance workshops as well as a Certificate learner visit to Carlow campus.

Post-delivery, An Cosán and SETU facilitated Award Ceremonies for participants on Saturday 24th September 2022 and on Friday 30th June 2023. An Cosán and SETU place high importance on award ceremonies to recognise adult learners and to celebrate adult learning. These events acknowledge and valorise adult learners' educational achievement in a public way, facilitating enhanced self-esteem for the individual as well as sharing a role-modelling example for family, friends, and the local community.

Package 2. Higher Certificate Design.

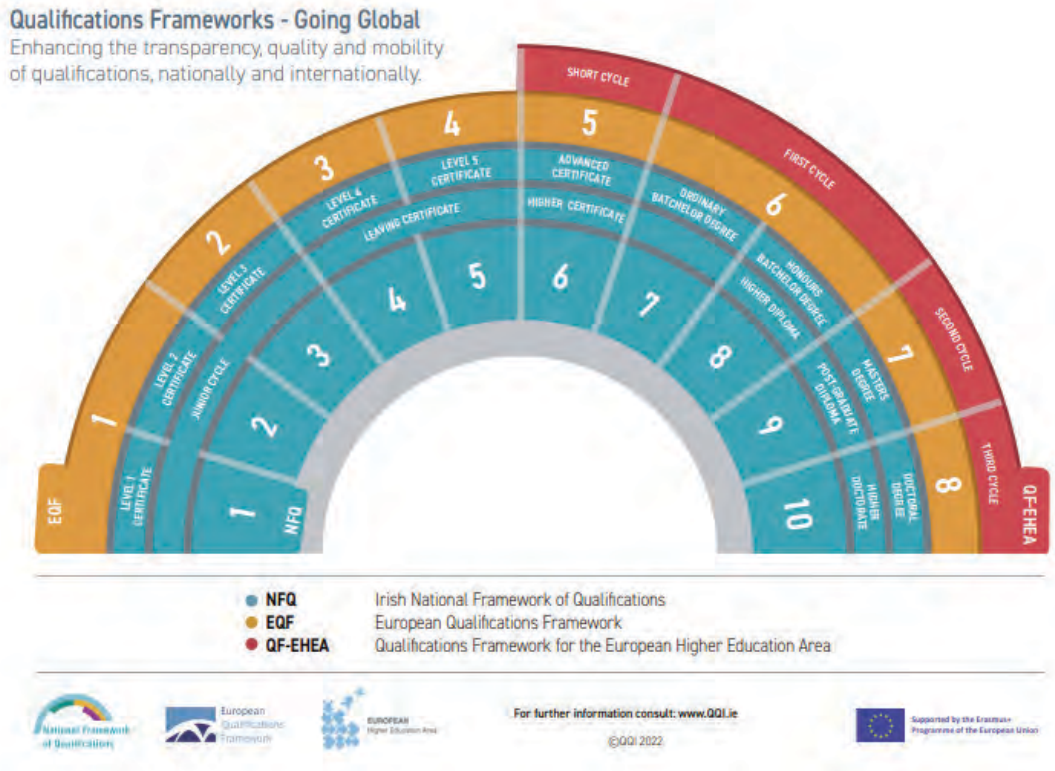
An Cosán drafted and submitted for accreditation a Programme Proposal for a Higher Certificate in Personal and Professional Development (Level 6, Major Award 120 ECTS). The Higher Certificate is a progression pathway from the Certificate. It is envisaged for part-time delivery over two years with 260 contact hours. Its component modules are listed in the table below.

Table 4.3 Higher Certificate in Personal and Professional Development. Component Modules.

Higher Certificate in Personal and Professional Development (NFQ Level 6)	ECTS	Available as Minor Award
Recognising our Prior Learning	10	No
Reflective Practice: Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes	10	No
Global Citizenship	10	Yes
Social Analysis	10	Yes
Leadership and Organisational Development	10	Yes
Understanding and Managing Conflict in Organisations	10	Yes

The figure below locates the proposed Higher Certificate in Personal and Professional Development (Major Award of 120 ECTS, NFQ Level 6) on the Irish National Framework of Qualifications and further locates the award within the European Qualifications Framework and the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area.

Figure 4.1 Table of Qualification Frameworks (QQI, 2023).



Learning outcomes at Level 6 require detailed theoretical understanding and include a comprehensive range of skills, which may be vocationally specific or of a general supervisory nature. Outcomes at Level 6 also provide a particular focus on learning skills. They further relate to working in a generally autonomous way to assume design and/or management and/or administrative responsibilities. Occupations at this level may include higher craft, junior technician, and supervisor.

In 2020, the initial project proposal to accredit a BA Honours Degree in Personal and Professional Development (Level 8) was deferred. Several factors occasioned the redesign of the original programme proposal. These included the initial feedback from the programme validation panel in 2019, the onset of the Covid-19 global pandemic, changes of leadership and strategy at An Cosán, programmatic review, as well as educational research and learner feedback during the Certificate's delivery. An Cosán contracted an independent consultant to undertake an environmental analysis of comparable awards and to conduct a stakeholder consultation with relevant employers. The project research team also identified learners' needs, preferred educational/career pathways, and relevant facilitators at curriculum, classroom, and organisational levels.

An Cosán's research findings have informed the programme proposal's redesign, now prioritising a Major Award (Higher Certificate, Level 6) as the option most beneficial for future learners. Considerations as to feasibility, relevance, and value-added in the changed and evolving context indicated the greater suitability of progressing a Higher Certificate in Personal and Professional Development (120 ECTS, NFQ Level 6) in the first instance. A new BA Hons Programme in Personal and Professional Development (240 ECTS, NFQ Level 8) awaits the Higher Certificate's delivery and successful proof of concept. Finally, An Cosán drew on this experience to expand its adult learner library collection to support the Certificate's current delivery and future development. An Cosán also collaborated with SETU Carlow Library to make relevant e-books available to learners.

Package 3. Educational Research

An Cosán engaged in research design, data collection and analysis proper from October 2021 onwards. The research team consisted of Dr. Rebekah Brennan, Ms. Yasmin Kutub, and Dr. Thomas Murray, all members of An Cosán's Higher Education team. The report authors compiled and analysed anonymised student records for all participants on the Certificate in Personal and Professional Development, inclusive of application forms and student results. Next, the report authors designed and circulated a large-n survey to 161 Linked Provision learners, inclusive of all Certificate in Personal and Professional Development learners, as well as alumni on 28 June 2022. The survey remained open until 21 July 2022 and received 61 responses during that period. Mr. Noel Fitzgerald, an independent consultant, facilitated two reflective evaluation workshops, the first with round one learners in October 2021 and a second with round two learners in November 2022. There was a total of 15 focus group participants. Mr. Fitzgerald drew on the results to complete a report on the learner experience of the Certificate. Between October 2021 and June 2022, the research team completed four Photovoice workshops with Certificate learners. There was a total of 11 participants. Data analysis took place primarily in the period between July 2022 and December 2022. The research findings generated form the basis for the present report.

An Cosán convened an international Project Advisory Council in 2021 and 2022. The group's primary purpose was to advise on educational research and project learning, as well as to enhance consideration of international practice in adult community education. Its expert and international membership consisted of: Tess Maginess (Director of Open Learning, Queen's University, Belfast); Joseph Collins (Head of Faculty Lifelong Learning, SETU Carlow); Thomas Murray (Project Lead, An Cosán); Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson (Co-Executive Director, Highlander Research & Education Center, USA); Lone Yolal (Principal, Folk High School for Migrant Women, Copenhagen, Denmark); Dr Sharon Clancy (Assistant Professor Educational Leadership and Management, University of Nottingham); Camilla Fitzsimons (Department of Adult and Community Education, Maynooth University); Niamh McCrea (Department of Humanities / Social CORE, SETU Carlow); and Vivienne Patterson (Head of Skills, Engagement and Statistics, Higher Education Authority and member of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs).

Package 4. Research Dissemination

An Cosán organised and hosted a two-day concluding event in the Russell Centre, Tallaght, on Friday 18th and Saturday 19th November, 2022. The event combined a seminar for policymakers, community partners, and wider stakeholders ('Rethinking Higher Education Pathways') and a participatory workshop for adult learners and educators ('Igniting Community-Based Higher Education'). Representing An Cosán, Dr. Thomas Murray and Dr. Rebekah Brennan presented preliminary research findings from the project report.

The seminars also enabled the review of project learning and sharing of best practice with international guest speakers from Denmark, the US, and the UK. International guest speakers and respondents included: Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson (Co-Executive Director, Highlander Research & Education Center); Lone Yolal (Principal, Folk High School for Migrant Women, Copenhagen); and Dr. Sharon Clancy (Assistant Professor Educational Leadership and Management, University of Nottingham). Over 100 people attended over the two days, representing diverse stakeholders in the public and private sectors as well as Ireland's broader lifelong learning community. Participants and local media coverage reported extremely positive feedback over the two days.

On 30th June 2023, An Cosán hosted 'The Whirlwind and the Path', a photographic exhibition and launch of an accompanying booklet generated by Certificate learners during the research process. This community exhibition showcased the learners' work in the Russell Centre, Tallaght. It accompanied the concluding award ceremony for Certificate learners held in partnership with SETU Carlow. Over 100 people attended, including learners from across all levels of An Cosán's education programmes, their family, and members of the neighbouring communities of Tallaght. Finally, further research dissemination will be achieved through publication in peer-reviewed academic journals.

Challenges, Responses, and Impact

The primary challenges encountered over this period centred on COVID-19 disruption. In the first instance, learners reported experiences of bereavement and illness, increased anxiety and mental health problems, increased isolation, and loss of support networks. Secondly, the project experienced significant staff turnover and staff vacancies, partly related to Covid-19 and partly related to the current nature of work and conditions in the community and voluntary sector (See The Wheel, 2023).

An Cosán and SETU Carlow responded in the following ways. An Cosán offered learners wraparound holistic supports to enhance student welfare and engagement, including administrative, financial, counselling, as well as additional mentoring and digital inclusion supports. In addition to hardware donations secured by An Cosán, students could also apply to SETU Carlow's laptop loan scheme. Programme delivery remained online for most of the funding period. Educators worked collaboratively and creatively to sustain student engagement and motivation when learning online. All aspects of Linked Provision collaboration between SETU Carlow and An Cosán- Programme Board meetings, Joint Quality Visits, Programmatic Review and Linked Review - continued to operate online during the reporting period. Student representative processes, including the participation of class representatives in Programme Board meetings, played an important role in articulating learner voice and ensuring responsiveness to learner needs throughout this period.

These challenges and responses impacted on and delayed some project outcomes. Both rounds of the 'Certificate in Personal and Professional Development' were delivered on schedule and to a high standard. This has been confirmed by student achievements to date and by positive feedback from An Cosán students, external examiners, and associated stakeholders. However, the additional workloads involved in responding to complex learner needs combined with occasional staff shortages resulted in significant delays to project delivery with respect to advancing research and research dissemination. To complete all teaching, research, and dissemination work packages, An Cosán and SETU Carlow applied for and received a 6 month no-cost extension.

Linked Provision: New Synergies

An Cosán and South East Technological University enjoy a well-established linked partnership grounded in learner-centred values, a collaborative ethos, and shared experience of programme delivery since 2008. Collaboration on the 'Higher Education Pathway for Non-Traditional Learners' project has generated additional synergies and value-added aspects.

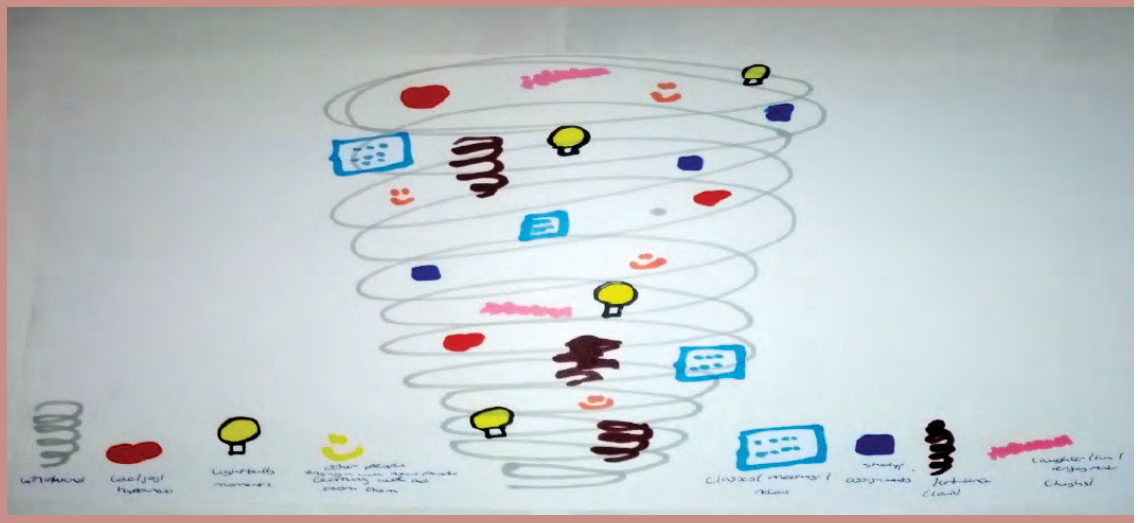
Improvements to Linked Provision collaboration and learner supports. Organisational collaboration and learning during project delivery facilitated improvements in the early identification and provision of additional, wraparound supports to An Cosán learners. This includes collaboration within An Cosán's Recruitment and Marketing team to enhance the admissions process, information provision, and orientation events for incoming learners; and collaboration with SETU to ensure early learner access to Disability Services and to targeted workshops on Library services as well as Career Development.

Improvements to all HE Linked Programmes. An Cosán offers a BA Degree in Leadership and Community Development and a BA Degree in Applied Addiction Studies and Community Development (NFQ Level 7) through its Linked Provision with SETU. Learnings generated through HEA project collaboration informed Linked Review (completed Sept. 2021) and the quality assurance of all programmes offered to An Cosán and SETU students. Design and delivery for the Certificate in Personal and Professional Development as well as expert participation on the Project Advisory Council has facilitated enhanced curriculum design and provision across all Linked Provision programmes. This includes provision of additional academic skills workshops, embedding adult community education and UDL practices in delivery, and enhanced attention to RPL, work placement, and career guidance.

Research and Organisational Learning. Arising out of the project's emphasis on action research to inform the subsequent accreditation of progression pathways, An Cosán has explored new research collaborations with eduCORE, SETU Carlow's research centre for educational research. Notably, An Cosán HE collaborated with eduCORE members on Irish Research Council COALESCE proposals in 2022 and in 2023. Continued collaboration in this area will strengthen the teaching-research nexus, the dissemination of research outputs and the continuing professional development of An Cosán's education team. Through the research process, outputs and dissemination, the Linked Provision's profile and innovation has been raised among a broad range of policymakers, practitioners, and relevant adult education stakeholders. There is enhanced visibility of and robust advocacy for our model of flexibility, wraparound support, and transformative adult education methods in widening access to third level education. Provision of international collaboration opportunities has resulted in the Linked Provision enhancing its capacity for future collaborations with current and new international partners.

Collaboration between SETU Carlow and An Cosán on this project continues to impact positively in communities experiencing educational disadvantage. The experience to date provides a firm basis to explore potential collaborations, partnerships, and alliances jointly and with other organisations in the future with a view to further innovating to enhance equality of access to third level education.

5 Learner Profiles



It's a whirlwind with all the things flying around and things falling out. It's very overwhelming. But it's a lovely experience, getting to know all the different people and learning from each other.
Amy

The present chapter presents research findings concerning Certificate learners' profile at the outset of their programme. It provides an overview of their status in relation to the priority groups identified by National Access Policy, and offers insight into complex life situations, past educational histories, and barriers to Higher Education access. In keeping with community education's emphasis on adult learner agency, the report draws attention to learners' diverse motivations.

Priority Groups: Work, Education, and Civic Participation

50 students registered to the Certificate in Personal and Professional Development or its component awards over the project's duration (Table 5.1). 25 students registered to round one of the Certificate in Personal and Professional Development in October 2020. 25 students registered to round two in October 2021.

Table 5.1. Certificate in Personal and Professional Development participation and completion.

Participant in	Total No. of Students	Achieved Full Certificate Award	Achieved Component Minor Award	Incomplete
Certificate in Personal and Professional Development (60 ECTS)	38	20	11	7
Component Minor Award (10 ECTS)	8		8	
	46 *	**20**	**19**	**7**

*5 learners withdrew prior to the commencement of teaching delivery.

70% of participants identified as women. Ages ranged from 23 years to 61 years with 70% of learners over 30 years old. Students joined the online classroom from 11 counties in Ireland, including Dublin (26), Wicklow (9), Mayo (3), Wexford (2), Waterford (2), Meath (1), Kerry (1), Kildare (1), Galway (1), Offaly (1), and Cavan (1). Moreover, the Certificate class was diverse. 12 learners (25%) were born outside of Ireland. Countries of origin included Cameroon, Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, UK, Kenya, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Zimbabwe.

Figure 5.1 Certificate Learner Profile: Gender.

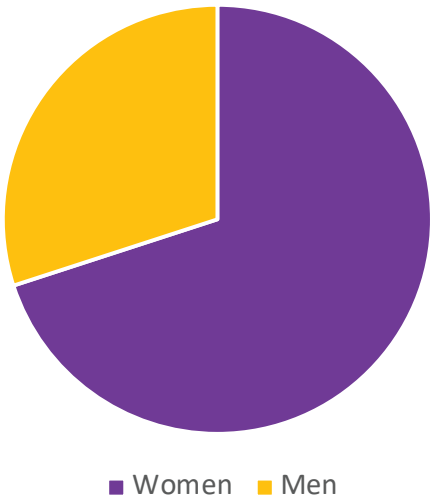


Figure 5.2 Map of Certificate Learner Locations.

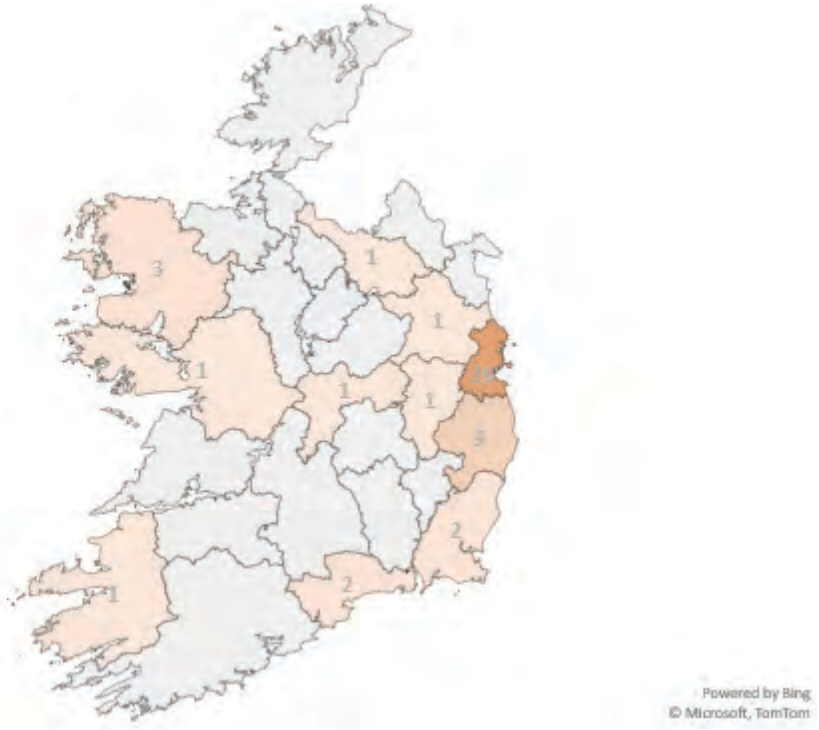
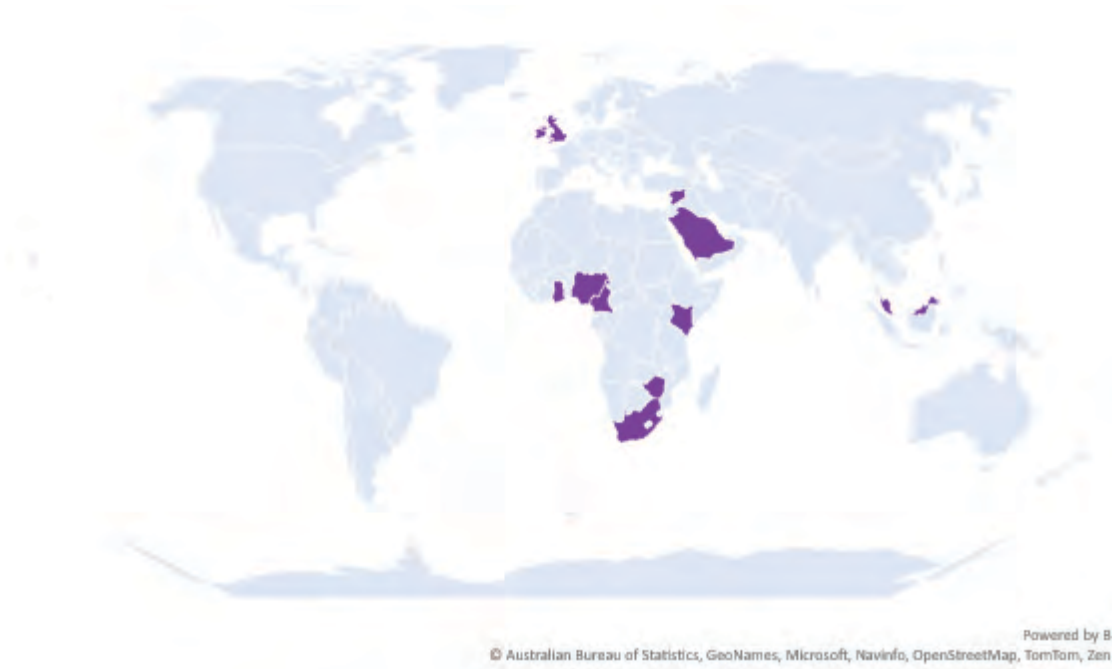
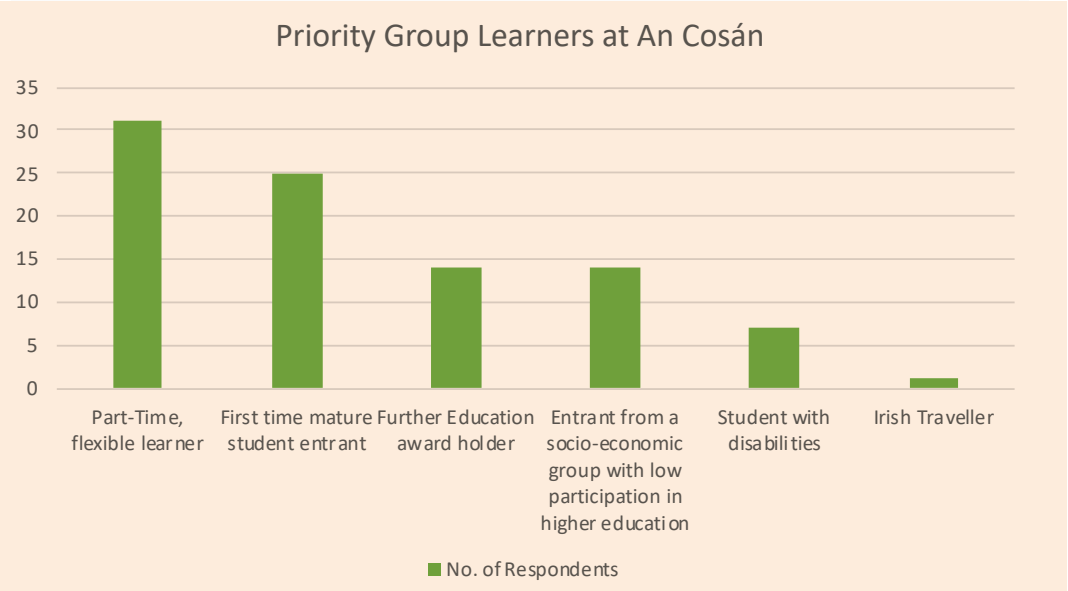


Figure 5.3 Map of Certificate Learner Countries of Origin



Linked Provision attracts adult learners from all priority populations named within national policy on equality of access to HE. These priority groups are: entrant from a socio-economic group with lower participation in higher education; first time mature student entrants; student with disabilities; part time, flexible learners; further education award holders and Irish Travellers. Fig. 5.4 presents how survey respondents identified:

Figure 5.4. National Access Policy priority groups as represented in survey respondents.



Survey Question. The National Access Plan identifies specific target groups the state hopes to support in accessing Higher Education. The plan's descriptions are listed below. Please tick any descriptions that match how you think about your own circumstances. You may tick more than one.

The Certificate in Personal and Professional Development learners were overwhelmingly drawn from priority groups in access policy. All applicants met criteria for funding support. 31 respondents identified as part time flexible learners; 25 respondents were first time, mature student entrants; 14 respondents were entrants from a socio-economic group with low participation in HE; 7 were students with disabilities and one survey respondent self-identified as a member of the Traveller community.

Individual learners frequently belong to multiple priority groups and thus experience intersecting forms of social exclusion and oppression:

> **'I've been in Ireland for six to seven years in Direct Provision. I saw myself trying to study, being intelligent when I came at a young age of 24. I was planning to be that great person, struggling. All schools are turning me down. "Oh no, you have to have your GNIB (Garda National Immigration Bureau) before you study". I ended up being discouraged. At that time, I became a mother. Now a mother, I wanted to study. There was no way. At the end, An Cosán gave me that opportunity'.**
>
> (Photovoice participant).

Learners' programme application forms explicitly identify barriers to their education and well-being. These include socio-economic difficulty, lone parenthood, asylum-seeker status, full-time caring responsibilities, addiction, and exclusion based on membership of the Traveller community.

Work

Diverse forms of work and labour, from full-time paid employment to unwaged care work, form an important part of adult learners' lives. 62% of survey respondents are currently in paid employment. 27% are currently not in employment and seeking either full or part-time work.

58% of survey respondents were engaged in unpaid domestic work and the care of others. 18% of respondents reported being engaged in these activities for more than 35 hours every week. Domestic work typically includes activities such as preparing food/cooking; cleaning; washing; household planning; and shopping for household goods. Care work typically involves the direct care and emotional support of children, of the elderly, of ill or disabled family members, or of community members. In subsequent Photovoice discussion, several participants spoke of the challenges of combining care and domestic work with personal or academic development:

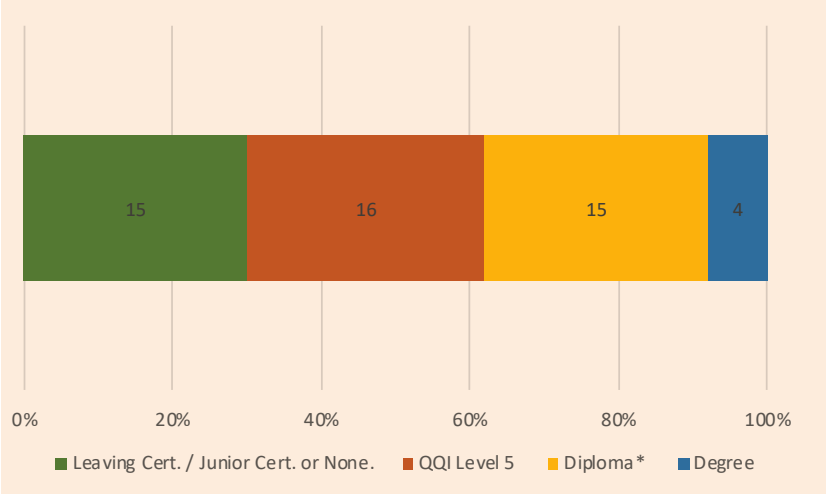
> **'Parts of me weren't growing, where other parts were growing. Like family life is really good. The kids, love, I'm happy in that. But there was always this other little branch…There was the academic side that never grew, if that makes sense?… I didn't grow because I'd no opportunities. There's no access, you know, a lot of things…'.**
> (Photovoice participant).

> **'Currently I'm doing [the] Level 6 Personal and Professional Development course with An Cosán. At the same time, I'm a mother…My kids - they just come in and all'.**
> (Photovoice participant).

Education

Linked Provision learners' prior highest educational qualification range from none (early school leavers) to Degree level. Most participants comprise of adult learners with prior experience of FE. Similarly, on the Certificate in Personal and Professional Development, 31 learners (62%) were first time mature student entrants into HE, while 16 (32%) were FE award holders.

Figure 5.5 Certificate Learner Profile: Prior Highest Educational Qualification.



* 'Diploma' includes self-reported international award classifications.

Past negative experience of mainstream education features in learners' initial application forms and subsequent Photovoice discussions. By way of a representative example:

> **'I failed Maths in my Leaving Certificate and have carried this stigma, lack of confidence, fear'**
> (Applicant form).

> **'I left school at 15. I'd no formal education you know. Who'd ever thought I'd do, you know, Level 6. Not in my wildest dreams. If you had asked me four years ago, I'd say "no"'**
> (Photovoice participant).

> **'I felt stupid in school. From the time I can remember going to school, I always felt I was stupid in school. But I wasn't: I was just very curious…You know, I spent most of my time in the principal's office explaining why I was questioning things. I was questionable. I was a questionable person, you know, and I wasn't allowed question'**
> (Photovoice participant).

An Cosan's learners self-reported their feelings of 'being left behind'. Past negative experiences of mainstream provision form a background 'push' factor or implicit motivation for adult learners to seek out alternative models of education.

Community and Civic Participation

71% of survey respondents reported engaging in community, civic, or voluntary activity in the previous four weeks. The theme of civic and voluntary participation was evident in learner application forms and in Photovoice workshops:

> **'I have experience working as a peer support worker and I am now a group facilitator. I am very good at what I do and am dedicated to furthering my career. I have volunteered and would love a paid job in the services'**
> (Application Form)

> **'I have done a bit of volunteering in a outreach preparing clothes for the homeless in the past for Tiglin and also did a few volunteering shifts in the treatment centre itself'**
> (Application Form).

> **'I'm volunteering in the Rehab project in NAME OF PLACE, and I just, I feel in a really… the way I feel…invigorated, energised, refreshed. So, yeah, that's the reason I chose that photo, because that's how I feel when I'm out there. It just is my happy place'**
> (Photovoice Workshop).

Civic activities reported as being important to survey respondents were diverse in nature and included youthwork; tidy towns; sporting clubs; diversity and inclusion; family support; involvement in NGO's; community gardening and animal welfare.

Motivations

Learner motivations for seeking to engage with community-based Higher Education are wide-ranging, nuanced, and complex. Among Linked Provision learners, the most observed motivations for taking part were 'to gain a qualification' (39 survey respondents); 'to challenge myself' (37); 'to improve my academic skills' (36); 'to secure a better job' (35); 'to meet likeminded people' (22); 'to gain a route to an undergraduate education' (11); other factors (7). Some participants self-disclosed in their application forms that they were undertaking the course to either change career or progress in their existing career.

> **'I worked as a health care assistant looking after clients. I feel this course will move me up the chain in order to progress'**
> (Application Form).

> **'I am already working…but to secure my job I need to complete this Degree'**
> (Survey respondent).

Research participants consistently emphasise the importance of education to their own sense of personal fulfilment:

> **'I want to go to school. I want to make my life meaningful. I want to achieve something. I want to say in the future I've achieved something'**
> (Photovoice participant).
>
> **'I have been a home carer to three amazing autistic children for the best part of 20-years. I wanted something for myself'**
> (Survey respondent).

Equally, research participants frequently associate personal development, achieving qualifications, or gaining employment with a discourse of 'giving back' either to their family or to their communities:

> **'Rearing a family, dropping out of school when I was 14, gave me the motivation to go on and do great things and work hard to get a good education. I now have the opportunities I didn't get when I was younger. I also have younger kids that are in college and school. I'm encouraging them to go far and that education is key to knowledge and power'**
> (Applicant Form).
>
> **'To get the educational information to go with my experience of racism and addiction. To work where I want, I need the degree as well as experience'**
> (Survey respondent).
>
> **'I am motivated to learn because I want to gain employment. I am a member of the Travelling Community…This programme will help me to gain employment with Travellers…I also want to work with the youth on the benefits of life skills and education'**
> (Applicant Form).
>
> **'Learn more about community development so that I can contribute effectively'**
> (Survey respondent).

Conclusion

In line with contemporary research (See Indecon 2021), An Cosán's learners frequently name 'time' and 'money' as the primary barriers to widening participation in the third level. Learners' time is allocated to both waged and unwaged work, the latter consisting of multiple hours of unpaid domestic and care work each week (See Lynch 2021). Importantly, notwithstanding the specific model of education adopted, the big issues of the access story - inequality, poverty, and social class – remain enduring realities for many students (Fleming et al. 2017, p. 7).

The preceding overview of participants' profile at the outset of the programme, inclusive of complex challenges, past educational histories, and diverse motivations, provides a basis from which to examine the Certificate's impact.

6 The Impact of the Certificate: Learner Perspectives

I feel the way I feel when I'm at Seapoint - invigorated, energised, refreshed.
Gillian

Accessing, engaging, and succeeding on the Certificate in Personal and Professional Development generates positive outcomes for learners. The present chapter outlines the four primary benefits for learners engaging with An Cosán's model of community-based Higher Education. These concern academic development, personal well-being, professional development, and community development. The combined effect of the beneficial impact of the programme is further evidenced in participants' new and raised expectations for their future work and lifelong learning pathways.

Academic Development

The first observable impact concerns priority learner progression through the National Framework of Qualifications. The new Certificate in Personal and Professional Development resulted in 46 non-traditional learners accessing and participating in third level education. 39 learners (85%) subsequently achieved an accredited third level award. 7 learners (15%) did not complete the programme.

Table 6.1. Certificate in Personal and Professional Development participation and completion.

Participant in	Total No. of Students	Achieved Full Certificate Award	Achieved Component Minor Award	Incomplete
Certificate in Personal and Professional Development (60 ECTS)	38	20	11	7
Component Minor Award (10 ECTS)	8		8	
	46 *	**20**	**19**	**7**

*5 learners withdrew prior to the commencement of teaching delivery.

The qualitative nature of academic development is equally observable. Certificate participants report learning new knowledge, skills, and competencies, specifically those concerning reading, writing, and research; digital literacy and online learning; critical thinking and problem solving; as well as time-management and organisation (See Fitzgerald, 2022).

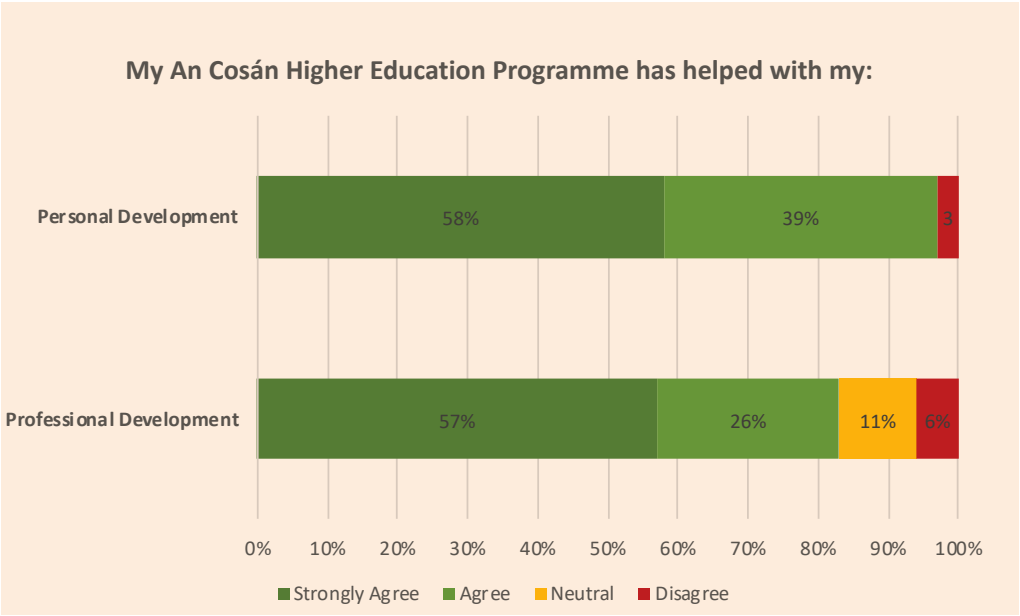
> **'An Cosán has given me the skills to progress in education and work… The skills learned and acted upon in class have shown me how to deal with certain situations with an open mind'**
> (Survey respondent).

> **'The different theoretical lenses and modes of practice have given me a greater insight into how to view situations from a multidisciplinary approach'**
> (Survey respondent).

> **'Since I started with An Cosán, I have been empowered…The institution has taught me a lot in terms of approach and handling of multiple projects'**
> (Survey respondent).

In addition to specific forms of learning, Certificate participants report that their overall relationship to education has improved. Those with learning challenges such as dyslexia spoke about a sense of belonging despite those challenges, as did those with a history of negative experiences in the education system. Research participants reported an enhanced ability to speak to people in the academic field through access to academic language and feeling heard in academic spaces.

Figure 6.1 Certificate Impact: Personal and Professional Development.



Survey Question. Responses of Linked Provision learners concerning the extent to which they agree with statements concerning personal (n=33) and professional development (n=35).

Personal Well-Being

An Cosán learners experience personal transformation as part of their HE pathway. 97% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their programme helped with their personal development (Fig. 6.1). Similarly, 88% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that 'I clear goals for my personal development'. Data from the reflective evaluation workshops underline positive outcomes for Certificate learners in relation to the self. Participants' comments indicate a positive relationship between meeting a level of academic challenge, achieving a recognised qualification, and enhancing self-esteem:

> **'I have professional qualifications behind me…I feel more confident in my academic abilities'**
> (Survey respondent).

> **'An Cosán has given me the opportunity to show how capable I am and to grow in confidence. It has shown me that with the wraparound support I can blossom and thrive in education. Mental health and ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences) do not have to be a permanent barrier to education and the joy of learning'**
> (Survey respondent).

> **'I have a great sense of energy and an open door…I feel the way I feel when I'm at Seapoint – invigorated, energised, refreshed'**
> (Photovoice participant).

> **'At the end, I was this waterfall that was rushing to get where I wanted to be. Nothing could stop me…I now know how to get where I want to be. The fear is (kind of) gone'**
> (Photovoice participant).

> **'It's hard to express the glory when you finish: "Hey! Happy days! Hallelujah!"'**
> (Photovoice participant).

A sense of empowerment and 'moving forward' in life came through strongly in learner accounts of realising one's own potential and abilities. One learner described their experience as mind-opening or 'an epiphany' (Evaluation participant). Others spoke of feeling more 'in tune with themselves' and of 'loving themselves more' (Evaluation participants). Overall, most participants spoke of increased confidence and increased life skills.

Professional Development

The third observable impact concerns learners' subsequent progression pathways into employment or into more advanced levels of education. 83% of learners surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that their An Cosán HE programme helped with their professional development (Fig. 6.1). Supporting this finding, research participants reported renewed enthusiasm and motivation for further study and career progression:

> **'All the materials that I have learnt and attained have enhanced my personal growth and work ethic. I am more productive at work and produce great results because of knowledge that I have gained. Work has become more fun, and I am eager to engage and impart knowledge to my fellow workers'**
> (Survey respondent).

> **'[I now have] the confidence to go and apply for a job'**
> (Evaluation participant).

> **'I hope to go on even further…once I have finished it. I would love to aim for a PhD. I'm not entirely sure what role I want to do but I know it's definitely in this field'**
> (Survey respondent).

It was not possible to conduct detailed post-programme analysis of Certificate learners' progression within the project timeframe. However, in a survey of similarly positioned Linked Provision BA Degree graduates (n=23), 44% reported entering full or part-time employment and a further 38% reported progressing to Honours Degree or Master's level. Moreover, 10 participants from the Certificate advanced to Degree programmes within An Cosán and SETU in the 2022/23 Academic Year.

Community Development

Linked Provision facilitates An Cosán's delivery of third level programmes in communities challenging disadvantage and social inequality. These programmes equip adult learners with the relevant knowledge, competencies, and skills to make a professional contribution to public, health, and community services at a local, national, or international level. Stepping back from the programme content, however, An Cosán learners meet and collaborate with diverse participants from across Ireland. Research participants speak to a process of adult learners finding and building community together:

> **'It's like the United Nations!'**
> (Photovoice participant).

> **'I have made great connections through the course'**
> (Survey respondent).

An Cosán learners have reported gaining social capital, access to professional opportunities, and enhanced capacity to promote social inclusion and human rights in their local community. This in turn enables learners to play an active role in their communities.

> **'As an asylum seeker I understand what living in Direct Provision is…I will be able to direct other asylum seekers on how to best utilise the opportunities of further education rather than allowing the situation to deter you'**
> (Survey respondent).

> **'I've realised my potential is not only for me to succeed, but also for me to impact other people, other women'**
> (Photovoice participant).

> **'I'm really excited about going out there, be it in whatever environment, be it in recovery centres or juvenile centres or prisons. If I can say anything to help one person, that to me is education, which is back to what Paulo Freire said. It's the ripple effect'**
> (Photovoice participant).

Strikingly, 71% of survey respondents reported engaging in community, civic, or voluntary activity in the previous four weeks. This finding aligns with learners' stated motivations for returning to education and their frequent linking of personal advancement with community development. Positive educational outcomes for individual learners thus have far-reaching benefits for wider Irish society.

Preparedness for the Future World of Work and Lifelong Learning

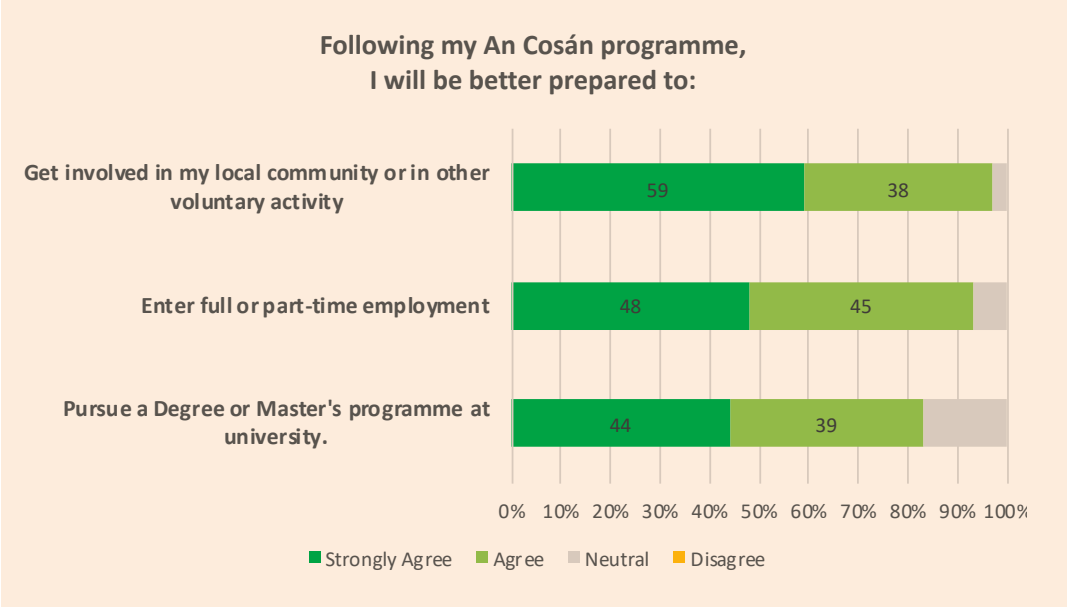
The combined effect of academic, personal, professional and community development experienced by Certificate learners is further evidenced in participants' new and raised expectations for their future work and lifelong learning pathways. Table 6.2 indicates that 45% of participants intend to enter the world of work after completing their award; 32% intend to enter a Degree programme; and 21% are currently unsure of their next steps.

Table 6.2. Participant Intentions after completing HE award.

Participant Intentions after completing HE award	No. of Responses	%
Enter the world of work	17	45%
Enter a Degree programme	12	32%
I am unsure	8	21%
Participate in civic, community, and voluntary activity	1	2%
	38	

An Cosán learners clearly demonstrate a feeling of enhanced preparedness to pursue their plans.

Figure 6.2. Certificate Impact. Learners' post-programme preparedness

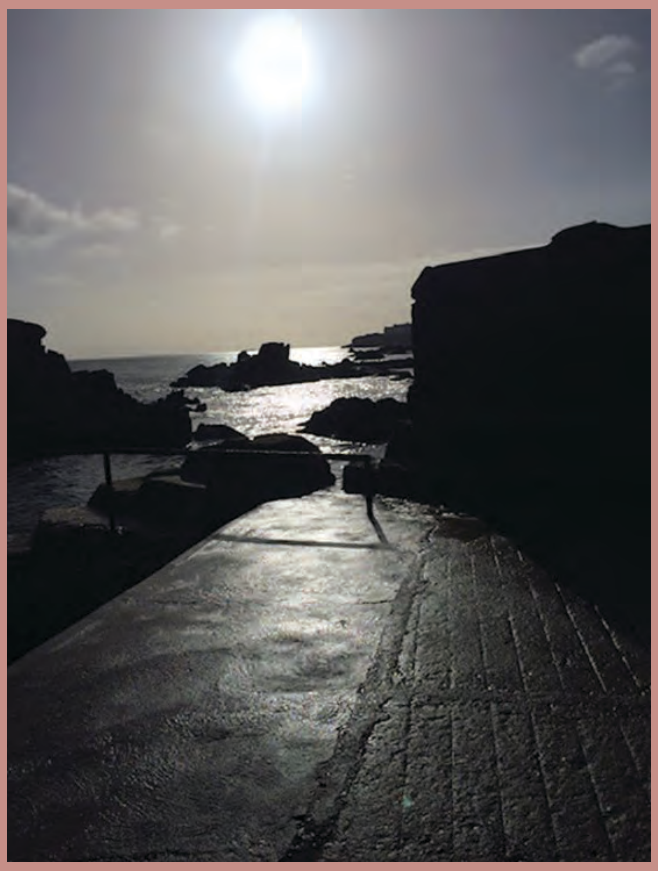


Survey Question. Responses of Linked Provision learners concerning the extent to which they agree with statements concerning post-programme preparedness to engage in community activity (n=34), employment (n=31) and a Degree or Master's level programme (n=36).

As the table demonstrates, 97% of participants agree or strongly agree that, following their An Cosán programme, they will be better prepared to get involved in local community and voluntary activity. 93% agree or strongly agree that they will be better prepared to enter full or part-time employment. 83% agree or strongly agree that they will be better prepared to pursue a Degree or Master's programme at university.

In summary, the Linked Provision initiative generates multiple and interrelated positive outcomes for the individual and for wider society. An Cosán's Higher Education programme supports individual learners' academic development and personal well-being, underpinning active citizenship and full participation in a democratic society, as well as fostering capacities to engage in meaningful employment with positive implications for social inclusion and social mobility. Having surveyed the programme's impact, the following chapter outlines the specific factors supporting these positive outcomes and identifies potential areas for future development.

7 What works? Community Education for Empowerment



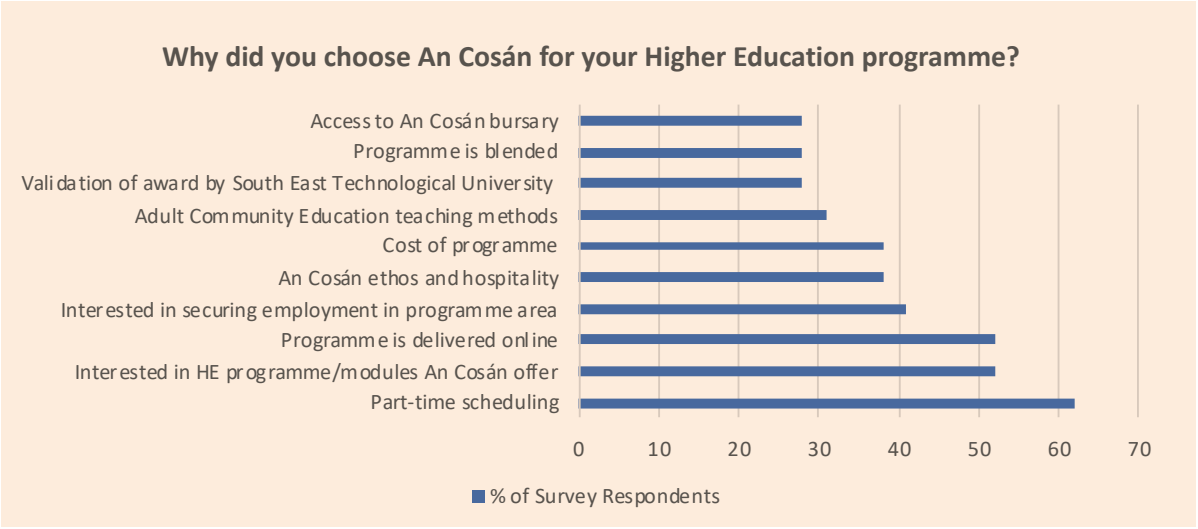
I'm really excited about going out there… If I can say anything to help one person, that is education. It's the ripple effect.
Carol

How best to facilitate third level access, participation, and success in Higher Education presents a complex challenge. The following chapter sheds further light on the specific facilitating factors and interventions that enable An Cosán to support priority group learners to access, engage, and succeed in Higher Education. Within a broad ecosystem of interdependent supports and interventions for the individual adult learner, the primary enabling factors have been identified as: (1) flexible, part-time provision; (2) wraparound support and (3) transformative teaching and learning.

Part-Time, Flexible Provision

Research participants were asked why they chose An Cosán for their HE programme. The options presented to learners relate to the nature of the programme's environmental and institutional contexts (Fig. 7.1).

Figure 7.1. Reasons for choosing An Cosán HE programme.



Survey Question. Responses of Linked Provision learners (n=61) to the question 'Why did you choose An Cosán for your Higher Education programme?' Please tick any descriptions that apply. You may tick more than one.

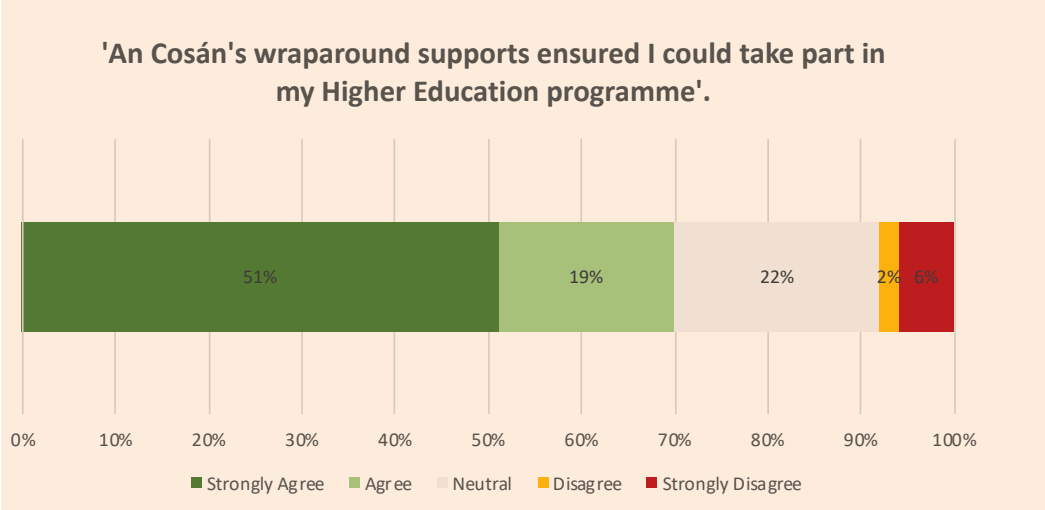
The responses highlight the primary importance of part-time scheduling (62%). This finding is supported elsewhere in the survey. 83% of respondents claimed they would not have been able to attend their programme if it had been a full-time (rather than part-time) course.

The next two most important reasons for choosing An Cosán are learners' interest in the HE subject area (52%) and the programme's online delivery (52%). In the reflective evaluation workshops, learners were fulsome in their praise and appreciation that the Certificate was designed and delivered in a manner that was learner-centred and affirming of their lives in all their complexity. In line with the survey findings, research participants identified the blended nature of programme delivery as facilitative, including the availability of class recordings to review learning and the accessibility of the programme from any part of the country (Fitzgerald 2022).

Wraparound Supports

An Cosán offers learners wraparound supports, including bursaries, counselling, childcare, tutoring, mentoring, and digital inclusion support. When asked to reflect on their experience, 70% of research participants strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that 'An Cosán's wraparound supports ensured I could take part in my Higher Education programme' (Fig. 7.2).

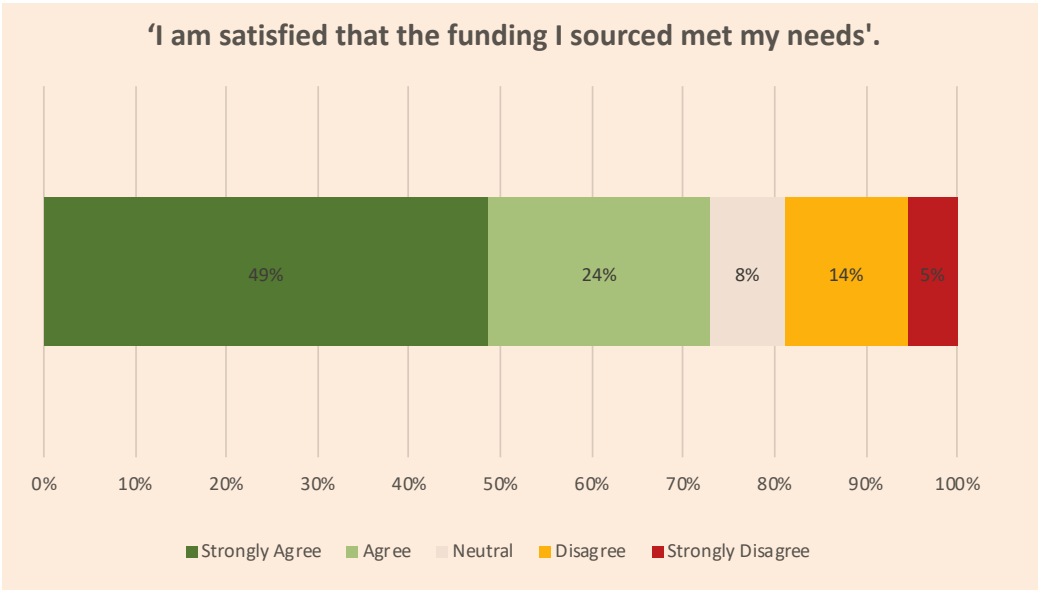
Figure 7.2. Role of wraparound supports in learner participation.



Survey Question. Responses of Linked Provision learners (n=53) concerning the extent to which they agree with the statement 'An Cosán's wraparound supports ensured I could take part in my Higher Education programme'.

72% of research participants reported having to access **funding** to take part. Among this cohort (n=44), the primary sources of funding accessed were the An Cosán bursary fund (59%), St. Vincent de Paul (25%), and the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (16%). Of those learners who accessed funding, 73% were satisfied that it met their needs while 19% were not (Fig. 7.3).

Figure 7.3. Satisfaction with funding sourced.



Survey Question. Responses of Linked Provision learners who sourced funding (n=37) concerning the extent to which they agree with the statement 'I am satisfied that the funding I sourced met my needs'.

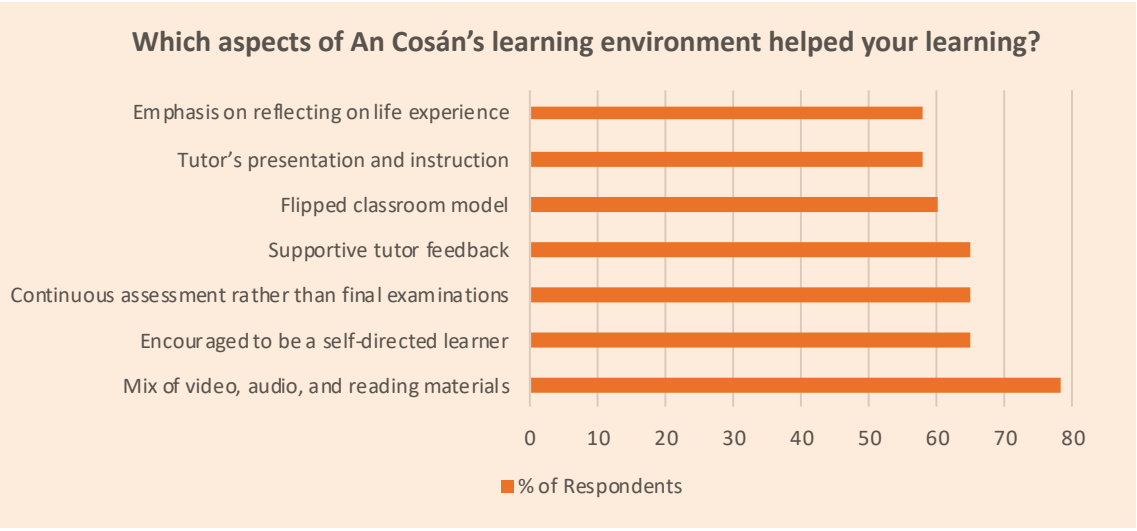
48% of participants reported accessing other wraparound supports during their studies. Among this cohort (n=31), the primary supports accessed included **one to one tutor** support (58%); **mentor** support (35%); **digital inclusion** support (35%); and **counselling** (26%). 28% reported accessing additional supports from a **local community organisation**. In evaluative workshop discussion, research participants highlighted wraparound

supports such as one-to-one time with tutors, laptop provision, timely communications, and academic skills mentoring. These supports were described as facilitating increased confidence. Moreover, Certificate learners acknowledged and appreciated the level and speed of An Cosán's ongoing and practical support as well as the personal, relationship-based nature of how support is offered (Fitzgerald 2022).

Teaching for Transformative Learning

The survey also asked learners to identify which aspects of An Cosán's learning environment helped their learning. The options presented related to the nature of teaching and learning (Fig 7.4).

Figure 7.4. Learning Environment survey question results



Survey Question. Responses of Linked Provision learners (n=60) to the question 'Which aspects of An Cosán's learning environment helped your learning?' Please tick all that apply. You may tick more than one.

78% of learners claimed that the 'mix of video, audio, and reading materials facilitated my learning'. The second tier of facilitators, identified by over 60% of learners, are: encouragement to be an independent, self-directed learner (65%); emphasis on continuous assessment rather than final examinations (65%); supportive tutor feedback facilitated my learning (65%); and the flipped classroom (i.e. learning materials/activities available online before class) (60%). A third tier of facilitators, identified by over 50% of learners, are: tutor's presentation and instruction (58%); emphasis on reflecting on life experience (58%); learning materials were relevant and engaging (57%); emphasis on dialogue and small group discussion (55%); emphasis on inclusivity and diversity of learner community (53%); and group work and collaborative exercises (53%).

Reflective workshop participants, while acknowledging the role of multiple means of engagement, identified the Certificate's emphasis on **peer-learning and peer support** as most important to their participation, confidence-building, and learning (Fitzgerald 2022). Speaking of the programme learning environment, participants emphasised the important role of **small group collaboration**, centred on shared discussions and activities, both in person and in online breakout rooms:

> **'It's the spaces, the people, the talking!'**
> (Evaluation participant).

Furthermore, research participants highlighted the **diversity** of class groups and understood the collaborative learning environment as breaking down pre-existing stereotypes, increasing understanding of diverse perspectives, and increasing ability to support and respect others. :

'It's like the United Nations!'
(Photovoice participant).

'Understanding of my cultural background'
(Survey respondent).

'The equality shown between tutor and learner helped a lot'
(Evaluation participant).

'By far the most helpful part of my first year were the tutors, their approach, and their feedback. They were excellent'
(Survey respondent).

Enhancing Programme Delivery

Attention is due to those factors or interventions that may require improvement. In terms of the environmental and institutional context, 15% of research participants found An Cosán's supports to be less than satisfactory. When asked to elaborate, the following issues were raised: **administration** ('Mixed or incorrect information was given'; 'communication about registration'); **programme scheduling** (references to holding two modules per week as unhelpful and to delayed start dates owing to Covid 19); and **priority access to childcare** for students ('Rainbow House had children whose parents didn't even work!').

Regarding the specifics of teaching and learning, 31% of research participants found aspects of the programme learning environment to be unsatisfactory. When asked to elaborate, learners highlighted issues such as **insufficient time**; **group work and assessment**; (some) **tutors' methods** and perceived lack of preparation; as well as problems associated with **online learning** and the flipped classroom. In the reflective evaluation workshop, research participants spoke about inhibiting factors as being the absence of time, scheduling of two modules per week, insufficient time to digest reading materials, and the academic year being very 'full on'. Research participants spoke about the challenges of blended learning, including the challenges around unstable internet access, the absence of physical books, and a loss of personability in online discussions. They discussed difficulty with understanding new academic language and terminology, unclear explanations from (some) tutors, and too much emphasis on 'opening circle' discussions.

'While I enjoy [online] class discussions, I feel they are shorter and not as "deep" as face to face discussions and debate'
(Survey respondent).

'I felt that at times the modules and tutors seemed to be under pressure time-wise to get everything covered. There seemed to be an overload of information, assessments and assignments within a short time-frame. However, I understand that this is a practicality of a part-time course'
(Survey respondent).

'Group work was difficult mainly due to time restraints with people's schedules. If it's required, it's probably best to do this at the start of the year'
(Survey respondent).

Guidance and Networking Opportunities

Research participants made specific recommendations with a view to improving the programme. The primary recommendation related to programme delivery concerned **enhanced understanding of self-directed learning**. Some learners identified feeling lost or overwhelmed by the workload on some modules and expressed a preference for more direct tutor instruction. While acknowledging that there was a balance to be struck between self-directed learning and direct instruction, Certificate learners recommended enhanced pre-course communication and alignment of expectations concerning the workload associated with accredited learning at third level (Fitzgerald 2022). The Certificate learners also recommended retaining the **end of programme evaluation workshop** as a participative exercise that enables all stakeholders to reflect on their development, name their learning, as well as show mutual appreciation (Fitzgerald 2022).

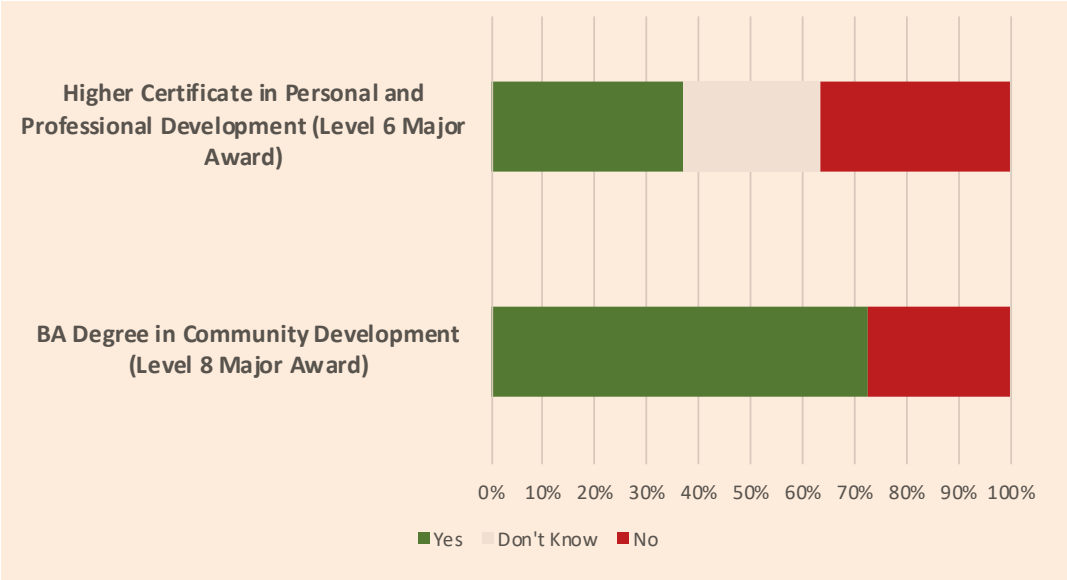
When asked to consider what additional supports they thought might sustain and benefit An Cosán learners after their programme, research participants most frequently identified a need for **'guidance'** (Survey, 12 respondents). This was expressed in terms of career guidance generally as well as for specific guidance pertaining to academic progression and potential employment. The demand for 'guidance' was also evidenced in the reflective evaluation workshops (Fitzgerald 2022). Responding to some Certificate learners' uncertainty as to linking their current learning to future academic progression or to the labour market, research participants recommended that Linked Provision offer additional training and support in this area. This might include providing a 'database of relevant employment opportunities', identifying suitable education pathways, and support around matching existing skillsets and qualifications to those required for desired roles. Learners found the existing provision of career guidance and CV preparation workshops helpful but recommended additional opportunities for same. In a similar fashion, research participants recommended increased provision of **'networking opportunities'** post-programme, understood in terms of facilitating meetings and relationship-building between current learners, alumni, as well as employers and education providers (Survey, 6 respondents). These supports were envisaged as enabling learners to view their Certificate as the beginning of a longer journey of progression.

> **'Career guidance for education or employment'**
> (Survey respondent).
>
> **'Introducing the learners to the organizations that are seeking people to join the work force'**
> (Survey respondent).
>
> **'I think it would be beneficial if An Cosán had a networking day inviting students to meet many different NGOs'**
> (Survey respondent).

New Programme Offering

Learners were asked directly for their thoughts on An Cosán offering a Higher Certificate in Personal and Professional Development (NFQ Level 6, 120 ECTS). In practice, this award would amount to a second year of the Certificate, incorporating new modules with enhanced focus on facilitating work experience, recognition of prior learning, and professional development planning. Demand for continuing the Certificate in Personal and Professional Development to a Level 6 Major Award is mixed.

Figure 7.5 Participant Interest and Future Programme Development



Survey Question. Responses of Linked Provision learners (n=38, above) and (n=36, below) to the following question: 'An Cosán is currently exploring the development of X award. If offered the opportunity, would you consider applying?

34% of respondents (n=61) reported interest in applying to a Higher Certificate award, 36% would not be interested in applying, while 30% did not know. The following indicative comments illustrate this mixed response:

> **'It will enable me to increase both my personal well-being and my learning'**
> (Survey respondent).
>
> **'I would be interested in some of the modules in Year 2. Recognizing my prior learning, Reflective practice, Conflict in organisations'**
> (Survey respondent).
>
> **'Two years for a Level 6! The cost isn't mentioned but it's more than likely too high'**
> (Survey respondent).
>
> **'[A] two-year program for a Level 6 seems long?'**
> (Survey respondent).

By way of comparison, in a separate survey, current learners have expressed demand for continuing their Level 7 Degree in Community Development to a Level 8 Honours award. 72% of respondents (n=36) reported interest in applying to a BA (Honours) Degree in Community Development.

8 Evaluation

Education is the light that shines your path. I’m not where I want to be, but I can see the light now.
Thembi

An Cosán and SETU's offering of the new Certificate in Personal and Professional Development resulted in 46 non-traditional learners accessing and participating in third level education. 39 learners (85%) subsequently achieved an accredited third level award while 7 learners (15%) did not complete the programme. The Certificate clearly satisfied equality of access to HE criteria, attracting adult learners from all priority groups set out in national access policy. 31 learners (62%) were first time mature student entrants into HE. In line with contemporary research (See Indecon 2021), An Cosán's learners name 'time' and 'money' as the primary barriers to widening participation in the third level. Learners' time is allocated to both waged and unwaged work, the latter consisting of multiple hours of unpaid domestic and care work each week. In this context, working with those traditionally excluded from mainstream provision, the Certificate's completion rate of 85% is remarkable. It compares favourably with mainstream HE provision in Ireland, which had a completion rate of 75% for full-time undergraduate students who started a Level 6, 7 or 8 major award in 2016/2017 (HEA 2023). It also occurs against a national background where lifelong learning participation rates in Ireland remain low, particularly in the case of priority group learners.

Beyond academic progression through the national framework of qualifications, the Certificate positively impacted learners in a wide-ranging manner. 97% of research participants agreed that their programme helped with their personal development. Similarly, past An Cosán learners have reported gaining increased self-confidence, independence, and a more positive outlook on the future (Kovačič et al. 2020). 83% of participants felt that the Certificate helped with their professional development. Similarly, past An Cosán learners have reported gaining social capital and access to professional opportunities by meeting and collaborating with diverse participants from across Ireland (Murray 2022). Linked Provision programmes correlate with enhanced civic participation and egalitarian attitudes among learners, including support for diversity and social inclusion. 71% of participants reported engaging in community, civic, or voluntary activity in the previous four weeks. In support of this finding, focus group and Photovoice workshop data indicates a desire to help others or a service ethic as a consistent motivation for learners to take part in the programme. Past An Cosán learners have reported enhanced cultural awareness and an improved a sense of belonging (Kovačič et al. 2020).

Enabling Factors and Interventions

This report sheds new light on the dynamics of widening participation in third level education among traditionally excluded socio-economic groups. Clearly, while navigating complex inequalities in a shared society, each individual learner is different with specific needs and aspirations. Nevertheless, by identifying how and why community-based HE at An Cosán worked for them, An Cosán's research participants highlight shared enabling factors and interventions. Specifically, the research indicates the importance and interdependence of flexibility, wraparound support, and transformative learning.

The primary factor identified was part-time scheduling with 83% of survey respondents claiming they would not have been able to attend if their programme had been a full-time course. The next two most important factors were learners' interest in the HE subject area and the programme's online delivery. In addition, An Cosán's wraparound supports ensured learners could participate. The most important wraparound supports identified by research participants were funding and one-to-one tutor support.

In terms of the programme learning environment, 78% of research participants underlined educators' use of a mix of video, audio, and reading materials as a vital learning facilitator. Other leading facilitators identified by over 60% of participants include: encouragement to be an independent, self-directed learner; use of continuous assessment; supportive tutor feedback; and the flipped classroom. Reflective evaluation participants identified An Cosán's emphasis on peer-learning and peer support as most important to their participation, confidence-building, and learning. Participants further recognised the diversity of the classroom as facilitating enhanced cultural awareness and social inclusion. While broadly praising the existing model of flexibility, wraparound support, and pedagogy, participants further recommended enhanced 'guidance' and 'networking' opportunities to facilitate their next steps into the university, the labour market, or the community.

Wraparound Support

Firstly, An Cosán's model of community education is underpinned by a 'living system of education' philosophy centred on an ethos of welcome, belonging, and wraparound support (Gilligan and Zappone 2006, p. 20; see also Kerins 2018). Developing a genuine experience of belonging is understood as vital to overcome individual atomisation and to build communal energy for radical social change. Hospitality, offering learners 'a place of heart and home', informs An Cosán as a learning environment in both cultural and material terms. An Cosán's supports include bursaries, childcare, counselling, hardware provision and digital skills support, as well as one-to-one mentoring. As already outlined, these supports are wide ranging in recognition of the systemic inequalities and diverse obstacles impeding students' access to third level. The provision of holistic, wraparound supports has been evidenced to play a key role in the inclusion and retention of non-traditional learners. Supports clearly matter; so too does the way supports are offered. Research participants acknowledged and appreciated both the level and speed of An Cosán's ongoing and practical support as well as the personal, relationship-based nature of how support is offered.

Linked Provision aims to foster learners' sense of welcome and belonging in university. Recognising that many learners may be the first in their family to enter tertiary education, introductory modules intentionally unpack the 'hidden curriculum' at university (Jin and Ball 2019; Semper and Blasco, 2018). An Cosán tutors foster learners' knowledge, skills, and confidence around 'knowing the ropes', including academic writing conventions, time management, attendance, communication, and other norms and assumptions essential to learning (Whitty *et al*. 2015, p 41). Learning about university life is a hands-on experience. An Cosán's learners, as registered students of SETU, attend an induction day on campus, enjoy access to the on-campus library, disability support, and career guidance services, as well as to relevant online learning resources, including Blackboard and the off-campus virtual library. Awards are formally presented in university conferring ceremonies, thereby ensuring social and familial recognition and celebration of learners' achievements. Through Linked Provision, An Cosán offers first generation entrants to university a familiar, safe space to participate and to gain 'academic capital' or an enhanced understanding of the rules and norms of a university (Bourdieu 1986).

Flexible Time and Knowledge

The second strand of praxis concerns the formal, accredited nature of third level education, and the importance of flexibility to learners meeting this new level of critical challenge. The research indicates the need to offer 'flexibility' to adult learners in multiple senses, each with important implications for programme delivery. As previously outlined, research participants highlighted the importance of flexibility related to part-time scheduling and to online provision. An Cosán's community educators adopt the 'flipped classroom' model which is based on interactive group learning activities inside the classroom and directed, online learning outside the classroom (Galindo-Dominguez 2021). Students can thus access their class recordings, multi-media learning materials, and coursework around their own schedule. Equally, 'flexibility' may challenge prevailing constructions of what constitutes knowledge at third level and how such learning may be demonstrated. In An Cosán's model of community education, this involves a vital role for critical pedagogy and valorising learners' life experience and prior learning.

Teaching practice at An Cosán is underpinned by Freirean critical pedagogy and intersectional feminist pedagogy (Kerins 2018, pp. 20-7). Class sessions are structured primarily around facilitated group discussion with tutor-led clarification of core concepts and issues where necessary. In place of teaching a series of facts and opinions to be memorised, the educational goal is to co-create knowledge together through dialogue. This pedagogical approach values learners' life experience as well as peer learning and collaboration. It is opposed to merely banking material and strives for learning driven by students' agency, questioning of assumptions, and preparedness to act in the world. In this model, continuous assessment with supportive feedback is prioritised over final examinations. To facilitate inclusive learning, assessment takes diverse and authentic forms, combining traditional essay writing and reflective journaling with projects that replicate what learners might do in a social, community, or work-based setting upon graduation. The level of critical challenge offered thus remains appropriate to third level education and ensures learners experience a sense of genuine achievement upon completion.

Transformative Learning

The third strand of praxis concerns transformative learning. This strand advances a critical model of lifelong learning, pushing beyond the merely functional to promote the democratic and emancipatory goals of education (Fleming 2021, pp. 17-20). The research sheds new light on how An Cosán contributes to people's full and equal participation in a democratic society. Research participants emphasised the peer support, comradery, and group cohesion that they experienced. In contemporary society where isolation is a symptom of social disempowerment (See Morgan 2022), this research finding is significant. As has been noted, the classroom was diverse and attracted applicants from all priority groups listed in Ireland's National Access Policy, including students with disabilities and Irish Travellers. A quarter of Certificate participants were born outside of Ireland. As one learner put it, 'It's like the United Nations!' Participants consistently described this diversity in the class group as well as the collaborative, dialogic learning environment as facilitating increased understanding of others, intercultural awareness, and increased respect for others. This finding resonates with Paulo Freire's observation that democracy, before it becomes a political or institutional form, is a form of life. For Freire, the 'transitive consciousness' which underpins democratic life can only develop as people are launched into dialogue and participate in examining common problems together (2010, p. 25).

Transformative learning plays a role in deepening learners' care and concern for others and their empowerment. The research indicates that a distinctive group bond arose through learners' mutual understanding and empathy in the face of similar hardships and struggles they experienced while returning to education. Indeed, in early data collection, a perception of life as an inevitable 'struggle' or 'battle' was evident from multiple participants. These views were constructed through long-term experiences of poverty, social exclusion, or addiction recovery. However, drawing on these experiences to inform a new, helping role in the community also emerged strongly in the dataset. Indeed, one of the most consistent themes in participants' contributions was their motivation to use their education 'to help others'. Participants' future aspirations spoke to their current practice. 71% of research participants reported engaging in community, civic, or voluntary activity in the previous four weeks. Importantly, through use of dialogue, peer learning and reflective practice at An Cosán, learners can identify a means of changing what had once been a personal struggle for them into transformative action for their own lives and the lives of others.

Reach and Significance of Impact

The Linked Provision's positive impact in communities in Tallaght and throughout Ireland is evident in successive reviews and evaluations. A recent Social Return on Investment (SROI) study found that for every euro of investment in An Cosán Virtual Community College, there was 5.1 times as much social value created (Kovačič, Forkan and Goodspeed, 2022). The present report sheds further light on the deep, far-reaching nature of the Linked Provision's impact and the qualitative nature of the social value created.

Specific benefits attach to widening participation in Higher Education. In Ireland, those who attain an educational award at NFQ Levels 6 and 7 are more likely to enter employment, earn a higher income, and enjoy increased life expectancy. Individual achievement in higher education sets an intergenerational precedent and facilitates families exiting poverty and breaking down cycles of disadvantage.

Community-Based HE at An Cosán supports individual learners' personal development and well-being, underpinning social trust, active citizenship, and full participation in a democratic society, as well as fostering capacities to engage in meaningful employment with positive implications for social inclusion and social mobility. By meeting and collaborating with diverse participants from across Ireland, An Cosán learners have reported gaining social capital, access to professional opportunities, and enhanced capacity to promote social inclusion and human rights in their local community. Positive outcomes for individual learners thus have far-reaching benefits for their local communities and for wider Irish society.

9 Recommendations

There is the beautiful blue sky that signifies that the destination, if reached, will be beautiful.
Buki

An Cosán and SETU Lifelong Learning now share an evidence-based model to inform how adult learners experiencing diverse inequalities can be supported and motivated to access, participate, and succeed in third level education. This concluding chapter outlines the recommendations arising for the future development of the Linked Provision initiative and the HE Pathways for Non-Traditional Learners programme.

These recommendations are informed by the Higher Education Authority's call for 'system innovation and transformation' and speak to the future development of lifelong learning and of community-based Higher Education pathways in Ireland. On the journey to educational equality, this report emphasises the value of flexibility, wraparound support, and transformative community education.

Policy Recommendations

Community-Based Higher Education

Community-based Higher Education clearly enables non-traditional learners to access, participate, and succeed in third level education. Past negative school experiences have a long-term impact and lessen adult learners' motivation to engage in Further or Higher Education. If flexible, blended, and part-time programmes help facilitate non-traditional learners' access and participation, transformative learning motivates that participation and facilitates success. Programmes that take a holistic approach to learning, thereby valuing learner voice, experiential learning, peer learning and praxis, play a key role in supporting adult learners' self-esteem, confidence, and personal development. In this way, community-based Higher Education at An Cosán engages the whole person and enables education through an interdependent ecology of wraparound supports and interventions.

The experience of An Cosán and SETU provides a case study in how a vibrant collaboration between community and university can centre and address the needs of non-traditional learners in novel ways while also advancing national policy objectives with respect to equity of access, participation, and success in Higher Education. By enabling the delivery of third-level programmes directly to adult learners online and in their local community centre, Linked Provision meets the recognised policy need for education providers to start local and to create clear, inclusive pathways between different education levels. Moreover, by enabling Community Educators to implement transformative learning approaches associated with the discipline of adult education, Linked Provision offers learners an enhanced form of flexibility. While supporting learners to meet the level of critical, academic challenge appropriate to third level, Community Educators further welcome and draw upon learners' prior learning and life experience. In place of didactic instruction, the classroom is a site for the co-construction of knowledge.

Community-based Higher Education is of clear relevance to all stakeholders seeking to widen participation in Higher Education and to achieve a unified tertiary system centred on the needs of adult learners (See Sartori and Bloom, 2023, p. 75). The HEA is to be commended for recognising and supporting An Cosán and SETU's model of collaboration through the Higher Education Pathways for Non-Traditional Learners project. Realising the full potential of community-based Higher Education on a national scale will require further state recognition and support for diverse initiatives. While the form these initiatives might take are beyond the scope of the present report, they will require research at scale to inform future policy and funding. A useful first step may be to establish a network of community organisations providing Higher Education programmes for priority group learners under Linked Provision agreements like that between An Cosán and SETU. With appropriate state support, this network could facilitate required research into community-based Higher Education, share local, national, and international practice, and advocate for this innovative model to widen participation in Higher Education and enhance social inclusion. Ireland's expertise in community education and effective engagement with marginalised learners is recognised and valued across Europe (O'Reilly, 2022, p. 19). Community education organisations, as the present report indicates, have significant potential to inform policy and practice to make equity of access, success, and participation in Higher Education a living reality.

1. **It is recommended that An Cosán and SETU collaborate to celebrate and publicise the Linked Provision's existing strengths and success in widening participation in Higher Education and, in the context of wider Higher Education system innovation and transformation, to advocate for this Community-Based Higher Education model's recognition and wider replication.**

Supporting Flexible, Part-Time Learning

If the state seeks to promote priority group access, participation, and success in Higher Education, the present case study underlines the necessity of allocating public resources to part-time, flexible learning. It further underlines the necessity of accommodating re-entry and second chance provisions for groups with low levels of educational attainment and with higher economic and social risk attached to their participation. By highlighting how the challenges of 'time' and 'money' are experienced by all An Cosán learners across their access, engagement, and participation in Higher Education, the current report indicates the need for these challenges to be mitigated by an appropriate financial package.

The report's findings support and are supported by existing research examining the Higher Education System in Ireland more broadly. Contemporary research consistently shows the need for an equitable, coherent, realistic, and flexible funding model for mature students from disadvantaged communities (Indecon, 2021; see also Sartori and Bloom, 2023). Currently, only students on full-time programmes are eligible for 'Free Fees' and similar educational funding supports. This effectively disincentives part-time or flexible study. If the state seeks to promote priority group access, participation, and success in Higher Education, exchequer resources should be focused on part-time learning and on supporting priority groups and their communities to access Higher Education.

2. **It is recommended that An Cosán and SETU collaborate with relevant stakeholders to advocate for the allocation of public resources to part-time, flexible learning and to priority group access and participation in Higher Education.**

Practice Recommendations

Valuing Wraparound Support in the Community

In a changing world of work and lifelong learning, priority group learners experience isolation, disruptive home environments, and diverse forms of social inequality. This report underlines the complex and often challenging nature of adult learners' life situations. It further underlines the importance of wraparound, holistic supports in ensuring priority group learners can access education. An Cosán's model of care forms an interdependent ecology of supports and interventions. Learners frequently attributed their capacity to participate to their availability. The way supports are delivered also matters (Fitzgerald, 2022). Learners appreciated the personalised care and support provided by An Cosán staff throughout the array of services provided, including hospitality, childcare, digital inclusion, and one-to-one tutor and mentor support. Some learners highlighted specific areas for improvement, including the level of bursary support available, communications, and scheduling. These points have been recognised and remedied where possible.

Researching the wider organisational context or the experience and views of An Cosán staff, senior management, and board members lies beyond the scope of the present report. However, it should be noted that ensuring adequate state recognition and resources to deliver services to standard is now an acute challenge throughout the community and voluntary sector. While demand for not-for-profit services is growing and becoming more complex, community organisations lack both the staff numbers and the experienced staff necessary to meet this demand. Employees working in the sector face declining relative income during an inflationary period, prompting high turnover, exacerbating workplace stress, and undermining the quality of service offered (The Wheel, 2023, p. 3). An Cosán is not exempt from these highly gendered dynamics (Foster, 2023). By way of illustration, the HEPNTL project's original programme proposal identified a total of 12 An Cosán staff members in January 2019. Of these, 50% had changed employment by the project's completion in December 2022. Among other actions, restoring pay parity with the public sector is vital to future-proof the state's capacity to deliver necessary services to the most vulnerable in Irish society (The Wheel, 2023, pp. 48-9).

3. **It is recommended that resources are ringfenced in as much as possible to continue the development and delivery of An Cosán's wraparound supports. Every effort should be maintained across An Cosán and SETU to ensure that these innovative, important, and relevant supports are protected and maintained in future.**

Transformative Learning

The present report underlines the importance of community education spaces, dialogue, and collaborative learning in making diverse adult learners feel welcomed and valued. In classrooms where economic hardship, oppression, and exclusion feature prominently, An Cosán's transformative teaching and learning practice facilitates adult learners to meet the level of critical challenge presented by Higher Education. Crucially, it does so while enabling learners to develop self-esteem, empathy, and intercultural understanding. Community Educators ensure that learners' motivations, life experience, and diversity are highly valued throughout their learning journey.

An Cosán facilitated an independent consultant to undertake reflective evaluation workshops or focus groups with learners at the end of each round of the Certificate in Personal and Professional Development (Fitzgerald, 2021, 2022). This research and the present report indicate several specific items for further consideration. The academic, relationship-based, and practical support offered by An Cosán tutors builds adult learner confidence and capacities and should continue. So too should the role of small group collaboration and peer support, including tutors' drawing on class members' prior learning and life experience. In terms of improvement, pre-course communication, application processes, and tailored workshops may be used to better align learner expectations regarding the workload, standards, and challenges of being a self-directed learner on an accredited Higher Education programme.

4. **It is recommended that resources are ringfenced in as much as possible to continue the development and delivery of transformative learning at An Cosán. Every effort should be maintained across An Cosán and SETU to ensure that this innovative, important, and relevant model of pedagogy is protected and maintained in future.**

Future Programme Development

The Certificate in Personal and Professional Development has the potential to inform best practice in adult community education as well as outreach or access education. It represents a timely, community-based programme that is highly flexible, competency-based, and digitally inclusive. The current project enabled the development of a programme proposal for a Higher Certificate in Personal and Professional Development, designed to ensure learners are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and competencies to work autonomously in diverse professional environments and to engage in lifelong learning for future development.

An Cosán facilitated an independent consultant to undertake an environmental analysis of comparable awards and to conduct a stakeholder consultation with relevant employers (See Van Aswegan, 2023). Considerations as to feasibility, relevance, and value-added in the changed and evolving context indicate the potential suitability of progressing a Higher Certificate in Personal and Professional Development (120 ECTS, NFQ Level 6). This research and the present report indicate a modest level of learner demand for same. A new BA Hons Programme in Personal and Professional Development (240 ECTS, NFQ Level 8) awaits the Higher Certificate's delivery and successful proof of concept. Of interest here is the higher level of learner demand for a BA Degree in Community Development (240 ECTS, NFQ Level 8). There is significant overlap in the target learner cohort, programme content and transversal skills on both awards. The latter, however, explicitly addresses target learner cohort's expressed interests and motivations concerning subject matter, educational progression, and future employment.

While the Certificate programme explicitly addresses educational disadvantage in a transformative way within the classroom, similar disadvantages concerning the 'hidden curriculum' and unequal social capital may be experienced by learners when entering and navigating the labour market (Jin and Ball 2019; Semper and Blasco, 2018). Regardless of the award programme to be implemented in future, the present report underlines the importance to An Cosán learners of 'guidance', or impartial, professional advice concerning future opportunities for employment, education, and volunteering. The report also underlines the importance to learners of 'networking', understood as the provision of opportunities for learners to build relationships with current learners, alumni and potential employers or education providers.

Capacity and opportunity to imagine possible career paths and identify specific goals to work towards are

important predictors of professional success (See Asafova and Vashetina, 2022). An Cosán may address the above considerations in tailored module design on a future Higher Certificate in Personal and Professional Development or BA Degree in Community Development. Equally, evidenced learner needs may require provision of an additional series of career guidance workshops during the academic year. This could include an end of programme evaluation workshop enabling participants to reflect on and to name their learning. All such workshops would underline to learners that they are at the start of a longer journey of progression at professional and personal levels. During the research process, learners consistently emphasised that 'helping others' and 'making a difference' through meaningful work in the community was a primary driver behind their return to Higher Education. Targeted guidance and networking opportunities in these areas may be particularly relevant and impactful.

5. **It is recommended that the findings of this report and the Van Aswegan report (2023) form the basis of a strategic project to develop a Level 8 BA Degree programme in Community Development. Learners' personal and professional development may be enhanced through provision of career guidance and networking opportunities.**

Research Recommendations

Nothing About Us Without Us: The Value of Participatory Action Research

Gathering data to evaluate a new and innovative model of education clearly matters to supporting its development and to ensuring wider recognition of and resources for the work of those delivering it. If research matters, so too does the way research is conducted. The present research was conducted using a participatory, mixed-methods methodology. Adult learners clearly valued taking part in programme reflection and decision-making. Moreover, in addition to quantitative data, the current National Access Plan similarly recognises the importance of robust qualitative indicators in understanding and monitoring equity in Higher Education, and in realising inclusion objectives (Ireland, 2022, p. 74). Important limitations also attach to positivist measures of deprivation-disadvantage (Bissett, 2023, p. 4). Use of participatory and visual methods can help to overcome these limitations by sharing agency, building confidence, and addressing what Paulo Freire once identified as the 'culture of silence' that accompanies oppression and marginalisation (1996, p. 12).

Community education values and practices have the potential to inform diverse and creative forms of educational research, capable of engaging, involving, and celebrating diverse and marginalised learners. In the present research, Photovoice, as a method for qualitative enquiry, has demonstrated enormous potential to curate rich and complex learner narratives. The Photovoice workshops contained intimate and emotional explorations of identity, backgrounds, and life experiences. Navigating the vulnerability of research participants warranted an ongoing ethics of care. However, to overcome social injustices, and for people to reach their full potential it is imperative that their voices be heard in matters that impact them ('nothing about us without us'). Wherever it is the case that underrepresented groups choose to tell their stories, it gives organisations and institutions an opportunity to listen, learn, and improve (Rogers, Sims, and Boyd, 2022). Participatory action research advances this model of inclusivity by inviting the learner to participate as a co-researcher. Involving learners meaningfully in the research process from the design stage to dissemination is imperative for the informed development of community-based organisations. Naming the world is not the privilege of some few persons, but the right of everyone (Freire, 1996, p. 69).

6. **It is recommended that An Cosán and SETU give special consideration to and make provision for participatory action research as part of future programme evaluations.**

Snapshots

'Igniting Community-Based Higher Education'
Workshop

'The Whirlwind and The Path'
Photovoice Exhibition

An Cosán and SETU staff, learners, and guests at the 'Igniting Community-Based Higher Education' workshop in Tallaght, 19 November 2022.

Pictured at the 'Igniting Community-Based Higher Education' workshop in Tallaght, 19 November 2022, left to right: Sharon Clancy (University of Nottingham, UK), Rosemary Flynn (SETU Lifelong Learning), Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson (Highlander Research and Education Center, Tennessee), Thomas Murray (An Cosán), and Lone Yolal (Day School for Immigrant Women, Copenhagen, Denmark)

Pictured at the launch of the 'The Whirlwind and The Path' Photovoice Exhibition, left to right: Adelaide Nic Chárthaigh (Adult Community Education Manager), Heydi Foster (CEO), Marlene McCormack (An Cosán Board Member), Senator Lynn Ruane, Thomas Murray (Higher Education Lead), Anne Genockey (Deputy CEO), and Yasmin Kutub (Higher Education Community Educator).

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An Cosán staff and learners at the launch of the 'The Whirlwind and The Path' Photovoice Exhibition in Tallaght, 30 June 2023.

Heydi Foster, Chief Executive Officer, An Cosán

David Denieffe, Vice President for Academic Affairs, SETU.

Dr. Rebekah Brennan, (Report Co-Author) Higher Education, An Cosán.

Dr. Thomas Murray, (Project Lead and Report Co-Author) Higher Education, An Cosán.

An Cosán and SETU learner, Thembinkosi Ngoma Malisa, pictured with her exhibit at the 'The Whirlwind and The Path' Photovoice Exhibition in Tallaght, 30 June 2023.

An Cosán and SETU learner, Amy Hanley, pictured with her exhibit at the 'The Whirlwind and The Path' Photovoice Exhibition in Tallaght, 30 June 2023.

An Cosán staff pictured at the launch of the 'The Whirlwind and The Path' Photovoice Exhibition in Tallaght, 30 June 2023.

An Cosán staff, Further Education awardees, and Higher Education awardees pictured at the learner Award Ceremony in Tallaght, 30 June 2023.

Certificate in Personal and Professional Development awardees celebrate at their Award Ceremony in Tallaght, 30 June 2023

An Cosán and SETU learners receive their awards for the Certificate in Personal and Professional Development. Left to Right: Wasiu Afariogun, Tanya Johnston, Fred Harford, and Samantha Dowdall

An Cosán and SETU awardee, Natasha Jordan, pictured with her family.

Certificate awardee, Tanya Johnston.

An Cosán and SETU awardee, Barbara Flood, pictured with her family.

An Cosán and SETU awardee, Omosalewa (Buki) Ayinla, pictured with her family.

An Cosán and SETU awardee, Tamara Kearns, pictured with her family.

An Cosán and SETU awardee, Amy Hanley, pictured with her family.

Certificate awardees celebrate at their Award Ceremony in Tallaght, 30 June 2023

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