

Impact of PATH Funding Midlands East and North Dublin Cluster 2017–2025

Changing Who
Goes to College



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Glossary

AIRO	All-Island Research Observatory
CAO	Central Applications Office
CEF	Community Education Forum
CFE	College of Further Education
CNA	Community Needs Analysis
CWTS	College: What's the Story?
DCU	Dublin City University
DKIT	Dundalk Institute of Technology
ETB	Education and Training Board
FE	Further Education
FET	Further Education and Training
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEI	Higher Education Institution
MEND	Midlands, East and North Dublin
MU	Maynooth University
NAP	National Access Plan 2022–2028
NTO	National Tertiary Office
NTWF	National Traveller Women's Forum
PAR	Participatory Action Research
PATH	Programme for Access to Higher Education
PLC	Post Leaving Certificate Course
TTT	Turn to Teaching
TUS	Technological University of the Shannon
WWKR	Whidden Workshops; It's Kushti to Rokker
PATH 1	Initial Teacher Education
PATH 2	The 1916 Bursary Fund
PATH 3	Higher Education Access Fund
PATH 4	Universal Design for Learning & Course Provision for Students with Intellectual Disabilities
PATH 5	Traveller and Roma Education

Foreword



Higher education has long been recognised as a powerful driver of personal growth, social mobility, and economic progress. A society that provides educational opportunities to all benefits not only the individual but also the wider community. However, many people from under-represented groups must overcome barriers—both visible and invisible—on their path to higher education. The Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH), initiated in 2017 by the Higher Education Authority, represents a transformative step toward dismantling barriers and creating an inclusive and diverse higher education landscape in Ireland.

PATH is a dedicated fund valued at €30 million divided into five strands, each committed to developing programmes and initiatives to increase participation in higher education of under-represented groups:

- **PATH 1:** Initial Teacher Education
- **PATH 2:** The 1916 Bursary Fund
- **PATH 3:** Higher Education Access Fund
- **PATH 4:** Universal Design for Learning & Course Provision for Students with Intellectual Disabilities
- **PATH 5:** Traveller and Roma Education

Dublin City University, Dundalk Institute of Technology, Maynooth University, and Technological University of the Shannon Midlands work collaboratively on PATH 2, 3 and 5. Collectively known as College Connect, we serve the Midlands, East and North Dublin (MEND) region.

Together, we have published four Community Needs Analyses (CNAs) employing Participatory Action Research methodologies, fostering participative and democratic relationships with stakeholders who are encouraged to engage in collaborative leadership. The CNAs identify and address barriers to higher education faced by priority communities:

- [A CNA with the Pathways Centre for Prisoners and Former Prisoners: A Pilot Study as part of College Connect](#)
- [A CNA with Refugees and People Seeking Asylum: Exploring Access & Barriers to Higher Education in Ireland](#)
- [A CNA with Further Education Students: Thoughts Around Progression from Further Education and Training to Higher Education](#)
- [A CNA with Traveller and Roma Students on Their Experiences of Higher Education](#)

Through College Connect our four Higher Education Institutions have developed and delivered programmes and initiatives with community groups, deepened connections with local communities, implemented evidence-based engagement models, and promoted inclusive access to education. We have worked closely with the All-Island Research Observatory to develop a data visualisation tool which supports HEIs to track impact and make strategic and data-driven decisions.

The following case studies highlight the impact of PATH 2, 3 and 5 on local MEND communities. As you explore these stories, you will see how the concerted efforts of higher education institutions, community organisations, and dedicated individuals are changing lives and reshaping the future of education in our country.

We hope that these case studies will inspire further action and collaboration as we work together to create an inclusive educational system empowering all to succeed.



Dr Rosario Ryan
Director of Access
Maynooth University

For more information on PATH and other widening participation programmes in MEND Higher Education Institutions, visit each of the websites below:

[dcu.ie](https://www.dcu.ie) | [dkit.ie](https://www.dkit.ie) | [maynoothuniversity.ie](https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie) | [tus.ie](https://www.tus.ie) | [collegeconnect.ie](https://www.collegeconnect.ie)

To stay up to date on the research, outreach and achievements of widening participation programmes in the MEND region, follow our HEIs on X:

@DCU
@DkIT_ie
@MaynoothUni
@TUS_Athlone_

PATH 2



The 1916 Bursary Fund



PATH 2: The 1916 Bursary Fund

Without the Help... I Would Have Dropped Out



The 1916 Bursary Fund

The 1916 Bursary Fund aims to encourage participation and success in higher education by providing financial support to students from under-represented socio-economically disadvantaged groups in Ireland.



Strategy

The 1916 Bursary Fund focuses on promoting participation and success in higher education among students from specific priority groups, and complements existing student supports and access initiatives such as [SUSI](#) and the [Student Assistance Fund](#).



NAP Goals

- Inclusivity
- Flexibility
- Clarity
- Coherence
- Sustainability
- Evidence-driven Approach



PATH Synergies

- PATH 1
- PATH 3
- PATH 4
- PATH 5



Impact: What has Changed?

The College Connect evaluation of the 1916 Bursary Fund in the MEND region titled [Without the Help... I Would Have Dropped Out](#) demonstrated the impact the 1916 Bursary Fund has had upon successful recipients and made the following recommendations:

1. Increase the number and value of 1916 Bursaries.
2. Simplify the application process.
3. Streamline the support system, both during the application process and upon receipt of the fund.
4. Offer a clear and proactive appeals process.
5. Work to destigmatise the 1916 Bursary Fund.
6. Carry out a review of the 1916 Bursary Fund to include public consultation.
7. Embed the 1916 Bursary Fund as a permanent source of funding for low-income priority groups.

PATH 2, 3 & 5



“Without the Help... I Would Have Dropped Out”
Dr Sarah Sartori, Dilara Demir Bloom
& Lilian Nwanze, May 2023

Evidence-driven Approach

The College Connect evaluation of the [1916 Bursary Fund](#) documented the impact of the funding on successful applicants in the MEND cluster over four years from its inception in 2018 to 2022.

Impact by Numbers

1,851

Eligible applicants for the 1916 Bursary across the MEND region from 2018/19 to 2023/24.

853

Recipients of the 1916 Bursary award at all award Tiers in the MEND region from 2018/19 to 2023/24.

90%

Retention/completion rate of 1916 Bursary recipients across all Tiers in DCU from 2018/19 to 2022/23.

82%

Retention rate of 1916 Bursary recipients across all Tiers in DkIT from 2018/19 to 2022/23.

90%

Retention rate of 1916 Bursary Tier 2 and Tier 3 recipients in TUS Midlands Midwest from 2021/22 to 2022/23.

91%

Retention rate of 1916 Bursary Tier 1 recipients in Maynooth University from 2018/19 to 2022/23.



College Connect Voices



As a Syrian refugee, I was the first student in my close network to ever complete the Leaving Certificate in Ireland and to attend university. The process was far from easy. I had to teach myself English and put in twice as much effort, just to be on an equal level with the rest of my peers.

Thankfully, I heard about the 1916 Bursary Fund. I applied for it and got it. With the support of the Bursary, my mind was more at ease regarding meeting financial needs as a student. It allowed me to focus more on my studies. I was also able to undertake paid online courses that opened new horizons for me.

Thanks to such support, I received the Dean's List Award for academic excellence for all my years in college and was shortlisted for the Ireland Undergraduate of the Year award. I also got the opportunity to do my work placement at a multinational company. This company subsequently offered to pay for me to undertake a Master's programme with a full job offer afterwards! This goes to show that even small support can go a long way in someone's life, and I'm certainly incredibly grateful for that.

Mohamad Abo Haileh

Final Year Bachelor of Business (Hons.)
Technological University of the Shannon Midlands

PATH 3



College Connect

PATH 3: College Connect

Our Collective Intelligence:

A Regional Approach to Access and Inclusion



College Connect

College Connect is a regional access project that aims to widen participation and increase higher education access for under-represented groups in the MEND region. A Higher Education Authority PATH 3 funded project, it is comprised of three models of community engagement and has been led by Maynooth University in partnership with Dublin City University, Technological University of the Shannon Midlands, and Dundalk Institute of Technology.



Strategy

The four MEND Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) collaborate through College Connect to build sustainable relationships with community organisations representing priority groups identified in the [National Access Plan 2022–2028 \(NAP\)](#). The project uses strategic outreach and collaborative research to align with the NAP goals of inclusivity, flexibility, clarity, coherence, and sustainability, supported by an evidence-based approach. The cluster model facilitates the sharing of best practices both within the MEND region and across the sector.



Community Partners

- AHEAD
- AONTAS
- Empowering People in Care
- Irish Refugee Council
- Louth Local Development
- National Traveller Women's Forum
- The Pathways Centre
- SOLAS



NAP Goals

- Inclusivity
- Flexibility
- Clarity
- Coherence
- Sustainability
- Evidence-driven Approach



PATH Synergies

- PATH 1
- PATH 2
- PATH 4
- PATH 5

PATH 2, 3 & 5

HEI and Community Governance



Leading community representatives work in equal partnership with senior HEI representatives at a strategic level to offer expert community insight, guidance, oversight, and support in the development and implementation of the College Connect programme in the MEND region.



Community Needs Analyses

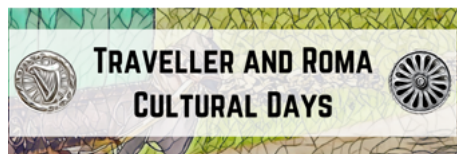
College Connect has built, and continues to build, an evidence-base to inform educational policy and targeted supports for marginalised communities through Community Needs Analyses (CNAs). These peer-led, participatory research initiatives are designed and implemented in collaboration with community partners representing priority groups.

Consistency of Approach

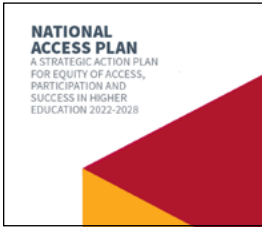
MEND HEIs engage with priority groups through community-focused initiatives aligned with their strategic plans. A Community Connector is based in each HEI to work with local community groups and Access colleagues delivering initiatives such as Traveller and Roma cultural celebrations, *Whidden Workshops*, the *We Are Here*, *HEAR* exhibition, and the *Change Makers* mentoring programme.

CHANGEMAKERS
Opening the doors to higher education

Headstart
In The Community



Collective Voice for Policy Change



The MEND HEIs, through College Connect, are a unified voice identifying good practice regionally that can support under-represented groups to access and succeed in higher education. The regional partnership model has enabled a consistency of approach throughout the region, sharing resources and expertise to maximise regional impact. Shared learning from the CNAs has led to the establishment of the Mountjoy Prison Maynooth University Partnership and the development of the [Unlocking Potential Fair Admissions](#) toolkit. Individuals with criminal justice experience are now named in the NAP and are eligible for the 1916 Bursary Fund. The development of the [How-to-Guide to Group Mentoring](#) supports greater coordination and consistency of mentoring work nationally. The College Connect Access Data Hub has the potential to support the sector in developing an evidence-base to target resources towards those furthest from education.



Evidence-driven Approach

From 2022–2024, College Connect partnered with community organisations across the MEND region to raise aspirations and increase access to higher education for those furthest removed from it. This collaborative approach has had a significant impact, reflected in the achievements shown below.



Impact by Numbers

259

Community Groups engaged.

5,474

Mentoring and Pathways Engagements.

13,908

Priority group students entered MEND HEIs.

4

Community Needs Analyses.

5,842

DEIS school students who progressed to MEND HEIs.

College Connect Voices



In today's educational landscape, fostering equitable access and widening participation are imperatives for societal progress. College Connect's regional approach highlights a transformative strategy that addresses diverse community needs.

A partnership of trust has been formed between DCU, DkIT, Maynooth University, and TUS Midlands, which make up the Midlands, East and North Dublin cluster. This regional partnership has allowed us to work together to achieve our shared objectives of collaborating with community and voluntary organisations and DEIS schools to widen the participation of under-represented groups in our respective institutions and diversify our student bodies.

Our regional partnership has also allowed us to form equitable relationships with priority groups as outlined in the [National Access Plan 2022–2028](#). Community-led governance, with eight diverse community groups represented on our regional steering group, ensures inclusive decision-making. Senior HEI stakeholders reinforce collaboration, ensuring institutional buy-in. The evidence-driven approach identifies priority communities through meticulous mapping and participatory methodologies, empowering communities to shape their educational trajectories.

The model has also enabled a consistency of approach throughout the region, championing best practices and fostering a collaborative ecosystem where successes are shared and replicated. Regional intelligence and collective voices drive policy change, with cross-agency collaboration and ministerial buy-in resulting in tangible changes. From my experience with this project, I have seen how collective action and inclusive governance can create a more equitable higher education landscape.

Dr Sheila Flanagan

Vice President for Academic Affairs and Registrar
Dundalk Institute of Technology

PATH 3: College Connect

Evidence-Driven Approach to Supporting Priority Groups Access Higher Education

Supporting Priority Groups in Accessing Higher Education

College Connect employs a dual strategy for its evidence-driven approach: mapping engagement with priority groups through development of a data hub in partnership with the All-Island Research Observatory (AIRO) and building a robust evidence-base via Community Needs Analyses (CNAs).

Strategy

An evidence-driven approach is central to the [National Access Plan 2022–2028](#), particularly Goal 6. College Connect's CNAs directly support Goal 6.1 by building an evidence base to promote inclusive access, participation, and success, informing future policy and planning. Additionally, the College Connect Access Data Hub aligns with Goal 6.2 by enabling the evaluation and monitoring of access and inclusion initiatives, ensuring measurable impact.

Community Partners

- | | |
|---|------------------------------------|
| ■ All-Island Research Observatory | ■ Irish Refugee Council |
| ■ Ballyfermot College of Further Education | ■ National Traveller Women's Forum |
| ■ City of Dublin Education and Training Board | ■ The Pathways Centre |
| | ■ Pavee Point |

Community Needs Analyses

College Connect conducts peer-to-peer CNAs to support under-represented priority groups in higher education by identifying and addressing barriers to access. The CNAs employ Participatory Action Research methodologies, fostering participative and democratic relationships with stakeholders who are encouraged to engage in collaborative leadership. College Connect has published:

PATH 2, 3 & 5

- [A CNA with the Pathways Centre for Prisoners and Former Prisoners: A Pilot Study as part of College Connect](#)
- [A CNA with Refugees and People Seeking Asylum: Exploring Access & Barriers to Higher Education in Ireland](#)
- [A CNA with Further Education Students: Thoughts Around Progression from Further Education and Training to Higher Education](#)
- [A CNA with Traveller and Roma Students on Their Experiences of Higher Education](#)

Our fourth CNA with Traveller and Roma higher education students was published in May 2025 during the publication of this booklet. It put forward 11 recommendations for HEIs and policymakers to create a coordinated sectoral response to increasing access to higher education for Traveller and Roma students. The recommendations will enable higher education institutions to support Traveller and Roma students in accessing, participating, and succeeding in higher education, as well as in pursuing post-graduate and employment opportunities.

Recommendations for a Regional Model of Access for Widening Participation

Through the three CNAs published, which considered the specific barriers faced by students with criminal justice histories, those with experience of the international protection system, and Further Education and Training award holders progressing to higher education, 29 recommendations were identified that would better support these groups to access and succeed in higher education. Of these, 12 core recommendations have been identified as serving all three priority groups. These recommendations highlight a shared need for various supports, including mentoring, targeted information, skills training, and financial assistance across all groups. Additionally, the CNAs provide specific recommendations to address barriers unique to each group.

The 12 common recommendations form a [Regional Model of Access](#), allowing Access Offices to develop strategies that address the challenges to participation faced by all priority group students. Additional unique recommendations address specific barriers faced by students with criminal justice histories, those with experience of the international protection system, and Further Education and Training award holders progressing to higher education.



Learn more about the [Regional Model of Access](#) and the recommendations to meet the specific needs of individual priority groups.

All-Island Research Observatory – Access Data Hub

In collaboration with the [All-Island Research Observatory](#), College Connect has successfully developed an Access Data Hub. This initiative aligns with Goal 6 (evidence-driven approach) in the [National Access Plan 2022–2028](#). The Access Data Hub integrates data from the Census 2022, the Pobal Deprivation Index (Pobal DIS), and school progression data. It offers a unique and detailed visual of educational facilities and community groups across the country. By providing accessible data visualisation tools and dashboards, the Hub can empower stakeholders to make informed decisions and develop targeted interventions to promote inclusive access and participation in higher education. This initiative exemplifies College Connect's commitment to changing who goes to college in Ireland and creating a more equitable education landscape for all.

Informed Outreach

Strategic Planning

Tracking Impact

Data-Driven Decision Making



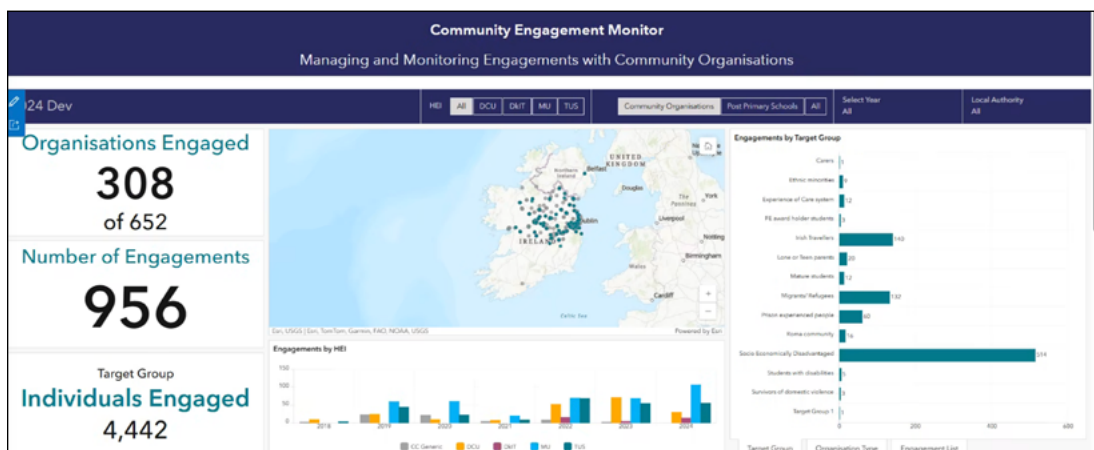
Impact by Numbers

2,000+

Mentoring and pathways engagements logged on the hub since 2018.

600

Community organisations mapped by our Community Connectors since the launch of College Connect in 2018.



College Connect Voices



As the Director of the Maynooth Access Programme, I am aware of how challenging it can be to ensure that we target our resources to support the most marginalised communities to access higher education. Using the College Connect Access Data Hub, Maynooth University can now identify and support those who are the furthest from education by using detailed mapping and attainment data. This tool enables us to meet priority groups where they are in their educational journey, enhancing our ability to design targeted interventions. The Hub also allows us to track progress over time, ensuring that we can pivot our resources to meet new and emerging needs.

Dr Rosario Ryan

Director of Access
Maynooth University

PATH 3: College Connect

Community Mentoring: Nurturing Relationships with Community Partners Through Engagement and Collaboration



Community Mentoring

College Connect mentoring programmes apply community education principles to provide community-based, participatory, and experiential mentoring, focusing on what matters most in the lives of mentees.



Strategy

College Connect mentoring programmes are aligned specifically with Goal 3.2 of the NAP, which is to ensure greater coordination and consistency of pre-entry and mentoring work across HEIs.



Community Partners

- BITE Ballymun
- City of Dublin ETB
- Coláiste Dhúlaigh
- DCU School of Applied Language and Intercultural Studies
- Familibase
- Gaisce
- Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board
- Irish Prison Service
- Longford and Westmeath Education and Training Board
- Longford Community Resources CLG
- Louth Local Development
- Mountjoy Prison
- Movement of Asylum Seekers Ireland
- Narrative 4 Ireland
- New Horizons
- Partners Training for Transformation
- Trinity Comprehensive
- Wheatfield Prison
- Youthreach Ballymun
- Youthreach Dundalk

PATH 2, 3 & 5



Impact: What has Changed?

MEND HEIs have developed models of good mentoring practice across the region in a coordinated approach including:



College: What's the Story? is a student-mentoring project based on the community development principles of inclusion and participation. Current college student mentors engage with youth or community groups with whom they have a direct connection to deliver fun, relationship-building and aspiration-focused workshops.



Whidden Workshops: It's Kushti to Rokker is a mentoring programme led by current Traveller and Roma higher education students. It provides information and guidance to prospective Traveller and Roma students who are thinking about going to college.



Narrative 4 Story Exchange methodology supports participants to develop empathy through storytelling, explore concepts of leadership, power and change together and learn to respect boundaries of privacy and confidentiality. Participants work together towards their Gaisce award and become agents of change in society sharing a positive message about university and students who are prison experienced.



[#IUACHangeMakers: Youth Crime & Justice Video](#) (24:16)



Change Makers is a student-mentoring programme delivered over six weeks creating a transformative educational experience for both mentors and mentees through participatory and experiential learning processes. Change Makers seeks to challenge perceptions, raise aspirations and enhance the participants' comprehension of higher education learning.



[College Connect Change Makers Video](#) (1:59)



College Connect developed a [How-to-Guide to Group Mentoring](#) to ensure greater coordination and consistency of mentoring work across the sector. Mentoring is an effective way to build meaningful and sustainable relationships with communities. Our programme is based on the principle ‘if you can see it, you can be it’. Mentors are college students with similar backgrounds and life experiences as people from the communities we work with.



Evidence-driven Approach

College Connect has evaluated many of its programmes including the [Story Exchange Project](#) in Maynooth University and *Change Makers* in DCU.



Impact by Numbers

1,800

College Connect mentoring engagements with priority groups through programmes including *Change Makers*, *College: What’s the Story?* and *Whidden Workshops: It’sKushti to Rokker*.

101

Community partners that have worked with College Connect to deliver mentoring programmes and interventions since 2021.

12

NAP priority groups engaged by College Connect through mentoring activities.

15

College Connect *Change Makers* programmes delivered by Access Offices in DCU, MU and TUS Midlands and by [Turn to Teaching](#) in MU.

PATH 2, 3 & 5

College Connect Voices



CHANGEMAKERS
Opening the doors to higher education

I'm an international protection applicant from Botswana, studying law and criminology with the Maynooth University Sanctuary Scholarship. Despite a challenging 7-hour commute, I feel privileged to pursue higher education and I remain resilient and committed to my studies.

As a mentor in the Change Makers Mentoring Programme, I advocate for higher education access and empowerment for both mentors and mentees. Change Makers provides crucial support, offering guidance through challenges like Direct Provision (a place where your dreams can be buried, and your voice can remain silent for a long time) and lack of information. Through mentoring, I've embraced community engagement, advocating for inclusion and social justice.

My growth through the programme led to an internship at the Maynooth Access Programme office, a significant milestone for me. Despite adversity, Change Makers nurtures growth and empowerment. Addressing resource challenges is crucial for long-term sustainability. Grateful for its impact, I extend appreciation to all involved, inspiring us to dream big and be the change we seek.

Kefilwe Nawa

Maynooth University Student & *Change Makers* Mentor

Attending the College Connect Change Makers Mentoring Programme was a turning point for me in my new and fragile life. I had the most uplifting experience restoring my confidence, equipping me with the right knowledge and encouraging me to further my education. Being on Maynooth University campus regularly and seeing the diversity of students gave me a sense of belonging; I wasn't an impostor anymore.

I personally hadn't been in school in the last 11 years, and I thought I didn't have the mental capacity for it anymore. The eight weeks we spent at Maynooth University helped me realise my potential in the academic world and propelled me to enrol in college courses. Throughout the course I realised my burning passion for Social Justice and Community Development.

My mentors helped me look into related courses and gave me information on how to apply. They made us aware of scholarships that enable people like us to get access to higher education. I am very grateful and inspired to start my journey in higher education.

Moji Mokotso

International Protection Applicant & *Change Makers* Mentee

PATH 3: Case Study

College: *What's the Story?*

Dundalk Institute of Technology



Context

Beginning in April 2024, the Community Connector in Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT) delivered a series of *College: What's the Story?* (CWTS) mentoring programmes with Youthreach Dundalk.



Strategy

CWTS is designed to provide prospective students with clear, understandable information on accessing higher education. It starts in the mentees' local setting, fostering a relationship between the community and the higher education institution. The programme culminates in a campus event that brings the community to the college. At this event, detailed information on the supports and pathways available to access higher education is provided.



Community Partners

- Ballsgrove Youth Club
- Drogheda Boomerang
- Drogheda Youthreach
- Dundalk Youthreach
- Louth Local Development



Community Engagement

DkIT consulted with community organisations to explore how they could best support these groups in raising the aspirations of the communities they serve. The organisations expressed a need for their members to gain a deeper understanding of college and the benefits of further education for their careers. They emphasised the importance of delivering workshops in smaller groups to improve comprehension of group dynamics, develop skills, and provide the necessary information for academic progression.

PATH 2, 3 & 5

**Impact: What has Changed?**

Following consultations with the Dundalk Youthreach Coordinator on the needs of their students, the Community Connector for DkIT facilitated a *College: What's the Story?* session with Youthreach students at DkIT. Chloe Kelly, a Youth and Community Studies student, volunteered as the student mentor for the group. This student self-identified as being from a disadvantaged area and had prior negative secondary school experience.

In May 2024, the Youthreach students were invited on a comprehensive tour of the DkIT campus facilities. The tour included visits to the film and music studios, hospitality and engineering workshops, apprenticeship workshops, and a demonstration of the engineering wave pool used for renewable energy research.

The success of the CWTS programme with Youthreach Dundalk has sparked interest from Drogheda Youthreach, Ballsgrove Youth Club, and Boomerang Youth Club to bring the programme to the prospective students they work with during the 2024/25 academic year.

**Impact by Numbers****3****Workshops****8****Students**

College Connect Voices



My name is Chloe, I'm 20 years old, and I'm entering my third year in Community Youth Work. I come from a disadvantaged area in Drogheda, where education isn't highly valued. In secondary school, I had hopes and ambitions, but my poor behaviour and attendance led to being labelled as someone who was going nowhere. I felt abandoned and unheard within the school system.

From the age of eight, I attended a youth project, which became a safe and supportive environment for me. As I grew older, I realised the importance of such spaces and wanted to create similar opportunities for others. Despite my struggles, I managed to finish school, but I wasn't allowed to graduate, which felt like a significant loss.

When exams approached during the second year of COVID-19, I chose to sit them, knowing it was my best chance, but the outcome reflected the lack of support I had experienced. Earlier that year, I applied for a Level 5 PLC course and discovered a Community Youth Work course. It felt like a chance for a fresh start, and I embraced it fully. The support from my classmates, lecturers, and the community was incredible, and I didn't miss a day, eventually earning Student of the Year.

Encouraged by my PLC experience, I applied for a place on the Community Youth Work course at Dundalk Institute of Technology. Though I faced personal challenges, including the sudden loss of my dad, I pushed forward, believing that what was meant for me wouldn't pass me by. DkIT has been an amazing support system, and I'm grateful for the knowledge and encouragement I've received.

One day, I'll thank everyone who believed in me—I'm so incredibly grateful for their support.

Chloe Kelly

3rd Year Community Youth Work Bachelor of Arts (Hons.)
Dundalk Institute of Technology

PATH 3: College Connect

Supporting People with Criminal Justice

Histories in Higher Education



Context

Prior to the publication of the College Connect [CNA with the Pathways Centre for Prisoners and Former Prisoners](#), little was known about the higher education support needs of people with convictions including prisoners and former prisoners, and none was known in an Irish context. Prisoners and former prisoners are, for the most part, severely educationally disadvantaged. The majority of Irish prisoners have never sat a state exam, and over half left school before the age of 15.



Strategy

The [National Access Plan 2022–2028](#) (NAP) identifies people with experience of the criminal justice system as a priority group. College Connect, MEND HEIs, and the Irish Prison Service have begun sharing successful regional strategies for supporting students with criminal justice experience.



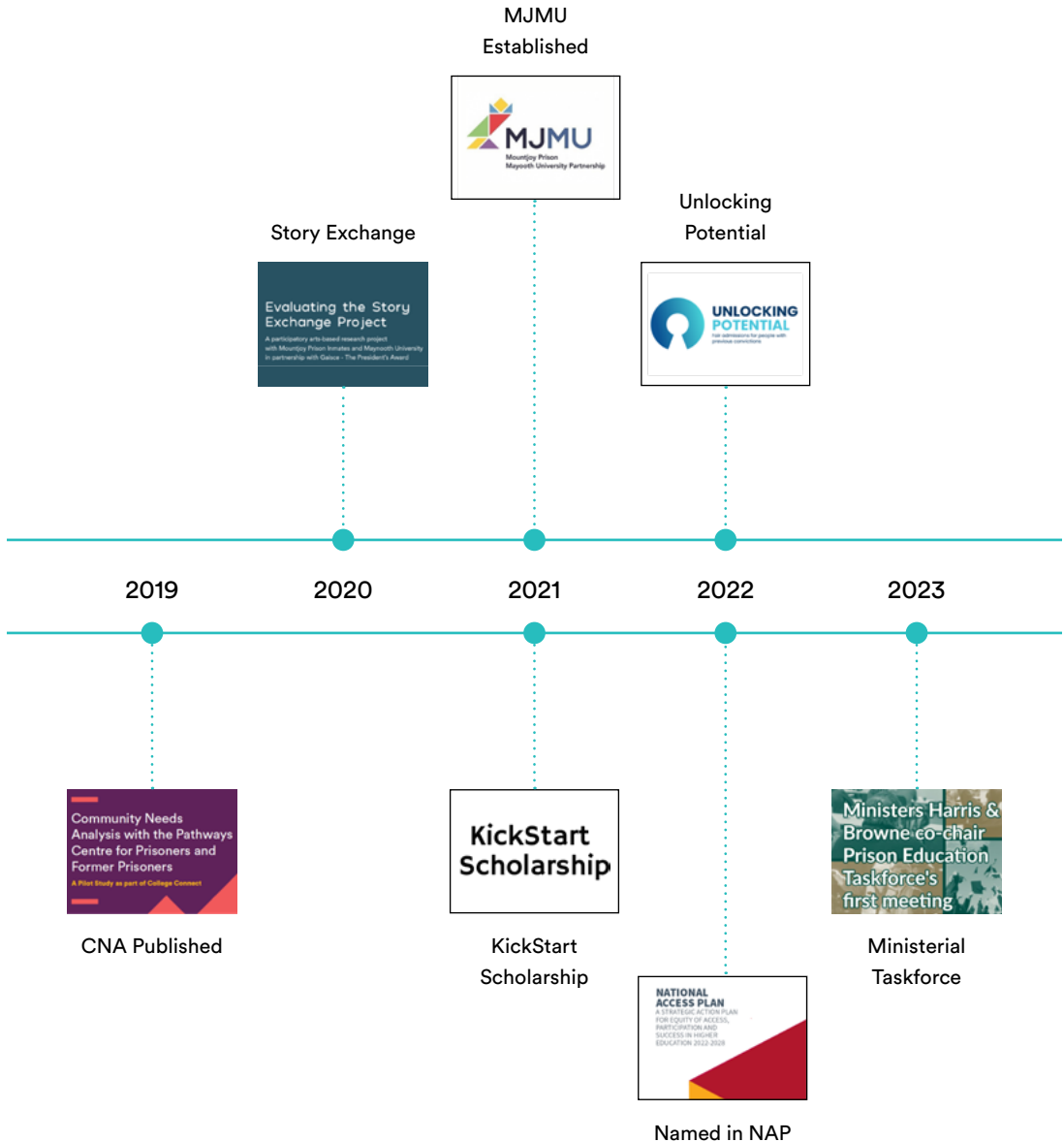
Community Partners

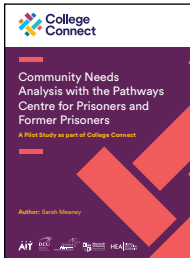
- | | |
|---|---------------------------|
| ■ City of Dublin Education and Training Board | ■ Irish Probation Service |
| ■ Dóchas Women's Prison | ■ Mountjoy Prison |
| ■ Dormant Accounts Fund | ■ Narrative4 Ireland |
| ■ Gaisce The President's Award | ■ The Pathways Centre |
| ■ Irish Prison Service | ■ SOLAS |
| | ■ Wheatfield Prison |



Impact: What has Changed?

Since the launch of College Connect's [CNA with the Pathways Centre for Prisoners and Former Prisoners](#), there has been a significant impact from grassroots to government in the provision of programmes, scholarships, resources, and policy change for the admission of those with criminal justice histories.



PATH 2, 3 & 5

A Community Needs Analysis with the Pathways Centre for Prisoners and Former Prisoners
Sarah Meaney, November 2019

KickStart Scholarship**KickStart Scholarship**

The KickStart Scholarship Fund was established by the Irish Probation Service and is supported by the Irish Prison Service. The scholarship supports people with convictions who are experiencing socio-economic disadvantage to access higher education.

We are delighted to support this initiative in conjunction with Maynooth University and the wider MEND cluster. The Probation Service sees this scholarship as a fantastic opportunity to challenge stigmatisation and reduce barriers to higher education for people with convictions. We firmly believe in the power of higher education to help people create new opportunities for themselves and for their communities.

Mark Wilson

Director of the Probation Service



An tSeirbhís Phromhaidh
The Probation Service



**KickStart
Scholarship**

These scholarships are intended to kickstart a new path and direction for people who historically have been the furthest from higher education. The power of education is that it gives choices and empowers people to choose what they want to do with their life. These scholarships are an investment in Ireland's future. The Working to Change Strategy and MEND cluster are closely aligned on the principle that everyone in Irish society should have fair and equal opportunity and access to fulfil their potential, and this should not be hindered by gender, race or class. These scholarships aim to address this.

Dr Gemma Irvine

Vice-President for Equality and Diversity,
Maynooth University



[Unlocking Potential](#) aims to widen higher education access for people with criminal justice experience. The website offers information on pathways, funding, Garda vetting, and personal development. It includes the *Unlocking Potential Fair Admissions Toolkit* to help HEIs refine their approach for entry applicants with experience of the criminal justice system.



Evidence-driven Approach

College Connect published the [CNA with the Pathway Centre for Prisoners and Former Prisoners](#) in 2019, and an evaluation of the [Story Exchange Project](#) was published in 2020.



Impact by Numbers

86

Participants were involved in eight Story Exchange programmes in Mountjoy Prison and Wheatfield Prison (50 prisoners & 36 HEI students).

€100k

Awarded annually in KickStart Scholarships across MEND HEIs.

12

Students with experience of the criminal justice system have been awarded a Kickstart Scholarship since 2022.

8

Community partners including Irish Probation Service, Mountjoy Prison, Wheatfield Prison, The Pathways Centre, An Dóchas, Gaisce – The President's Award, Narrative4 & City of Dublin Education and Training Board.

College Connect Voices



Hopeless to Hopeful

The best way to predict your future is to create it. As a child growing up in the 80s and 90s in a large social housing estate, I felt lost and misunderstood at home and at school. I have vivid memories of being embarrassed in school because I couldn't read and write like the other students which made school a very difficult place to be. As a result, I gravitated towards the streets to try and find my place and my tribe in this world. This became the start of my involvement with the justice system and a life of chronic heroin addiction.

After spending many years in courtrooms and drug treatment centres and obtaining a large criminal record, I finally came into recovery from addiction in 2017, which was the start of my journey into education.

My feelings and thinking about education weren't great. I believed I wasn't smart enough, but with the help of some good people, I signed up for a level 5 PLC course. I have never looked back. I recently completed an Honours Degree in social care at TUS Midlands with a distinction. I couldn't have done this without the help of the Disability Office, the Access Office, and the KickStart scholarship.

The KickStart Scholarship allowed me to concentrate on my studies and ease some of the stressors associated with juggling life and studying. I am honoured to have been asked to write this piece about my journey through the education system with the hope my story will inspire others to fulfil their true potential.

Sean Calders

KickStart Scholarship Recipient
Final Year Applied Social Studies Bachelor of Arts (Hons.)
Technological University of the Shannon Midlands

PATH 3: College Connect

Supporting People with Experience of the International Protection System



Context

College Connect, in partnership with the Irish Refugee Council, conducted a [CNA with Refugees and People Seeking Asylum](#) to address the lack of research on their experiences within the Irish higher education system.



Strategy

The [National Access Plan 2022–2028](#) (NAP) identifies refugees or those with experience of the international protection process as a priority group. MEND HEIs are partnering with community organisations to support these cohorts in accessing higher education.



Community Partners

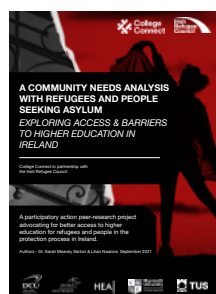
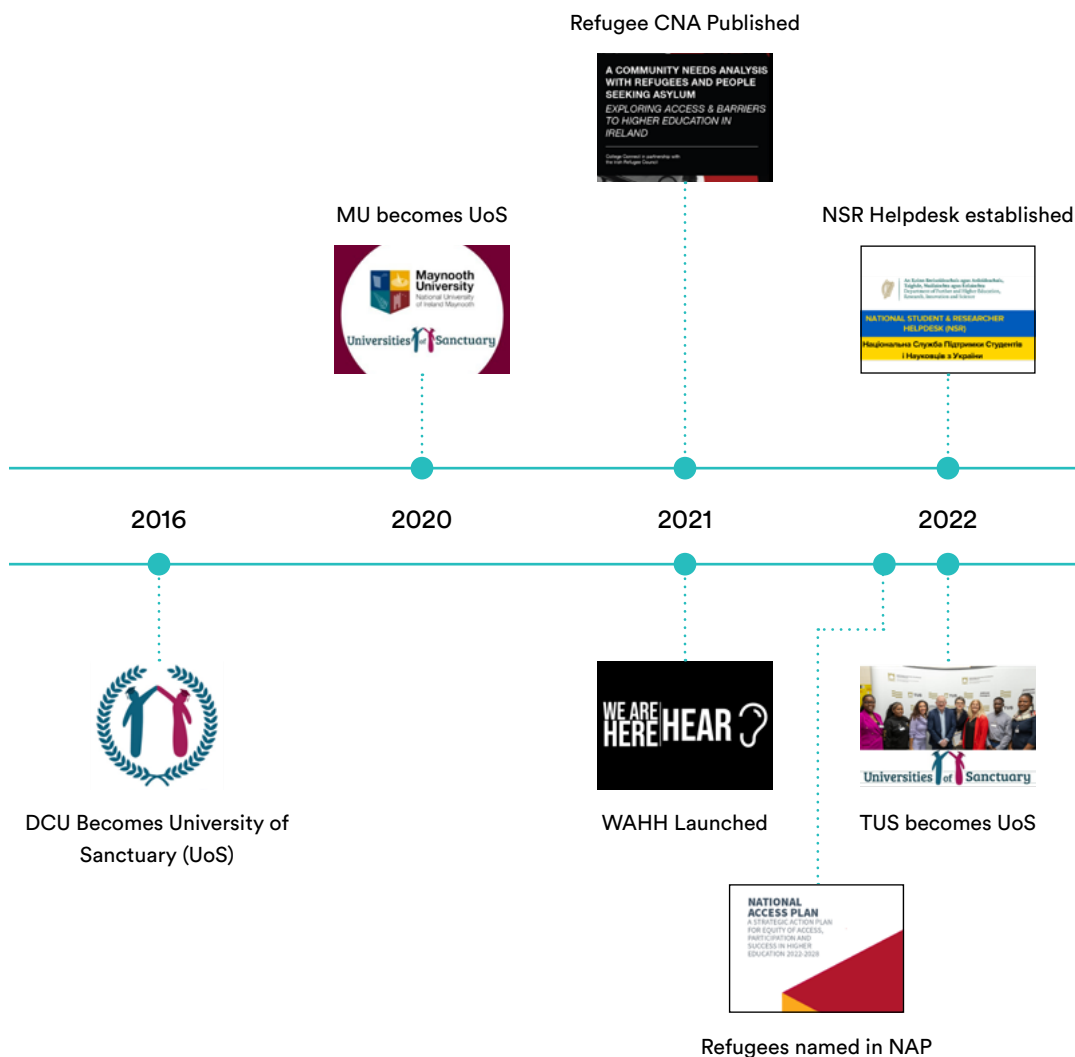
- | | |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| ■ Athlone Accommodation Centre | ■ Kilmacuagh and Daly's Apartments |
| ■ Baleskin Reception Centre | ■ Movement of Asylum Seekers Ireland |
| ■ Irish Refugee Council | ■ New Horizon Athlone |
| ■ Kildare Leader Partnership | ■ Temple Accommodation Centre |



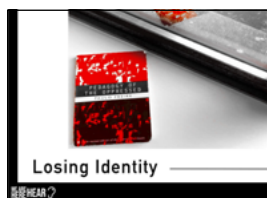
Impact: What has Changed?

Since the launch of College Connect's [CNA with Refugees and People Seeking Asylum](#) in 2021, College Connect has supported refugees through the DCU Sanctuary Programme, delivered Change Makers in direct provision centres, exhibited the We Are Here, HEAR (WAHH) exhibition, and supported the **National Student and Researcher Helpdesk (NSR)**.

PATH 2, 3 & 5



A Community Needs Analysis with Refugees and People Seeking Asylum
Dr Sarah Meaney Sartori & Lilian Nwanze,
 September 2021



The [We Are Here, HEAR](#) photovoice exhibition shares the stories and experiences of refugees about the barriers they have experienced accessing higher education in Ireland. Since 2021, it has been exhibited 17 times in 13 locations across Ireland including higher education institutions, Mountjoy Prison and the Office of the Ombudsman of Ireland.



[Deconstructed transcript Poetry: Felispeaks](#) (3:42)



Evidence-driven Approach

College Connect's [CNA with Refugees and People Seeking Asylum](#) has contributed to an evidence-base on how to better support students with experience of the protection system to access higher education.



Impact by Numbers

1,126

Applications from displaced Ukrainian refugees were received through the National Student and Researcher Helpdesk online PAC application portal in 2022.

808

College Connect outreach engagements with refugees, international protection applicants or those seeking asylum.

13

Venues that have hosted the *We Are Here, HEAR Photovoice Exhibition* including Mountjoy Prison and the Office of the Ombudsman.

354

Displaced Ukrainian students and researchers who received higher education offers at undergraduate (298) and postgraduate (56) levels in 2022.

College Connect Voices



I am Olena, from Kharkiv, Ukraine, which is close to the Russian border. I was studying Computer Science at Kharkiv National University until the morning of February 24th, 2022 when my family were startled awake at 5am by explosions and air-raid sirens. After enduring a week of terror, we fled our home on March 2nd, 2022, taking only a backpack each.

By sheer luck, we ended up in a host family in Ireland, which was and still is extremely supportive and kind. Around this time, there were discussions about admitting Ukrainian students into Irish colleges, and we waited with patience, hoping that one day someone would come up with a solution and allow us to continue our education.

And it did happen. The National Student and Researcher Helpdesk created a single application system for Ukrainian students and provided invaluable assistance to students, helping us continue on our path to the future. The team worked tirelessly to offer a range of supports, including translation services and English (proficiency) tests.

I am currently a 2nd-year student of Product Design at Maynooth University. My life could have been vastly different without this opportunity, and I am confident that other Ukrainian students would say the same. With all the supports I was offered, I could integrate quickly into student and academic life. Now, I am giving back to the community by mentoring participants of the Change Makers Mentoring Programme and supporting my fellow Ukrainian students through the Ukrainian society I established with other Maynooth University students. Being a MAP Ambassador and a College Connect mentor gave me courage, confidence, and a sense of inclusion and belonging, and I strive for other students to feel the same.

Olena Kaniuka

2nd Year Product Design & Innovation Bachelor of Science
Maynooth University

PATH 3: College Connect

Supporting Progression from Further Education and Training to Higher Education



Context

College Connect conducted a [CNA with Further Education Students](#) in 2023 to gain an understanding of the needs of Further Education and Training (FET) award holders in relation to higher education access and progression.



Strategy

The [National Access Plan 2022–2028](#) (NAP) identifies people with the need to build on and improve partnerships and collaborative pathways between the Further Education and Training and Higher Education sectors.



Community Partners

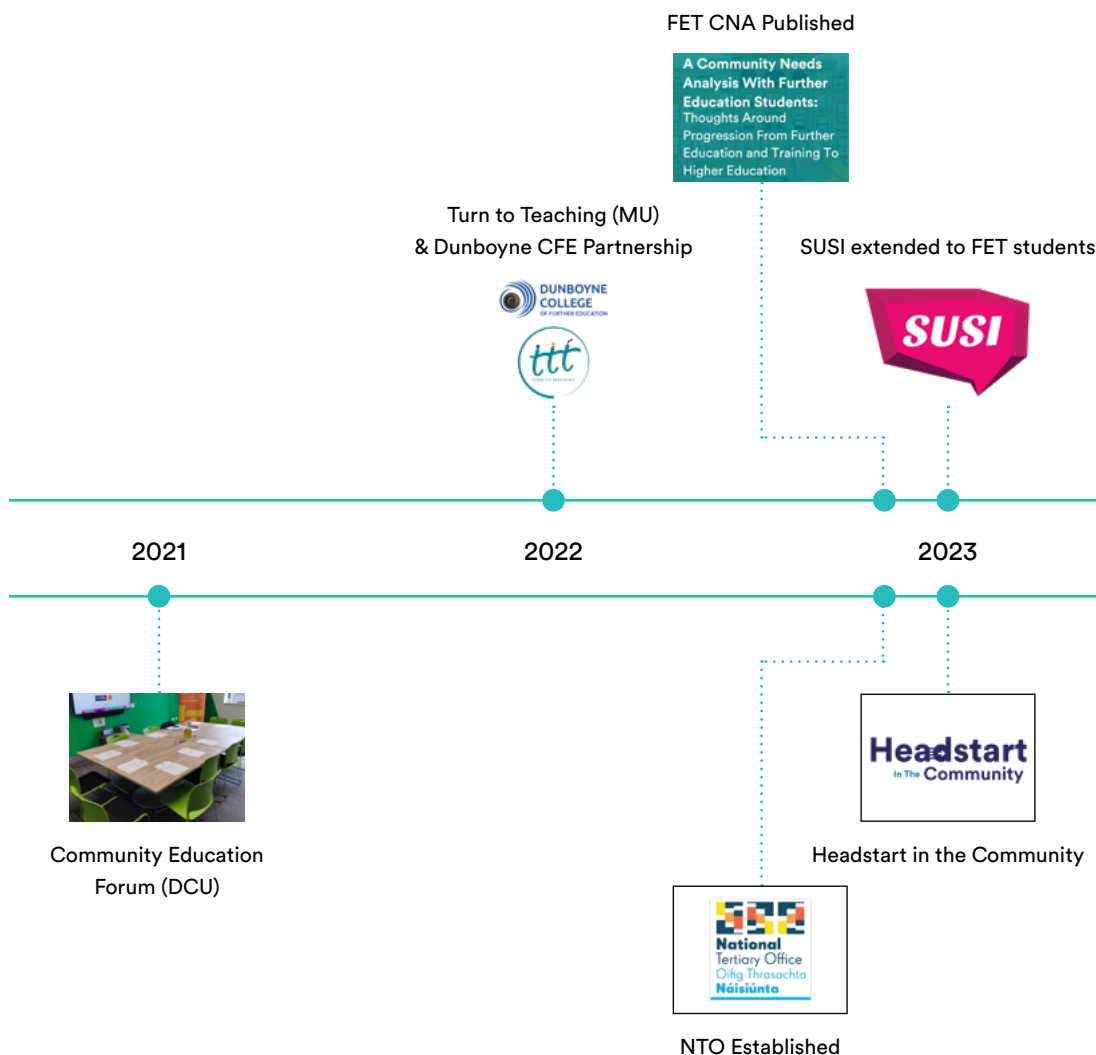
- Ballyfermot College of Further Education
- BITE Ballymun
- City of Dublin Education and Training Board
- Colaiste Dhúlaigh College of Further Education
- Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board
- Dunboyne College of Further Education
- Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board
- Killester College of Further Education
- Longford and Westmeath Education and Training Board
- Marino College of Further Education
- Plunkett College of Further Education
- SOLAS
- Whitehall College of Further Education



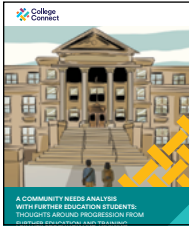
Impact: What has Changed?

Since the launch of the [CNA with Further Education Students](#), there has been significant systemic policy change in Ireland, emphasising that there is more than one way to go to college.

PATH 2, 3 & 5



Strategic partnerships between FET providers and MEND HEIs have been established, such as the Community Education Forum (CEF) in DCU and the Turn to Teaching (TTT) and Dunboyne College of Further Education partnership in Maynooth University.



A Community Needs Analysis with Further Education Students
Dr Sarah Sartori & Dilara Demir Bloom,
February 2023



[College to University...The Start of Something Bigger](#)



Evidence-driven Approach

College Connect's [CNA with Further Education Students](#) published in 2023 supports outreach engagements across the MEND HEIs.



Impact by Numbers

78

FET students who participated on the Turn to Teaching FET to HE pathway.

208

College Connect outreach engagements with FET students since 2022.

58

FET students participated in the Community Needs Analysis research in 2022.

7

Colleges of Further Education participated in the Community Needs Analysis research.

College Connect Voices



Embarking on my journey to college, I found myself uncertain about my future path. Unsure of what career to pursue after school, I enrolled in a Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) course in social care. This decision proved to be a determining move that led to me being offered my top Central Applications Office (CAO) choice.

My PLC education provided me with a solid foundation. It gave me practical skills and insights into social care and multiple other subjects. Due to this diversity of the course, I found an interest in social science. Through this PLC, I gained entry to the social science course at DCU.

For the Change Makers participants, I recommend considering the PLC route as a practical pathway to college. Whether undecided about future career aspirations or seeking a practical approach to explore interests, PLCs offer a supportive environment for academic and personal development.

In Ireland, PLCs are widely accessible and offer numerous opportunities across various fields. With 1,571 courses in the CAO system accepting PLC qualifications for entry, there is a wide array of options available for educational advancement and career exploration.

Youthreach and Leaving Certificate Applied students can easily apply too. So, to those uncertain about their next steps, I suggest exploring the possibilities offered by PLC education. It may provide the clarity and direction needed to navigate the journey to college and beyond.

Roisín McDonnell

2nd Year Social Sciences & Cultural Innovation Bachelor of Arts
Dublin City University

PATH 3: Case Study

Community Education Forum

Dublin City University



Context

The *Community Education Forum* (CEF) is a partnership between DCU, local FET providers and community organisations. It offers a space to address and develop nuanced responses to educational inequalities.



Strategy

The forum gives visibility to communities, providing a space for them to share their voice and ideas in a safe and encouraging environment. It serves as a direct link between the university and local community organisations.



Community Partners

- Adult Education Service Balbriggan
- Adult Education Service Ballymun
- City of Dublin Education and Training Board
- Dublin City University
- Discovery Community Training Centre
- Dublin South City Partnership
- Dublin- Dun Laoghaire Education and Training Board
- Northside Partnership
- Partners Training for Transformation
- Supporting Travellers and Roma (STAR) Project
- Whitehall College of Further Education



Community Engagement

To assess community needs emerging from COVID-19, DCU consulted community organisations regarding their educational requirements and the support they needed from DCU. These organisations emphasised the importance of sharing their voice, being heard, and actively participating in discussions regarding their educational needs, leading to the inception of the CEF.

PATH 2, 3 & 5

**Impact: What has Changed?**

The CEF has strengthened DCU's relationships with local organisations through innovative approaches, sharing key information about pathways and supports via mentoring and engagement.

The CEF adapted DCU's successful mature student programme *Head Start* to develop *Head Start in the Community*, a four-session programme aimed at pre-entry QQI Level 3, 4, and 5 students. The content focuses on building confidence, motivation and demystifying academic writing.



CEF members have collaborated with the DCU Traveller and Roma Education Officer (PATH 5) to organise art and craft workshops for Traveller families in North Dublin's disadvantaged areas. Renowned Traveller artist Francesca Hutchinson led four workshops with children and their families at St. Joseph's Senior National School, Ballymun. The workshops celebrated Traveller culture, and families met with DCU PATH 3 and PATH 5 staff to discuss educational opportunities.





Impact by Numbers

10

Community Partners are represented by members on the CEF.

33

Students have completed the Head Start in the Community programme to date.

College Connect Voices

“It feels like the advantage of holding the meetings in DCU is that participants are away from their workplaces and outside of their usual workday, so it’s almost like an away-day situation where it’s easier to engage in blue-sky thinking, be creative and dream up possibilities, without the (physical and mental) constraints of their day-to-day work.”

CEF Participant

“The art workshop facilitated by Francesca Hutchinson was a huge success for providing a safe space for DCU and Higher Education to be discussed by parents. The workshop was a lovely informal setting, and parents were able to hear about further education opportunities. I would say another event like it, with other parents, would be a great success.”

Sinead Buggle

Star NTRIS



PATH 3: Case Study

Foundations for Success

Technological University of the Shannon Midlands



Context

Foundations for Success was established in 2024 and is an eight-week pre-entry programme at TUS Midlands. It is designed to prepare mature students for higher education, targeting those from priority groups as identified in the [National Access Plan 2022–2028](#). The course covers essential basic academic skills and digital literacy, creating a supportive learning environment.



Strategy

College Connect's [CNA with Further Education Students](#) made a series of recommendations, including creating opportunities for mature students to bridge gaps in digital literacy. Participants in the research were concerned that their IT skills were insufficient to succeed in higher education.



Community Partners

- Athlone Community Radio
- Athlone Family Resource Centre
- Athlone National Learning Network
- Athlone Training Centre
- Esker House
- Involve
- Longford Community Resources CLG
- New Horizon Athlone
- Roscommon FET Centre



Impact: What has Changed?

Foundations for Success is dedicated to cultivating key skills that are vital for achievement in higher education. The programme inspires participants to pursue further studies by focusing on the following factors:

- **Digital Literacy**
Enhancing participants' digital skills is a crucial component of the course to address the digital gap.
- **Further Education Enrolment**
Success in motivating participants to pursue further and higher education.
- **Motivational Factors**
Course contributing to participants' growth, confidence and skill enhancement.
- **Pathways**
Advice on supports and routes into further and higher education.



Showcase

Participants engaged in hands-on workshops, learned essential IT skills and gained confidence through interactive sessions. The programme concluded with a showcase celebration highlighting the achievements and aspirations of the group. The showcase featured certificate presentations and personal performances.



PATH 2, 3 & 5



Evidence-driven Approach

Foundations for Success is underpinned by evidence-based practices, drawing on research in adult education and digital literacy. Ongoing evaluations and participant feedback will refine the programme, ensuring it meets the needs of mature students.



Impact by Numbers



College Connect Voices

Feedback from Participants:

“This course has helped me a lot, and if I ever had the chance to do it again, I would. There is so much to learn and it really has helped me to plan out my future.”

“I think one of the biggest parts of the impact of the course was to be able to see how much help and effort is out there for people who want to learn and enjoy learning and education. I think that the initiative taken in the course is excellent and would be a benefit for anybody going forward in life.”

“I just feel more confident going forward on my academic journey.”

“I feel the course has shown me that it’s never too late to try different things and anything is possible if you work for it.”

“The programme created room for me to meet new people and to share thoughts on how to improve in education and career course.”

“At the moment, my plans are hopefully to take part in the access course of 2024/2025. I learned a lot and gathered a lot of information about this course as part of Foundations for Success. I am appreciative of all the staff that are part of Foundations for Success.”



PATH 5

Traveller & Roma Education

PATH 5: Supporting Traveller & Roma Access to Higher Education

From Camp to Campus.



Context

The MEND HEIs have a long-standing commitment to supporting students from the Traveller and Roma communities to access higher education.



Strategy

The [National Access Plan 2022–2028](#) has set a national target of 150 new entrants to higher education from the Traveller Community by 2028. To increase the participation of Traveller and Roma students in MEND HEIs, each HEI has employed a Traveller and Roma Education/Outreach Officer.



Community Partners

- Kildare Roma Employment Support Programme (Kildare Leader Partnership)
- Kildare Traveller Action
- Longford Community Resources CLG
- Meath Traveller Workshops
- Minceirs Whiden
- National Traveller Women's Forum
- Northside Partnership
- Offaly Traveller Movement
- Pavee Point
- Supporting Travellers and Roma (STAR) Project
- St. Catherine's Community Services Centre
- St. Conleth's Community College
- St. Joseph's Senior National School



Impact: What has Changed?

In recent years, significant momentum has driven funding, outreach programmes, and targeted resources to support Traveller and Roma students in the MEND HEIs including:

PATH 2, 3 & 5



Change Makers mentoring programmes held with Traveller and Roma students at Maynooth University in 2024.



The *Whidden Workshops; It's Kushti to Rokker*, established in 2020, received an AONTAS STAR Award in 2023.



Travellers, Teachers & T(h)inkers: research project on Traveller teacher's experience of the staffroom.



Traveller and Roma cultural celebrations have been hosted annually in MEND HEIs since April 2022.



All four HEIs have appointed a Traveller and Roma Education/Outreach Officer.

Whidden Workshops: It's Kushti to Rokker



In May 2020, Pavee Point and the National Traveller Women's Forum (NTWF) published a report titled [The Implications of Covid-19 for Traveller and Roma Transfer to and Progression within Higher Education \(2020\)](#). In response to the report's findings, College Connect's four HEIs (DCU, DkIT, MU, and TUS) collaborated with Munster Technological University (MTU) to develop *Whidden Workshops: It's Kushti to Rokker* (WWKR).

WWKR aims to provide targeted information and peer-led guidance to prospective Irish Traveller and Roma students considering college by bringing together current Irish Traveller and Roma students and university access staff. The workshops follow the philosophy of “You have to see it, to be it.”

Since August 2020, 16 WWKR workshops have been held, with over 400 potential students from the Irish Traveller and Roma communities in attendance. Participants have included prospective students from schools, Further Education and Training centres, Education and Training Board centres, Irish Traveller and Roma community organisations, charities, and government agencies such as TUSLA and the HSE.

In March 2023, WWKR was honoured with the prestigious AONTAS Star Award for Third-level Access and Engagement. At the award ceremony, an adult learner described the initiatives and those involved by stating: “*These people are planting the seeds; they’re change makers. This is a transformative project.*”

The award recognises the efforts of a student-led cross-institutional collaboration that continues to highlight pathways to higher education for Traveller and Roma students at a national level.



Evidence-driven Approach

College Connect, our PATH 5 colleagues and the NTWF, in collaboration with Pavee Point, published a [Community Needs Analysis with Traveller and Roma Higher Education Students on Their Experiences of Higher Education](#) in May 2025. The 11 recommendations enable HEIs and policymakers to create a coordinated sectoral response to increasing access to higher education for Traveller and Roma students.



Impact by Numbers

400+

Prospective students from the Traveller and Roma communities of all ages who attended *Whidden Workshops; It's Kushti to Rokker* workshops since August 2020.

697

College Connect outreach engagements with Traveller and Roma communities since 2022.

76

Estimated Traveller and Roma students studying in MEND HEIs in the 2023/24 academic year of a national target of 150.

31

Members of the Traveller and Roma communities employed in MEND HEIs through PATH 3 & 5 initiatives in full-time, part-time and casual roles since 2020.

College Connect Voices



My name is Harry Mallon, and I am from Dundalk, Co. Louth. My education journey began as a mature student at 27 years of age. Here is my story:

After leaving school at 15 years old, I had no interest in education due to a negative experience and not much support in secondary school. However, 11 years later, I thought to myself I wanted an education, but I didn't know how I would go about getting one. I was clueless about how the education system worked. I didn't know where to start. On a notice board in my local shop, I saw a flyer from Louth Local Development explaining pathways into

third-level education, so I rang them. A few days later, I met an education worker, and from there, I began my journey.

I began with the Head Start Programme at DkIT, which helped me gain knowledge of academic writing and referencing at university. Keep in mind, that I didn't have many qualifications, apart from doing Head Start, so I decided to do a level six Journalism course at Dublin Business School.

After that, I applied for an undergraduate degree in English Literature and Human Development at DCU, and three weeks later, I received an offer. Once I completed my degree, I applied for the Master's in Creative Writing. I graduated with a Master's degree from DCU in March 2025.

Gaining a degree has opened so many doors for me. Not only am I studying at DCU, but I was also offered a position as the Traveller and Roma Education Officer with DCU Access Service. I truly enjoy the work and can relate to it too. Education is important to me, and I am grateful for the opportunities DCU has given me.

Harry Mallon

Master of Arts in Creative Writing,
Dublin City University

College Connect



