

## About the College Connect Project

*College Connect* is a collaborative initiative between Athlone Institute of Technology, Dublin City University, Dundalk Institute of Technology, and Maynooth University and community partners in the Midlands East and North Dublin (MEND) region. *College Connect* aims to enhance educational aspirations for the region's most socio-economically disadvantaged people through a participative and sustainable suite of activities and resources to illuminate pathways and provide opportunities into, through and beyond higher education. *College Connect* will achieve this through a project management team and Community Connectors who will invigorate a regional network of regional stakeholders whose collective expertise will strengthen the knowledge base for effective engagement with target groups.

*College Connect* presents a departure in how HEIs are conducting their work to widen participation across Ireland. This collaborative approach will result in new organisational structures, additional regional capacity and resources to deliver innovative initiatives and measurable impact for socio-economically disadvantaged people across the region.

The focus of *College Connect* will be:

- Entrants from socio-economic groups that have low participation in higher education
- First time, mature student entrants
- Students with disabilities
- Irish Travellers
- Lone parents
- Programme refugees
- Part-time/flexible learners
- Further education award holders

We also consider other marginalised groups including, those who are, or have been, in the care of the State, who are carers and who are from other ethnic minority backgrounds.

400 additional students from disadvantaged groups across the region will enter MEND HEIs over the course of the programme. These students will be systematically tracked through their engagement with the programme, entry into HE, their student experience and academic and employment outcomes. *College Connect* will facilitate the development of regional relationships, fora, strategies, structures and processes involving target group stakeholders who will take ownership of, and lead on sustainability beyond the funding window.

## **Impact and Evaluation**

*College Connect* will increase higher education participation from groups experiencing multiple marginalisations by admitting 400 additional students to the MEND HEIs within the three-year funding period.

The evaluation of *College Connect* is innovative, sustainable and integral to the programme's participative, inclusive and transformative vision and objectives. Evaluation is part of the lifecycle of the programme taking place before, during and on completion of *College Connect*, with both formative and summative dimensions (UNESCO, 2009) and will focus on processes, outcomes, impact and organisational learning (Senge, 2006; Stevenson, McCaig, & Madriaga, 2017). A mixed-method approach to evaluation, based on community education principles will be developed in the early stages of the programme (Cooper, 2014; Fitzsimons, *Community Education and Neoliberalism: Philosophies, Practices and Policies in Ireland*, 2017).

The evaluation of the experiences and learning of target groups, community partners, cluster partners and HEI stakeholders will use participative community research approaches, drawing on qualitative methods such as: individual interviews; focus groups; network meetings; questionnaires; and workshops. There will be a focus on narrative and creative modes of capturing and communicating data about students', partners' and communities' experiences.

College Connect will also develop quantitative systems to identify and track the impact of the various aspects of the project in relation to access to higher education, the student experience,

retention and progression and attainment. It will draw on analyses of existing datasets as well as gathering new quantitative research to build detailed and intersectional maps of the profiles and experiences of these students, communities, stakeholders and partners. The programme will also track progression into graduate employment and/or post graduate study.