

‘Voice is the Process’

A Study Exploring the Access Potential of the

An Cosán Model of Higher Education

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Abstract

An Cosán offers degree programmes through a community education model in West Tallaght, Dublin, an area of socio-economic disadvantage. This study examines the features of this unique model of higher education provision and considers its potential contribution to the access policy debate.

National access policy, as encapsulated within three National Access Plans (HEA, 2004a, 2008, 2015), has failed to achieve targets designed to address the persistent under-participation of lower socio-economic groups in higher education. New thinking in access policy is required, as demonstrated within this research which used a deep analysis of access policy to reveal an over-reliance on deficit-based approaches to access, thus opening a space in the policy debate for transformative approaches to access.

This research study specifically focuses on two degree programmes which were offered as part of a collaborative partnership between An Cosán and IT Carlow. Merten's transformative research methodology (2010) influenced primary data collection via four non-sequential phases of fieldwork. The resulting case study of An Cosán serves to articulate distinct characteristics of the An Cosán model of higher education, notably the foregrounding of learners' experiences.

Bourdieu's concept of habitus helps explain the sense of inclusion that learners felt in this community education context. Additionally, the theoretical underpinnings of An Cosán, informed by Freire, permeated the organisation through its distinct feminist, social justice purpose and through its enactment by tutors in their pedagogical approach. An Cosán's Freirean-inspired feminist pedagogy enables the unearthing of voices that are typically marginalised and unrepresented in higher education, which supports access and social action, and contributes to shaping the organisational habitus of An Cosán. The malleability of the organisational habitus of An Cosán shaped by the community, staff and through both the physical learning environment and pedagogic process, was positively experienced by learners, thereby enabling access.

Although constrained by funding, the An Cosán model of higher education exhibits elements of a transformative approach to access and makes important contributions to supporting educational equality.

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Abbreviations

ALCES	Adult Literacy and Community Education Scheme
BTEI	Back to Education Initiative
CEDR	Centre for Educational Disadvantage Research, Mary Immaculate College
CEF	Community Education Facilitator
CEN	AONTAS Community Education Network
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DARE	Disability Access Route to Higher Education
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DETE	Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment
EAAL	European Agenda for Adult Learning
EAEA	European Association for the Education of Adults
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
ETB	Education and Training Boards
EU	European Union
FAR	Funding Application Requests
FET	Further Education and Training
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council ¹

¹Amalgamated into QQI in November 2012

HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEAR	Higher Education Access Route
HEI(s)	Higher Education Institution(s)
HELS	Higher Education Links Scheme
HETAC	Higher Education and Training Awards Council ²
HSE	Health Service Executive
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IT	Institute of Technology
LCDCs	Local Community Development Committees
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NQAI	National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PATH	Programme for Access to Higher Education
PLC	Post Leaving Certificate programme
PLSS	Programme and Learner Support Systems
QA	Quality Assurance
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
SICAP	Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme
SIF	Strategic Innovation Fund

²Amalgamated into QQI in November 2012

UCC	University College Cork
VCC	An Cosán Virtual Community College
VEC	Vocational Education Committees

Glossary

Access The concept of *access* in this thesis is used as to describe the ability of a person traditionally marginalised, including from a lower socioeconomic background, to access, participate and complete their higher education course.

An Cosán An Cosán is the largest community education organisation in Ireland, and is based in West Tallaght, Dublin, Ireland. Their mission is to empower through education by providing people of all ages with pathways to learning, leadership and enterprise. An Cosán offers a variety of programmes in early years education and care, parenting, community, further and higher education. Their Virtual Community College also extends beyond Jobstown to locations across the country.

AONTAS AONTAS is the National Adult Learning Organisation. It is a non-governmental membership organisation established in 1969. The mission of AONTAS is to advocate for the right of all adults in Ireland to quality learning throughout their lives and to promote the value and benefits of lifelong learning. AONTAS' vision for all adults to achieve their educational aspirations through an equitable lifelong learning system. It is a registered charity and a company limited by guarantee. It is core funded by SOLAS (Ireland's Further Education and Training Authority) and receives project funding from other sources. AONTAS has a growing membership of over 400 organisations and individuals committed to lifelong learning. The membership includes adult learners, tutors, statutory, nongovernmental, community and voluntary organisations from across the island of Ireland. It works through principles of social justice, supporting social inclusion, partnership, valuing diversity, advancing equality and feminism.

Deficit approach

Deficit approaches to access centre on how the individual can change to fit into the existing higher education system rather than address the complexity of factors that impact on access. The 'site of focus' of access approaches centres on the lack in the individual that should be

addressed, rather than issues relating to the institution or broader societal inequalities.

- Liminality** Within the context of non-formal education, liminality is the nature of the underlying codes of behaviour, which in this case is ascribed as the 'code of informality'. There is greater freedom to express oneself in a non-authoritarian system which facilitates the construction of multiple identities where marginality is reduced, a sense of belonging fostered and the participation in democratic processes garners a sense of freedom and spontaneity.
- NFQ** The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) is a system of ten levels used to describe the Irish qualifications system. The NFQ is based on standards of knowledge, skill and competence and incorporates awards made for all kinds of learning, wherever it is gained. Qualifications achieved in school, further education and training and higher education and training are all included. All framework awards have an NFQ Level (1-10) which describes the standard of learning and an NFQ Award-Type which describes the purpose, volume and progression opportunities associated with a particular award.
- SOLAS** In 2013, SOLAS (The Further Education and Training Authority, An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna) was established under the Further Education and Training Act. It is an agency of the Department of Education and Skills and is responsible for funding, planning and coordinating Further Education and Training (FET) in Ireland.
- Transformative approach**
A transformative approach to access describes approaches in access policy or by HEIs that seeks broad structural change at the institutional level; is informed by under-represented groups; is concerned with creating an institutional culture that does not require the participants to change and perceives diversity as a definite strength.

Chapter 1 Introduction

Introduction

In Ireland, there is a persistent under-participation of certain cohorts of society in higher education despite the development of extensive national access policies (HEA, 2004a; HEA, 2008; HEA, 2015). Beyond the scope of national access policy, An Cosán, a feminist community education organisation in an area of socio-economic disadvantage, has developed degree programmes to engage those experiencing marginalisation (henceforth termed the *An Cosán model of higher education*). Research indicates the complexity of access issues emanate from structural inequalities (Archer, Ross & Hutchings, 2003; Ball, 2006; Bowl, 2001; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Crozier and Reay, 2008, 2011; Gewirtz, 2001; Lynch & O'Neill, 1994; Reay, Davies, David & Ball, 2001), much of which manifests at institutional level, thereby pointing to the need for a more transformative approach to access (Jones & Thomas, 2005). This raises questions about the limited impact of current access policy approaches to make significant inroads on the issue, opening up a space to consider alternatives approaches to access beyond a narrow deficit discourse. This study aims to provide a clear description of the An Cosán model of higher education within a policy context; moreover, it will offer insights into the learners' experiences of the model so to understand the potential contribution of the model within the national access policy agenda.

Personal motivation

Through my work in AONTAS, I have direct experience of witnessing the impact of community education on the lives of learners and their community, the level of provision offered but also the lack of political or policy interest in realising its potential. Whilst the work of AONTAS covers the broad field of lifelong learning, including advocating on issues of equity in higher education, which I am very interested in, the potential of the overlooked An Cosán model to answer some of the policy questions appearing in national access policy was the impetus for exploring this model in more detail. But my overarching drive was to consider the potential impact that a diverse system of more equitable higher education provision could have on marginalised

people's lives, thus driving my passion for exploring the model further. The research journey that shaped this thesis is outlined in Chapter 2, whereas, this section focuses on my personal motivation for undertaking this research study.

I have worked in the non-governmental advocacy organisation, AONTAS, the Irish National Adult Learning Organisation since 2005. AONTAS was established in 1969, is funded by the Department of Education and Skills through SOLAS, and with over 400 members seeks to enact its vision for “all adults to achieve their educational aspirations through an equitable lifelong learning system” through its mission “to advocate for the right of all adults in Ireland to quality learning throughout their lives, and to promote the value and benefits of lifelong learning” (AONTAS, 2019).

Since 2005, and with my intervening appointment as Chief Executive Officer (CEO) in 2016, the AONTAS membership's wealth of expertise, passion and unwavering commitment to learners has shaped my understanding of educational equality, both the impediments and solutions. Learners' experiences and insights and the field of community education have continually excited and inspired me, and I feel deeply bound to the struggles they experience and a responsibility in my role to staunchly advocate for improvements. Having engaged with adult educators across the lifelong learning field and having played a key role in building a range of networks with the membership from the Community Education Network (CEN) to the National FET Learners' Forum, I have seen the power of bottom-up approaches and in particular, the patent impact that community education has on people's lives. In pursuing that drive for educational equality I have gained insights into policy formation, influence and implementation through my engagement with senior officials in the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and a range of policy advisory and steering group³ with agencies such as the HEA, SOLAS⁴, and QQI⁵, the latter two of which I was appointed

³ National Plan for Equity of Access Steering Group (within DES), Upskilling Pathways Steering Group (within DES), FET Strategy Strategic Implementation Advisory Committee (SIAC), Programme and Learner Support Systems Steering Group (PLSS/SOLAS), QQI Consultative Forum and at European level through European Commission EAAL national coordinator meetings and peer learning groups.

⁴ SOLAS (Further Education and Training Authority) was established in 2013 under the Further Education and Training Act and are an agency of the Department of Education and Skills and have responsibility for funding, planning and co-ordinating Further Education and Training (FET) in Ireland. Appointed March 2019.

⁵ QQI (Quality and Qualifications Ireland) is an independent State agency responsible for promoting quality and accountability in education and training services in Ireland. It was

to their Board by the Minister for Education and Skills. Insights into the role of EU policy, through Board membership of the European Association for the Education of Adults (2011-2017) and as National Coordinator for the European Agenda for Adult Learning since 2016, have expanded my understanding. Through these experiences, I have learned that community education is a phenomenally inclusive model of education; learners have the most remarkable insights into policy issues; national policy formation and implementation is complex, yet advocacy requires a clear, evidence-informed link between the issue and the national policy framework. Over the course of this research study, these themes have crystallised in my exploration of the An Cosán model from a learner perspective whilst linking to national higher education access policy plans.

As Reay notes: “All research is in one way or another autobiographical or else the avoidance of autobiography” (1998, p.2). I fundamentally believe that national access policy can have a profound impact on a person’s life. Firstly, I owe a debt of gratitude to many for the life-changing opportunities I have gained from higher education. As opposed to Ireland, in 1994, the no-fees policy of the Scottish higher education system enabled me to gain access to the University of Dundee. Whilst the first two years were a financial struggle; I still remember where I was when I heard about a change in Irish education policy, in 1996 for the first time students studying abroad became eligible for student maintenance grants⁶ this had huge implications for me personally. These policy decisions enabled me to experience the freedom of aspirations realised through an educational experience, one I had always wanted. At the time, I said to myself I would return the favour to someone else by pushing forward positive changes to access policy, as I had so greatly benefited from. This also contributed to my heartfelt passion for both advocacy and educational equality which has undoubtedly sustained me over this journey.

Throughout my experience in AONTAS, I have seen at policy and Governmental level the indifference for community education, through the power struggles in advocating for what is essentially viewed as a less-than, working class orientated, low-prestige, messy, touchy-feely kind of education provision that predominantly involves women.

established in 2012 by the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012. Appointed March 2018.

⁶ Financial means-tested support to support higher education access.

While individually senior department officials may value community education, it is constantly overlooked in policy never capturing its value, complexity or radical nature. Yet, I also believe that community education, through its dedicated practitioner-advocates will not be silenced, has the power and importantly the track record for transforming the lives of people and their communities that cannot be denied in a policy context. Also, perhaps as it is a radical model of education that exists outside the formal education system, it will always be on the periphery which is both a benefit in its ability to be community-focused yet also a challenge for national policy which favours defined, measurable, replicable actions which cannot handle the complexity of people's lives nor the multitudinous impact of education.

Context: An Cosán and community education

This research centres on a case study of An Cosán, the largest community education organisation in Ireland (Downes, 2011) which is situated in West Tallaght, an area of deprivation and educational disadvantage. An Cosán offers a range of non-accredited and accredited programmes from personal development courses to higher education qualifications provided through a community education process. To support educational access and retention, a range of supports are provided to this community which has been systemically disadvantaged and marginalised intergenerationally for decades, including: financial; in-house childcare provision; counselling; and mentoring. The two part-time degree programmes which evolved over time were developed through a bottom-up process and are offered as a *community education* model of higher education. This example of provision is distinct from higher education outreach, and in this thesis is described as the *An Cosán Model of Higher Education*.

An Cosán is part of Ireland's grassroots inclusive model of education provision, community education, as its practice is underpinned by the educational philosopher Paulo Freire (1970), is learner-centred and is developed in a working class area where participants experience social exclusion, poverty and oppression as a result of structural inequalities. This is very much in line with the historical development of community education (Connolly, 2003), especially women's community education as its founders had a specific radical feminist focus that sought to improve women's lives through education (Gilligan & Zappone, 2008, p. 125). It is through a Freirean lens that

the learners' experience of the An Cosán model of higher education is considered, in addition to drawing on the Feminist, Freirean scholar, bell hooks.

Community education is well established in Ireland. In the AONTAS CEN alone there are over 120 organisations that continue to respond to the needs of disadvantaged areas in which they are located despite a lack of meaningful Governmental support or effective funding. Also, community education suffers from a lack of clarity amongst policy makers even though it was clearly described in the *White Paper on Adult Education* (DES, 2000), it is even less understood in the education system and publicly (AONTAS, 2011) but has links to the broader non-formal education umbrella term frequently used at EU and global level.

I believe the difficulty of articulation contributes to community education being overlooked in policy; thus, its further potential remains unlocked. Currently, at education policy level⁷ community education is becoming increasingly limited to active inclusion strategies (SOLAS, 2014) aimed mainly at NFQ level three or four, with pressures not to offer level five for fear replication in provision, in addition to expensive, challenging new demands within the Quality Assurance (QA) process from QQI. However, as this is the case in a further education policy context, where it is set, there is an even greater challenge for recognition for community education in a higher education context. The role of community education in higher education provision is even less understood, offering further cause for studying this topic.

Background to the research issue: limitations of a deficit approach

In setting the context for the potential of the An Cosán model of higher education to contribute to access policy, in this thesis, I set about to consider the issue of access in the national access policy context. In reviewing the approaches to access the predominance of a deficit approach emerges despite the complexity of factors attributed to educational inequality as outlined in the literature.

Given the history of educational inequality, broader societal inequalities (Lynch, 2018) the manifestation of such at an institutional level (Baker, Lynch, Cantillon, & Walsh, 2004; Reay, 1998) together with the inherent limitations of formal education (Dewey,

⁷ Not relating to other policies that impact on community education, e.g. SICAP.

1916; Freire, 1970, Illich 1971), the complexity of factors impacting on access are multifaceted. Although research acknowledges the differential aspiration levels across social class (Clancy & Higher Education Authority, 1995; Lynch, 1999; Reay, 1998), there is a significant field of literature on access that offers a rich, multifactorial picture of access where social inequalities play out at institutional level, impacting on marginalised groups (Archer, Ross & Hutchings, 2003; Ball, 2006; Bowl, 2001; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Crozier & Reay, 2008, 2011; Gewirtz, 2001; Lynch & O'Neill, 1994; Reay, Davies, David & Ball, 2001;). Proposed causal factors are rooted in the hegemonic influences of institutional practice ranging from pedagogy to a distinct understanding as to what constitutes valued knowledge (Burke, 2009; Corrigan, 1992; Gewirtz, 2001; Jones & Thomas, 2005; Thomas, 2002; Thompson, 2000) thus perpetuating dominant norms and resulting in exclusion (Burke, 2008). Of particular note within the research study is the pedagogic practice in An Cosán and its impact on the learners' experiences.

In Ireland, the impact of inequalities in a higher education context came to light with the pioneering work of Prof. Pat Clancy (Clancy, 1996, 1997, 1999; Clancy & Goastellec, 2007). Although higher education participation rates had increased over the decades, from 20% of the relevant age cohort in 1980 to 44% in 1998 (HEA, 2015, p. 14) reaching 54% when the first HEA Access Plan was published in 2004 (HEA, 2010, p. 17) stark differential in access across social groups were evident (Clancy, 1982, 1988, 1992, 2001). Whilst his quantitative approach to defining target groups has been critiqued, the work of Prof. Clancy has been highly influential, and the basis for national access targets ever since. Spurred on by the differential levels in access, and in line with legislative requirements, the Government responded to the issue, most notably through a range of National Access Plans (HEA, 2004a; HEA, 2008; HEA, 2015) which are national overarching policy documents that guide access activities across higher education institutions aimed at persistently under-represented cohorts of society, namely the socio-economic group, mature students, individuals with a disability and members of the Travelling community. However, despite efforts to widen access, persistent under-participation was most notable within the cohorts defined in policy as 'semi/unskilled manual worker group' and 'non-manual' and mature students. In terms of limited impact, from 2004 to 2018, over the course of three National Access Plans (HEA, 2004a; HEA, 2008; HEA, 2015) and one Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) commissioned research report specifically focusing on the 'non-manual' target group (McCoy *et al.* 2010), the participation rate for this cohort has remained stagnant:

dropping from an estimated 27% in 2004 (HEA, 2004a, p. 59) to 23% in 2015 (HEA, 2015, p.35) returning to 27% in 2016/2017 (HEA, 2018, p. 18). Astonishingly, for the cohort 'semi/unskilled manual worker group' an initial target of 54% was set in 2008 to be achieved by 2020 (HEA, 2008, p. 60), the inability to achieve the target led to a revised reduced target of 32% by 2021 (HEA, 2018, p.43), a perceived more achievable target at 22 percentage points less. Of course, one could argue that overly ambitious targets were set, but lowering targets is blatantly not the answer to achieving success in access policy. Given the lack of progress, rethinking approaches to access is warranted. Examining the national access policy approaches is a necessary step to better understand the potential contribution of the An Cosán model of higher education and this study aims to offer this.

Given the lack of impact on access, this thesis critically reviews national access policy (HEA, 2004a; HEA, 2008; HEA, 2015). In framing a move away from a deficit discourse as described by Rogers (2004), how this is played out in actual access approaches at an institutional level is helpfully captured by Jones and Thomas (2005). Their concept of a 'transformative approach' to access recommends far-reaching structural change, including changing institutional culture. Rogers (2004) also offers a lens to consider the discourses that influence access approaches, whether from a deficit, disadvantage or diversity discourse. By drawing on these two constructs for the purpose of the understanding access policy, and its limitations, I reviewed key national access policy documents to frame the potential of the An Cosán model of higher education in the broader access policy landscape. The policy review in this thesis points to a distinct over-reliance on deficit models (Rogers, 2004) that result in so-called academic or utilitarian (Jones & Thomas, 2005) HEI approaches to address the issue of persistent under-participation of certain cohorts of society in higher education. The access plans, in particular the first two, were informed by existing Higher Education Institution (HEI) access initiatives and mainly focus on approaches which are rooted in a deficit perspective, centring on the need for the individual to change, rather than seeking to fundamentally change higher education to become more inclusive. Although the relationship between national access policy and HEI approaches for widening participation is complex (Archer, Ross & Hutchings, 2003; Burke, 2009); their commonalities appear to be a shared site of focus for policy, that of incorporating the individual who is underrepresented into the existing higher education system.

The over-reliance on deficit approaches is at odds with the solutions proposed from research, for example, changes at institutional level: broadening the understanding of valued knowledge (Ryan, 2000; Burke, 2008), becoming more learner-centred (Burke, 2009) and moving away from the current focus on the individual (Rogers, 2004; Burke, 2008; Thomas, 2001). Thus, the preponderant focus on the individual rather than the institution or broader societal inequalities limits the potential of access initiatives to address educational inequality more broadly thus calling for a need to shift the focus beyond the individual. Contra to the deficit model that focuses access initiatives on the lack within the individual (Jones & Thomas, 2005), over the course of the case study of the An Cosán model of higher education, a number of themes emerged indicate that moving towards a more transformative approach to access centres on the concept of voice.

The potential of the An Cosán model and its exploration

Tinkering at the edges (Reay, 2012) of higher education institutions will not make successful inroads in achieving access policy targets. Different models of higher education, and in particular a community education approach, have much to offer the access policy debate. Throughout this research study, specific practice examples of models developed by the community which support access and also move away from a deficit approach are scarce. There were similarities with a case study of the LAST⁸ project in Scotland which explored attitudinal factors to access from learners on a contextualised part-time HEI course aimed specifically at working class people (Bamber & Tett, 2000).

What makes this model of particular interest is that it exhibits unique characteristics, although outreach models of higher education exist, this model is distinctly community education in nature. Community education emerged in Ireland to address hegemonic educational processes that perpetuate the oppression of marginalised communities and, in particular, women (Connolly, 2014). Similarly, An Cosán has a specific feminist, social justice agenda (Gilligan & Zappone, 2008) cognisant of the importance of listening to the voices of marginalised people, especially women. The

⁸ LAST (Lothian Apprenticeship Scheme Trust)

learning process specifically centres on voices as the Freirean-informed pedagogic process in An Cosán developed over the years to become, what one of the co-founders describes as, the Feminist Imaginative Pedagogy (Gilligan, 1999).

Whilst An Cosán is a vibrant place with a strong sense of community, as supported by CSO data, the area it serves experiences higher than average levels of deprivation, unemployment, and the associated issues related to the violence of structural oppression and poverty. The degrees were developed according to local, rather than external top-down, demand which grew out of a request from local people working in community development, particularly drugs work, who wanted to have the language, and qualifications, of other professionals in the field. The local people approached An Cosán, described what they needed and identified the kinds of modules that would be useful; in other words, a negotiated curriculum was developed. This diploma course has been running for 12 years and acted as the impetus for offering other higher education courses developed in this manner, including the BA Degree in Applied Addiction and Community Development and BA Degree in Leadership and Community Development. They are specific examples of grassroots developed higher education provision.

The majority of participants who engage in this form of higher education provision left school early, have come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, are female and are mature students, i.e. the non-traditional student in higher education. Learners can avail of all the support 'scaffolding' in An Cosán, including practical aspects such as childcare and financial. Entry to the course is based on an individual's experience, not formal education as many left school early, and it is taught in a way that is democratic, learner-centred in a non-governmental organisation that is in community ownership.

Within this study, I sought to get a clear understanding of the An Cosán model, predominantly from the learner perspective and framed in an access policy context.

Overall aim of the research

Given my commitment to educational equality and considering the subject of my research, I draw on elements of Mertens' transformative research paradigm (2008) to provide the methodological framework for this case study of An Cosán. The study

focuses on two specific degree programmes developed and delivered through a community education process and accredited through a collaborative partnership with IT Carlow. This is termed the *An Cosán model of higher education*. The study explores the characteristics of the model based on management and tutor interviews, but primarily the access potential of the model is considered based on learners' experiences through interviews and a focus group.

In considering the potential contribution of the *An Cosán model of higher education* to access policy, over the course of the thesis, I cover the following areas. Firstly, it was essential to include fieldwork in the literature review sections to provide a comprehensive background context and description of the model; therefore, this necessitated beginning the thesis with the methodology chapter. I discuss this approach in the proceeding chapter.

Secondly, I carry out a literature review on three specific areas:

1. To analyse national access policy documents following Jones and Thomas (2005), consideration of a transformative approach, and Rogers' (2004) lens of a deficit discourse, I highlight the dominant approaches to access opening the space for alternative models of higher education beyond the deficit discourse. Additionally, in considering the potential of the *An Cosán* model, I include the findings from an interview with a relevant senior policy maker.
2. To characterise the *An Cosán model of higher education*, I offer a detailed overview of *An Cosán* based on a literature review and, due to a lack of written resources, supplement information on the development of the degree programmes based on fieldwork interviews with management. Additionally, in framing the model in a policy context, through the unique collaborative partnership with IT Carlow (which will be described in detail), the *An Cosán* model is described with regard to the second model of community education as outlined in the *White Paper on Adult Education* (DES, 2000). Finally, in offering a broader relevance beyond Ireland, I describe the *An Cosán* model as part of the broader non-formal education umbrella.
3. To delve into the literature relating to higher education access, I offer an analysis that includes a review of key theorists pertinent to the pedagogic process in *An Cosán*, Paulo Freire and bell hooks, and the learning environment by considering Bourdieu's concept of habitus in an organisational context.

Thirdly, I outline the findings from the learner interviews, the analysis of which is deepened through the subsequent chapter concerning the learner focus group findings and rounded off by considering aspects of how the enactment of the pedagogic process in An Cosán occurs based on the tutor interviews. The impact of the pedagogic process within the An Cosán model of higher education sheds light on one of its characteristics, particularly in relation to supporting access. Themes relating to voice across the study include the Freirean-informed dialogic pedagogy that harnesses voice which facilitates what hooks (1996) would describe as a coming to voice. The process involved a pedagogy and learning environment that enabled dialogue, a flattening of power-relations between tutor and learners, thereby building a sense of community between learners and with the tutor. For some learners, it involved a move from being silenced (Belenky *et al.* 1986), to a valuing, recognition and autonomy to speak (hooks, 1984). The overall feeling of being able to be yourself within An Cosán, was enabled through this validation of one's lived experiences, opinions through a dialogic process which linked to an organisational habitus⁹, that matched that of the learners. Ultimately, moving away from a deficit approach to access involves harnessing the voice of people who are underrepresented in higher education.

Potential contribution of the research

I do not want to overstate the potential contribution of the research, although few community-based practice examples of a transformative approach based on a learners' perspective to access appear in the academic literature, so this study attempts to fill that gap in an Irish context. The potential contribution of this research to the field covers a number of areas from practice: in terms of clearly identifying the access-enabling characteristics of the An Cosán model; to theory as it draws on Reay's use of Bourdieu to understand how learners feel within a community education context and the potential of a Freirean-informed, feminist pedagogy for retention is explored; to policy by locating the An Cosán model of higher education in the national policy context.

⁹ Drawing on Reay's use of Bourdieu's concept of habitus (Reay *et al.* 2001)

In terms of practice, articulation of the An Cosán model may support community education organisations seeking methods to respond to their communities' desire for higher education access. It may support An Cosán through this characterisation of the model by drawing on theory. It may also be of interest to HEIs interested in exploring characteristics for access based on the community education approach. Within the Irish education policy-making context, although it involves a complex web of interactions between policy players (Murtagh, 2009), the An Cosán model offers practical insights useful for understanding an approach to access beyond the deficit perspective.

Most importantly, however, the study gives voice to the learners, their experience, and especially their insights of this model of higher education and analysis of a transformative approach to access.

A summary of the potential contribution of this study to academia, policy and practice includes:

1. Describing the case study example of the An Cosán model of higher education within an access literature framework.
2. Offering an articulation of how it can contribute to access from a learner perspective.
3. Offering a practice example of the characteristics of the An Cosán model in terms of key aspects such as development (community-engaged process), provision (including feminist pedagogy) and partnership (QA for accreditation).
4. Distinguishing the An Cosán model in a national access context beyond a deficit perspective.
5. Contributing to theory as it uses Bourdieu and Freire within a community education context.

Chapter 2 Roadmap of the Thesis

Introduction

Over the course of this research study, I draw strongly on the work of Prof Diane Reay, and her interpretation of Bourdieu in an educational access context. Regarding my relationship with the research process, I considered Reay's understanding of reflexivity as "giving as full and honest an account of the research process as possible, in particular explicating the position of the researcher in relation to the research" (2007, p. 611). Therefore, this chapter makes explicit my reflexivity in the research process in order to signpost the influences that shaped my decisions and choices in shaping this thesis. The unconventional shape owes to my endeavour to effectively guide the reader to understand the context of the access potential of the An Cosán model of higher education but more importantly, to bring forth the participant voice as part of the story.

The methodology chapter of this thesis (Chapter 3) precedes the literature review sections which span Chapter 4, 5 and 6, the reason for which is two-fold. Firstly, the inclusion of empirical research findings within the first two literature review sections was required, thus necessitating this positioning; secondly, in order to foreground insights into the transformative methodological process adopted, which is analogous to the ethos of An Cosán and my own personal affinity for research for social change.

In Chapter 4, I set about analysing national access policy which included the findings from the policy maker interview to draw on their insights in relation to the access potential of the An Cosán model of higher education. Possessing elements of what Milligan (2014) describes as an "inbetweener" perspective, in terms of An Cosán's membership to AONTAS, I was conscious that the An Cosán management perspective was an essential aspect of the literature review, offering insights into the development of the degree programmes. Therefore, for Chapter 5, in describing the An Cosán model for higher education, I included the management interviews as it was important to gain valuable information regarding the development of the degree programmes which had not previously been documented. In telling the story of the degree programme, their views within the historical context of community education and the development of An Cosán were important to enable the reader to frame the An Cosán model in the broader community education context. Additionally, in considering the characteristics

of provision, I also drew on tutor interviews. The literature review is preceded by three findings chapters: learner interviews, focus group and tutor interviews and a final discussion and conclusion chapter.

Methodology chapter: reflexivity and relationships

At the outset of the thesis, I wanted to communicate the methodological approach of this study to the reader as I believe it was vital to highlight how I endeavoured to marry the research paradigm with the ethos of An Cosán. It was also vital in terms of describing the researcher-participant relationship across the An Cosán case study, with management, tutors and learners. In doing so, the methodology chapter describes how elements of Mertens' transformative research paradigm was applied to this research, central to which is an acknowledgement of power differences and "building trusting relationships" (Mertens, 2012). In order to "make the relationship between and the influence of the researcher and the participants explicit" (Jootun, McGhee, & Marland, 2009, p. 45), reflexivity is essential. In the case of this research study my relationship could be considered as Milligan (2014) describes as a 'knowledgeable outsider' or 'in betweener', neither entirely inside or outside which is based on my association with An Cosán and the development of relationships through working within Mertens (2009) transformative research paradigm.

As An Cosán is a member of AONTAS, prior to the research study I was familiar with the work of the organisation and had met a number of staff and learners, thus, to a certain extent, I could have been considered an 'insider researcher' as I possessed some "intimate knowledge" of "the community and its members" (Hellowell, 2006, p.483). The benefits of such an established and trusted relationship include the initial agreement to engage in the research study and access and engagement of the research participants, who gave generously of their time. However, as I do not work in the organisation, and have elements of 'outsider researcher', the power dynamic between myself as researcher, An Cosán as the case study, and the learners who were central to my understanding of the model, did not result in any "hidden ethical and methodological dimensions of insiderness" (Labaree, 2002, p.109), and I did not feel any restraints in exploring the findings. Also, importantly in terms of my relationship with the learners, as an inbetweener, an overt manifestation of power was not

detrimental to what Mertens' highlights as "establishing a dialogue" between the researcher and the participants. Whilst issues relating to the limitations of the An Cosán degree programmes are identified, having an outsider's distance from the research enabled a critical engagement with the findings. Overall, due to elements of being an 'inbetweener researcher' I did find it easier to engage learners and management in the research project as the request came through established and trusted channels that may not always be open to an external researcher. I did not have any formal authority over the research participants, but I would say that the relationship was fluid, in that I was known by the organisation, but through taking on Mertens' transformative research paradigm, I sought to engage with the An Cosán as a researcher.

In planning my research study, which endeavoured to consider a model of higher education beyond a deficit model of access, I too needed to consider my power relations with learners and the value I placed on their contributions. In foregrounding the methodology chapter, I wanted to demonstrate the importance of the research process in this, particularly as it sought to establish "relationships in order to determine ways that the study can be more culturally responsive" (Mertens, 2012, p. 808). However, as Stacey (1991) notes, it is not enough to ease power differentials, regardless of the egalitarian relationship with participants, I, as a researcher, ultimately determined the data collection and analysis. Thus, it is important to delve deeper into the power relationship with learners within this research study through reflexivity as a means for "interrogating how we might be perpetuating particular kinds of power relationships, be advancing particular ways of naming and discussing people, experiences and events" (Kamler & Thomson, 2014, p75). This is essential to accurately understand the access potential of the An Cosán model of higher education as it drew heavily on the learners' perspectives.

Initially, I started this research project with a determination to accurately describe the model of higher education provision in An Cosán. Through my advocacy work, I saw both the inherent limitations of access policy, notwithstanding the positive developments which occurred over three access plans, and the potential to shine a light on other models of higher education provision that met the goals of access thereby necessitated a clear description of the An Cosán model. The learner interviews were designed to offer a description of the An Cosán degree programme; they were not intended to offer

a deep exploration of the learners' life histories. For some learners, they inevitably drew on their life story in response to my opening interview question, how did you come to be in An Cosán? It clearly linked to the lived experience of learners', who were mainly women, and had experienced social exclusion and poor experiences of school yet through the feminist pedagogy, many felt liberated and empowered. It was more than just a course; it was more than being locally based, it centred on the unearthing of silenced voices that were cultivated in a safe, supportive environment that attended to all dimensions of mind, body and spirit. Acknowledging that participants become "extremely vulnerable and trust becomes an issue when they feel encouraged by researchers to share the most intimate and confidential details of their lives" (Nagy Hesse-Bibber & Piatelli, 2012, p.18), I set out to ensure participants could make an informed decision on their participation and to return to a focus group to further explore the emerging themes providing a more robust representation of their views.

But more than that, the sharing of personal stories comes with responsibility as I reflected on my role as researcher in being true to their word, but also conscious that their stories become part of my words. I thought about the words of bell hooks:

No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still colonizer, the speaking subject and you are now at the center of my talk. (hooks, 1989b, p. 243)

Although, I brought aspects of what Nagy Hesse-Bibber and Piatelli (2012) describe as feminist methodology to the research process: listening to learners, conscious of power dynamics and seeking some social change as a result of the research, as researcher ultimately I have the final word. Given that ethical considerations are imperative when writing about oppression and the oppressed: "When we write about the experiences of a group to which we do not belong, we should think about the ethics of our action, considering whether or not our work will be used to reinforce and perpetuate domination" (hooks, 1989, p. 43). Notwithstanding, my support for educational equality and passion for learners' rights to gain a degree, I was not from that social group, thereby highlighting the need to carefully consider and represent the voice of learners. The methodology chapter sets out to demonstrate how I endeavoured to build

relationships across An Cosán and a cultural understanding of the organisation and the learners.

As hooks notes: “we fear those who speak about us who do not speak to us and with us” (1990, p. 343), yet I considered myself an ally of community education. Through this work, I sought to bring forth the learning from the research into the advocacy domain of my work. The ability to extend the potential of my position to the research project in terms of the possible policy influence is significant. As bell hooks notes, solidarity is key, and indeed there is a responsibility to challenge the oppressive elements of the status quo:

This is an intervention. A message from that space in the margin that is a site of creativity and power, that inclusive space where we recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity to erase the category colonised/colonizer. Marginality as site of resistance. Enter that space. Let us meet there. Enter that space. We greet you as liberators. (hooks, 1989b, p. 243)

Literature review chapters: policy, practice and theory

The literature review section of this thesis evolved into three specific areas which aim to frame the An Cosán model of higher education in relation to i) national access policy ii) community education practice in Ireland and iii) issues of educational access drawing on Freire, hooks and Bourdieu.

Chapter 4, *Analysis of National Access Policy*, sets the foundation for exploring the potential value of exploring the access potential of the An Cosán model of higher education in a policy context. In order to understand the policy issue of persistent under-participation and set out the issue at hand, Chapter 4 offers a deep analysis of national access policy, the influence of the deficit discourse and the resulting approaches that dominate access policy. An essential first step for me was to provide a basis for the An Cosán model of higher education in national access policy with specific reference to opening up space for such a model. The impetus for my undertaking the research was to, in some way, contribute to widening access to higher education within the remit of my potential area of influence, i.e. advocacy. Thus, I invested significant effort in conducting a thorough analysis of access policy by exploring historical educational inequality in Ireland, making reference to EU policy debates and vitally

within the context of national access policy. During the research, it became clear that An Cosán wanted access policy change also. In terms of the potential for influence, I am fortunate to have the professional role as CEO of AONTAS that has access to policy makers, my position on the higher education access steering group, access to senior civil servants and politicians. Thus, there is potential to influence access policy and also raise the profile of the An Cosán model of higher education, as part of the broader community education provision that we advocate for (AONTAS, 2019)

Within my advocacy work, I saw both the inherent limitations of access policy, notwithstanding the positive developments which occurred over three access plans, and the potential contribution of a model of higher education provision that appeared to meet the goals of access policy. However, novel or grassroots approaches to higher education access received limited attention, whilst at the same time, the proposed issues of access resonated with my understanding of the potential contribution of community education. In exploring the model in a policy context, in keeping with a transformative research paradigm, I sought to explore policy in relation to the positioning of the learner in approaches to access. What interested me about access policy was not just that this model emerged within an area of socio-economic disadvantage outside the scope of access policy but that the shaping of policy by those who are the focus was negligible. Further offering an impetus to hear from learners on the degree programmes and indeed an organisation that grappled with addressing educational inequality since its inception. Therefore, Chapter 4 offers an analysis of national access policy documents following Jones and Thomas (2005), consideration of a transformative approach, and Rogers' (2004) lens of a deficit discourse. I highlight the dominant approaches to access opening the space for alternative models of higher education beyond the deficit discourse. Additionally, in considering the potential of the An Cosán model, I include the findings from an interview with a relevant senior policy maker.

Whilst the approaches to access built on existing initiatives, the chapter provides an analysis of the three National Access Plans and the reports which contributed to the development of the first two Plans. In making space within the access policy gap, the interview with an access policy maker, in addition to the policy analysis opens up the potential contribution of the An Cosán model to complement existing access efforts. Also of note is the potential of the model in terms of addressing regional variations in

higher education participation; therefore, I reference a large EU study, as the An Cosán model of higher education specifically focuses on the area of West Tallaght.

In Chapter 5, *The An Cosán model for higher education access*, I set out to offer a standalone literature review chapter which is split into two sections. The first section maps out the An Cosán model of higher education in terms of charting the establishment of An Cosán within the broader historical community education context in Ireland, with due consideration to its feminist influences; outlines its educational provision that spans the national framework of qualifications, and describes the characteristics of this model of community education.

A key aspect in the articulation of the An Cosán model of higher education was relating the model to existing concepts in the literature and policy, as non-formal education and model two in the White Paper on Adult Education (DES, 2000). Initially, my approach to describing the An Cosán model of higher education was quite binary, in terms of how it differed, and even directly addressed, the inherent limitations of formal education. Formal education is not merely accredited provision, as I discovered from a detailed analysis of non-formal education literature. I expended considerable time exploring a definition of non-formal education for the purpose of the study with the intention of demonstrating the complementary aspects of having both formal and non-formal higher education provision. However, as things transpired, I considered a more nuanced approach, moving from a comparative approach to describing the model by honing in on its community education attributes, potential to meet national access policy objectives, and most importantly, providing ample scope for how it is experienced by the learners themselves. Whilst, far more limited in detail than I first envisioned, I do think reference to non-formal education is helpful to the overall research study in offering another dimension in which to characterise the distinct attributes of the An Cosán model set within a broader policy context that has applicability beyond Ireland.

Furthermore, as I began to consider the An Cosán model of higher education within national policy, by offering a framework to hang this model on, I sought a similar understanding of this approach to education provision. At the outset of the research, it was clear that the An Cosán model of higher education differed from the outreach model of higher education, which is an extension of HEI provision in a community setting which has semblance with model one of the White Paper (2000). Given the

context of where the degrees were offered, I brought into account the Irish understanding of community education which in this case linked the An Cosán model of higher education to model two of the White Paper.

Subsequently, it became clear that it was vital to consider the broader emergence of community education in Ireland, in particular women's community education, as having a specific social justice ethos that recognises the lived experience of women in their locale. Similarly, later in the research project, the importance of the feminist influence on the origins of the organisation, and its feminist pedagogy aided further articulation of the model.

Although literature on the establishment, growth and pedagogic process in An Cosán was available, there was a distinct lack of information that charted the impetus and development of the degree programmes. In bridging that gap, the second section of Chapter 5 draws on empirical research findings from An Cosán management interviews to offer a clear articulation of the genesis, development and features of An Cosán's degree programmes. The inclusion of tutors' perspectives on the non-formal aspects of the degree is added to management perspectives as a means to describe the model further. Finally, I conclude the chapter outlining the logistical aspects of the collaborative partnership between An Cosán and IT Carlow.

Given Chapter 4 considered the policy approaches to access and Chapter 5 community education and the development of An Cosán and the degree programmes it offers, Chapter 6, *Literature review for analysis*, outlines the factors impacting on access as articulated in the literature. In creating space for the An Cosán model of higher education, I critique the inherent limitations of formal education meaning that despite efforts, the access potential of formal education is limited which may contribute to the persistent under-participation noted in national access policy. Additionally, in order to analyse the learner interviews and focus group, I review key theorists pertinent to the learning environment of An Cosán by considering Bourdieu's concept of habitus in an organisational context and the pedagogic process through consideration of Paulo Freire and, due to the feminist roots of An Cosán, bell hooks with a specific focus on voice.

Research findings chapters: power and harnessing voice

The experience of conducting the fieldwork of An Cosán, reaffirmed my commitment to community education and highlighted the specific contribution that the pedagogic process plays in access. Commencing the research, I was poised to compare the potential of the An Cosán model of higher education to formal education provision and its resonance to what Jones and Tomas (2005) describe as a transformative approach to access. However, with the unfolding of the research findings, the resounding focus on a pedagogic process that harnesses learners' voices became ever more evident. In deference to this, Chapter 7 *The Learners' Interviews: Listening to the Voices* and Chapter 8 *Empirical Findings from the Learner Focus Group* make up a substantial part of this thesis.

The emotional dimension of learning really came to the fore, it was not just about getting a degree, for some learners that was part of the reason, it also related to the power of transformative learning. The emotional work involved was striking, clearing the previous negative educational experiences and the associated self-doubt to make way for learning in a new context was both emotional and at times challenging for some. It was vital that learners' experiences were given significant space within the thesis and their points effectively analysed. The subsequent chapter on the learner focus group aided a deepening of analysis.

It was also essential to centre the articulation of the An Cosán model of higher education on the learners' experiences which contribute to the body of knowledge that this thesis offers. In keeping with a feminist approach to reflexivity, bringing forth their voices is also essential for social justice advocacy:

Negotiating power is not simply changing the relationship between researcher and researched. Feminist researchers value and bring alternative forms of knowledge to the forefront of public discourse and argue that the ultimate goal of sociology is the creation of a more just society (Nagy Hesse-Bibber & Piatelli , 2012, p. 567).

Also, as both the aim of An Cosán was to engage women in a liberatory educational experience, and the majority of learners in An Cosán, and those interviewed for the research project were women, it was important to consider this impact. Bringing forth the learners' views was also important for creating robust research outcomes. As Harding (1993) notes, strong objectivity requires reflecting on our position in the world. In this instance, I sought to employ this approach "strong objectivity is built upon the

sustainable desire for critical self-reflection and an attempt at liberatory social change, starting from women's lives" (Nagy Hesse-Bibber & Piatelli, 2012, p. 561). This also involved paying particular attention to the voices of those who are silent. Although the research process is limited in terms of engaging all learners on the degree programmes, within Chapter 7 I paid particular attention to one learner who described her experience as being silenced to becoming a liberated woman through An Cosán. In foregrounding these voices in the thesis, a special effort was made to ensure they were adequately included.

I learned that voice is multidimensional in its value: as a method for effective dialogical teaching that deepened understanding; as a method to affirm the lived experience of learners whilst building capacity, and that voice itself supports personal development and confidence. It became clearer that voice is central to working towards social justice and the articulation of voices once repressed is both powerful and transformative for learners. Also, I learned about the relationship with voice and how this supports the recognition of cultural capital that supports a feeling of belonging in a community education context. The tutor-learner relationship was central to this; therefore, Chapter 9, *Tutors' Perspectives of An Cosán Model in Practice*, completes the findings chapters.

Twists and turns towards a discussion

In previous drafts of the thesis, the discussion section made efforts to consider the elements of the transformative framework (Jones & Thomas, 2005) and the extent to which the An Cosán model exhibited such. However, after a number of attempts, I had to change my approach and listen to the voices of learners as a basis for the thematic analysis of findings. Although I was committed to going into the fieldwork with an open mind, in the data analysis process I was originally quite wedded to a deductive or theory-testing idea, possibly due to my past educational background in science. There were so many interconnected parts that seemed to overlap in explaining the An Cosán model of higher education and, although it seems unusual now, I had no intention of using Freire's work as a conceptual framework to interpret research findings. Having studied Freire previously, I was not drawn to his work initially; however, there simply was no other suitable theoretical means to understand the data. Additionally, due to

the feminist ethos and mission of An Cosán, it was vital that interpretation also included the work of bell hooks.

During the process of data collection, it became clear that a deductive approach could prohibit rich understanding of learners' perspectives and ultimately was not in keeping with the methodological approach that I took based on the work of Mertens (2006). By switching to an inductive approach, the primary data gathered through this research allowed thematic analysis and identification of key topics which could only be fully understood in light of the theories of Freire, hooks and Bourdieu. In changing my analytical approach mid-way through this project, some data was not included in the final thesis, particularly that involving the interview with Prof. Liz Thomas. On reflection, that interview was an exploration of her view of a framework I had assembled, which, due to my limited range of interview questions, did not offer enough insights for inclusion. Ultimately, by letting go of my preconceived understanding of the An Cosán model of higher education, the theories of Freire, hooks and Bourdieu crystallised my understanding on a deeper level.

Therefore, in Chapter 10, *Discussion and Conclusion*, I draw together the literature review with the research findings as analysed through the application of Freire, hooks and Bourdieu. I also consider the access policy potential of the An Cosán model of higher education. In doing so, I offer a reserved link to the potential for advocacy.

As Nancy Hartsock (1993) states that “we [researchers] need to develop our understanding of difference by creating a situation in which hitherto marginalized groups can name themselves, speak for themselves, and participate in defining terms of interaction, a situation in which we can construct an understanding of the world that is sensitive to difference” (p. 545). It was important to give voice and centre this thesis findings on voice. Therefore:

The purpose of research, then, is not to construct grand generalizations but to work closely with people, maintaining an inclusive reality, open and flexible, consisting of a diversity of perspectives and enhancing their understanding and ability to control their own reality. (Nagy Hesse-Bibber & Piatelli, p.568)

Whilst I don't profess to offer research participants the ability to control their own reality, nor offer the constructions of grand generalisations; however, this study offers

learners' insights into the An Cosán model of higher education that has potential for change within a national access policy context.

Chapter 3 Methodology

Introduction

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the layout of this thesis is unorthodox. Shifting the methodology section to the start of the thesis enabled me to integrate the findings of the interviews as part of describing An Cosán and the degree programmes. It would not be possible to discuss An Cosán without describing the broader context and history of community education in Ireland, but as there is a paucity of literature available on the focus on this study, i.e. specific An Cosán degree programmes, interviews with management enabled this insight and are therefore part of the literature review section.

This chapter will give a detailed overview of my approach to the research and how it was carried out. In the first section, I will provide an overview of how I attempted to link the research paradigm with the focus of the study. As a starting point for the methodology, I tried to draw on my belief that access is a complex issue whereby those impacted, i.e. the learners, must be central to shaping the kinds of education provision that enables their access. Therefore, I focused on listening to learners' voices with the purpose of affecting change. Additionally, based on an underlying commitment to social justice, I sought to conduct the research in a manner that was authentic to both my values and that of An Cosán, the management, staff and learners. I detail the case study method in this context outlining the underpinning theories and how it can be used to influence access policy.

Personal rationale for the methodological approach

My personal impetus for undertaking this research was a strong desire to listen to learners' voices and their insights into a model of higher education provision that could be used as a non-deficit example within an access policy context. Through my work in AONTAS, I had the privilege to learn from community education practitioners and learners that a holistic, transformative model of education that is fundamentally inclusive could offer a practical approach to addressing issues of access. However, community education lacks prestige, recognition, resources (AONTAS, 2011), and I would say respect in the broader education policy structure. A home-grown, grass-roots, holistic education model that spanned the NFQ was continually overlooked in

terms of educational access, and overlooked by access policy. The issue of comprehensively articulating community education and its contribution to addressing educational disadvantage has been a persistent issue in advocacy (AONTAS, 2011). In creating the methodology, with a respectful humility to undertaking the research, I sought to bring and develop my existing knowledge, skills and experience: academic and practical knowledge of adult learning; 15 years' experience of policy and advocacy in order to address the research questions. My approach was underpinned by a commitment to social justice, a consciousness of power differentials in the research process and an openness to learn, particularly from the learners.

The outcome of this research is centrally about having evidence to advocate for access policy change; therefore, I knew that it had to not only be considered robust in policy terms: have a large degree of policy analysis and statistical review of the location of the case study; it also needed to offer a clear example whereby elements of the model could potentially be the basis for future access policy development. Superseding all of this was a fundamental desire to bring forth the voice of the learner, to understand their experience of the An Cosán model and thus propose a grassroots informed view of alternative methods for access.

Driven by a commitment to equality whilst making a conscious move away from a deficit discourse, the methodology of the fieldwork draws on elements of a transformative methodological approach to the case study fieldwork.

The research question

The genesis of the research question relates to three aspects of literature in the field. Firstly, on review of the national policy documents (HEA, 2004a; HEA, 2008; HEA, 2015) there was a significant indication that socio-economically disadvantaged people were less likely to engage in higher education. Secondly, in considering the academic work of key thinkers in the field of access, including Prof Diane Reay and Prof Liz Thomas, factors impeding participation were attributed to inequities in the higher education system and in society more generally, rather than a perceived deficit within the individual. Yet, a deep analysis of national access policy approaches, considering the work of Rogers (2004) and Jones and Thomas (2003), pointed to a predominant focus on the need for prospective learners to fit into the system, rather than seeking

institutional change. Finally, in considering An Cosán, as a feminist community education organisation, on review of the evolution of community education in Ireland (Connolly, 1999, 2003) which is predominantly located in areas of disadvantage, such a model of higher education could offer insights into its potential role in meeting national access policy objectives.

With this background the research question of this thesis is: recognising the persistent under-participation of learners from socio-economically disadvantaged communities and the predominance of the deficit model to access in Irish higher education policy, what can the An Cosán model of higher education contribute to national access policy?

Driven by this overarching research question, this specific case study example of a community education model of higher education provision sought to explore its potential in the context of national access policy by articulating the An Cosán model of higher education, with a specific foregrounding of the learner perspective.

Ontological and epistemological positioning

My approach to the research design and implementation was based on a social justice perspective, where the voices of those who are the focus of access policy are normally excluded, i.e. under-represented learners, come to the fore. Additionally, in order to move away from a deficit perspective of policy approaches, the centrality of learner voice as a means to understand their experience of the An Cosán degree was an essential part of the research study. Drawing on my own experience of advocacy in AONTAS, witnessing the access capacity of community education and persistent educational inequalities experienced by adults, I positioned myself in this research as a supporter of this model of education committed to demonstrating its value. However, I brought a critical perspective, an honesty and an analysis in order to offer a valuable evidence base to affect practice and access policy.

The values informing this research project stem from my core beliefs in a range of philosophical positions on adult education but generally those concerned with equality and social justice. From the power of the lived experience of Dewey (1933), Lindeman (1926), the role of dialogue Brookfield (1986), to the education of the whole being, hooks (1994), the power of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1990), to the inherent inequalities of formal education (Illich, 1971) and to its more radical role in social

change Freire (1971), these perspectives strongly influenced how I undertook this research.

Foremost, the research draws strongly on the work of Paulo Freire, which is perhaps unsurprising given the focus on community education. But it also influenced my positioning and focus on change, as Freire stated: “there's no such thing as neutrality. The people who use that label are people who unknowingly, for the most part, are dedicated to the support of the status quo” (Horton, Freire, Bell, Gaventa, & Peters, 1990, p.185). I specifically set out to seek alternatives to the status quo approaches to access. Additionally, the focus on learner voice draws strongly on the work of Freire, but also in the context of higher education access Diane Reay, and her extensive body of qualitative, learner-informed research work on access and Donna Mertens (2007, 2009, 2010, 2012) and her engagement with disadvantaged communities which had a distinct focus on collaborative research for social change. The impact such thinking has had on this research is ultimately that I sought to approach my engagement with An Cosán, and particularly with the learners, as one of authentic partnership with a consciousness of the need for change and a responsibility that the ultimate outcome of the research would impact on improving access.

In reviewing where the focus should be, I considered the work of leading academics in the field of social justice in education (e.g. Reay, 2000; Gewirtz 2006). In her extensive work on higher education access Reay has mainly focused on the learners' voices (Reay, 1998; Reay, 2000; Reay, 2005; Reay, 2012; Reay, 2017; Reay & Ball, 1997; Reay, Ball & David, 2001; Reay, David & Ball, 2005; Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2010). Although as an academic proponent of engaging the voice of the most marginalised, Gewirtz (2006) conducted interviews with the mothers of the students who were having difficulty in school, rather than engage the students directly. Whilst not questioning the rationale or legitimacy of this approach, I did consider whose voice should be heard in this thesis, what constitutes the truth, how can it be unearthed?

At this juncture, it is important to note the role of voice in a feminist-informed research approach, which influenced this study due to my own values, those of An Cosán's and the predominant cohort of learners, and thus research participants in this study, who are women. This approach is inherently concerned with listening to women's lived experiences, not just what was happening in An Cosán but how it was experienced by learners. There is an interconnectedness between the unearthing of women's

experiences, which is part of knowledge building, and feminist activism (Hesse-Biber, 2006) and in my case advocacy. With this foundation, how I approached the validity of the research, what counts as valuable data closely aligned to learners' perspectives, ensuring that their experience is both valid and has value in offering solutions to the issue of access. How learners experienced the An Cosán model was foundational to my approach to the research; to value their knowledge, their lived experience, their insights similar to the pedagogical approach in adult education, a learner-centred approach is concerned with creating together. I sought to do so similarly in this research. The role of power within the research process has been noted, e.g. Foucault (1982), and the unavoidable question of the power dynamic between researcher and the subject of the research has led me to explore emancipatory methodologies that acknowledge the power dynamic and aims to research with, rather than on, people. I was drawn to emancipatory methodologies which view research participants as co-researchers, as experts in their own life. Drawing on Freire (1971), such research is not just appraisal, or involvement, of marginalised groups in the process, research becomes a political activity as consciousness can be raised through the production of knowledge and critical reflection on the implications of the research. The process becomes about empowerment and self-realisation of individuals. Furthermore, the underpinning potential for change, and in this case, through advocacy, was closely aligned to thinking in emancipatory methodologies.

Methodological approach

Following on from the aforementioned ontological and epistemological considerations, in keeping with the philosophical underpinnings of the research, I reviewed a range of methodological literature that was used in research projects with a strong social justice focus. The transformative approach by Donna Mertens fit most closely to the purpose of this study. Mertens (2009) explores the underlying paradigm that permeates the thinking of transformative-emancipatory scholars, including recommendations of a specific research goal that will contribute to a more just and democratic society. This is important for this research study as it is very much in keeping with the outcome I hope to achieve. Consideration was given as to how I could marry elements of the research paradigm with the research topic; thus, the fieldwork drew on Mertens (2009) transformative research approach.

The methodological approach led to the use of qualitative methods, “listening to the voices” (Thomas, 2000), getting depth of experience but also giving space to hear from people who are generally the subject of policy plans. Firstly, listening to the voices of learners to gain their perspective of the An Cosán model of higher education. Secondly, understanding the development of the model from the perspective of management. And thirdly, gaining insight into how it is offered by those teaching on the course (tutors and management staff who also teach the course).

Elements of a transformative research approach

Building on the work of Guba and Lincoln (1989) and Lather (1992), four dominant paradigms exist in educational and psychological research: post-positivism, constructivism, pragmatism, and emancipatory (Mertens, 2009, p. 2); I needed to find one which was congruent with the value system of both the research participants, my position in the research and aims of the study. I sought to draw upon an approach to the research design and implementation process that would align to both my ontological position, but also importantly, that of the organisation and its learners. This approach also lends itself to qualitative research as it is in keeping with voice, experience and individual subjectivities.

I had hoped that participants (learners, management, tutors) involved in the case study of An Cosán could use the research in order to advocate for their needs, whether funding for their degree courses or for recognition in policy. Mertens approach moves from emancipatory to transformative in order to emphasis the role of agency for people involved in the research (Mertens, 2009 p. 2). This research approach is broadly in keeping with the ethos of this study and resonates strongly with the goals of An Cosán as it involves the following features:

- Assumptions which rely on ethical stances of inclusion and challenging oppressive social structures (Mertens, 2009, p. 5).
- The research is with the community and is designed to build trust and make goals and strategies transparent (Mertens, 2009, p. 49).
- It recommends the dissemination of findings in ways that encourage use of the results to enhance social justice and human rights (Mertens, 2009, p. 49).

Also, in keeping with the ethos of An Cosán, the transformative research methodology is commensurate with feminist, critical race, queer, postcolonial and indigenous, theories (Mertens, 2009, p. 63). Of particular note too, in keeping with my ontological positioning and the ethos of An Cosán, as per the tradition of feminist research, this study has the dual objectives of seeking new knowledge based on the lived experience of participants and, in the longer term, contributing to social change (Hesse-Biber, 2006). Also, the common focus of the approach is on the inclusion of voice and acknowledging the value of such traditionally excluded groups.

A set criteria relating to axiology, epistemology, ontology and methodology for a transformative approach has been developed by Mertens (2009) and was considered for developing the research plan. With regard to epistemology, Mertens states that there must be recognition by the researcher of the interactive link between researcher and participants as that knowledge is seen as socially and historically situated and that issues of power and privilege are explicitly addressed. I considered relationships with the prospective participants in terms of the research focus and questions with methods amended to accommodate cultural complexity, in addition to the recognition of contextual and historical factors particularly if they relate discriminatory and oppressive actions (Mertens, 2009, p. 49). Furthermore, central to this process is the development of a trusting relationship, which is seen as critical (*ibid.*), noting the need that “honest and respectful relationships among human beings involved in any inquiry are essential” (Mertens, 2009, p. 71). In practical terms, the research process includes a number of methods to authentically cultivate a relationship with An Cosán and build solid foundations for the research partnership.

In terms of axiology, and assumptions about ethics, the ethical considerations of a transformative research paradigm are: “respect for cultural norms of interaction; beneficence is defined in terms of the promotion of human rights and increase in social justice” (Mertens, 2009, p. 49). Which in the case of the research process means involvement of An Cosán in initial discussions and relationship building in terms of my clarity on my approach to the fieldwork.

Additionally, the ontological approach of this research paradigm attempts to reject cultural relativism and recognises the influence of privilege in determining what is real and the consequences of accepting one version of reality over another. It acknowledges that “multiple realities are shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic,

gender, disability, and other values” (Mertens, 2009, p. 49). Therefore, this research centres on the lived experiences and reality of the organisation and more centrally, the participants, thus requiring a dialogical research method.

However, the extent to which a PhD can truly take a transformative approach is limited. The focus of the study was not proposed by An Cosán; I decided on that. Although discussions with An Cosán management were fruitful in terms of their expectations for the research outcomes, i.e. to support advocacy for funding, the involvement of learners in the research plan was limited. However, learners were consulted in the interviews regarding their expectations or ‘what would they like from the research?’ In line with Freire (1970), in my research, I regarded learners as active participants, experts in their own lives, experiences and knowledge, which is in contrast to how access policy objectifies learners, regarding them as deficient in knowledge and skills. The subject-object dichotomy is central to Freirean pedagogy, and I was conscious of such when considering my approach to the research process. Overall, the research is strongly influenced by Merten’s transformative approach methodology.

Fieldwork: A case study of An Cosán

This section provides an outline of the reason for choosing a case study approach for this study, the challenges, limitation and potential in guiding the fieldwork research in An Cosán, which was carried out in four phases.

A case study approach

A case study approach to the fieldwork was used to explore An Cosán, as it can be understood as an “enquiry in a real-life context, as opposed to the contrived contexts of experiment or survey” (Bassegy, 1999, p. 26). Four broad styles of case study have been identified: *ethnographic*, *evaluative*, *educational* and *action research* (Stenhouse *et al.* 1985). The approach taken in this study could be viewed as *educational*, which seeks to understand education in action (Bassegy, 1999, p. 28) as I sought to explore the An Cosán model of higher education from a learner perspective and supplemented by findings from management, tutors in addition to observations.

The sampling of this research was quite straightforward as on review An Cosán appeared to be the only model to offer its own degree programmes, accredited through a collaborative partnership with an HEI, through a community education context. This kind of sampling can be viewed as *purposive sampling of a special or unique cases*, as per Teddlie and Yu's (2003) taxonomy sampling techniques for social and behavioural sciences (p. 78). Such a unique case can be viewed as an "unusual manifestation of a phenomenon", examples of which are outstanding successes and notable failures (Yin, 1994, pp. 38-41), in this case, it is based on appearing to be the only example of this model of higher education. Indeed, it involved selecting certain units or cases "based on a specific purpose rather than randomly" (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003, p. 713) as the case itself is of primary importance, rather than some overall issue (Teddlie & Yu, 2003b, p. 80).

In terms of my own professional and personal development, I have learned hugely through a qualitative, people-facing research process. It enabled me to see, hear and feel An Cosán, the fieldwork is indelibly imprinted in my memory, and specific learner quotes still resound in my mind. The experience also acted as a means to reflect on my own thinking about access, as noted in literature qualitative research can provide an individual "with information about how one thinks about the particular question" and "strengthens the ability of the individual to come to a better informed decision" (Tierney & Clemens, 2011, p. 88). Without doubt, from my own standpoint, the outcomes of the research led to a good deal of consideration in terms of its potential, and inherent limitations to influence access policy, perhaps similar to the statement that: "good qualitative research is meant to provoke conversations and debate rather than proffer a conclusion served as a *fait accompli*" (Tierney & Clemens, 2011, p. 99).

Fieldwork of the An Cosán model: articulation in an access policy context

The fieldwork exploring the An Cosán model takes a qualitative approach, the outcomes of which are intended to contribute to the access policy debate. This can be seen as problematic, due to a perceived lack of replicability and the dominance of quantitative data-informed policy. However, qualitative research can demonstrate a deep analysis of an education context, draw out the learner voice, and delve deeper into why adults participate in one particular model of higher education.

The strengths and weaknesses of the ontological and epistemological features of qualitative and quantitative research have been debated by education scholars (Lather, 1992, 2004, 2006; Tierney & Clemens, 2011) and critically explored by qualitative researchers (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, 2005). However, the benefits of qualitative research to demonstrate the An Cosán model are significant. Qualitative research supports the voice that is usually hushed or lost, as it seeks to understand complex environments (Tierney & Clemens, 2011, p. 78); therefore, it puts the voice and face to participants. This is particularly important in the transformative research paradigm, as outlined by Mertens (2009). Furthermore, such an approach can be used to help describe an issue in detail to policy makers (Tierney & Clemens, 2011, p. 78).

According to Mason (2002), features of qualitative research are broadly within an interpretivist philosophical position, in that it concerns how the social world is understood or interpreted; is based on flexible and sensitive methods of data collection in which they are produced; relies on methods of analysis that involve understanding complexity, detail and context which provides nuanced, rich and detailed data resulting in a holistic form of analysis (Mason, 2002, pp. 3-4).

As the case study is set within the broader access policy agenda, it can offer some contribution to the policy debate. One of the strongest arguments for qualitative research and its range of influence on policy is cited by Rist (1994) and incorporates other considerations, including the intended and unintended consequences of a policy approach.

Qualitative research allows for the study of both anticipated and unanticipated outcomes, changes in understandings and perceptions as a result of the efforts of the programme or policy, the direction and intensity of any social change that results from the programme, and the strengths and weaknesses of the administrative /organisational structure that was used to operationalise the programme. Policy makers have no equally grounded means of learning about programme impacts and outcomes as they do with qualitative research findings. (Rist, 1994, p. 632)

However, debate regarding the suitability and legitimacy of qualitative data as evidence for policy influence varies. Although dependent on the research paradigm, from a positivist approach supporting future advocacy would be considered as undermining the objectivity of the study (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Additionally, the benefits of qualitative research in contributing to policy are also part of the challenge, as noted:

Given its interpretive methodological approaches, its thick descriptions and nuanced findings, its lack of a statistical meta-analysis for knowledge accumulation, its goal of divergent complexity rather than convergent certainty, qualitative research is more susceptible than quantitative research to the critique that it is unable to address urgent educational policy priorities. (Dumas & Anderson, 2014, p.4)

A perceived issue in a policy context relating to qualitative research is that it cannot be objective and cannot be replicated in experimental conditions akin to quantitative research. One main challenge facing qualitative research is its ability to be aligned with “traditional definitions of validity” (Tierney & Clemens, 2011, p. 64) in order to support evidence-based policy. Yet the reliance on quantitative studies has limitations that of “social and cultural decontextualisation, ahistoricity” and “the creation of randomisation that is seldom generalisable to real life settings” (Donmoyer, 2012; Dumas & Anderson, 2014).

In a policy context, the challenge of qualitative data has been expressed as: “the assumption of many policymakers and quantitative researchers has been that educational work should more closely follow the medical model of research and be able to produce valid findings that are generalisable” (Tierney & Clemens, 2011, p. 64). Although Tierney and Clemens note that qualitative research cannot be generalised (2011, p. 78), they do mention the notion of transferability which is dependent on how the research data is written up and the applicability of research questions that allow “specific yet still focus on critical questions”.

However, challenges to influence policy from a qualitative case study remain. In the Irish context, there is a traditional reliance on quantitative research, for example, in access policy (Bernard, 2006). The influence of neoliberal ideology on Irish education policy is manifest in the introduction of the new public management system and accountability processes which seek to increase, a certain understanding of, efficiencies within the system. This approach has been central to recent government agency driven research reviews of education processes and systems (see recent SOLAS reviews of FET programmes¹⁰), with the research tendered to the ESRI and delivered in a mixed-methods approach (McGuinness *et al.* 2018; Smyth *et al.* 2019). However, private economic research consultants have successfully tendered for government reviews of

¹⁰ Review of National Youthreach Programmes (2019), Evaluation of PLC (2018)

education and have predominantly favoured quantitative and econometric approaches in the positivist tradition (Indecon, 2019). Monitoring and evaluation are predominantly quantitative in the Irish education system, in access policy pertaining to participation targets, in FET, e.g. through PLSS and Funding Application Requests (FAR). Access policy is mainly dominated by targets set at national level, again based on quantitative research.

However, I believe in the Irish context advocacy is complex and akin to what Weaver-Hightower has described as a policy ecology:

A policy ecology consists of the policy itself along with all of the texts, histories, people, places, groups, traditions, economic and political conditions, institutions, and relationships that affect it or that it affects. Every contextual factor and person contributing to or influenced by a policy in any capacity, both before and after its creation and implementation, is part of a complex ecology. (2008, p. 155)

Despite the challenges, this study can contribute to theory, practice and the access policy debate, in that it has clearly articulated the An Cosán model of higher education and has linked its contribution to access policy through a robust review of national access policy literature. Specifically, I agree with Dumas and Anderson that: “our contribution as policy scholars is to ask critical questions and provide knowledge that can be used in policy development and implementation, and in evaluating the extent to which existing and new policies fulfil these collective aspirations” (2014, p.12).

Research design of the case study

A case study approach of An Cosán was carried out in four non-sequential phases (phase 1 initial management engagement, phase 2 organisational engagement, phase 3 interviews in An Cosán, phase 4 access policy interviews), as outlined in appendix 1. As noted, an effort was made to implement elements of a transformative research methodology; therefore, an outline of the axiology, epistemology and ontology related to the framework guided the methods. It is not to say they are absolutely discrete and may overlap it was also used to explain my methodological approach to An Cosán, staff and learners. A key feature to note is that my focus was solely concerned with degree programmes which were developed with the community and offered in a community

education model. This section describes what was planned and implemented over the course of the fieldwork.

An essential approach to the research design was to move away from a deficit perspective in all aspects of the fieldwork. This was reflected in the approach I took, which involved the following elements of the transformative research methodology:

- Moving away from a deficit perspective when we choose to focus on the strengths and not problems of a community (Mertens, 2009, p. 41)
- Assumptions which rely on ethical stances of inclusion and challenging oppressive social structures (Mertens, 2009, p. 5)
- Research with the community is designed to build trust and make goals and strategies transparent (Mertens, 2009, p. 49)
- Dissemination of findings in ways that encourage the use of the results to enhance social justice and human rights (Mertens, 2009, p. 49)

Fieldwork: Overview of the four phases

Phase 1: building a relationship with An Cosán prior to fieldwork

Building a trusting relationship with An Cosán research participants was an essential part of implementing Mertens' transformative research approach. The reason being is that elements of a transformative approach require reflexivity, a relationship with participants, and methods that accommodate cultural complexity in addition to the recognition of contextual and historical factors particularly if they relate discriminatory and oppressive actions (Mertens, 2009, p. 49).

However, as Mertens notes there are a number of challenges when engaging in research within the transformative paradigm that I considered including: "the establishment of effective relations and reciprocity with the research group, the need for self-knowledge and to be mindful of gate keeping" (Mertens, 2009 p. 71).

In the first phase, a number of actions were initiated to engage with management prior to commencing interviews. The second phase of relationship-building was through sustained engagement with the organisation and particularly the learners over the course of the research but predominantly over the course of the fieldwork. This section outlines in detail the preliminary research work with An Cosán management prior to interviews as this process shaped, although not to a huge extent, the research process.

Building a research partnership with An Cosán management

It could almost be viewed as a pilot prior to commencing the interviews; however, phase 1 aimed to open up a clear line of communication with An Cosán regarding the research, offer opportunities for discussion and clarity on the research fieldwork. Engagement with management comprised: one meeting with An Cosán's CEO; two meetings with management and one meeting with the Education Subcommittee (management, board, tutors and learners). The reason for choosing this approach, to have in-person discussions, was to initiate the transformative research process, to agree on the process for engagement and discuss expectations. It also offered a space to communicate the purpose of the research, discuss methodology, gain insights into the research cohort, and vitally, to gain clarity on which of the degree programmes were developed as a community education, rather than an outreach model (appendix 2).

In my first meeting with the CEO, there was agreement to carry out the research with An Cosán, clarity on the process and discussion on its potential outcomes on access policy. Two meetings with management occurred in advance of the fieldwork, for each I sent an agenda in advance and compiled comprehensive meeting minutes which I circulated within one day of the meeting.

In the first meeting with the An Cosán management team, a detailed agenda was disseminated in advance. The outcome of the meeting was: an agreement to initiate the research including; a process for engagement; a contact person; clarity on aspects of the degree programmes (i.e. which were developed by An Cosán and thus the subject of the research); An Cosán proposed interviewing tutors to understand their knowledge of community education; the potential transferability of the model internationally and how to frame that. However, the main focus of the meeting was to propose a Research Advisory Group for this research study that, in line with elements of a transformative approach, would be drawn from across the organisation and would include learners. Terms of reference for the proposed advisory group were discussed. Although there was interest and agreement and effort was made the advisory group was never convened, and no meetings were held.

The second meeting covered topics of clarity on expectations or outcomes of the research, clarity on the research cohort, i.e. how many are on collaborative degrees; the logistical agreement for the research, e.g. timings of interviews that would be conducive to the academic/work schedule; proposed information sessions which were held; clarity on the goals of the research; and clarity on the research questions.

A meeting with An Cosán education subgroup (management, board and learners) was held. The purpose of this meeting was to enable greater engagement of An Cosán with the research, it also offered a space to provide an overview of the research quite informally and as a means to encourage the subgroup to communicate broadly across An Cosán, as a verbal invite, to participate in interviews.

Summary findings from phase 1 - An Cosán management engagement

Firstly, the management was very open and accommodating to the research project and engaged enthusiastically with the proposal. The original unamended research plan was agreed with An Cosán management, the fieldwork date was agreed, research questions were amended for language clarity only, expectations clarified, and the goals articulated. Also, a list of suggested external interviewees in line with the original research plan was offered, e.g. IT Carlow. Overall, there was a sense that this model of higher education provision needed clear articulation in terms of its contribution as a valuable, unique degree that required policy support.

Valuable information was gathered, clarification on the degree programmes offered and, the best time for interviews confirmed. A key aspect of clarification was that only two degrees were part of the collaborative partnership with IT Carlow, which were developed and offered in line with a community education model of provision. This will be further outlined in findings Chapter 4. It was confirmed that the degrees in question were the BA Degree in Leadership and Community Development (QQI Level 7) and the BA Degree in Applied Addiction Studies and Community Development (QQI Level 7).

Regarding the feedback on the research questions, there were only points of clarification relating to language, no suggestions or amendments to the core questions were made. Discussions with regard to the creation of a Research Advisory Group were noted, I provided an outline of what the terms of reference would be and how it would

contribute to meeting the needs of the researcher and An Cosán. This also included the purpose, roles and responsibilities and underlying principles based on the work of Mertens; however, it was never established. Staff were under pressure and plans to develop a Research Advisory Group to oversee the project did not come to fruition for a range of reasons but mainly due to time. However, there was no interest from learners to engage in the Advisory Group, which is further discussed in the next section relating to learner engagement. It is important to note that the research is the main focus of the researcher, which is very different in terms of the priorities of staff and learners. Overall, I do not believe the lack of an advisory group impacted negatively in the study, in retrospect, given the limitations of PhD research, if additional research was required by the group perhaps I would not have been in a position to deliver it. It would have enabled An Cosán to have a greater influence on the research, but given the initial management meetings, the common goal for access policy change coalesced between researcher and An Cosán.

A key aspect of a transformative approach to research is not only to engage with the organisation at a methodological level but to strive to use the research findings for social change. Therefore, the desire of An Cosán to have their higher education provision funded on a par to formal higher education (namely equality between part-time and full-time provision), was identified in this phase of the research. The aspirations of the An Cosán management was similar to that of the researcher – to ultimately use the findings to contribute to national access policy debate. They specifically wanted the research to contribute to the evidence base of advocacy activities regarding the issue of fees for part-time learners, which received no State support.

Phase one of the research plan was enriching and offered very helpful insights into not only expectations but also the logistical aspects of the case study research process. I believe it was part of building a constructive relationship with An Cosán. None of the interactions hindered the research process or resulted in deviations from the original plan. Neither were any restrictions set on the process; therefore, there was no issue regarding the issue of power; it was very much a collaborative, supportive process that mainly trouble-shot logistical issues.

Finally, the approach was in keeping with standards of rigour as well as elements of a transformative approach:

Lincoln's (1995) standards for rigor in research include the assertion that the researcher should know the community "well enough" to link the research results to positive action within that community. (Mertens, 2009, p. 73)

Phase 2: developing relationships with learners in An Cosán

I took a range of approaches to engage with learners from across the organisation and to get a sense of their experiences in the organisation. This involved attending three graduation ceremonies, one scholarship event, one IT Carlow Seminar on collaborative provision and four presentations: one information input to a group of degree students and three workshops with degree students¹¹. The graduation ceremonies, held in premises adjoining An Cosán, offered an opportunity to meet the An Cosán degree graduates past and present, funders and the wider community and also provided insights into the role of An Cosán and IT Carlow on this pivotal day. Furthermore, the profile of the research was increased so to encourage engagement in the study. The scholarship event enabled observations on the role of the sponsors/major funders of the degrees and an opportunity to engage with learners and staff. The four presentations enabled me to discuss the research study with An Cosán degree programme learners, open discussions about the research, and clarify my intentions of the research so learners could make an informed decision regarding their potential participation in the study. Finally, the IT Carlow Seminar offered insights into the role of IT Carlow and An Cosán in the collaborative partnership. Further details are outlined in appendix 3.

Four presentations clearly outlining the research were made to the two degree programmes on different occasions which included all learners and the tutor, so learners could make an informed decision as to whether they wanted to participate in the study. PowerPoint presentations were used in addition to facilitated discussions for questions and feedback. Each learner received an information sheet and consent form, and I verbally outlined the voluntary nature of the research, the anonymity of data gathered and the option to opt-out. A tutor was present in the room at the time. Following the presentation, I left the room; learners read the material and those interested in participating used a box I had previously placed in the room to leave a

¹¹ Learners on the Degree programmes for which this research is concerned.

completed consent form. I followed up with learners who expressed an interest to arrange a suitable time for an interview.

Over the course of the fieldwork, I noted my reflections following the workshops, graduation ceremonies, the sponsorship ceremony, which was also covered in the local paper and the IT Carlow Seminar. I witnessed the celebration at graduation ceremonies and was even asked to take photos of graduates and their families.

At the first presentation input, my then 10-month old son accompanied me for the presentation. I note this as many learners empathised with my lack of childcare which broke the ice. Overall, my overwhelming experience of engaging with learners was one of positive interest in being interviewed and a general sense of support for the research, particularly with the cohort of learners on the Leadership degree who undertake it for three years as opposed to the Applied Addiction Studies, which is one year.

However, in relation to a call for interest to be part of the proposed Advisory Group there was no interest. On reflection, given that the learners were studying part-time, many working in a paid or volunteer capacity together with family commitments, perhaps the involvement of learners was not only over-ambitious but out of step with their existing list of demands. From my reflective journal, I noted at one learner workshop, a learner in the group posed a question to myself as to why I wanted to do the research, I had already given an overview of how I came to be interested in the research, but a comment from the group was “to get a PhD”. I think this is a fair comment, and it is understandable that although I was trying to develop an engaged process and involvement, this is part of a PhD and that can cause an amount of tension and a justifiable cynicism. However, this was an isolated incident and not indicative of the general reception I received from learners or indeed An Cosán, rather it was overwhelmingly warm and friendly.

Reciprocity with An Cosán

My commitment to engaging in robust and impartial research was paramount. Developing a positive, reciprocal relationship with An Cosán actually aided my ability to critically understand and document the degree programmes. By creating an openness and honesty with staff, management and learners in An Cosán, it enabled greater access to learners on the degree programmes whereby learners chose to participate, lessening the potential gatekeeper aspect of An Cosán management or

staff. Offering clarity on the outline of my research study fostered trust, which supported my ability to seek an objective, unhindered view of the degree programmes.

As part of my approach to inviting learners to interview, I was asked by An Cosán to provide a general presentation on research methodologies to learners as part of the degree programmes, each lasting approximately two hours. Of the four presentations that I was asked to give, three were in the form of a workshop.

This reciprocity is a feature of research processes that has elements of a transformative approach. The need for such was highlighted by Mertens (2009, p. 74) who cites Broom and Klein (1999) to emphasise that:

Reciprocity is necessary for healthy, trusting relationships. People need to feel that they are receiving as much valuable energy as they are giving. Determining reciprocity is a complex matter because people's ideas of equity and fair exchange usually involve varying ideas of right and wrong (or the rules that we use to determine what is fair or unfair).

Whilst balancing the needs of the organisation, I believed full disclosure and background to the research process would not compromise the results if anything they would provide prospective interviewees with enough information to be able to make an informed choice as to whether they wanted to participate in the interviews or not.

Phase 3: interviews with learners, management and tutors

Interviews were used as a primary source of data from the An Cosán case study as they are the foundation to qualitative research designs. A semi-structured interview format was chosen as it allows the researcher to pose specific pre-prepared question based on the research focus, and also facilitates people to answer on their own terms. The process of semi-structured interviews is also a method of a transformative model approach.

The purpose of the interviews was to answer the research questions relating to an articulation of the An Cosán model of higher education from a practice perspective, from learners, but also to frame it within policy by delving further into the characteristics of the model, through tutor and management interviews. As part of phase three of the fieldwork 18 interviews were carried out: ten learner interviews, three

tutor interviews and five management interviews; additionally, one learner focus group was conducted.

Interviews were carried out at a location of the participant's choice, which was mainly based on proximity to the interviewee. For learners, that was in a room in An Cosán, for tutors, it was outside of An Cosán, and for management, it was a mix of the two. Included in the term 'management' are: An Cosán Management, An Cosán Board of Directors, and an IT Carlow staff member. Due to the potential to compromise anonymity, I intentionally grouped these interviewees together and also as they have a management role in relation to the degree programme. Teaching management are differentiated in the data analysis as their view on the teaching and learning process at the classroom level is also included.

I developed a set of interview questions for each interview cohort (learner, tutor, management, policy maker and academic), see appendix 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 respectively. Common to all interviews, I asked what they would like from the research and if there were any other questions. I attempted to create a relaxed, informal environment to conduct the interviews by establishing a sincere rapport with the interviewee so to support an open, unhindered dialogue, whilst being consciously aware of the need for humility as points raised could be personal in nature.

Consent forms were discussed and signed prior to the day of interview, an outline of the interview questions given in advance of the interview, and a clear outline of research process provided at the start of the interview. Transcripts were sent to participants for final sign off and any amendments sought were made to the final transcript which was then coded. The majority of learner interviews took place in November 2013, with tutor interviews taking place over the course of the academic year (2013-2014), an outline is in appendix 1.

Learners were central to the fieldwork, as the validity of this research is based on giving voice to the learner and ensuring their voice is represented, valued and treated equally to other research participants, which I sought to do to the best of my ability. Furthermore, it was important to get the views of learners, which could be considered "non-majority communities" as their exclusion in the research process serves to "support the status quo and disallows challenges to power distributions" (Mertens, 2009, p. 72).

For learners, interviews were conducted to understand the An Cosán model in order to support its clear articulation and to provide valuable insight into their experience of the model in relation to access. Questions centred on: How and why they were engaging in the degree; level of learner engagement; how they feel in An Cosán and what they would like from the research.

A call for learners to participate in the research

Learners from both degree programmes were included (eight from the Leadership and Community Development degree and two from the Applied Addiction and Community Development degree). A call for participants in the research was made during inputs, and a letter and information sheet was disseminated via staff in the organisation. Furthermore, a learner took it upon themselves to post the call in their closed Facebook group.

This next set of interviews formed what can be seen as the broader shell of the fieldwork, at the centre is the learner, then the tutor, the management and the policy influences on the furthest level. As the research centres on two degree programmes, only tutors teaching on these programmes were invited to be interviewed. The interviews with practitioners (tutors) were used to explore An Cosán as an organisation, the approaches used in the teaching process in order to understand the An Cosán model, and the interaction with learners. It was vital to explore the pedagogic process, and the relationship with the tutor as knowledge development and the teaching process is central to supporting access, which is outlined in the literature review section of this thesis.

The interviews with management (some of whom also act as tutors) were used to explore: How the degree was developed; the An Cosán model and the collaborative partnership; community education for access; and the impact of national policy on practice.

Under the umbrella of ‘management’, in order to understand the model and how it differs from outreach, an interview was carried out with a senior staff member from Carlow IT. The focus was to understand the collaborative partnership; development of,

value and features of the degree; and the limitations of a community education approach to degree provision.

The learner focus group

This section outlines the process of the learner focus group, which was carried out with a selection of interested learner interviewees and served to offer a deepened analysis of the initial set of findings from the learner interviews. I had framed the main themes arising from the interviews and sought their views on each aspect; details of the process are outlined in appendix 9.

The decision to employ a focus group method can be attributed to its ability to enable a researcher to 'check back' with previously involved research participants; it can be usefully combined with, and enhance other methods; and additionally, it can be empowering for participants (Matthews & Ross, 2010). Furthermore, focus groups are useful in feminist research because of their compatibility with the ethics and politics of feminism (Bryman, 2016), thereby aligning to Mertens' transformative approach. Also, focus groups are in keeping with the aim to involve the community in the interpretation and analysis of the research as part of a transformative methodological approach (Mertens, 2009). The limitations of focus groups include the challenge for anonymity; however, the same rules apply for the researcher and a declaration at the start of the focus group to respect the privacy and anonymity of participants can go some way to mitigate the issue of anonymity (Matthews & Ross, 2010).

All learners who participated in an interview were invited to a focus group in An Cosán. By this time all fieldwork interviews had been transcribed, coded, the findings written up and an assembly of draft themes developed. In preparation, I contacted a learner who had agreed to participate and sought their assistance in hosting the focus group in An Cosán. Through our email communication, I outlined the aim and methodology of the focus group, and we agreed that the contact person, a learner, would start the focus group session with the opening circle, as is customary for all classes in An Cosán, which involved the reading of a poem of their choosing. The learner facilitated a check-in with each participant in the group, including myself, where we said how we were feeling that day. I was prepared to carry out the focus group, and after a round of

introductions, which involved each participant saying their name and their expectations for the focus group, I began the process.

In order to deepen the analysis, the focus group reviewed the themes which emerged from the learner interviews, which were outlined as a visual depiction, appendix 9. I described how I analysed and interpreted the codes that arose and asked focus group participants for their view on each aspect.

Initially, I was going to use the focus group to co-analyse the emergent themes in relation the literature review¹²; however, after a participant asked a question, I decided to change tack and ask for their views to interrogate the themes. Judging from their enthusiasm and interest in critically engaging with each theme, I thought it more in keeping with an authentic approach to tap into their expertise rather than limit it. What transpired was a rich group dialogue on the themes and their applicability to An Cosán. The focus group was recorded and transcribed. It was not coded using MAXQDA as it went sequentially through each theme previously documented.

Phase 4: access policy interviews

Beyond the An Cosán case study, two additional interviews were conducted in phase 4 of the fieldwork. In what Murtagh describes in the Irish policy context as “proximate policy-makers” (2009) a relevant public servant involved in access policy was interviewed to garner a broad sense of the access potential of the An Cosán model. Whilst only one was chosen, this is due to the relatively small scope of the policy area, it was a high-level national access policy maker. The purpose was to explore the development of National Access Plans, the current issues with access, target groups, policy drivers, and their view of the An Cosán model of higher education provision. The interview took place during the fieldwork and at the time of the HEA Access Plan (2008-2013). There was a gap between that and the next Access Plan (2015-2019), which was published in December 2015.

I interviewed Prof. Liz Thomas, who agreed to be named in the thesis, in order to gain her views on a framework I developed based on emerging themes from the fieldwork

¹² Literature which relate to a transformative approach to higher education access

and to explore if she knew of any other such examples of this model of higher education provision that is not based on a deficit approach.

Interview coding and analysis

Due to time pressures and family obligations associated with having a new baby, I asked a member of my family, who supported by their extensive legal secretary experience, to transcribe the interviews. The interviews were cleansed from transfer errors by “corrective listening” (Flick *et al.*, 2004). By listening to all interviews again, I reviewed all transcripts for accuracy; each had to be corrected because of contextual or acronym errors. In addition, I anonymised and sent each transcript to the interviewee for review, comments and proposed changes, all of which were made. No learners proposed any changes; other interviewees proposed changes in phrasing but not content.

All transcriptions, when approval was granted by the interviewee, were transferred to MAXQDA software for thematic analysis. Of course, software does not analyse data; this remains the task of the researcher but provides support in the form of a tool (Flick *et al.* 2004). Analytical techniques that are selected for semi-structured interviews within the framework of research depend on the goals, the questions and the methodological approach (Schmidt, 2004, p. 255). Whilst questions were designed to elicit a response in relation to the topic; it does not mean there is an exact correlation between the two (Schmidt, 2004, p. 254). I approached the coding process with an open manner to thematic analysis relating to the questions across all of the interview transcript. I read and reread the interview transcript a number of times whilst listening again to the recordings, consciously maintaining an openness of mind to analysing the text. Each interview was analysed via open coding, taking a line by line process from which categories emerged (Bohm, 2004). I drew mainly from Schmidt (2004) in terms of proposed coding processes for semi-structured interviews. Each interview was treated separately; the aim was not to find common categories but to build an initial bank based on each transcript.

The second phase was to assemble the categories into codes, by relating particular passages of text to one category, the usability is tested, and evaluated across interviews, the categories are refined or omitted as appropriate (Schmidt, 2004, p. 255) similar to Bohm (2004 p. 272). Each cohort of interviewees (learners, tutors, managers, policy

makers and academics) were coded in separate groups. I reviewed all quotes under the theme, and compared and contrasted the comments, building a narrative around quotes. I further condensed each quote, choosing which illustrated the point usefully in the findings chapters. I decided to keep large quotes for the findings as I believe it is in keeping the transformative approach in that the voice, particularly of the learners, needs to be clearly represented in the thesis. This draws on Mertens' approach to crystallisation as a method of validating results within a transformative research paradigm. Crystallisation uses "the metaphor of a prism (crystal)" to convey the multifaceted nature of knowledge, each participants' voice within the study can be considered a facet, which is listened to and valued by the researcher (Mertens, 2009, p.59). In the case of transformative research, it is more beneficial to listen to and value the participant's voice so that crystallization evolves over time, as understanding grows changes and alters.

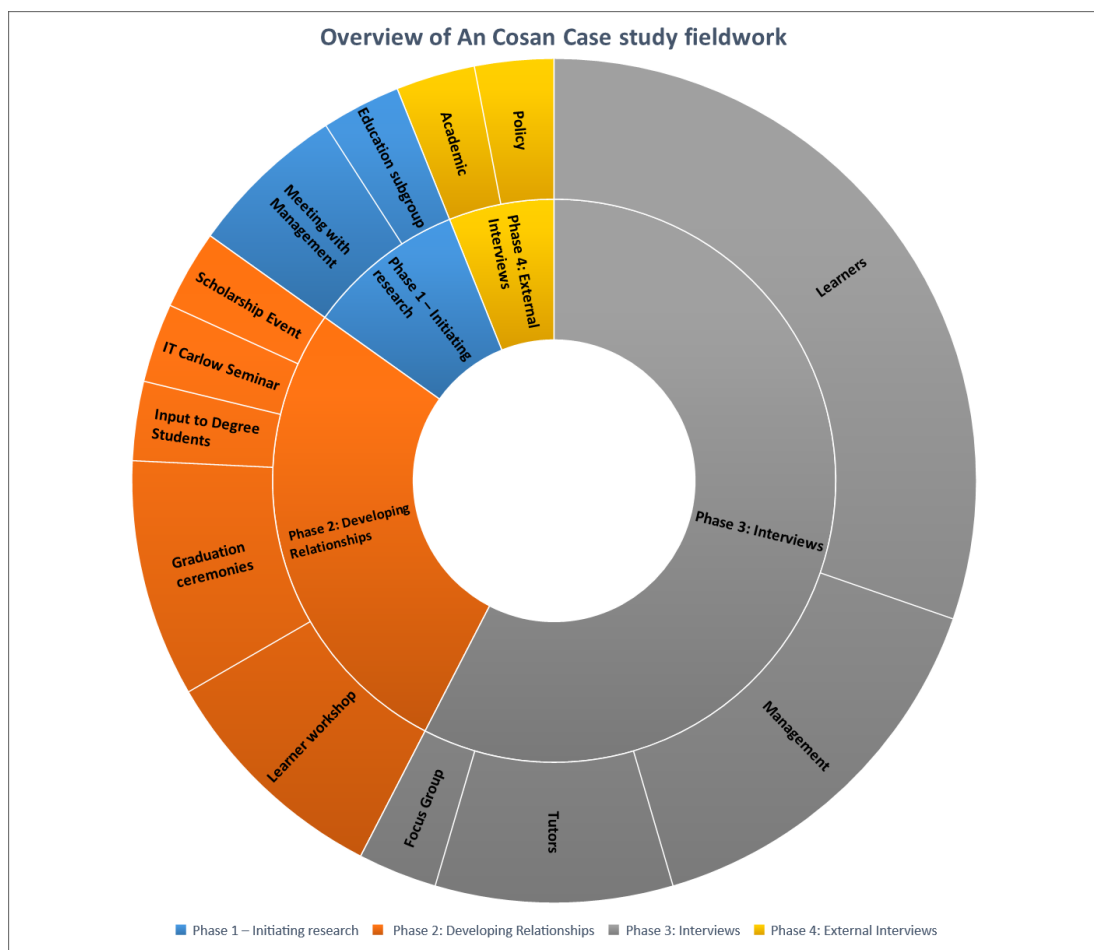


Figure 1 Overview of An Cosán Case Study

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were foremost in my mind when I approached the fieldwork. In my endeavour to take a more transformative approach to the research, I considered power relations between myself as researcher and the participants, particularly the learners. I considered how I could carry out reflexive interviewing as a feminist approach to the process (DeVault & Gross, 2012), in addition to a consciousness of non-verbal language whilst also striving to engage in active listening throughout the interview process. I was conscious that learners' experiences in An Cosán are bound to their life stories, and I had a duty of care and responsibility to ensure that through the interview process my engagement would be one of respect, attention, sensitivity and an appropriate level of informality that supported an authentic conversation.

Phase one of the research fostered a positive relationship between myself and the An Cosán management, resulting in an open, respectful and cooperative process. However, managing their expectations of the research and how it could contribute to providing an evidence base for their advocacy required ongoing effort. Due to the time-frame of the research, the immediate application of research outcomes was not possible, yet no issues arose as a result.

As part of Ethical Approval, a number of processes were put in place to ensure safe storage of data, informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality and anonymity. Ethical considerations were embedded in the research process. A clear outline of the research was provided via an information sheet, supplemented for learners by four inputs (one input and three workshops), supporting an informed decision regarding participation (details of which have been outlined earlier in this chapter). The information sheet, as outlined in appendix 10, provided details of: the title of the study; information about myself and research motivations; contact details; supervisor details; overview of the research; research process; what is required in the interview, an outline of the interview, confidentiality of data; outcome of study; if they decide to withdraw and a point about potential issues; and a link to the Ethics Committee in Maynooth University. All participants received a consent form, as per appendix 10, prior to the interview, which enabled the participants to review and the opportunity to ask questions. All interviewees signed the form prior to interview.

During the interview, confidentiality and the voluntary nature of the process was discussed, including timings and agreement of when the recorder (iPhone) was to be turned on and off. Challenges of research in communities can result in breaches in confidentiality (Kaiser, 2009), as part of ethical approval and informed consent, participants were assigned pseudonyms, some were gender-neutral as there were a small number of male interviewees.

As previously mentioned, in the findings, I collated management, board and IT Carlow interviewees into a common category of management in order to assure anonymity. As, at the request of interviewees, many interviews took place in An Cosán, during which time I intentionally refrained from disclosing why I was in An Cosán to staff or learners in order to support confidentiality within the organisation, this proved challenging, but I believe it was successful in the main.

I specifically asked the academic if she was happy to have her name used in the research as the conceptual framework I initially developed was strongly influenced by her work, Prof. Liz Thomas was happy to do so. Participants were told that I would send the interview transcript for review and it would not be used until I received confirmation. Although this delayed the process in many instances, all replied and gave approval which gave me reassurance that the transcript accurately reflected the interview, which is an ethical issue in itself.

Chapter conclusion

Four non-sequential phases of the fieldwork were carried out to develop the case study of the An Cosán model of higher education. As noted, efforts were made to implement elements of a transformative research methodological approach which involved considerable time being spent cultivating an open working relationship with An Cosán at various levels of the organisation.

Marrying the research paradigm with the research topic was important; therefore, an attempt to employ a transformative research paradigm (Mertens, 2010) was made. Yet, although careful consideration in meeting the axiological, epistemological and ontological requirements was made a truly transformative approach was not possible as the PhD thesis has a set purpose and a protracted engagement with the community

is not possible. Indeed, if it were to be truly transformative, all participants would have shaped the research plan, reviewed the questions and engaged in co-analysis of the data. Therefore, I would say elements of a transformative approach were used. That being said, the length of time taken to immerse myself in An Cosán was effective in providing insights into the organisational culture, enabling a good rapport with staff and learners thereby encouraging engagement and interest in the research.

Regarding the potential of this research to contribute to the access policy debate, there are limitations, perhaps due to a perceived lack of replicability and the dominance of quantitative data-informed policy. However, qualitative research can demonstrate a deep analysis of an education context, draw out the learner voice, and delve deeper into why adults participate in one particular model of higher education. Despite challenges and some limitations, this study can inform policy makers and researchers.

There has been immense learning for me over the course of this study that challenged my viewpoints and outlook on a multitude of levels. Rather than give an extensive list, I will name a number which relate directly to how I understand the research process. Firstly, my initial desire to apply a theory to a social context proved futile, in that the story had to evolve from the learners themselves in order to truly be authentic to their words. Furthermore, initial conceptions based on my perceived understanding of access and the potential of the An Cosán model to address access policy issues had to take a backseat as the learners' voice told the true story. This was an ongoing challenge throughout the research study, and indeed probably contributed, in part, to its extended duration. Even though I was wholly committed to a social justice-informed research process, my attempt to squeeze complexity into discrete theory hampered my ability to understand the research. However, ultimately it enabled me to move from my past scientific research approaches¹³ to that one that embraced authentic, robust and meaningful emancipatory social science process.

Additionally, I thought about the concept of privilege as something which is embodied, where learners who benefited least from the formal education system seem less likely to critique an education opportunity which they feel so lucky to have. This made me consider how to unearth critique from learners which may require a more protracted

¹³ My past educational experience is from the scientific disciplines (BSc Hons, MSc, PGDip Statistics)

engagement with learners, e.g. through biographical narrative approach. However, the research study does not aim to act as a review of the An Cosán model but to offer insights and a description of its characteristics. Finally, the experience also made me think about the concept of community education as multi-layered, not just between tutor and learner, but equally between learners which leads to collective growth.

Chapter 4 Analysis of National Access Policy

Introduction

In this study, we will explore the characteristics of the An Cosán model of higher education in order to consider its contribution to the national access policy debate. To set the policy context for the thesis, this chapter has four objectives. Firstly, to provide relevant historical information on educational inequality, stratified higher education participation rates and policy antecedents to current national access policy. Secondly, to detail the issue of persistent under-participation by some cohorts of society in higher education as articulated in the three National Plans for Equity of Access to Higher Education (HEA, 2004a; HEA, 2008; HEA, 2015). Thirdly, to critically review both the proposed policy approaches to addressing issues of access, which are predominantly from a deficit perspective, and consider the faulty foundations from which the first two access plans were developed. Finally, I close the chapter considering the potential role of the An Cosán model of higher education given the most recent Access Plan (HEA, 2015) as informed by the policy maker interview and the new approaches to access which are emerging.

To start the chapter, in order to provide a process for offering a deep analysis of the deficit discourse of access policy and how in practical terms this manifests as recommended approaches to access, I will draw on the work of Rogers (2004) and Jones and Thomas (2005), respectively.

Clarity on the concept of access

Firstly, to note, the concept of *access* in this thesis is used to describe the ability of a person traditionally marginalised, including from a lower socioeconomic background, to access, participate and complete their higher education course. Various terms are used to describes cohorts of the population who are the focus of national access policy: non-traditional (HEA, 2010), socio-economically disadvantaged (HEA, 2004a) and under-represented (HEA, 2018)¹⁴, the latter is most common but fails to acknowledge

¹⁴ In policy, the term 'non-traditional student' is used to describe a student who by their class, educational background, race, ethnicity, gender, dis (ability) are less likely to participation in higher education. In the Irish context non-traditional students, who are targeted for specific widening participation activities and funding are categorised by the Higher Education Authority

structural inequalities unlike terms used in Irish academia, legislation, advocacy and practice such as socio-economically marginalised groups (Downes, 2014) and educationally disadvantaged (The *Education Act*, 1998; AONTAS, 2016; An Cosán, 2016).¹⁵

Exploring Irish access policy – analysing the underlying discourses

To explore why access policy has had limited impact on persistent under-participation in higher education by some cohorts of the population, we can explore the dominant access approaches that informed, and are articulated in, the three national access policy plans over the period of 2005 to 2020.

To determine the potential contribution of the An Cosán model within the national access policy landscape, I am specifically seeking to channel thinking away from a deficit perspective of learners to one where the system shapes to the needs and aspirations of the learner. Before attempting to unpack national access policy and make space for a potential alternative model, I thought about researchers in the field that specifically focus on concepts of deficit both within a non-formal education context and in the field of higher education access policy. To understand discourses in access policy, I considered the *Discourse of Development in Education Framework* that Rogers (2004) developed and also the practical access policy concepts that determine what is carried out in HEIs to widen participation by Jones and Thomas (2005).

(HEA) as mature students, students with disabilities, travellers and target socio-economic groups (HEA, 2010, p. 3). ‘Under-represented’ is also used (DETE, 2002; HEA, 2015) to identify particular target groups: Entrants from socio-economic groups that have low participation in higher education; First time, mature student entrants; Students with disabilities; Part-time/flexible learners; Further education award holders; and Irish Travellers (HEA, 2015, p.27)

¹⁵ The *Education Act* (1998) defines educational disadvantage as ‘the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools’ which was also used by the now defunct Educational Disadvantage Committee. In relation to students in the formal education system educational disadvantage has been also been defined as: ‘a limited ability to derive an equitable benefit from schooling compared to one’s peers by age as a result of school demands, approaches, assessments and expectations which do not correspond to the student’s knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours into which (s) he has been socialised (as opposed to those to which (s) he is naturally endowed)’ (Boldt & Devine, 1998, p.10).

Understanding discourses in access policy

Discourses are essential for determining what we know and the limits of what is knowable (Crowther, 2000, p. 480). Therefore, in terms of reconceptualising possible approaches to access, exploring discourses is a useful way to open up one's view and unearth biases in policy, as the common sense view is constructed from unequal relations of power (Foucault, 1982), which generally represent the view of policy makers or educators rather than students (Crowther, 2000, p.480). Ball (1990) notes that:

Discourse provides a particular and pertinent way of understanding policy formation, for policies are, pre-eminently, statements about practice – the way things could or should be – which rest upon, derive from, statements about the world – about the way things are. (p. 26)

Therefore, one world view can be used to set limits on change, maintain privilege whilst offering “idealised solutions to diagnosed problems” (Ball, 1990, p. 26). We can consider the positioning of the prospective learner in access policy. Bernard described this in Irish access policy as the “site of focus” (Bernard, 2006), whereby access initiatives manifest themselves in a particular approach to widening participation, for example, if the individual is considered the subject for change then initiatives will address the perceived deficit through specific actions e.g. pre-entry supports, a framework of understanding can be applied.

In his book on *Non-Formal Education: Flexible Schooling or Participatory Education?* Alan Rogers offers the *Discourse of Development in Education Framework* (2004) which proposes three discourses that influence the kinds of actions taken to widen participation in education broadly: *deficit* which centres on the individual; *disadvantage* which focuses on structural barriers; and *difference* which values diversity, each of which will be described in this chapter. This framework can be used to explore the interacting *discourses* which influence policy recommended for widening participation (Rogers, email communication, 2011).

Of particular interest to this study, which is gaining greater prominence in the field of access, is the discourse of diversity. The discourse of diversity views the individual as the agent of their own development, rather than being the beneficiary of another's perceived notion of such (Rogers, 2004, p. 27). It also views the multiple nature of society whereby the identity and interests of groups are not homogenous, for example,

mature students are not a set group with the same features, rather they are complex and widening their participation in higher education cannot be approached by the implementation of a generalised solution. The diversity discourse identifies local self-determination through democracy and grassroots participation as the approach to fulfilling one's educational development which is very much in keeping with models of community education. The shift moves from what is lacking in an individual (deficit) or structural barriers (disadvantage) to the need for a plurality of approaches. Plurality is based on educational choice which is actively shaped, and controlled, by the individuals who are underrepresented in education manifesting in participatory activities and alternatives. This is also proposed in the work of Baker *et al.* (2004) as they state that "unless educationally disadvantaged groups, in particular, are involved in the planning and development process in education, other inequalities cannot be meaningfully challenged" (p. 163). The discourse of diversity values heterogeneity of higher education provision, which points to the potential of approaches such as the An Cosán model of higher education.

Although the diversity discourse seeks to involve under-participating groups in developing access initiatives and alternatives, its ultimate goal does not appear to centre on tackling societal inequality. Rather, individuals will realise their educational aspirations through a democratically informed diversity of provision, which in itself may result in actions for social change, i.e. it is an outcome rather than the immediate goal.

A UK research project explored access based on a discourse of diversity. In investigating this approach to widening participation in higher education, the New London Group explored the recognition of different individual subjectivities, rather than action to maintain or incorporate differences into a homogenous education system (New London Group, 1996, p. 71). The diversity approach is proposed, whereby the subjectivities, interests, intentions, commitments, and purposes which learners bring are attended to through a curriculum that caters for, and uses, such differences in the process of learning. Rather than approaching education from a deficit perspective that involves "writing over existing subjectivities with the language of the dominant culture" it seeks to draw on differences to shape "productive diversity, civic pluralism, and multi-layered lifeworlds" (New London Group 1996, p. 71).

Linking discourses to access approaches in policy and practice

In order to link Rogers' *Discourse of Development in Education Framework* to higher education access policy, a clearer link was needed and resulted in a synergy with the concepts proposed by Jones and Thomas (2005). Within their review of policy, Jones and Thomas draw out three specific strands in terms of the practical *approaches* to access which are taken by HEIs and are outlined in policy, which they applied when critiquing the access policies of the UK Government White Paper on Higher Education (2003). This is a helpful way to disentangle the focus of access policy approaches. Firstly, they describe an *academic* approach to access based on the work of other scholars (Ball, 1990; Williams, 1997), which attributes different participation rates to attitudinal factors; secondly, they describe a *utilitarian* approach which acknowledges the range of obstacles to access including the need for structural and curricular reform; and finally, their own concept *transformational* (Jones & Thomas, 2005) which highlights the need for access policy to focus on far-reaching structural change, including changing institutional culture.

In their work on higher education access policy, Jones and Thomas (2005) describe a “transformative approach to widening participation” which basically means approaches in access policy, or by HEIs, that seek broad structural change at institutional level. This concept is related to progressive adult education and radical notions for widening participation and is based on Robert Chambers' ideas of Participatory Rapid Appraisal (Chambers, 2004). In the Jones and Thomas (2005) description it states that a *transformative approach* to access requires: far-reaching structural change; is informed by under-represented groups; is concerned with creating an institutional culture that does not require the participants to change and perceives diversity as a definite strength (Thomas, 2002). This is in keeping with the work of Freire, and perhaps it is unsurprising that they used the term ‘transformative’, which can be confusing as transformative is often used in adult learning; however, in the context of this thesis, it solely relates to the approaches to access, not to be confused with transformative learning. In my interview with Prof Liz Thomas (appendix 8), when discussing potential models of access that have elements of a transformative approach, she was “not surprised” that I was considering the potential applicability of this term to a community education model of higher education.

However, few practice examples of a transformative approach to access have been documented, yet some HEIs show elements of this approach (fieldwork interview with Prof. Liz Thomas); one initiative includes the involvement of students from lower socio-economic groups in the governance activities at Queensland University of Technology (Australia) (Bland, 2001). A number of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds elected to a student council were tasked with representing the needs of underrepresented students in order to influence systemic change. In doing so the needs of the least advantaged became a normal feature of institutional planning (Bland, 2001, p. 199). However, adhering to only a number of the theoretical features of a transformative approach, it has been noted as a clear example by Jones and Thomas (2005). In Scotland, the LAST project has a number of similarities with the An Cosán model in terms of learner cohort, entry process, supports (personal, academic, financial), tutor cognisance of learners' realities, and it is also part-time (Tett, 2004). It also potentially exhibits elements of the aforementioned transformative approach to access. Although the learning context of the project is an elite HEI, learner data were also analysed using Bourdieu's concept of habitus. However, this described learners' experiences in the HEI, as opposed to this study, where the focus is the organisational habitus of An Cosán.

Relating to the *Discourse in Education Development Framework* (Rogers, 2004), although using the language of both the deficit and disadvantage discourse, I would propose that Jones and Thomas' transformative approach to access (2005) stems from a diversity discourse as it values diversity and proposes an education system which is informed by, and meets the aspirations of, under-represented individuals. This approach to learner engagement is in keeping with community education which, as will be described in the next chapter, enables access and retention in socio-economically disadvantaged communities.

Approaches to access based on a deficit or disadvantage discourse

Persistent under-participation in higher education by specific cohorts of society is a complex and multi-layered issue. Access policy generally focuses on rather simplistic approaches, and predominantly at a micro-level, i.e. how the individual can change to fit into the existing higher education system rather than address the complexity of

factors that impact on access. At meso/institutional level, much of the literature highlights the limiting impact of certain institutional practices. Additionally, at macro level, broader structural issues in society, such as the unequal distribution of resources resulting in poverty, have been attributed to issues of access but are not part of national access policy. The preponderant focus of access initiatives and policies on the individual rather than the institution or broader societal inequalities, the latter which manifests in unequal participation to education (Baker, Lynch, Cantillon & Walsh, 2004, p. 144), limits the potential of access initiatives to address educational inequality more broadly, thus necessitating a shift in focus beyond the deficit approach.

Perhaps due to the complexity of the access issue, simplistic, deficit-based approaches are favoured, foregoing actions concerned with broad systemic change. With persistent under-participation, a reality, a rethinking of access approaches is required. Moving away from the dominant deficit approach, that is limited, to more transformative approaches to access (Jones & Thomas, 2005) needs to be explored. Although much research acknowledges differential aspiration levels across social class (Clancy & Higher Education Authority, 1995; Lynch, 1999; Reay, 1998), the underpinning reasons cannot merely be attributed to deficits within an individual but the complexity of factors relating to access, from the positioning of individuals in society to how the individual interacts with higher education institutions.

In order to understand approaches to access, whether in HEIs or in policy, it is also worth taking time to explore the impact that a deficit discourse has on HEIs approaches to access. How access approaches are understood and operationalised by HEI staff is another issue (Stevenson, Clegg, & Lefever, 2010); however, the deficit discourse is mainly dominant in access policy, focusing on the lack within the person as opposed to institutional or societal factors which contribute to under-participation. This limited understanding of access narrows potential approaches. The deficit discourse uses the language of 'needs' to identify what an individual must have satisfied in order to participate in education (Rogers, 2004, p. 19) and frames the cause of non-participation around the individual (Crowther, 2000 p. 484). In effect, the individual is incorporated into the dominant system, rather than seeking to reform the institution, it seeks to reform the individual (Rogers, 2004), thus maintaining the orthodoxy. This also has an impact on how the individual views their ability, as the disempowering language of what is 'lacking' results in the silencing of the individual's own aspirations. As Lyn Tett

describes as the internalisation of the deficit discourse by individuals resulting in the undermining of self-esteem and “their sense of themselves as learners” (Tett, 2010, p. 52).

Attributing under-participation to an individual’s ‘lack’ of tools to succeed in an educational institution is problematic as “educational underachievement, lack of knowledge of the range of education and training opportunities, are not perceived as structural failures but rather issues of individual attitude or ability” (Tett, 2006, p. 30). Deficit discourses fail to consider the constraints in which individuals live and how structural inequalities manifest, e.g. in the reproduction of class divisions and the success/failure dichotomy inherent in the education system.

When reviewing national access policy identifying specific actions that stem from a deficit discourse is important so we can highlight not only the implications of this narrow view but also how alternative approaches to access do not surface, for example, the potential contribution of community education. Drawing on the work of Jones and Thomas (2005), they outline that access policy proposed solutions which are based on a deficit discourse manifest in a range of common approaches which can be termed *academic* (Ball, 1990; Williams, 1997). The *academic* approach has been specifically linked to the deficit discourse (Griffin, 1993) where the focus of academic access initiatives centres on the individual, rather than proposing institutional or curricular change (Quinn, 2004). The approach focuses on the requirement of externally identified compensatory interventions (e.g. access course) for addressing the perceived deficits in the individual (e.g. lack of academic preparedness) (Thomas, 2001). It also includes the common approaches to access such as awareness (information) and aspiration raising as it attributes the lower rate of participation by specific cohorts on the basis of attitudinal factors, i.e. a lack of, or low, aspirations.

It is not to say that academic approaches based on a deficit discourse are valueless; however, they are limited. The *academic* approach “ignores the complexity and multiplicity of obstacles facing people from lower socio-economic groups, and therefore, offers simplistic responses” (Jones & Thomas, 2005, p. 617). The approaches do not address the root cause for social inequalities which manifest in the unequal distribution of resources, rather initiatives seek to adapt underrepresented students to “adopt the behaviour and participation patterns of middle-class groups” so that “problems of poverty and exclusion will be eradicated” (McGivney, 2001 p. 33). In

addition to a lack of acknowledgement of structural barriers such as class or ethnicity, the academic approach is critiqued for acting akin to 'victim blaming' (Tight, 1998).

The *utilitarian* approach to access combines elements of both the disadvantage (which uses the language of 'barriers' to access) and deficit discourse. This approach to access focuses on the change needed to address the 'lack' within the individual, but it also acknowledges structural inequalities and proposes initiatives to counteract this. In practice, this approach speaks of compensatory activities, e.g. pre-entry activities (Thomas, 2001) and 'bolted on' actions of the institution to support the transition to higher education, e.g. mentoring, learning support mechanisms and stand-alone student services (Jones & Thomas, 2005, p. 618). Additionally, viewing access from this lens is limited as it has been proposed that this approach is rooted in an impetus for access in order to meet the changing demands of the economy (Jones & Thomas, 2005). Furthermore, it has also been suggested that the approach centres on neo-liberal logic which serves to reproduce social, cultural and economic exclusion whilst claiming to be against social exclusion (Burke, 2002). Again, unlike the transformative approach, the utilitarian approach does not focus on the empowerment of people, which is a hallmark of community education.

Overall, combining discourses and approaches to access offers a helpful method to critically analyse access policy, highlighting dominant approaches whilst making space for other potential alternatives such as the An Cosán model of higher education.

A history of educational inequality

The limited impact of national access policy, much of which is focused on HEI activities that address the perceived deficits of an individual (and will be explored in more detail later), cannot be viewed without consideration of embedded systemic educational inequalities. In Ireland, historically the unequal participation in education and measures for addressing social stratification across the Irish education system, including primary and secondary, have been a recurring issue.

Whilst it has been proposed that the impetus for mass education was based on its role for socialisation, the transmission of culture and selection for employment (Drudy & Lynch, 1993), social control and the desire for a compliant and obedient workforce (Bowles & Gintis, 1976 cited in Baker *et al.*, 2004) it has also been a site of struggle.

Historically, when primary education was limited for Catholics (Penal laws, through the *Education Act* of 1695, and the associated banning of Catholic schooling), illicit hedge schools emerged and remained until about 1870 (Coolahan, 1981, p. 8). Following the Stanley letter in 1831 (Stanley, 1831), funding of primary education commenced leading to a substantial increase in participation at State-supported primary level from 107,042 pupils in 1835 to 745,861 in 1900 (Coolahan, 1981, p. 8) with the Catholic Church garnering responsibility for primary school education of the majority and thus acting as the main moral educator of the nation (*ibid.*). Access to second level education remained beyond the reach of the poor and working class students; however, through the *Vocational Education Act* (1930) which resulted in the Vocational Education Committees (VECs), a system of non-denominational and unisex post primary vocational education enabled this cohort to avail of a “two year vocational post-primary education programme” (Coolahan, 1995, p. 12). The kinds of education afforded to working class students were limited to a vocational rather than general second level education as VECs were restricted in provision so as not to encroach on general education which was the preserve of clerical authorities (Coolahan, 1981).

Shocking revelations regarding pupil participation rates in second level schools (Coolahan, 1981) came to light, causing the Department of Education to conduct a review of the Irish education system in 1962. An all-male, non-clergy cohort headed up by Patrick Lynch in collaboration with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Murray, 2010) resulted in *Investment in Education* (1965) which is considered “one of the foundation documents of the modern Irish education system” (Coolahan, 1981, p. 165). Following analysis of a cohort of 55,000 pupils, it estimated that 17,500 left full-time education at primary level and 11,000 of these without having obtained the Primary School Certificate. Of the 37,500 who went on to second level 36 % left without a junior post-primary certificate. Furthermore, working classes and the poor fared worse as the most striking drop-out rate was in the aforementioned vocational sector where, from an entrance group of 16,000 to the two-year course, 44 % left without having sat for the Group Certificate (Coolahan, 1981). Overall, statistics across socio-economic groups demonstrated stark differentials in second level participation: students whose father was employed as a farmer, professional, senior employee etc. were four or five times more likely to participate in education than those from a skilled, semi-skilled, unskilled worker background. With such evident inequalities *Investment in Education* laid the foundations for future

education planning and policy and acted as the impetus for the introduction of free fees for second level education in 1967, the latter resulting in increased second level participation rates by 60% between 1967 (148,000) and 1974 (239,000). Unsurprisingly, the low second level completion rate by certain cohorts of the population led to a skewed proportion of students accessing higher level. The highly influential work of Pat Clancy concerning participation rates (Clancy, 1996, 1997, 1999; Clancy & Goastellec, 2007) has had a long and lasting influence on current research and access policy (Bernard, 2006). In his research on higher education access, prior to the introduction of free second level education (1967) the national participation rate in higher education was 11% in 1965, of which 85% were from students whose family backgrounds were farmers, professionals and clerks. Furthermore, before 1965 the higher education system had little in the way of diversity of provision as it was dominated by the university sector (78% of all full-time enrolments), (Clancy, 1997, p. 87) leading to fewer higher education options for prospective students.

Policy changes to promote greater participation in education were not always welcomed. The introduction of State support for secondary education provision by Fianna Fáil Minister for Education, Donogh O'Malley, was not well received by Catholic leaders who were cautious of such State intervention in the private and relatively autonomous secondary school system where access was only for middle and upper classes who were capable of financial contributions. Although free second level education had been proposed as far back as 1878 (*Intermediate Education Act*), when it came into effect, it did not result in an equitable second level system as the educational needs and aspirations across social classes were perceived very differently by Church leaders who decided the level of education that the poor and working classes were entitled to as they were considered a "self-perpetuating sector of society for whom a limited education in literacy and numeracy was deemed sufficient" (Coolahan, 1981, p.55). This top-down determination reinforced educational inequality across social class and unsurprisingly mass second level education did open the gates to higher education for all.

Academic or liberal second level education, the currency to gain access to higher education, was mainly the preserve of middle and upper middle classes as lower social classes received a vocational education thus automatically impacting their ability to access higher education. This stratification was created as financial capacity remained

a factor in gaining a liberal education as established fee-paying schools offering an academic education opted out of the State-funded second level process (Coolahan, 1981). Hannan and Boyle charted the link between religious order, social background of students and the kind of provision offered (1987), this study was drawn on for a PhD study on elite schools in Ireland (Courtois, 2012 verbal communication). Lower social class students went to gender segregated schools run by such orders as the Irish Sisters of Charity, Sisters of Mercy and the Christian Brothers; lower middle and middle class to schools run by the Presentation Sisters, De La Salle Brothers, Holy Faith Sisters and Presentation Brothers; and the upper middle to schools run by Loreto, St Louis Order, Order of Jesus and Holy Ghost Fathers. Thus the secondary educational experience across social groups was markedly different, mainly liberal for middle class students of elite school through to religious and vocational education for working class students (Courtois, 2012 unpublished). The role of state schooling in stratifying students has been noted by a number of authors (e.g. Baker *et al.*, 2004; Illich, 1971; Rogers, 2004) and in the case of Ireland, social class stratification was embedded in second level education.

Liberal education gained by higher social classes carried prestige as it relates to the socio-economic position of an individual as outlined above but its intrinsic features links to freedom: “liberal education was the education of a free man of independent means who did not need to use it to earn a living” (Sanderson, 1993, p. 189); focused on a cultivation of mind rather than instrumental knowledge as outlined in the acclaimed essays on higher education by John Henry Newman, where he stated “liberal knowledge which stands on its own pretensions, which is independent of sequel” (Newman, 1852, cited in Sanderson, 1993, p. 189); and is a dialogical educational process, which leads to what could be considered critical analysis rather than indoctrination (Strauss, 2003, cited in Fennell & Simpson, 2008). The second level vocational education of the poor and working classes limited freedom to progress to higher education and it had little, or no, transfer value and was either used to provide competence in an individual to engage in work “the aim is, not intellectual excellence for its own sake, but competence at work” at “home and in the community” as discussed by Pring (1995), or more ominously as a class-based solution invented by capitalist businessmen and industrial managers to consolidate their power over the emerging corporate capitalist economies (Spring, 1972; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Violas, 1978, cited in Benavot, 1983).

Vocational second level education locked the poor and middle class out of the more prestigious academic-type education and the associated employment opportunities, which led to advanced educational and white-collar employment opportunities (Coolahan, 1981). Financial capital was a factor, historically, if you lacked money or had failed to make the entrance exam to secondary school a VEC education could be undertaken. Society viewed this poorly funded vocational education as second rate in that “dull or under motivated pupils” attended these schools and stayed at ‘the Tech’ until something better came along (Coolahan, 1981, p. 103). As an aside, the largest provider of vocational education, the Education and Training Boards (ETBs), through the amalgamation of VECs and FAS training centres in 2014, still battle such negative perceptions as highlighted in policy with the “status of further education” being one of the five goals of the *Further Education and Training Strategy (2014-2019)* (SOLAS, 2014). This top-down, broadly paternalistic determination of the kinds of education made available across social classes is in itself a deficit model of education, embedding perceived deficits of the poor and working class and limiting their educational potential.

Participation rates post- 1967, an impetus for access policy

Post-1967 higher education access expanded, provision diversified, and research into differentiation in participation rates across social groups resulted in a basis for access policy development. It is worth noting that gendered differences in the overall participation rates were also studied, for example in 1977/78, the university participation rate for males was 20% higher than that for females (Kellaghan & Fontes, 1980). The abolition of fees for second level education had an impact on higher education participation; however, views on how it contributed to greater educational equality at higher level differed.

Noting changing demographics, in this case increasing birth-rate (between 1960 to 1980), the higher number of students completing the Leaving Certificate (Clancy, 1997) had greater significance in terms of higher education participation rates:

Rising retention rates at second level have been a remarkable feature of developments over the past two decades ... Thus, while there was an increase in the birth rate of some 11.5 % between 1960

and 1976, there was an increase of 65 percent in the numbers taking the Leaving Certificate between 1978 and 1994.(Clancy 1997, p. 90)

The number of students sitting the Leaving Certificate increased by 65% between 1978 and 1994, thus opening up the possibility to access higher education. The expansion was met by a more diversified system of HEI provision, mainly through technical higher education institutions, and legitimised, in large part, by the needs of the economy as changing labour force needs acted as a “powerful stimulus” for higher education provision (Clancy, 1997, p. 87). Technical higher education institutes started to become a bigger player in higher education provision, from 5.5% of enrolments in 1967/68 to 39% in 1992 (Clancy, 1997, p. 88). Higher education participation increased greatly between 1967/68 to 1992/3, with a four-fold increase in enrolments, although universities accounted for an increase of 179% of enrolment, proportionally it had decreased compared to other higher education providers (*ibid.*). Universities did not meet the level of expansion at the same rate as other HEIs and Institutes of Technology had a greater proportion of students from lower socio-economic groups, which remains today (HEA, 2019).

Enrolments were used as a measure of higher education participation over this time; however, this was problematic as it does not capture repeat students, or differentiate between full and part-time students, or those who have a higher education qualification going overseas. In order to get a better picture of the true level of higher education participation, Clancy captured the levels of participation in the first year of a full-time higher education through a national survey with the following results: 15% in 1980 to 20% in 1996 and 36% in 1992 (Clancy, 1997, pp.90-91).

In terms of socio-economic background of students entering higher education institutions in 1992, Clancy uncovered differential participation rates by using a method for determining the number of entrants into higher education against the total number of the population at the same age range – giving a national participation rate for each socio-economic cohort. This is significant as it has had an immense impact on how we measure participation rates and is the basis for national access policy targets. In 1992, 38% of new entrants to higher education were from higher socio-economic groups, but only 21% of the population of that age group were from these social groups. Therefore, higher socio-economic groups were over-represented in higher education. The converse was true for lower socio-economic groups in that they made up 35% of

entrants but were under-represented in higher education as they made up 56% of the population in that age range. It is worth noting that the socio-economic group was determined for entrants based on their father's occupation and his method regarding the identification of social class received critique, which will be discussed later.

Between the period of 1980 to 1992, Clancy (1997) proposed that inequality in access between classes had significantly reduced, others (Smyth, 1999) claimed that no overall reduction in social inequalities in third level could be assumed as the two sources of data used by Clancy (CSO and student questionnaires) was limited, and the now-defunct School Leavers' Survey offered a different picture.

At this point, I will pause to reflect on the emerging shaky ground from which access policy is built. Not only are there issues that the source of quantitative data used to inform policy making was flawed, measuring third level educational inequalities in policy through quantitative analysis of 'target groups' has been contested (Bernard, 2006). It only gives one perspective and fails to capture the complexity of the issue, including structural inequalities, thereby limiting not only our understanding but setting a basis that provides no direction of how it should or could be addressed. This gets to the heart of this research study and the potential of the An Cosán model, as it is informed by the community it seeks to serve rather than a top-down determination of need. The issue of target groups and measurement will be discussed within a broader umbrella of the impact of neoliberalism on education policy later in this chapter.

To demonstrate the differing perspectives of participation based on quantitative data at this early stage, when comparing changes between 1980 and 1992, from the highest admission rates group (higher professional and employer/managers) to the lowest admission rates (semi-skilled and unskilled manual), Clancy proposed that there was "a reduction in inequality" by 22%" over this time period (Clancy, 1997 p. 98). However, the validity of the conclusions came into question as they were based on different data sources which were used for the 1980 and 1992 (the former (1980) from the Central Admissions Office (CSO) and the latter from a questionnaire sent to students which captured more detailed information on social background). Also, in 1992, the School Leavers' Survey researched the progression of students who left second level education in the next academic year and assigned social class based on either a mother or father's occupation. The result from this survey, showed a steadier increase in participation

rates across social classes compared to the research offered by Clancy, leading to some calls of an overinflated perception that the equality gap was narrowing:

The HEA data indicate only very slight increases between 1980 and 1986 in third-level participation among those from a manual background but rapid expansion in rates between 1986 and 1992. In contrast, the school leavers' surveys indicate a steady increase in participation over the early 1980s, in line with expanding third-level provision, within all social class groupings. (Smyth, 1999, p. 281)

The School Leavers' Survey made a number of findings regarding progression to higher education, the first that an increase in the proportion completing Leaving Certificate level was evident for both males and females and there was a decline in those leaving without qualifications in the early 1990s (Smyth, 1999). This change is reflected in all social class groups however the rate of second level completion among the professional groups was high, with the vast majority of whom completing the Leaving Certificate the rates of early leaving were highest among the manual, especially the unskilled manual:

Among the 1994 cohort, over one-tenth of young men from unskilled manual backgrounds leave school without sitting any formal examination while this is the case for fewer than 1 % of those from higher professional backgrounds. (Smyth, 1999, p. 272)

Again in 1994, Smyth noted the persistence of substantial class differences in third level participation with over two-thirds of those from higher professional backgrounds attending third-level institutions compared with 15 % of those from an unskilled manual background (Smyth, 1999, p. 279). Concluding that:

In the absence of substantive changes (such as a rapid decrease in income inequality) and more especially in the context of a lack of change in the relative pattern of participation at second-level, it appears that no overall reduction in social inequalities in access to third-level education can be assumed. (Smyth, 1999, p. 282)

Despite differing views on the extent of higher education inequality, the new research data and methodology by Clancy provided the main basis for access policy which began to clearly take shape in the early 1990s.

Antecedents to national access policy

In addition to the legislative Acts (appendix 11) which outline the need for higher level institutions to develop policies for widening participation, a range of national public policies was developed in the period spanning 1992 leading up to the first National Access Plan, *Achieving Equity of Access to Higher Education in Ireland* (2005-2008) (HEA, 2004a).

In terms of widening participation to become more representative across social classes, the *Green Paper on Education, Education for a Changing World* (DES, 1992) identified specific actions for widening participation in higher education: greater links with designated schools and the development of programmes to increase access and improve retention. The *White Paper on Education, Charting our Future* (DES, 1995), additionally included HEI access activities of awareness-raising for students and parents from lower socio-economic groups, and proposed a nationally coordinated collaborative approach between the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and higher education institutions, setting in motion a national approach to access policy. Differential patterns of participation in higher education across social class were noted in the HEA *Steering Committee on the Future Development of Higher Education* (HEA, 1995), a detailed analysis of which was conducted by the ministerially appointed Commission on the Points System resulting in a range of proposals (quotas, supports and flexible learning systems) for increased participation by mature students and students experiencing educational disadvantage (DES, 1999).

Influenced by EU policy trends in both employment (DETE, 2002) and education, since the start of 2000 policy had shifted towards a lifelong learning agenda. At this time the *Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999* established the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) as a method for supporting an individual's seamless transition through accredited learning and progression from further to higher education. The *White Paper on Adult Education* (DES, 2000) consolidated the concept of progression to higher education by proposing a number of measures, both financial and institutional, for facilitating a culture to embrace and increase mature student participation.

The HEA commissioned an influential study *Access and Equity in Higher Education* (Skilbeck & Connell, 2000). By drawing on international practice and trends and taking

an all-encompassing view of equity in education, it called for actions at all levels of the education system to address the issue of underrepresented groups in higher education. The move to develop a national body for coordinating, strengthening and intensifying initiatives for widening participation was proposed by the *Report of the Action Group on Access to Third-Level Education* (DES, 2001), resulting in the establishment of the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education (Access Office) in the HEA, in 2003. In the same year, the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) was established, later becoming an element of access policy by focusing its attention on this tool as a means was to enable progression to higher education.

In other areas of public policy, the importance of lifelong learning for economic growth and responding to the needs of a new post-industrial employment market emerged. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, in collaboration with the Department of Education and Science, created a Taskforce on Lifelong Learning and in its report highlighted the need for greater higher education access by underrepresented groups; the need to reform the fees system for part-time students; the value of the NFQ for education progression; whilst also mapping out educational attainment of the workforce (DETE, 2002).

Resulting in the *Report of the High-Level Group on University Equality Policies* (HEA, 2004b), the HEA reviewed equality policies implemented by universities under their statutory obligations regarding equality, mainly those set out in Section 36 of the *Universities Act 1997*. Recommendations included: the need for data collection; performance outcomes of access programmes; training of institutional staff; promotion of more equitable employment procedures in universities and a recommendation that the Access Office should initiate “the national strategy on access to universities and third level institutions” (HEA, 2004b, p.57).

The genesis for the first national strategy, *Action Plan on Achieving Equity of Access to Higher Education in Ireland 2005-2007* (HEA, 2004a), was an evaluation of all HEA funded access initiatives carried out by higher education institutions published in the report *Towards a national strategy – Initial review of HEA targeted initiative to widen access to higher education* (HEA, 2004c). This pivotal document shaped national access policy but also, to an extent, perpetuated what has traditionally been understood as good practice in access initiatives, rather than seeking innovative new access initiatives such as grassroots community education responses to higher education inequality.

The access issue: persistent under-participation in higher education

A crucial issue for national access policy is the persistent under-participation of certain cohorts of the population in higher education, and this remains an issue today, particularly for socio-economic target group access policy defined as ‘*semi/unskilled manual worker group*’ and ‘*non-manual*’ and mature students. Furthermore, the reduction in policy targets appears to reflect the consistent issue of the limited impact that access policy has had on underrepresented groups. Given the range of approaches undertaken to widen participation in the past decade and the many positive impacts, particularly with the yearly increases for people with a disability in full-time undergraduate programmes (AHEAD, 2017) at a participation rate of 6% in 2015 (HEA, 2015), persistent inequalities exist. Addressing this issue calls for an analysis of access policy and the need to explore models of higher education that engage persistently underrepresented groups. The An Cosán higher education model could play a part in addressing the limitations of the current higher education offerings. Particularly for part-time, one-parent families, first-time mature students from socio-economically and educationally disadvantaged communities.

National access plans, and their associated reviews, focusing solely at widening participation in higher education have been produced by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) which set out the overarching national access policy framework: *Achieving Equity of Access to Higher Education in Ireland; Action Plan 2005 – 2007* (HEA, 2004a); *National Plan for Equity of Access, 2008-2013* (HEA, 2008); *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008-2013: Mid-term Review* (HEA, 2010); *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019* (HEA, 2015); and *Progress Review of the National Access Plan and Priorities to 2021* (HEA, 2018).

The first two access plans have been explicitly built on existing HEI approaches to access mainly centring on deficit methods for the incorporation of educationally disadvantaged students into the HEI system as outlined in two HEA research reports which will be explored in detail. The resultant access policy within a neoliberal context reinforces deficit thinking on issues of access centring on functionalism, status attainment, stratification and rational choice theory which has had limited impact on supporting working class students into higher education. This creates a gap in how policy approaches enable access as they predominantly focus on deficit type

approaches and fail to consider the potential of different models, such as community education provision.

National access targets across the three access plans

From 2004 to 2018, over the course of three National Access Plans (HEA, 2004a, 2008 and 2015) and one Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) commissioned research report specifically focusing on the 'non-manual' target group (McCoy *et al.*, 2010), the participation rate for this cohort has remained stagnant: it dropped from an estimated 27% in 2004 (HEA, 2004a, p. 59) to 23% in 2015 (HEA, 2015, p. 35) and has returned to 27% in 2016/2017 (HEA, 2018, p. 18). Initially, ambitious targets were set for the non-manual cohort across National Access Plans, but have been reassessed and reduced over time, for the second Access Plan, *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education* (HEA, 2008), the target for the non-manual cohort was set at 37% for 2010, with incremental targets of 42% by 2013 and 54% by 2020 clearly set out (HEA, 2008, p. 60). The subsequent *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019* (HEA, 2015), reduced this target to 30% (HEA, 2015, p. 35), but revised to 32% for 2021 (HEA, 2018, p. 43).

For the second target group: termed 'semi/unskilled manual worker group', the participation rate in 2004 was 33% (HEA, 2004a, p. 59), in 2015 it dropped to 26%, it increased to 36% in 2016/2017 with a target of 35% for 2019, increased to 40% for 2021 (HEA, 2018, p.43). Demonstrating some improvement. In practical terms, the latest combined target translates for both socio-economic target groups (semi-skilled and non-manual) to 1,500 students over 5 years, modest compared to a total of 43,569 students entering full-time higher education per year (2016/2017) (HEA, 2018, this target has been maintained until 2021 (HEA, 2018).

Initially, access plans focused on full-time mature students as a target group. Target rates for whom increased from 2004 to 2013: from 9% in 2004 to 13% in 2006 (HEA, 2005), to 17% for 2010 and 20% for 2013 (HEA, 2005, p. 61 and HEA, Mid-term review, p. 3) then reducing to a lower target of 16% in 2015. Again the less ambitious targets perhaps influenced by the stagnation of the actual rates of full-time mature student participation which stood at 13.6% in 2010 reducing to 13% in 2015. Current participation rates for first-time mature (full-time) students is only 9% (HEA, 2018, p.

18). In the Irish context, it has been proposed that the linear, narrow, sequential pathway from school to higher education has contributed to one of the causes of under-participation by mature students: “there are limited opportunities for alternative entry points for adults generally in the system. This is one of the reasons why Ireland has amongst the lowest mature student participation in higher education in the industrialised world” (DES, 2000, p. 138). Also, there are limitations, e.g. NFQ awards attained in this manner are not always relevant for application purposes and are generally limited in number and course choice. The current Access Plan target of 10% using an NFQ award is beyond the 2016/2017 rate of 7.3% despite also being a national policy issue in the *FET Strategy* (2014-2019, (SOLAS, 2014)). Recently, FET learners voiced their concerns regarding the lack of, clear, non-discriminatory progression paths from further to higher education (AONTAS, 2018a).

With a growing realisation that part-time, flexible provision is a more appealing mode of higher education provision for mature students a combined full and part-time mature student participation target of 27% for 2013 was set (HEA, 2015) aiming to bring it up from the actual rate of 18% in 2006. For the third Access Plan (HEA, 2018), the reduced target for the combined rate was 24% with an actual rate in 2015 of 19% (HEA, 2015, p. 25) which has dropped further to 16% for the period 2016/2017 (HEA, 2018, p. 18). Thus, the freefall in first-time mature student participation rates at both full and part-time, and the lowering of access policy targets, has further compounded the need to seek effective approaches for engaging these learners. Although the lowering of unemployment rates and changing context has influenced full-time take up, in spite of increased Governmental funding for part-time provision aimed at tackling unemployment, by way of the Springboard funding initiative in 2011, participation is still low.

Why hasn't national access policy made a greater impact?

At macro level, societal inequalities impact on large scale educational opportunities as those economically disadvantaged have fewer resources such as housing, health, transport, childcare, welfare, employment and finance (Lynch, 2018). The intersectionality of disadvantage exacerbates issues of access based on race, ethnicity, sexuality and disability (*ibid.*). While Ireland has a typical level of income inequality in relation to other countries, the gross income inequalities are quite high (TASC, 2019),

and has the highest rate of low pay in the EU 15 which disproportionately impacts women. Within the context of this study, the level of deprivation in West Tallaght is significant. A limiting factor at macro level for reaching access policy targets is the understanding that:

Equal opportunity is impossible so long as privileged people can deploy their economic and cultural advantages on behalf of themselves and their families – as they will surely continue to do, so long as the consequences of success and failure are so spectacularly different. (Baker (2003) cited in Baker *et al.*, 2004, p. 41).

Economic inequality in society impacts strongly on the likelihood of individuals participating successfully in the education system as those with financial resources, which can be converted to cultural capital, increase their advantage in this competitive system (Baker *et al.* 2004). Additionally, resources not only relate to financial support, but also other aspects of education processes, as outlined by Baker *et al.* (2004) such as selection and admission, grouping and tracking, curriculum assessment and linguistic intelligences. If you are living in poverty, in an area of disadvantage access such as West Tallaght, the case study of An Cosán invokes the need for initiatives to be broad and holistic. Offering simplistic solutions from a deficit position such as increasing information and aspiration raising activities in the hope that it will enable people to make the choice to enter higher education have a limited impact. Contributing factors impeding access cannot be merely attributed to the individual or institution but rather are a result of the unequal distribution of resources in society (Reay, 2012; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Therefore, access is tied to economic and cultural advantage and to individualise the issue fails to acknowledge the broader context.

As Reay emphasises, “educational inequalities are inextricably bound up with social inequalities and cannot be addressed in isolation from them” (2012, p. 587); therefore, in order to explore the factors contributing to the under-participation of certain cohorts of society in higher education, a holistic approach is required. Rather than merely “tinkering with an unjust education system” (*ibid.*), far-reaching changes are needed.

Financial constraints impeding access

Economic constraints have been identified in access literature as a significant factor in educational access, choice and retention. In an Irish research study by Lynch and O’Riordan (1996), economic constraints which are independent of education in terms of origin, but which impact directly on educational decisions, was cited as one of three impediments to accessing higher education, the other two being institutional and cultural issues. The impact of poverty on education is manifested in a variety of ways: lack of extra tuition; lack of an appropriate study environment; and educational resources; the need for part-time work; and the pressure to secure employment as soon as possible (Lynch & O’Riordan, 1998). Their research noted that “all four groups (students, teachers, parents and community workers) regarded economic barriers as the over-riding obstacle to equality of opportunity defined in terms of equality of access and participation” (Lynch & O’Riordan, 1998, p. 454).

Equality of opportunity is understood by liberal egalitarians as defining equality in terms of “individuals rather than groups; while they vary between conservative liberal and left-leaning liberals, they all subscribe to the view that equality of opportunity means that people should in some sense have an equal chance to compete for social advantages” (Lynch, 2018). There is an assumption that inequality is endemic to society; equality of opportunity is about equalizing the distribution of educational (and life) chances within an unequal society (Baker *et al.*, 2004).

Likewise, in a study of working class participating and non-participating students, the cost of higher education participation was cited as a “major deterrent for potential working-class and mature applicants” (Hutchings & Archer, 2001, p. 77). In that study, all focus groups noted the reality of financial constraints that working class students experienced. However, there was also a high level of financial misinformation which led many students to overestimate the cost of participating in higher education, and some were ill-informed about their financial support entitlements (*ibid.*).

As with other access issues, economic constraints must be viewed more broadly. Linked to financial constraints, and to some extent aspirations and choice, is the value placed on higher education, in terms of the relative return for investing time and money; this differs as social classes assess the value of participating in higher education with regard to financial risk, which is greater for lower social groups (Archer & Hutchings, 2000).

Accepting this risk is dependent on one's perception of opportunity that educational qualifications provide in terms of obtaining a better paying, more satisfying job (slightly gendered towards men) or being a 'better' person for social rather than economic or instrumental reasons (gendered towards women) (Archer, 2003, p. 123). Additionally, participation in higher education involves the build-up of significant debt in addition to challenges of juggling part-time work, academic and family commitments (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003, p. 608). In the Leathwood and O'Connell longitudinal study on working class students in English higher education institutions, such issues emerged; however, it was noted that debt does not impact on all students equally.

More recently, Diane Reay's work has also explored the impact of debt on life after higher education for working class students, who for a range of reasons (e.g. social networks and HEI status participated in) do not appear to derive as much benefit from higher education in career opportunities as middle class students (Reay, 2017). This is further impacted on by a heavy debt burden (*ibid.*).

Limitations of deficit approaches to access

Issues still remain in access as the "stubborn persistence of social background determining both the extent of access and the types of higher education to which access is being accorded" (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007, p. 138). Given the complexity of the access issue, to illustrate deficit-based approaches that are used in HEI policy and practice I will provide a critique of examples of such to highlight their limitations in addressing access namely, awareness and aspiration raising.

Aspiration raising activities have been a common access approach designed to compensate for the perceived lack of aspirations amongst underrepresented groups which is based on a deficit discourse. This is perhaps unsurprising as such approaches are more easily implemented compared to addressing the aforementioned challenges at macro and institutional level. Aspirations and decision making can be viewed as comprising a complex process of feelings and emotions, experience, access to information and guidance, perception of opportunity available, family background, class and gender (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). In exploring the concept of aspiration formation, Bourdieu's concept of habitus has been used as a tool to understand the

impact of familial and individual habitus, which is composed of external influences such as school, on the aspirations of individuals (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997; Reay, 1998). Aspirations and the associated choices an individual make are intrinsically linked to social class, race and ethnicity which is mediated through an individual's social and cultural capital resulting in differential participation rate across courses and educational institutions of varying prestige (Reay *et al.*, 2005). Similarly, one critic of this access approach proposes that aspirations are not individually formed but are related to the interaction of a number of concepts including identity, social positioning, institutional influences and personal biographies (Burke, 2009b). As a result, such a singular approach has limited value.

However, it is not to say that aspiration raising activities are rendered useless as they come from a deficit perspective. Such approaches by HEIs have communicated higher education opportunities to disadvantaged communities and through pre-entry access activities in schools links between HEIs and the community have been built. However, the issue of aspirations is complex, drawing on Bourdieu, aspirations also relate to a belief in what is possible; therefore, activities that support notions of what is possible, communicated in culturally appropriate language set in a context of potential could be better placed. An example of aspiration-raising that is not within a deficit context is the promotion of educational opportunities through learners' own stories which, written in their own words, document relatable narratives that include resonating structural issues regarding routes to higher education. An example of which was developed by AONTAS (2016) which documented learner stories in their own words from a range of contexts.

In the literature, the lack of information regarding higher education opportunities has been proposed as one of the main explanations for the under-participation of lower socio-economic groups (Gilchrist *et al.*, 2003, p. 93), resulting in HEI access initiatives that focus on information and awareness-raising. A simple increase in information will not directly lead to widening participation, rather the literature points to a number of factors. In the UK, Gewirtz (2001) explores policy which centres on the need to provide information regarding higher education opportunities within a complex set of parameters which relate to social class. Information is not neutral; it can be print, it can be word of mouth; it is understood differently, and is linked to social networks for knowledge and understanding of the higher education system.

Additionally, it has been proposed that for the majority of higher education students there is no moment of decision with regards to going to college; they always expected to go to third level education, and no university is ruled out based on how they would feel within in it; this is not true of working class students (Hutchings, 2003, p. 97). It is not merely a case of offering information, interpretation and use of 'rational' information by working class students is not applied without the influence of 'hunches' in what Bowe *et al.* describe as "landscapes of choice" (1994). Socially embedded networks of information which lead to education choice have been described in terms of being 'hot', i.e. word of mouth, or 'cold,' i.e. information produced by education institutions (Ball & Vincent, 1998). Cold knowledge is provided by official, governmental or HEI sources (*ibid.*) including prospectuses, which can be perceived as having a vested interest, serving the interest of the HEI (Archer *et al.*, 2003). This information differs across social class and how it is used; it has been proposed that middle class students not only have more (cold) information about higher education but also hot knowledge on the topic has a greater currency and exchange value for them than for their working class counterparts (Reay *et al.*, 2005, p. 157). Educationally disadvantaged students may have an over-reliance on hot knowledge and is oftentimes an unreliable source of information on educational options (Ball & Vincent, 1998).

Furthermore, information is not neutral; it is presented and understood differently depending on perceptions of the information provider, in addition to contextual and identifying factors (Hutchings, 2003, p. 98). In practical terms, this means that people having access to identical information about higher education may come to different decisions regarding their learning projections. Besides variations in interpretations of information, working class groups may be less-informed as a result of having less exposure to family members or friends who experienced higher education; they have less relevant cultural capital (Reay *et al.*, 2005, p. 154); and less information on higher education is made available by schools and further education colleges to working class (Reay, 1998, p. 522).

Higher education institutions and information providers generally provide 'cold' information, prospectuses, and via their website; however, there is a need to share hot knowledge through inputs from past students of underrepresented groups. The lack of appropriate information appears to have a significant impact on a working class student's capacity to make an informed decision. Information is undoubtedly

important, but there is also a need to acknowledge that information needs to be culturally relevant as some cohorts are inherently disadvantaged if they do not possess the appropriate cultural capital. A solution to the information challenge proposed by a group of working class students in one study was that more 'hot' knowledge be made available by trustworthy information providers including those who have experience of higher education first-hand (Archer *et al.*, 2003, p. 106).

The link between the deficit discourse and neoliberal policy

As this research study seeks to explore the access potential of the An Cosán model of higher education, set within a non-deficit approach, this section briefly considers the impact of the neoliberal agenda on national education policy, which in itself reinforces a deficit discourse.

Neoliberalism has influenced policy and practice in higher education (Lynch, 2006; Lynch, 2014), adult education (Finnegan, 2008), community education (Fitzsimons, 2017) and access (Fleming, Loxley & Finnegan, 2017) in Ireland. Linear comparison of its impact on policy cannot be discreetly drawn as public policy development is dynamic influenced by a range of factors: political interests by Government and civil servants (Murtagh, 2009); supranational organisation influence (OECD/EU); national and EU policy; changing Ministers for Education and Skills; public opinion and advocacy groups within a broader context of public sector reform.

The detrimental effect of neo-liberal education policy, which is fundamentally at odds with a social justice¹⁶ imperative, has been debated extensively (Archer, 2007; Baker *et al.*, 2004; Grummell, 2007; Leathwood, 2006; Lynch, 2014; Ross, 2009). For clarity, it is helpful to note that social justice is a broad concept that centres on a fair and just relationship between people and society. Social injustices can be described in terms of the dimensions of inequality covering: economic, cultural, political and affective, which can be resolved through re/distribution; respect and recognition; parity of representation; and relations, respectively (Baker *et al.*, 2004).

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The prospective learner in a neo-liberal policy context is “expected to take full responsibility for their own lives and futures lives as self-reliant, self-managing autonomous individuals, engaging in the ‘choice’ practices of the market economy and providing for themselves free from any dependence on the state” (Leathwood, 2006, p. 614). Lynch draws on the research of leading academics (including Archer, Ball, Gewirtz and Reay) to argue that there is overwhelming evidence that “in economically unequal societies only individuals with sufficient resources can make choices and the poor have no choice at all” (Lynch, 2008). Therefore, in higher education systems which are based on student choice from a market perspective broader inequalities, for example, unequal resources across social groups, will manifest themselves in education, thus perpetuating advantage or disadvantage. Set within a deficit discourse, neoliberal policies view the social stratification in educational attainment as a result of an individual’s “failure to take advantage” of opportunities or a lack of the required factors for success. There is a sense of that in Irish access policy, whereby if only underrepresented groups know about the courses, they could take advantage of such. Policies focus on equality of opportunity rather than equality of outcome (Ross, 2009) without due regard to structural inequalities.

Central to national access policy is the categorising of cohorts of the population as target groups, which has been contested in terms of process, approach and validity. How we measure participation is an issue of power and control as it reinforces the same deficit lens by focusing on the individual. Access policy plans use the national participation rate criteria based on the father’s occupation as a criterion, and comparisons between social groups are made in order to understand participation rates and to develop targets. No access policy report appears to question the method for determining an individuals’ socio-economic group or its limitation, which could potentially impinge on effective access policy. There are a number of issues with the method, firstly, the use of one parameter to define an individual’s social class has been critiqued in terms of its effectiveness for addressing issues of access (Bernard, 2006), as it ignores the multitude of factors influencing under-participation and the complexity of issues attributing to under-participation are equated to social groups rather than other intersectional issues at play, e.g. race. Secondly, it could be considered sexist as it is based on the father’s income and neglects the link between a mother’s educational attainment to that of her child (Drudy & Lynch, 1993, p. 138). And thirdly, ultimately a functionalistic approach of quantifying educational inequality fails to acknowledge

power, wealth and privilege (Drudy & Lynch, 1993). Thus factors in determining target groups inherently limit the potential impact of access policy as it focuses predominantly on the individual rather than the broader contributing factors. There are challenges to using a method that categorises whole groups of individuals in a homogenous manner, particularly in relation to mature students. Excluding the differing experiences and capitals that individuals possess can be misleading and detrimental to actions taken to address under-participation. Furthermore, by establishing national targets, which differ across social groups, an acceptance of a degree of inequality for a proportion of society is implicit.

Before the publication of the National Access Plans (HEA, 2004a; HEA, 2008; HEA, 2015) a highly influential report that broadly sets access in an economic frame was produced by the OECD in its report *Review of National Policies for Education: Higher Education in Ireland* (OECD, 2004). In 2003, at the request of the Irish Department of Education and Science, the OECD Secretariat was invited to evaluate the performance of the Irish higher education sector and offer the necessary recommendations for its betterment (OECD, 2004). Its report attributed the need to address the issue of underrepresentation in higher education to changing demographics and economic imperatives:

We [OECD] believe the time is ripe for a further attack on the problem not least because, with the demographic downturn, not only will HEIs need to broaden their catchment of students to retain resources but there is the risk of a national shortfall of qualified new entrants to the labour market. (OECD, 2004, p. 30)

This justification for engaging in widening participation activities is not primarily based on a social justice perspective rather it is seen as contributing to addressing labour market requirements and for ensuring resources for institutions at a time of depleting student numbers. Regarding the actual approaches which need to be taken by universities to support the widening participation agenda, the OECD report suggests: financial parity of esteem for part-time students; funding to attract and retain students from disadvantaged areas (due to proposed higher associated costs); continuing education evening classes in higher education; accreditation for prior experiential learning; and methods to collect “wastage figures” for calculation of current grants (OECD, 2004, p. 33). Although noting that higher education provision was relatively diverse in the Irish context, the report supported a diversity of provision,

which this research study explores in the context of the An Cosán model. However, the potential of such diversity is not to address issues of access and educational inequality rather the learner is positioned as a customer, who can express the freedom to choose, often by purchasing, the kind of education that gives the most advantage. This influential report set out higher education access policy recommendations from a broadly neoliberal perspective.

At this juncture, it is worth pausing to note that the EU is also part of the education policy-making picture in Ireland, by virtue of our membership. Whilst EU education policies are non-binding, in an attempt to maintain a relatively powerful position in an increasingly competitive world economy (Field, 1998), and lacking a firm basis for employment, the EU focus moves to individualised responsibility and the associated need for education (*ibid.*) taking a distinctly deficit position. Since the early 1970s, as part of a drive for neoliberal political and economic policies (Ball, Dworkin & Vryonides, 2010), EU education policies have been informed by the economic imperative (Davies, 2003, p. 100). In the 90s, the key concept of ‘knowledge economy’ was introduced, later evident in lifelong learning policy (CEC, 2000; CEC, 2001), and saw education as a tool to build human resources and to address social exclusion and marginalisation (Brine, 2006). Benchmarks at EU level for education participation were introduced, for example, in lifelong learning (CEC, 2002), providing a link between national policy and EU policy plans. More recently, the 10-year strategy, *Europe 2020* includes education as one of the five key EU-wide targets, relating to higher education there is a target of at least 40% of 30-34-year-olds completing third level education. Therefore, when considering access policy development in Ireland, it is important to take cognisance of the broader influence of the largely deficit-focused EU policy agenda.

The economic needs of the country have been cited as the main rationale for increasing participation in higher education in a number of broad national policy documents over the years: from the *National Development Plan* (Government of Ireland, 2007); *Towards a National Skills Strategy* (EGFSN, 2007); *Building Ireland’s Smart Economy* (Government of Ireland, 2008); the *National Strategy for Higher Education* (HEA, 2011); to the *National Skills Strategy 2025* (DES, 2016a). This perspective is explicitly expressed in *National Skills Strategies* (e.g. EGFSN, 2007) which identifies the need for increased participation in higher education as a key objective for creating a well-educated, highly

skilled population which contributes to a competitive, innovation-driven, knowledge-based, participative and inclusive economy (EGFSN, 2007). The Strategy outlined specific targets for increasing participation in higher education in order to achieve the projected requirements of the “New Knowledge Economy” (EGFSN, 2007, p. 12). More recently, an increased policy focus on the restructured further education system as a ‘first choice’, is strongly linked to meeting the needs of the economy (*Action Plan for Education 2016-2019*, (DES, 2016b); *Further Education and Training Strategy, 2014-2019*, SOLAS 2014). Reasons for increasing participation in higher education in the current *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* were cited as: the requirements of a global economy for a highly skilled workforce which is capable of adapting to new technologies and developing a research base, combined with the value of a well-educated workforce for attracting investment (DES, 2011). However, the *Investing in National Ambition: A Strategy for Funding Higher* report has a more inclusive justification for access, viewing “increasing access and participation in higher education as a part of the social contract” (DES, 2016c, p.6). Additionally, one of the four guiding principles of the new funding system is access, participation and progression among all socio-economic groups (*ibid.*)

Furthermore, in Ireland’s *National Skills Strategy 2025* (DES, 2016a), four of the six objectives specifically relate to employers and the needs of the labour market. In terms of higher education participation progress, the *Strategy* focused on the increased higher education participation rate as a mark of achievement (progression rate to higher education increased by 14 percentage points, from 55% to 69%, (DES, 2016a, p. 14). Although the *Strategy* acknowledges the *National Access Plans*, broader national policy document appears to focus more on increasing higher education participation rather than striving for a more equitable system.

The OECD, through its comparative analysis research between countries, has also contributed to shaping the higher education system. Competition not only at national but also international level has also be referred to in terms of the need to improve Ireland’s ranking within OECD countries (Government of Ireland, 2007). However, this approach has been criticised for focusing on a narrow set of internal market considerations that do not include the quality of student experience or access initiatives (Lynch, 2008). The impact of this on widening participation is that ranking

discourages a focus on access “as they are fundamentally about ensuring universities become even more elite in their orientation” (Lynch, 2008, .p 7).

Impact of the neoliberal agenda on National Access Plans

Set within the context of targets defined in the *National Skills Strategy* (EGFSN, 2007), the second Access Plan acted as the main overarching document influencing access activities of higher education institutions during the fieldwork of this research. It sets out the Irish Government’s vision, and actions, regarding higher education access policy for widening participation of underrepresented groups (HEA, 2008, pp. 5-6). However, the Plan also draws on a Communiqué from EU Ministers of Higher Education (Bologna Process, 2007) to identify the intertwining role of higher education in social and economic development. The concept of diversity within the student body is expressed as a feature of populations, rather than a strength, which should not act as a barrier to participation when adequate supports of a flexible higher education system are in place which acts on a “basis of equal opportunity” (Bologna Process, 2007, cited in HEA, 2008, p. 14). In addition to this view, the role of access to higher education is not exclusively devoted to “the pursuit of equality in higher education” but also for its part in the knowledge society, which is understood as the need to broaden the involvement of citizens in the economic stability through learning achievements and skills which adds “greater urgency to our pursuit of educational opportunities for all” (HEA, 2008, p. 14). The intertwining of the dual drivers for widening participation policy, both economic and social, is clearly expressed within the document as it states that the access agenda is a “very concrete illustrations of the complementarity and interdependence of our national social and economic objectives” (HEA, 2008, p. 15).

The impact of the neoliberal agenda can seem prevalent within public policy; however, the third Access Plan appeared to move towards a more articulated commitment to social inclusion as it notes “the objective of achieving equity of access to higher education is rooted in principles of equality and social inclusion and has been a longstanding national policy priority” (HEA, 2015, p.14). Furthermore, it called for the higher education sector “to open up to communities experiencing entrenched socio-economic disadvantage and to address inequality of access at a policy level” (HEA, 2015, p. 20). However, the pull of the economic agenda is also evident where it notes the

policy need to address skills shortages in the market – “the Irish economy needs to tap into the skills and talents of all our people so that the economy can continue to grow and prosper” (HEA, 2018, p. 15).

Developing National Access Plans on faulty foundations

This section outlines how the first two National Access Plans (HEA, 2004a; HEA, 2008) were developed in order to highlight their inherent limitations as they were built on an uncritical view of historical HEI access initiatives. Whilst they did have an impact on participation rates of underrepresented students, their potential was limited as the reports which informed their proposed policy actions predominantly came from a deficit approach (appendix 13 and 15). Additionally, although noted in these foundational reports, community education, or community-based approaches, were bypassed as a possible method to support access in the resulting access plans.

For the first Access Plan, *Action Plan on Achieving Equity of Access to Higher Education in Ireland 2005-2007* (HEA, 2004a), the HEA, through the National Office for Equity of Access (Access Office), drew heavily on the report: *Towards a national strategy - Initial Review of HEA Targeted Initiative to Widen Access to Higher Education 2004* (HEA, 2004c). Although there was historical precedence for higher education outreach in the community by HEIs, including a community responsive model offered by UCC which was noted in one research report (HEA, 2004c), it was viewed as a means to address geographical barriers rather than a model of community-led higher education provision. The subsequent Access Plan published in July 2008, the *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008-2013* (HEA, 2008), which covered the period of the fieldwork of this research, was heavily influenced by *Towards the Best Education for all: An Evaluation of Access Programmes in Higher Education in Ireland* (2006). The role of the community in access was tentatively noted in the evaluation; however, save for part-time, flexible provision, any diversity in modes of higher education provision is completely absent.

Ultimately, however, neither community outreach approach translated into a priority in the first, nor indeed any National Access Plans as it never gained any traction in access policy. The access plans generally promoted a more of the same approach, recommendations based on existing practice, without a radical overhaul of the higher

education system, a proposed introduction of quantitative and qualitative measurement of such was included in the first Access Plan, but that appeared to be mainly linked to national access funding support, i.e. as a means to monitor the impact. While a need for an institution-wide approach to access was highlighted in both Access Plans, in practical terms, the recommended policy actions were limited to awareness-raising within an institution; access was still resigned to add-on activities. Ultimately, this opens up the policy space for community education organisations, whose main focus is access, to have a greater part to play in meeting participation target rates of national access policy.

Whilst it is not my intention to critique access initiatives as emanating from a deficit perspective in negative terms, such initiatives have undoubtedly made an impact. It is merely to consider what other approaches could be taken to address the issue of access. Notwithstanding the positive impact access activities have had, a deficit approach limits the potential impact that access policy can make as given the range of research literature outlining the complexity of access issues, as will be discussed in the next chapter, a narrow approach that disregards structural disadvantage can only have limited impact.

In-depth analysis of the first Access Plan, its development and focus

One of the five overarching functions of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) is promoting equality of opportunity in higher education (Higher Education Authority Act, 1971), and as such has been involved in widening participation activities prior to the establishment of the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education. In 1996, following the White Paper on Education, *Charting our Education Future* (1995), the HEA provided institutional funding for infrastructural support of widening participation activities through the Targeted Initiative Scheme, now known as the Strategic Initiative Funding Scheme. The scheme was not prescriptive, but institutional activities were tied to detailed criteria set out by the HEA, mainly to terms of reporting and evaluation. As mentioned, the first Access Plan (HEA, 2004a), drew heavily on the report which reviewed that scheme: (HEA, 2004c). The Review mapped out the reportedly well-developed field of access initiatives through the self-evaluations of

nine¹⁷ higher education institutions (HEIs) targeting socio-economically disadvantaged learners, mature students, students with a disability and travellers. The Review also drew on two previous studies commissioned by the HEA an evaluation of the targeted initiative on widening access for young people from socio-economic disadvantaged backgrounds (Osborne & Leith, 2000) and a review of access to higher education in Ireland (Skilbeck & Connell, 2000) as well as university equality policies by a review group commissioned by the HEA (HEA, 2004b). The Review also aimed to capture the experience of the schemes, its impact, the learning and expertise gained by participants on HEA targeted initiatives schemes in preparation for the development of a national access strategy (HEA, 2004c, p. 5).

Unfortunately, neither community education nor outreach courses featured in the six goals of the first the Access Plan (HEA, 2004a), which were limited to: actions for the newly established Access Office in terms of top-down national level access activities; policy frameworks; routes of entry with further education qualifications; research; communications; funding for part-time students; monitoring and reporting of access initiatives. Although greater links with disadvantaged schools/communities and funding for access initiatives were proposed, it didn't go as far as the Review recommendations of aiming for increased partnerships with the further education and training sector, which included a particular focus on the role of adult and community education centres in providing access to higher education for rural and urban communities. Furthermore, the need for access courses to go further and adapt programmes to "meet the student's needs in terms of curriculum, assessment, and teaching and learning strategies" (HEA, 2004c, p. 29) was also recommended (appendix 13).

It is important that there is historical precedence for higher education outreach in the community as the An Cosán model of higher education meets many of the recommendations of this Review and perhaps a rediscovery of this approach could be made and included in future access plans. The Review noted that six HEIs offered an extension of their HEI courses in local centres, many with a focus on women (especially WERRC at UCD) from the settled and Traveller community, in addition to local

¹⁷ Mary Immaculate College; St Patrick's College Drumcondra; Dublin City University; the National University of Ireland Galway; National University of Ireland Maynooth; Trinity College; University College Cork; University College Dublin and the University of Limerick.

information sessions. It was generally 'in the community' but not 'of the community', this key difference is the possible parachuting in of higher education as a top-down approach, rather than a community-led, bottom-up approach based on a locally driven need, and locally devised programmes. One example, of a more community-led approach, was that of the Centre for Adult Continuing Education in UCC involving 'education animateurs' to develop programmes in conjunction with community-based stakeholders. However, the Review focused on outreach as a means for overcoming geographical challenges for students in rural areas, rather than offering community-led provision. Of course, location is one part of a broader picture of issues impacting on equality of access.

The Review also proposed that HEIs develop local and regional partnerships with other education and training providers in order to "make important teaching and learning connections between the sectors, widen understanding on all sides of the needs of students from diverse backgrounds, and identify and support the activities that most effectively facilitate all learners to reach their full potential" (HEA, 2004c, p. 29). Also, another transformative approach to access was noted, recognising the need for institutional change, as one goal was devoted to the broadening of teaching and learning practices. Although documented as a minority access approach in the report, teacher education focused on alternative access through reserved places for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and changing the practice of teachers to build the system in order to accommodate learners from diverse backgrounds, e.g. Centre for Educational Disadvantage Research (CEDR) in Mary Immaculate College (HEA, 2004c, p. 21), thus appearing to exhibit elements of a transformative approach. In 2017, a new fund for higher education access, Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) 1 funding supported this access approach. Also, a recommendation for a new approach to teaching, learning and assessment was mentioned in terms of the need to develop good practice in teaching and learning, curriculum development, and assessment practice across the institution as a whole. Details of how this could be implemented is not expanded upon for lower-socio-economic or mature students; however, it does mention "in-service teaching qualification opportunities for academic staff, guidelines on inclusive assessment practice that are developed in conjunction with access personnel, and also in the development of course curricula" (HEA, 2004c, p. 32). The value of this recommendation is not solely aimed at non-traditional students as there was a recognition for the role of "innovative teaching and learning strategies on rates

of drop out and non-completion of courses by students from the 'traditional' cohort” (HEA, 2004c, p. 33).

The recommendation for taking an institution-wide approach to widening access highlighted the need for a “robust rationale or policy for widening access initiatives and the need for a more socially inclusive student population is understood and proactively supported by academic staff” (HEA, 2004c, p. 27). This would essentially result in the move from peripheral actions of the university, e.g. access initiatives being the sole preserve of specific HEI departments or by specific personnel, to all departments and all staff. This proposed approach to widening participation appears to shift the main focus of actions from addressing the perceived deficits of non-traditional students to the institutional change by way of changing procedures and roles for all academic staff which could be viewed as a move towards elements of a transformative approach.

In terms of institutions making a genuine commitment to access it was proposed that there is a potential tension between the concept of quality and equality in higher education in that greater debate on the topic was required as the “extent to which more equitable participation in higher education affects an institution’s traditional image is a question that seems to have been largely avoided in institutions to date” (HEA, 2004c, p.31). Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, which will be discussed in chapter 6, prestige and inequality are perpetuated by the dominant social class, who prefer to preserve the status quo in order to maintain their advantage. Challenging the dominant higher education system, by mature and lower socio-economic students was reported to have begun to change the campus, and was mainly supported, as it stated that “students sometimes raise questions about the curriculum, teaching and learning, and assessment methodologies; on the whole, this contribution is welcomed and has a positive impact on the learning experience” (HEA, 2004c, p.31). It would suggest that the non-traditional students were seeking to change aspects of the institution in line with their needs; however, it is not clear how the students are identified as being from certain backgrounds, e.g. lower socio-economic, or which group is influencing the change most. The report does mention the influence of mature students as “challenging fellow students and lecturers to think and learn and question in new ways and with a different perspective” (HEA, 2004c, p. 32).

Nevertheless, the predominant access approaches in HEIs were pre- and post-entry actions which attempt to address individual/community deficits via learner supports

and awareness-raising, and to overcome structural barriers through alternative entry routes (appendix 12). Similarly, for mature student access, the report noted that initiatives wholly or partly funded by the strategic initiatives schemes comprised: taster courses, foundation courses, information and guidance and learning supports (HEA, 2004c, p.11). The majority of access initiatives for non-traditional students that were documented by HEIs in the Review were based on deficit and disadvantage discourse manifesting in an academic and/or utilitarian approach.

The Review made the following recommendations: a national strategy for access; the need for greater data collection; taking an institution-wide approach; increased partnerships with the further education and training sector; new routes of access; greater quality and equality in higher education; and a new approach to teaching, learning and assessment. These approaches have been included in all three access plans. By focusing access initiatives on the perceived deficits within the individual, the variety of actions carried out are limited, leading to a one-size-fits-all approach aimed at a target group. Also, the Review appears to treat mature students as a homogenous group, without taking account of the different educational, socio-economic, gender and ethnicity differences. Such approaches are again characterised as pre- and post-entry supports and alternative routes similar to progressing to higher education for lower socio-economic students. Similarly, the approach centres on the need for the learner to adapt to the system rather than vice versa. The need for community centred access was noted, but examples of community-led higher education opportunities were only noted in a minority of cases, with the focus on location rather than the approach being the focus. In summary, the predominant HEI approaches to access that influenced the first HEA Access Plan mainly focused on addressing the perceived deficit in the individual.

In-depth analysis of the second Access Plan, its development and focus

Overall, the second Access Plan (HEA, 2008) was built on a slightly more critical assessment of existing HEI access initiatives. In order to shape access policy development and as part of implementing the first Access Plan (HEA, 2004a), the Access Office carried out a broad evaluation of access programmes in 27 higher education institutions in Ireland using four defined criteria: policy, practice,

partnership and targeting (HEA, 2006). Where the aforementioned Review (HEA, 2004c) provided scope for the range of access initiatives, this report set about to evaluate the effectiveness of the access programmes¹⁸ in order to shape future policy and practice for higher education in Ireland. Yet, it does not critique the access programmes; rather it sets out a framework of guidelines drawn from what was already happening in higher education institutions and from suggestions, i.e. it is the sharing of best practice (HEA, 2006, p. 15); therefore, it was about building on what has been done rather than seeking alternative approaches to access or including a community education approach.

The report sets out the criteria of access programmes that have effective institutional policy indicators: mainstream policy and strategy; allocation of resources to non-traditional students; is high profile in the institution; institution systems and structures are designed to include diverse student bodies and staff of the institution are fully engaged (HEA, 2006, p.16). Good practice examples of successful access programmes, which put policy into practice, centred on initiatives aimed at changing or incorporating the individual into the higher education system (pre- and post-entry activities) and more predominantly changes required by the institution in order to adapt to a more diverse student body (institutional) and alternative pathways. Although most activities proposed centred on a deficit or disadvantage discourse as they sought to correct the inequalities within the system, e.g. through alternative routes, elements of a transformative approach were also evident by the use of democratic learning processes (appendix 14). The broad variety of approaches in this report may be due to the mix of Institutes of Technology and Universities; however, no differentiation between the type of HEI and the kinds of initiatives are made.

The evaluation noted the gaps in policy and practice of access programmes, which was in the main the lack of institution-wide commitment, inadequate supports, the need for better information and communication, the limited reach of programmes which appears to demonstrate that the under-funded and peripheral activities of access limit its impact. The main thrust of the points focuses on institutional issues: the negative perception of access students by staff, in terms of driving down standards; the

¹⁸ Access programme in the context of this document is defined as: All actions taken by higher education institutions to increase the participation of students from four specific under-represented target groups: students who experience socio-economic disadvantage, members of the traveller community and ethnic minorities, students with a disability, and mature students. (HEA, 2006, p.9)

integration rather than inclusion approach of access programmes, i.e. the students fit into the access programme rather than vice versa; information, guidance and support on third level options for students; limited reach of direct entry routes and the extra year of study for engaging in a foundation course. The tension between institutional reform through transformative approaches to access and rigid structures appear to be at play, thus limiting the capacity to create an institution-wide approach to access. Furthermore, the challenges facing policy and practice focused on the need for resources, the competing emphasis of research for career advancement of HEI staff versus the apparent unrecognised area of access and the need for collaboration. Again when considering the gaps and challenges, the need for an institution-wide approach could be further hampered by its lack of professional reward, which in turn could limit involvement and commitment. Perhaps the level of change that is required is unsurprising as the complexity in implementing such broad-scale change at HEI level is as enormous as it is glacial in pace. Furthermore, perhaps there is a finite ability for change in HEIs, pointing again to the necessity for additional methods of higher education provision that can respond more rapidly to a diverse student population.

Recommendations for policy and practice chiefly deal with the need for identifying and addressing gaps, supporting and consolidating what works, providing resources and defining the target group (HEA 2006). Also recommended were minimum policy and practice criteria which would go some way to create an institution-wide approach through diversity training; however, the main focus was on improving pre- and post-entry activities and alternative routes. Although the need for all staff involvement was identified, a clear suggestion to address this does not appear to go far enough in order to address the aforementioned challenges, perhaps as institutions are essentially autonomous overly directive suggestions linking to career advancement and whole institutional change could be deemed inappropriate.

The role of partnership between HEIs and other stakeholders was also evaluated within the report. Effective partnership appeared to be understood as a means to develop pre- and post-entry initiatives with schools through raising learner expectations in addition to outreach provision in order to offer credits and exemption towards degree subjects. Importantly, the community education sector was identified as an area for further collaboration in terms of contributing to the shaping of pre-entry activities (HEA, 2006, p. 40). In terms of recommendations for partnership, the following were made:

- More active collaboration with local communities
- Better communication with prospective students
- Work with younger pupils
- Make course structure more responsive to learners' needs
- Minimum partnership criteria for an effective access programme
- Should be supported at national level.

Such recommendations appear to be a mix of approaches, from a deficit perspective in raising expectations of younger pupils, to disadvantage in terms of more collaboration with communities acknowledging the challenges for certain cohorts in accessing higher education, to elements of a transformative approach with a fundamental change in provision based on 'learner's needs'. Although partnerships may not necessarily be equal in terms of power and influence the suggestion of local communities and learners whom they are trying to reach actively contributing to shaping initiatives appears to come from a discourse of diversity and the potential to be a transformative approach to access. In this case, students are not asked to change to fit within the system entirely, as the institution attempts to develop mechanisms to accommodate the learners' views and requirements. However, if the approach is to prepare the individual for incorporation into the system, i.e. through an access course, it could use both approaches: transformative and deficit could be at play.

The report outlined how widening participation initiatives could effectively be monitored; examples of best practice demonstrated levels of a transformative approach by asking the target groups what they need, including outreach activities. However, most initiatives focused on a deficit approach to access programmes: meeting the needs of all target groups, working with target groups at critical stages or alternative access (which would be transformative) and promoting improved access to primary teacher education for lower socio-economic groups. In terms of what has been achieved regarding monitoring, institutions that set targets in line with national policy was highlighted as valuable.

The gaps in monitoring by HEIs identified the need to demonstrate the effectiveness of access programme as "there is still a shortage of quantitative data that provide evidence about the relative effectiveness of different activities, it is difficult to show that they are doing the right things" (HEA, 2006, p. 47). Interestingly, no reference is made to the need for qualitative research in this regard.

Although institutions evaluate access programmes, a process of critique is recommended as not all initiatives can be assumed to be effective regardless of the best intentions of personnel involved. The need for better tracking and monitoring was deemed important to assess retention and progression in higher education, and again, the need to determine what works was also noted – a national analysis across institutions was suggested. In terms of challenges, defining the target groups and target setting, resources to pre-entry activities and systematic data collection and analysis were cited. The recommendations proposed centred on directing the focus of access programmes on the specific target groups and implement through targeting criteria for an effective access programme.

In summary, the evaluation report outlined a number of approaches to access at play, from current practice which generally centred on the need for institutional change to accommodate pre- and post-entry initiatives and alternatives routes that are based on the deficit/disadvantage discourse mobilised through academic/utilitarian approaches. A transformative approach appeared to be present in examples of best practice in terms of initiating a more democratic learning pedagogy and through partnership initiatives. There appears to be a slight shift from focusing on the deficiencies of the individual or community to working with groups in developing appropriate learner responsive access initiatives.

Ultimately, in the second Access Plan (HEA, 2008), whilst there was a move away from deficit approaches, reference to such approaches, such as institution-wide actions were quite peripheral, rather than systemic or transformative in focus: supporting access strategies to HEIs, capacity building through continuous professional development, exchange good practice, equality training, research and conference (HEA, 2008). In assessing what was achieved in this regard, it included: data gathering, funding for HEI access initiatives, professional development opportunities and research (HEA, 2010).

Additionally, the value of community education was noted in the plan “community education strategies have proved very effective in reaching out to ‘non-traditional’ learners and are purposely designed to build up and maintain resources within communities” (HEA, 2008, p. 44), but unfortunately not included as an action. However, the main focus of the policy actions was operational and aimed at HEIs (appendix 15). Enhancing access focused on actions from an operational level: flexible provision, support for part-time students, PATH, diversification of entry routes, RPL,

early-second chance, workforce strategy, promotional campaign, transition year module (HEA, 2008). Investment for access focused on HEI initiatives rather than community education providers: Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF), performance, philanthropy, advocacy formant accounts (HEA, 2008). Student supports were operational but with a welcome focus on free part-time provision: low/middle-income families; part-time support (modular accreditation programme, means-tested free part-time); awareness-raising, student assistance fund; millennium partnership fund; ethnic minorities and ERASMUS (HEA, 2008). A range of measures for people with disabilities includes quite significant changes at institutional level: Disability Officers, reasonable accommodations, part-time support, funding, coherence in learning supports, international study, and alternative formats of academic materials (HEA, 2008).

Additional studies to address persistent under-participation

Reemphasising the failure to address the “the persistently poor participation by low to middle income working families need special attention” (HEA, 2008, p. 11), further exploration of the consistent, and decreasing, participation of individuals from the socio-economic group termed ‘non-manual’ in higher education resulted in the HEA commissioned, ESRI study *Hidden Disadvantage: A Study on the Low Participation in Higher Education by the Non-Manual Group* (McCoy *et al.* 2010). A further rationale for focusing on this socio-economic cohort of the population is that the non-manual group comprises 20% of households in the country (McCoy, Byrne, O’Connell, Kelly & Doherty, 2010). The report highlighted two distinct sections within the non-manual cohort: ‘intermediate’ and ‘other’ non-manual, with the latter experiencing greater educational disadvantage similar to manual cohorts. Access was described as being dependent on: cultural, social and economic capitals; experience of second level education; guidance or the lack thereof; lack of eligibility requirements for higher education; lack of familial and peer experience of higher education; financial constraints and the need to for employment; and when in higher education, lower retention due to their purported inability to fit in (HEA, 2010). None of the policy recommendations focused on any proposed change at institutional level, more complex interpretations of class beyond the ‘non-manual’ target group was called for; continuance of the School Leavers Survey; second level education policy and practice

focus with links to higher education; information and awareness-raising; information on access courses; financial supports; access initiatives for increased integration into HEIs (McCoy *et al.*, 2010, pp. 168-71). A note to the need for greater societal equality through taxes was also highlighted. Whilst exploring the access issue for the non-manual group in more detail, recommendations were predominantly based on a deficit perspective perpetuating further policy initiatives through that lens. Again, no reference was made to exploring community-led approaches to access.

Another pivotal document influencing access policy was *A Study of Progression in Irish Higher Education* (HEA, 2010) as within the widening participation agenda, progression and retention in higher level education are intrinsically linked to the concept, i.e. it is not simply a matter of enrolling but successful completion of the programme of study, this is also vitally important in terms of outcome. The study identified factors influencing progression through higher education in Ireland, for the academic years 2007/08 and 2008/9, factors which include: the NFQ level of the programme; prior educational attainment (specifically mathematics and to a lesser extent English at Leaving Certificate); and Leaving Certificate examination points. A lower level of each factor was associated with reduced progression rates. However, rather than exposing the impact of structural inequalities, the methodology employed sought to even out class differentials across institutions in order to create a level playing field, “all things being equal”, in order to assess the retention rate in higher education institutions. However, all things are not equal in higher education participation.

The issue with the two aforementioned reports is that although the persistent underrepresentation is an issue, and progression rates are unequal, the proposed action for access is predominantly placed on the need for the student to change to fit better into the system. By ignoring the role of the educational institution, or the impact of broader societal inequalities, the potential for increased educational equality is diminished. For this research project, the potential of the An Cosán case study explores its potential to bridge that gap moving away from a deficit model of access.

Creating a space for community education in access policy

We have seen that educational inequality is persistent, access approaches limited and the orthodoxy of deficit approaches prevalent in access policy, however, there are

changes ahead and a potential opening up for new ways to engage underrepresented people. This section sets out to explore the potential of the An Cosán model of higher education within the access policy context by drawing together the findings from an interview with a key access policy maker and an exploration of EU policy relating to regional disparities in education, and finally by analysing the latest Access Plan (HEA, 2015) which exhibits greater transformative, as opposed to deficit, informed actions.

Interview with access policy maker

As part of this fieldwork, an interview was carried out with a policy maker in the Access Office in order to gain greater insight into their perspective of the An Cosán model of higher education in addressing issues of access. Although only one public servant agreed to be interviewed for this research project, given the few staff at the Access Office and the pivotal role the policy maker made over the course of developing the first and second Access Plans, their contribution offers some insights into the potential challenges and pitfalls of proposing the An Cosán model of higher education in a national access policy context. Overall, the potential of the model was met with caution.

Firstly, the policy maker¹⁹ disputed the prevalence of the deficit discourse stating that the HEA is more focused on the need for institutional change than for the individual to change to fit into the system, with a particular emphasis on the need for flexible learning processes:

The HEA is concerned with institutional change, creating more responsive institutions, having policies, policies around equity of access, policies around equality, that recognise people come from different starting points, recognising that students, for example, can be parents, can have a lot of other commitments, and probably most importantly of all letting people learn in a flexible way where they can reach the same goal over a longer time period. The system is still way too focused on 17 to 19 year olds doing Leaving Cert and going into College and that is what that is trying to break the mould.
(Eoin)

¹⁹Interviewed during the course of the second Access Plan

The policy maker stated that in terms of influencing access plans the community sector has, to an extent, been part of processes to shape national policy through participation in consultations in advance of the development of national access plans and by participating in the National Access Advisory Group. In the early development of the national access plans a series of extensive, but not exhaustive, consultations were carried out, of which a key stakeholder included the community sector (Eoin). However, the level and the extent to which this has truly represented community groups is difficult to ascertain as a range of organisations were seen as representative structures: i.e. Pobal was seen as a mechanism for partially representing the community sector in their capacity as a funder, so too were AONTAS and Traveller organisations. The main vehicle of influence in the development of national access plans was stated as the Access Advisory Group with ultimate sign off from the Board of the HEA (Eoin).

They stated that there appeared to be greater engagement between access policy makers and the community sector during the time when Partnership companies at local level administered the Millennium Fund; however, following its abolition and replacement with the Student Assistance Fund, the links, and potential policy influence by the community sector (including proposing the potential of community education) appears to have weakened (Eoin).

Although not mentioned in access plans, there had been a failed pilot initiative between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and community organisations located in two areas of educational disadvantage which neither led to a new initiative nor a funding stream for community-based higher education provision. This unfruitful experience also appeared to have led to a perceived lack of capacity in the community sector, particularly in relation to documenting quantitative outcomes. However, it was acknowledged that the community sector is probably not on the radar of the HEA enough as it is essentially a funding agency for HEIs (Eoin).

Further issues, or words of caution, were expressed with regard to community provision, in terms of the need for the model to be strategic, supported by robust data collection on participation, retention and progression to education and employment in order to demonstrate the value of this mode of progression (Eoin). There was a need to:

Show funders, people who want to fund you, how can you show progress on your objectives if you don't collect any data, because no

one is going to ... the Department of Education are not just going to sit back and say oh grand, they are not going to accept purely qualitative stuff, without things seeming a lot better, but we cannot actually prove, you know, you have to be able to show the impact of what you are doing, the outcomes, you have to be able to show impact, outcomes. (Eoin)

With the new focus on regional disparities rather than solely socio-economic indicators based on geocoding (Eoin), there may be a move from focusing purely on the individual to a broader community perspective which could potentially call for a local approach to widening participation as access policy plans will focus on area-based analysis (Eoin).

An Cosán model of higher education as a solution to regional disparities

The focus on regional disparities opens up the potential of the An Cosán model which is based in an area of disadvantage. The influence of the geographical area in which an individual lives can either constrain or enhance one's aspirations; in relation to individuals from lower socio-economic areas, it has been noted that socially excluded areas limit the potential aspirations of its inhabitants (Johnson, 2008). It is exacerbated in areas with a high concentration of poverty rather than in mixed socio-economic areas (Andersson *et al.*, 2007). Under-participation of socio-economic groups must be considered in relation to "diversity, institutional discrimination, and the complex interplay between the educational system, individuals, groups, and the surrounding society" (Cederberg, Hartsmar & Lingärde, 2009, p. 13). Research led by Ballas *et al.* (2012), for the European Commission document *Mind the Gap - education inequality across EU regions*, was explored in this study in order to assess the broader potential of a locally devised solution to educational inequality, not just in Ireland, but beyond. Across Europe, there is an extensive network of non-formal adult education organisations, their European umbrella NGO, the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA), counts 142 members from 44 countries (2017), and drawing on the learnings from the An Cosán model of higher education may be useful for other regions. Also, as this case study is very location specific, in West Tallaght an area with significant levels of poverty, the potential of a locally developed higher education offering to address educational inequality will be explored in terms of its ability to address local disparities in educational attainment elsewhere.

In the Ballas study, one of the reasons for researching the regional differences within countries was to expose spatial variations, such as those between remote rural and urban locations, that are obscured in aggregate national statistics (Ballas *et al.*, 2012, p. 57). This geographical and spatial variation within a country, or intra-national, has been cited as being greater than international differences which manifest due to social structures, processes and experiences which generate, perpetuate and shape educational disparities (Ballas *et al.*, 2012, p. 57). Primarily, people and their lived realities make places or living spaces. Determining a spatial understanding of educational disparities requires acknowledgement of the people who live in different regions because meaning is socially constructed and produced by the social relations, activities and imaginaries of people (Lefebvre, 1991). Living spaces take on meaning as places of decline, conflict, danger, community, excitement, culture, growth or innovation (Taylor *et al.*, 1996, cited in Ballas *et al.*, 2012, p. 63). However, deeper, more complex factors have been attributed to differential educational attainment across regions, including what is valued as knowledge between regions (Ballas *et al.*, 2012, p. 63) where places have spatial characteristics manifesting in “particular places, distinct geographies and topographies, local histories, identities and social relations, forms of industrial or agrarian organisation and ownership, as well as politics, cultural resources, facilities and services” (Ballas *et al.*, 2012, p. 64).

Such differences influence material inequalities, forms of capital, educational habitus, and issues of recognition and status, as well as having direct influences on opportunities to learn (Ballas *et al.*, 2012, p. 64). Each region has its own specific characteristics which contribute to how a community views itself and has repercussions on the educational opportunities for the inhabitants. In order to address localised educational inequality, local, national and European interventions are required where multilateral approaches can contribute to addressing inequalities (Ross, 2009). One of the recommendations of a research project conducted from 2007-2008, which involved 284 national, regional and local projects in fourteen European countries (including Ireland), focused on successful interventions one of which was the involvement of disadvantaged communities in “identifying and defining issues, in the planning and management of programmes, and in the evaluation of programmes” (Ross, 2009, p. 42). The involvement of the community cannot only involve a recognition of the knowledge and experience that disadvantaged groups have and a response in ways that are culturally sympathetic, but must also be used to “deliberately

empower communities, and give them a sense of agency, power and direction over their futures” (Ross, 2009, p. 42). In this regard, a locally devised approach is proposed where the involvement of the under-represented community within the whole process is required, and policies are framed within a discourse of diversity rather than deficit.

Cautious support for the An Cosán model of higher education

Whilst the value of local approaches to address inequalities in areas of disadvantage is recognised, doubt hangs over the ability of community education to offer higher education provision. The policy maker interviewed for this research project made no clear indication of the potential contribution of the An Cosán model to access policy. However, on a personal level, they noted the value of the community sector and their having “a very active and vibrant role” in access; however, the rollout of such a model may have a number of issues as the community sector is not perceived as traditionally having a role in higher education provision and also, significantly, there was a need to guarantee stringent quality assurance systems for aiding the validity of this alternative model of higher education provision (Eoin).

They stated that if the HEA coordinated such a model at a national level, so to avoid duplication, there could be potential. A genuine collaboration between an HEI and the community organisation was seen as essential and one that is “very much in the spirit of partnership”. A clear rationale for running similar courses in a community-based format, rather than in an HEI, would be required or alternatively, a combined HEI/community provider model would be preferred “rather than just two separate entities” (Eoin). Any potential model should ensure community provider autonomy rather than the HEI attempting to control the model, on condition that the quality assurance is robust (Eoin). In summary, further exploration is required: “I think the conversation needs to become more about higher education providers rather than higher education institutions being the only providers of higher education” (Eoin).

Overall, the potential viability of the An Cosán model from this policy maker’s perspective was met with caution, examples of apprehension of the community education sector were expressed together with perceived capacity issues; the need for effective partnership with the HEI; robust quality assurance; a rationale for its provision versus HEI provision and the ability to demonstrate the quantitative outcomes were

articulated. However, the move towards exploring spatial disparities appears to offer some justification for exploring local solutions to access.

The current Access Plan - moving away from the deficit model

There was no plan for the period of 2014 until December 2015 when the *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019* (HEA, 2015) was published following an extensive period of consultation and data gathering resulting in a very detailed Plan which did include community education, albeit within a limited capacity. Also, more broadly, there was a move away from a predominantly deficit-centred approach to access. Greater commitment to institutional change was supported with the establishment of the National Forum for Teaching and Learning in 2013, which also has an access agenda focus.

Underpinned by eight principles, the five goals of the third Access Plan, *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019* (HEA, 2015) (which was produced after primary data collection for this research study had concluded) focused on: mainstreaming access; the impact of access initiatives; data gathering; transition pathways between further and higher education and more of an emphasis on regional and community partnerships (appendix 16). This plan had a broader scope in terms of a focus on regional access initiatives through clusters and community partnerships, within the context of new structures such as the Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs); also the involvement of community education organisations was limited to knowledge sharing purposes (goal 3). Regarding the engagement of the community, particularly through PATH, whilst welcomed the structures to set up the community engagement aspect of the funding scheme, i.e. regional clusters only include HEIs. However, civic engagement activities and access requirements were included in HEI Compact agreements.²⁰

The Access Plan (HEA, 2015) contained a greater level of proposed policy actions that move away from the deficit discourse. The first goal was mainstreaming, which did include a more transformative approach to access than previous access plans by

²⁰ Equity of access is one of the six high-level objectives in the Higher Education System Performance Framework and is reflected in mission-based performance compacts signed between the HEA and each HEI

focussing on institutional teaching and learning practices. Interestingly, addressing the issue of teachers with low expectations of students in second level, as well as broadening the teaching profession to include those from the target groups through to alternative routes was proposed.

Alternative pathways was the main focus of goal four of the Access Plan (HEA, 2015), including actions for: a systemic approach to mapping HE pathways via regional clusters, RPL, extending the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) and Disability Access Route to Higher Education (DARE) schemes to include FE graduates and FE-HE access courses. This is noteworthy as the processes for making the transition to higher education can act to exclude under-represented groups through the tradition of selection procedures, funding mechanisms and structures which are aimed at a younger, full-time student body (McGivney, 2001). Interestingly, one action in the Plan aimed to increase target groups in professions where they are typically unrepresented.

Within the data gathering goal, student involvement in the development of policy was included as an action, opening up opportunities for the involvement of learner voice in access policy, as well as an action for the development of qualitative indicators of access progress. A more sophisticated approach to data gathering, including geographic patterns of disadvantage, were included along with tracking the progression of the target groups regarding retention, employment and postgraduate studies.

The third Access Plan made a move closer to adhering to more transformative elements. However, ultimately, access plans focus on operational issues, data collection, progression routes, funding, and sharing of practice, which are worthwhile. Ultimately, whilst the importance of community engagement is noted, there is no meaningful commitment to bottom-up community-led solutions by communities facing educational disadvantage. This is specifically where the An Cosán model of higher education can fill this policy gap.

Chapter conclusion

Through a deep analysis of access policy, there appears to be an over-reliance on deficit informed approaches to access. Whilst inequality is an ingrained feature of the Irish education system, approaches to address under-participation in higher education are opening up a space for more transformative approaches to access. Tentative potential

for the An Cosán model of higher education was expressed by a policy maker, and with the increasing need to address under-participation in higher education, as outlined at national policy level, a policy gap is opening up.

Over the course of three access plans and ESRI commissioned research, there remains persistent under-participation of certain access policy target groups: semi-skilled manual worker group, non-manual and mature students. This can be partially attributed to the limited scope of access policy which overlooks the complexity of access in favour of operational actions and predominantly focussing on a deficit perspective, notwithstanding the positive impact access activities have had, the limited impact is evident. Historically, the overwhelming focus of HEI access initiatives was to provide various interventions in order to assist an underrepresented individual to fit into the higher education system by cultivating the same aspirations, cultural capital and level of knowledge as mainstream traditional higher education student. Successive access plans have stayed true to the recommendations on the Report (HEA, 2004c) focusing on: institution-wide approaches, data collection, quality, transfer and teacher education. Although a number of discourses and approaches were at play, the main site of focus was the individual which based on a deficit discourse resulted in academic and utilitarian type initiatives. The complexity of access issues cannot be addressed by simplistic deficit access approaches, nor understood as quantitative measures; however, the gap is narrowing in the more transformative-leaning third Access Plan but falls short of supporting a truly institution-wide approach.

Although the need for institutional-wide change in order to embed access actions across HEIs was recognised, the dominant approach of widening participation initiatives was carried out through parts of the institution, which had a peripheral position. Suggestions to broaden responsibility for access initiatives were made; however, in practical terms, the responsibility for implementing widening participation actions appeared to remain limited to specific departments. The push-pull of policy and practice appeared to be evident, the need for a broader approach to access is hampered by factors which limit its capacity for an institution-wide approach resulting in more of the same based on, a perhaps more amenable, deficit discourse. With this backdrop it is perhaps unsurprising that proposed access approaches have remained conservative in subsequent HEA access plans, relying mainly on peripheral activities by the institutions, centring on the need for the individual to fit into the dominant

orthodoxy within the aforementioned limited success. However, given the move away from deficit approaches in the third Access Plan and also towards a consideration of spatial variation in higher education, the An Cosán model may well find a greater space in which to contribute to the access debate.

Chapter 5 The An Cosán model for higher education access

Section 1 An overview of community education and the history of An Cosán

Introduction

This research study focuses on a case study of An Cosán, the largest independent, community-based education centre in Ireland (Downes, 2011) which developed a model of higher education provision in response to the educational and social inequalities of West Tallaght, Dublin. Specifically, the research is concerned with the degree programmes which were developed by An Cosán, in collaboration with, and in response to, the community and validated by way of a collaborative partnership with the Institute of Technology Carlow: the BA Degree in Leadership and Community Development and the BA Degree in Applied Addiction and Community Development. This unique example of a grassroots approach to addressing educational disadvantage is on the periphery of national access policy, yet it meets national policy targets. Whilst an acknowledgement of higher education outreach in the community has emerged sporadically across Ireland (HEA, 2015) it is not embedded in access policy and is mainly seen as a mechanism to overcome geographic issues that impede participation in higher education (*ibid.*) rather than a valuable model in itself.

There is a need to explore other methods for supporting greater access to higher education. In public policy, national access plans, which were described in more detail in Chapter 4, have focused heavily on deficit-positioned measures which aim to enable an individual to gain access to higher education albeit with limited impact for certain socio-economic groups and mature students. However, there is an increasing policy focus on taking an institution-wide approach to access; therefore, the lessons from the An Cosán model of higher education, as a bottom-up community education approach, can contribute to the access policy debate.

This chapter is in two parts, the first considers community education from a theory, practice and policy perspective; charts the establishment of An Cosán, including its feminist ethos, within the broader historical community education context in Ireland; and maps its education provision. The second part offers details of the community An Cosán serves in West Tallaght and draws on empirical research findings from An Cosán

management interviews to offer a clear articulation of the genesis, development and features of An Cosán's degree programmes. The inclusion of tutors' perspectives on the non-formal aspects of the degree is added to management perspectives as a means to further describe the model. Finally, I conclude with the logistical aspects of the collaborative partnership between An Cosán and IT Carlow.

Community education under the global umbrella of non-formal education

It is important to position community education in a broader understanding of education provision. I do not subscribe to the concept that once an educational course is accredited, it becomes defined as formal education regardless of process, context or characteristics. This understanding is currently used by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) and their Adult Education Survey (AES), in that their definition of non-formal education includes the criterion: the programme of study does not lead to a nationally recognised qualification (CSO, 2018). By this rationale, an accredited programme in community education becomes formal education, which to my mind is not reflective of its characteristics, nor the other non-formal education provision that is offered Europe-wide, of which it has so much in common. Also, fundamentally to this research study, in order to describe the An Cosán model of higher education in the broader education landscape in Ireland, particularly in terms of access policy, it is valuable to consider its specific features. Suffice to say that is not to infer a dichotomy nor to prize formal over non-formal education, or vice versa, it is to aid description of the model. The non-formal education characteristics, as outlined in this section, were discussed during the tutor and management interviews in order to consider their applicability to more fully describing the An Cosán model of higher education provision.

Community education has a long history of engaging on an equal footing with the most educationally disadvantaged communities to, amongst other things, address educational inequality. Involvement with the community is central to this, offering a bottom-up rather than top-down approach to educational access. Community education is not unique to Ireland; the concept and practice have been described in the UK (Tett, 2010), in Northern Ireland (Lovett, 1975), and in Scotland as community learning and development (Mackie, Sercombe & Ryan, 2013). Further afield, community education features in Australia and in New Zealand, including wānanga

(Tobias, 1992); the US (Griswold, 2013) and in the Philippines (Ličen, Lihtenvalner & Podgornik, 2012) and draws parallels with popular education in South America (Connolly, 2003).

In the European context, the term community education is not generally used but various models of non-formal adult education exhibit similar characteristics. This specific case study of An Cosán, a community education organisation that exhibits characteristics under the broader umbrella term *non-formal education* engages educationally disadvantaged people in higher education outside the formal education system. To aid articulation of this model in an access policy context, and to clearly differentiate it from formal higher education and outreach, the use of the umbrella term, non-formal education is helpful.

Community education is comparable to non-formal educational models such as *sozial pädagogik* in Germany, *animation* in France and socio-cultural work in Belgium. A Swedish form of non-formal adult education, *folkbildning*, from the two words folk and bildning means people-learning and is based on group learning and shared experience through study circles, which also has similarities to community education. In terms of offering an alternative path to formal education, folk high schools in Sweden receive regional municipal funding to provide high school diplomas equivalents. Another Nordic mode of non-formal education is the Danish Folkehøjskole (Folk high schools), founded by Nikolai Grundtvig; it operates in a similar manner to community education where it is an educational space specifically aimed at learning for citizenship (Connolly, 2010). It is noteworthy that such models are often embedded within national education systems, are often well-funded, are under specific governmental policies, are used as modes for education access, but also maintain autonomy to offer locally needed programmes. However, other areas, such as New Zealand experience significant challenges for funding community education (Bowl & Tobias, 2012), similar to Ireland.

Non-formal education as a concept for the study

The lack of conceptual clarity and theoretical coherence associated with non-formal, and community, education contributes to its credibility problem (Martin, 1987 p. 189), adding to the challenge of influencing policy:

Discourse is not simply to change the way we look at the world: it is also to help us change the world as we see it. If the non-formal education discourse is confused, it will be less useful as a tool of planning educational programmes. (Rogers, 2004, p. 237)

Paulston remarked in 1972 that non-formal education was “the least studied and understood” part of the education system, such comments are still valid as “formal education has long been the preferred daughter of educational theorising while non-formal education has been relegated to the position of an exotic or poor relative” (Beckerman, Burbules & Silberman-Keller 2006, p.2). Beckerman *et al.* (2006) attribute this neglect to the negative view of non-formal education: “even the rhetoric adopted by those who practice it often seem to assume this position, defining the non-formal in negative terms, as an education that is not formal” (p.2).

For the purpose of this literature review, the value of clearly defining non-formal education is in congruence with Rogers’ perspective, i.e. for the good of the education sector and for the benefit of the research. A clear understanding of non-formal education is imperative to providing a firm articulation of the An Cosán model in a policy context, as a foundation for an effective literature review, to the selection of appropriate research methodologies and to the creation of a context where comparative work is accurately related, i.e. through the common theme of non-formal adult education.

Describing non-formal education poses many challenges (Beckerman, 2006; Bhola, 1998; Carron & Carr-Hill, 1991; Grandstaff, 1978; LaBelle & Ward, 1996; LaBelle & Ward, 1994; Paulston, 1972; Rogers, 2004; Romi & Schmida, 2009; Tobias, 1992). The flexible wide-ranging characteristics, “high degree of elasticity and openness to change, and its readiness to adapt to heterogeneous populations with many and diverse educational needs” (Romi & Schmida, 2009), add to its complexity. Contextualisation of descriptions add another layer of challenge (Tobias, 1992; Grandstaff, 1978; Rogers, 2004).

Alan Rogers’s pivotal book (2004) *‘Non-Formal Education, Flexible Schooling or Participatory Democracy’* explores the concept of non-formal education from a variety of perspectives yet falls short of explicitly proposing a definition. Tobias suggests that non-formal education is part of community education (1992), the more fitting umbrella in this research is to consider non-formal education as the umbrella term thereby

linking community education with other modes of provision. In practical terms, an advocacy structure already exists to bring such providers of non-formal education together at EU level, through the EAEA²¹.

A detailed analysis of literature that focuses specifically on describing non-formal education was carried out as part of this literature review, a synopsis of the main features which can be used to describe non-formal education are outlined as: organisational; purpose and funding; democracy and control; educational access, teaching methodology; participation as control²²; educational programme and timing (see appendix 17). Through the course of the analysis, one pertinent finding describes the often discussed ‘feeling’ that learners have within a non-formal education environment through one understanding of the concept of *liminality*. Romi and Schmida, (2009) state that in the context of non-formal education, *liminality* is the nature of their underlying codes of behaviour, which in this case is ascribed as the “code of informality” (Kahane, 1997). There is greater freedom to express oneself in a non-authoritarian system which facilitates the construction of multiple identities where marginality is reduced, a sense of belonging fostered and the participation in democratic processes garners a sense of freedom and spontaneity.

In summary, as a result of this review and for the purpose of offering a clear articulation of the An Cosán model of higher education, I propose the following working description of non-formal education for the purpose of this study:

Organised learner-centred educational activities provided by self-governing²³ non-governmental organizations²⁴, which can be accredited or non-accredited. It offers an intentional²⁵ learning environment that is flexible in entry requirements²⁶ and has liminality²⁷ attributes that facilitate active participation²⁸ in a contextual,²⁹ democratic³⁰, learning process based on a negotiated curriculum³¹ which can lay foundations for social change.

²¹ European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA), the voice of non-formal education in Europe. EAEA is a European NGO with 133 member organisations in 43 countries and represents more than 60 million learners Europe-wide.

²² Participation as control, where learners take responsibility for decision-making, implementation and evaluation of programmes. Facilitating learners and groups in ‘learning *what* they want to learn, *when* they want to learn it, and *for as long* as they want to learn’ (Rogers, 2004, p. 253, original emphasis).

²³ (Paulston 1972; Simkins, 1977; UNICEF 1993)

²⁴ (Lynch *et al.* 1997 and LaBelle, 1982)

²⁵ Werquin (2010)

²⁶ (Fordman, 1980 and Rogers, 2004)

²⁷ Kahane, 1997

²⁸ Rogers (2004)

²⁹ Rogers (2004)

³⁰ Simkins, 1977; Fordman, 1980)

³¹ Fordman (1993)

Community education as articulated in national policy

There remains a lack of clarity at policy level regarding a conceptual understanding of community education to the detriment of its wider recognition, public awareness, governmental policy development and potentially learner involvement. There is a challenge in articulating the An Cosán degree programmes in this study as having specific characteristics that support access within the broader access policy landscape. At a national level, An Cosán mainly falls under FET policy; however, at EU level it is in keeping with broader lifelong learning policy as it is non-formal education provision in a lifelong learning context, quite uniquely ranging from non-accredited and accredited provision from NFQ level 1 – level 8. At a national level, community education has become the umbrella term for all outreach education in the community in these policy documents, as outreach and as an emancipatory process. Whilst community education has been recognised in policy documents (DES, 2000; HEA, 2008; SOLAS, 2017) and research (AONTAS, 2010, 2011) as being effective in engaging educationally disadvantaged people it has suffered from a narrow, limited policy scope and is generally confined by funding models to NFQ level 3 – NFQ level 5 (AONTAS, 2010, p. 32). Additionally, challenges for community education providers to offer accredited programmes with new QQI arrangements (AONTAS, 2018b), coupled with the even greater issue of a lack of funding (AONTAS, 2016, 2017, 2018b), limits the potential of community education.

National policy documents offer what are essentially models, rather than definitions, of community education in the Green Paper on Adult Education, *Adult Education in an Era of Learning* (DES, 1998) and the White Paper on Adult Education, *Learning for Life* (DES, 2000). Although, 20 years on the White Paper has lost impact on policy due to the shifting discourse (Hurley, 2015); however, it is a nationally stated understanding of community education in policy which aids articulation. However, in national policy there are two stated modes: the first of the two models of community education presented in the White Paper (2000), model one, which is based on that of the Green Paper (1998) and is described as:

An extension of the service provided by second and third-level education institutions into the wider community. In this sense, it could be seen to incorporate almost all adult learning opportunities provided by the formal education sectors at community level - it is education in the community but not of the community. (DES, 2000, p. 110)

Model one is essentially higher education outreach, similar to the *community organisation/ education and community development/education* models described by Lovett *et al.* (2003), a formal education process, offered in working class areas, concerning local issues of concern and emanating from a deficit discourse. This is comparable to *the universal and reformist* models of community education described by Martin (1987), top-down access to compensatory education in disadvantaged areas which aims to increase participation through the decentralisation of provision. In practice, the education programme is not developed by the community or community organisation but by an external education institution who offer a service by providing the programme through their lecturers to those outside of their institution. It is in the main, unidirectional, academy centred provision *for* a community. It does necessitate a level of collaboration and partnership with the community; however, higher education outreach has a different ontology, epistemology and methodology than that of a community education model of higher education provision.

The White Paper (DES, 2000) chapter on community education is almost solely concerned with model two, adopted from the Green Paper (DES, 1998), as it specifically describes the key characteristics of community education which bear little relation to the more liberal approach:

In a more ideological sense as a process of communal education towards empowerment, both at an individual and a collective level. Such an approach to Community Education sees it as an interactive challenging process, not only in terms of its content but also in terms of its methodologies and decision making processes. (DES, 2000, p. 110)

Model two of the White Paper is similar to what Lovett *et al.* (2003) describe as a community action/social action models and the radical model as outlined by Martin (1987), see appendix 18.

Community education in Ireland and the emergence of An Cosán

In describing community education in the Irish context, Connolly draws upon the evolution of community education in Ireland and the features it exhibits (2003), which is surprisingly similar to a that outlined for the Philippines (Ličen *et al.*, 2012). Connolly sees community education as comprising a complex dynamic interaction of the

following characteristics which are strongly influenced by the participation, and valuing, of learners, their voice, lived experience together with an active engagement within a feminist, emancipatory educational context:

1. Grassroots organic growth
2. Ownership of the process by the participants
3. Taking a person-centred approach, drawing on that developed in literacy education
4. Voluntary participation by learners
5. The centrality of the subjective experience of the participants' location within and of the community
6. Feminist education, which is very complex in itself, but incorporating consciousness-raising and gender awareness
7. Emancipatory education proposed by Freire (1970) incorporating praxis and conscientisation
8. Jane Thompson's 'really useful knowledge', (Thompson, 1996), emancipatory, politicising knowledge which has the potential for societal transformation. (Connolly, 2003, pp. 12-13)

These characteristics are about harnessing the potential of the individual and their community, standing in sharp contrast to a deficit perspective of the individual. Community education can be understood as being characterised as grassroots, locally developed and owned, learner-centred, emancipatory education, as described by the AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN) in an effort to become a cohesive network with a united understanding for advocacy activities (AONTAS, 2008). Process and social action are front and centre.³² A key characteristic of community education is voice and dialogue. Group learning is central to the process as facilitated discussions enable people to learn from each other and to critically engage with their own experience in a participatory, democratic way that moves from the personal to the social (Connolly, 1996). Such group learning facilitates the recognition, and valuing, of the learner's lived experience within the learning practice: "no one teaches another, nor is any one self-taught. People teach each other, mediated by the world" (Freire & Ramos (1972, p. 53), cited in Tett, 2010, p. 54). Marginalised voices no longer silenced often spark a move for social change.

³² Community education is a process of personal and community transformation, empowerment, challenge, social change and collective responsiveness. It is community-led, reflecting and valuing the lived experiences of individuals and their community. Through its ethos and holistic approach community education builds the capacity of groups to engage in developing a social teaching and learning process that is creative, participative and needs-based. Community education is grounded on principles of justice, equality and inclusiveness. It differs from general adult education provision due to its political and radical focus. (AONTAS, 2008)

Historically, and up until this day, community education participants are from working class areas which experience social exclusion, poverty and oppression as a result of structural inequalities. Community education participants are predominantly women, who had left school early, are unemployed or in precarious work, lone parents (AONTAS, 2010, p. 10) in receipt of a social welfare payment and experience a high rate of deprivation, namely economic poverty (AONTAS, 2011, p. 36). As such, community education is located within areas of disadvantage and marginalization, exactly where national access policy should be focusing on. For example, An Cosán serves the community of West Tallaght, which experiences educational inequality and poverty (Gilligan & Zappone, 2006).

In Ireland, community education grew out of the work of the Vocational Education Committees (VECs), the extramural courses of higher education institutions, courses offered by religious orders, workers' education associations, unions, adult literacy tuition, and to a large extent women's community education (Connolly, 2003, p. 9), especially in areas of socio-economic disadvantage.

With the establishment of a small funding stream in 1984, the Adult Literacy and Community Education Scheme (ALCES) budget sustained the adult education provision in the 1980s (AONTAS, 2004, p. 9). Against a backdrop of increasing recognition of the existence of educational disadvantage in Ireland, and a view that local initiatives were effective in supporting anti-poverty actions, small locally organised community groups, mainly run by and for women, developed education programmes many of which were based on Freirean principles. EU funding through the NOW (New Opportunities for Women) Programmes and the various subsequent phases of this fund, allowed groups to grow, develop and expand their community education provision. An Cosán was established during this movement in 1986.

At this point, it is pertinent to consider the link between the development of community education with the emerging women's movement of the early 1980s. Women, as a group "have moulded community education" (Connolly, 2003, p. 9) and the politicised origins in the early 1980s of women's community education were characterised by a Freirean influence (Ryan & Connolly, 2000). A feminist pedagogical approach emerged to "subvert the traditional hierarchical relationship between tutors and participants" (Ryan & Connolly, 2000, p. 95) and had an emphasis on humanistic group work. From their inception, and up to this day, the hospitality of tea and coffees

formed part of provision, and the acknowledgement of care, the reality of women's lives and childcare provision, in addition to furthering social justice and equality aims were central to women's community education (Connolly, 2014).

Notwithstanding the similarities between groups, a heterogeneous model of community education emerged. Women's community education had different underpinning values and purposes where not all were in support of feminism or social action. KLEAR, Kilbarrack Local Education for Adult Renewal emerged during this period with a social change focus, especially relating to the illegal drug issues within the area (Connolly, 2014). Some groups emerged from the more conservative Irish Countrywomen's association (e.g. Longford Women's Link which itself has evolved over the years to become active in building women's capacity to engage and become representatives in public life and the political system). The dual strands of women's community education provision have been described from a focus on women's personal development to the more radical social action model that sought to liberate women (Ryan & Connolly, 2000). The focus of the education provision in An Cosán is clearly articulated as the latter, which will be further discussed in this chapter.

Importantly, in relation to the research project, higher education has long been a feature of community education offered by women's group. Connolly (2014), links the extramural courses offered by Maynooth University with women's groups in Lucan, Leixlip, Clondalkin and Tallaght in the early 1980s with learners from the latter forming part of the emergence of An Cosán (Connolly, 2014). Also, Quilty *et al.* 2016, outline the potential of women's community education groups as a means to widen higher education participation, especially through its pedagogic approach and the specific equality-focused purpose of those groups.

Elsewhere, other community development projects were providing community education. In 1990, such projects were created through the establishment of the now-defunct Community Development Programme (CDP) providing funding for projects which offered community education unattached to the formal education system. Today, exact data on the number of community education groups are not available; however, as a vibrant flourishing field the AONTAS Community Education Network, which I established with organisations in 2007, now comprises 130 organisations. Many of those organisations were established by community leaders who sought to address social injustices and educational disadvantage and gave voice to those with the least

power through radical education models. The kinds of organisations offering community education differ (Harvey, 2012) generally non-governmental organisations, e.g. local development companies, partnerships and Family Resource Centres, and are funded through a plethora of precarious funding streams across a range of government departments (AONTAS, 2011) with criteria that can dictate the programme focus (e.g. accredited) to the choice of tutor.

The potential to provide higher education in a community education context is significantly limited by national policy. The constraints of funding impact on the kind of provision offered, as a predominantly centralised national policy structure, dictates policy priorities limited to further education and training (FET) only. Similar challenges have been noted in New Zealand (Slater, 2009). Within the FET policy context, community education is funded through 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and managed by Community Education Facilitators (CEFs) with funding from the Department of Education and Skills through SOLAS³³ reaching over 50,000 learners (SOLAS, 2017). Outside of this context, the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) overseen by POBAL under the Department of Community and Rural Development (DRCD) offers funding but again through its criteria confines the scope to lower levels of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). The potential of community education to offer higher education has been hampered yet the An Cosán model remains nonetheless.

Beyond having the required qualifications for standard admittance to higher education, learners from community education may have difficulty in transferring to formal higher education environments. This has been attributed to the cultural gap, the lack of flexibility in making the transition to a formal education institution, the loss of a student-centred style, and range of supports, including childcare, which is not always matched by the formal institution (McGivney, 2001).

³³ Mainly through the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) community strand and the Adult Literacy and Community Education Scheme (ALCES)

The feminist informed founding and evolution of An Cosán

The An Cosán model of community education described in this section is in line with model two of the White Paper (DES, 2000) and is based on a community/social action/radical model as described by Lovett *et al.* (2003) and Martin (1987).

The historical roots of An Cosán stem from a social justice imperative that acknowledges structural inequalities but seeks to address such through a transformative education process and feminist pedagogy. Specifically, the education centre was established in 1986 because the founders Dr Ann Louise Gilligan and Dr Katherine Zappone “were passionate about women’s lives and because it was one of the most radical feminist ventures we could imagine” (Gilligan & Zappone, 2008, p. 125). The impetus stemmed from the founders’ dream of creating an educational centre that would “promote freedom from sexism, classism and any other kind of social inequality” (Gilligan & Zappone, 2008, p.88). An Cosán, was originally called The Shanty Educational Project as the founders set up the centre in their own home, which was named The Shanty, in Brittas close to an area of poverty and deprivation, West Tallaght. The founders engaged with the local community, immersing themselves in the personal stories of multiple social deprivation which women experienced (Gilligan & Zappone, 2008), convincing them further that “an aesthetically pleasing place and space is fundamental to human flourishing”(ibid, p. 91). Engaging with the local parish and meeting those with a shared vision for their educational project was vital, and following an initial request to give a lecture to a group of local women, who had previously completed an outreach programme from UCD in Women’s Studies, their home hosted its first learning session to a group of fifteen women (Gilligan & Zappone, 2008, p.93). These initial sessions informed the first course offered to a cohort of women leaders in the community of West Tallaght, which focused on building capacity with skills in advocacy and negotiation. The provision of childcare offered was central to enabling women to access education. Participants were transported to Brittas by minibus from Jobstown, and vital supports such as crèche facilities were provided in Jobstown Community Centre (An Cosán 2006 p. 5). The warm environment and hospitality in An Cosán described by learners in this study, harks back to the first-ever course where the “fire was lit under the copper canopy, scones baked and handouts prepared” (Gilligan & Zappone, 2008, p.93). Listening to the women’s stories of poverty, structural injustices and prior negative educational experiences reconfirmed the founders’ commitment to radical social change (ibid., p. 99) as they set about offering

‘women’s community education’ within a learning environment and pedagogy that was markedly different from the school experience. The friendship, sense of belonging, security and bonds developed with and between, participants of the first courses. Later their involvement in fundraising activities to build a new education centre, resulting in strong, lasting connections as many of the first cohort of learners are working in An Cosán today (Gilligan & Zappone, 2008). Furthermore, half of the employees in An Cosán are from West Tallaght area.

Permeating their publications is a recurrent statement that An Cosán strives to provide education underpinned by a specific philosophy, influenced by Habermas, Freire and bell hooks, that is manifested in their belief that adult community education is an individual and community transformative act, that social exclusion and poverty experienced by women and men of their community can be challenged and transformed through education (An Cosán, 2011; Gilligan & Zappone, 2006). Specifically, for An Cosán, a ‘feminist imaginative pedagogy’ is described as the distinct learning methodology which evolved, informed by liberation theology, feminist and educational theorists, practical experiences of what enhanced and hindered women’s participation, and importantly by learning from, and with, the working-class women learners who participated on their courses.

The evolution of the pedagogic process in An Cosán has a clear theoretical basis. In describing a set of principles of a ‘Female Pedagogy’, Anne Louise Gilligan outlines: the learning space as an environment; a method and practice that seeks to reverse a patriarchal society; a curriculum co-intended by participants that is not neutral; and a rigorous critique of women’s exclusion to raise awareness of oppression (Gilligan, 1999, p. 207). At the heart of the feminist pedagogy is the cultivation and development of the ‘female imagination’ as a means to address hegemonic patriarchy. In contrast to mainstream educational methods, a feminist pedagogy includes not only care, empowerment and social/political change but also the “education of a female imagination and the intentional development of our creative potential are what will allow this pedagogy to find radical expression” (Gilligan, 1999, p.208).

Over the years, whilst offering the Women’s Studies Diploma course in the Shanty Educational Project, in dialogue with participants, Anne Louise Gilligan developed a feminist imaginative pedagogy that included six non-sequential steps: opening circle, naming of presuppositions; articulating women’s experience; critical and imaginative

social analysis; theoretical reflection and engaging praxis (Gilligan, 1999; Gilligan & Zappone, 2008). The opening circle process, for example, reading a poem, remains a key feature of both meetings and classes in An Cosán and was carried out in this study as part of the learner focus group. This process for “self-reflection within a group who held a common purpose” is a process which the founders describe as feeling “strengthened by the feeling of care it created between us” (Gilligan & Zappone, 2008, p. 126). The founders brought an educational approach that links the body, mind and spirit, the whole being, that is “integral to raising consciousness that patriarchal culture inhibits the full human development of everyone, but especially women and those who live with the injustice of poverty” (Gilligan & Zappone, 2008, p. 125).

Voice is central to community education and involves listening to the voices of otherwise silenced people (Connolly, 2003). Similarly, the feminist imaginative pedagogy described by Gilligan brings forth those voices through creative processes that reject “male imagery of who we are or ought to be” (Gilligan & Zappone, 2008, p. 114). Through critical and social analysis, the learner moves from feelings of self-blame and via theoretical reflection frames analysis that challenges patriarchal ideology and through engaging praxis envisions a “world beyond patriarchy” (Gilligan & Zappone, 2008, p. 117).

From the Shanty in Brittas to An Cosán in West Tallaght

From September 1986 until 1999, The Shanty in Brittas, and their on-site educational facility, The Muse, offered ten courses to women from West Tallaght. With increased demand and interest in courses by the local women in the community, sourcing funding to build new premises became a focus (Gilligan & Zappone, 2008). In 1998, twelve years after it was first established the Shanty received an inter-departmental government grant to build a multi-purpose, community-based education centre on a site in West Tallaght which was opened in September 1999. An innovative feature of the building was the positioning of the Coffee Dock at the entrance, which acts as the central meeting space and hub for learners, staff and volunteers. The ownership of these premises lies with the community of West Tallaght and is held in trust by the members and Board of directors; therefore, it a non-governmental organisation that is owned by the community.

In 1999, named by a learner and organiser, Imelda Hanratty, the organisation became known as An Cosán – *The Path, to Learning, Leadership and Enterprise* and housed The Shanty Education and Training Centre, Rainbow House Educational Childcare Centre and Weaving Dreams (a craft enterprise). Today, An Cosán aims to serve four areas of West Tallaght; its primary focus is Jobstown; however, participants are also drawn from Killinarden, Fettercairn and Brookfield. Currently, An Cosán comprises: The Shanty Education and Training Centre; Rainbow House Early Years Education Care Centre; and Fledglings Social Enterprise Initiative which holds Fledglings Education and Training. Adult education takes place in An Cosán in three operations: The Shanty, Fledglings and through An Cosán Virtual Community College (VCC). Recognising the need for childcare, and early years' education, as a means to enable participation and address community need, Rainbow house was established (An Cosán, 2006, p. 6) which is available for parents or carers accessing education programmes, one or two days per week. This essential service is in line with the oft-recited mantra in women's community education – no crèche, no course.

In practice, The Shanty enacts the primary aim of An Cosán by providing education to the people of West Tallaght in order to support the active transformation of their lives and their community through a supportive educational environment (An Cosán 2011, p.8). In terms of educational access, its stated ethos is cognisant of students who struggle with the injustice of poverty, experience a variety of complex educational and social challenges, and require a series of dedicated supports. With its focus on 'scaffolding' learners by establishing the 'scaffolds' or supports necessary for learners to actively participate, An Cosán's approach is clearly not a deficit model of education provision. The Shanty offers a distinctive holistic model of community education offering specialised learner-centred supports which facilitates each person to achieve their lifelong learning goals, whilst addressing the extensive barriers experienced by disadvantaged communities (An Cosán 2011); thereby acknowledging structural inequalities.

In terms of offering a valid mode of higher education, it is important to look at the capacity of the organisation, which could be considered as strong due to its size but also its political influence and power, which is not generally the norm in the hierarchy of education provision. The founders, Dr Ann Louise Gilligan and Dr Katherine Zappone, remained centrally involved in An Cosán (at the time of data collection, they

were no longer involved in the direct teaching within the organisation), its work is driven by the Board, CEO and management team – a number of whom were interviewed in this research. The organisation could be considered as having political influence, for example, in part attributed to the nomination of Dr Katherine Zappone by the Taoiseach Enda Kenny to the 24th Seanad in May 2011, having been recommended by the Labour Party leader Eamon Gilmore.³⁴ An Cosán's founders Dr Anne Louise Gilligan and Dr Katherine Zappone resigned from the Board of Directors in October 2012. Dr Anne Louise Gilligan passed away in 2017, and whilst attending her wake, which was held in An Cosán, I witnessed generations of learners and the community coming together to celebrate her life. The organisation has considerable political support and influence, which impacts how it is viewed. That is not to say the local community shares the same political views; indeed field observations would note the contrary, for example, the anti-water charges protest outside An Cosán in 2014 was directly linked to the presence of the then Tánaiste Joan Burton during a graduation ceremony.

Education provision in An Cosán

Firstly, it is important to note that there has always been a tension in terms of reaching learners, especially women, who are most marginalised (Gilligan & Zappone, 2006) and a tension between basic and higher education provision (management interviews, e.g. Angela). In order to provide context for the fieldwork, it is necessary to give an overview of the other educational activities in the organisation, which some learners on the degree programmes had engaged in, during the period immediately preceding the field research (2013-2014). A specific focus on higher education provision is outlined, which acts as the focus of the fieldwork.

Entrepreneurial endeavours have long been a feature of An Cosán, from Weaving Dreams, which closed in 2001 due to declining financial viability, to Fledglings Early Years Education and Care social enterprise (established in 2007), resulting in a variety of courses for early years educators and parents in order to staff the social enterprises. At the start of 2011, Fledglings Education and Training had more than 200 participants

³⁴ <http://www.labour.ie/press/2011/05/21/gilmore-announces-seanad-nominee-recommendations/>

studying 11 different courses (An Cosán, 2011 p. 10). These activities highlight the ambitions of the organisation as developing local initiatives, addressing local issues with the community, where the community can be agents of its development emanating from a diversity discourse.

A key element of the An Cosán education experience is the range of student supports on offer including: dedicated time for study skills support; peer support and mentoring; one-to-one sessions with tutors; and access to guidance and counselling. Additionally, 120 children of parents attending courses in the Shanty received sessional care and education each week. Extra sessions were also made available for the children of parents accessing the counselling services and other meetings in An Cosán (An Cosán, 2013, p. 6).

In 2012, there were 600 student places across the spectrum of lifelong learning: 38% engaged in non-accredited programmes, accessing second chance education for the first time; 62% of students were engaged in accredited programmes; 38% in FET; 4% in ICT and, pertinent to the research, 20% in Third Level programmes (An Cosán, 2012, p.6). No breakdown on participation by gender was given. Also, 20% of the on-site childcare places were dedicated to learners in higher education provision. Local needs analysis identified a high level of interest in access to higher education for the community of West Tallaght, and in response, they had over 70 students engaged in the following part-time 3rd level options: BA Degree in Leadership and Community Development (QQI Level 7); BA Degree in Applied Addiction Studies and Community Development (QQI Level 7); BA Degree (Hons) in Early Childhood Education and Care (QQI Level 8); and Special Purpose Award in Childcare and Development (QQI Level 7) delivered as part of in-house staff training (An Cosán, 2013, p. 6). The latter two programmes were not included in the research as their development and delivery mechanism is akin to outreach provision; this research only focuses on degrees which were developed by An Cosán and informed by the local community.

The focus of this research study centres on the following degree programmes:

1. BA Degree in Applied Addiction Studies and Community Development (QQI Level 7): The aim of this one-year programme is to provide an academic qualification in the area of addiction and community development work. It builds the capacity of drugs workers and volunteers to become increasingly effective leaders and reflective practitioners. The course is run over one evening per week and also include some weekends. The entry requirement is a Certificate or Diploma in a similar field.
2. BA Degree in Leadership and Community Development (QQI Level 7): Fee-paying part-time course (full-day Friday) which is run over a three-year period, this programme aims to build the capacity of individuals to effect change in their local community, the opportunity to build on participants' existing knowledge base, apply theory to practice and critically reflect on experience.

The BA Degree in Leadership and Community Development was introduced in September 2008, which was created and developed for mature students because of the amount of burnout that people experience as they tried to exercise leadership in their community (Downes, 2011, p. 362). A similar approach was taken with the Applied Addiction and Community Development degree. A detailed background of these degree programmes will be provided in the second part of this chapter based on management interview data. Obviously, there is a significant difference between the programmes, one being for one year, the other three years, both part-time. This has implications in terms of how embedded people are in An Cosán; also the Addiction Studies programme runs in the evening and, from my observations, is very different from the day experience, with less interaction with other learners and staff.

Further developing their higher level provision, during the fieldwork a new innovative approach to virtual community education was launched (in 2013) enabling a broader reach across Ireland as it “connects the curriculum, teaching, student support and ethos of An Cosán through virtual learning technology to ensure learners can access affordable, high-quality accredited and non-accredited learning experiences whenever and wherever they wish” (An Cosán, 2013, p. 6).

Section 2 The evolution of An Cosán's model of higher education

Introduction

Drawing on empirical research findings from An Cosán management interviews, this section offers a clear articulation of the socioeconomic and educational attainment of West Tallaght together with the genesis, development and features of An Cosán's degree programmes. In order to frame this model of community education more broadly in an education context, the inclusion of tutors' perspectives on the non-formal education characteristics of An Cosán is included, together with the management perspectives. Finally, I conclude the section with the logistical aspects of their collaborative partnership between An Cosán and IT Carlow.

Context of educational attainment in West Tallaght

In terms of national higher education access policies, the region which is served by An Cosán is of specific importance. This section includes Central Statistics Office (CSO) data which I analysed for the specific region in West Tallaght that An Cosán serves in order to link it to national access policy. An important caveat is that such data offers a basic quantitative method to characterise an area; such data could be construed as painting a negative picture of the area as it does not capture the vibrancy of West Tallaght such as the level of community engagement and volunteering activities.

To determine the socio-economic composition of the area, national census data obtained from the Central Statistics Office were analysed for the research fieldwork period of 2011, covering each of the four areas of West Tallaght served by An Cosán: Jobstown, Killinardan, Brookfield and Fettercairn (CSO, 2011). Averages for this area were compared to national averages. Therefore, all census data are based on figures for 2011 unless otherwise stated. The population of West Tallaght is 28,152: the largest proportion are residents of Jobstown at 16,630, followed by Fettercairn and Brookfield at 7607, then Killinardan at 3915.

Socio-economic overview of the community

Statistical analysis of the CSO census data covering the time of the research fieldwork (2011) noted that West Tallaght is characterised as: diverse in terms of new communities; having twice the national level of unemployment; significantly higher levels of lone parent households; and five times the national average of local authority rental, all of which are factors which indicate poverty.

Low levels of educational attainment were evident, particularly in Killinardan, and in all regions of West Tallaght there is a greater representation of the HEA socio-economic groups target groups compared to national averages. On average across the four areas of West Tallaght, unemployment was twice the national level at 22%, and the number of households renting from the Local Authority was over five times the national average at 42%. Furthermore, the percentage of households headed by a lone parent was 47% as opposed to the national average of 26% (CSO, 2011). The lone parent rate for Jobstown is 42%, the highest being in Killinardan at 52%; such families headed by a female comprise 93% and 91% respectively, with the national average being 87%. In terms of provision for the community, An Cosán initially catered for the learning needs of women and is still predominantly providing courses for women; therefore, the provision of childcare is paramount, particularly given the level of lone parents. Lone parent households are said to experience greater levels of deprivation (One Family, 2017), and in terms of poverty indicators, the number of households renting from the local authority is also significant.

Based on the averages of West Tallaght the percentage of the population who are 'foreign nationals' (term defined by CSO) is 12%; however, this is skewed as it is 19% for Jobstown and only 6% for Killinardan. One salient point is in Jobstown, almost half of foreign nationals are from outside EU27 (44%) compared to the national average of almost a third (29%). In responding to the needs of the diverse community, as of 2011, An Cosán had 48 students from different nationalities in accredited and non-accredited classes, e.g. Nigeria, Angola, Congo, Ivory Coast, Slovakia, Lithuania, China, Romania, Poland, and South Africa. A number of these learners were participants on the BA Degree Leadership and Community Development and the BA Degree Addiction Studies and Community Development, one of whom agreed to be interviewed for this research.

In terms of National Access Plan socio-economic target groups for widening participation in higher education, namely non-manual, semi-skilled and unskilled (HEA, 2008, p. 12) an overview of the percentage of HEA target groups (defined as socio-economic households) for West Tallaght is compared to the national average (data was obtained from CSO office, census 2011) in Figure 2. In all instances, HEA access policy target groups in West Tallaght exceed the national average. The An Cosán model is therefore of significance for access policy as not only is it situated in an area of educational inequality, and importantly, it also offers higher education provision to that community.

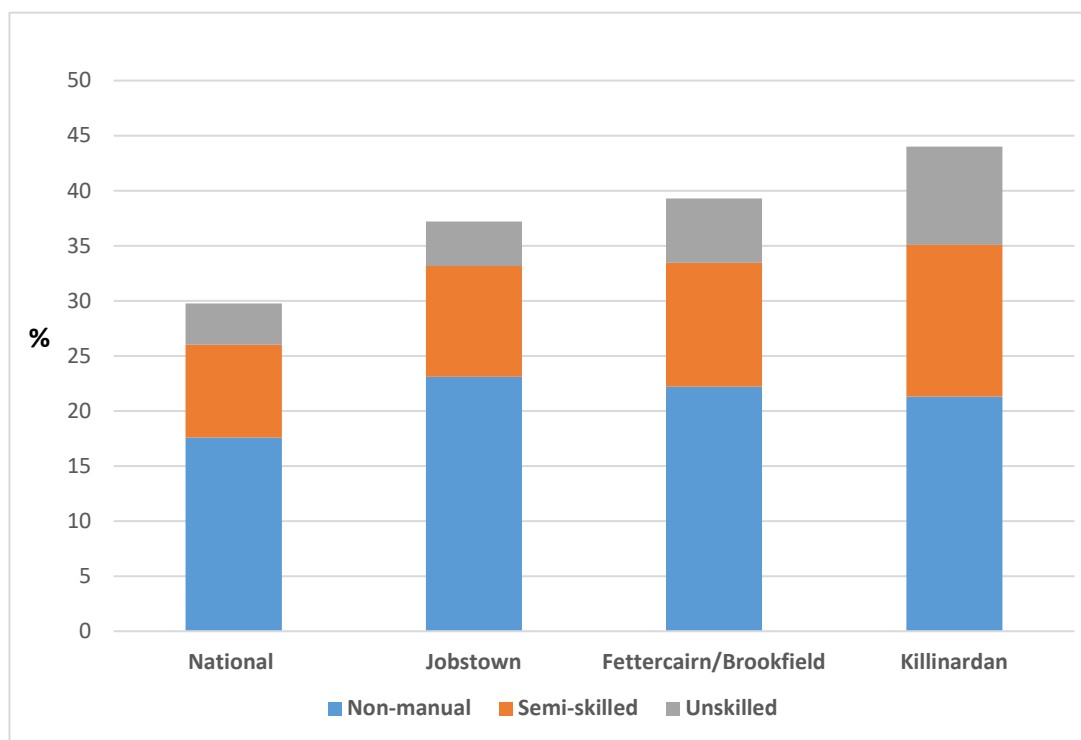


Figure 2 Percentage HEA access target group (West Tallaght) compared to the national average

Recent data from the Pobal deprivation index (Pobal, 2017), as developed by Trutz Haase and Jonathan Pratschke (the Pobal HP index), based on the Electoral Division: of Tallaght-Jobstown, gave the regional Pobal HP Index (2016) of -6.90, marginally below average, with an unemployment rate for 25% and 23%, for males and females, respectively and a lone parent ratio of 36% (Pobal, 2017).

Educational attainment in West Tallaght

Intra-national disparities in higher education access are evident, in 2004 variances were evident across Dublin and prominently in the Border, Midlands, West region of Ireland (Connell, Clancy & McCoy, 2006), interestingly the results for socio-economic cohorts were similar to the previous national survey in 1998 (Clancy, 2001). Currently, although in the early development stage, national policy relating to educational disadvantage, both in school and for higher education, will be developed based on geo-coding from census data (HEA, 2017).

Educational inequality is an issue for West Tallaght, and a case study of an education provider based in the area offers an insight into strategies for supporting access and retention of learners. Overall, Killinardan has a greater proportion of its population having no formal education (almost twice the national average 2.60% as opposed to 1.41%), over twice the national average have primary education as the highest level of educational completion (28.35% as opposed to 13.80%) and 25.41% as opposed to 13.80% for Lower Secondary as the highest level of educational completion (CSO, 2011). Jobstown has a similar level of educational attainment to the national averages for the lower levels (no formal education, primary education) but less than the national averages for Ordinary degree/National Diploma and honours Bachelor degree/professional qualification (a third less likely to obtain an honours degree). Similarly, Fettercairn/Brookfield fair worse than Jobstown in degree attainment. Overall, West Tallaght has lower than the national average of higher level attainment, ranging in severity from Jobstown to Killinardan. The higher level of educational attainment in Jobstown could be due to a range of factors and potentially the higher rate of the immigrant population, as noted previously in this section, who are more likely to have degree level of education attainment.

History of the An Cosán model of higher education

This subsection outlines the impetus for, and development of, the two degree programmes that are offered by An Cosán as part of the collaborative partnership with IT Carlow, based on 'management' interviews, i.e. key decision making people involved

in the development and delivery of the degree in An Cosán (n=4)³⁵ and IT Carlow (n=1). It covers initial development of the degrees in response to the community's desire for an appropriate mode of higher education; continuance of the degrees, characteristics of An Cosán as a non-formal education organisation, the process and features of their development as a community education model; and differences and weaknesses within the programmes. The section ends with an outline of An Cosán's model which could be used by those involved in access initiatives in a practice or policy context.

Responding to the community need for higher education at An Cosán

The genesis for higher education provision in An Cosán was rooted in the local community and specifically focused on the need for an accredited programme in the field of addiction studies. An Cosán started to explore the notion of providing higher education following a request from the local community. Emanating from the local drugs protests in the 1990s, an increasing number of the local community were working with people struggling with drug addiction issues, often in a volunteer capacity. When the Health Service Executive (HSE) started to invest in drugs projects in the area, the potential to gain paid employment for such work, combined with the expertise that had been built up and a need to improve their practice spurred members of the local community to approach An Cosán regarding their educational needs. There was a sense in An Cosán that there wasn't any Higher Education available in a model that suited the community's needs which also valued their existing experience (Lindsay³⁶).

The first step taken was to contact an HEI and explore how a partnership could be formed in order to provide a higher education programme on drugs work in An Cosán. However, this proved challenging, as the ethos that informs the approach to education provision in An Cosán, i.e. the co-creation of knowledge, appeared to be at odds with the approach taken by the HEI. It appeared that An Cosán viewed their contribution to higher education provision the same way they view learners, that they have something to offer in shaping the collaborative learning process. The disconnect in terms of the purpose and value of the partnership was stark, from the perspective of an HEI Head

³⁵ Lindsay, Bailey, Amanda, Sheila, Riley

³⁶ Interview with An Cosán management (pseudonym used).

of Department, the model of higher education provision was that of outreach, in which An Cosán would benefit from the provision of an accredited programme and the HEI would have the opportunity for student placements. However, from the perspective of An Cosán it was an opportunity to share expertise and specifically the co-creation of knowledge to which he stated: “I don't know what you are talking about, and he didn't know what I was talking about, and that showed me the gap” (Lindsay). However, despite the difficulties An Cosán, with the HEI, offered a non-degree (Diploma) higher education programme in Addiction Studies for a number of years. That programme would be replaced with the BA Degree in Applied Addiction Studies and Community Development via the partnership with IT Carlow.

Similar to the origin of the Addiction Studies degree, the BA Degree in Leadership and Community Development was developed in response to an articulated need within the community. Circa 2004, a course was made available to local learners in a project that An Cosán hosted, an Atlantic Philanthropies/State-funded Childhood Initiative. A group of learners approached the CEO of An Cosán and asked for an accredited programme (Bailey)³⁷.

An Cosán had run a number of short leadership programmes, but students stated they were looking for accredited programmes and that they wanted to be “able to access degrees in our community” (Amanda). One of the cited reasons for requesting such a programme was the influx of middle class people from outside the community coming to take up jobs. Although local people had practical expertise for such roles, this heightened the need for a recognised accredited programme that would allow them to access jobs and take up leadership roles:

Although they were exercising leadership or they were doing a lot of work in a voluntary capacity, they weren't able to access employment, get the good jobs, get the good jobs that they would be in a position of influence or being able to exercise their leadership, if you like, in a meaningful way so they wanted the qualification. (Amanda)

In addition to the call from students, it was stated that the development of the Leadership and Community Development degree was influenced by community leaders through a consultative process:

³⁷ Interview with An Cosán management (pseudonym used).

Just my knowledge was, that there had been a community consultative process, that there had been different programmes that had been run in conjunction with An Cosán and with leaders in the community in terms of what were the educational needs and out of that, now this is a very generic ... but it really developed in response to the community leaders saying yes education is important but students in our community do not have access to Third Level education. (Sheila)

Furthermore, in making higher education provision in An Cosán possible, there also seems to be a personal commitment from the An Cosán staff to the notion of responding to the needs of the community through the provision of higher education as it was part of the community education ethos and should not be limited: “I thought it was absolutely essential and powerful that An Cosán doesn't stay rooted in just delivering personal development, just delivering childcare, that it moves” (Sheila), other interviewees spoke of the excitement of the new development “so I was very excited about it I thought yes why not let's do a [degree] course” (Lindsay).

The need for an appropriate model of higher education provision

In addition to the articulated need from the community leaders, community volunteers, and students for higher education provision, the mode of provision to be offered was also important. It was not simply the need for higher education, but a model that was conducive to their educational requirements. The prospective learners were part of that conversation, in terms of determining the appropriate model required.

The prospective degree students articulated the need for provision within their community to management which was attributed to the constraints of accessing formal higher education in an HEI. The restrictions were identified as: finance; location; the challenge of fitting into formal higher education environment “they didn't think they would manage or fit into that kind of environment” (Amanda). Furthermore, there was a desire for the degree to be provided by An Cosán “they felt comfortable within An Cosán; they knew the ethos, they knew the way that we worked, that's what they wanted, so that was really the impetus for it” (Amanda). This point was noted by Lindsay in that there was no other higher education provision available to that group of learners in a manner that suited them, or offering the support that they might need,

or acknowledging their experience: “in a way that really recognised what they brought to the process” (Lindsay).

Continuing to provide higher education – the influence of learners

The aim of An Cosán was not to become a third level provider rather higher level education provision evolved from an articulated need from the local community: in order to fulfil the need for appropriate local education provision, which by being accredited at higher level afforded students the opportunity to gain employment in the local area. Furthermore, based on their prior successful learning experience in An Cosán, the model of education provided was deemed a suitable model: in terms of its part-time nature, low cost, and methodology which drew on their lived experience.

It's never been about becoming a third level provider, it's about providing the opportunity to access third level to those who wouldn't of had that opportunity, or don't have that opportunity, and to provide the programmes that a relevant to the community or community development sector. (Amanda)

The evolution of higher education provision in An Cosán was described as organic since the basis for offering more educational opportunities was endorsed by students and influenced further development:

I think it is so strongly grounded in a kind of experiential, phenomenological lived experience of those learning and working there; but particularly for learners and I think that their endorsement really helped An Cosán to make decisions or take decisions around further development of higher education. (Riley)

The impact of the experience of learners on the degree programme strengthened An Cosán's commitment to higher education provision as the strength of the learners' stories resonated and contributed to the strategic decisions influencing the direction of the organization and the kinds of provision offered: “so we had individual experiences of the change and the transformation that was brought about for them, from their own voices, through their own voices, through their own stories” (Riley). Ongoing support for a degree by the first degree learner cohort further strengthened the commitment of An Cosán to higher education provision. As one interviewee stated:

I think they were in their penultimate year and that had been such a positive experience and certainly, those students who were

participating in that first degree programme on Leadership and Community Development, they were very encouraging of further developments. (Riley)

Such stories provided a strong impetus for further development of programmes “it’s hard to counter the kind of depth of experience that an individual brings who has been through a programme, it’s very hard to go against that, it is very powerful” (Riley).

Starting the process of providing a collaborative degree

During circa 2004, the need for higher education provision on the topic of Leadership triggered a process of exploration for funding, developing and providing such educational opportunities. Initially, the idea was to provide a diploma, as had previously been the case with the higher education provision in drugs work. However, the previous experience of partnership with HEIs in the provision of higher education was unsatisfactory (Lindsay).

After securing some funding from South Dublin County Council, the CEO of An Cosán, attempted to engage an Institute of Technology (IT) in the project, however without a background in the area, a recommendation for IT Carlow was made. The Registrar at the time, considered a person who could think outside the conventional box, proposed the idea of doing a degree as it was only an additional year.

An Cosán undertook the challenging task of writing the degree, the excitement for which emanated from the desire to meet the known needs and wishes of prospective students: “because what we felt we could do was after all our discussions with the students we had a really clear sense of what they wanted and how to go about that was very exciting” (Lindsay). An Cosán set about developing a “real solid response to a clearly articulated need” (Lindsay). During this time, IT Carlow very much left them to develop the degree themselves, which suited An Cosán.

In terms of contextualising the degree, the modules of the degree were created with students working in their community, with recognition for the knowledge they would need and the skills they brought to the degree. Based on previous feedback, it also brought the knowledge and influence of students on previous leadership courses (Amanda). In terms of the Leadership degree, it sought to bring a grassroots, community concept of

leadership rather than a corporate one, and one that can lead to social change by including group work, and also:

Social policy and social analysis, so it was really building up a picture of what are the kind of blocks, or the areas, that people would need to build their expertise and capacity in, in order to have ... to be able to operate at that level, not just operating in their community but to know what was going on in the wider political or social economic environment and to be able to influence change, in that way and harness that for others. (Amanda)

The difference between the An Cosán model and formal higher education

There were a number of points raised in terms of how the management see the degree programmes provided by An Cosán in comparison to those traditionally provided in HEIs. In describing the difference between the An Cosán model to formal higher education, the term “community based higher education” was used (Bailey).

The distinguishing characteristics articulated by one interviewee included that An Cosán has a different learning environment: it creates a community of learners; it creates shared learning experiences; is based on individual learner needs, and embeds the student experience organisation-wide in An Cosán rather than in HEIs which is generally individualistic in approach to student supports (in HEIs the student is responsible for finding the correct supports). In describing a key difference the learning environment was identified, it was about “creating a community of learners, and I mean akin to you know Wenger’s concept of community of practice” (Riley). The greater extent to which learning supports are embedded in An Cosán, compared to formal HEIs, was also noted, and An Cosán is “taking responsibility for that” (Riley).

Overall, examples of features which distinguish the An Cosán model to that of formal higher education include: location of provision in the community; collaborative learning environment; exhibiting community education principles in terms of curriculum development and provision; student support; collaboration with students; methodologies used to enable active citizenship across all courses in An Cosán; and commitment to student engagement in the class, the organisation and the community. The link between the degree programmes to the broader education provision in An Cosán was also noted:

It is collaborative learning environment and that it brings community education principles to it in terms of its development of the curriculum, how it's delivered, its methodologies, all of that is hugely important to it and recognising that the class doesn't operate in isolation, you are never just a student on the degree class, there is an active citizenship programme that underpins everything. (Amanda)

At class level the learning process was described as: "challenging students in how you question them, having that collaborative approach, making sure there is lots of opportunity for the student's voice, and it is nurturing that ability" (Amanda). The learning methodologies were also noted by another interviewee in what distinguishes this model of higher education is the mode of delivery, the methodology, the informality, the face-to-face contact with lecturers, and the physical layout of the classrooms. This mode is "obviously different, but equally valid and it has proven to date to be very successful" (Bailey).

An example of both creating a contextualised learning environment, and creating course content that is meaningful and aspires to social change was provided. The example described the involvement of students in advocacy and community leadership during their degree programme, for example: "Students ran the politicians' night, so they don't just come into class... they're all of the time engaged in An Cosán..., or given lots of opportunities for leadership" (Amanda).

Similarly, in terms of being contextualised, and within the same defined constraints of the quality assurance structure for accreditation of formal and non-formal higher education provision, the difference also comes from being an "engaged degree programme" that is contextualised, meaningful and relevant as opposed to the traditional "more detached, perceived potentially to be more detached, less engaged in the real world" (Riley).

Finally, the ability to develop a close relationship between the staff and the students in An Cosán was noted as a feature of this model:

That's the advantage of not being a Higher Education Institution, of being an Institution in which a small group of people are undertaking three years, four year degrees and you build up very close relationships with your students and that's mind blowing. (Lindsay)

The strengths of the model include: acting as an enabler for people to access higher education; the ethos of the organisation, its involvement at a local level within the wider West Tallaght, and its size and ability to respond: “The role really is to enable people to access third level, it is a sense of bringing people from a starting point where their overcoming some disadvantage or barrier to be able to access third level” (Bailey).

Management identified weaknesses in the model compared to HEIs

One very pertinent articulated potential weakness of the model was the perceived reservations regarding the model from students and “maybe their families and people in the wider community, so you are not really at College” (Amanda). There was a sense that although it may have gained greater support, the perception remains: “maybe it has changed a little bit now, but there was still a perception that they weren't really at Third Level [the students that were in An Cosán]” (Amanda).

Additionally, there was a sense that some learners are almost too supported “that they are very protected” (Amanda). And that the intense ability to respond to students hinder future progression to other higher education providers, again as almost too much support is offered. An interesting further point regarding the high level of student support was raised as both a positive and a potential weakness of the model highlighting the need to empower learners to have the ability to engage in education systems with lower levels of support:

I suppose the level of support that a student has or the environment in which the student learns is one that is very strongly supported by virtue of the size, the classroom environment, the circle time, reflective learning practice so when the students move on from here maybe one weakness is that this system needs to prepare the student for the next stage and moving from this if they are progressing on to Level 8 elsewhere or a Level 9 programme elsewhere that they are given more empowering skills to do just that. (Bailey)

The small, albeit highly committed, staff team inhibited the expansion of the model, but the potential of the new virtual learning provision model could contribute to broadening the experience out for learning, exposing them to a wider pool of tutors. On the flipside of previously noted positive attributes, negatives were also discussed, for example, this "engaged degree" could be considered narrow in terms of content and

exposure to debate and views of other students outside this very specific cohort of students; therefore, it lacks diversity (Riley). That said, it was noted that formal higher education is quite homogenous in terms of the learner cohort being from “one main social class and background” (Riley). Further weaknesses in the model are the potential to be parochial “the weaknesses in the model is that perhaps by virtue of its size, it can become somewhat inward-looking” (Bailey).

Proposed weaknesses in the An Cosán model of higher education provision compared to formal higher education could be viewed as the aforementioned potential lack of experience of a large institution, including the additional extracurricular activities and the general experience that comes with traditional higher education. It was noted that learners “miss the presence of a larger institution which has lots of additional activities and the experience of being in a Third Level Institution, they lose out on that and that is a loss” (Lindsey). However, the endeavour of providing such experiences has required some effort to bring learners to the IT Carlow campus, and it is on the radar for improvement. Also, there was a sense that such a loss could be made up when learners progress to Masters in an HEI.

Finally, Angela was keen to emphasise a very important point regarding An Cosán’s ability to continue to meet the learning requirements of all learners, without favouring higher education over basic education.

An Cosán's remit and mission is about addressing educational disadvantage and eradicating poverty, so it has a very clear social justice mission, it is not simply around educating all up to a particular level, it is very clearly about widening access allowing as many as possible opportunities to access positive educational experiences. (Angela)

With scarce funding, the resource-intensive provision of higher education was seen as a cause of tension as a provider of education across the non-accredited provision it requires ongoing reflection and consideration to maintain a balanced level of provision. She cautioned that it poses risks “if one or other is dominant then your organisation, your learner, your community is out of balance” but it was a recognised issue that received consideration from management while the organisation also attempts to grow and develop further. Indeed, the constant need to source funding for the programme was also noted as a slight distraction from concentrating on the learning process: “I

would argue more energy could be put into the learning activities as opposed to the accessing resources” (Angela).

Additionally, the lack of resources was seen as causing significant pressure on staff, that their commitment to learners is evident, but staff wellbeing needs attention:

The last number of years have been very difficult for the organisation we have seen phenomenal cuts in our funding and our resources and people have had to take pay cuts and have had to take unpaid leave; staff have gone, they haven't been replaced, so there has been huge pressure. I think that has impacted on staff morale and I think the staff are hugely committed to students and to their learners... I can tell you that on my team there is not one person who does not consistently go over and above and beyond what is expected of them, they are amazing, but I think it has taken its toll, I used to hear years ago people saying oh it's all very well we look after the students but who looks after the staff, I used to think, well you are paid to do a job, one of your jobs is to look after the students, that their terms and conditions were fine and everything, I don't hear people say that now I think they are just too busy trying to survive and everyone is trying to manage in very different sets of circumstances. (Amanda)

A community education model of higher education provision

Management spoke about the radical, or community education, model of higher education that An Cosán offers which is based on: the ethos of community education for social change through to reflexivity in staff for the co-creation of knowledge, to the theorists which inform the learning methodologies.

The provision of higher education was viewed in the context of the purpose of community education, in that it is in keeping with the ethos of community education, the need to offer different forms of education, not just personal development, but also supporting people to change their lives. The opportunity to provide meaningful educational opportunities which have an impact on the community, and in this case the degree programmes, are part of this notion of providing radical education: “community education for me is about radically supporting people to transform their lives and their community's lives” (Sheila). Furthermore, the role of education in addressing poverty was also noted in terms of the impact of learning at an individual and community level which transforms and changes lives; this was also cited as a motivational aspect to their community education provision “An Cosán is positioned

to be more radical than passive as opposed to lots of other community education” (Sheila).

It was clear from interviewees that the degrees are a form of community education, also involving social analysis, making them “distinct from outreach degrees” as there are processes which empower students to have a voice and are driven by a community need which is characterized by poverty and exclusion (Lindsay). The open learning process encourages a two-way feedback system between learners and An Cosán, which becomes stronger over the duration of the degree programme (Lindsay).

The concept of co-creation of knowledge was cited as a distinguishing feature of the An Cosán model of higher education provision. Whilst acknowledging this is the theoretical aspiration, and one which may exist in formal higher education, and that the reality in practice may differ; there is a conscious effort to acknowledge and utilise the knowledge of students, in provision, in evaluation and in the evolution of the degree programmes. It was stated as:

It is grassroots leadership in a community of West Tallaght, isn't it true that there is real opportunity to co-create knowledge and that is what I would say, for me, has been happening, because I teach the Leadership modules and I know how I have changed because we constantly review and evolve. (Lindsay)

Reflexivity in staff, which enables that co-creation of knowledge was also described:

In response to what I am learning all the time but it is that new knowledge, or that new, it is not mine, it's ours and I don't want to say they don't do that at higher level education anywhere else, because I am sure they do in lots of places, but all I am saying is that what we do and I am saying we found a way of delivering higher education to students who themselves say would never access it in an ordinary higher ed. situation so if I take that for what it is then we are doing something right. (Lindsay)

The model of provision in An Cosán was described in terms of its features and also how it is distinguished from formal higher education or traditional outreach provision. An Cosán higher education provision was described as radical due to the theoretical underpinnings and approach taken, it is a “radical model because I think it is a model that is rooted in individual power, individual transformation, it's underpinned by radical theory and we can talk about Gramsci, Freire, all the traditional [theorists] ... bell hooks...” which manifest in the methodology of the provision that supports the individuals, values their experience where learners can “embrace their own learning,

embrace their own analysis, embrace their own articulation” (Sheila). The model is actualised through community education methodology described as the “flipped classroom” through group work, which facilitates peer learning and peer support; and support with the challenges of the course in order to enable the development of independent learners who engage in transforming their lives, community, family and lead to social change (Sheila).

The difference within, and between, the two degree programmes

A proposed difference between the two degrees was noted by some of the Management interviewees. The Applied Addiction degree programme, where students come in for the third year of the programme, in the evenings, compared to the Leadership degree which is over the course of three years during the day was identified as having differences relating to learner experience. One difference between the programmes noted was the “scaffolding”, or learner supports which are offered and experienced by students. This differing level of supports for the two cohorts of learners was described as intense for the Leadership programme, which is gradually reduced to become more self-directed (Amanda). The support experiences of the Applied Addiction studies vary as they have engaged in third level in a different provider which provides to be a different challenge (Amanda).

There is also a sense of differing relationships between the staff of An Cosán and the students on each of the degree programmes, this difference impacts on making clear decisions, e.g. around assignments, where the experience of working with a student over a longer period could “cloud your thinking” (Amanda). Also, the Leadership degree cohort is a small class, and the first cohort was “homegrown in An Cosán”, having participated in various courses previously. The second cohort of the Leadership programme was different and perhaps allowed a more objective approach to supports with clearer means for reducing support as appropriate:

They're a smaller class...I think it has been different from the first cohort that came in because they were like completely homegrown in An Cosán, the second cohort weren't as much, I think that has been different for us, I think it has been really good for us to learn from that, we were a bit more hands-off in a good way, in a very positive way, very clear on how we can put the scaffolding and then

you have to remove it, the relationship is definitely different.
(Amanda)

There was a sense that, to a greater or lesser extent, there was a different relationship between the staff in An Cosán and the Applied Addiction degree learners, which was a cause for consideration. One staff member stated they “would argue a lot more on behalf of the students on the Addiction [programme] because I know them and I have a relationship with them” (Amanda). The more hands-off approach by other staff resulted in a weaker relationship with those students, perhaps “wouldn't always know their names even sometimes” (Amanda). The caution being that that a level of familiarity with the students is important or it could result in a model of provision that would be similar to HEIs (Amanda).

The An Cosán model as non-formal education

In exploring the potential contribution of the An Cosán model to access, clearly describing its characteristics is helpful as it may otherwise be simply considered a small-scale formal higher education provider. The An Cosán model is quite clearly community education but, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, to aid articulation in a broader context, this section outlines the findings from tutors and management interviews who were asked for their view on the applicability of the characteristics of the broad overarching concept of non-formal education which was based on the literature.

For the purpose of this study, and based on an extensive review of the literature, the bolded elements of this aforementioned working description of non-formal education were posed:

Organised learner-centred educational activities provided by **self-governing**³⁸ **non-governmental organisations**³⁹, which can be accredited or non-accredited. It offers an intentional⁴⁰ learning environment that is **flexible in entry requirements**⁴¹ and has **liminality**⁴² attributes that facilitate active participation⁴³ in a

³⁸ (Paulston 1972; Simkins, 1977; UNICEF 1993)

³⁹ (Lynch et al. 1997 and LaBelle, 1982)

⁴⁰ Werquin (2010)

⁴¹ (Fordman, 1980 and Rogers, 2004)

⁴² Kahane, 1997

⁴³ Rogers (2004)

contextual,⁴⁴ **democratic**⁴⁵, learning process based on a **negotiated curriculum**⁴⁶ which can lay the foundations for social change.

Contextualised learning was seen as a strongly applicable characteristic of An Cosán and the degree programmes. It was seen as an essential element of the whole learning process, from deciding on content, aiding courses relevancy to learners' reality, and that it is the purpose of the degrees "because that is what they are about" (Lindsay). There appeared to be a level of curriculum negotiation, mainly with learners prior to programme validation, but not all tutors agreed. Within the confines of accreditation, there is limited leeway in assignments, but some changes were made in iterations of the degrees following learner feedback. The concept of learner-centredness was seen as a strong, distinguishing characteristic of An Cosán. As illustrated:

In terms of working with groups in An Cosán one has to, from my experience, understand it just has to be learner-centred. So it really isn't about the person who is doing the teaching, it is about the learners. (Michael)

At a class level, it is evidenced from the physical environment and interactive teaching methodologies, but that it is perhaps limited by the capacity of the tutor to meet the needs of a heterogeneous group generally, rather than individually. Also, as the tutor is central to the learning process, they must also be supported as there is the potential detrimental impact of an increasingly pressurised environment on their ability to maintain learner-centredness.

The proposed concept of liminality⁴⁷ was discussed at length and was generally seen as a fitting description of An Cosán by all tutors, whereby learners are free to be themselves and are recognised due to a warm, open, non-judgmental, supportive, welcoming physical, and learning, environment. This was expressed as: "I do think for the learners 100% we do our best to encourage, create a space where people can come into their own and feel free to express themselves", and that there was a "sense of belonging" (Sheila) to the teaching process: "what we do around the whole critical thinking is to support them in how they articulate their expression of who they are and

⁴⁴ Rogers (2004)

⁴⁵ (Simkins, 1977; Fordman, 1980)

⁴⁶ Fordman (1993)

⁴⁷ Romi (2009) states that in the context of non-formal education, liminality is the nature of their underlying codes of behaviour, which in this case is ascribed as the 'code of informality' (Kahane, 1997). There is a greater freedom to express oneself in a non-authoritarian system which facilitates the construction of multiple identities where marginality is reduced, a sense of belonging fostered and the participation in democratic processes garners a sense of freedom and spontaneity.

why they are and what they are” (Amanda). Although that does not mean everyone is always satisfied: “it’s not a perfect system, and changes happen which can frustrate” (Sheila). Liminality was also linked to a culture of “openness, friendliness, trust, I think people are very kind of equal, learners, tutors, that is my experience anyway, my perspective. (Michael). It is an almost a “way of being”, that must be authentic: “I suppose there is an unwritten ether that people pick up and I think that is an issue” (Stephen).

Another contributing factor to liminality is the link between the learners who benefited from the learning in An Cosán and who now work in the organisation, this achieves a unique situation that results in a blurring of lines between staff and participants “that kind of creates that unique culture and probably transcends also the differences between people to a degree” (Michael). However, and interestingly, for two tutors, the same sense of liminality does not appear to apply: “I think there are significant challenges in terms of staff being able to necessarily be who they are in the same way” (Amanda) and entering the organisation supports the ideology of the centre: “A bit of that, I think in that I suppose there is an ideology within the centre and you can't really go against it.” (David) and that “Well you can be if you fit in with the vision then you’re grand and if not ...” (David).

There appeared to be varying levels of participation as control, from initially building learners’ capacities to have a voice at classroom level, structures for feedback, to supporting learners to take up leadership roles in the organisation, and to actively influence the degree programme at evaluation level. Within An Cosán, participation as control could be seen as aspirational (Stephen), it is potentially enabled by the ‘flipped classroom’ methodology (Lindsey), limited by constraints of the degree programme; however, organisation-wide, although happening in “pockets” it is fluid, in a state of flux. The term ‘participation engagement’ was proposed in this regard.

Collective growth was understood differently; all tutors express the view that there was collective growth for learners. More broadly, there was a sense of growth collectively for tutors, learners and the organisation, with one tutor noting that the latter is potentially the most difficult.

Although it couldn’t be considered that learners determine the entry requirements, there is flexibility in the entry requirements to the degrees. Essentially, there is scope

for learners without traditional formal qualifications to gain access onto the degree programmes based on their experience; however, there is due consideration to the potential prospective learners have to achieve the degree, and it is important that learners are not set up to fail, that there are supports in place and ultimately by virtue of the fact it is a degree there are academic standards which much be achieved.

There was a definite sense that entry requirements were very cognisant of the previous life experience of the learner, recognition of prior learning (RPL) and that they were not dependent on formal education: “somebody mightn't have a Leaving Cert or a Level 6” but that there is a process to assess if the learner had the capacity, with the right supports, to enter into the degree programme (Amanda). Again, An Cosán takes into account the person’s whole life experience regarding entry, noting that:

There is huge freedom for students to come and say I want to do this, we take into account their work experience, we take into account their life experience, they don't have to have any other, they don't have to have Leaving Cert, they don't have to have a Junior Cert. (Lindsay)

However, it was stated that there is an entry process: “people have to have a certain level of education or experience because we use RPL, not hugely, but we do use it, we use previous educational attainment” (Sheila). In terms of the entry requirements, half of the cohort of students who come to An Cosán have basic education, and regardless of the accredited programmes which they want to participate in, an assessment process exists. Therefore, within that openness to access, there is also a consciousness regarding ensuring that students are not set up for failure: “because one of the things that we have got to remember is that everybody coming to us has been failed by the educational system for a start, so the last thing we want is to set anybody up for failure” (Lindsay). Ultimately, there is a challenge to this in that the requirements of the degree programme require a level of skills around writing and communication which can be challenging and therefore there are questions regarding the need for bridging processes which had been articulated to management (Stephen).

An Cosán was seen as self-governing within the constraints of funders' requirements and is non-governmental; however, it is not static, it is on a continuum but that they strive towards greater self-governance (Amanda). In the context of the degree, and relationship with IT Carlow, it allows self-governing, due to trust: “Carlow is an enabler, it's not a gatekeeper, so I think that is important for community education” (Stephen).

As a non-governmental organization, An Cosán was seen as a hierarchical organisation with a level of democratic processes, there are elected members to the Board but also that the sense within An Cosán, particularly the canteen, supports a democratic environment as both staff and learners congregate there together. The suitability of the word democratic was debated in this context. An analysis of the characteristics of non-formal education as applicable to An Cosán from a teaching management and tutor perspective is outlined in Appendix 19.

Characteristics of the collaborative partnership with IT Carlow

This section of the chapter outlines the practical aspects of delivering the An Cosán model in a community education context, thereby acting as a potential resource for access policy makers and practitioners who seek replicability. The history of the collaborative partnership based on the management interviews will be outlined in order to offer a summary of the logistical aspects for such a partnership.

The main aspects of the history between IT Carlow and An Cosán and a brief exploration of the term which has been used to define the partnership/collaboration will be considered. In exploring the value of the model, and the potential for replication as an alternative approach to widening participation the accrediting process, or partnership, is vitally important. The characteristics of the partnership from autonomy, ethos, shared learning to formal HEI links and logistics are also covered.

In describing the partnership with IT Carlow, it was described as excellent, and has resulted in the validation of the degree in Leadership and Community Development, Applied Addiction and Community Development and the new programmes via the Virtual Community College. Also, there are outreach programmes in An Cosán provided with IT Carlow: Early Years BA Degree (QQI level 8) (Sheila). This model of higher education provision differs to the aforementioned programmes as they are not part of the 'collaborative partnership', a difference being that the Early Years degree has "all IT Carlow tutors and they essentially run and manage that" (Sheila).

The history of the relationship between IT Carlow and An Cosán involved an earlier Registrar who felt that this was a worthwhile pursuing this collaboration. To an extent, it was more the personalities involved initially, so An Cosán approached IT Carlow for

validating the Leadership and Community Development, which was the initial degree programme and subsequently now that has been expanded to include the Applied Addiction Studies (Bailey). As mentioned earlier in this chapter, following the securing of funding the CEO of An Cosán, attempted to engage an Institute of Technology in the project, however without a background in the area, a recommendation for IT Carlow was made. The Registrar at the time was considered a person who could think outside the conventional box (Lindsay). Following discussions with the then Registrar of IT Carlow, it was proposed that a degree rather than a diploma should be provided as it was only an additional year.

As An Cosán were developing the degree, HETAC suggested that they should engage directly with the accrediting body and become a registered HETAC Centre, capable of offering their own awards. Furthermore, the Registrar was “getting a bit weary of the whole thing” (Lindsay) due to their “incurred costs of time and money” and over time also suggested engaging directly with HETAC; however, this was not the method which An Cosán wanted to undertake (Lindsay). An Cosán outlined what IT Carlow had to gain in that it was also providing them with intellectual property and that they are “actually getting a degree written for you” (Lindsay). Over a number of months, agreement on the intellectual property was established, and one that differed from the previous HEI-An Cosán arrangement, this time it lay not with the HEI but as a unique collaborative partnership between both parties. This enabled the potential to adapt and develop, degrees in response to the needs of the community in the longer term (Lindsay).

Both degree programmes (Applied Addiction Studies and Community Development and Leadership and Community Development) are accredited by IT Carlow and are defined as *collaborative programmes*. They also developed (2013) an online synchronous course: Certificate in Transformative Community Education, with the first cohort of students graduating in 2014 (source: field notes from 15/11/14, attendance at the 2014 Graduation ceremony). At graduations, there is a sense of partnership:

The President of Carlow is such a fine woman, you know, and to say having our Graduations in An Cosán with all of ... it's fabulous for the community and that's not Outreach, you know that's partnership so I think we have been so lucky with finding Carlow. (Lindsay)

The graduation ceremonies held in An Cosán, or the near vicinity, had both partners equally participating (15th November 2012, 9th November 2013, and 25th November 2014) thereby clearly presenting the collaborative partnership publicly.

Maintaining a degree of autonomy

A key aspect in the provision of a community education model of higher education is the ability to maintain its distinguishing features within the constraints of quality assurance for accreditation and within the partnership with the accrediting HEI. As the policy maker noted, without a level of autonomy, the whole notion of a community education model is compromised (Eoin).

As mentioned previously in this chapter, prior experiences of working with HEIs in order to provide higher education was problematic for An Cosán, mainly due to the restrictions applied regarding ownership of the degree programme and how it was developed. The level of autonomy of An Cosán, as with other higher education providers, is set within the required policies and procedures (Bailey). In this case, autonomy is within the context of the quality assurance policy and procedures of the partner HEI. A considerable level of dialogue and collaboration between An Cosán and the partner HEI regarding the programme validation process is carried out and eventually assessed by the validation panel which is overseen by an external Chair from the IOT or university sector (Bailey). This process supports autonomy. The final programme validation process includes the required procedure:

One that the syllabus is pitched at an appropriate level, two, the resources required for the programme are in place and three, that the staff who are being proposed to deliver on the programme meet the requirements to do so. (Bailey)

The importance of robust quality assurance (QA) criteria was described as very stringent but An Cosán's autonomy to offer the degree through a community education process is possible within the validation process:

What we are saying through the validation procedure is that the quality of that programme is the same as any other Level 7 on the National Framework of Qualifications, the mode of delivery might be somewhat different and that was, and is, explored through the validation process. (Bailey)

Also mentioned previously, the challenge of clashing ethos between An Cosán and the previous HEI partner was noted. A driving force for the collaborative nature of the partnership between IT Carlow and An Cosán could be viewed as the need for An Cosán to validate the degree programmes and for IT Carlow fulfilling its desire to widen participation in a coming together of beliefs and ethos. A proposed basis for the partnership is a buy-in to the philosophy and ethos of An Cosán and “certainly not a money-making collaboration”, and a drive on IT Carlow’s part to support access to higher level, a belief which it is fully committed to (Bailey). Also, for An Cosán, the partnership was made possible by a low, not-for-profit making cost approach in addition to a united commitment to social justice: “They have a commitment to, what I would broadly call social justice and engaging disadvantaged communities” (Lindsay).

The relationship is one of collaboration in that the award is from IT Carlow. An Cosán rely on IT Carlow in terms of validating the degree programme, as it would not be possible without a partner in higher education to run this and “from our perspective there is a real belief in the model because it certainly centres around the philosophy of enabling people access” (Bailey). This differed to other experiences, or knowledge, of outreach which is often a money-making, self-sustaining and profit-making for HEIs: “like I can understand that the self-sustaining, not the profit-making I can't understand that” (Lindsay). However, it was stated that the programmes are neither profit-making nor even self-financing: “the reality is the An Cosán programmes aren't self-financing” (Bailey).

The partnership attributes which facilitate the development and delivery of a community education model of higher education between An Cosán and IT Carlow were also described as respect and openness; respect, particularly by IT Carlow for the abilities and staff of An Cosán and openness to listen and for shared learning (Lindsay). Furthermore, the partnership was described as a mutually beneficial shared learning experience. For An Cosán, this encompassed benefiting from IT Carlow’s expertise of the QA requirements of higher education and the support with developing and delivering higher education. For IT Carlow, the partnership influenced the practice of a range of specific courses which they provide on Campus. Also, the model of higher education provision in An Cosán not only works well but enables their engagement

with people who require access. Additionally, it was a learning experience of effective partnerships (Fieldnotes, 13/02/2013).⁴⁸

An Cosán's relationship with IT Carlow was described as supportive, and they "really engage in a relational model" which includes: Collaborative programme boards; shared training and facilities, e.g. blackboard; and an acknowledgement from IT Carlow of the learning they gained from the partnership. The difference between the An Cosán model compared to other outreach provided by IT Carlow was apparent, in terms of recognition for the ethos of the organisation, the relationship with learners and level of learner supports. This was a new learning experience for IT Carlow (Sheila).

The collaboration was viewed as a means to support community development which has resulted in their changing approach to partnership; there is reciprocal benefit involving mutual learning:

With An Cosán it is something very different, it is an entirely different philosophy behind it, I think it is a very good relationship, I think the collaboration is working well, and I think we have both learned from each other. (Bailey)

Other benefits of the partnership with IT Carlow were noted, e.g. for learners, the ceremony is an opportunity to celebrate their graduation "it's like the mark of a Third Level institute, it is hugely important to them" (Amanda). However, as touched on previously, there was a sense that the link students feel with IT Carlow needs to be strengthened: "we have done a lot of work over the last couple of years to ensure that students feel a sense, and we could probably do more about it, feel a sense of connection to IT Carlow because they are IT Carlow students". Learners now go to Carlow as part of the induction (Amanda).

Ultimately, the partnership with IT Carlow was characterised by trust, openness and a similar ethos of a commitment to social justice; it was viewed as a "really engaged relational model" or a "collaborative partnership". From the An Cosán perspective, the partnership with IT Carlow was described as excellent.

⁴⁸ IT Carlow Seminar on Collaborative Provision, 13/02/2013, I posed a question to the panel – what is the value of the collaboration between An Cosán and IT Carlow, is it just about accreditation for An Cosán, what's the impact for IT Carlow?

Chapter conclusion

The An Cosán model of higher education has clear characteristics which can be described from the literature and, in a more detailed sense, the fieldwork interviews. Simply, the An Cosán model of higher education can be understood as non-formal education, which links to the community action/social action/radical model of community education as described by Lovett *et al.* (2003) and Martin (1987). In national policy, it can be framed within model two of the White Paper on Adult Education (DES, 2000). An Cosán emerged at a time when community education was developing in Ireland, and driven by its radical feminist ethos has particular resonance with women's community education that aspires to social action. Not only is An Cosán influenced by Freire and hooks, the feminist imaginative pedagogy, as described by the founder, was shaped by both the context and learners whilst paying attention to the affective dimension of learning, as a holistic approach that tends to the whole person.

In relation to the provision of the two degree programmes at the centre of this study, over the course of the management interviews and phase two of the fieldwork (observations), it appears that An Cosán developed the degree programmes in response to, and in collaboration with, the local community so that those volunteering in the field of drugs work would be able to compete with the others, mainly middle class people from outside the community, in obtaining employment. This initial call for an accredited programme resulted in the Diploma in Applied Addiction Studies, later students undertaking a course in An Cosán also called for accreditation of the leadership course at higher level. The model of provision desired was locally based, part-time, in an amenable learning environment which capitalised on their lived experiences.

From An Cosán's perspective, the rationale for providing higher education stemmed from a radical community education ethos eventually leading to the two degree programmes at the centre of this study. Driven by passionate staff, in striving to provide appropriate higher education experiences that lead to social change, several accreditation options were explored in order to offer contextualised degrees. A number of models of partnership evolved over time with various HEIs, from direct outreach with no ownership of intellectual property in the Diploma in Drugs Work to a collaborative partnership with IT Carlow which enabled the provision of accredited degree programmes in a manner which acknowledged the expertise of An Cosán whilst

being able to respond to community need. Although both HETAC and IT Carlow encouraged An Cosán to consider becoming an accredited HETAC provider, this was never viewed as an appropriate option; the decision to provide higher education was from "a solid response to a clearly articulated need" (Lindsay), its continuance is supported by An Cosán based on the impact and feedback from learners and the community.

Differences between the degree student cohorts on the two programmes were articulated as deeper engagement with, and a higher level of learner support or "scaffolding" for, the Leadership degree learners, particularly for the first Leadership degree cohort. There was a lack of clarity between the boundaries for the long-time learners in An Cosán, yet they had a greater understanding of supports available than for those who are newer to the organisation, i.e. the Addiction Studies cohort.

Possible limitations of the An Cosán model of higher education include: negative perceptions of the degree; limitations in the size of the organisation; the potentially disempowering level of learner supports and the constant need to balance resources across education provision.

From the experience of management, elements of the collaborative partnership with IT Carlow that enables the An Cosán model of higher education provision include: respect; openness; an understanding of mutual ethos; low financial cost and not-for-profit ethos; shared learning; complimentary programme/organisational missions; mutual support; and a high level recognition for learners.

Chapter 6 Literature review for analysis

Introduction

The previous chapters set out the policy context and detailed the development of the An Cosán model of higher education. As this study explores the An Cosán model of higher education from the perspective of learners, this chapter covers literature which will be drawn upon to analyse the data, predominantly that of the learner interviews and focus group. This chapter outlines the factors impacting on access as articulated in the literature and has three objectives. Firstly, I critique the inherent limitations of formal education, meaning that despite efforts, the access potential of formal education is limited, which may contribute to the persistent under-participation noted in national access policy. Secondly, attention is paid to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus to consider how people feel in a community education context. Thirdly, I consider pedagogic processes that support an inclusive environment by drawing on the educational philosopher Paulo Freire. Given the feminist ethos of An Cosán, I also include work from the feminist Freirean scholar bell hooks. Finally, I consider concepts of voice from a feminist perspective by drawing on hooks, Belenky *et al.* (1986) and within an education context by considering the work of Giroux and other academics in the field.

Problematising formal education as the sole provider of higher education

As outlined in the previous chapter, the An Cosán model of higher education exhibits characteristics of non-formal education based on its positioning as community education and based on fieldwork interviews with management and tutors. Although it is not to say that the model does not have anything in common with formal education, it may do. However, it is worth considering the inherent limitations of formal education in order to open up space for non-formal education in a diverse landscape that offers learners a variety of learning opportunities. While education offers a multitude of benefits to the individual, communities and society, there has been significant critique of formal education with respect to its in-built ability to perpetuate inequalities in society and limit access to education. This has been a significant feature of work from key thinkers influencing the field of adult education.

Historically, formal education has been critiqued by many philosophers of education, e.g. Dewey (1916), Illich (1971) and Freire (1970), particularly regarding its inability to provide suitable learning experiences for all individuals (Illich, 1971; Ryan, 2002; Webster, 1996). Critique includes the current dominant unchanging model of education provision, which was borne out of a different context, as “a modern institution in a postmodern world a symbol of what has passed” (Webster, 1996, pp. 72-73). In this section, I have chosen recurrent themes in critiques relating to formal education from an access perspective. When including the work of Illich in this literature analysis, I am drawing on Lichtenstein’s framework (1985) which covers key limiting factors of formal education as outlined by Illich including: individual autonomy, solidarity, social equality, participation and pluralism.

The issue of formal education being inherently unequal can be viewed from a number of perspectives, but firstly, there is a need to explore understandings of equality. The *Equality of Condition Framework*, developed by Baker *et al.* (2004) offers a useful tool to explore the inherent characteristics of formal education that limit educational equality, in addition, it helpfully offers suggestions to address such. As previously explored, access policy focuses considerably on a deficit perspective, focusing on the individual and their need to change to fit into a system with access activities e.g. access courses to compensate for an inevitable level of inequality in an otherwise meritocratic system. In terms of equality, this could be viewed as liberal egalitarianism which is based on “the assumption that many major inequalities are inevitable and that our task is to make them fair” (Baker *et al.* 2004, p.33). This concept of equality focuses on the role of the individual in making the most of opportunities presented; it deals with individual agency without taking cognisance of structures of inequality. This is generally in keeping with “the task for egalitarians is to make various adjustments to these structures rather than to alter them in fundamental ways” (Baker *et al.* 2004, p.33). In the pursuit of equality, the ambitions of the *Equality of Condition Framework* set out to “eliminate major inequalities altogether, or at least massively to reduce the current scale of inequality” (Baker *et al.* 2004, p.33) and differentiates itself from liberal egalitarianism by critiquing the notion of equal opportunity by recognising that:

Equal opportunity is impossible so long as privileged people can deploy their economic and cultural advantages on behalf of themselves and their families – as they will surely continue to do, so long as the consequences of success and failure are so spectacularly different. (Baker 2003, in Baker *et al.*, 2004, p.41)

This view of equality is mindful of ‘entrenched inequality’ taking into account that the “rights of powerless and marginalized people are easily violated” (Baker *et al.* 2004, p.41), which could be viewed as similar to the work of Freire (1971).

The four dimensions of the *Equality of Condition Framework* as applied to education are:

- Equality of resources and economically generated inequalities in education: the primacy of social class
- Equality of respect and recognition in education: recognizing diversity
- Equality of power: democratizing education
- Equality of love, care and solidarity: the emotional dimensions of education
(Baker *et al.* 2004)

As equality of condition is also concerned with people having a range of choices; the rights and advantages of groups as opposed to just individuals and how people are related to, particularly in terms of power relations (Baker *et al.* 2004, p.33), one could draw a comparison between the nature of non-formal education and its promotion of equality of condition. Furthermore, as the focus of equality of condition relates to fundamentally changing the system and providing choice, it appears to adhere to concepts from a discourse of diversity (and to some extent disadvantage) as outlined by Rogers (2004).

Baker *et al.* (2004) propose that the resolution to such inequalities involves democratising the pedagogical and organisational relations of schooling. Illich speaks of school as the prime source of social inequality due to the power they hold in that only school, or university, have the financial and legal authority to educate (1971), it can also make learners as consumers of education and limits the level of learner access and participation.

With respect to formal education, hierarchical relations are fundamentally inegalitarian as well as organisationally dysfunctional, not least because educational institutions of all kinds are highly complex organisations requiring careful management of both internal and external social relations (Baker *et al.* 2004, p. 163). Similarly, Illich proposed that the hierarchical nature of teacher-learner prevents solidarity. His position on this theme in relation to education refers to the hierarchical and antagonist nature of the relationship between students and teachers and administrators and teachers (1971). Similarly, “one of the main inequalities that many groups experience in education is lack of respect and recognition” (Baker *et al.* 2004, p.

154), which they identify in educational practices as “a general silence or invisibility that is often accompanied by devaluation or condemnation, a systematic bias in the syllabus and practices of schools, and segregation into different classes or schools” (Baker *et al.* 2004, p. 154). Furthermore, the dominance of certain classes in the control of education has been noted in one respect as: “upper class and middle class families also exercise more control over how schools operate, not least because their resources permit it” (Baker *et al.* 2004, p. 150).

With regard to higher level education, Illich states the old university of the Middle Ages was “a community of academic quest and endemic unrest” (Illich, 1971, p. 22), it was rooted in a community of learning with dialogue at its centre, whereas now discursive engagement rests in lecturers’ offices, on the peripheral of the campus rather than at its heart. In effect, he states that the modern university has little to do with its traditional mission due to the shift from discussion to instruction: “Critical enquiry, for the most part, moved from chair to print” (Illich 1971, p. 22). Illich states that formal education limits individual autonomy as people cannot “organise their lives around their own experiences and resources within their own communities” (Illich, 1971, p. 4). Furthermore, “the power of school thus to divide social reality has no boundaries: education becomes unworldly and the world becomes uneducational” (Illich, 1971 p. 24). Thus highlighting how formal education has created division in learning environments, invoking ideas of what constitutes a legitimate space to learn. The resultant decontextualised nature of formal education is perhaps an inevitable result, linking to Freire’s notion of “banking” whereby education is served in decontextualised and uncritically assessed units for consumption (Freire, 1970). The limited variety of educational institutions available for students was noted by Illich “we permit the state to ascertain the universal education deficiencies of the citizens and establish one specialised agent to treat them” (Illich, 1971 p. 116). The result of this approach is the inhibition of possibilities for a meaningful education system which can offer the plurality of approach needed to accommodate all learners. Overall, formal education, and formal higher education, has inherent issues that inhibit educational equality.

One could ask, how is fundamental change possible within formal education? Throughout the fieldwork, we will explore how An Cosán addresses many of the intrinsic limitations of formal education, opening up the potential to explore the value of other models of higher education provision. However, the potential of the An Cosán

model to counter limitations of HEIs for access through a more heterogeneous system of higher education provision is interesting but brings dilemmas. It has been argued that a diversified higher education system can assist in addressing under-participation as it has the potential to accommodate different education backgrounds and learning requirements (van Vught, 2008, p. 154). The lack of choice in higher education provision has been viewed as an obstacle, rather than trying to continually change the existing dominant system there is a need for organisations that are inherently different, i.e. display characteristics of external diversity (as per Birnbaum's (1983) typology of forms of diversity). However, the driving factor for diversity impacts on the potential to address educational inequality. It has been proposed that the concept of diversity in higher education can mobilised in two forms, through the notion of choice in the context of institutional diversity, and equality, in relation to student diversity (Archer, 2007), both of which are conceptually incompatible when influenced by an economic impetus for widening participation (Archer, 2007). However, as was explored in the previous chapter, the development of the An Cosán model was driven by a social justice rather than an economic imperative; therefore, facilitating equality-based higher education diversity.

Formal HEIs and the inherent limitations for access

To deepen our understanding of the limitations of formal HEIs, we can consider the large swath of access research that focuses on impediments at institutional level. A vital part of this research study is the link between the limitations of formal education as outlined in the literature and the potential of An Cosán to address this challenge. Academic literature identifies key features of educational institutions that impact on access including: the entry process; the nature of formal education institutions; practices within institutions; what is valued as knowledge; and the role of the curriculum. The persistent challenge of educational practices on access, and how they are shaped by formal education institutions, opens up the space for non-formal education, such as the An Cosán model of higher education.

Research into issues relating to class and access at institutional level is rich (Archer, Ross & Hutchings, 2003; Ball, 2006; Bernstein, 1975; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Crozier & Reay, 2011; Gewirtz, 2001; Lynch & O'Neill, 1994; Reay, Davies, David & Ball, 2001).

Complex factors influencing access focus extensively on the institutional aspects that need to change, rather than those in the prospective learner, which runs contra to the deficit-informed policy approaches we have seen in a previous chapter.

In formal higher education, the culture, ethos, characteristics and practices of educational institutions have been attributed to the non-participation by certain groups in society (McGivney, 2001, p. 56). Based on McGivney's (2001) research with community education workers, it has been proposed that the implications of such negative experiences are not just on an individual but also community level, whereby if an individual has had an inadequate first experience with an education institution news of such travels throughout the locale (McGivney, 2001, p. 56). The lack of commitment to access by institutions, and indeed the marginality of access initiatives within the institution, together with staff perceptions that the admission of underrepresented groups leads to a driving down of standards, can further compound the issue (McGivney, 2001, pp. 56–60). However, such a perceived driving down of standards cannot purely be attributed to the student profile or socio-economic status, but the institutional ethos, systems, procedures, and practices also play a part (McGivney, 2001, p. 62).

Whilst competing values, perspectives, policy interpretation and priorities create tensions for higher education institutional development aimed at widening access; perhaps it is unsurprising that access approaches centre on either marginal access activities, rather than the need for an institution-wide change. Yet, it is not to say that higher education institutions are static, they can be viewed as dynamic spaces, moulded by individual and collective agency within the organisation; whereby actors can collectively work to determine the form and substance of the educational institutions itself (Lynch & O'Riordan, 1998, p. 450). Therefore, such a system is not entirely predefined by existing conditions but is determined by the choices made by the individuals within that organisation. However, the potential of 'non-traditional' students, who are generally in the minority in higher education institutions, to influence their learning environment is limited.

Knowledge creation at institutional level

Factors influencing access can be rooted in the hegemonic influences of institutional practice, from pedagogy to a distinct understanding as to what constitutes valued knowledge (Burke, 2009; Corrigan, 1992; Gewirtz, 2001; Jones & Thomas, 2005; Thomas, 2002; Thompson, 2000). As explored earlier, An Cosán has feminist roots in terms of the kind of holistic, feminist imaginative pedagogy, which has developed in *The Shanty* (Gilligan & Zappone, 2008). Central to this pedagogy is the voice of women and their lived experiences which form a vital part of the knowledge creation process. In formal higher education, a number of authors have noted the relationship between what constitutes legitimate knowledge (Burke, 2009; Ryan, 2002; Ryan & O'Brien, 2000) and the influence of hegemonic patriarchal knowledge (Burke, 2008; Morley, 1999; David, 2011) in perpetuating exclusion to education by under-represented groups. Drawing on the work of a number of feminist scholars (e.g. Morley, 1999) Burke suggests that the hegemonic knowledge within academia is linked to masculinity and perpetuates a patriarchal education system (Burke, 2008, p. 203). That is the production of legitimate knowledge, which in HEIs centre on objective, value-free and detached approaches, is at the behest of certain groups, who are, in the main, white, middle class, heterosexual men. However, the system of knowledge production is not a homogenous as feminist theorists argue that knowledge is intrinsically linked to power relations (class, gender, race) (Collins, 1990), which may also be subject-specific where the overrepresentation of one gender, for example in education, may influence the kinds of knowledge considered legitimate.

Elite groups controlling what constitutes legitimate knowledge has important implications for access. Drawing on the work of Santos (1999), Ryan (2002) proposed that individuals who are outside the knowing, or elite group, and not part of the creation of knowledge are othered and their differences are considered as problems to overcome. McGivney (2001) notes that in academia experience is rarely viewed as a recognised currency, except for the limited use of recognition of prior experiential learning, thus leading to a disconnect between the lived experience of learners and valued knowledge by the HEI. Burke (2008, p. 204) considers the lack of legitimacy for subjective knowledge, whereby in order to validate one's position it must be framed in relation to academic knowledge, the literature or "the field". Similarly, Baker *et al.* (2004) reference the decontextualised nature of valued knowledge which perpetuates

inequalities. Additionally, the knowledge, capabilities and skills associated with privileged occupations in society are most prized within educational institutions thus perpetuating a social stratification of knowledge. A related question is who may participate in producing knowledge and in what contexts (Burke, 2002; Burke & Jackson, 2007).

Exclusion is further perpetuated through the control of knowledge when under-represented people do not see themselves in the curriculum, their knowledge not reflected in higher education, and their experience not validated in the learning process. This can lead to othering but also can result in perceptions of “a view that the formal education curriculum is irrelevant” (McGivney, 2001, p. 67); thus dominant values result in the marginalisation of certain social groups.

Methods for assessment in HEIs and the predominance of the written word as the currency for exam success also has implications for access. How knowledge is represented through writing, and in particular the essay, can reinforce knowledge gatekeeping which ensures “that particular forms of epistemology carry status and privilege, giving legitimacy to certain knowers and those students recognised as having the right forms of linguistic capital” (Burke & Hermerschmidt, 2005, p. 205, cited in Burke, 2008).

Through my work in AONTAS, adult learners from low socio-economic backgrounds frequently speak about their lack of confidence to attend higher education. I see this as a symptom of social inequalities. As Burke (2008) reflects, an individual’s confidence is set within a complex interaction of social inequalities based on age, class, gender, race, and other social differences. In relation to participation in higher education, confidence is privilege embodied for middle class groups, for underrepresented groups, it needs nurturing to grow. Deficit-informed access initiatives cannot provide a quick fix for low confidence.

Addressing the access limitations of formal HEIs

As we have seen in a previous chapter, access policy points to the need for innovative teaching and learning processes in higher education (HEA, 2004c; HEA, 2006; HEA 2008; HEA 2018) but falls short of recommending reflexive approaches across the whole

institution to create an institution-wide approach to access. Burke argues that the challenge of institutions limiting access is, in part, due to the will and inherent prejudices of staff to non-traditional students (Burke, 2009). Burke argues that in order to create greater equity of access, from a social justice perspective, university admissions personnel, and all staff across the organisation, must practise reflexivity in order to make the implicit prejudices, e.g. classist, racist etc., explicit (Burke, 2009). This moves the site of focus for access from the individual, to the institution, and from a deficit perspective to diversity in that it sees diversity as a strength to embrace as an institution rather than an issue to overcome. This approach to access, as reflexive practice is commonly attributed to good adult learning practices, including community education (e.g. Freire, Knowles, Rogers). Given the size of An Cosán and the potential impact of all staff on the learner experience, reflexivity was considered in this research.

Bourdieu as a lens to understand the An Cosán model of higher education

The potential of the An Cosán model of higher education to support access could be attributed to its location in an educationally disadvantaged location; indeed we have seen in a previous chapter “outreach courses” have been cited in access policy as a means to address geographic challenges (HEA, 2004c, p.11). However, this fails to acknowledge the broader characteristics of community education, including how people feel in the organisation, which will be explored in this study. One challenge of formal higher education institutions for working class students manifest in what Diane Reay (1998), drawing on Pierre Bourdieu, describes as middle class students “always knowing” and working class students of “never being sure” in higher education contexts which either feel as natural or alien environments.

Although dominant discourses of knowledge, communication and practice differs between institutions and disciplines; it is possible to describe these discourses as comprising an academic culture that influences, and is influenced by “the way in which students and lecturers think, speak and write in the academy” (Read, Archer & Leathwood, 2003, p. 261). Therefore, the culture of An Cosán as an educational institution can be understood as a set of actions of staff and students who together create the agreed and valued norms of that educational setting to a greater or lesser extent. In exploring why students chose An Cosán to do a higher education course,

particularly as a community education organisation rather than a higher education institution, the work of Bourdieu is used as a lens to explore how a traditionally underrepresented in higher education cohort feel in An Cosán. This section outlines some key concepts within Bourdieu's work before I link it to its application in an education context.

It has been proposed that Bourdieu's theory of social and cultural reproduction is "one of the most prominent attempts to explain the intergenerational persistence of social inequality" (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014, p. 2). In *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), *habitus* is employed to explain education, social and cultural reproduction as it reconciles structure and agency, the outer social and inner self with individual histories that lead to an acquired habit and associated dispositions. *Habitus* is the property of social agents (individuals or institutions) within which a structure and is formed from previous experiences, including educational, and encompassing various *capitals* (economic, social, cultural, symbolic) form dispositions in relation to different *fields* (Bourdieu, 1990; Maton, 2010). Capitals are defined as "the set of actually usable resources and powers" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 114) and are inter-relational because "a capital does not exist and function unless in relation to the field" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 101). As the levels of cultural capital differ between social classes, with middle class groups benefiting from possessing the valued cultural capital as opposed to that of the working class for whom this 'deficit' perpetuates social inequality in education (Bourdieu, Passeron & Nice, 1977). Therefore, cultural capital has been used as a tool in exploring access to education by working class students, also but importantly for this research, as the case study centres predominantly on women and includes ethnic minorities, it can be used to explore gender and race (Reay, David & Ball, 2005; Reay, Davies, *et al.*, 2001; Wallace, 2017). Cultural capital can exist in three states and is described as embodied, objectified and institutionalised.

Cultural capital can exist in three forms: in the embodied state, i.e., in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; in the objectified state, in the form of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.), which are the trace or realization of theories or critiques of these theories, problematics, etc.; and in the institutionalized state, a form of objectification which must be set apart because, as will be seen in the case of educational qualifications, it confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital which it is presumed to guarantee. (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243)

The concept of habitus is helpful in the context of education, as it is essentially a process for change, that although habitus is a system of durable, transposable, cognitive “schemata or structures of perception, conception and action” (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 27), it is not fate defined. Being the product of history it is an open system of dispositions that is “constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 133). A social agent’s actions, or practice, results from the relationship between one’s dispositions (habitus) and one’s position in the field (capital) within the current social arena (field). As described by Reay, Bourdieu argues that habitus links agency with capital and field, thereby “transcending dualism of agency-structure and objective-subjective” (Reay, 2005, p. 22).

The ability of social agents to act in various fields is constrained by one’s habitus and is described clearly as shaping “the parameters of people’s sense of agency and possibility; it entails perceptual schemes of which ends and means are reasonable given that individual’s particular position in a stratified society” (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014, p. 3). Bourdieu noted that:

One can even say that social agents are determined only to the extent that they determine themselves yet the categories of perception and appreciation which provide the principle of this (self-) determination are themselves largely determined by the social and economic conditions of their constitution. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 136).

Bourdieu attributes one’s understanding of social limits to forms of misrecognition and symbolic dominance (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). With all aspects of the inter-relationship in flux social agents jostle for position to preserve or transform these “fields of struggles” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 101). Therefore, habitus can be used to explain why some adult learners have a limited sense of what is possible for them and can be used to understand the challenge of underrepresented groups to transform the field.

The concept of habitus is complex; however, it can be used to understand situations affecting the “socially advantaged and disadvantaged” (Reay 2004, p. 436) and has previously been used as a tool to identify the social and cultural roots of injustices and inequalities in higher education. Habitus, in this context, is concerned with the influence of an individual’s capital(s), and the extent to which they are valued within an education institution (Reay *et al.*, 2005). While much research focuses on the use of

Bourdieu's concepts to explain the under-participation of some social groups in higher education, as community education has a history of engaging people who are educationally disadvantaged, which was explored in a previous chapter, the concept of habitus will be applied in this study to explain the access enabling potential of the An Cosán model of higher education.

For clarity, habitus is described, as follows, offering a tool to understand how people feel in a particular social space, such as An Cosán.

Social reality exists, so to speak, twice, in things and in minds, in fields and in habitus, outside and inside social agents. And when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a 'fish in water': it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 127)

Bourdieu uses these concepts to explain how environment and conditions shape one's attitudes and knowledge which may, or may not, be in confluence with the educational institution. The *match* or *mismatch* can affect one's ability to meet academic standards and consequently, one's ability to succeed within an institution (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). However, the application of the concept of habitus is not straightforward as it is multi-layered which Reay (2004) describes in terms of its interaction with agency, which is a complicated collection of individual trajectories with a complex interplay between the past and present. Therefore, that *match* can be tentatively explored in relation to the An Cosán model and its ability to support learners to succeed.

Where formal education privileges and enables the middle class, working class people blame their lack of success in school on a perceived lower ability which manifests in low confidence. Where the natural step for middle class people is to higher education as they will feel at home in that environment and have a feel for the education system as habitus "is the social game embodied and turned into a second nature" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 63). For example, in exploring school choice, it was proposed that assumptions middle class people make are normative and for working class people it is ill-informed (Reay & Ball, 1997, p. 91) where such options are as Bourdieu states "not for the likes of us" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 110).

Institutional habitus as a concept to understand the An Cosán model

In considering how the organisational culture and environment in An Cosán supports access the use of Bourdieu will be broadly based on Reay's use of the concept of 'institutional habitus'. This concept allows a deeper analysis of the link between access and educational institutions (Reay, Ball & David, 2001) and has formed part of a number of studies on the role of institutions in educational access by working class students (Reay, 1998; Reay, Ball & David, 2001; Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2010; Thomas, 2002). McDonough describes institutional habitus as comprising a complex amalgam of agency and structure which could be understood as "the impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual's behaviour as it is mediated through an organisation" (McDonough, 1996, cited in Reay, David & Ball, 2010, p. 109). Reay argued that schools and colleges had identifiable institutional habituses and utilised the concept to demonstrate how the organisational cultures of schools and colleges are linked to wider socio-economic cultures through processes in which schools and their catchments mutually shape and reshape each other (Reay, 1998, cited in Reay, David & Ball 2001). "Institutional habituses, no less than individual habituses, have a history and have been established over time" (Reay *et al.*, 2010, p.109). Therefore, institutional habitus is not simply the culture of the institution, rather it also includes issues and priorities that are deeply embedded, meaning that its components are "educational status, organisational practices and the expressive order" (Reay *et al.*, 2001). This is an interesting concept to ascribe to a community education organisation as that intangible sense of its inclusiveness can be difficult to understand.

Institutional habitus is played out in terms of the legitimate values, languages and knowledge on which success and qualifications are based (Thomas, 2002), which permeates the teaching and learning practice. In the case of formal higher education, this can negatively impact on marginalised students as the perpetuation of the dominant class is made possible by the maintenance of middle class norms, whereby those students that can operate and achieve in this system succeed, whereas those who don't struggle. Conversely, and for the case of An Cosán, institutional habitus can be considered in terms of that match between learners and the institution.

Although open to influence and change, institutional habitus whilst established over time, is generally static in nature and less changeable than individual habitus (Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2010). Furthermore, it has been noted that the relationship between

the status of higher education institutions and its institution's habitus comprise less tangible aspects of cultural and expressive characteristics (Reay *et al.*, 2010, p. 109), or 'the expressive order' which includes "expectations, conduct, character and manners" (Bernstein, 1975, cited in Reay *et al.*, 2010, p. 109). In this regard, it is embodied in the cultural capital of students, including their attitudes towards learning and level of confidence and entitlement they feel towards higher education (Reay *et al.*, 2005, p. 923). Reay *et al.* (2001) acknowledge the challenges of the concept of institutional habitus, in that the habitus of the individual may take precedence over the institution; however, rather than being a limitation of the concept – it demands that the influence of institutional habitus requires further exploration. Therefore, the potential of the institutional habitus of An Cosán to be less static and more malleable due to its size, status and ethos, can be considered.

However, it is important to note that Bourdieu's work is not without critique in relation to considerations of gender (Adkins & Skeggs, 2004; Lovell, 2000) and a perceived lack of a comprehensive understanding of race (Puwar, 2009). On the one hand, Reay extends and genders Bourdieu's concept of capital to include emotional capital in exploring mothers' involvement in children's education (Reay, 2004), on the other hand, Skeggs proposed Bourdieu believes women develop both a desire for the dominant and to be dominated (Adkins & Skeggs, 2004; Skeggs, 2004). One would question the assertion of women's misrecognition of dominance and also Bourdieu's concept of masculine charisma:

Because differential socialisation disposes men to love the games of power and women to love the men who play them, masculine charisma is partly the charm of power, the seduction that the possession of power exerts, as such, on bodies whose drives and desires are themselves politically socialised. Masculine domination finds one of its strongest supports in the misrecognition which results from the application to the dominant of categories engendered in the very relationship of domination and which can lead to that extreme form of *amor fati*, love of the dominant and of his domination, a *libido dominantis* (desire for the dominant) which implies renunciation of personal exercise of *libido dominandi* (the desire to dominate). (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 80)

This view is clearly at odds with the feminist ethos of An Cosán; however, in his work *Masculine Domination*, Bourdieu acknowledges patriarchy by noting the female

habitus is “constantly exposed to the objectification performed by the gaze and the discourse of others” (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 80).

Another challenge of Bourdieu’s work, whilst noting fields of struggle between working class and middle class or dominant groups, is what appears to be a lack of regard for the value of non-dominant groups’ capital. Middle class capitals are not dominant in all contexts; indeed, this may be the case in community education. An interesting study by Wallace of black, middle and working class youth in the UK and US highlighted notions of dominant capitals as related to whiteness and that the cultural capital of non-dominated groups has value in different fields/subfields (Wallace, 2017).

However, within the context of this research, as the case study is an organisation, Reay’s application of institutional habitus based on Bourdieu’s work is valuable in offering an understanding of how learners ‘feel’ in An Cosán and draws links with how habitus supports, or potentially hinders, learner participation in the field of higher education. Whilst Bourdieu’s tools are useful for highlighting the challenge of deficit models relating to higher education access, for me, the value of working class cultural capital is unpronounced.

This can be somewhat challenging as it is precisely the diverse lived experience of adults, and particularly working class people, which is valued and drawn upon in the learning process of adult, and certainly community, education. It is clear in An Cosán that the experience of learners’ working class knowledge and women’s lived experiences and knowledge, is valued. This leads to the next section on Freire and hooks and the link between pedagogy and the creation of inclusive educational experiences.

Freire as a lens to understand the An Cosán model of higher education

As noted in the previous section, institutional habitus is played out in terms of the legitimate values, languages and knowledge on which success and qualifications are based (Thomas, 2002). Therefore, it is useful to consider the role of teaching and learning in creating inclusive learning environments. Through the exploration of the work of Paulo Freire, we can consider how the institutional habitus of An Cosán is

influenced by an inclusive pedagogic process that values learners' lived experiences and particularly that of women.

As discussed in an earlier chapter, An Cosán specifically ascribe to a model of education that draws on Freire (An Cosán, 2011); therefore, the pedagogy in the provision of their degree programmes should be reflective of his theories. Freirean pedagogy offers some distinguishing features to this model of higher education provision but also sheds light on the value of specific educational processes as tools for access. The centrality of learner voice in Freire's work, and its influence on community education in Ireland, has fundamental implications for models of higher education developed in this context. This section focuses on the work of Freire, bell hooks, learner voice and tutor voice as means for supporting higher education access through inclusive pedagogies and presents the An Cosán model as an example of such.

Freirean pedagogy as a model for access

A key factor influencing an individual's higher education experience is institutional practices. Literature indicates that, in the main, through its approach to teaching, whereby a diverse student body is treated in a homogenous manner, institutions favour traditional, rather than non-traditional students. In addressing the challenge of pedagogy in higher education Burke (2002) proposes that pedagogy must be viewed as a central issue for widening participation. Similarly, anti-classist/anti-sexist/anti-racist approaches to teaching and learning are needed to facilitate the empowerment of access students. Importantly, this perspective views widening participation as improving retention of under-represented students, not merely in terms of enrolment on courses, as it is based on the experience in higher education (Burke, 2002, p. 166). In Ireland, community education has been effective in engaging educationally disadvantaged people (AONTAS, 2010) and is highly influenced by the Brazilian educational theorist Paulo Freire. In his work with peasants in Brazil, Freire saw education as a route to liberation from poverty and oppression (Freire, 1970) and one could say his work was a pioneering example of access to education. His work has informed community education (Connolly, 2003, 2006; Tett, 2006, 2010), where it has sought to give a voice to the voiceless and oppressed in society through the Freirean approach of transformative education (Connolly, 2003, p. 9) which is entwined with

social justice and equality. His key ideas for facilitating education for liberation were: shifting a learner's perception of self from an object to a subject in the world; that education is an intervention and a catalyst for change; that learning provides the tools for a learner to create change; that education is for liberation not 'banking' information; and 'conscientisation' which is the process of developing a critical awareness of one's social reality through reflection and action (O'Reilly & Fitzgerald, 2012). Such concepts have informed community education from its inception; as Connolly notes, community education is founded on "principles of praxis and conscientisation" (Connolly, 2001, p. 3). Community education is; therefore, by way of the theory which informs its practice, closely linked to community development where it roots its practice in the lived experiences of individuals in a community who struggle for equality, social and political change and liberation (Connolly, 1996; AONTAS, 2004). The bringing of lived experience, including the challenges that impacted the lives of learners and their community, offers a respect and consciousness of diversity. This is particularly pertinent in the case of feminist pedagogy which will be described by drawing on the work of bell hooks in the following subsection.

Freire (1970) advocated for empowerment, critical consciousness and social transformation through an authentic dialogical, democratic learning process. In the case of the under-representation of certain parts of society in higher education, one could refer to excluded groups as experiencing oppression, in that national access policy priorities focus on 'target groups' which are characterised as being from certain social groups that experience educational disadvantage. Therefore, the liberation of, or at least striving for more authentic participation of educationally disadvantaged people can draw on the thinking of Freire, particularly in the instance of his views relating to learner voice.

To set the context, I will outline key Freirean concepts in relation to pedagogy. Within a group setting, Freire proposed specific pedagogical actions for facilitating learning for liberation and transformation they are: *problem-posing* whereby education is about problematising situations rather than prescribing solutions; *coding*, which highlights community issues for further exploration by learners; being cognisant of *internalised oppression*; and *praxis*, where praxis, is the basis for social change as it centres on the notion of *reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it* (Freire, 1970). Beyond coming together in dialogue in order to gain knowledge of their social reality,

people must act together upon their environment and critically reflect upon their reality in order to transform it through further action and critical reflection. Dialogue is a core philosophical belief of Freire and essential for liberating education. Thus “without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education” (Freire, 1970, p. 92) and that changes to the education process itself must happen to enable this as “if the structure does not permit dialogue the structure must be changed” (*ibid.*). The authenticity of dialogue is not just in terms of creating spaces for discussion, but an openness to question the process itself.

A Freirean approach is contra to the deficit perspective as he states that “critical and liberating dialogue, which presupposes action, must be carried on with the oppressed at whatever the stage of their struggle for liberation” (1970, p. 47). Specifically, there is a need for consciousness in the education process as “there’s no such thing as neutral education. Education either functions as an instrument to bring about conformity or freedom” (*ibid.*). Furthermore, central to moving away from the oppressive concept of banking, itself a deficit approach and a tool for reproduction and domestication, is a facilitative approach that enables collective inquiry, contextualised learning and action.

Freire expressed that “knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry, human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (1970, p. 53). Dialogue is a core philosophical belief of Freire and essential for liberating education. Thus “without dialogue, there is no communication, and without communication, there can be no true education” (Freire, 1970, pp. 73-74). Dialogue is central to the learning process as power relations in the education process shifts from tutor-dominated to a more democratic process with learners in a collective learning process:

Authentic education is not carried on by A for B or by A about B, but rather by A with B, mediated by the world—a world which impresses and challenges both parties, giving rise to views or opinions about it. (Freire, 1970, p. 74)

This is helpful in understanding the An Cosán degree programmes. At the heart of the learning process is learner empowerment which requires educators to shift roles “through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers” (Freire, 1970, p. 80). In the context of higher education access, learner empowerment moves away

from a deficit discourse and could potentially facilitate access, in a higher education context this is essential for engaging a more diverse study body, breaking down dominant notions of valid knowledge and hegemonic middle class norms.

Usefully, Freire offers the dialogical process of problem-posing education which shifts vertical teaching patterns to become horizontal through a dialogical process of mutual learning, as outlined in the following quote:

Indeed, problem-posing education, which breaks with the vertical patterns characteristic of banking education, can fulfil its function as the practice of freedom only if it can overcome the above contradiction. Through dialogue the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. (Freire, 1970, p. 80)

This relationship between tutor and learner is essential to the learning process with love and care also forming part of the relationship with learners; these qualities are essential to the learning relationships and engagements that form the heart of education (Grummell, 2017). Having resonance with the work of Baker *et al.* (2004), Grummell offers an interesting insight into the impact of care on the pedagogic relationship with marginalised people:

The formal structures of education often do not acknowledge or encourage these elements of love, care and solidarity that are fundamental to education. The implications of care and love's neglect are felt most deeply by those disadvantaged and marginalised in our societies. (Grummell, 2017, p. 3143)

This affective dimension of learning is a feature of a feminist pedagogy, which will be described later by drawing on the work of bell hook.

Dialogue and supporting learner voice, particularly for those who have been silenced, is essential for reclaiming rights and overcoming oppression (Freire, 1970). Furthermore, the learning process centres on the lived experiences of the learners whereby people "say their word", thus contextualising the learning through dialogue. As Freire notes:

Dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world. Hence, dialogue cannot occur between

those who want to name the world and those who do not wish this naming — between those who deny others the right to speak their word and those whose right to speak has been denied them. Those who have been denied their primordial right to speak their word must first reclaim this right and prevent the continuation of this dehumanizing aggression. (Freire, 1970, p. 69)

In Freire's book the *Pedagogy of Freedom*, he notes the importance of facilitating learner participation in the educational process: "the educator with a democratic vision or posture cannot avoid in his teaching praxis insisting on the critical capacity, curiosity, and autonomy of the learner" (Freire, 2000, p.13). Also, in terms of supporting access or striving for educational equality, Freire challenges us to consider the meaning of support, or help as he writes:

Authentic help means that all who are involved – help each other mutually, growing together in the common effort to understand the reality which they seek to transform. Only through such praxis-in which those who help and those who are being helped help each other simultaneously – can the act of helping become free from the distortion in which the helper dominates the helped. (Freire cited in hook, 1993, p. 155)

Therefore, for radical Freirean inspired community education as a process that is equitable and inclusive, the political element needs to be rooted in the learners rather than dictated from a top-down perspective, be it tutor or institution.

At this juncture, it is worth reflecting that Freire's work is not without critique, particularly regarding race and gender. As the practice and ethos of An Cosán has a feminist focus, the following subsection will focus on the role of voice from a feminist perspective by drawing on the work of feminist scholar, bell hooks. The race and particularly gender 'blindspot' of Freire from sexist language to "phallogocentric paradigm of freedom" was highlighted by hooks (p. 49) in her book *Teaching to Transgress*. However, she emphasised that her critique should not overshadow Freire's work and the capacity to learn from his insights; also his acceptance of her arguments at their meeting demonstrated the embodiment of his radical convictions and resulted in a relationship of solidarity between them.

Voice through a feminist lens

Influenced by Freire, but set within her context as a Black woman, hooks highlighted the role of voice in addressing oppression from racism and sexism as she states:

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of "talking back", that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject - the liberated voice. (hooks, 1986, p. 9)

hooks defines "talking back" as "speaking as an equal to an authority figure" (hooks, 1986, p. 5), with silence being multidimensional and submissive to dominant control (over a group), thus, there is a need to not only "emerge from silence into speech" (hooks, 1986, p. 6), but to make speech heard.

hooks points to the centrality of voice in feminism but cautions that voice is neither homogenous nor when expressed is always meaningful, but the "coming to voice" for those marginalised and harbouring destructive feelings due to oppression "is an act of resistance" (1989, p. 11). This marginality is based on lived experiences which are vocalised, it is not "ordinary talk" but it moves to a liberatory voice, "an act of overcoming our fear of speech" (1989, p. 18) that is no longer determined by ones' status as object - as oppressed being. Therefore, the marginality of oppressed groups, including women and minorities through silencing has potential to act as a "site of radical possibility, a space for resistance" for creating "counter-hegemonic discourse" to imagine new worlds (hooks, 1990, p. 341). This potential for voicing feminist resistance includes methodology for creative expression, such as composing poems (hooks, 2000) which is also expressed in what Gilligan described in the An Cosán context as feminist imaginative pedagogy (1999). hooks also notes that for feminism to be impactful, there is a need for moving feminist studies from the academy to women in communities of deprivation, to those with literacy issues, to move from bourgeois feminist movements controlled by White, middle-class, academics (hooks, 2000). Tracing the origins of An Cosán, the first courses offered by The Shanty enacted that mission, to offer a space for women in the local community to engage in feminist thinking as they critically reflected on the issues of their community and their lived experiences (Gilligan & Zappone, 2008)

In addressing unequal privileges of social class and race in higher education institutional settings, hooks proposes a pedagogic process that “ruptures the established order, that promote modes of learning which challenges bourgeois hegemony” by creating in “classrooms learning communities where everyone’s voice can be heard, their presence recognised and valued” (hook, 1994, p. 185).

In terms of voice in the pedagogic process, there is a link between the influence of Freire and hooks as “feminist and critical pedagogy are two alternative paradigms for teaching which have really emphasized the issue of coming to voice” (hooks, 1994, p. 185). The centrality of the uniting theme of voice is evident as “race, sex and class privilege empower some students more than others, granting ‘authority’ to some voices more than others” (hooks, 1994, p. 185). A feeling of entitlement to speak differs between social background with those from working class backgrounds coming to college assuming professors do not value their contributions (*ibid.*)

Coming to voice, “moving from silence into speech as a revolutionary gesture” (hooks, 1989, p. 12) is not facilitated by a superficial process that seeks to allocate time more evenly across learners, it is about “valuing the uniqueness of each voice and a willingness to create spaces in the classroom where all voices can be heard because all students are free to speak, now their presence will be recognized and valued” (hooks, 1996, p. 186). Students feeling free to speak or as hooks frequently references as the ability for “speaking freely” is not constrained by the audience, it is speaking in a decolonised form of which learners are empowered to do so (1989). In an education context this links to an ‘engaged’ pedagogic process that enables one to speak freely through a disruption of the power dynamic in the classroom, but includes wellbeing, whereby the teacher pays attention to, cares and respects learners so conditions can initiate learning where “learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (hooks 1994, p. 13). More broadly, within a group learning context, pedagogic processes to create an understanding between learners reduces domination between learners. This can take the form of “confessional narratives”, drawing on one’s life story as part of the learning process, but conscious of classroom power relations, this also requires similar engagement from the tutor (hooks, 1994). Therefore, pedagogy that links to personal experiences not only creates a tutor/learner awareness but learners become aware of each other.

The academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom with all its limitations remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labour for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom. (hooks 1994, p. 207)

With education as a practice of freedom, there is an inherent acknowledgement of one's own privilege and the inequalities in education that advantage and disadvantage certain groups, and a need to offer a pedagogic process that harnesses marginalised voices. This highlights the importance of tutor reflexivity in a feminist pedagogic process.

With such an emphasis on voice in the work of Freire and hooks, I will briefly discuss silence, or more accurately silenced women in feminist thought. There are a number of concepts of voice, including verbal and photo, where bell hooks also describes voice as written and expressed through creative processes. Voice acts as a form of agency, is recognised, respected, and an individual has the ability to speak freely, and be entitled to do so. In the book *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) found voice was a common theme arising across the diverse cohort of learners involved in their research project. *Silence* is the first of their five epistemological perspectives by which women know and view the world. *Silence*, as a position in which women experience themselves as mindless and voiceless and subject to the whims of external authority; *received knowing*, a perspective from which women conceive of themselves as capable of receiving, even reproducing, knowledge from the all-knowing external authorities but not capable of creating knowledge on their own; *subjective knowing*, a perspective from which truth and knowledge are conceived of as personal, private, and subjectively known to intuited; *procedural knowing*, a position in which women are invested in learning and applying objective procedures for obtaining and communicating knowledge; and *constructed knowing*, a position in which women view all knowledge as contextual, experience themselves as creators of knowledge, and value both subjective and objective strategies for knowing (Belenky *et al.*, 1986, p.15).

In 1996, Belenky, moved the concept from silence to silenced. The silenced woman is cut off from the world full of rumour and innuendo, where in the original study they

spoke of women “finding a voice” in terms of their growth and development. Of the five perspectives from which women view reality and draw conclusions about truth, knowledge, and authority, self-concept and ways of knowing are intertwined. The theme of care arises, which was noted by hooks and Grummel, as it forms part of facilitating connected knowing through “really listening” to others’ lived experiences with resonance, empathy and caring (Belenky *et al.* 1987, p. 143) in order to draw out learners’ own views and “their own voice” (*ibid.*, p. 227). A pedagogic process to support women to come to voice acknowledges theirs and others’ lived experience in a caring dialogical context.

Radical learner voice for supporting access

Over the course of this chapter, we note that engaging the voice of those marginalised and excluded is important in critical and feminist pedagogy. Within a higher education access context, we can consider that shifting the focus of access initiatives away from a deficit perspective presupposes the importance of engaging those for whom can be considered ‘access policy target groups’. This subsection explores the concept of radical learner voice that draws on the work of Paulo Freire in order to frame the learners’ experiences of the An Cosán model of higher education in terms of voice.

The proposed unwillingness of higher education institutions to critique the knowledge base or to challenge predetermined truths, further perpetuates unequal higher education participation (Ryan, 2000, p. 51). Authentic learner voice engagement can be viewed as a solution for such an issue, Ryan (2002) proposes solidarity of knowledge co-created through meaningful engagement with those who have been “silenced and objectified” by way of participative learning environments which are in keeping with the “epistemological concerns of radical adult education” (Ryan, 2002, p. 30) should be considered. Other pedagogical approaches to address the issue of how to legitimise knowledge creation by students, and rather than writing over an individual’s subjectivities, includes the use of learning journals for assessment which involves personal knowledge, which is gaining greater recognition in universities (Burke, 2008). As previously noted, from the work of Freire one can consider that learner voice enables deep educational engagement with oppressed groups, and by extension can contribute

to access. As community education is a process rather than a product, the tutor-learner relationship is paramount and intrinsic, thereby highlighting the role of learner voice.

The concept of learner voice is complex, and in order to understand it more fully, and in order to describe the kind of learner voice at play in An Cosán, I will devote this subsection to exploring the concept by drawing on a range of literature (Fielding, 2001a, 2001b, 2004a, 2004b, 2006; Fielding & Bragg, 2003; Rudd, Colligan & Naik, 2006; Rudduck & Fielding, 2006). It is also informed by my work in AONTAS, in leading the National FET Learner Forum (Dowdall, Sheerin & O'Reilly, 2019) and the associated academic expert group, including discussions with Dr Stephen O'Brien (UCC) and Dr Fergal Finnegan (Maynooth University), and indeed through my engagement with adult learners. Academic literature in the field refers to student and learner voice, but regardless of education context they broadly offer key concepts relating to how educators engage with learners within both schools and adult learning environments (Rudd *et al.*, 2006).

Learner voice activities are broad: at micro-level within a group or class; to meso-level encompassing interactions with the educational organisation; to macro-level in shaping national policy. Learner voice can be a form of personal development for both learner and practitioner and can be viewed on a range of levels to: inform, consult, involve, collaborate and empower (Rudd *et al.*, 2006). As such the depth and level of learner voice engagement is on a continuum, from tightly controlled informing and consulting with learners through, e.g. questionnaires to empowering, democratic acts in an authentic educative experience by collaborating with practitioners to shape practice.

Depending on learner voice practices, they may liberate or be tokenistic. Concerns that learner voice is confined to improving standards rather than as a process for empowerment, which is also inherently educational, have been explored (Fielding, 2001b). Also, the kind of processes used and the outcome of such interactions can be empowering or disempowering. Learner voice engagement can be tokenistic, superficial, and focused mainly as an evaluative measure for performance and transparency or embedded decision-making processes negotiated with learners regarding issues of course form, style and even the purpose of education (Rudd *et al.*, 2006). Learner voice can be enacted as consumer choice or as an emancipatory, democratic act and can be harnessed through surveys, questionnaires, interactive

methodology - including online, qualitative feedback or a deeply rooted engagement process.

Mainly in the school context in the UK, Martin Fielding has written extensively on student voice and offered a range of insights, particularly with regard to students as change agents (Fielding, 2001b), researchers in the education experience (Fielding and Bragg, 2003) to what appears as a Freirean influenced concept (Robinson & Taylor, 2007) of 'transformative student voice' (Fielding, 2004b) which centres on emancipatory processes and outcomes. The characteristics of learner voice for empowerment: as dialogue, participation and inclusivity, requires recognition of power relation in education and the possibility for change and transformation (Robinson & Taylor, 2007).

The Freirean scholar Henry Giroux comments on the centrality of learner voice in Freirean radical education. Within a school context, Giroux (1997) expressed a critical view of conservatives and radical adult educators' indifference to voice which "generally fail to engage the politics of voice and representation – the forms of narrative and dialogue-around which students make sense of their lives and schools." Noting that this is at odds with "an emancipatory notion of human agency, it represents a serious theoretical and political failing on the part of radical educators" (Giroux, 1997, p. 120).

In developing a radical pedagogy in the school system, Giroux proposes a central need to understand "power with respect to everyday experience and the construction of classroom pedagogy and student voice" (1997, p. 121). Whereby change goes beyond the educational institution: "it also signifies a level of conflict and struggle that plays itself out around the exchange of discourse and the lived experiences that such discourse produces, mediates, and legitimates" (1997, p. 121). Drawing on the work of Bakhtin (1981), Giroux, also points out that voice is neither neutral nor intrinsically having immediate power as it is "inseparable from lived experience" which links to a struggle of what is meaningful and whose cultural capital will prevail. (1997, p.121). That is, power and discourse are now investigated not merely as the single echo of the logic of capital but as a polyphony of voices mediated within different layers of reality shaped through an interaction of dominant and subordinate forms of power (Giroux, 1997, p. 122).

Although focusing on a different context, that of school, it is a useful cautionary note regarding learner voice that there is a need for educators to master the “language of critical understanding” whilst needing to attend to all three “different ideological spheres and settings: these include the school voice, the student voice, and the teacher voice” (Giroux, 1997, pp. 141). School, or perhaps educational institution, voice points to sets of:

Practices and ideologies that structure how classrooms are arranged, what content is taught, what general social practices teachers have to follow. Moreover, it is the interplay between the dominant school culture and the polyphonic representations and layers of meaning of student voice that dominant and oppositional ideologies define and constrain each other. (Giroux, 1997, pp. 141-2)

Giroux explores teacher voice in relation to learner and school voice, describing the process as “reflecting the value, ideologies and structuring principles that give meaning to the histories, cultures, and subjectivities that define the day-to-day activities of educators” (Giroux, 1997, p. 142). Tutor reflexivity and understanding of their underlying values and interests have the power to shape the learning experience according to the logic of emancipatory interests (*ibid.*). Thus tutors are central to either destructive processes if used to marginalise and silence, as well as to empowering learners. This brings language into play the need for an educator’s mindful dialogue that does not force their own world view on the learner, as Bakhtin (1981) states:

Language is not a neutral medium that passes and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated -over populated- with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process. (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 249)

Giroux also points to the need for teachers to engage collectively in social movements so that learner voice is supported in solidarity, struggle and empowerment (1997, p. 142) but crucially, engaging all learner voices is an act of radical pedagogy. In order to understand the multiple and varied meanings that constitute the discourses of student voice, radical educators need to affirm and critically engage the polyphonic languages their students bring to schools (Giroux, 1997, p. 141).

Tutors are central to learner voice activities, particularly within the class setting, holding power to provide an emancipatory experience. Educational access that moves away from a deficit perspective emphasises learner engagement, prizes listening and responds to educationally disadvantaged learners. Furthermore, clarity of

underpinning values for teaching and a degree of reflexivity links to the capacity to either support voice through actions that empower, or hinder through marginalisation and silencing of learner voice. This is especially pertinent to supporting or hindering education access.

Chapter conclusion

In exploring the potential of the An Cosán model of higher education to support access, the inclusive environment can be explored through the concept of institutional habitus which is in part facilitated through a Freirean, dialogue-driven pedagogic practice.

Bourdieu's concept of habitus can be used as a lens to explore the cultural influences on access from an individual and institutional perspective. Habitus offers a theory to explain how people feel in a particular social space; the match between learners and institutional habituses can explain the inclusive nature of a community education context. Within the context of the An Cosán model of higher education, linked to creating inclusive learning environments is the role of a feminist-influenced, dialogue-driven pedagogy. hooks and Belenky *et al.* (1986) offer insights into the link between women's oppression and the importance of bringing forth silenced voice into a liberatory space. Additionally, with radical learner voice, when supported by tutors, a pedagogic process to bring forth the knowledge of those who are generally not represented in education can support access from a non-deficit position.

Chapter 7 The Learners' Interviews: Listening to the Voices

Introduction

In this chapter, we start by exploring the factors of the An Cosán model of higher education that support access. I have foregrounded learner voice to continue the story of this case study and most importantly, to become immersed in the learners' experiences and their stories of participating on the An Cosán degree programmes. In doing so, I endeavour to explore their experience and by linking to the literature consider the potential contribution of the An Cosán model of higher education to the access policy debate.

The overarching theme that emerged across the learner interviews was voice and the specific way it is facilitated in a community education model of higher education and its associated link to enabling access. Learners clearly articulated how learner voice is embedded across the fabric of the An Cosán model and touches on a range of aspects of their degrees. Central to this is facilitating authentic learner voice through the teaching and learning processes that acknowledges and values the learner's experience via a more equal relationship with the tutor; this is further enabled by the learning environment across the organisation, creating a holistic system that ultimately enables learners' successful completion of degree programmes. In closing the chapter, learner observations of the broader context for the An Cosán degree and the outcomes of the degree are outlined.

The learners interviewed, and whose accounts are outlined in this chapter are: Margaret, Fiona, Ruth, Suzanne, Martha, Aine, Kelly, Alex, Ali and Adam. Within this group there are two men and eight women mainly living in West Tallaght or within the vicinity of this area. A number of learners originally came to Tallaght from other urban areas of Dublin, one from rural Ireland and one from outside of Ireland. Learners were mothers, women parenting alone, people who experienced poverty, people who experienced marginalisation and a number who had left school early.

At the time of interviews, through my role in advocating for educational equality in AONTAS, I had engaged with learners for over 8 years. By listening to their story in a range of ways, I had developed a consciousness around creating conditions to allow the learners to speak freely. All but one learner had met me before at one of the information or workshop sessions, and some knew me through my work in AONTAS. Just before

the fieldwork interviews commenced my son was born, and he accompanied me to An Cosán for seven of the interviews, sometimes he stayed in Rainbow House, but on two occasions he was in the room sleeping through the interviews. I think this is important to note as many of the learners had children and empathised with the juggling of childcare. I tried to create a respectful, relaxed interview environment and listened intently throughout. As the researcher who ultimately decides how these interviews are expressed in this thesis, I do hope that through the process of repeated listening, reading and analysing the intentions of the learners' views are accurately reflected.

Factors supporting participation in the An Cosán degree programme

In responding to the initial open-ended question: “tell me how you came to be in An Cosán?” a variety of responses covered practical aspects of progression from examples of previous courses to more detailed accounts of lived educational experiences, particularly of schooling. Responses varied in detail. Four learners offered a rich account of their prior educational experiences, including the impact of growing up in a working class area to the challenge of educational access as a lone parent. Early school leaving featured often, many learners noted challenging prior experiences in formal education institutions, and a number cited positive experiences of adult education from which they progressed to their degree programme. An emerging theme from learners (Suzanne, Martha, Kelly and Adam) was a general dissatisfaction with the teaching and learning process in school: “I left school when I was fifteen, and I wasn't into the way that school was taught, so I wasn't one for sitting and being taught that way” (Adam). Although Adam did not complete the apprenticeship, it was a type of learning that was traditionally seen as a route to secure employment: “me Da told me that if you got an apprenticeship that you would be sorted, you would always have work” (Adam). For this learner, reaching the point of accessing a degree was not straightforward and whilst Adam found adult education enjoyable there was a long process of progressing through the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) from levels 3-4, to a higher education access course, to a Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) programme, to a Certificate, then Diploma and finally the degree in An Cosán (Adam). Another learner participated in a range of further and higher education courses from basic education to degree, across a range of providers before coming to An Cosán. Where learners did not like the school experience and preferred the adult education

process, they were almost penalised by the complicated pathway to progressing to a degree. Another learner experienced success in the working world but felt that the impact of their school experience hampered their desire to return to formal higher education:

I wouldn't have wanted to go to college, you know I wouldn't, I didn't like school, I didn't like that environment, I did ok in school, I didn't do great in school, but I went to work ... Then when I had the opportunity to go back into College but I would never have gone out to Maynooth. (Martha)

One learner stated that learner-centredness was evident in An Cosán as she felt there was a greater emphasis on her needs and best interests which superseded that of the organisation's which was a contributing factor for her participating on the degree:

And even though I was given a place on the course, there was no pressure on me to go on to the Addiction Studies, and I really appreciated that because I felt I could be really honest, you know. It was, the focus was on me, and what path I needed to take next and not, well you know you have a place, and you can't upset the apple cart. You know up to that I had been in more formal learning institutions where you toe the line, and this is it, and that was that. So I thought I like this, it's centred around the student, rather than the college, so I decided to apply. (Fiona)

"I couldn't do it in any other way" - higher education access through An Cosán

A key aspect of the An Cosán model of higher education appeared to be engaging people who otherwise didn't believe they could undertake a degree programme other than in An Cosán. There is extensive literature concerning factors influencing participation in higher education. This section outlines, from the learners' perspectives, what factors of the An Cosán model enabled their access to higher education. Whilst the interview questions didn't explicitly focus on exploring factors influencing participation, many learners referred to this topic when asked how that they came to be in An Cosán. The focus of the interview was primarily about their experience on the degree programme in An Cosán; however, interesting points were raised about participation in higher education, why they chose An Cosán and what impacted on their potential to engage in higher education. It is also useful in exploring how their experience in An Cosán addressed those issues, where applicable.

Regarding the factors that impacted on the learners' decisions to engage in higher education a number of factors were identified as a challenge to participation in higher education. In order of times it was raised by learners (high to low frequency of response): financial; could only engage at a local level; location; inclusive to working class people; part-time provision; accessible information; childcare; guidance; social class; addressing notions of an imposter syndrome; and they didn't feel like they had the ability or opportunity to get a degree. However, in addition to these commonly cited supports was the broader, more embedded and perhaps nebulous concept of the feeling they have in An Cosán, the supportive learning environment, the feeling of encouragement and the feeling of safety at An Cosán. A number of learners (three) said they didn't think they could do a degree, and that participation in higher education hadn't occurred to them prior to participating in other courses in An Cosán.

Two learners explicitly stated that they could only engage in higher education in An Cosán due to the safety of the environment, the building of confidence at An Cosán, the supports and encouragement:

Well, I think that is the most amazing thing ever, I really do, because I would have never went to do a degree, I know I wouldn't, and I think even after being here and building my confidence I wouldn't have applied anywhere to do a degree, because I know it is the same standard and everything but I almost just felt a lot safer to be here, I don't think I would have felt like I was good enough to apply anywhere else, that is why I done it, and I was encouraged, as well, supported with it, so that was huge. (Suzanne)

Through participation on other courses confidence was nurtured and the potential to participate on a degree was suggested by management and the programme became a possibility, but only in An Cosán: "I couldn't do it in any other way I don't think" (Fiona). The supportive environment and staff enabled learners to have self-belief in their ability to do a degree:

As a participant you know, the door was open all the time so when she was standing in front of me talking to me about the degree it did not scare me, you know because I knew her, you know, so I just think I would not be here now there is no hope in hell I would have went on. (Suzanne)

This learner, Suzanne, stated that they didn't think they were at a "degree standard":

Because I had only done the Level 4 but it was actually with one-to-one support and people encouraging me, and on the course and people were saying, I was like "Jesus, maybe I can", I remember even

filling in the form, and saying I won't get it but I will just do it, you know you know feeling the fear. (Suzanne)

That learner continued that they don't think they would have gone on to third level: "so I don't know if it was on anywhere else whether I, I probably would have gone on to do a Level 5 but probably not the degree, not what I did, no" (Suzanne). This learner also experienced the perception of being an imposter, and they would be found out, but the environment supported their participation:

Like I remember when I started for the first two months, I remember sitting there thinking wait until they figure out I am not supposed to be here but I do think it was the environment that kept me coming back, the people in the room, people were nice and I don't think I spoke for the first four months believe it or not, because I was afraid that if I spoke that people would cop on that I wasn't supposed to be there and, so something kept me coming back do you know like I wanted to run but I like I came back, do you know what I mean, but I think it is a combination of so many things. (Suzanne)

One learner spoke of not thinking they were capable of doing a degree, in terms of finance and self-belief:

There was a lot like even financially I didn't have the money to just go out and pay for a course, and I wasn't thinking degree, I never thought I was capable of doing a degree, you know. I just, I would have thought no, wouldn't go there, it's just really strange, I just fell into it. (Ruth)

Learners had different reasons for engaging in the degree programme, one of whom stated that they hoped this research would offer some clarity on this point:

I love that you are doing this research though, I think it is very important, I think if people were asked I think the majority would have not done the degree had it not been where it was so I think that is very interesting. (Suzanne)

Financial issues

The financial constraints of participating in higher education was a common theme and whilst there are fees associated with the degree programme, the flexibility in payment, perceived low cost and the opportunity to avail of scholarships were cited as essential supports that An Cosán offer for overcoming financial challenges which might hamper learners' participation. The topic of financial issues with regard to participating

in higher education was discussed explicitly by half of the learners interviewed; however, it was not the sole reason for participating on the degree, other factors were also noted.

The reason one learner was enabled to participate on her degree programme was due to: “just in relation to support, in relation to finances even, the fact that you can apply for a scholarship” (Fiona). Similarly, another learner described the importance of financial supports for the degree, and the possibility to secure a grant enabled participation, which shifted their interest from initially doing a Certificate to a degree:

They were encouraging the course; the Cert was cheap enough as well there was no grants for that one, there was for the degree, so that was affordable as well, so it was all those factors that played a part in choosing here. (Margaret)

The learner further elaborated that:

Again they were offering grants, because I wouldn't have been able to afford the degree, to be honest with you, without the grants so all those things I was able to go on to the degree and again I wouldn't have been able to do it anywhere else, I really feel that. (Margaret)

The flexibility in being able to pay for the degree programme in a manner that suited the learners was noted and an openness to make special arrangements:

So when I heard of the degree, I decided to talk to them and shifted to the degree and lo and behold the management they helped me so much, the money I paid for the Level 5 I spent in the one year and though I spent in three years, they transferred the entire money again to the degree. If they had not done all these things, I have no money; I am not working, I have no money to pay the school fees and all those things I had been borrowing to pay. (Alex)

Flexible payment plans were noted by the following learner as supporting participation:

So then I just applied, came in and done the interview, and kinda explained that I don't have that kind of money upfront, but if there is a payment plan, so she organised a payment plan and subsidised some of it and then all of sudden I am just doing a degree. I didn't start off that way but ended up that way I fell into nearly. (Ruth)

Although noting the financial implications of undertaking the degree programme, the following learner attributed their participation to the learning processes and ethos of the organisation: “it was the funding, and primarily it was the way it was facilitated, because it was similar in groups sitting around, the tutors were all very community-focused, they come from a community development ethos” (Martha).

Again, although in relation to the fee, further factors impacted on access: the learner's perception of their ability was also a factor in influencing their decision to undertake the degree programme: "there was a lot like even financially I didn't have the money to just go out and pay for a course, and I wasn't thinking degree, I never thought I was capable of doing a degree, you know" (Ruth).

Social class

Regarding social class, two learners explicitly referenced being working class as a factor that on the one hand influenced their decision to undertake higher education in An Cosán, and the other as a factor that would have impeded accessing higher education.

Adam attributed the reason for learners participating in An Cosán to social class as there was a sense that perhaps you would be more comfortable to "mix with your own" and there is a comfort and understanding without potential prejudice that you could experience in a formal higher education institution. Adam noted that:

You know, as I said, I only found out more about An Cosán and what it's about when I came in, and why it's set up. I like that type of thing, you know what I mean? Maybe because I come from a certain area, a working class area myself so I understand what they are trying to do to help people from certain areas because a College can be seen as a social thing, a social class thing. (Adam)

When asked if this is what distinguished education provision in An Cosán the learner continued: "yes possibly. I don't know, maybe, I don't know, because you mix with your own" (Adam). This learner described prejudiced language that their friend, who is also from a working class area, experienced in formal higher education:

I have a friend that's in College and he is from the same kind of working class area as me and he comes up against so much prejudice, and he is talking to me, he is doing Social Care, and he talks about these people who come up to him, and they talk about, they give out about, in racist terms, and they call them junkies or whatever else and he talks about he is drove demented, and he is like these are people that are going to work in Social Care and they are going on about this and he has to kinda of bite his tongue, so it is comfortable for me, I feel there is none of that prejudice here. (Adam)

The learner stated a growing realisation of class division and the challenges which working class people have to face:

Well, the way I said about social class because it is through my learning I am going back to adult education, I see the divide within the social class and how people in a certain social, the end of the social ladder, have to climb harder than others due to their situation. (Adam)

This was further reinforced by the course as he described class discussions during the degree programme with focused on inequality and a general sense that everyone was “singing from the same hymn sheet” (Adam).

Another learner, Kelly, attributed their working class background to one of the challenges of participating in higher education:

I was a lone parent quite young, a teenage mother, so I am originally from (suburb in Dublin) and I moved up to Tallaght, coming from a working class background that no one went to college, there was loads of social issues within my family, it was intergenerational, stuff like that. (Kelly)

Location of degree

The location of the degree was very important due to it being in the community, which facilitated learners to combine learning with other work and family commitments. Learners spoke about the benefits of having access to the degree programme in the community as:

The commitment to drive down twice a week and working full-time, you know the commitment mightn't be as big as it is because it is here, it is closer, people in the community and working in the community can access it much easier than having to travel and work, it's all that. (Ali)

Similarly, another learner stated: “location, I mean I couldn't have made it out to Maynooth, UCD, anywhere like that, it had to fit in around my schedule, so the Cert was brilliant” (Margaret). Although access to transport was not necessarily an issue for one learner, the distance to a higher education institute would have posed difficulties for one learner: “I had a car, I drove, I wouldn't have been able to go out to Maynooth sitting there two nights a week and coming home, I couldn't have done that, I don't learn that way, so for me it was the ease of access” (Martha). For this learner, learning

in the community was the only mode of provision that they wanted to participate in: “I kinda have always been doing something, so then as I said the opportunity came up to do this, this is for me and it might never be offered again and I am not going to go anywhere else to do it other than in the community so that is how I ended up here” (Martha).

Acknowledging the reality of women’s lives

Flexibility of provision of the degree programme, in particular being part-time, was cited by four learners as a contributing factor to enabling participation and overcoming family and work commitments constraints. One learner stated that: “I looked at all the factors again it suited me though it was one full day I knew I could work around that” (Margaret). Furthermore, another learner stated that by being part-time, they could also manage to engage in part-time work and family commitments:

I was getting part-time work I wasn’t really willing to give that up to go full-time and again, I have a daughter, she is nine now, but I was not really in a position to be able to do that, you know it just wasn’t going to happen. (Aine)

Another learner cited family commitments and the need for part-time provision: “I was working, and I have two young kids, and I needed to work things around them, and it just felt right” (Fiona), another mother stated that being part-time and the location enabled family responsibilities (Margaret).

The benefit of having childcare available on the premises was also cited as a factor that supported participation in the degree and also for the courses that led up to the degree. When describing the progression through courses, one learner cited that her daughter was still in the childcare facility in An Cosán which enabled her participation: “they still had (daughter)” (Suzanne) and “honestly, (daughter) downstairs was huge, and me friends” (Suzanne).

A supportive learner experience

Learners described the learning environment in An Cosán as a distinctively positive aspect of their degree programme experience, one which enables participatory learning

methodologies that support learner voice and fosters peer support. It was viewed as very effective for engaging learners; supporting meaningful participation in learning; and a contributing factor in the retention of learners. The supportive nature of provision in An Cosán was noted by a number of learners referencing the range of supports offered by the organisation. The concept of support was wide-ranging: tutors making learners aware of the supports that are available; the different channels available for support if one didn't suit, for example, learners who cannot bring something up in class there were other ways to address issues; the open door policy with management; one-to-one support for learners; peer study groups; a genuine desire from staff to listen even with the strains they are under; that staff went above and beyond their work to provide this support. One learner noted that there was always support available and all learners were made aware of these supports. Another learner defined the whole process of learning in An Cosán as “supportive community learning” (Aine).

That safe, supportive environment enabled learners to be their “true selves” and find out who they are:

Once you feel safe to share, then everybody shares and it's a kind of richness, and I think that is when people are their true selves and I think that is part of what happens here, is that people actually no matter what course they do they find out who they are. (Suzanne)

One learner noted that the overall organisation-wide the care and support she received took into account other things that were going on in her life, it wasn't just the academic issues, but the personal ones. This enabled the learner to successfully continue on the course contributing to her retention on the programme:

In general terms, they are all very approachable, especially if you have stuff going on outside, you know, and it is impacting on your work or not being able to cope once you can flag that for them, you know, they are very supportive. I had that occasion last year and could not have asked for better support, and it was because of that support I was able to continue on, and if that was not there, I would have just fallen behind you know, and that's really important, and you do get that here. (Fiona)

Learners noted that the staff went above and beyond their work, that there was an open-door policy when their workday was completed, they recognised the pressure the staff were under (and particularly that of management was noted), the pressure of limited resources yet their commitment to keep costs for the students down. Also,

supportive management staff, which learners saw as offering a genuinely personal approach, meant learners could talk to management staff, and they wanted to listen.

Another learner described support and encouragement as a means to bring the best out of them, being able to overcome those initial fears, through a collective supportive experience from staff and peers. In summary, one learner noted that this support was more wide-ranging, going beyond the academic support, or personal life support to a support and belief in the students' potential, supporting their ability to confidently engage in activities to represent An Cosán, to becoming leaders: "I suppose because of the encouragement and support of, well I feel they bring out the best in you" (Margaret).

Challenges of the An Cosán degree

Although learners noted a range of factors that supported access in An Cosán, particularly through the teaching and learning process which will be discussed further, the shift in requirements of a degree programme, which is essentially an academic pursuit, compared to that of their previous experience of community education was problematic and required support. Although previously noted as a strength, diversity within the class in relation to the academic experience created challenges for one learner as was the unequal level of support for some learners (Aine). The link to IT Carlow was mainly received as positive by learners, but one noted a negative comment about this association.

There was a sense that whilst it is a very inclusive course there will still be a cohort of learners who cannot successfully participate in the degree programme due to the nature of the academic requirements of the degree. The mandatory aspects of traditional methods of assessment, such as essays, were challenging for those with no previous experience in essay writing. One learner noted that there will still be a cohort of learners who cannot successfully participate in the degree programme, regardless of the amount of support An Cosán can give, in this case, due to dyslexia:

Because if An Cosán can't do it, I don't know who can, I suppose that's what I am trying to say that they are the ones that are so aware of this and that is why they have the Basic English and they have all

those other courses to help people and the supports and yet there still isn't enough to help people, you know. (Margaret)

On the other hand, there was a sense from one learner that the level of support available was not clear to everyone, and indeed some people were perceived to be also getting too much support:

And you know there was talk of some people sending their assignments to their tutor, to the mentor, and you know it was coming back and forth and it seemed to be a lot for their mentor, and it would come back, and they were basically told to redo it again, and there seemed to be a lot more support in relation to the content of the assignment and the brief, and I kinda felt, I suppose honestly that it was a little bit unfair in a way because I kinda felt well we are all here and we are all at the same level, and of course people have different needs and need different supports and that's fine, but I felt that some of those people would have maybe not needed that support, or would have needed it as much, or as little as other people in the class who didn't avail of the service. (Aine)

Within their own context, the challenges of the academic requirements were handled differently by different tutors and there appeared to be different referencing systems. The difficulty in handling the "loose structure" was also noted as problematic regarding an assignment:

It kind of caused a little bit of an uproar because I think people found it really difficult to manage with a loose structure, I think people preferred to maybe be told what to do and to do it, but when we were given very loose directional instruction, I think it was much harder for the class to manage to get on board to do that, so I think in the end the outcome was not what was hoped for. (Aine)

This learner wanted to know exactly what was required at the start of the degree programme and that the confusion caused huge problems. There was a perceived disparity between the flexibility in requirements of the degree, around submitting assignments, which was not consistently implemented across the board (Aine).

In terms of the status of the An Cosán degree programmes, accreditation from IT Carlow was viewed as an important means to gain recognition for the learning achieved; as a means to gain employment and as a mechanism to describe the degree programme. However, the less than positive public perception of IT Carlow was noted by one learner, for example, when they received negative verbal comments from people regarding the institution:

I did hear a comment somebody passed but I chose to ignore it, because it is Carlow IT and they don't have a high standard. But I chose to ignore that and just go with it myself and learn for myself if it is or it isn't. (Ali)

Also, some questions arose regarding the potential perception of employers towards a degree which was achieved via an outreach model, the need for legitimacy of the degree programmes which is afforded by the link to IT Carlow.

Learner voice: supporting access

Learner voice was identified as central to learners' experiences on the An Cosán degree by interviewees and as later noted in the learner focus group, "learner voice is the process" (Rachel). This prominent theme was described at a range of levels: embedded in the learning methodology and as part of underpinning their broader interaction within the organisation of An Cosán. But there was a real sense that the impact of supporting the learner voice enables access, supports effective participation, retention and a sense of personal transformation.

At a micro-level, learner voice in the teaching process appears to be a mechanism to overcome negative past experiences of education, thus enabling access. This was a common thread across learner interviews, voice enabling one to be heard and have their life experiences validated, leading to a general feeling of satisfaction with this process of learning. As it was a specific interview question⁴⁹, all participants described learner voice from multiple perspectives; however, overall, the common view was that their voice was heard in An Cosán. Learner voice in An Cosán was not only interpreted in relation to learners' own personal experience on their degree but the broader impact they had witnessed across the organisation. The power and impact of learner voice offered through the following example highlights that the process of finding your voice requires nurturing and time, yet it goes beyond a factor that enables access to one that fosters social change.

But they seem to become really strong and resilient, you know I do have to laugh even when you are watching people speak in here right up from the Basic English class to the degree level, everybody

⁴⁹ Do you feel listened to in the learning process within the class setting? And if so how? Do you feel your voice is heard? And does it influence how the class is run?

speaks with a very, I don't know, they own what they say. I have been asked at politicians' hustings and I have seen people here who probably walked in the door not able to speak and I have seen them fight for themselves and speak up, I don't know, it is just like growth and that's themselves like it's nurtured in some way. I think, as well, it contradicts an awful lot of negative stuff that is said, it is not a negative place like, people are not negative to each other here and tutors here listen and we respect each other, even though we don't agree we respect so when that happens it's really contradicting any negative crap that you heard before, because it gives you power. (Suzanne)

Suzanne stated that the nurturing of the learner voice also enabled people to “own what they say,” to “fight for themselves [at local meetings with politicians]” which ultimately “gives you power” (Suzanne). This links learner voice to empowering people to speak, and that also signals the positivity in West Tallaght and An Cosán, and the social impact that learning in An Cosán has on the local community. There was a sense that when voices become unsilenced across the learners in An Cosán it opens the possibilities for social action.

Learner voice: through the teaching and learning methodology

This harnessing of learner voice is enabled through teaching and learning processes at classroom level by bringing the life experiences of learners which were acknowledged, valued and drawn upon in the co-creation of knowledge. Life experience included work, volunteering, and experiences of work in the home. Learners described how life experience is drawn upon in class discussion and assignments. This links to the contextualised nature of the learning process reinforcing confidence, both in themselves and their practice (if working/volunteering). One learner noted that the tutor: “pulls the good out of you” (Suzanne), being able to see them, value their experience and build an individual’s learning to learn skills and confidence. Learners noted that although group work was not always facilitated by some tutors, in the main, it was the predominant teaching method.

As a way to increase participation and engagement with each other and as a powerful learning method, group work was cited as a key method for harnessing learner voice through their lived experiences, thereby contextualising the learning:

In the group discussions that's where you can take it to your own expertise and when you are writing your essays or giving your presentations there is a freedom there to go into your own field from that point of view. (Fiona)

The learning across the group is enabled and draws on the diversity whereby assumptions were challenged and, in part, a contribution to the collective shaping of the degrees took place, there was a sense of ultimately being able to "bring us to the degree"(Suzanne):

And we were challenged a lot as well; basically, we challenged each other's assumptions a lot, in that group of people had, we all had, views on how we thought things were and people in the group really challenged that because they were showing examples of how they weren't, even though you think you are not biased and you think you don't have something in your head, but you do, it was only when we were kinda faced with people I just think it was amazing the whole lot, but I do think that was it, we were able to bring us to the degree, do you know that way, it was us. (Suzanne)

Descriptions were offered of how discussions acknowledged and harnessed the diversity within the group, facilitating interactions between tutor and students and importantly among students through peer learning. This added a richness to the experience. Peer learning also appeared to reinforce the value of personal knowledge and experience.

First of all, do they take our life experiences into account? I'd definitely say they would because we all have different backgrounds and experiences, some of us work, some of us volunteer, some of us don't work, you know as I said within the class you can bring up maybe your own work environment and something that has worked or not worked. (Margaret)

Two learners remarked that it was the reason for coming to An Cosán, that they wanted an adult education approach and wouldn't be comfortable with the teaching process in a formal higher education institution and that they were drawn to the small informal group discussion process (Marta) and: "I mean my reason for coming to An Cosán and adult education is I wouldn't feel comfortable enough [in formal education], and it wouldn't be my teaching method... I don't think I would take it in as much either" (Adam).

Beyond the cited group work methodology, broadly speaking the teaching and learning method was dialogical in nature and harnessed the learner voice. Learner voice was not just considered a tool for supporting the learning process but as an authentic method

for validating the learners' life and work experiences as valid contributions. Learning moves from abstraction towards a more contextualised experience.

“The place where you are coming from is really encouraged, and the work, and the difference that you can make, they tend to look at the person and try and pull the good out of you and to encourage the work that you are already doing and there is a referral constantly back to the work on the ground, and where you are and your experiences, so I think being here has made me more confident in what I am doing and it has changed me in terms of my own work and I can see that my practice has really developed just because of being here, so it has enhanced more than anything else. (Fiona)

The benefit of drawing on learners' lived experiences was noted as being particularly validating at a personal level: “what you say is valid and is relevant to what is being taught so that's good to hear as well” (Adam). Bringing the learners' voices to the fore enabled the tutor to draw on the life experiences of learners: “This is most helpful because then you can relate everything back to your own situation and your own practice” (Fiona). There was also a sense that there are mandatory aspects to the degree but there is still ample space for discussion:

But then they will come in and say this is what we have to cover today but there is always the allowance of if something comes up that is of particular interest to us all, we can have a discussion on that and I really like that. (Margaret)

The applied nature of the course topics covered resonated with the learners' lived experiences. Contextualised learning also become more political in focus whereby one learner describes a class experience in which a peer becomes cognisant of structural inequalities, a topic of a class and noted that:

She just realised the inequalities in education, I think it was like in the second year, well my god, she was so passionate, and she researched, and she told us everything she learnt you know what I mean because she couldn't believe that she didn't get the shot she deserved in the first place, but that was her passion, but we learned from it. (Suzanne)

Indeed, this example demonstrates elements of the imaginative feminist pedagogy, in particular, the critical and imaginative social analysis as oppression is surfaced.

Another learner, went so far as to say that the content of their degree intertwined with their lived experiences so much that it shaped the content, as previously referenced in this chapter (Suzanne). The degree in Leadership and Community Development also

contained subject content that resonated and mirrored the reality of some learners (Suzanne). Furthermore, this learner also reflected on the reality of her life as mirroring the issues being raised in the class. The learning process, however, facilitated her to be able to bring those issues forth:

I mean like, I was homeless for the second year of the degree, so I focused some of my studies on housing, it was really interesting, and people would know that that was something really deep, on an individual level for people so you were getting the research piece of it and you were getting the heart so it's just so powerful like, but you know, you know what I mean, both it's not just what you are reading and what you are learning what you are believing and what you are learning you could see the face and the experience of everyone in the room. (Suzanne)

The contextual nature of the learning process was not just in relation to the processes in class but also in relation to the assignments which were based on the work (paid or volunteering) that the learner engaged in. The idea was that it was practical, would support their practice and offer links to theory (Aine).

A key difference cited between other educational organisations (formal) to their experience at An Cosán was that the facilitation of dialogue was not confined to the subject itself, but there is an openness to question the learning process itself which enables a democratic process within the class:

Yes, it was delivered to you, and unless you were asked a specific question to do with the curriculum, you were given exercises to do and then obviously people would interact with that, but it was different in that you would never question what they were delivering, you never questioned it. It was kinda different. It was, this is what's out there, this is what we are teaching you. Whereas people here if you disagree with what the tutor is saying they say ok fair enough, tell me a bit more about that and take on their point of view. In our class, it is very like that. It would not be dismissed; you don't know what you're talking about; we are delivering the degree; everyone's opinion is taken on board, and experience. (Ruth)

A similar sentiment was echoed by another learner when offering a comparison of undertaking a course in An Cosán as opposed to another educational organisation. Margaret described how she felt that they were listened to in An Cosán whereby interactive methodologies in the classroom increased learner engagement:

Yes, I do definitely think I am being listened to, very much so. You know, it is even more so from the year I had done in the counselling skills course, it was so different, you know, you had it delivered to

you, and here any time you can stop and ask a question, and you will be asked “have you ever come across anything like that?” and people will give their different stories, it’s very interactive. (Margaret)

Learner voice: a flattening of power relations between tutor and learner

The general openness of tutors to learners’ views enabled a sense of being heard:

I do think that any of the facilitation was very equal and I think everybody always felt, well from my perspective, everybody always felt they could be heard, and I suppose if an issue arose and people didn’t feel like they could say it within the classroom, there was always other ways made available to you. (Aine)

This sense of all perspectives being heard and openness was explored further through questions regarding the relationship between learner and tutors. Broadly, learners described situations that appeared to indicate a flattened power structure in the learning process, between tutor and learner, and this was seen as a positive aspect of the experience in An Cosán. This was cited across learner responses from their experience with tutors, from the CEO to adjunct tutors. The more equal power relations was alluded to: “the tutors don’t seem like tutors if that makes sense. You know they are kinda nearly part of the class” (Fiona).

The lack of tension regarding power in the class from across the teaching staff was noted: “I don’t necessarily ever think there is a power thing” (Margaret). In comparison to formal higher education, the differential power relations between tutor and learners was described:

“Yes, well at least I can do a comparison of another college, because if you had asked me that about (Institute of Technology) I would have said that the lecturer has it and the body has it that you go to, but here power does not come into it for me personally, I don’t see that there is a power thing”. (Margaret)

The more equal power relations also linked to the ability to voice opinions, for learners’ voices to be heard and the learner experience is taken into account, not dismissed, in the learning process (Ruth). It was noted that a number of tutors were more open to the learners’ wishes than others. The features of the more personal approach of tutors was characterised by the ability to go beyond the curriculum, engage in inclusive discussion, posing questions and an openness to collective learning. There was a sense

that tutors don't lecture 'at' the students and a reflexivity of tutors who isn't at the top of the class but "sitting within your circle"(Margaret).

That's funny I never thought of power in the class, to be honest with you, say the last tutor we had he is very much about, each week he will say "is this suiting you and is there something I can change" and we said to him you are very patient, and he said it is not that I am patient if you don't get something it's I am actually standing back and wondering why you are not understanding it. And he said he looks at himself then and sees well is it the way I have written it up. (Margaret)

However, alternative views arose in the learner interviews regarding differential power relations between learner and tutor. One learner noted that the tutor knows something the learner doesn't, that they have the power in assignments, however, they stated that there is no abuse of power although you are not on an equal footing:

Well I mean there is that tutor/student relationship, and even though it is inclusive, they know something you don't, they are teaching you, that's the whole dynamic there, you know, is there when it comes to your assignment, and you're this, and you're that there is a power dynamic there because they have got more power, your grades, your understanding, definitely, there is a power balance, but I think it's not a bad thing. Definitely, there is a power differential there, you know, there is power, and then there is abuse of power, there is no abuse of that power, but you are aware it's there, because it is just the nature of the relationship, your kind of not on an equal footing as such, I don't think. (Ruth)

Varying degrees of learner voice in the teaching and learning process

It is important to note that it is not a homogenous teaching process where learners are listened to in the same manner, the varying degree to which tutors listen to learners was expressed. One learner proposed that some tutors are more open than others who are busy with the teaching process:

I think some tutors are more open to the students' wishes and suggestions than others, I think you know, the tutors have their job and what they need to do, and the work they need to get done, so they cannot always listen to everybody. (Fiona)

Describing the process further that although all the tutors are different, and have teaching different styles, that they all essentially come from the same perspective, one of inclusiveness:

With every tutor it's different, do you know what I mean, because they all have their own way of doing things, I mean, there would be certain tutors where you go in, and you would find it's far more relaxed and then maybe other times you might feel, you know it's personalities. Everyone is open, some people might be far more relaxed, and easy-going, some might be a bit more, I don't know what's the word, "ah come on like" different styles, different tutors, I mean, essentially they are all coming from the same perspective, very much inclusive, but they would all be different. (Ruth)

Overall, in the main, learners felt listened to, and this supported their engagement. However, regarding communication with the tutor, it appeared more difficult for one learner, which resulted in the learner blaming themselves for being misunderstood, resulting in retreating from the group. This only happened on a few occasions but did have an impact on the learner:

From a tutor point of view, sometimes I felt like I wasn't listened to, yes, that maybe I wasn't putting the question in a way that they understood it, but yet I understood it in my own head and then when I tried to rephrase, then it was lost. Then I would be a person that ok, if I try to rephrase it and it is still not understood I would say oh shit it is the wrong question, so I would take a back seat then, now that is only on a few occasions, but it is still something I would think about. (Ali)

However, a more interactive learning methodology resulted after this learner approached the tutor on one occasion to discuss issues that they had regarding how the class was being run and impact of which was evident: "but the methodology of teaching and learning it changed after that and it was more practical working in small groups and more active as a learner which I really enjoyed" (Ali).

There was a sense of trust regarding learners voicing their concerns: "People would be very vocal about that, there is no whispering among ourselves, and not saying it, it would be said" (Ruth). Also, there was an incident that a number of learners noted, some describing it as "a shambles" which was addressed following intensive discussions. Demonstrating that learner voice is also about being critical but importantly that it was heard and addressed by An Cosán staff: "it was taken on board and the second one went so smoothly, and everyone kind of bonded with each other, we got to know each other, it was a really enjoyable experience" (Ruth).

The increasing articulation of issues and voicing of concerns was also a feature of the process of the degree, the issues raised were heard and time was taken to address them as a group, but also that the capacity to challenge built up over the course of the degree:

We fought a lot as well, we told them what we wanted, and we didn't stop 'til we got it, but that was very interesting because the first year we wouldn't say nothing but come the end, we challenged, I felt sorry for them, because you had these leaders, who were going you ... talk about leadership, and you are challenging me, and like they took it, no not took it, but they would sit down listen to any kind of conflict that was going on and then as a group we came up with a solution, not the tutors, sometimes when we said it out loud we realised we were just panicking, you know last year and all that kind of, almost like a storm, but there was always the space there if something came up, whatever was supposed to be coming in that half-an-hour didn't even come into account, the time was taken to deal with whatever was going on within the group which was huge you know what I mean, you wouldn't get it anywhere else like.
(Suzanne)

It is important to note that learner voice was not just about the teaching methodologies, whilst important for drawing and validating the lived experiences, it was also about creating an environment that was open to critique and allowed time for learners to collectively arrive at solutions. The building of trust, but also the ability for learners to express their views seemed part of the learning process.

Learners reflected on the structures within An Cosán which are available for learners to voice their concerns to staff in the organisation. The topic of learner representatives (learner reps) was noted by a number of learners (Ruth and Aine). There was a sense that this structure is a space for discussion but the topics that were raised varied and were often issues to which there could be no resolution, e.g. parking spaces. One learner who was a class representative, had previously been a class representative in a formal HEI and stated that they were two very different experiences in terms of the ability to be more open in An Cosán. There was a sense of openness by the organisation; however, these structures only relate to practical issues, if there are other issues, e.g. with the tutor, there are other channels which the learner can pursue. Also noted were the clear boundaries and that you can't bring up issues about the tutor:

Which I think is good because you know if you have an issue with a tutor you either go to them yourself or you go to the Manager. So I think that is good that there is boundaries people are coming in bitching about people so you know that isn't allowed either.
(Margaret)

A learner from the Addiction Studies class was less connected to the learner representative structure, but this may be because of the short duration of the course and the suggestion that if it was required, then they knew the channel existed. There was a sense that the structure existed, but it was only for issues that were outside of the classroom rather than issues relating to the learning, and that was not a major concern for a learner cohort, and they felt that they didn't have a space to bring these points up (Aine). However, there was concern from a learner that there was a strain on being learner-centred as An Cosán became busier: "I think the person-centred approach ... although it has changed a bit as An Cosán has got busier" (Fiona). Another learner who is also involved in tutoring stated that she felt the challenges of being able to remain learner-centred was under threat from the pressures of funding criteria.

Learner voice: shaping the degree

This section explores the potential of learners to influence their degree programmes, from the content to the structure. Linked to learner voice, life experiences of learners and the contextual nature of the course, learners were specifically asked if they could shape their course. Moving on from just being heard and for the learners' views being valid, is the specific influence of learners on degree programmes. In response to this, overall, there was a sense that learners could shape their degree course to some extent, but it was difficult to ascertain the level possibly as changes are not seen until the next year. This was particularly challenging for learners to know as the Addiction Studies degree was one year, and it was an evolving process yet by its very nature as an accredited programme, the learning outcomes are set. However, there was a broad sense that An Cosán were open to ideas and responded to them, but some learners thought it was not necessarily a good idea for learners to be able to shape the programme. It already had been noted that not everything is perfect. "So yes definitely, I do, and again I think there is an openness there for them to be willing to change if they feel that actually makes sense ..., but yeah, I definitely do think there is scope for shaping, definitely" (Martha).

Furthermore, Suzanne felt that An Cosán "nearly designed the course around us":

[D]o ya know, so I think that that's the thing, even with the degree a lot work has to be done but we kinda inputted into the work, we

nearly designed the course around us cause it was our issues that came up and we were trying to analyse like how society deals with these issues, why they happen, what individuals can do and that personal, a lot of it was very personal, everybody had different things that was going on for them but very open way kind of getting to express that, that was even in terms of the degree, which is quite academic really like, you still had the space to do that. (Suzanne)

Perhaps change doesn't happen immediately but that there is openness to change things for the future and where possible change happens and this is visible to the learner:

Well, we obviously have to stick to the learning outcomes that are already set. You know, so I don't think that we can influence the content, in the immediate context, but definitely, I do think that the tutors listen to stuff for going forward because there is not a lot that they can do in the now if the learning element is set, do you know, having said that the first module that we did the tutor and this is going back to year 1, 2 and 3, the tutor did change stuff around from week to week because they would say, now I could see from last week that you didn't really enjoy that element so I have just re-jigged it a bit this week, now that was that particular tutor's style, and he was quite happy to do that you know the way, but I do think that in general they listen and I think they change within reason when they can. (Martha)

Although one learner thought that it wasn't possible and you weren't asked about the content and rather it was up to the learner to respond to this: "I don't think so. No, I think the module is there, and the amount of work to be got through is there" (Fiona). Furthermore, they stated that there is flexibility on aspects of the course but not the content. They did also note that there is a calendar, but it often only goes up for one term which they, and they sense others, find frustrating (Fiona).

Proposed course content to cover is debated in the class "someone would bring in certain stuff and again some people wouldn't agree with that either because they think it is becoming too informal, do you know what I mean? It becomes a discussion" (Adam). Although learners stated that the degree would change to some extent through learner feedback when the question was posed regarding the possibility to influence the curriculum this was largely seen as an unknown possibility or even an inappropriate action: "I don't know if it would be appropriate for the students to say how the course runs" and that it would be both challenging to take on board a range of views within the parameters of the programme "no I think maybe too many voices in

that area would have an impact on how the course is then run, I think it runs very well” (Ali).

Another learner stated that they didn’t know it was possible for learners to influence the degree but thought that perhaps in the past it happened: “I don't know if you could influence it? I don't know, because we are never asked a certain way how, I am sure it has been influenced by its students in the past, but I don't know” (Adam). However, there was a sense of ownership around the degree, learners described it as our degree: “I just think it was amazing the whole lot, but I do think that was it, we were able to bring us to the degree, do you know that way, it was us” (Suzanne).

Learner voice: a deepened exploration

The theme of learner voice was discussed from a wide range of perspectives by all interviewees. For illustrative purposes, I have chosen one learner interview to deepen the exploration of learner voice. Their perspective of learner voice goes beyond enabling access to higher education through the An Cosán model but demonstrates an example of how listening to the learner voice and providing supports also enables a transformative learning experience. The depth of impact which supports confidence-building and enabling a person to find their voice is part of their experience. One learner, Kelly, was a teenage, lone parent who left school early without completing the Junior Certificate and cited the subsequent multitude of challenges which they experienced from marginalisation and social exclusion. Their experience was not about the need to access higher education; it was about continuous fostering of confidence and voice that ultimately led to their undertaking of the degree.

Furthermore, Kelly describes what appears to be a critical incident which in turn led to her continue in education: meeting a person who she feels recognised her potential and their own personal resilience which has led to personal transformation.

No, I had never done, what had happened was I had left school at fourteen, I had no education, I had no Junior Cert or anything like that. I was a lone parent quite young, a teenage mother, so I am originally from (suburb in Dublin), and I moved up to Tallaght, coming from a working class background that no one went to college, there was loads of social issues within my family, it was intergenerational, stuff like that. So I moved up here [x] years ago,

with my two children on my own, knew no-one, had no life skills, no coping skills, no education behind me and I wanted better for my children. I just didn't know how to go about it, I always had that in me, and through a friend, through a girl that I used to talk to and stuff like that, she told me about this course FETAC Level 3, and because I suppose I was really isolated, I was depressed, and I wanted to get out of the house, so I went to this [organisation], and I met this amazing woman, who I still hold dearly in my heart, I feel myself getting a bit emotional even thinking about her, because I think about her every day like you know, and I suppose I had no self-esteem or confidence or anything like that, I felt worthless and all that goes with it. I suppose she seen something in me that I couldn't see in myself so you know it was like the first thing I had ever achieved in my life, except for my children obviously, like you know and she kinda, I suppose I started believing in myself a bit more, and I wanted to change, I didn't want my children to grow up how I had grown up, I didn't want them to experience the same things that I had. So I just, I worked my way up from my Levels 3, 4, 5, and stuff like that, any course that was going I kinda of grabbed it. (Kelly)

Similar to a number of other learners, Kelly availed of many learning opportunities after she was supported to have greater self-belief. With regard to the organisation more broadly and in line with others' views, Kelly stated strongly that An Cosán listen to learners and are true to their ethos in that there is an understanding of the context and challenges facing learners and this translates to the classroom setting of learners where their voices are heard:

100%, definitely, they, I have to say now. I can have different opinions on different days when someone annoys me or whatever, but from my heart definitely 100% they stand by their ethos. You know, they want to see us doing well, they want to see us leaving at the end of this with a degree, they understand completely about our outside life, our pressures around family, around work and they always work around what we want, they always listen to us. (Kelly)

Although noting that they felt listened to and that their points were valid, initially she felt inferior and there was still a sense that the tutor was the expert; however, this was a minor element overall, and in the main, they felt their voice was heard:

I think what it is, is that depending on the facilitator or whatever, as I said, in the first two years sometimes I would feel very inferior and less than, what I would say is not valid enough because I have come from where I have come from kind of thing. And it's like what do you know I am the expert, but I think you will get that everywhere, everywhere you go, and it is not an overall thing that is just very kind of minor, because overall I feel part of, I feel my voice is heard and that what I have to say is valid. (Kelly)

Though having a perhaps more negative perspective of relations with the tutor than other learners, her experience was in line with the overwhelming view that their voices were heard.

However, whilst on the one hand, learner voice is important for validating, supporting and engaging learners, there is potentially a negative side in that the openness can also lead to a sense of a loose structure. This loosened teaching structure at class level was framed as the 'learners' structure' by tutors which caused some frustration. Kelly noted, and a number of other learners highlighted that the challenges academic requirements pose for people coming from a community education background is disempowering, sometimes resulting in a feeling of being left on their own:

Well you know actually there is one thing that kinda can annoy me, and I have questioned the facilitator on this before, around the ethos and power and how people who have come from disadvantaged backgrounds that, I understand that it is a degree and there is a certain level that is expected of you. But I think sometimes there can be a cross over from the community education, and it can be very, even though a degree is academic, but I don't think that there is, sometimes, there is not enough support around that for some people who have never been through college before. And I just think that I will just say it like it is, I just think sometimes that there is not enough support around that because I feel that I have been kinda left on my own they are saying it's your structure and that's that, and the other and I am saying what are you on about, I have never wrote an essay before in my life when we were in the Diploma, and we described a theory, or we described a model or something like that but I never done any critical analysis or anything like that and I am like what is it? I am not coming from an academic background I am coming from the background I have come from. (Kelly)

Similarly, a common point made moves from learner voice in the teaching process to the contextual nature, and topic, of the degree which acts as a method to validate learners' life experiences. In this case, being able to link the challenges in their life to the learning processes and content of the course was significant:

I remember the first year coming in here and there was community development and the facilitator what he did was, he got us to discuss issues that happen within society and stuff like that, what issues affect people, individuals and families and I remember he got us into do a group and we all had our stuff and we put them on the wall and every issue that was put up on the wall I had experienced in some way or another, every single one of them, except the transport in rural counties, that was the only one, every other one.

Because the content of Leadership and Community Development every single, and its society, there is huge scope in the room that we can talk about our issues and own experiences like that. (Kelly)

The impacts of An Cosán and the degree programmes on both themselves and their community, particularly for women, was strongly felt. Enabling access to the degree programme was commended:

[An Cosán] it is actually an amazing organisation like, when you see the amount of women that come in here that never had the opportunity to go and get themselves a degree, you know, that is what it is about, that's really what it's about. That is what it is about I mean, I'm nearly getting emotional thinking that, it's just, because the impact it has, not only on the women and children, but also on their wider community and their wider family, you know what I mean it is just amazing. (Kelly)

A further common theme which arose while describing their experience of not getting on well in school was moving from an oscillation in confidence on the degree course, to ultimately feeling liberated and being transformed through their own efforts with the support of An Cosán was frequently cited. The impact on the personal development of Kelly really brought to the fore that impact the degree has had on their lives.

Because I went to a nuns' school, so I didn't get on too well. But I don't know it has just been a rollercoaster for me, some days I come in here, and I say God what am I doing, you know and then other days like you know, do you know what I feel, I feel now that, I know I am going off track. I feel that from the background that I have come from, from being a lone parent to having no self-worth and allowing people to walk all over me, I feel that I am a strong, educated, liberated woman now, you know, and An Cosán has given me that. I know I have put the work in and I have attended here, but without having here, I wouldn't be that. (Kelly)

Outcomes of the learners' experiences of the degree programmes

This section outlines specifically identified outcomes from the degree programme, although learning outcomes are self-evident, specific reference to community and empowerment were noted. One learner (Alex) interviewed reiterated throughout their interview the transformative nature of the degree programme which is outlined in this subsection.

Four learners interviewed specifically described the impact of the learning from the An Cosán programme personally and on the wider community. It was seen, in a broad

sense, regarding the empowerment of the local community in particular educationally disadvantaged women who now have a degree. Ultimately, it appears that the outcomes are twofold – the impact of third level education on women in the community and the ripple effect on their families. Secondly, it relates to fulfilment at a personal and professional level. The outcome is somewhat blurred as the content of the degree programmes centre on empowerment and community development.

At a professional level, learners cited their ability to now facilitate a critical education process which enables learners to identify oppression and work towards a more social action model of learning. Similarly, another learner cited the Leadership degree programme as a means to support the identification of societal inequalities by linking to the learners' real-life experience. In addition, an outcome of the learning was described as their new ability to give a voice to the voiceless. All four learners spoke of the significance of contextual learning in terms of identifying areas of oppression they face. A learner stated that she now engages in advocacy work for herself and the community by exploring channels of political influence. From finding their voice, having that nurtured and supported in this positive environment, learners are empowered. Adam spoke of a sense of appreciation for learning, its ability to empower them individually and within a working class community:

I think what they are trying to do is amazing like; you know that kinda way, because I always, what has driven me to continue to study is knowing that knowledge is power like, you know that kind of way. To give people knowledge it is empowering them especially when you are coming from a place that is feeling disempowered, or I can't find the right word, plus I enjoy learning, I didn't realise how much I enjoy learning until I came into adult education, you know?
(Adam)

Another point raised was the approach, that it could be replicated and what makes it different is the holistic approach:

I hope, that would be my dream, that it would be replicated, I would not shut that down in a second, An Cosán, is not the only place that can do that it just needs to be a certain holistic level, I think, to how degrees are delivered. (Suzanne)

At a personal level, one learner described in detail the transformative experience of the An Cosán degree programmes. They noted a positive change within themselves and their understanding of social inequality which they feel enables them to be part of the solution and not the problem:

An Cosán has taught me you know, the cultures, the differences, those several types of inequalities like racism, feminism, you know all those things I learnt from An Cosán. Then I begin to see how I was part of the problem, not part of the solution. (Alex)

That learner continued to describe the impact of the learning from the degree in An Cosán and their new way of living:

Because it is a way of life, what An Cosán is about is a way of life, it actually showed me another way of living my life from the way I was living my life before and I just, it is so comfortable and easy, and it is not about money I am a little bit poor, but the way I worry about it and the way that it consults in my attitude is different, you know, if it was before that and I was broke like this, I can't sit down and laugh I can't just laugh, well now I am laughing even I am not rich, I have no money, those are the things I believe that if this was replicated among people you might not solve a financial problem but lot of evils, you know when you have pressure on yourself, and you begin to have heart failure, you begin to develop lung diseases and all those things; eventually one is killing themselves. But you ask what impact that those have had on me and I now take it easy, I still enjoy life to the full. (Alex)

Finally, the learner emphasised what they wanted me to take from the interview, their change in perspective to a new paradigm:

I said it earlier on, if you do this study again tomorrow, I would probably be thinking, talking from a different perspective, but the main centre, the main thing that I want you to know that doing this degree is a shift from my initial ... what I was, to a new paradigm and this new paradigm is much, much better than that and in fact even that is subsumed in this new paradigm, it is different, and that is my thinking, it broadens my thinking, it allows me to tolerate things more. (Alex)

An Cosán organisational culture reinforced by the pedagogic practice

The organisational culture of An Cosán links learner voice centred practice to broader inclusive features. Overall, the learning environment in An Cosán is viewed as welcoming, non-threatening, relaxed, caring, supportive which is in part due to the U-shaped layout of the room combined with the learning methodologies used, e.g. small groups discussions and atmosphere of trust and care. It also stems from the overall ethos of the organisation. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, the importance of the physical environment as a place of beauty was seen as centrally important by the founders.

The difference between formal and non-formal education, in the physical learning environment was remarked upon, the An Cosán model being more relaxed and with less pressure.

I think it is good like, I like it here in An Cosán, but even the layout of the room is very open, and I think it makes a difference when you can see everybody, and you are not in desks behind each other (long pause) it is more relaxed, and I think it is easier to learn in that kind of environment and although it is a degree programme, I feel there is a certain element of being relaxed while learning, it doesn't feel as much pressure as if it was in a formal classroom setting. (Ali)

Overall, the environment enabled peer support, which evolves from peer learning, and resulted in a tightknit group that acted as a means of getting people through the degree. The learning environment facilitated a certain closeness between learners which enabled a comfortable, safe and open environment where, over time, learners would feel confident in sharing their views, without the individualised nature of traditional classroom setups, e.g. desks. It was stated that you couldn't disengage from the class "you can't just be sitting at a desk on your own doing whatever you have to do" (Suzanne). However, the more informal physical learning environment did require a change in perception for one learner, in addition to the process:

I did have to change my perception because when I came in then like we were all sitting on sofas in a circle, and the tutor isn't lecturing at us, and you know, so I did have to change my own perception. (Kelly)

The smaller classrooms, and the use of small learning groups, that were continuously changed each week, were cited as a distinguishing and positive feature of the learning process in An Cosán and one which could be replicated in other educational organisations. Also, there was a sense of care for learners' personal growth "actually caring about the personal growth of people in the room" (Suzanne).

There was some concern that there was a change in the set up in the learning environment, from one with couches in a circle to more traditional desks for certain modules in the subsequent degree cohort. A learner stated that the desks would have been a barrier for them: "I think I would have been terrified I am just wondering because our degree never had a desk maybe we might have pulled up one or shared one, but we had our feet up on the couch" (Suzanne). And further elaborated: "it makes a difference in terms of atmosphere and environment for people who are doing it now to us" (Suzanne).

The learning environment extended beyond the physical to an atmosphere of support, care, respect, confidentiality and understanding that enables a safe space to share. “I think it is because An Cosán gives you the safe space.” (Suzanne). The environment as a space encouraged retention, she kept coming back, although she had a feeling of being an imposter the learning environment, in combination with other factors, encouraged her participation (Suzanne).

A learner emphasised that the learning environment is what makes people comfortable:

They [An Cosán] are fantastic, and as I said I have been to places and I have been to seminars on their behalf and I always, I am like a broken record I go on about the environment, the environment, because I kind of feel that it is not scary for people and because I listen to the people in the Basic English and their horror stories of how they were treated in school and they were told they were stupid and all that, that really bothers me. (Margaret)

Through this environment, the atmosphere of equality between participants fostered peer support which in turn aids retention and the feeling of acceptance; an example was offered in relation to a prior outreach course experience: “there is the peer support, which is huge. I mean that’s what really pulls you through in the end. I think because you are doing it in this environment, you get that closeness” (Ruth).

There was a constant reiteration of the learning environment enabling peer learning; this was not attributed just to the small group work in the class but also the people within the class, who came from similar educational experiences. One learner described the difference of the degree in An Cosán to their previous experience on an outreach course which had a different group of people and how they didn’t have that experience in An Cosán.

Even though I wouldn’t have been in a big group doing the counselling course. There would have been people, teachers, people with degrees coming to the course who just came to the course to add to what they had, and I found it personally really intimidating, and I felt stupid. I would have blended into the background with them. (On the outreach counselling course). It was very strange it never happened [here in An Cosán]. (Ruth)

Learners also attributed peer support to their common commitment to their subject of learning community development. An Cosán enabled peer support by providing space

for study groups and collective learning, by way of a room in the evenings. Ultimately, the learning environment in An Cosán leads to a supportive culture amongst learners:

I am really lucky. I think it is a combination, I think it is because of the way it is done here and the informality of it that it kind of allows for people to get close, they set up the study groups here, so we get into the habit of going to study group together, they give you a space, there is a room for the evening during the week, so it just allows for that, it encourages that, it nearly encourages it, so it is set up to allow that to happen, and then it's the people and some groups it's not going to happen, but really when you are together for three years you kind of go into that level, that you will. (Ruth)

However, it was not the case for all learners, one learner (Ali), initially felt outside the group as they didn't come from the same background and had very different life experiences. The learner ascribed this to the relative homogeneity in the group in terms of being urban dwellers of a similar social background. Also, there was a sense that you are not going to fit in with everyone regardless of how you feel about An Cosán: "I love An Cosán, I really love it, but you are not going to like everyone... you're not going to feel that you fit in with everyone" (Kelly).

Central to the learning environment was the pivotal role of the tutor as a key aspect of the learning experience. One learner (Aine) felt that the tutor went above and beyond their duty by providing more direction than they should have. Other learners positively expressed the driving focus of tutors on community development. The personal touch of tutors, their authentic human interaction, enabled significant learner development through meaningful dialogue whereby learners felt listened to, and the impact of their contributions had become visible (Martha). Tutors were not merely concerned with the academic process but appeared to care about the learners, which in turn supported personal growth within the group (Suzanne). There was a sense of love for, and belief in, the learners, who were really listened to and understood, as one learner described the tutor "could see into your soul" (Suzanne) – a deep connection was there.

The organisational culture of An Cosán was explored from a learner point of view to determine how they feel in the organisation, do they have to change to fit in, what creates the culture and any particular aspects that strike them, linking to Bourdieu's concept of habitus. The main points raised regarding institutional experiences that support access were: learners can be themselves; An Cosán is less hierarchical than other organisations; An Cosán is both a supportive culture and a reflexive organisation.

The predominant point raised by learners was that the institutional culture is overwhelmingly supportive and one that encourages engagement between learners. The link between institutional culture and gender was noted, in that it is a predominantly female environment from staff, learners, volunteers to founders. There is a culture of warmth which is created in a number of ways; some attributed this to the founders of the organisation, that it was originally in their home, the CEO, all staff and importantly the staff in the Coffee Dock and the participants: “when I came up I just, you’ve seen the Coffee Dock, I just got a lovely sense as soon as I came in” (Margaret). Furthermore: “I liked the whole vibe, the feeling that’s in this place. I knew it was right for me.” (Fiona).

The origins of the warmth were attributed to the history of the organisation:

I don’t know whether you are aware that [the founders] started it in their home and you can’t get warmer than that, someone’s home. And I actually went up there, the first year, I think, and I can’t remember, anyway it was a day up there, and it was a very warm environment, sitting around the fire and all. I assume it came from them, you know, that’s what I would think, that it came from them being in their home teaching them making sure that women got up there on a bus. You’re in their home, to moving down and I think it has been there from the start you know. That’s what I can gather. (Margaret)

This environment enabled learners to be themselves. There was a strong sense from learners that they didn’t have to change to fit into An Cosán, the organisation, you could be yourself. Initial feelings of uneasiness when entering the course were mentioned by learners but were attributed to a perceived lack of course subject knowledge. Another learner said that based on her previous experience of higher education, she had some preconceptions about how the degree in An Cosán would be provided. However, after her positive experience, her view changed and felt that she didn’t have to compromise her true self to fit into An Cosán.

It was noted by a learner that there are always challenges of interacting with other people but that through her learning in An Cosán she has grown to recognise and accept that. A sense of comfort between learners in the class was noted, furthermore sense that the “environment kind of adapted around me”, (Suzanne) illustrating a view that a learner could influence the culture. However, one learner remarked that she didn’t know if she felt comfortable in the organisation but proposed that the value placed on learners sharing their views, which are acknowledged and heard, offers a

sense of safety. There was a sense that the environment facilitates a culture of peer support and equality between participants.

On being asked if a learner had the ability to influence the organisational culture, one learner questioned this as they believed it is limited due to a perceived hierarchy within the organisation. Although stating that a hierarchy existed, and one which they felt uncertain as to whether they could truly influence, the learner noted through hushed tones that they didn't feel confident to categorically state the limitations to influence and chose not to discuss further.

The culture of An Cosán appears to result from a number of influences at a range of levels: the overall organisational ethos; the physical environment; the teaching process; staff and by learners. Two learners attributed the culture in An Cosán to the CEO from whom the culture of the organisation flows by way of a personal touch and student interaction. Another learner remarked that it is broader and also involved the participants:

I kind of think it is everybody in the place, staff you know because I don't think it just comes from the higher up because you might not see the CEO, we are lucky enough to have her as a tutor, but I just think it comes from everybody if that makes sense. (Margaret)

The learner also noted the contribution of the staff in the coffee dock, which encouraged modelling norms in the organisation, which they believe rubs off on people:

Even the girls in the Coffee Dock, I mean you know it's warm, I suppose that's it, it's warm. And then I come in, and I feel that's the way it is so I am going to do that as well, I suppose it rubs off. I would like to think that that's the culture, rubs off on everybody and then the students that come in, you would like to think that it rubs off on them as well. (Margaret)

Interestingly, one learner attributed the culture to the organisation being run by women, and thought that this was a factor which set the tone and it would be very different if it was run by men:

I think that I suppose because it is mostly women, yeah, that is my own opinion because it is mostly women that are running it, you know, and I think that if it was predominately male-run, I think it would probably be very different, do you know what I am saying? (Kelly)

The broader context of adult and community education

Beyond their degree, a number of learners described the challenging broader context in which An Cosán is working in. Although interviews focused on the degree programme and An Cosán, three learners commented explicitly on the challenges facing the community education field. Three themes emerged: the challenge of maintaining community education provision with the lack of funds; the burden on teaching staff; and the fear of losing that personal touch which they feel An Cosán does so well. It is worth noting that of the three learners who raised this issue, two were involved in community education provision in either a paid or voluntary capacity, thus answering from both a learner and practitioner perspective.

A learner described the pressure of adhering to funding requirements and the general challenges that community education groups with the lack of resources and perhaps an over-reliance on volunteers:

I don't feel I have to sit here singing An Cosán's praises, and I didn't I said they have their weaknesses and if you want to say that, that is, that they are I suppose like every other community based environment, they are limited by different aspects, limited by funding, they rely on volunteers to come in and take up that slack and you know there is all that sort of thing but they are fantastic.
(Margaret)

The continuous need for community education and the unsatisfactory model of funding for community education was identified as the driving pressure resulting in the challenge of marrying the two imperatives: building skills for the employment sector and the personal development of the individual and their community. There was a sense that staff are under pressure but endeavouring to support learners as best possible:

I mean that is going above and beyond they really do, there is so much pressure on them, [management teaching staff] take on so much with the teaching, they have their jobs as well, they're doing the tutoring to keep the costs down making the whole thing possible so it won't fall apart. (Marta)

The impact of funding having a labour market activation focus, resulting in an over-emphasis on measuring learning outcomes as opposed to personal development, non-accredited provision and nurturing:

It is almost like trickery we have to look after the individual needs of the people, but yet we need to survive... it's like you almost have to, imagine having to lie about being nice and looking after individuals it's like you are doing something wrong, but in actual fact, you are doing something beautiful. (Suzanne)

One learner sensed that there was a need to take stock and review what community education organisations want rather than the requirements of funders (Martha). The pressure of funding requirements to have a certain number of participants complete a course within a year was cited as a challenge as people can't fit into such strict criteria. Cautioning the challenge of ensuring learner needs are not secondary to external funding pressures, it was felt that as An Cosán is a bottom-up organisation and overriding priority will ultimately always favour the needs of learners. The learner felt that other participants are probably not aware of the pressure, as she never considered it as a student on the course, only in retrospect.

That said, one learner who is not volunteering or teaching in any capacity internally in An Cosán or externally, sensed the constraints of funding, which resulted in recent negative changes. Although stating that they were generally satisfied in An Cosán, there was a sense of reduced resources from over-reliance on volunteers to reduced information on grants. They cautioned that although there was a recognition for the need to grow as an organisation, the most important selling point of An Cosán was their person-centred approach which should be retained. Generally, it was felt that the limitations of the organisation mirrored the community and voluntary environment more broadly, including the increased reliance on volunteers for sustainability.

Chapter conclusion

Overall, learners described their experience in An Cosán as distinctively positive due to such aspect of their degree programme as one which enables overcomes access issues.

The most prominent theme that arose from the learner interviews was learner voice: in the context of where it is situated within the ethos of An Cosán; how learners view their engagement in An Cosán; and the pedagogical approach that facilitates it. The dialogue-centred pedagogic approach was viewed as effective for engaging learners; supporting meaningful, contextual participation in learning; fosters peer support and

was a contributing factor in the retention of learners. The impact of a learner-voice centred approach, and the degree itself, was evident from the transformative experiences that learners described.

In the main, learners described situations that appeared to indicate the lack of a hierarchical structure in the learning process, between tutor and learner, and this was seen as a positive aspect of the experience in An Cosán. The flattening of power relations also linked to the ability to voice opinions, for learners' voices to be heard and the learner experience to be taken into account in the learning process. Linked to the learning process was the An Cosán organisational culture was experienced as welcoming, non-threatening, relaxed, caring and supportive which is in part due to the open layout of the room combined with the learning methodologies used and atmosphere of trust and care. It was also attributed to the overall ethos of the organisation. The feeling of warmth was noted, and generally, you could be yourself, but that was not for all learners if they came from a different background (i.e. rural).

The cohort of learners generally undertaking the degree programmes in An Cosán had a number of commonalities relating to their past educational experiences. A number had left school early, had unsatisfactory experiences of school and the effects of which impacted on their decision to progress to further or higher education. In addition to this, for lone parent mothers, the challenge of going to formal higher education emerged as significant, in terms of affordability but also their own self-belief. A few learners completed formal schooling, but progression to further education was not satisfactory, or decisions to engage in obtaining a trade led to unfulfilling and precarious working conditions. However, on returning to education, a number of learners progressed through accredited programmes across the National Framework of Qualifications mainly in part-time, local provision. Many learners participated from further to higher education by way of outreach programmes at Certificate and degree levels. For learners having gained their educational experience in outreach provision, the distinguishing features of An Cosán included the whole organisation approach to provision and the permanency of An Cosán enables it to be unique coupled with the range of supports available. The An Cosán model was described by one learner as supportive community learning. The difference between formal and non-formal education, in the physical learning environment was remarked upon, the An Cosán model being more conducive to fostering inclusion and learner voice. There was also a

sense that learners can influence future iterations of the degrees from a group perspective and within the limits the academic requirements of the degrees. The factors supporting participation, as articulated by learners, covered themes of: flexibility of payment (low cost); location; social class, family-friendly provision, nurturing self-belief and a supportive learning environment.

However, some learners felt there are differential power relations between learner and tutor. Other challenges of the degree include the difference between the requirements of a degree programme which is essentially an academic pursuit, to that of community education, was problematic and the loose structure. This shift to a more academic process requires support, which in itself was an issue for another learner as there was a perception that there was almost too much support available for some learners. Overall the external perception of the link with IT Carlow was welcomed in terms of offering legitimacy, but one learner spoke of comments to the contrary. Finally, learners noted the challenging funding context for community education and the resultant impact on outcomes.

Chapter 8 Empirical findings from the learner focus group

Introduction

To offer a deepened understanding of the degree programme, when all learner interviews were transcribed and analysed, I held a focus group with three learners who had participated in the interviews. In the interest of confidentiality, I have provided new pseudonyms for those learners who participated in the focus group. I asked for their views on the themes which emerged from the interviews, that do they think about the culture in An Cosán; what are their view on access issues which emerged; to provide insights on the idea of inclusion; the pedagogy on An Cosán and how the learning appeared to be contextualised. I asked learners to offer any further reflection on the research and the An Cosán degree programme in terms of access and if there was anything missing from the themes that emerged from my findings from the learner interviews. To open the focus group, in line with An Cosán's feminist imaginative pedagogy of having an opening circle (a reflective space created through engagement with music or a poem), I asked the participants if they wanted to start in this manner. One learner chose the following poem at the start of the session to set the context for the opening circle.

The Other Side of the Door

On the other side of the door
I can be a different me,
As smart and as brave and as funny or strong
As a person could want to be.
There's nothing too hard for me to do,
There's no place I can't explore
Because everything can happen
On the other side of the door.

On the other side of the door
I don't have to go alone.
If you come, too, we can sail tall ships
And fly where the wind has flown.
And wherever we go, it is almost sure
We'll find what we're looking for
Because everything can happen
On the other side of the door.

By Jeff Moss

Structural issues impacting on the An Cosán model

The focus group described An Cosán as providing a transformative learning experience beyond just widening participation which is ultimately important for systemic change. Yet they described broader structural changes which are needed so that the imposition of fees doesn't continue to restrict higher education participation.

Nigel stated that An Cosán is not focused on equity of access, rather it is about making an impact on the community; to change its mentality, and that education becomes a tool of “social classes to break cycles of poverty”. It was argued that An Cosán does not seek to provide a model of education that perpetuates inequalities in society or middle class cultural dominance, rather An Cosán seeks to engage in a transformative learning process which facilitates systemic change and challenges the dominant deficit model of education. Although initially disagreeing that An Cosán is not based on widening participation, Johanna and Rachel stated that they believed that An Cosán is centred on equality of access but that this is enabled by the work An Cosán has engaged in at community level, it is not merely about increasing the number of learners participating from the community; An Cosán's model is more of a systemic approach which seeks structural change within society.

The need for policy change regarding fees for part-time higher education learners was highlighted. Set within the context of far-reaching structural change, Rachel states that access to higher education isn't as easy as before in An Cosán: “scholarships are gone; the funding is gone; the fees are still there which has a significant impact on the cohort who are least likely to participate in higher education, they are still not included.” Johanna stated that although the scholarships were there, fees are still present for the degree courses in An Cosán. The group expressed concern that the immediate community couldn't access the degree courses in An Cosán in 2014; there was a sense that people from the community are excluded due to the fees and that there is a real need for policy change: no part-time fees as is the case for full time students from this cohort. One learner stated that other people wanted to participate and progress to the degree programmes in An Cosán but end up volunteering. There was a suggestion that people who are participating on the degree programmes could “probably go to UCD anyway” (Johanna), in that the cohort of students has changed so much in the last few years. This somewhat differs from what was noted in the learner interviews; however, it refers to the learners' perception of access rather than their lived experiences. They

stated that “you are excluding people; perhaps the most passionate who don’t have the finances to participate on the degree programmes.” In addition to fees, childcare was highlighted by Johanna as a major factor impacting on higher education access. It was noted that a concerted effort is made by An Cosán to accommodate learners’ needs in terms of childcare and work commitments by running the degree part-time; however, it is a ‘catch 22’ as part-time students can’t receive grants.

Ultimately, unless there is broad-scale structural change that includes funding for part-time higher education participation, even with all the fundraising efforts, widening participation for under-represented groups will not be possible. There were questions about the government funding private schools and the inequality in funding the education system, particularly community education. Comments were made that even if you are working, you still don’t have any money for education, that there is the new poor who perhaps would have traditionally been able to pay for courses. There is consistent structural inequality. I stated that I had a huge assumption around far-reaching structural change in relation to An Cosán, and the contribution from the group had highlighted my blind spots.

Institutional culture and access

One focus group participant felt that the culture of a formal higher education institution would impact negatively on their ability to participate in higher education as they felt they couldn’t be themselves. With regard to their experience in An Cosán, two learners stated that this was not an issue for them, in that they didn’t have to change to fit into An Cosán. It was noted that although the culture in An Cosán is open, it still requires change for some students in terms of the norms to which they are unaccustomed, and that change is necessary in terms of personal development and growth.

In relation to the first point, Johanna said at first, as a learner you don’t have to change to fit into a formal higher education institution as long as you get the grades required for the degree standard. Therefore, looking at it from an institutional perspective, there was a strong sense that An Cosán does not have a culture that requires students to change in order to benefit from higher education because it is “not concerned with who

you are”. The learner continued that their perceived view of formal higher education institution was “they want you to come, pay money, participate and move on.”

From a learner perspective, Rachel imagined what it feels like to be in a formal higher education institution as opposed to An Cosán. They stated that one might feel the need to be someone else, sound different, or act differently in order to fit into that institutional culture. They felt that if they went to Trinity College to do a degree, they would have had to change as the “culture would have pressured me to change”, “even my appearance and all would change.”

Although not all learners felt immediately comfortable within the An Cosán environment: Nigel found the culture in An Cosán very alien to the way they would have traditionally learned; however, now they feel free after understanding the culture of this model of education. They continued that this approach is just a small part of society and the education system and, “one which is not about conforming.” Although Nigel felt that they were required to “change and concede to the system here”, it was ultimately beneficial as they experienced a new transformative, process of learning. Following this learner’s intervention, Johanna said they began to reconsider their viewpoint, that just looking at An Cosán, means that participants don’t have to change in order to benefit from higher education yet, perhaps, people need to change the way they look at themselves or to increase their skills.

There was an overall sense that, in relation to prospective learners, An Cosán is not trying to change people before they engage in their higher education course “it takes them how they are”. Nevertheless, that is not to say that individual change doesn’t occur; a learner’s identity is not fixed, particularly in the context of a transformative learning process.

During the focus group, after reviewing their viewpoint in light of another learner’s input, Rachel stated that the institutional culture does impact on the individuals who come in and even though “the place is brilliant and is about empowerment” there are processes that are different. In summary, it was agreed that An Cosán takes people as they are; generally, people don’t feel they have to change to fit in, but An Cosán, through its transformative learning process wants people to change, in a positive sense.

Diversity and inclusion

Across interviews, learners described a feeling of being included in An Cosán. When asked to reflect on this point, from the focus group's perspective, it emerged that diversity within the student cohort plays a "huge part" of the provision of the degree programmes in An Cosán. Rachel cited it as the best part of her degree in that learners come from all backgrounds; they challenge each other and provide insight into each other's worlds. One learner stated that "without the diversity in that room the light wouldn't have shone". Diversity was viewed as "the most engaging and powerful thing about the degree" and one learner (Johanna) noted that diversity is needed in order to change one's views.

It would appear that when learners spoke about diversity in the An Cosán context, rather than it being viewed from a deficit perspective which needs to be overcome, it is viewed as an essential part of the learning process. More broadly, one learner (Nigel) stated that there is a limit to diversity in society and that stronger groups continue to exert their strength, power and domination over the minority groups. However, in the context of An Cosán, diversity as a strength was viewed as both a characteristic of their approach and a feature which is exhibited by the An Cosán higher education model.

Pedagogic practice of the An Cosán higher education model

The topic of pedagogy formed the most engaged discussion session of the focus group. The discussion focused on how the process of knowledge production is a key characteristic of the An Cosán model which is facilitated by the teaching methodologies employed by An Cosán. As outlined by tutors and learners previously, in the An Cosán context, the learning methodologies used create a process of knowledge production that values the learner experience and leads to co-creation of knowledge.

With regard to the learning methodologies used by the tutor, Rachel noted the flattened power relations, which enables the learner to be "side by side" with the tutor. They stated that knowledge is produced via: "everyone in the room, [it is] a circular thing, it's not a one-way process, everyone gains and everyone gives", in addition, they stated that "the tutor is not the expert". Two learners, in particular, emphasised that

this process of knowledge production is “the way it should be” and that in formal third level education it is akin to the banking system, whereas they believe that the knowledge is in the room. The learners emphasised that An Cosán “do it right”, and the process of knowledge production and transfer is crucial to authentic engagement of learners; however, they felt that this could only happen in a community education environment.

The focus group stated that neither An Cosán, nor its lecturers, present themselves as the authority in any subject, because their primary purpose is to facilitate collective learning, a co-creation of knowledge, which leads to a transformative learning experience. The reason proposed for this approach, for which facilitation is pivotal, was noted by Johanna in that if this approach didn’t happen learners would be consuming and reproducing the dominant knowledge and also people wouldn’t want to be part of that “jug and mug process” (Rachel). There is a sense that tutors are open about valuing the collective knowledge, the focus groups spoke about the notion that “it’s not that all the knowledge is in one person, it keeps it moving, it keeps it fresh, energising, it needs to be innovative” (Johanna).

The learning process was seen as a key feature of the degree programmes:

If you offered me to go to Trinity tomorrow, I don’t think I could do that ... this process works for me, I see the benefits of this process, a transformative process, it is about us all learning together. Learning from everyone’s experiences. (Rachel)

People in formal higher education would benefit from this process: “this type of learning, this process, is so much richer” (Johanna). This process of knowledge production (Rachel) builds confidence, due to “how it’s delivered, how knowledge is shared: it lights two fuses, the personal and the professional development.”

Bridging the link between the learning process and its role in widening participation through effectively engaging and retaining students was described by one learner:

In communities like this, that’s what makes education accessible; it builds confidence so that people’s voices are finally heard; for some, they have probably been silenced their whole life. That method of engagement: how knowledge is shared. This is part of retention; it helps people stay in education, whereas people [from this community] just don’t stay in the formal higher education system. (Rachel)

The learners in the focus group discussed the tutor-learner relationship and the need for reflexivity in staff which was viewed as essential: “the reflexivity is what enhances the learning, the tutors are willing to change” (Johanna). On further reflection, one learner (Rachel) stated that: “being reflexive is about being transformative. So unless the staff are willing to be reflexive and change a transformative approach cannot happen.”

The positive impact of the learning methodologies in An Cosán, over formal higher education, were described in terms of building learner confidence: “[this approach is] what is needed for people is that their confidence has to be increased. This way facilitates that, the other way (formal education) shuts that down.”

Learners shaping the degree programme

In the context of An Cosán, one learner stated (Rachel) that “the degree seems to be tailored to each person, you could always put your own slant on it.” The focus group learners said that people focused on their particular interest, they would bring their life experience to the degree and therefore, it was, in a sense, tailored. There was a sense that the curriculum was developing over time in response to consultations with previous learners (Johanna) and student evaluations which resulted in changes to the degrees because the “curriculum is evolving” and “the way it is delivered evolves” also. An example of the evolution of higher education provision in An Cosán was the new online special purpose award which was developed in response to a need to reach the wider community; therefore, there was both an awareness and a willingness to try and meet the needs of the community.

One learner viewed the curriculum as the minimum standard, but there should be an opportunity for learners or groups to influence it. It was suggested that the minimum standard should be maintained, but learners should have a space to add their piece (Nigel). Furthermore, it was proposed that a responsive degree is about matching theory to practice, it must be meaningful and address the issues in the group: “how you do it, how you have scope to do this, this is where the learner voice comes in” (Nigel). One learner suggested that this is the same as community consultation; it’s about asking what the community wants and changing and adapting as you are going along. Beyond the curriculum, it was suggested that the actual course type evolves, as an

example, the new childcare degree was provided as that is needed by the community as that is the level required by childcare practitioners.

The concept of the curriculum being contextualised, so that it speaks to the participants' world, was not merely deemed as being useful but deeply meaningful to the learners' life, an example given was the highlighting of concepts of structural inequality within the course. One learner described it as being contextualised in that "it's relevant to the context of your life." The learner focus group proposed that the curricula of courses in An Cosán are designed to meet the needs of the local community with the main aim of ensuring that the education offered is relevant to people's lives.

One learner, Johanna, stated that "the curriculum is no use unless you can apply it to your own life, and the issues in people's lives." This is important because many excluded learners are "people coming in thinking I'm poor, I'm stupid, and it's my fault ... it's the structural inequality." This characteristic appears to link strongly to the responsive curriculum and outlines the need for a contextualised learning experience, which is both needed in a transformative process, in order to provide meaning and applicability of the learning, which is part of the An Cosán degrees.

Learner voice as the underpinning theme

The final point discussed was with regard to decision-making structures in relation to the learner voice. It was discussed on a number of levels: in terms of facilitating the learner voice regarding issues affecting the community; in relation to engaging the learner voice in An Cosán; and the need for long-term engagement with learners to support the expression of their voice.

The focus group initially described this point in relation to the broader impact of giving a voice to underrepresented groups particularly regarding issues that their community faces: "it is not just in the classroom, but as part of assignments, it is not just what happens in the room" (Rachel) and that it is about supporting learners to engage with local decision-making structures regarding issues that impact on their lives and that of the community. Activism was spoken about in terms of supporting learners to create advocacy campaigns on pertinent issues and that "it's about lobbying people, it's about your voice in the curriculum, it's giving you the power. It's about giving people power"

(Rachel). Specific methods of learner engagement employed in An Cosán and the influence of the CEO were discussed:

It's about reflective practice and evaluation; everything is taken into account; there's a student forum; there was a wall of issues in the coffee dock. But also, what challenges they [learners] face, there is a lot of time that is involved in this, verbally, written, and that influence how things are done. And with Liz as CEO, it is so reflective. You need to look back before going on. (Rachel)

However, it was noted that engaging with learners in order to get to their issues takes time and due to the diversity in An Cosán it is not a one size fits all: "there is a need to get minority groups to open up on their issues, but it takes time, after theory, interaction and knowledge" (Johanna). The challenge for learners from minority groups to voice the issues was raised: "to get to their truth, it takes longer, it's not about repeating what is already happening. Even if you want to challenge issues. You just let it go" (Johanna).

The long-term approach to learner voice, how it can impact on the organisation and that change may be experienced for future, rather than current learners, was mentioned: "An Cosán has the structure of involvement, but in terms of change you may not experience it but those who are coming up after you will. It may not happen, in your own time" (Johanna). The unique range of education provision, including higher education, was seen as a novel example of an organisation taking a transformative approach to higher education provision: "I do think An Cosán are an exceptional example because they go so high in terms of the qualifications" (Nigel).

As a final part of the focus group, learners described the main theme they would use to characterise the An Cosán model of higher education. The resounding answer was the learner voice:

The learners' voice in the decision making, in the curriculum, in the group, that whole engagement with the learner and the learner being at the centre of that. That's the key, transform the individual, the community, the family. The whole learner-centred piece, give the learner the opportunity to use their voice. (Nigel)

The learner voice extends broader than its impact on the curriculum, or even building the capacity to raise issues in wider society; it is also a key element in the learning process: "the learner voice is the process – the peers are, the peer stories, hearing their

voice” (Rachel). An Cosán enables a collective learning process that facilitated peer support:

Peer support and peer growth and learning comes through the methodology and culture of the organisations: opening circle, people’s hopes, fears and expectations, put into groups, creating the group has as much emphasis as the curriculum. (Nigel)

Chapter conclusion

This chapter outlines the findings from the learner focus group, which explored the themes that emerged following the analysis of the fieldwork interviews. From the learners’ review, a number of pertinent points were raised from the applicability of themes and to a deepening in understanding. All themes were considered applicable to An Cosán but often went beyond the confines of an organisation, e.g. far-reaching structural change. Far-reaching structural change is not merely from a perspective of institution-wide activities which seek to widen participation but through its model of education provision. It moves the concept of structural change from institutional to one of a societal level. The learners viewed this point from a variety of perspectives: that An Cosán is more about providing a transformative learning experience than widening participation which is ultimately important for systemic change and that broader structural change is required so that the imposition of fees doesn’t continue to restrict higher education participation.

But at the heart of the practice is the role of the learner voice in the learning process: as a tool to engage, to recognise and affirm the learners, as a tool for peer learning and support, as a means for deep engagement with the subject due to a curriculum and learning methodology that speaks to their world, is contextualised and is meaningful. As one learner stated: “the learner voice is the process” (Rachel). This appears to reinforce the main points raised in the learner interviews. That the role of the tutor is central, by way of flattened power relations, in creating a learning process that harness’ the participants’ voices in an authentic manner.

A striking theme that emerged in both the learner interviews, and which was reinforced in the focus group was an issue that those learners who would benefit most and should be the focus of access are not in a position to take up places on the degree programmes. That due to the lack of funding supports available for part-time students and to the

organisation, a detrimental effect is being had on people who may already be in a position to go to a formal HEI. This is a concern for the organisation, as it has been an ongoing tension to meet the needs of those, particularly women, most marginalised in the local community, with appropriate provision. As noted in the management interviews (Angela), the resource-heavy provision of higher education, coupled with the lack of funding, could cause a dynamic in provision that would move away from the basic educational needs of the community. However, An Cosán has always provided higher education level provision, and that tension has remained constant through local community engagement on needs. In offering pedagogic processes that centre on voice, tutors are not seen as experts, but with some flattened power relations between learner and tutor at play, it contributes to a rich learning experience. With this in mind, the perspective of tutors will be explored in the following chapter.

Chapter 9 Tutors' perspectives of An Cosán model in practice

Introduction

This section covers the findings from interviews with tutors who taught on the two degree programmes, which are the subject of this study, in order to support the articulation of the An Cosán model of higher education and provide a background to learners' experience of teaching practice. All tutors agreed to be interviewed (n=3), all of whom are male and sessional; however, three other members of staff are involved in tutoring from the management interviews, all of whom are female and full time members of staff. The chapter sets out to offer the three sessional tutors' perspective of An Cosán's organisational culture, describe how learner voice is supported in the teaching process and tutor-learner power relations. In considering the research question, the chapter is quite descriptive in tone as I am seeking to offer the characteristics of the An Cosán model of higher education.

The organisational culture of An Cosán

Learning environment and organisational culture were explored in the tutor interviews in order to understand the An Cosán model of higher education, from classroom to organisational level. In this section, the contribution of tutors to, and the impact of, organisational culture upon their practice is explored. In order to give space for tutor voice, who are central to learners' experiences, detailed quotes will be used as appropriate.

The tutors were asked to describe the institutional culture of An Cosán in order to give their perspective on how people, particularly students, feel within the organisation. Initially, the word institution was used; however, a tutor argued that the concept of 'institution' is too grand to relate to such a small organisation (Michael), rather it could almost be considered a "meeting place", due to the familiarity of the staff; the hospitality; the culture of openness; and the more equal power relations between all participants.

The institutional culture ... that is a very big question. Well, the institutional culture, first of all, I wouldn't see An Cosán necessarily as an institution, because when you enter An Cosán you have somebody who knows your first name, who greets you with your

first name, the doors are being opened to tea and coffee and scones if, I just don't see it as an institution, the culture is the culture of openness, friendliness, trust, I think people are very kind of equal, learners, tutors, that is my experience anyway, my perspective. It is almost a bit like a meeting place, it's very interesting, but that is far as I can describe the culture. (Michael)

Therefore, the term organisational culture will be used going forward. The factors contributing to the organisational culture were attributed to the leaders of the organisation, these characteristics were described as: “definitely love, change orientation, education, attempting to change the reality in Tallaght and beyond so there are common values, and that binds and brings people together” (Michael). Similarly, another tutor (David) attributed the An Cosán's culture to the founders of An Cosán; however, he felt that as a sessional tutor, it was difficult to define, or influence. David stated that the inability to influence the culture was attributed to sessional/module tutors, who he felt are “not really part of the organisation.” This could be due to the lack of connection with the organisation, or between tutors, as David also noted that: “I don't understand why we are not brought together with the other tutors”; however, he was ambivalent as to whether he could engage in such a process: “but if they invited me to meet I don't know if I want to go, don't know if I want to meet the group” as “I feel that I am freelance in an organisation.” Michael described the organisational culture as being firmly established in terms of its ethos but is one of openness and shaped by all in that the “culture is the culture of openness, friendliness, trust, I think people are very kind of equal, learners, tutors, that is my experience anyway, my perspective.”

Linked to the culture, is the feminist imaginative pedagogy, which although noted in terms of love, was a certain unsaid influence on the learning process as David noted that “they leave me things, so I go in, and there is a book left, and I am supposed to pick up that, I have to read the opening circle, but no one has actually asked me.”

One feature of the culture was noted as the strive for excellence and high standards which can be stressful for tutors (David)). It was proposed that the creation of the organisational culture is almost a cyclical process, one tutor (Michael) attributed the culture to the leaders of the organisation, and through an education process those who are now working in An Cosán were originally learners - which results in greater equality within relationship between leaders, workers and learners in the organisation.

I think what informs it really is the coming together between those that have the passion and the vision and the urge to see change and to do that through, or try attempt to do it through, education and the coming together with those who have benefitted from it and that are now working with An Cosán, and are part of An Cosán, I think that kind of creates that unique culture and probably transcends also the differences between people to a degree. (Michael)

Finally, the culture of An Cosán was described as fundamentally transformative (Stephen). Whilst being supportive of learners moving at their own pace, the tutors' goal is to get students to the graduation stage. Even within the backdrop of academic and financial constraints of a degree programme, the learner-centred culture of An Cosán fundamentally strives to create a transformative learning process (Stephen).

Supporting learner voice in the pedagogic process

All tutors described an underpinning approach to teaching that is congruent with facilitating learner voice, as was also noted in the learner interviews. When asked what informed the practice of tutors, a number of points were raised including: the Freirean theory of pedagogy; community education; the learning outcomes of the curriculum; passion for adult learning and a belief that the students can succeed in achieving a degree (David). Another described the impact of daily work in community development, knowledge of international research and policy work, coupled with a belief in human rights (Stephen). All of which underpin a general philosophy of equality and learner engagement.

The reality of the lived experiences of the learners featured as part of the learning process in that the teacher must consider the context of the learners, both locally and more broadly, to influence the learning process.

With any teaching approach in community education, it needs to be underpinned by the lived reality of learning and development. Teachers must consider how participants invoke ideas, practices, and accounts from both the larger and local cultures of which they are a part. In addition, we must keep in mind that they may not simply borrow from these cultures or reproduce them; rather, they may make innovations as they adapt them to serve their immediate purposes. (Stephen)

Another tutor expressed the influence of the work of Paulo Freire, Irish community education practitioners, the theory of group work and social justice, past community development experiences, lecturers in Maynooth and with a general background in adult education theorists, e.g. Mezirow, and classes by Prof Tom Collins⁵⁰ attributed to shaping their teaching practice (David).

Learners cited the importance of the processes used in supporting learner voice, from group work to the contextualised nature of the learning process. Such themes also emerged from the tutor interviews, whereby the process for engaging with learners was explored: group work and group dynamics; contextualised learning; the lived experience of participants and, most importantly, the centrality of the learner voice in the process emerged. Ultimately it is a process-driven rather than an outcomes-based mode of teaching, learning objectives are achieved, but the focus centres on how the learning happens.

All three tutors discussed group work as a means for facilitating the learning process, in part, it was attributed to the physical environment and “atmosphere” of learning, which lends itself to a dialogical learning process (Michael). Two tutors (David and Michael) noted that for creating a community education approach to the degrees, the use of group work is the predominant method used.

It is facilitated. It starts with the experience of the learner, it's learner-centred, obviously because it is a degree programme, you know, there is an element of lecturing, but that would be, from my perspective maybe 25 to 30% if at all, maybe less, no more, definitely no more and the rest is discussion group work, interactive education methods. (Michael)

It is pertinent to unearth the predominant teaching process, which learners noted as central to the experience. David (tutor) attributed active engagement to An Cosán's community education approach, describing group work as intrinsic and a main

⁵⁰ Prof Tom Collins is the former Head of Education at Maynooth University (2006-2011); former Dean of Teaching and Learning between 2008 and 2011 and interim President 2010-2011. Between 2011 and 2013, he was President of the Royal College of Surgeons of Ireland, Medical University of Bahrain. Professor Collins was special government advisor in the development and publication of Ireland's only White Paper on Adult Education, Learning for Life, in 2000. Between 2006 and 2012, he was Chair of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). His scholarship, publications and other professional work throughout his career has focused on the links between educational disadvantage and he has led multiple initiatives in enhancing educational access and participation Ireland.

pedagogical process: “the big thing would be getting people in groups to talk to each other” (David). Again featuring strongly in their pedagogy describing:

I get people to do role plays, I get people to do group work, I get people to work in groups rather than isolated, and often I get them to work in class, so they will actually bring the work to class. (David)

Furthermore, another tutor (Stephen) used discursive teaching techniques, again as group work, to encourage critical thinking. He noted that the cohort of learners would not be used to reading theory and that this was a way to enable discussion on the topic. The role of the tutor in this instance is to be active in guiding the process and to bring it back to the theory.

Related to group work are the processes of group formation and development. One tutor (David) noted two particularly challenging incidents in which his participatory processes were challenged in the classroom; he described one in which a learner questioned why he was checking in with all learners and if it was necessary. But he illustrated how the resolution came as the learner and group had a greater sense of themselves as a unit.

So last year I remember after the second or third session I went around them all individually and said "how are you getting on"?, "How are you getting on?" and I had one woman who said "this is a fuckin' load of crap why do I have to listen to how is every getting on," there's 22 of them, so it was a long time, "Why do I have to listen?" and I said well I want to know collectively how you are getting on and that means that I have to ask you, and in fact, I have to ask you in the class. And the next week the woman came back and said I would like to apologise for what I said because when I thought about it I thought it was a very good exercise because now I know how I am and everybody is in the class and suddenly they were a group. So, the same happened, one guy got very stroppy with me, and I ticked him off in the class and the next session I said I think we need to talk about what happened and I asked everybody what did they think actually happened and after that people said "we have a sense we are a group now". Now I don't know whether I am teaching them that, I don't know whether I'm not teaching them, but I am definitely going with what is going on in the room at the time because I think it is important. (David)

This rather long quote was used to illustrate the reality of group work and group dynamics, and it is important to note that participatory teaching can be challenging. It involves effective facilitation skills and not merely subject knowledge; it is more democratic but not without conflict.

Creating a contextualised learning process was seen by one tutor as the essential element of the teaching process, by putting the theory into their practice “[what] I am trying to do is put the theory in some of their practice and their knowledge, so they have got a theoretical base point so that in a sense is how my teaching is delivered” (Stephen).

Tutors differ in their approach to facilitating a contextualised learning process. From splitting a learning session into two parts, initial input followed by group discussion (Stephen), to structuring the module in two parts (Michael) whereby the tutor clearly outlined the process they would take, starting with content only lectures moving to the second part of the module which would be a more facilitative approach in order to integrate the theory into their own experience.

But the second half of the module will be them, using their experience to integrate what I have told them, to their own lives, so that's the way I do it. Because I say, well you are actually students, and because I do a lot of facilitation, I know the difference between facilitating and teaching, so what I say to them is that the first part I would be doing is the teaching and they need to know these things because there are learning outcomes, but the second part I would facilitate them learning more and integrating the theory type stuff to their own experience, and I am very open to that form of learning. (David)

The particular skill needed for this approach to creating a contextualised learning experience was noted (David) which also involved, where appropriate, bringing their own experience into the learning process. One of the tutors did not directly relate their responses to contextual learning or learner voice specifically.

The importance of drawing on learners' experiences was noted by two tutors (David and Stephen), in that in order to engage marginalised or second chance learners it is necessary to bring in the student's experience, on the one hand, to support the learning process by framing it in theory, and also as a means for engagement. One tutor (David) stated that the learner cohort influenced his teaching practice and proposed that in order to engage marginalised groups, it is necessary to draw on the students' life experiences:

I suppose I end up thinking of my commitment to marginalised groups and the notion that maybe paying more attention to students and to students' experiences as a way to get them back to learning, that would primarily be the idea. (David)

The tutors described various aspects of the learning process, as with the learner interviews, the theme of learner voice featured often. This topic links with the theme of facilitating a contextualised learning process. In order to create a learning context that is in keeping with the lived experiences of the participants', tutors noted that skills are required to do this and maintaining such an environment can be challenging. The process of facilitating learner voice into the learning process is more about the 'how' of the process, rather than the content, for example, this tutor (David) describes a process where learners are encouraged to own their projects by finding ones that resonate with them. Although the content of the curriculum is covered as required by the degree programmes, the focal point is the process:

For me it is primarily around 'the how' and the material ... we negotiate over and back so while the material, the content is fixed, and the topics are set, the way that it is done is very close to the student's own knowledge and experiences. (David)

Echoing the importance of process, Michael also noted that the delivery of the course has to be learner-centred and that there is a conscious effort to ensure that the whole group understands the content. It is essentially "process-driven" rather than results-driven.

Creating space for learner voice was highlighted by one tutor (Stephen) who described a structure for the learning session:

I think when you are dealing with adult learners, and when you are dealing with it in that community education environment, you need to set time aside for the learner's voice. And whether that is negative or positive, they need to have that way of expressing what they like what they don't like and what they want to discuss etc. again it is just breaking up the three-hour sessions into, what I want to tell you, what I want feedback from you and what you want to tell me so that is the sort of framework that I have done on that and that tends to work because they know well I will get a chance to say what I want to say rather than it being oh I wonder when am I going to get a chance, so it tends to stop interruptions and it tends to stop going off the script in a sense. (Stephen)

Enabling learner voice allows the tutor to cover less interesting areas by relating it to the learners' interests (David). Whilst the need for facilitating learner voice adds greatly to the process, a tutor highlighted the challenging nature of the process. Challenges to providing the best possible experience for learners was noted as the tension between

striving to provide support to students to learn at their own pace with the constraints of time, finance and around meeting requirements of the curriculum (Stephen).

The subject of reflexivity was considered by Stephen, in terms of the need to reflect on the appropriateness of their teaching practice, on how knowledge is created or reproduced, and reflection on how the reproduction of dominant knowledge needs to be critiqued. This tutor also expressed the need for this model of education provision outside the formal system and beyond current education policy. There is a space outside that education and training realm, which is learning and development, and that non-governmental organisations have a role to play in such. The kind of degree deemed appropriate in a working class area was questioned by Michael and whether these should be challenged in terms of their narrow, more social focus. He questioned the value for learners in that if one were aspiring to make real change in the lives of learners, and their community, perhaps there is a need to look beyond the programmes that are being offered, particularly the Addiction and Community Development degree to, for example, management courses. The Leadership and Community Development degree was seen as being a little more transferable; this was reiterated by another tutor who also referred to the personal growth of learners that was evident (David).

Negotiated tutor-learner power relations – a process in flux

In exploring the relationship between tutor and learner the theme of power emerged. The examples provided by tutors demonstrated how the flow of power between tutor and learner is constant, it can be a partnership, or negotiated involving a changing tutor identity from an authoritative teacher, facilitator, peer to mentor or continuously as a peer.

One tutor (David) was very explicit with learners about how the process of learning will happen; linking to power relations, he stated what their role will be at the start of the course, how it will evolve and how it will move to a more discursive part nearing the end of the course – this leads to a changing of roles for the tutor: from lecturer, to facilitator, to resource person.

I feel I have to hold on to the authority for the first one and half sessions, and then I just have to slowly let go until by the seventh, I have mostly let go. So by the seventh session, I am now a resource

for them to call on rather than the person who is doing the resourcing. (David)

Power relations can be in a constant state of flux, depending on the context and what has to be done in class, flowing in peaks and troughs in order to negotiate the time for discussion but also for achieving degree requirements (Stephen): “it is about negotiating with the learners and saying there are times for discussion and there is also time for information” (Stephen). The learner-tutor partnership has negotiated parameters of influence:

Well my experience, I think it's one of partnership, I know I might be being very idealistic here, but it is one of partnership, it is one of guide, of mentor those sort of elements it is also one whereby as long as the ground rules are there you can pull the hierarchy when you need to, say stop messing about ... I have tried to give them some control, some negotiating, to control of when they hand an assignment in. (Stephen)

One tutor (Michael) spoke about the impact of the tutor – learner power relations and how it lends itself to a more open environment which is non-threatening and learners “aren't intimidated asking questions” (1). This tutor felt that they were on the same level as the students rather being than an authority figure. Their identity centred on being a peer, not a peer learner, but a peer in their profession as much of the cohort worked or volunteered in a similar field. A reciprocal learning process was described in that the practical experience of the learner challenges the belief system of the tutor. However, a note of caution or concern is that some tutors were concerned with that could be perceived as an excessive amount of student support and perhaps too much ‘spoon-feeding’ which could hinder learner autonomy.

Chapter conclusion

In summary, the culture of the organisation appeared to be attributed to the founders, the leaders of the organisation and also the learners, particularly those who on completion of their studies became employees of An Cosán. Concepts of love and social change were also noted and that ultimately the pedagogical approaches are transformative. The feminist imaginative pedagogy is subtly influenced, e.g. materials left for the opening circle. However, the influence of the tutors on the culture was not mentioned and in one case was seen as having little or no contribution due to their

sessional/adjunct nature of employment in An Cosán. The link between sessional tutors and the organisation was touched on by two interviewees. There was a sense that there is some disconnect between the sessional tutors and organisational aims in terms of: the lack of induction (David); the element of happenstance that tutors deliver the course from community education principles rather than taking the approach of “I could go in and do a straight forward lecture and walk out” (Stephen). Ultimately, it was noted that the point was not of high significance and should not be overstated (David).

Tutors’ was informed by: a Freirean theory of pedagogy; community education ethos; learning outcomes of the curriculum; passion for adult learning; belief that students can succeed in achieving a degree; belief in equality and importance of community development-related knowledge. The lived reality of participants also impacted on the teaching. Emerging from the data were clear themes: the teaching process involved group work and group dynamics; contextualised learning; the life experience of participants, reflexivity and most importantly the centrality of the learner voice in teaching and learning processes. Ultimately, An Cosán’s pedagogical approach is a process-driven rather than outcomes-based mode of teaching; learning objectives are achieved, but the focus centres on how the learning happens, recognising that participatory teaching can be challenging.

In exploring the relationship between tutor and learner, the theme of power emerged. The examples provided by tutors demonstrated the flow of power between tutor and learner is constant, it can be a partnership or negotiated involving a changing of tutor identity from the authoritative teacher, facilitator, peer to mentor, or it can continuously be a peer. A note of caution regarding excessive learner support could lead to learner disempowerment.

Chapter 10 Discussion and conclusion

Introduction

My deep, passionate commitment to educational equality was the impetus for my setting out on this research journey. In my professional advocacy capacity in AONTAS, I wanted to consider how I could open up a space in national access policy for an overlooked approach to higher education provision that appeared to address many of the inherent limitations of HEIs. How marginalised people are framed within a deficit perspective, those very people and communities for whom public policy should serve to address the multitude of structural inequalities they face, has long been a cause for concern for me. Moving away from a deficit discourse is at the heart of critical and feminist pedagogy, valuing the lived experiences through voice is difficult to explain in an access policy context. I have found over the years, despite a firm commitment to social change one can fall back into deficit-framed approaches to issues of educational inequality, oftentimes as the answers are unclear. This thesis is not merely about a critique of access policy; I hope it will offer solutions and answers to issues that can be enacted. I work within the confines of advocacy (O'Neill, Fitzsimons, & O'Reilly, 2014) within the confines of the system, even if the suggestion is for a model of provision that is radically about changing the structure of society, it is set within changes in public policy, but I think that has value. In drawing on my own first-hand experience of the life-changing impact that access policy can have, together with my professional work, there is much to gain. In my efforts to answer the research question⁵¹ I set about to uncover the prevalence of the deficit position in national access policy through in-depth analysis; articulate the An Cosán model of higher education by drawing on the case study data and literature; explored the literature to outline proposed factors impacting on educational equality and use such to analyse the data of learners who shared their experience of the two degree programmes. The insights from learners were illuminating and characterised the An Cosán model of higher education from the perspective of those who are often the focus of policy but whose voice is seldom heard, women and men from marginalised communities. In keeping with a feminist approach to research, this brings forth “alternative forms of knowledge to the forefront of public

⁵¹ recognising the persistent under-participation of learners from socio-economically disadvantaged communities and the predominance of the deficit model to access in Irish higher education policy, what can the An Cosán model of higher education contribute to access?

discourse” (Nagy Hesse-Bibber & Piatelli, 2012, p. 567) for the purpose of a more just society.

A quote from one learner interview has resounded in my ears over the course of the study ‘*voice is the process*’. It seemed simple, as they effortlessly collated a range of complex concepts into just four words which cover much of this discussion chapter. I am indebted to all the research participants, but particularly to the learners whose deep understanding of the An Cosán higher education model enabled me to have a clear insight into its potential contribution to practice, theory and policy. I aspire to somehow do justice to knowledge co-creation inherent to this research project by attributing due credit to the learners’ contributions in the discussion of the research findings, and to the thesis overall.

Summary of the An Cosán model of higher education case study

Drawing on Mertens (2009), through a transformative inspired methodological approach, I built on my knowledgeable outsider or ‘inbetweeners’ (Milligan, 2014) relationship with An Cosán: with both the management and learners. In establishing my identity as a researcher, phase one and two of the cases study supported communication with, and my physical presence in, An Cosán which enabled me to build trusting relationships with management in the study, and facilitated the informed engagement of learners. Through the relationships I developed with learners in An Cosán, from those who participated in interviews and the focus groups, but also in all my interactions at the An Cosán events I attended, I was cognisant of the power I had in representing learner views in the research study and the need to ensure that I did not “reinforce and perpetuate domination” (hooks, 1989). I was conscious to bring forth their knowledge without ‘re-writing’ their stories anew (hooks, 1989), yet presented in a manner that could bring about social change (Nagy Hesse-Bibber & Piatelli, 2012). In this chapter, I will consider this summary of my thesis, interrogating the assertions I have made, highlighting the links between the findings and the literature and outlining the limitations of the study. I will discuss the learners’ experience of the An Cosán model of higher education with respect to voice whilst offering a link between voice and organisational habitus through a Bourdieusian lens.

In starting the research journey, I undertook an extensive review of national access policy (HEA, 2004a; HEA, 2008; HEA, 2015); which pointed to a distinct over-reliance on deficit models (Rogers, 2004) that result in so-called academic or utilitarian (Jones & Thomas, 2005) HEI approaches to address the issue of persistent under-participation of certain cohorts of society in higher education. Contra to the deficit model that focuses access initiatives on the lack within the individual (Jones & Thomas, 2005), over the course of the case study of the An Cosán model of higher education, a number of themes emerged which indicated a more transformative approach to access centres on the concept of voice. Firstly, An Cosán has a specific feminist, social justice agenda (Gilligan & Zappone, 2008) cognisant of the importance of listening to the voices of marginalised people, especially women. There is an intentional consideration for the holistic needs of the learners that attends to the affective dimension of learning, which forms part of the feminist imaginative pedagogic process (Gilligan, 1999), informed by Freire and hooks, and experienced by learners. Common with the development of women's community education (Connolly, 2014), the hospitality aspect and provision of support for the access-enabling childcare needs of the learners, particularly women, were evident. The community of West Tallaght has informed the degree programmes and education provision more broadly; however, there is an ongoing tension regarding the balance of courses offered from non-accredited to higher education. Themes relating to voice across the study include the Freirean-informed dialogic pedagogy that harnesses voice which facilitates what hooks (1996) would describe as a "coming to voice". The process involved a feminist pedagogy and learning environment which enabled dialogue and a flattening of power-relations between tutor and learners, thereby building a sense of community between learners and with the tutor. For some learners, it was a move from being silenced (Belenky *et al.* 1986), to a valuing, recognition and autonomy to speak (hooks, 1996). The overall feeling of being able to be yourself within An Cosán was enabled through this validation of one's lived experiences and opinions through a dialogic process which linked to an organisational habitus, that matched that of the learners.

In framing the model in a policy context, through the unique collaborative partnership with IT Carlow, An Cosán has been afforded the autonomy to offer a radical model (Martin, 1987) of community education similar to the second definition of community education in the White Paper (DES, 2000). Offering a broader relevance beyond Ireland, the model has resonance with the broader non-formal education umbrella.

Ultimately, moving away from a deficit model means harnessing the voice of people who are underrepresented in higher education. As Suzanne noted: “I don’t think I would have went anywhere else”, throughout the fieldwork, the An Cosán model of higher education appeared highly effective in engaging learners from a socio-economically disadvantaged area. The premise of this research study is the potential contribution of the An Cosán model of higher education to the access policy debate that is not based on a deficit approach. Access policy and practice, with persistent under-participation issues and an overreliance on a deficit approach can learn from a unique model of higher education that is fundamentally grassroots in its genesis, development and evolution. Importantly, understanding the specific attributes of the An Cosán model of higher education from the learners themselves offers valuable insights into how the persistent issue of under-participation can be addressed. Whilst the An Cosán environment is conducive to non-traditional students; it is the harnessing of the learners’ voice from a dialogue-driven pedagogical process, supported by flattened power relations with tutors to levels across the organisation, enables people to not only be heard but have their experiences valued. The influence of the feminist imaginative pedagogy (Gilligan, 1999) which has developed in An Cosán is echoed in learners’ experiences of warmth, care and holistic support. Additionally, the An Cosán model of higher education is a practice example of provision that is clearly not emanating from a deficit perspective.

Ireland has a history of educational under-participation across social groups and broader societal inequalities at a macro level manifest at the organisational level of HEIs, reinforcing the position of those who have traditionally benefited from the education system. Access policy has something of an ‘our way or the highway’ approach, focusing on how people can fit into the dominant, predominantly middle class system of higher education (HEIs, and in particularly universities), without due regard to the bias and privilege that manifests and is felt by underrepresented learners. Deficit perspectives in access policy are underpinned by a range of factors, including neo-liberal perspectives of individual responsibility which ignore structural inequalities. The persistent under-participation of people from lower socio-economic backgrounds in higher education demonstrates how “tinkering at the edges” (Reay, 2012) of access has had a limited impact over the course of three access plans (HEA, 2004a; HEA, 2008; HEA, 2015); thus reconceptualising our approach to policy and practice can have better outcomes for learners, communities and society as a whole.

The distinct characteristics of the An Cosán higher education model can contribute to access practice, theory and policy, in terms of: the link between feminist-informed, Freirean pedagogy and organisational habitus; the value of a non-deficit based approach; and how unique models can emerge when appropriately supported through a collaborative partnership with an HEI. Steeped in Freirean pedagogy and with an underpinning feminist ethos, the An Cosán higher education model resonates positively with learners, is enacted by tutors and led by management; its core value, and processes, of learner voice enables people to be agents of their own change and development who contribute to shaping the education process they engage in. There is a sense that the experience adheres to hooks' description that "everyone's voice can be heard, their presence recognised and valued" (1994, p. 185). Beyond the classroom, organisation-wide the learner voice, entailing listening, responding and acting upon, is of central importance. We have seen from the fieldwork that there appears to be a link between the Freirean approach of harnessing voice to the inclusive organisational habitus of An Cosán, where learners feel comfortable in the organisation; drawing on the thinking of Bourdieu, this chapter will offer pertinent insights into such experiences.

Although national access policy has largely excluded community education, save for some cursory references, given the predominance of a deficit approach to access, there is some space for alternative models. The recent National Access Plan (HEA, 2015), signals a broader view of access by including approaches that had elements of Jones & Thomas' (2005) view of a transformative approach to access. This chapter outlines the access-enabling characteristics of the An Cosán model of higher education, based on the learner interviews and focus group. Whilst the policy process is complex, the An Cosán model of higher education offers policy a solid example that moves away from a deficit approach to access. Of course, the model is not flawless; however, based on the learners' experiences, it exhibits many features that support access.

Over the course of the fieldwork and particularly from learner interviews and the focus group, the overriding theme of learner voice emerged strongly. Immediately, and perhaps unsurprisingly, the An Cosán pedagogical approach that focused on dialogue and the engagement of learners in the learning process created an impetus for me to closely interrogate the findings in relation to Freire. His work is used to interpret research data, again assisting in elucidating the An Cosán model of higher education.

Additionally, relating to voice and recognition, research findings illuminated how people felt about the organisational culture of An Cosán which was clearly a strong aspect of their degree programmes; analysing these findings called for the use of Bourdieu's concept of habitus. I will specifically draw on Prof. Diane Reay's application of institutional habitus to the An Cosán model of higher education in relation to the learner experience. This is particularly useful for this research as I interpret Bourdieu's work as a moving away from a deficit position recognising how broader societal inequalities impact at organisational level. Bourdieu is often used in access research to demonstrate the challenges for access posed by formal higher education, in this instance the use of Bourdieu is predominantly employed to demonstrate the value of the An Cosán organisational environment, practice and mission in promoting access.

While access policy is predominantly based upon a deficit perspective, national access plans are moving towards more transformative approaches to access. I will describe the characteristics of the An Cosán model in the access policy context by discussing my research findings to highlight specific access enabling characteristics. Finally, I will outline the limitations and implications of the study for the field of access.

Theoretical and practice implications of the An Cosán model

"I don't think I would have went anywhere else" (Suzanne). Unlike the premise within national access policy (HEA, 2004c), although noted by learners as a contributing factor, higher education access in the community cannot merely be ascribed to the enabling aspect of being in a convenient location. When starting this research journey, I was aware that the value of the An Cosán higher education model was beyond being 'outreach', I thought the process of its development, its contextual nature and the feeling of inclusion were the most important attributes. In terms of the implications for access policy, I initially saw it in polarities, as complementing formal education, whereas as the study developed, it became more about the unique characteristics rather than in relation to existing higher education provision.

The inclusive nature of An Cosán is not something that just happens; it is intentional, informed by theory, and links to the social justice mission of the organisation. The importance of theory-informed provision that has a clear feminist and equality mission came more to the fore. This is perhaps unsurprising as Freirean approaches link theory

and practice to action and the history of community education in Ireland is theory – savvy, something that in my experience policy-makers always seem both surprised and impressed by.

An Cosán is clearly influenced by Paulo Freire and bell hooks, whose educational philosophies informed the development, and underpins multiple aspects, of the organisation, as noted explicitly in their strategic plans. This is enacted by the feminist-informed social justice mission that permeates the organisation emanating from the founders, to the ethos of the organisation as discussed by management, to the practice described by tutors and experienced by learners. Collectively, this creates an approach to access that specifically frames learners within what Jones and Thomas describe as a transformative paradigm (2005), far removed from a deficit approach. It is informed by a will to make a change in the lives of the learners, and particularly women, and their community whilst being cognisant of the structural inequalities that they face (Gilligan & Zappone, 2008).

As I started the fieldwork, it became abundantly clear that An Cosán was a very special unique place, in terms of the feeling you get on entering the building. On entering An Cosán, one immediately gets a sense of what learners describe as a uniquely ‘warm’, engaging, and inclusive environment that enable learners to take the first step into education: “when I came up I just, you’ve seen the Coffee Dock, I just got a lovely sense as soon as I came in” (Margaret). This intentional consideration for creating a welcoming environment that attends to the affective dimension of learning was forefront to the founders’ aims (Gilligan & Zappone, 2008). It also reflects the importance placed on hospitality which is a feature of women’s community education (Connolly, 2014), and sets the context for a consciousness of care and community, particularly for those who experience marginalisation.

The access supporting aspect of the physical environment of An Cosán and the informal layout of the learning environment, of having sofas and armchairs in a circle, was remarked on by learners and tutors (Michael). Although this different space required an adjustment for one learner (Kelly), and the new tendency to move to a more traditional set up for some classes a cause for concern for others (Suzanne), overall it supported access and dialogue. There was a sense from learners that the caring environment, with spaces to cultivate relationships with and between staff and learners, embeds the learners’ experiences organisation-wide. The pedagogic approach

relates to the sense of community, as hooks describes her approach draws on the Freirean pedagogic process to intentionally create a community in the class (1984). This also seems to be the case in An Cosán.

Contra to formal structures in formal education that lack love, care and solidarity (Grummell, 2017), learners described An Cosán staff as "actually caring about the personal growth of people in the room". The intentionality of care within An Cosán, and as part of the feminist imaginative pedagogy also resonates with elements of the equality of condition framework (Baker *et al.*, 2005) and hooks' feminist pedagogy (1994). This sense of inclusion was deeper than just a physical space, the social/human aspect and sense of self within the organisation was vital: "I liked the whole vibe, the feeling that's in this place. I knew it was right for me" (Fiona).

The An Cosán model through a Freirean and feminist lens

An Cosán infuse a feminist perspective of the work of Freire across the organisation. Engagement with learners tends to the whole person, moving away from the mind/body dichotomy, a key feature of a feminist pedagogy (hooks, 1984). The founders of An Cosán developed their own imaginative feminist pedagogy so that women could be facilitated through a learning process to imagine a new world, liberated from poverty and marginalisation in West Tallaght. The opening circle was often described as a space for contemplation and bringing of the whole self to the learning process. With critical and feminist pedagogy strongly linked (hooks, 1994), voice is a central feature of both. In this section, the An Cosán model of higher education will be explored through a Freirean lens whilst also drawing on the feminist Freirean scholar, bell hooks.

Pedagogy featured as a key enabling factor for access "how it's delivered, how knowledge is shared: it lights two fuses, the personal and the professional development" (Rachel). Through the characterisation of the An Cosán model of higher education within this thesis, light is shed on the value of specific educational processes as tools for access. A flattening of power relations that builds shared learning and solidarity, as described by learners and tutors, was evident. As was the layout of the classroom to support a dialogical pedagogy informed by Paulo Freire; participative

methodologies that support the dialogue with, and between, learners; and work towards individual and collective change.

The historical background of social stratification in Ireland has legacy issues; individuals and communities internalise a perceived view of what working class people should and could learn which compounds issues of higher education access. The range of factors (liberal or vocational education provision, presumed appropriate educational aspirations) impose a sense of knowing your place in society on the one hand, yet many deficit-based access initiatives focus on the need for people to raise their aspirations as they seek to address perceived deficits of educationally disadvantaged people. Several An Cosán learners who participated in this research said they didn't think they were to degree standard, nor had the capability to undertake a degree. Their personal capacity increased and agency over the course of the degree as their confidence increased. However, such initial feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem may be unsurprising given the history of educational inequality in Ireland, whereby the education system was segregated based on class, and also due to financial resources that further disenfranchised socio-economically disadvantaged people. The internalisation of this sense of knowing your place (Freire, 1970), and as Reay describes as "never being sure" about higher education participation, links to structural inequalities (Burke, 2002).

Learner voice: supporting access

Learners gave examples of how An Cosán enact a Freirean model of education through their attention to the central theme of voice. Learners described how their lived experiences were harnessed as a central aspect of the participatory pedagogy; so eloquently encapsulated by Suzanne who described it as "bringing us to the degree." From feelings of voice repression in past negative education contexts to the confidence-building of being able to "own what they say" which "gives you power", the influence of learner voice ran deep in supporting their participation on the degree programmes and was a consistent theme emerging from the case study. The learner statements are reminiscent of what hooks describes as "coming to voice" when one overcomes a fear to speak the liberatory voice emerges (hooks, 1989).

Regarding under-participation in higher education, dialogue-enabled learner engagement which moves away from a deficit discourse could potentially facilitate

access. In a higher education context, this is essential for engaging a more diverse study body, breaking down dominant notions of valid knowledge and hegemonic middle class norms (Burke, 2009; Ryan, 2002; Ryan & O'Brien, 2000).

Learners experienced the An Cosán model of higher education as different to previous formal education experiences, including that of higher education outreach courses, which were described as lacking dialogue where “you had it delivered to you” (Ruth), similar to Freire’s concept of banking (1971). The openness and dialogue also enable peer support, which was the glue to support retention: “there is the peer support, which is huge. I mean that’s what really pulls you through in the end. I think because you are doing it in this environment, you get that closeness” (Ruth). Similarly, An Cosán management saw the purpose of dialogue was, in part, to build a “community of learners” (Riley, which links to the feminist pedagogic approach of hooks (1984) as a point to where “learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (hooks 1994, p. 13). Creating a learning context where learners can, as hooks describes as, “speak freely”, in a context of care, is outlined in the following learner focus group statement which also reflects a Freirean approach in action:

Once you feel safe to share, then everybody shares and it’s a kind of richness, and I think that is when people are their true selves, and I think that is part of what happens here, is that people actually, no matter what course they do, they find out who they are. (Suzanne)

The An Cosán model demonstrated solidarity with learners and a commitment to authentic learner voice engagement, which took time to harness. However, facilitating previously silenced voices, particularly those of women (Belenky *et al.*, 1986), was described as powerful by Suzanne and Kelly. One of the most striking endorsements for learner voice in relation to access was described by Rachel:

In communities like this, that’s what makes education accessible, it builds confidence so that people’s voices are finally heard, for some they have probably been silenced their whole life. That method of engagement: how knowledge is shared. This is part of retention, it helps people stay in education, whereas people [from this community] just don’t stay in the formal higher education system.

From the work of Freire, one can surmise that learner voice enables deep educational engagement with oppressed groups, and by extension can contribute to access. In the pedagogic process, the unearthing of these silenced voices to become what hooks’

describes as a liberatory voice, was the intention of the founders of An Cosán and marked the experience of some degree programme learners.

Community education is a complex, dynamic interaction of characteristics (Connolly, 2003), of which voice is an important component, involving the power dynamics of harnessing voice within the tutor-learner relationship. Learner voice was supported on a number of levels across An Cosán: from authentic dialogical learning processes in the classroom that not only harnessed and drew on the lived experiences but enabled critique of the process itself; to learner representative structures. However, this was experienced differently by learners, with those on the Addiction Studies degree appearing less knowledgeable or engaged in these organisational learner representative structures.

Underpinned by a Freirean approach, learner voice was enacted through nurturing, harnessing and acting upon learner recommendations in order to create degree programmes that are contextualised and build on their experiences through participative pedagogy and reflexive, comparatively non-hierarchical relationships with tutors, whereby the knowledge created was shaped by learners. As evident in the fieldwork, learner voice was facilitated by the high level of dialogue which was embedded in the teaching and learning process. This core philosophical belief of Freire is essential for liberating education in that “without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education” (Freire, 1970, pp. 73-4).

As dialogue is a central aspect to a Freirean approach, which is intrinsically linked to power relations in the education process, the traditionally tutor-dominated process shifts to a more democratic pedagogy of collaborating with learners in a collective learning process. Learners commented on this shift as it overcame the silencing, which is a feature of educational practices that perpetuate inequalities (Ryan, 2002). Learners stated the learner-tutor relationship was central to creating relationships with learners that were broadly unhindered by differing power relations, sometimes tutors “didn’t seem like tutors ... they are kinda part of the class” (Fiona), or were “side by side” (Suzanne) with learners. This happened regardless of the tutor’s professional role, from the CEO teaching to the adjunct tutor. The flattening of power relation dynamics within the classroom was also linked to the ability to voice opinions, as expressed by Margaret; and as Aine stated that: “everybody always felt they could be heard.” In the

focus group, Rachel described the learner-tutor relationship as “a circular thing, it’s not a one-way process, everyone gains and everyone gives”, and that “the tutor is not the expert”.

The notion that power is non-transactional, the tutor doesn’t lose it when it is shared with learners, that there is a mutual benefit is similar to power dynamic elements of a feminist pedagogic as described by hooks (2000). In terms of access, the facilitating of voice could be seen as addressing the aforementioned limitations of hierarchical relations often associated with formal education (Baker *et al.*, 2004; Illich, 1971) and the associated lack of respect (Baker *et al.*, 2004).

However, it is not to say that power relations between learner and tutor were all equal, there are of course inherent power differentials in setting assignments etc. as was spoken of; however, it didn’t hinder voice expression. Overall, the process appeared similar to that described by Freire: “through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist, and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers” (1970) and had elements of a feminist pedagogy of love, care and solidarity with learners (Baker *et al.*, 2004).

Tutors explicitly cited Freire as an influence on their practice, focusing on process over outcome and pedagogy that harnessed lived experiences and supported learner voice. Tutors described the dynamic relationship with learners, that it was predominantly quite equal, but also there is a consciousness and fluidity to it, moving from teacher to facilitator to resources for the group, similar to that described by Freire (1971). Whilst there was a level of negotiation about this, as described by David, Michael referred to learners as being equal to tutors, almost as peers in profession, perhaps as they were mature students and many of whom were working in the area of community development and held that identity in the classroom. However, this was not the case for all learners, as Ruth articulated: “Definitely there is a power differential there...there is no abuse of that power... because it is just the nature of the relationship, your kind of not on an equal footing as such, I don't think”. Furthermore, as community education was understood as being about voice (Stephen), whether positive or negative, it needs to be heard. Dialogue was not simply facilitating discussions, but creating a learning environment that was open to questioning the actual process itself. This was a point that one learner stated was very different from one learner’s previous experiences (Margaret). Tutors described the level of reflexivity that this required, that

consciousness could be seen as exhibiting access-enabling approaches (Burke, 2000). This could be challenging for tutors (examples of conflict were given by David), but a commitment to the process built learners' capacities to both challenge and find resolutions to issues as "the time was taken to deal with whatever was going on within the group" (Suzanne, learner).

Linked to dialogue was the drawing on the lived experience of learners, which was very central to the contextualised learning process on the degree programmes as described by learners throughout the interviews. This has implications for access as exclusion is further perpetuated through the control of knowledge when under-represented people do not see themselves in the curriculum (McGivney, 2001, p. 67); thus dominant values result in the marginalisation of certain social groups. In the case of An Cosán "the degree seems to be tailored to each person, you could always put your own slant on it" (Rachel).

One tutor described this process as bringing the life experiences of learners into the learning process as he "tried to put the theory into their world and lived experience" (Stephen). With power relations intrinsically linked to what is deemed as knowledge (Collins, 1990), the An Cosán model of higher education supported elements of a more democratic model of knowledge creation, management spoke of the concept of a co-creation of knowledge (Lindsey); however, the extent of this was difficult to ascertain from the learner interviews.

In terms of a contextualised degree, this was seen as important as described by Johanna in the focus group: "the curriculum is no use unless you can apply it to your own life, and the issues in people's lives". However, learners noted the limitations of the degree structure to influence the curriculum; there was a broad sense that learners could shape the learning experience and perhaps more concretely in future iterations of the course. Whilst it was unclear about how possible it is for the curriculum to be influenced by learners, through the management interviews, the genesis of the degree programmes was based on engagement with the community. However, it must be noted that the two degree programmes that are the subject of this study are in and of themselves 'applied' in nature, so both the pedagogy and the topic of the degrees are likely to contribute to their contextualised nature.

The pedagogic aspect of the An Cosán model of higher education is highly significant in terms of access, by taking a broadly Freirean and dialogue-driven approach issues of silencing, othering, the decontextualized nature of formal education, and curriculum can be overcome. With the opening up of knowledge creation through the validation of learners' lived experiences access is enabled; however, it can be challenging for tutors as their relationship with learners is in a state of flux and requires reflexivity.

Beyond access through transformative learner voice

Whilst the research set to explore the potential of the An Cosán model of higher education in supporting access, it became clear that the Freirean (1971) pedagogical approach in An Cosán had an impact on access but also facilitated social change. An Cosán clearly frames its work in the context of education as a tool to address oppression for disenfranchised and marginalised communities. For a number of learners, being awarded a degree, whilst important, was almost secondary to the personal growth inherent to releasing the pressure of voices that were silenced. Not only at a meso level impacting the community but also at a deeply personal level; one learner, Kelly, really brought to the fore the impact that their degree has had on their lives:

I feel that from the background that I have come from, from being a lone parent to having no self-worth and allowing people to walk all over me, I feel that I am a strong, educated, liberated woman now, you know, and An Cosán has given me that. (Kelly)

Learners made reference to aspects of their experience in An Cosán that in many cases, supported social action through praxis. Points raised by the learners: Suzanne, Adam and Kelly noted their realisation of structural inequalities and oppression. Whilst this may be partly attributed to the community development aspect of the degree programmes (as a specific subject), powerful examples were offered on how action for social change was sparked through the learning process. There was a sense of finding one's voice and using it for change (as reflected by Suzanne in describing a hustings session with politicians). Examples of the Freirean process of coding within the pedagogy was recounted by a learner when discussing issues of structural inequality recalling that they had experienced each one personally (Kelly). Learners passionately discussed their lived experiences and how challenges which impacted on their lives and their community, formed part of the learning process. Learners regarded this as a mark

of respect and a consciousness for diversity. Deeper than just contextual learning, these processes symbolised acknowledgement and solidarity with the learners' reality. This was important for learners, whilst access appeared to be supported by a Freirean approach, this kind of learning experience nurtured a sense of empowerment, identity and personal transformation (Alex). Through the experience of interviewing learners, that emotional dimension of transformative learning was very powerful; learners were not just describing their experience of the An Cosán model of higher education, they were sharing their personal stories of transformation. Some learners were emotional during the interviews as they recalled their new found confidence, self-belief and self-worth.

Within the transformative approach framework (Jones & Thomas, 2005) to under-participation, issues relating to access are not only addressed, the impact of structural oppression can also be tackled, such as low confidence (Burke, 2008; Reay *et al.*, 2005), of not feeling entitled to educational courses, of self-blame for not engaging in education, as Suzanne noted: "people coming in thinking I'm poor, I'm stupid, and it's my fault ... it's the structural inequality." The apparent conscientization (Freire, 1970) that happens takes time; thus, deficit-focused access initiatives that set out to offer quick fixes for addressing low confidence or aspirations are limited. This further highlights the issue of an over-reliance on deficit-informed approaches to access, where interventions address perceived deficits (Jones & Thomas, 2005) without taking into account broader structural issues of access (Lynch & O'Riordan, 1988).

Additionally, Freire (1971) describes how education can be an intervention and a catalyst for change which was fundamental for some learners. When describing the impact of learning, across all programmes in An Cosán, examples were given that the learning had enabled learners to "own what they say", to "fight for themselves [at local meetings with politicians]" which ultimately "gives you power" (Suzanne). The integration of opportunities for learners to engage in political processes and lobbying, such as An Cosán learner organised hustings, was described by management (Amanda). The creation of opportunities for action was akin to Freirean approaches which call for "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire, 1970, p. 51).

The content of the course is important to note, as a means to support a greater understanding of inequality, the inclusion of social policy as part of the degree

programmes was framed as tools to enable learners to effect social change (Amanda). There was a real understanding of the lives of learners and the tools that could support social change; therefore, it was not 'neutral' education, and the educational experience offered was what Freire describes as the latter of these two positions as "an instrument to bring about conformity or freedom" (1970). Therefore, in addition to the learning process, the degree content contributed to transformative learner voice.

There are limitations perhaps for access as degree programmes offered without this subject area may have less of an impact in offering a transformative approach to access. That said, as noted by learners, the social justice element runs across courses in An Cosán. This was further emphasised by management where the An Cosán model of higher education was explicitly described as "radically supporting people to transform their lives" (Sheila) and enabling "the development of independent learners who engage in transforming their lives, community, family and lead to social change" (Sheila). Local activism and political engagement were evident from the 'wall of issues' displayed in the coffee dock, to political hustings and the 2014 election of a learner on the degree in Leadership and Community Development to the local council.

Overall, the approach to learner voice in An Cosán can be interpreted as: learners being seen, heard, acknowledged, understood and valued; to being a contributor and influencer of the programme and An Cosán more generally; to engaging in capacity building for social action. These processes could be deemed similar to the concept of *transformative student voice* (Fielding, 2004b) as there are embedded decision-making processes, which centres on emancipatory processes and outcomes (Rudd *et al.*, 2006). This is also similarly in line with *learner voice for empowerment* due to the features of dialogue, participation and inclusivity, a recognition of power relations in education and the possibility for change and transformation (Robinson & Taylor, 2007).

There was such an emphasis on learner voice that from the tutor interviews, their voice seemed to be overlooked. Indeed, the pressure that tutors face was discussed by learners (Marta) and noted in detail by management (Amanda), who cautioned against ignoring the needs to tutors who go above and beyond what is required in order to maintain a learner-centred approach. In the context of the underfunding of community education, the precarious nature of running programmes has detrimental impacts which "takes its toll" on staff (Amanda). Despite An Cosán's focus on embedding voice across the organisation, notably learners' voice, there was no sense of tutor voice,

particularly among adjunct staff, suggesting the An Cosán model doesn't display a polyphony of voices (Giroux, 1997). This has implications for tutors' ability to shape the organisation.

Additionally, while the benefits of the learner-informed nature of the degree programmes were extensively noted, there is a potential downside, which may or may not be linked to voice. Aine spoke about an issue relating to difficulties in handling the "loose structure" of the degree programme; this was also expressed by Kelly, stating that the description from teaching staff of it being "your structure" was unhelpful. A need to more clearly define the academic requirements of the degree to learners was discussed.

"It just felt right": organisational habitus and the An Cosán model

A key factor that supported learners to access and stay on the degree can be attributed to the organisational habitus of An Cosán. Why learners chose An Cosán to do a degree, particularly as a community education organisation rather than a higher education institution, is explored by drawing on the work of Bourdieu to explore how a traditionally underrepresented cohort experience higher education in An Cosán. In particular, Reay's application of institutional habitus (1998), based on Bourdieu's concept of habitus, is valuable in offering an understanding of how learners 'feel' in An Cosán and draws links with how habitus supports access. Bourdieu uses these concepts to explain how environment and conditions shape one's attitudes and knowledge which may, or may not, be in confluence with the educational institution (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). The match between the habitus of learners and the organisational⁵² habitus of An Cosán in supporting learners' ability to succeed was broadly evident. Also, the impetus for the An Cosán degree was based on a desire from the community as "they felt comfortable within An Cosán, they knew the ethos, they knew the way that we worked, that's what they wanted" (Amanda). In terms of it supporting access, learners described feelings of being "safe" (Suzanne) in the "warm" environment (Margaret) which ultimately supported retention: "the environment, that kept me coming back" (Suzanne). Learners spoke about feeling that they could be

⁵² Due to the recommendation from a tutor interview, An Cosán will be referred to as an organisation, rather than an institution; therefore, the 'organisational habitus' of An Cosán will be discussed.

themselves in An Cosán this can be understood using the link between the learners' habitus and the organisational habitus of An Cosán in that it is like a 'fish in water' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 127).

For the most part, there was no sense that learners felt the need to change in order to fit into the organisational habitus of An Cosán: "it just felt right" (Margaret); "I liked the whole vibe, the feeling that's in this place. I knew it was right for me" (Fiona). Learners discussed how they felt comfortable in An Cosán as opposed to past negative formal education experiences. Personally, I would attest to the warmth, openness, kindness, solidarity as a mother, and humour of the community in An Cosán throughout the fieldwork.

Potential scenarios were cited by learners as a reason not to access formal higher education, "I wouldn't feel comfortable enough" (Adam) and that they "didn't like the environment" (Marta). The fact that An Cosán engages learners in a working class area was specifically cited as a factor influencing higher education participation by Adam and Kelly. Adam emphasised with positivity the ability to be able to "mix with your own". There was a sense from learners that their habitus constrained access to formal higher education: "I never thought I was capable of doing a degree" (Ruth) and that they weren't at a "degree standard" (Suzanne). This links to habitus acting as "the parameters of people's sense of agency and possibility; it entails perceptual schemes of which ends and means are reasonable given that individual's particular position in a stratified society" (Edgerton and Roberts, 2014, p. 3). Learners conveyed certain conceptions of formal HEI culture, for example, Rachel expressed that in relation to an elite HEI they thought the "culture would have pressured me to change" and "even my appearance and all would change." These are strong sentiments about the perception of an elite university and their sense of self in that. Adam recalled a story of a friend with a similar background in an HEI describing a lack of respect for people in working class areas which differed from his experience in An Cosán, "so it is comfortable for me, I feel there is none of that prejudice here". However, the perception of HEIs is not static as learners articulated new possibilities are opening up due to the learning process, such as Kelly stating "I feel that I am a strong, educated, liberated woman now".

Exceptions to feeling the comfort within the organisational habitus of An Cosán existed, perhaps as it is a heterogeneous group of learners, this is to be expected. Ali didn't feel the general social background within An Cosán reflected theirs and didn't

feel as comfortable. Alex and Kelly, whilst feeling comfortable noted that it took time to get used to the organisation and that you are “not going to fit in with everyone” (Kelly). However, such feelings did not appear to reflect a negative sentiment about the organisational habitus of An Cosán, nor limit access as learners broadly felt a sense of belonging in An Cosán.

Creating a sense of inclusion was vitally important for engaging learners as within a community that experiences structural oppression, poverty and a lack of key services, the topic of isolation was apparent. For those who were lone parents, unemployed or of having moved recently to the area explicitly mentioned the issue of isolation. In describing a reason for returning to education they noted: “I suppose I was really isolated, I was depressed, and I wanted to get out of the house” (Kelly). Another impetus was the desire of mothers, and from my observations the majority of learners in An Cosán generally were women, to improve their lives, that of their children’s lives and to give something back (e.g. Suzanne).

Linking feminist, Freirean pedagogic practice to organisational habitus

A key point to note regarding the An Cosán model of higher education is the link between the influence of the feminist, Freirean informed mission and pedagogic practice in An Cosán and its resulting organisational habitus. This link is made possible as institutional habitus includes issues and priorities which are deeply embedded, meaning that its components are “educational status, organisational practices and the expressive order” (Reay *et al.*, 2001). The clear priority for An Cosán is based on a feminist, social justice agenda as it seeks to address the issue educational inequality, particularly for women, through an emancipatory model of education (Gilligan, 1999; Gilligan & Zappone, 2008). Freirean theory provides a distinct strategic focus for the organisation, as evidenced by its reports and management interviews. But interestingly, as institutional habitus is played out in terms of the legitimate values, languages and knowledge on which success and qualifications are based (Thomas, 2002), which permeates the teaching and learning practice, the impact of Freirean informed pedagogy on organisational habitus is profound. The predominance of the learner voice centred approach to pedagogy enables learners to be heard, to have their values, language and knowledge appreciated, as Fiona noted “the place where you are coming

from is really encouraged” and as Adam stated, “what you say is valid ... that's good to hear as well”. These sentiments also resonate with hooks’ feminist pedagogical approach, to create learning contexts that counter-hegemonic patriarchy, with a focus on “valuing the uniqueness of each voice” where “all students are free to speak, now their presence will be recognized and valued” (hooks, 1996, p. 186).

Also, there was a consciousness in An Cosán regarding how people feel within the organisation, and from management an explicit effort involved in enabling a positive environment: “I do think for the learners 100% we do our best to encourage, to create a space where people can come into their own and feel free to express themselves”, and that there was a “sense of belonging” (Sheila). Again, the coffee dock also made for a positive physical environment that promotes a sense of community but also felt more like a home than a traditional educational institution. This welcome, hospitality and warmth within An Cosán were considered an essential part of the organisation by its founders, a place of beauty was deemed important, especially for those women who experience poverty and marginalisation (Gillian & Zappone, 2008).

As institutions are dynamic (Lynch & O’Riordan, 1998), and perhaps due to the distinct characteristics of An Cosán, the organisational habitus may be more malleable and influenced by learners. Learners spoke of the culture as coming from “everybody in the place” not just top-down, and that the culture starts from the coffee dock and beyond setting norms “I come in, and I feel that’s the way it is so I am going to do that as well” (Kelly) it also “rubs off on everyone” (Margaret). This may be due to its size, inclusive ethos (as per literature review), and perhaps in expressing liminality⁵³, the fluid nature of the culture itself, as one learner noted the: “environment kind of adapted around me” (Suzanne). Love was also noted by a tutor (Michael) as an informing characteristic of An Cosán and a learner, Kelly, described the feeling of care, both of which resonate with the feminist imaginative pedagogy (Gilligan, 2003). The evolving organisational culture of An Cosán was described as almost cyclical by one tutor (Michael), who noted that as some staff in An Cosán were once learners, it results in greater equality within relationships between leaders, workers and learners in the organisation. Perhaps the

⁵³ Romi (2009) cites Kahane to illustrate how in the context of non-formal education, liminality is the nature of their underlying codes of behaviour, which in this case is ascribed as the ‘code of informality’ (Kahane, 1997). There is greater freedom to express oneself in a non-authoritarian system which facilitates the construction of multiple identities where marginality is reduced, a sense of belonging fostered and the participation in democratic processes garners a sense of freedom and spontaneity.

organisational habitus of An Cosán, values, reflects and, to an extent, is moulded to the cultural capitals of the learners. In this instance, it means the *embodied* state of cultural capital such as the knowledge, language and accents of learners.

Furthermore, as described in the focus group, the transformative nature of learning implies change; therefore, the learners' habitus is also in a state of flux. However, compared to formal institutions (Reay, 1998), the malleable organisational habitus of An Cosán, which is conducive to the predominantly working class people, may have rigidity for some. There was a sense from tutors (Michael and David) that they couldn't really influence the culture, and as Nigel in the focus group noted you had to "concede" to the culture. Perhaps this could partly be attributed to the notion that "institutional habituses, no less than individual habituses, have a history and have been established over time" (Reay *et al.*, 2010, p.109), although it is open to change there is a structure there.

The organisation clearly has feminist origins which also involved the evolution of an imaginative feminist pedagogy within An Cosán, the extent to which this is enacted was not the focus of this study, but there are clear references to the six dimensions⁵⁴ (Gilligan, 1999). A learner, Kelly, commented that the culture could also be attributed to the organisation being run mostly by women. Yet, the organisation can also be perceived as hierarchical (Kelly), further exploration of An Cosán as a predominantly female-run organisation could be explored in the context of love, care and culture (Lynch & Walsh, 2009) and the feminist imaginative pedagogy.

I am cautious about drawing on the complex concept of habitus to describe the context in An Cosán; therefore, I will do as an expression of ideas rather than a statement of causality. It is difficult to ascertain the interconnectedness between a social agent's actions, or practice, which results from the relationship between one's dispositions (habitus) and one's position in the field (capital) within the current social arena (field). Also, as there is scant literature available on the beneficial impact of organisational habitus on enabling access, particularly in a community education context, referencing other studies was challenging. However, habitus, in the higher education access context, is concerned with the influence of an individual's capital(s), and the extent to

⁵⁴ Opening circle, naming of presuppositions; articulating women's experience; critical and imaginative social analysis; theoretical reflection and engaging praxis (Gilligan, 1999).

which they are valued within an education institution (Reay *et al.*, 2005). It is clear from the case study that learners are valued within An Cosán and the detailed descriptions by learners regarding the warmth and inclusion they felt, as supported by learner voice, was compelling.

Section summary

Bourdieu's concept of habitus can be used as a lens to explore an organisation's ability to supports access, including within a community education context. Framed as organisational habitus, learners' feelings could be explored in the An Cosán model of higher education whilst making a specific link to a learner-centred feminist, Freirean pedagogy. By facilitating transformative learner voice processes, the valuing of an individual's capital(s) is made possible. This unearthing of voices which are normally marginalised and unrepresented in higher education not only relates to supporting access, and social action, but contributes to shaping the organisational habitus of An Cosán.

The dialogical, feminist-informed, pedagogy that harnesses learner voice overcomes many barriers to access. A flattening of power relations between tutor and learner, greater recognition, valuing and respect, enabled learners to see themselves in the curriculum as part of a contextual learning experience. Furthermore, by taking a transformative approach, it not only addresses the access-limiting issues, it can also address the impact of structural oppression, such as low confidence, of not feeling entitled to education, and self-blame for not having previously engaged in education.

Habitus and field evolve, capitals are changeable and although predispositions are strongly held futures are nor predetermined. This leaves space for the transformative nature of education and the Freirean concept of conscientisation whereby an awakening of structural inequalities becomes clear, which may result in the development of cultural capital becoming more in sync with formal education institution. This could be used to explore the factors involved in the progression of learners between community education to formal HEIs.

It is clear in An Cosán that the experience of learners' working class and women's knowledge is valued, which is linked to a conscious understanding of the reality of

learners' lives which has Freirean and feminist roots (Gilligan & Zappone, 2008; Belenky *et al.* 1986; hooks, 1986). Perhaps the concept of institutional habitus is so complex that it cannot be definitively used in the analysis of An Cosán; however, we can draw on some elements to understand the organisation. Bourdieu's work is not without critique including: in relation to considerations of gender (Adkins and Skeggs, 2004; Lovell, 2000) which is significant given that the feminist ethos of An Cosán and the fact that the majority of learners interviewed, and indeed within the organisation, is predominantly female. Furthermore, the diversity within the learner group interviewed was evident, and the proposed lack of a comprehensive understanding of race by Bourdieu (Puwar, 2009) could also be a shortcoming in the application of his work in this context. Working class or minority group capitals (Wallace, 2017) should not be viewed as a deficit in the broader adult and community education context; there is an innate value that is often not reflected in access literature yet within the context of An Cosán the lived experience was part of the richness of experience.

Potential contribution to the access policy debate

This section draws on the findings of this study to consider how the An Cosán model of higher education can contribute to the access policy debate: by outlining how the model can address the limitations of the predominantly deficit centred approaches to access, which are inherent in national access policy. I will then clearly outline the potentially beneficial aspects of the An Cosán model and how it can be understood in a policy context; by signally the challenges of the model and finally articulating the implications for maintaining a community education approach within a partnership with an HEI.

Addressing limitations of deficit approaches to access

Historically, embedded educational inequality resulted in differential participation rates in higher education. National access policy approaches have failed to make significant inroads partly due to the overreliance on deficit-informed approaches to under-participation. Access issues are unsurprising as historically poor completion rates in primary, secondary (OECD, 1965) and vocational education, which was the

preserve of working class people (Coolahan, 1981), limited access to higher education. Differential participation rates in higher education became apparent through pioneering work by Clancy (Clancy, 1996, 1997, 1999; Clancy & Goastellec, 2007), whose legacy remains in access plans today via Clancy's methodology for defining target groups. The issue of access became part of national policy plans and reports (DES, 1992; DES, 1995; HEA, 1995; DES, 1999; DES, 2000; Skilbeck & Connell, 2000; DES, 2001; DETE, 2002; HEA, 2004b) which contributed to a national response via access plans and reviews (HEA, 2004a; HEA, 2008; HEA, 2010; HEA, 2015; HEA, 2018). Influencing access policy more broadly, a number of policy documents which were predominantly set within a neoliberal agenda recognised the need to increase access but chiefly framed within an economic imperative (OECD, 2004; Government of Ireland, 2007; EGFSN, 2007; Government of Ireland 2008; HEA, DES, 2016a). Additionally, as we saw in Chapter 5, the first two National Access Plans (HEA, 2004a; HEA, 2008) were built on predominantly deficit-informed perspectives (HEA, 2004c; HEA, 2006) and have resulted in what Jones and Thomas (2005) term academic and utilitarian approaches to access. The limitations of such are evident through a lack of achieving, and indeed a lowering of, socio-economic target rates (semi/unskilled manual worker group, non-manual and mature students).

As outlined in Chapter 6, literature in the access field clearly outlines a range of complex causal elements, which emanate from structural inequalities, that hinder access. Taking a predominantly deficit approach has shortcomings as they fail to recognise such structural inequality and expect educationally disadvantaged people to take not only advantage of opportunities (Tight, 1998) but also full responsibility for access (Leathwood, 2006), which can compound the issue (Tett, 2010).

The An Cosán model based on diversity discourse within a transformative framework

With this backdrop, there are significant advantages to the An Cosán model of higher education in supporting access as it clearly stems from a discourse of diversity and has specific non-formal education characteristics (as noted in Chapter 4) thus potentially overcoming the inherent limitations (Illich, 1971; Freire, 1970; Baker *et al.* 2004) of formal education. Much of the access enabling features of the model were described in

the previous Freire and Bourdieu section, addressing issues related to pedagogy (Baker *et al.*, 2004) and, through the tutor-learner relationship, hierarchy (Illich, 1971).

The responsiveness of An Cosán to the needs of the local community was central to the development of appropriate higher education provision. This resonates strongly with Freire, as he describes this as “authentic help” through praxis, whereby “the act of helping become free from the distortion in which the helper dominates the helped” (Freire cited in hook, 1993, p. 155). As was called for by the community, it enabled a grassroots, locally-informed model of higher education which shaped the kind of degree programme and preferred mode of provision offered. This important aspect of the genesis of the An Cosán degree programmes exhibited the noted value of local community involvement (Ross, 2009). Also, in line with the discourse of diversity (Rogers, 2004), to an extent, individuals were the agents of their own development and self-determination, rather than being the beneficiary of another’s perceived notion of such, as management noted the degree was: “a solid response to a clearly articulated need” (Lindsay). Furthermore, regarding prospective learners: “they felt comfortable within An Cosán, they knew the ethos, they knew the way that we worked, that's what they wanted, so that was really the impetus for it” (Amanda).

Interestingly, the basis for offering degrees centred on educational equality, and it has “never been about becoming a third level provider, it's about providing the opportunity to access third level to those who wouldn't of had that opportunity” (Amanda). As An Cosán wrote the degrees in response to learners, their direct contribution in shaping the programmes was apparent: “after all our discussions with the students we had a really clear sense of what they wanted and how to go about that was very exciting” (Lindsay). Management described it as an “engaged degree programme” (Riley), offered in a way that recognised what learners brought to the process (Lindsay). This is contra to Rogers (2004) view of a deficit approach of externally identified needs; rather, it is framed in a diversity discourse as ‘local self-determination’. Further examples of a diversity discourse included the involvement of individuals who are underrepresented in education, i.e. An Cosán learners, in shaping this plurality of educational choice:

I think they were in their penultimate year and that had been such a positive experience and certainly, those students who were participating in that first degree programme on Leadership and Community Development, they were very encouraging of further developments. (Riley)

The description of the development of the An Cosán degrees is similar to what Rogers (2004) outlines as offering a plurality of educational choice which is actively shaped, and controlled, by the individuals who are underrepresented in education manifesting in participatory activities and alternatives. This also links to the notion of a more equitable education system as “unless educationally disadvantaged groups, in particular, are involved in the planning and development process in education, other inequalities cannot be meaningfully challenged” (Baker *et al.* 2004, p. 163).

The extent of learner involvement in shaping the degrees is less clear but was evident. Annual programmatic reviews can incorporate changes (management interviews), and learners broadly felt there was space to influence, however, it may be successive rather than current cohorts who benefit from proposed changes. The contextualised nature of the degrees and learner-centred pedagogy also contributed to shaping the degree for some learners. Marta stated: “I definitely do think there is scope for shaping, definitely” and Suzanne felt that An Cosán “nearly designed the course around us” and it was about “bringing us to the degree”. The focus group noted that the “curriculum is evolving” and “the way it is delivered evolves” (Johanna). However, for one learner they couldn’t answer “because we are never asked” but they “were sure it had been influenced by its students in the past” (Adam). Additionally, two learners felt that they couldn’t shape the degree (Fiona), but that it was not appropriate (Ali) as it could be problematic yet “I think it runs very well”.

Moving away from the limiting deficit perspective, the An Cosán model exhibited elements of a transformative approach as it not only values difference and diversity, as Johanna stated, “without the diversity in that room the light wouldn’t have shone” but with a clear social justice agenda, enabling elements for access seem to permeate across the organisation. As part of a transformative approach or framework (Jones & Thomas, 2005), An Cosán did not require learners to change in order to fit into the organisation, as also noted in the exploration of organisational habitus. Furthermore, there are clear links to a transformative approach to access as An Cosán management clearly state that it is a “radical model” which is “rooted in individual power, individual transformation” (Sheila). Although few practice examples exist, the An Cosán model can be viewed as having elements of a transformative approach.

However, all characteristics of the An Cosán model of higher education do not entirely fit neatly into a set transformative framework; there are elements that could be

described as being deficit-based approaches, such as the extensive range of supports that act in a compensatory manner. The integration of wide-ranging supports across the learning environment, described as “scaffolding” by management, enabled learners to overcome access issues through approaches, such as mentoring, that do not serve to address the root cause for social inequalities in of themselves. These utilitarian approaches (Jones & Thomas, 2005) act as part of a broader transformative approach in the An Cosán model. In one management interview, support was expressed as being almost so extensive as to be disempowering “one weakness is that this system needs to prepare the student for the next stage” (Bailey), or indeed for a learner “unfair” (Aine). Yet, Kelly felt that the inherent challenges of the degree and the emphasis on written assignments required support: “I have never wrote an essay before in my life” and “I am not coming from an academic background, I am coming from the background I have come from”. However, an important point to note is that the overall approach to the An Cosán model is not based on a deficit position, but additional access supports were compensatory in nature.

Potential contribution of the An Cosán model to future access policy

The potential contribution of the An Cosán model to the national access policy agenda appears promising. Community education was specifically named in the second Access Plan (HEA, 2008) and there is a historical precedent for access, through a community-led approach from UCC (HEA, 2004c), yet a specific policy action is yet to be included in national access policy. More recently, the latest Access Plan (HEA, 2015) shifted from a deficit approach and with the move towards geocoding, which will highlight geographic variations (Ballas *et al.*, 2012) in higher education participation (HEA, 2019), there may be an opening up to the An Cosán model of higher education as it can support national access priorities. Increased funding through the PATH⁵⁵ programme of €16 over 3 years, offer measures to engage HEIs with communities, bridging the gap and opening up opportunities for collaboration and community centred projects (HEA, 2018). One of the three strands of PATH focuses on “building relationships between higher education institutions and regional community partners” in order to further national access policy aims and “embed models of sustainable community

⁵⁵ Programme for Access to Higher Education Fund (PATH)

engagement” (HEA, 2018, p. 1). Additionally, with full-time mature student participation declining nationally, there is now a focus on increasing participation of first-time mature students in the mode of provision offered by An Cosán, that of part-time, in the current Access Plan (HEA, 2018).

When discussing the viability of the An Cosán model for access, Eoin (policy maker), offered a moderate level of support for the model; however, unpublished past reports on a community-based model didn't instil confidence. The need for genuine collaboration between an HEI and the community organisation that is “very much in the spirit of partnership” (Eoin) was noted. A key aspect was that any potential model should ensure community provider autonomy rather than the HEI attempting to control the model, on condition that the quality assurance is robust (Eoin). Similarly, for An Cosán management, maintaining a community education approach was an essential aspect for any partnership with an HEI so that they were “distinct from outreach degrees” as there are processes which empower students to have a voice and are driven by a community need which is characterized by poverty and exclusion (Lindsay). Maintaining this “radical model” that is underpinned by radical theory, cited as “Gramsci, Freire, all the traditional [theorists] ... bell hooks...” (Sheila) was essential.

This brings forth the key practical aspect of the degree programmes, the partnership between An Cosán and IT Carlow. After previous less satisfactory engagements with other HEIs (universities), the collaborative partnership enabled An Cosán to have the freedom to write a degree programme that was in keeping with a community education approach, as IT Carlow were an open and willing partner. The high degree of autonomy afforded to An Cosán in the development and delivery of the degree, in addition to mutual learning with IT Carlow, was evident from the fieldwork. In order to support potential collaborative partnerships in access policy, a summary overview of the features of the partnership which enable the community education model (as per the fieldwork) is outlined in table 1.

Table 1: Features of the An Cosán collaborative partnership with IT Carlow

Autonomy: autonomy afforded to the community education partner (An Cosán) in terms of the development and delivery of the degree Programme. This is made possible through a collaborative partnership with an HEI that is characterised by mutual respect for the contributions, knowledge and practice of both partners.

HEI validation: HEI (IT Carlow) validate and oversee the validation of the collaborative programmes through an open, dialogical process that involves mutual learning.

Stringent Quality Assurance: QA processes in place with clear policies and procedures that the community education partner (An Cosán) must adhere to, which is overseen by a Programme Board.

Continual response of programme to community need: In terms of maintaining a community education approach, it occurs through the annual programmatic review, or an updating of modules each year, in line with best practice where the community education partner (An Cosán) updates their modules as per community (and learner) needs.

Delivered by the staff of the community education organisation: The community education partner (An Cosán) oversee the delivery of the modules, and the community education partner (An Cosán) staff deliver the collaborative programmes through a feminist, Freirean-informed pedagogy, in line with the HEI's (IT Carlow) Quality Assurance procedures.

Not-for-profit: Although the degree attracts fees, they are neither profit-making nor self-financing.

It is clear that the ability of An Cosán to enact a community education model of higher education was dependent on the partner HEI. Perhaps it is worth considering that historically ITs as formal education institutions, are more likely to engage underrepresented learners (Clancy, 1997), and still to this day (HEA, 2019) than universities.

Limitations of the An Cosán model: financial constraints

Poverty is a significant issue limiting access (Lynch & O’Riordan, 1996) and those with resources gain greater advantage in accessing higher education (Baker *et al.*, 2004). Despite incentives such as Springboard, part-time courses attract fees and are not eligible for SUSI grants. Regardless of how inclusive the An Cosán model of higher education is, learners and management expressed concern regarding the finance of programmes. Also, if one’s basic needs are not met learners simply cannot participate, comparable to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs where self-actualisation can only be achieved after basic and psychological needs are met (Maslow, 1962). Finance seems like a very obvious point to make yet again, but it remains an ongoing issue as broader societal inequalities manifest in certain groups having fewer resources (Lynch & O’Riordan, 1998).

A clear issue with the An Cosán model of higher education is the cost. Learners expressed the challenges of financial cost, as clearly noted by Alex: “I have no money; I am not working”. However, essential supports offered by An Cosán for overcoming financial challenges, such as flexibility of payment, low cost and scholarships were discussed as enabling factors by Alex, Margaret, Fiona and Ruth, in addition to cost-heavy related supports such as childcare (Suzanne). A very significant issue that impacts the policy access potential of the An Cosán model of higher education was noted in the focus group that the people who are participating on the degree programmes could “probably go to UCD anyway” (Johanna), in that the cohort of students has changed so much in the last few years. The access implication of costs was clearly referenced that due to cost “you are excluding people; perhaps the most passionate” (Johanna).

In terms of practice, the potential detrimental impact of a lack of funding for the programmes was noted by learners, as they spoke about the need to maintain the holistic model (Suzanne and Margaret) despite economic pressures on An Cosán; to ensure that local people can still participate in the degrees (Margaret). Management clearly discussed the link between the lack of sustainable funding for the programme, and organisation, and the resulting pressure on staff (Amanda). The value placed on returning to education by underrepresented groups versus the return on such an investment has been noted in research (Archer & Hutchings, 2000) but did not feature strongly in the study, save perhaps for one learner (Adam) who spoke a great deal about

class and education and recalled how a trade was traditionally seen as a route to secure employment for working class communities.

Since An Cosán was established, there had been an ongoing concern about meeting the needs of learners, and particularly women, who are most excluded in the community (Gilligan & Zappone, 2008). The imposition of fees is likely to impact the most marginalised from engaging, notwithstanding the scholarship funding available. Also, there is a balance in provision offered by An Cosán, between basic education courses and the resource-heavy higher education, that could disproportionately impact on the availability of courses at lower levels, those which could be the progression path to higher education in An Cosán. Also, the scarcity of funding was acknowledged by management as part of an ongoing process to consider where funding is best spent to meet the needs of the community.

Articulating the An Cosán model of higher education in a policy context

It is important that the An Cosán model of higher education can be clearly articulated in a policy context in order to make a contribution to access policy. Gaining recognition for the role that community education offers to higher education provision is a challenge, as community education is of low-prestige (AONTAS, 2010), overlooked, misunderstood and underfunded (AONTAS, 2011). Yet, it has a track record for engaging people who are educationally disadvantaged (AONTAS, 2010; AONTAS, 2011) as was also noted in access policy (HEA, 2015).

The An Cosán model of higher education is clearly not outreach. In the Irish adult education policy context, based on the case study, the An Cosán model of higher education it is in line with model two⁵⁶ of the White Paper (DES, 2000), similar to what Lovett *et al.* (2003) describe as a community action/social action model and the radical model as outlined by Martin (1993). The Freirean informed mission and pedagogic approach, as described by management, tutors and as experienced by learners is framed in a social action model. This is important as it gives policymakers a reference point to understand the model, and one that has legitimacy in education policy.

⁵⁶ In a more ideological sense as a process of communal education towards empowerment, both at an individual and a collective level. Such an approach to Community Education sees it as an interactive challenging process, not only in terms of its content but also in terms of its methodologies and decision making processes (DES, 2000, p. 110).

To further characterise the An Cosán model of higher education, based on management and tutors interviews (appendix 13), it can be framed in a more internationally-significant umbrella as non-formal education. I accept the limitations of developing a working definition⁵⁷ for the purpose of this study, which although a painstaking task involving an extensive literature analysis (appendix 17), it does go some way in explaining the model for clarity beyond the Irish context, further expanding the potential contribution of this study.

Limitations of the research study

Limitations of this research pertain to the nature of the An Cosán model, as a unique case study, and the potential challenges in contributing to the access policy debate.

The limitations for the research include the relatively small number of possible interviewees as the cohort of learners who participated in the degree programmes, including first and second cohorts of the degree, was quite small (n=55); also, many learners had a good deal of personal and professional commitments which limited their availability. As the fieldwork took place at a time of austerity following the financial collapse, the community sector had experienced extreme cuts and resources were tight.

Eleven learners expressed an interest in being part of the research, resulting in ten being interviewed. The challenge to engage participants is demonstrated by the one learner who didn't participate, although interested, due to competing life demands. There was an unequal representation in learners interviewed between the two degrees; however, an overall view of An Cosán and their experience of doing a degree was clearly articulated; therefore I believe the results remain valid. A more feminist informed methodology would have broadened the participation of learners whose voices are seldom heard, yet the small sample size limited this. Also, the interconnectedness between the unearthing of women's experiences, which is part of knowledge building, and feminist activism (Hesse-Biber, 2006) is unrealised. The involvement of

⁵⁷ Organised learner-centred educational activities provided by self-governing, non-governmental organisations, which can be accredited or non-accredited. It offers an intentional learning environment that is flexible in entry requirements and has liminality attributes that facilitate active participation in a contextual, democratic, learning process based on a negotiated curriculum which can lay foundations for social change.

participants was not at that depth of engagement over the protracted period of this PhD study.

An effort to implement a transformative research approach was made, such as: building a relationship with the community; incorporating elements of reciprocity; self-reflection in addition to elements of co-creation of knowledge with the focus group and enabling the voice of the subject of the study, learners, to be placed at the centre. However, there were limitations to developing greater participant engagement with the study. As Mertens notes:

Establishing effective research – community relations can be challenging as there is a need for enough time to develop a relationship, addressing variations in levels and types of power, addressing conflicting priorities and accommodating differences between researcher and participants. (Mertens 2009 p. 71)

A structure to enable a transformative approach, namely an Advisory Group, did not happen due to a lack of interest and time by both the An Cosán management and learners. However, I don't necessarily believe that the lack of an Advisory Group was a weakness in the research as there was open communication between myself and across An Cosán. The proposed formal structure may not have been more impactful than immersing myself in the organisation and engaging in all events available. Also, due to the scope of a PhD study, a transformative approach is inherently limited.

There was a dearth of research in the Irish context regarding community developed degrees that went beyond an outreach model. Even through my discussions with Prof. Liz Thomas, an expert in a transformative approach to access, I could find few practical examples on which to compare the An Cosán model of higher education. Although, an extensive amount of time was spent in An Cosán with relationship building, interviews, presentations and observations, the size of the cohort is limited to the relatively small number of learners on the degree programmes.

The degrees were broadly open to enrol learners from a range of prior educational backgrounds; however, issues of access to the programme remain, mainly from the structural issues of fees and the limitations of an academic degree in itself. Therefore, finance and, to an extent, academic requirements impact on the ability of the An Cosán model to contribute to the access policy debate. The case study demonstrated, through a feminist, Freirean informed pedagogy and contributed in part by virtue of the degree

subjects, that participants became engaged in actions for social change. However, there is no getting away from the impact of broader structural issues of systemic social inequality (Reay, 2012), regardless of the model, structural inequality impacts on access. The issue of funding impacts on the potential of the An Cosán model of higher education to reach under-represented people as fees increasingly act as a barrier, in addition to its threat to future sustainability.

The An Cosán degree has access limitations, as was described by learners by its very nature of being a structured academic programme, this was particularly noted by Margaret. How knowledge is represented through writing, and in particular, the essay can reinforce knowledge gatekeeping which ensures “that particular forms of epistemology carry status and privilege, giving legitimacy to certain knowers and those students recognised as having the right forms of linguistic capital” (Burke & Hermerschmidt, 2005, p. 205). It is difficult to determine the extent of the limitation of such assessment methods used on the An Cosán degree programme; however, learners described them as being challenging and exclusionary to some groups pointing to inherent access issues with traditional written assessment methods.

The research study offers a clear outline of the An Cosán model of higher education which can be considered in an access policy context: from its stated characteristics; relationship to existing policy understandings of community education; to a detailed outline of the collaborative partnership; however, there are limitations. The policy maker’s comments on perceived issues regarding a community education approach include: queries of QA robustness; the need for quantitative data on the impact of models; and ensuring there is not a replication of provision. These are common pressures on community education more broadly as it seeks to assert, what I believe rightful, its position as an effective grassroots, home-grown approach to addressing educational inequality. The preferred quantitative measures as evidence for policy, would not accurately reflect its broad, deep and systemic impact but a qualitative project has limitations in addressing policy (as a nonstandard evidence base for policy making). The stated challenges of a perceived lack of QA robustness is an issue, although it can be assured through the collaborative partnership with IT Carlow; nevertheless there always seems to be a level of doubt hanging over the capacity for robust QA processes in a community education context. The positive learner

experience of the model and the particular history of engagement that An Cosán has with the community of West Tallaght supports the access potential of this model.

In terms of policy influence based on the research study itself, it is difficult to ascertain the potential, but I'm conscious that it could be perceived as being limited, by being qualitative and the small sample size; however, it is bolstered by policy analysis. My perspective of education policy making and implementation is that it is very much a grey area, a complex web of interactions between policy players and the power of the learner voice and experience cannot be underestimated in terms of influencing change. Examples of the lived experience of learners are powerful. The sections of stories in this thesis tell a compelling story about the importance of access and how people come with complex personal histories, meaning the dominance of a formal education approach cannot be the only answer.

Conclusion

The gap between factors influencing participation, as outlined in the literature review of Chapter 6, and the actions to address those in access policy, particularly beyond a deficit approach, are stark. In the Irish context, educational inequality runs deep and has had an impact on the current under-participation in higher education. The An Cosán model is an interesting example of higher education provision that engages people, similar to those in access policy targets, who otherwise would not engage in higher education.

The findings of this research project describe the An Cosán model which may be of interest in the access policy landscape. It is important to note that this is not an evaluation of the degree programmes, rather the research captured the experience of the learners in the context of access. There was overwhelming support by learners for the An Cosán model, whilst challenges related to any academic endeavour were noted, overall, the learner centeredness they experienced and authentic engagement with voice was evident.

Based on the research, I can draw a number of conclusions:

This research demonstrated a model of higher education that predominantly displayed elements of a transformative approach, although, to a far lesser extent, it included

others access approaches (utilitarian and academic) based on a deficit discourse that ultimately worked together to the benefit of learners. The deficit approach in itself is not necessarily an inherently negative method to increase access, but an over-reliance on such approaches is limiting given the stagnating participation rates.

The theoretical underpinnings of the organisation's feminist mission permeate the purpose, ethos in how they positively engage with people, and through to the pedagogic process. An Cosán is knowledgeable in the field of radical adult education. Access doesn't just happen; commitment to social justice was a hallmark of the model; it is not simply about creating more higher education providers in the community. The benefit of the model was that it had a distinct purpose that was cognisant of the issues learners faced, and this was positively harnessed through a feminist, Freirean-informed pedagogy.

The value of a Freirean pedagogic approach to access was a significant feature of the model; it overcame the issues of access normally associated with formal higher education institutions. Through this dialogical approach, it can overcome aspects of structural inequalities than manifest in marginalised communities, such as self-blame.

Bourdieu's concept of habitus is helpful as it can positively shed light on organisations that support access to education, including in a community education context. The malleability of the organisational habitus of An Cosán shaped by the feminist mission, community, staff and through both the physical learning environment and pedagogic process, positively impacted on a learners' sense of themselves thus enabling access.

Additionally, a specific link between the influence of a learner-centred Freirean pedagogy to an inclusive organisational habitus can be drawn. By facilitating transformative learner voice processes, the valuing of an individual's capital(s) is made possible. This unearthing of voices which are normally marginalised and unrepresented in higher education not only relates to supporting access, and social action, but contributes to shaping the organisational habitus of An Cosán. However, a truly inclusive organisational habitus would include the polyphony of voices, including that of tutors. Habitus makes space for the transformative learning process, which can shape an individual's mutable habitus, potentially contributing to our understanding of how community education learners feel comfortable to progress to a formal education context.

Encouragingly, in an access policy context, there is a shift away from predominantly deficit-based approaches. However, the potential of this model is constrained by the precarious nature of funding for community education and the lack of financial support for part-time higher education learners. Financial issues remain and may even prevent this model of higher education provision from reaching the target groups that are persistently underrepresented in access policy.

Implications for future research

This research study offers a range of potential avenues for future research, from the use of Bourdieu's concept of habitus in a community education context to the role of Freirean pedagogy in supporting access and contributing to an inclusive organisational habitus.

There are a number of avenues which, building on this research, would be interesting to consider further. The link between a Freirean pedagogic process and an individual's habitus in different educational contexts and how that impacts on a learner's progression to various forms of provision, including formal education, could be explored. This would offer insights into the value that a diversity of provision offers and how movement between different types of education context can be understood.

The limiting or enabling implications of a transformative approach to access and the interaction between the deficit-based approaches needed to support access, within a specific cohort of people and within various educational contexts, would be interesting to explore. This could highlight the multitude of approaches needed to support access.

The role of all staff and learners in creating an inclusive organisational habitus, and the approaches needed for such, would offer insights into the role of tutors and the potential impact that would make on the organisation. Thus the increasing precarity of contracts for tutors, in higher and community education, the impact of such on the shaping of inclusive education spaces could also give a picture on its impact on access.

Exploration of other education models that emanate from a transformative approach would be interesting to explore in comparison to the An Cosán model of higher education. With consideration for the characteristics that contribute to access, where they are placed within that access policy context and how such models are funded.

Final reflection

Bringing this thesis to fruition involved significant personal and professional development, I have learned hugely from this experience, and particularly from the learners who so generously shared their knowledge and experience with me. I hope they see themselves as accurately reflected in “bringing themselves” to this thesis.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Overview of An Cosán Case Study Fieldwork

Phase	Activity	Dates
Phase 1 – Initiating research	Meeting with Management	07/12/2012, 07/05/2013
Phase 1 – Initiating research	Education subgroup	11/04/2013
Phase 2: Developing Relationships	Graduation ceremonies	15/11/2011, 11/09/2013, 15/11/2014
Phase 2: Developing Relationships	Scholarship Event	
Phase 2: Developing Relationships	IT Carlow Seminar	13/02/2013
Phase 2: Developing Relationships	Input to degree Students	18/10/2013
Phase 2: Developing Relationships	Learner workshop	02/02/2013, 15/11/2013, 4/08/2014
Phase 3: Interviews - Learner	Margaret	5/11/13
Phase 3: Interviews - Learner	Fiona	15/11/2013
Phase 3: Interviews - Learner	Ruth	18/11/2013
Phase 3: Interviews - Learner	Suzanne	22/11/2013
Phase 3: Interviews - Learner	Martha	22/11/2013
Phase 3: Interviews - Learner	Aine	29/11/2013
Phase 3: Interviews - Learner	Kelly	29/11/2013
Phase 3: Interviews - Learner	Alex	10/12/13
Phase 3: Interviews - Learner	Ali	8/4/14
Phase 3: Interviews - Learner	Adam	8/4/14
Phase 3: Tutor Interview	David	30/11/2013
Phase 3: Tutor Interview	Stephen	20/2/2014
Phase 3: Tutor Interview	Michael	27/05/2014
Phase 3: Management	Angela	8/5/14
Phase 3: Management	Sheila	30/7/2014
Phase 3: Management	Bailey	8/10/14
Phase 3: Management	Amanda	28/05/2014
Phase 3: Management	Lyndsey	29/05/2014
Phase 4: External Interviews	Eoin	7/8/14
Phase 4: External Interviews	Prof Liz Thomas	6/12/14

Appendix 2 Case Study Phase 1: Building a research partnership with An Cosán management

Method	Date	Purpose	Outcome
Meeting with CEO	15/06/2012	Initiate transformative research process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Agree to initiate research - Process for engagement - Expectations or outcomes
Meeting with An Cosán Management	12/7/2012	Introduction to the research To agree a research advisory group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Clarity on higher education provision in An Cosán - Communicate the idea of the research advisory group – did not happen
Meeting with An Cosán Management	05/07/2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Agree process - Clarify expectations - Review research methodology - Review information and consent forms - Request for Advisory group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Clarity on research cohort, collaborative degrees - Agree timing of interviews – October - Host information session for learners - Amend interview questions - Clarify goals of research - Meeting notes disseminated
Meeting with An Cosán education subgroup (Management, Board, Learners)	4/11/2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Wider engagement - Invite to participate in interviews - Input on research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Information update - Feedback

Appendix 3 Case Study Phase 2: Developing relationships with learners

Method	Date	Purpose	Outcome
Graduation ceremonies	15/11/2011 9/11/2013 15/11/2014	- Observations and increase profile of research to engage participants (learners/Carlow IT)	- Engaged with learners past and present, acknowledged their achievements
Scholarship Event	22/3/2013	- Observations of sponsors of the Degree	- Engaged with staff, learners, sponsors
IT Carlow Seminar on Collaborative Provision	13/02/2013	- To understand the role of IT Carlow and An Cosán in the collaborative partnership	- Observation, engagement, posed a question to the panel – what is the value of the collaboration between An Cosán and Carlow IT?
Input to Degree Students	18/10/2013	- Verbal information sharing about the research	- Clarity, 6 learners out of 11 agreed to be interview. - Learner engagement with the research and feedback
Workshop to learners	2/2/2013 15/11/2013 8/4/2014	- Overview of research - Open discussion on the research	- Workshop on research approach and overview of research to learners from both Degree programme

Appendix 4 Case Study Phase 3: Interviews with learners

Interview Questions - Learners

Theme – Participation (Why are you engaging in degree programme in An Cosán)

1. Tell me how you came to be in An Cosán?
2. Why did you decide on doing this Degree Programme in An Cosán?
3. Do you feel you are listened to in the running of the programme? If so, how, in what way?
4. How is your experience taken into account in the running of the course?
5. Do you feel you have to change to fit into An Cosán?
6. Are you consulted about the running of An Cosán – the organisation if so how?
7. What do you want to learn from this research?

Appendix 5 Case Study Phase 3: Interview with tutors

Interview Questions - Tutors

1. What informs your teaching practice on the Degree programme?
2. Do you take a community education approach to your teaching, if so how?
3. How do you interpret the delivery of the curriculum, do you do anything extra/omit?
4. How is the learners' voice incorporated into your teaching?
5. How would you describe the learner-tutor relationship?
6. Describe the institutional culture of An Cosán from your perspective?
7. To what extent do you think An Cosán meets these descriptions
Non-governmental, Self-governing, Democratic, Learner-determined entry requirements, Collective growth, participation as control, Liminality (a freedom to express oneself in a non-authoritarian system which facilitates the construction of multiple identities where marginality is reduced, a sense of belonging fostered and the participation in democratic processes garners a sense of freedom and spontaneity.)
Learner Centred, negotiated curriculum, Contextualised (the learning relates to their lives/experience)
8. What would you like to learn from this research?
9. Is there anything else you would like to say that you think would be useful to our discussion?

Appendix 6 Case Study Phase 3: Interviews with Management

Interview Questions - Management

1. Can you tell me how An Cosán has come to provide higher education, the history of this development?
2. Can you describe the model of higher education provision in An Cosán?
3. Can you describe the partnership between the Institute of Technology Carlow and An Cosán in the provision of the Degree programmes?
4. How does An Cosán maintain a community education approach in the provision of higher education?
5. What role does a community education approach have with regard to widening participation to higher education? What are the strengths and weaknesses?
6. To what extent do you think An Cosán meets these descriptions
Non-governmental, Self-governing, Democratic, Learner-determined entry requirements, Collective growth, participation as control, Liminality (a freedom to express oneself in a non-authoritarian system which facilitates the construction of multiple identities where marginality is reduced, a sense of belonging fostered and the participation in democratic processes garners a sense of freedom and spontaneity.) Learner Centred, negotiated curriculum, Contextualised (the learning relates to their lives/experience)
7. Can you tell me what, if any, national lifelong learning policy (adult education, further education, higher education etc.) effects higher education provision in An Cosán? (i.e. which policy has the most influence on An Cosan's provision)
8. What changes, if any, in national policy would help support the provision of higher education in An Cosán?
9. What do you want to learn from this research?
10. Is there anything else you would like to say that you think would be useful to our discussion?

Interview Questions – Management: Interview with Carlow IT

1. Can you tell me how Carlow IT began a partnership with An Cosán?
2. Please describe how the Degree programme has developed?
3. How is the learners' voice incorporated into the degree programme?
4. What is the role of Carlow IT in this partnership?

5. How has this partnership influenced Carlow IT, such as its widening participation actions?
6. How does the provision of the An Cosán degree programme differ to that in Carlow IT?
7. What role do you see the community education approach having with regard to widening participation? What are the strengths and weaknesses?
8. What do you want to learn from this research?

Appendix 7 Interview Questions – Policy Makers

1. Regarding the Access Plans: Achieving Equity of Access to Higher Education In Ireland, Action Plan 2005-2007 and National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education, 2008-2013. Can you describe:
 - a. How the Plans were developed?
 - b. What research /policy documents influenced their development?
 - c. What key actions should be taken to widen participation to higher education (Plans/HEA view)?
 - d. How successful were the Action Plans, what were the challenges to the implementation of their recommendations?
2. In your opinion what does the HEA see as the long standing issues with regard to widening participation in higher education?
3. Currently, what groups are specifically targeted (socio-economic groups) for widening participation policy?
4. What is currently driving access policy? (policy/other influences) And what are the priorities?
5. In your opinion, where do alternative models of higher education provision, namely community education providers, fit within Access policy (if at all)?
6. How would you see this kind of approach gaining traction in national policy?
7. What would you like to learn from this research?
8. Is there anything else that you would like to add to our conversation?

Appendix 8 Semi-structured interview questions for Prof Liz Thomas

1. What do you see as the characteristic features of a transformative approach to widening participation?
2. What do you see as the central element to this approach?
3. What examples of this approach to widening participation have you seen in practice?
4. What role do you see the learner voice having within a transformative approach to widening participation?
5. Can you give your views on the following suggested thinking frame for identifying transformative characteristics by higher education providers? What is appropriate/missing?

Thinking frame to determine a transformative approach to widening participation (Drawing strongly on (Jones & Thomas, 2005))

	Feature of a transformative approach	Reference
1	Far-reaching structural change	(Corrigan, 1992)
2	Institutional culture that does not require participants to change before they can benefit from higher education.	(Jones & Thomas)
3	Diversity is viewed as a definite strength	(Thomas, 2002)
4	Institutional activities are underpinned and informed by valuing and learning from difference and diversity	(Jones & Thomas)
5	Institutional review of processes of knowledge production and transfer	(Thomas and Jones, 2000)
6	Creating a curriculum in response to the input of new cohort of learners	(Bamber & Tett, 2000)
7	Prioritise knowledge that is of value and relevance to under-represented groups	(Freire, 1972)
8	Ensure curriculum is relevant to people's lives (contextualised)	Thompson (2001)
9	Reflexivity of higher education institution staff	(Burke, 2009)
10	Need to develop decision-making structures and curricula which engage with and give voice to the diverse experiences and perspectives from underrepresented groups	(Gewirtz, 2001)

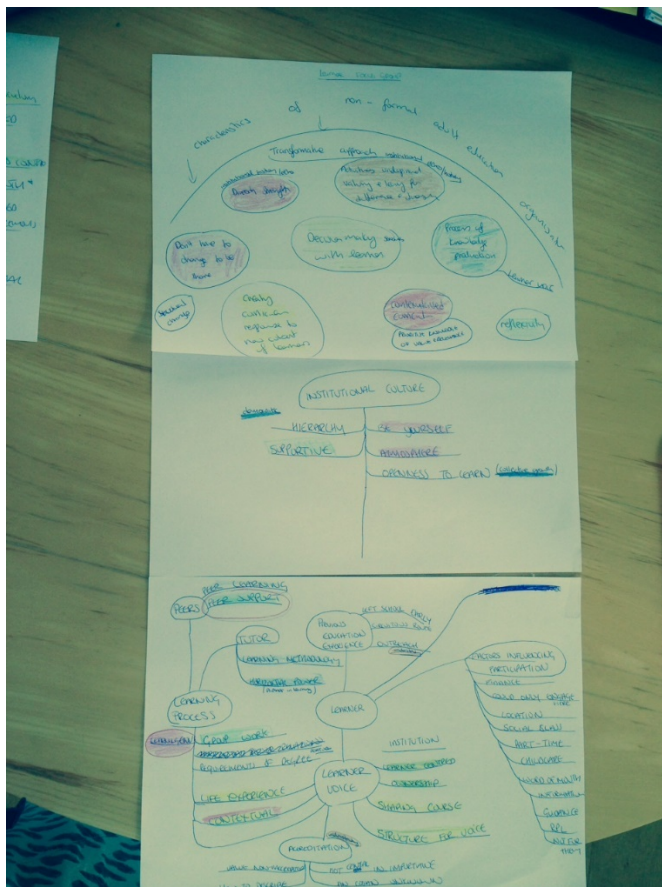
6. What do you want to learn from this research?
7. Is there anything else you would like to say that you think would be useful to this interview?

Appendix 9 Learner Focus Group

Timeframe: 2.5 hours in An Cosán Thursday 23rd October 2014 - 10 am - 1 pm (maximum)

Purpose of the focus group: In order to deepen the analysis, the focus group reviewed the themes which emerged from the learner interviews, which were outlined as a visual depiction. I described to the focus group how I analysed and interpreted the codes that arose and asked focus group participants for their view on each aspect.

1. Opening Circle from a participant if they so wish (request sent beforehand)
2. Round of introductions
3. Response to the interview learner analysis codes
 - a. General response
 - b. Questions/comments
4. Any other reflections the group have about the research or this approach to widening participation? Does it make sense? Are there other things we are missing out on? What are they?
5. Close and thanks



Appendix 10 Information Sheet and Consent Form for Semi-Structured Interviews

Information Sheet and Consent Form for Semi-Structured Interviews

Information Section

The title of the study

Exploring the value of non-formal adult education for offering a transformative approach to widening higher education participation

The Researcher

Niamh O'Reilly, I am a PhD student at National University of Ireland (NUI) Maynooth. I am studying on a part time basis as I work full time for the past 9 years as Head of Membership Services in AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation.

My interest in adult education started in 2002 when I became a volunteer literacy tutor. Soon after joining AONTAS I started to learn more about community education through my development and coordination of the AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN). I became passionate about this kind of education and interested in how it can provide education at all levels of the national framework of qualifications. After a number of years considering how best to explore this I started a part-time PhD in 2009, I hope to complete this study by 2015.

My contact details are:

E-mail:

Department of Adult and Community Education, Education House, NUI Maynooth, Kildare.

The Supervisor of my research is:

Dr Michael Murray

Lecturer, MA Course Co-ordinator

Department of Adult and Community Education, Education House, NUI Maynooth, Kildare.

E-mail:

Telephone:

What the research is about?

I am trying to find out if An Cosán offers a transformative approach to increasing the participation of students who wouldn't generally go to higher education. Many approaches to widening participation in higher education focus on changing the student, it sees the student as lacking in something that must be fixed in order to fit into the higher education system. Therefore it comes from a deficit, or what's missing in someone, perspective. I want to see if An Cosán offers a way to include the local community and the student voice in shaping the kind of higher education they want, therefore the student doesn't change but are part of creating the kind of learning they want.

How am I going to research this?

I am doing a case study of An Cosán using semi-structured interviews (with questions already written in advance), focus groups and a seminar. I am doing the research in partnership with An Cosán and welcome the views of all participants about what they want to learn from the research.

I am very interested in the learner perspective of the Degree programme so I want to interview the students who are, or were on, either of the two Degree programmes (BA Degree in Leadership and Community Development HETAC Level 7, BA Degree in Applied Addiction Studies and Community Development HETAC Level 7). I also want to see how the Degree is provided and shaped so I want to interview tutors, management, Board of Management and also Carlow IT (who accredit the Degree programmes). This information sheet provides an outline of the interview process.

In order to explore the themes which came up in the interviews I want to host a focus group to facilitate further discussion on the topics. The focus group will comprise either learners only, tutors only, management only and board of management only. It is only open to participants who had agreed to, and completed an interview with the researcher. A seminar with all research participants will be used to share the outcomes of the research so far and also allow participants to share their ideas on how I interpreted the data.

In addition to the field work at An Cosán, I will be studying national policy that aims to widen participation to higher education in order to understand what are the main approaches and where, potentially, could a 'transformative' approach fit. To support this I will be interviewing appropriate policy makers also.

What is required if you decide to participate in the research?

You agree to be *interviewed*, *the outline of this is detailed below*.

In addition learners will be invited to participate in a *focus group* if you so wish. You will also be invited to participate in the *seminar*. Further information on the focus group and seminar will be sent to you after the interview is completed.

Outline of the interview:

1. You will be given the questions in advance of the interview (at least 1 week)
2. I will give you this consent form to sign in advance of the interview (at least 1 week). At this time if there are any questions you will be free to ask me.
3. You are also free to ask me questions after you have signed the consent form and before the interview starts.
4. The interview will take place at any public venue of your choice.
5. There will be approximately 8 questions
6. It will take approximately between 30-40 minutes for the interview
7. I will record the interview and tell you when I start it
8. I will transcribe (type up) the interview and I will send it to you
9. You can comment, amend or withdraw your transcript from the research at any time

10. If you stated that you would like to learn something specific in this research project I will incorporate that into the research plan

Confidentiality of data –who will have access to the data?

I will ensure confidentiality of the data. Written data will be encrypted⁵⁸ and stored on my own personal password protected laptop. Audio data will be stored on a hard drive which will be secured in NUI Maynooth. No names will be used in the data, ‘research names’ will be used instead and any identifiable information e.g. details that could be used to identify a person, will be removed from the transcript.

My supervisor will also have access to the anonymized data (no names), so too will any examiner of the thesis. If any research participant would like to see the transcript of the focus group they can obtain it at any time or have access to the audio recording. The encrypted data will be held indefinitely on a secure password protected laptop by the researcher (Niamh O’Reilly) in order to allow the production of academic articles etc. In order to build on this research future reanalysis⁵⁹ and further research using data from this study may happen which would involve contacting participants again for their consent to use their interview data on another occasion. Any future reanalysis or use of data outside of this study would involve getting your consent again. You can refuse to allow your data to be used again.

What will happen to the study results?

The results from the study will be used for the production of my PhD thesis, for academic articles, presented at conferences and seminars and for lobbying work. Again only An Cosán the organization will be identifiable from the study results, no names, or identifiable data will be included in any oral or written work.

What is I decide to withdraw from the research?

Any research participant is free to withdraw from the study at any time up until the publication of the thesis. If you wish to withdraw please contact the researcher directly, no questions will be asked and there is no pressure to continue with the research or give a reason for withdrawing. It is essential that participants act in a voluntary capacity.

The interview process- potential issues raised

Please note that the interview is designed to find out your views on the research topic. It is not a form of counselling and if issues arise that need professional advice the researcher will provide referral information to you.

Niamh O’Reilly, 27th March 2014

If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process, please contact the Secretary of the National University of Ireland Maynooth Ethics Committee at research.ethics@nuim.ie or +353 (0)1 708 6019. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner. You can also read more:

⁵⁸ Encrypted data is data which has been changed into a secret code and is one of the most reliable ways to secure data.

⁵⁹ Reanalysis involves looking at the data again with the addition of further information

Consent Form for Semi-Structured Interviews

Name of Researcher: Niamh O'Reilly

Email: NIAMH.OREILLY.2013@nuim.ie

Department of Adult and Community Education, Education House,
NUI Maynooth, Kildare.

**Please
tick the
box**

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the research information sheet for the above study.
2. I have spoken to the above researcher and understand that this consent form involves being interviewed at a time and place to suit me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions.
3. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.
4. I understand that any data or information used in any publications which arise from this study will be anonymous.
5. I understand that all data is confidential and will be stored securely.
6. I consent to further contact from the researcher in the event that she undertakes a future research study which uses the data obtained in this interview
7. I consent to the storing of data from this interview indefinitely for potential reanalysis for future research
8. I agree to take part in the above study.

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process, please contact the Secretary of the National University of Ireland Maynooth Ethics Committee at research.ethics@nuim.ie or +353 (0)1 708 6019. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner. You can also read more: <http://research.nuim.ie/support-services/research-ethics>

Appendix 11 Legislation Acts in relation to higher education access

Policy aimed at widening participation is developed in addition to the basic foundation that of the legislative framework: The Higher Education Authority Act (1971), The Universities Act (1997), The Regional Technical Colleges Act (1992), The Education Act (1998) and the Equal Status Act (2000). Section 3 of the Higher Education Authority Act (1971) states:

“An Údarás shall, in addition to the specific functions given to it by this Act, have the general function of ...

(d) Promoting the attainment of equality of opportunity in higher education,

(e) Promoting the democratisation of the structure of higher education.”

A number of sections of the University Act (1997) relate to the responsibilities of universities for promoting equality, equity of access and adult learning, under sections 12, 14, 18, 31 and 36. Section 14 specifically names access as a function of the university and section 18 identifies the target groups (underrepresented and disadvantaged) for inclusion in the university and university education and a statement for such provided for in Section 36 (1) (a). Section 14:

“A university, in performing its functions shall—

(b) be entitled to regulate its affairs in accordance with its independent ethos and traditions and the traditional principles of academic freedom, and in doing so it shall have regard to—

(i) the promotion and preservation of equality of opportunity and access”

Section 18 (6):

“In performing its functions a governing authority, or a committee where appropriate, shall—

(b) have regard to the attainment of gender balance and equality of opportunity among the students and employees of the university and shall, in particular, promote access to the university and to university education by economically or socially disadvantaged people and by people from sections of society significantly under-represented in the student body.”

Similarly, the Regional Technical Colleges Act (1992) attributes comparable responsibilities on the Institutes of Technologies regarding the widening of access to higher education.

Section 7(5):

"In performing its functions a governing body shall have regard to the attainment of gender equity and of equality of opportunity in education".

Further legislative Acts, Education Act (1998) and Equal Status Act (2000), also support the access agenda. The Education Act (1998) includes one objective as being "to promote equality of access to and participation in education and to promote the means whereby students may benefit from education". The issue of discrimination higher education institutions is outlined in section 7 of the Equal Status Act, 2000.

Appendix 12 Towards national strategy - Initial review of HEA targeted initiative to widen access to higher education 2004 (HEA, 2004c)

Type of Initiative	# HEIs	Example of approach	Activities	Approach
Work with secondary schools	9	Encourage children to stay in school	Pre-entry	Deficit/academic
Learning support	9	Provide post-entry learning supports include: extra tuition, counselling services, book loans, peer study groups, financial supports, writing support.	Post-entry	Deficit/utilitarian
Work with primary schools	8	Address the cultural deficit of specific students through campus visits and awareness raising.	Pre-entry	Deficit/academic
Extra tuition	8	Compensate for the educational advantage (in this case grinds) of other, middle class students, extra tuition is provided.	Pre-entry	Deficit/utilitarian
Direct entry	8	Reserved places by higher level education institutions (DIT and six universities) for the Higher Education Direct Applications Scheme (HEDAS) which is open to students in designated disadvantaged schools and other linked schools.	Alternative pathways	Disadvantage/utilitarian
Financial support	5	Students who enter higher education through access programmes can obtain financial aid via a grant.	Post-entry	Disadvantage/utilitarian
Further education links	4	Using FETAC accredited learning as means to meeting requirements of a limited number of allocated further education link courses.	Alternative pathways	Disadvantage/utilitarian
Foundation /access courses	3	Access courses for a limited number of students who have not gained sufficient Leaving Certificate points but who have, in the view of a selection committee, demonstrated academic potential.	Alternative pathways	Disadvantage/utilitarian
Teacher education	2	The allocation of places for disadvantaged students on Teacher education programme ,e.g. Bachelor of Education degree programme and also facilitating learning for teachers in designated disadvantaged areas by sharing best practice.	Alternative pathways/institutional change	Disadvantage/transformational

Appendix 13 First Action Plan: Achieving equity of access to higher education in Ireland: Action Plan 2005-2007 (HEA, 2004a)

Goal of Action Plan	Summary of approach	Activities	Approach
Communicate the rationale for equity of access to higher education	National level - Publications, DVD, website	National Level	-
A national framework of policies and initiatives to achieve equity of access	Evaluate existing access programmes Guideline based on existing access programmes Links between disadvantaged schools communities and HEIs Qualitative/quantitative indicators for access initiatives Financial support for HEI access initiatives	Alternative pathways	-
Routes of access and progression to higher education	Evaluate access and progression routes, collaboration between HEI and FE to higher, link disadvantaged schools, FE programmes as entry routes, systemised entry, information and guidance	Alternative pathways	Disadvantage/ utilitarian
A broader range of teaching and learning practices in higher education	Guidelines on inclusive teaching and learning practice Curriculum projects that develop teaching and learning strategies for diverse groups, Modular, credit-based learning and accreditation of prior learning. Teaching development, inservice and qualifications for higher education. Teachers/lecturers, with a particular emphasis on equality awareness. Information to students on access/courses	Institutional	Transformative Mainly and utilitarian
Necessary financial support and resources	Funding programmes for students Review of national grant schemes for access including data collection and reporting on such Financial support for part-time learners	Finance / Macro	Finance/ Macro
Learning from what works	Evaluation guidelines that are based on democratic, participative principles Data collection on target groups Monitor targets qualitative and quantitatively		Elements of transformative

Appendix 14 Towards the best education for all: an evaluation of access programmes in higher education in Ireland (HEA, 2006)

Type of Initiative	Example of approach	Activities	Approach
Access is part of the mainstream equality policy and strategy.	Designated member of staff for access	Institutional	-
Integrating the different strands of access	Linking access strands across different target groups and approaches	Institutional	-
Systems and structures to promote equity of access	Specialist teaching for inclusive learning e.g. Small group teaching.	Institutional	Transformative
Access activities at pre-entry, admission and in-course stages	Working with designated disadvantaged second-level schools e.g. extra learning supports for prospective students.	Pre-entry	Deficit/utilitarian
Alternative routes of access, transfer and progression	Admission through FETAC accreditation or the higher education access route (HEAR)	Alternative pathways	Disadvantage/utilitarian
Promoting an inclusive learning and reaching environment.	Curriculum innovation and assessment reform based on learning outcomes. Meitheal concept to create leaning community and shared learning aims and teamwork.	Institutional	Transformative
Creating an accessible learning environment	New learning technologies e.g. Blackboard	Institutional	Disadvantage/utilitarian
Providing on-course support	Extra learning supports, childcare, transport, mentoring, student advisors	Post-entry	Deficit/utilitarian

Appendix 15 Second Action Plan: National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008 – 2013 (HEA, 2008)

Goal of Action Plan	Summary of approach	Activities	Approach
Institution-wide approaches to access	Supporting access strategies to HEIs, capacity building through CPD, exchange good practice, equality training, research and conference.	Institutional	-
Enhancing access through lifelong learning	Flexible provision, support for part-time students, PATH, diversification of entry routes, RPL, early-second chance, workforce strategy, promotional campaign, transition year module.	Alternative pathways	Disadvantage/ utilitarian
Investment in widening participation in higher-education	Funding for access, SIF, performance, philanthropy, advocacy formant accounts	Alternative pathways	Disadvantage/ utilitarian
Modernisation of student supports	Supports: low/middle-income families, part-time support (modular accreditation programme, means-tested free part-time), awareness raising, student assistance fund, millennium partnership fund, ethnic minorities, ERAMSUS	Institutional	Transformative
Widening participation in higher education for people with disabilities	-----		Disadvantage/ utilitarian

Appendix 16 Third Action Plan: National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 (HEA, 2015)

Goal of Action Plan	Summary of approach	Activities	Approach
To mainstream the delivery of equity of access in HEIs.	The first goal focuses on: working group for non-completion; research into teaching of target groups (NFTL), mentors and role models in HEIs pre and post-entry, access programmes for teacher training, teacher education to raise expectation in students.	Institutional	N/A-
To assess the impact of current initiatives to support equity of access to higher education.	To review GAM supports access, review SAF, FSD, financial support for part-time students.		-
To gather accurate data and evidence on access and participation and to base policy on what that data tells us.	Data strategy (HEA-SUSI), PLSS, geographic patterns of disadvantage data, track progression and retention of target groups, progression to employment and postgraduate studies of target group. Monitor outcomes DEIS schools, student engagement on policy, share knowledge and include community/voluntary groups, analyse HEI links with schools, qualitative indicators of access progress.	Alternative pathways	Disadvantage/ utilitarian
To build coherent pathways from further education and to foster other entry routes to higher education.	Systemic approach to map HE pathways via regional clusters, RPL, extend HEAR and SARE schemes to include DE graduates, increase target group in professions, FE-HE access courses	Institutional	Transformative
To develop regional and community partnership strategies for increasing access to higher education with a particular on mentoring	Regional cluster/LCDC initiatives, link between local communities and HEIs civic engagement in Compact agreements, mentoring in second level by regional clusters.		Disadvantage/ utilitarian

Appendix 17 Characteristics of non-formal education based on a range of literature that primarily focuses on the definitional issue

Characteristics	Literature
Organisational Features	
Intentional provision of educational activities, often by NGOs, outside the formal education system.	Coombs & Ahmed (1974) Adiseshiah (1975)
Providers are generally small-scale; that they meet a specific need for a period of time and that once that need is met they no longer exist.	Brembeck & Thompson (1973)
Funding for such organizations is generally from a variety of sources.	
Community-related and community based position of non-formal education, within the local environment.	Simkins (1977)
Welcoming, safe and supportive environment.	Kahane (1997)
Local personnel and low-cost, minimal, non-education specific facilities	Simkins (1977)
Liminality - open, non-authoritarian, flexible and democratic elements which promotes education access	Kahane (1997)
Purpose and function	
Provision of short-term and specific education programmes which are also non-credential based.	Fordman (1980) & Simkins (1977)
Meets the needs of the individual and inculcates specific knowledge, skills and attitudes which results in immediate improvements in material wellbeing and/or productivity.	Simkins (1977)
Practical skills and knowledge gained are used for work or community.	Paulson (1972)
Purpose of NFE is resocialisation and acculturation.	Paulson (1972)
Seeks to supplement, or complement, the formal schooling system	Paulson (1972)
When successful form leads to desired social change, as a result of an individual influencing their environment rather than conforming to it.	Simkins (1977)
Socially integrative	Simkins (1977)
Democracy and control	
Democratic, uncoordinated, fragmented, diffuse nature	Simkins (1977) and Fordman (1980)
Greater level of decision making made at programme level	Simkins (1977) & Fordman (1980)
The greater level of control by participants and local community was also proposed	Paulston (1972) & Simkins (1977)
Relationship between educator and learner: emphasis on process that focuses on learning rather than the teaching Role of sharing, exploring and analysis together with the facilitator and learner.	Paulston (1972) & Simkins (1977)
Educational Access	
Flexible, innovative, no specific entry requirement, community based, responsive form of education	Brembeck & Thompson (1973) & Simkins (1977)
Entry requirements that are determined by the clientele rather than the organisation	Fordman (1980) & Rogers (2004)

Democratic learning process with a substantial level of control exerted by participants and the local community.	Simkins (1977)
Teaching Methodology	
Contextualized learning process that adapts to local contexts and demonstrates participation;	Goodman (1971), Coombs (1976), Schram (1973) & LaBelle (1982)
Learner-centred	Coombs & Ahmed (1973)
Has a code of informality	Kahane (1997 p. 31)
Flexibility: delivery system	Paulston (1972), Fordman (1980) & Simkins (1977)
Flexibility in application and performance-standards	Paulston (1972)
Flexibility of in structure	Simkins (1977) & Fordman (1980)
Educational programme	
Skill-centredness; relating to the needs of the participants; and values conflicting with the status quo and elites	Paulson (1972) & Simkins (1977),
Output-centredness; practical nature; and individualised task approaches used	Fordman (1980) & Simkins (1977)
Non-standardised, contextual nature of non-formal education which is interdisciplinary in approach, promotes critical reflection, social change and legitimises local cultures.	Simkins (1977)
Lack of failures, rejection and persistent dropouts associated with non-formal education	Rogers (2004)
No failures, open entry and exit points, progress is based on one's own development and that universal participant satisfaction is important.	Simkins 1977
Low verbal content	Paulson (1972)
Organized programmes which may have learning objectives; learning that is intentional; does not generally lead to a qualification	Werquin (2010)
Timing	
Short-term and lifelong/recurrent throughout life.	Paulston (1972), Simkins (1977) & Fordman (1980)
Part-time not full-time	Paulson (1972), Fordman (1980) & Rogers (2004)
Multiple entry points throughout the year i.e. not limited to an academic calendar	Simkins (1977)
Time orientation and has high benefit in relation to time spent on an educational activity and the personal gain received.	Paulson (1972)
Flexible	Paulson (1972)

Appendix 18 Comparison of community education models as described by Lovett *et al.* (2003), Martin (1993) and the White Paper (DES, 2000) in relation to characteristics of an outreach model or a community education model.

White Paper (2000)		Outreach education model	Community education model	
Lovett <i>et al.</i> , 2003 p 36	Community organisation/ education	Community development/education	Community action education	Social action/ education Working class education
	Tutors in the community. It is a mix of formal procedures in informal organisations that are more appealing to working class students.	It looks at addressing issues in the local community as a collective but it does blame participants for this. It is a deficit model.	It involves organisations that were found by the community, alternative institutions and organisations. It's about community education and community action and uses Freirean pedagogy. Methods imply dialogue and discussion	Structured education provision, which strengthens the working class to take on a broader social change agenda, i.e. political economy. Educators act in solidarity with community.
Martin (1993)	Universal	Reformist		Radical
	Promoting lifelong learning though opening up access and provided and integrated local provision. Top-down and institutional.	Compensatory education in disadvantaged areas provided through partnership actions offering decentralized learning opportunities which increase participation.		Community development process involving local control in political education which involves structural analysis. Bottom up, process driven education provided locally through solidarity and collaboration.

Appendix 19 Non-formal education characteristics as demonstrated by An Cosán

Review and assessment of applicability of non-formal education characteristics as articulated by teaching management and tutors

Characteristic of non-formal education	An Cosán Applicability	Evidenced	Comments
Contextualised	Strongly applicable	Degree content	Important in terms of learning relevance to learners' lives,
Negotiated Curriculum	To an extent	Prospective/current learner consultation prior to the Degree programmes, and retrospectively from evaluations.	Flexibility in delivery of the curriculum. Constrained by accreditation requirements
Learner centred	Strongly applicable	Organisational ethos, physical environment and learning methodology	Pressure from external environment could negatively impact on tutors ability to maintain learner centredness
Liminality	Strongly applicable	Warm, open, supportive environment, which has equal power relations amongst staff and learners, further supported by some learners becoming tutors.	Applicable in context of learners not staff/ those not who don't adhere to ethos or organisation
Participation as control	To an extent	Varying levels of participation. In classroom Support learners to take up leadership roles in the organisation and to actively influencing the Degree programme at evaluation level.	Seen as aspirational and set within the constraints of the Degree. In a constant state of flux.
Collective Growth	Applicable	Collective growth was articulated as a characteristic that reflects An Cosán.	Unanimously applicable for learners Some perspectives agrees in relation to the organisation.
Learner determined entry requirements	Not wholly applicable	Scope for learners to gain entry without traditional formal qualifications based on their experience.	Due consideration to the potential prospective learners have to achieve the Degree Important that learners are not set up to fail and supports in place Constrained by academic standards of the Degree

Self Governing	Applicable	Yes	Within the constraints of funders' requirements
Non-governmental	Applicable	Yes	Within the constraints of funders' requirements
Democratic	Applicable	Democratic processes within the organisation between staff and learners. Democratic meeting space for all: canteen.	Hierarchical organisation