



**'HERE LADS, THIS IS THE STORY!'**

**AN EXPLORATION INTO ACCESS PRACTITIONER KNOWLEDGE AND COMMUNITY  
ENGAGEMENT WITHIN IRISH HIGHER EDUCATION**

**By**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This research explores higher education access practitioner knowledge, investigating the relationship between access practice and community engagement. The research delves into the world of HEI access practice, it looks at how access can be enhanced drawing on the knowledge from professional access practitioners and communities that experience disadvantage.

Access practitioners have been working within Higher Educational Institutions in Ireland since the late 1990s. Despite equity of access being a strategic priority of the Higher Education Authority and policy and funding commitments by the Government to address educational inequalities, there remains inequalities in our society that have deep levels of educational disadvantage. As an access practitioner for over two decades, this research explores with access colleagues and community participants if and how community engagement practices could enhance access practices.

This research stands within a critical tradition, interested in questions regarding equality and power. Using qualitative research methods with community participants and access practitioners, the reality of the access role is depicted, alongside the untapped access opportunities that exist within communities. In-depth interviews with practitioners and community workshops using participatory research methods (photovoice) were undertaken. Research participants explored themes relating to educational disadvantage, access to higher education and community engagement.

The research found that access practice at institutional level is significantly impacted by neoliberal government policy and new managerial practice. The empirical evidence from this research points to difficult working conditions, inappropriate institutional positioning, and pressures on time for access practitioners, all of which limits real meaningful engagement with communities that are under-represented in higher education. Access practitioners are working with limited resources, and with time specific funding streams, which have negative consequences for community engagement. Communities have been on the receiving end of this hurried approach, resulting in very few opportunities for meaningful, collaborative and respectful engagements, where HEIs and communities can

together, as equals, address issues relating to educational disadvantage. New principles for access and community engagement for access professionals are presented.

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## **ABBREVIATIONS AND GLOSSARY OF TERMS**

|       |  |
|-------|--|
| AASAM | Academic Administration and Student Affairs Manager    |
| ACE   | Adult Continuing Education (UCC)                       |
| AMA   | Access Made Accessible (Access Practitioners Network)  |
| AO    | Access Officer   |
| CDP   | Community Development Project                          |
| CIT   | Cork Institute of Technology                           |
| DAWN  | Disability Advisors Working Network                    |
| EAS   | Equal Access Survey                                    |
| EC    | European Council                                       |
| ETB   | Education and Training Board                           |
| EU    | European Union   |
| FE    | Further Education                                      |
| FET   | Further Education and Training                         |
| FETAC | Further Education and Training Awards Council          |
| FSD   | Fund for Students with Disabilities                    |
| HE    | Higher Education                                       |
| HEI   | Higher Education Institution                           |
| IoT   | Institute of Technology                                |
| IUA   | Irish Universities Association                         |
| KPI   | Key Performance Indicator                              |
| LN    | Learning Neighbourhood                                 |
| MTU   | Munster Technological University                       |
| MU    | Maynooth University                                    |
| NOW   | New Opportunities for Women (EU Funded Programme)      |
| NQF   | National Qualifications Framework                      |
| OECD  | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development |
| PAR   | Participatory Action Research                          |
| PATH  | Programme for Access to Higher Education               |
| PLC   | Post Leaving Certificate                               |

|      |  |
|------|--|
| QQI  | Quality and Qualifications Ireland         |
| RGAM | Recurrent Grant Allocation Model           |
| RPL  | Recognition of Prior Learning              |
| RTC  | Regional Technical College                 |
| SAF  | Student Assistance Fund                    |
| SE   | Socio-Economic                             |
| THEA | Technological Higher Education Association |
| TU   | Technological University                   |
| UCC  | University College Cork                    |
| VEC  | Vocational Education Committee             |
| WP   | Widening Participation                     |

## Glossary of Terms

|                              |   |
|------------------------------|---|
| College Awareness Week (CAW) | College Awareness Week aims to inspire and inform students of educational opportunities post-secondary education. It promotes educational progression and encourages students to pursue a programme of study that meets their interests, abilities and hopes for the future. It highlights opportunities at further education, higher education and Apprenticeship routes.  |
| College of Sanctuary         | The College of Sanctuary is an initiative of the City of Sanctuary movement. Launch in 2005, in Sheffield, it promotes good practice of third level institutions welcoming sanctuary seekers and fosters a welcoming culture for all.   |
| Compacts                     | Performance compacts are agreed between the HEA and the HEIs. Each HEI has an individual institutional profile and their compact includes the individual mission, capacities, strengths and priorities for the HEI. It also states how the HEI contributes to the regional and national system objectives, as outlined in the System Performance Framework 2018-2020.   |
| Covid Contingency Funding    | A once off €1.9 million fund was allocated in 2020 to HEIs to enable access services to deliver local COVID related supports to students who were experiencing disadvantage.  |
| Dormant Accounts             | Unclaimed funds in credit institutions in Ireland are used for initiatives that address socio-economic educational disadvantage.  |
| eCohesion                    | EU Reporting requirement for European funds. It is an objective of the Third Level Access which is co-funded by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and the European Social Fund (ESF) as part of the ESF Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning (PEIL) 2014-2020. It is managed by the HEA (Higher Education Authority) on behalf of the DES. As part of the reporting requirements the FSD and DSS supported the Access Service to return information on 2014-2018 FSD and SAF students in 2020 as part of eCohesion/ |

|                                   |   |
|-----------------------------------|---|
|                                   | EU reporting requirements for the HEA who confirmed the end of the PEIL in 2020   |
| LEADER                            | LEADER funding has provided rural communities within the EU with resources to facilitate and empower local partners to engage, contribute and direct through community led rural development. (Pobal.ie)  |
| Learning City                     | UNESCO defines a Learning City as one which mobilises its resources across all sectors to generate greater lifelong learning opportunities for all its citizens.  |
| Learning Neighbourhood            | The Learning Neighbourhood initiative aims through agency collaboration, to provide inclusive and diverse learning and educational opportunities for people within their own localities.  |
| Lifelong Learning Festival        | The Cork Lifelong Learning Festival celebrates learning in all its forms. Formal, non-formal and informal learning opportunities are promoted. The festival offers free learning events to the public for one week every year.  |
| Student Assistance Funding (SAF)  | The Student Assistance Fund provides financial support to students (full-time or part-time) who require financial support. Financial support can be awarded for temporary or ongoing financial demands. Students apply to the access service in the HEI they are studying. Funding is awarded to HEIs annually.   |
| Strategic Innovation Funding 2006 | The Strategic Innovation Fund was established by the Government to promote collaboration, support change and enhance quality in Irish higher education so that it would be equipped to meet the challenge of driving Ireland's development as a leading knowledge economy. Creative approaches were encouraged to build on the collective strengths of higher education institutions, working together as a cohesive system. The Strategic Innovation Fund involved the provision of €300 million over five years |
| SOAR                              | The SOAR Project is an inter-institutional collaboration on Access. It involves the South Cluster of higher education institutions - Munster Technological University, South-East Technological University, University College Cork and a variety of community partners. The Project commenced in 2018 and is funded by the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) Strand 3.   |

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

There are significant educational inequalities in communities in Ireland including stark differences in progression rates of different communities to higher education (HEA, 2005, 2015, 2022). Scholars have argued that universities have a moral obligation to address and support challenges and issues that exist in society and that higher educational institutions (HEIs) have a role in building a more humane society (Boyer, 1996; Baker *et al.*, 2009; Barnett, 2011).

Investment in education has been a government priority in Ireland since the 1960s, with a belief that a more educated population would contribute to the development of a modern, more economically viable and just society (Clancy, 1996; O'Connell *et al.*, 2006; Fleming *et al.*, 2017). There has been exponential growth in educational policy on equity of access and widening participation since this time (Fleming *et al.*, 2017). With a commitment to a more equal society, the Irish Government in the mid-1990s pledged to increase access and widen participation for under-represented groups and at that time funding to appoint access officers was allocated to all HEIs (Department of Education, 1995). Unfortunately, despite government investment, participation in higher education is still deeply unequal and significant barriers to access remain for some individuals and communities (HEA, 2022).

Access research undertaken in Ireland thus far, has tended to concentrate on case studies, policy analysis, and on barriers and challenges to higher education for specific access groups (Fleming, 2013; Creedon, 2015; McCann and Delapp, 2015; Hannon, 2017; Kelly, 2017; McTernan, 2019, Fleming *et al.*, 2022). There has been very little research on addressing equity of access to higher education from the perspective of access professionals, and what practitioners have learned since inception (Slowey, 1990; Fleming *et al.* 2017). There is very little understanding of what goes on in relation to the work of access practitioners and this is a significant gap in the research landscape which means a key element of the access 'world' is poorly understood. As an access practitioner with over two decades of experience, I feel that I have gained deep levels of professional knowledge. I was interested in studying and reflecting on this. I was also interested in engaging with and learning from other access practitioners, who similarly have acquired substantial professional experience and knowledge so that I can understand how I could improve my

own practice and produce critical knowledge that is relevant, useful to my peers and researchers interested in access and equality. Consequently, this thesis will critically evaluate the work of access practitioners and their quest to improve access to higher education for under-represented groups. Access theory and practice will be explored from an access practitioner perspective. The knowledge and experience that this group of professional's hold will be untapped, offering a unique insight into the world of higher education access. Practitioner knowledge is at the heart of this thesis.

A second gap in access research relates to access and community engagement. Since the White Paper on Education (Department of Education, 1995) there has been a linking of educational equality and community engagement. Access policy references the need for HEIs to form partnerships with communities in trying to address inequities in access and participation. Despite the rhetoric, as an access practitioner my experience has been that community engagement as a way of enhancing access to education has been minimal and tokenistic (O'Reilly, 2020). I wanted to explore access practices and how higher education institutions (HEIs) engage with communities in advancing their access agenda and supporting social inclusion.

My research examines the realities of the access role within higher education institutions from a social justice and equality perspective. I wanted to examine how HEIs engage with marginalised communities to progress their access agenda and support social inclusion and what they are doing to operate strategically and collaboratively to challenge systemic inequalities. I was curious to explore from a community perspective what 'access to education' means for people who are under-represented at higher education and what they need HEIs to do to support learning and access opportunities within the community. This research was concerned with what is happening on the ground, critically evaluating access practice and community engagement. The community perspective is given a focus, with the community voice and community knowledge having equal prominence to that of access practitioners. The impact of policy and the inter-relationship between that and practice is also captured within this research. Access practitioner knowledge and community knowledge are core tenets of this research.

The empirical research presented in this thesis makes significant contributions to the understanding of access work within HEIs and their commitment to engagement with marginalized communities. The research allowed practitioners and community participants space to reflect and articulate the issues and challenges relating to access to higher education from their perspective, thus presenting a rare opportunity for the access practitioner and community voice to be heard. The community knowledge and the deep level of professional knowledge by access officers are acknowledged and highlighted and become a bridge for understanding the more systemic issues relating to equity of access to higher education.

### **1.1 My Background**

Prior to my professional career in third level education, I worked as a community development officer with a rural development company. I worked with many small rural communities which had very few resources, very few amenities and high levels of under-employment and unemployment. My role was to work with communities using EU LEADER funding to revitalise and invigorate communities. I loved this work; on the ground, engaging with and supporting people to positively impact on their lives going forward. I could see that European funding had a positive impact on these communities. I learned that with resources and with support, communities can be empowered to take ownership of their futures and shape their lives more positively. On the other hand, however, I saw that sometimes with external funding, criteria can stifle creativity and sometimes communities can be left trying to mould funding opportunities to meet their needs, which is not always possible.

I was appointed to Cork Institute of Technology <sup>1</sup>(CIT) as access officer in 2003, having worked on various EU funded (NOW and Integra) posts within Cork Regional Technical College (RTC)/CIT prior to that. As access officer for more than twenty years, I have a remit to increase access and widen participation to higher education for people and communities which are under-represented. When appointed initially, I had a wide brief and limited resources. At this time, I had relative autonomy, and I could focus my energies on what I felt needed attention. I have worked on many programmes aimed at improving

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<sup>1</sup> Cork Regional Technical College (RTC) was established in 1974 and in 1997 it became Cork Institute of Technology (CIT). In 2021, CIT merged with Institute of Technology Tralee to become the Munster Technological University.

educational opportunities for under-served communities and under-represented groups. I have worked on programmes that support progression to third level for women, long-term unemployed men, mature students, students with disabilities, ethnic minorities and those who experience socio-economic disadvantage. My work as access practitioner involves designing, delivering, and managing educational programmes at pre-entry, entry and post-entry level, in an effort to increase the numbers of students coming from these under-represented groups.

When appointed initially, I was working alone on this agenda and any interventions I developed and implemented were short-term and inconsistent, and in my opinion, had minimal gain for the stakeholders or for my organisation. At this time, there was no policy on equity of access within my institution and there was no specific government policy on access to higher education. A National Access Office (within the Higher Education Authority (HEA)) was established in 2003, and with it came a sense of hope amongst the access officers that issues would be identified at national level that could be addressed in a strategic, collaborative, and organised way.

Since the establishment of the National Access Office, I have seen many state and institutional policies come into play (e.g. National Access Plans, the Hunt Report, Roadmap to Social Inclusion, etc.). When the first National Access Plan was launched (HEA, 2005), I was happy to be provided with a road map, which I believed I could use to influence institutional policy directions. I felt that I could now quote legislation and state policy to look for resources to put structures in place to grow an access service to meet the needs of our stakeholders. National policies relating to equity of access have had impact and power at institutional level on the direction of resources, the development of HEI policy and the focus of energies. In the past, I have often referred to the National Access Plan as 'my bible', as I have allowed it to dictate my activity and the direction of my work, without questioning or critically reflecting on the initiatives or the impact.

Funding opportunities followed policy and allowed for the piloting of new initiatives and also for the expansion of staff. While welcome, the funding criteria were prescriptive, short-term, ad-hoc and unconnected, e.g. Strategic Innovation Funding, Dormant Accounts Funding, private industry funding. My experience is that funding received has not allowed for organic, responsive, respectful, purposeful engagement with under-represented

communities. All resulted in an access service which was growing - however, in a piecemeal fashion, with little or no strategic vision.

As my access practitioner role evolved, I became more conscious of the learning needs of local communities that were labelled as 'disadvantaged'. I also began to realise that the HEI in which I worked was only one actor in the access to education stage. So, while prior to this research, I thought that access targets dictated through national policy were a good thing, I began to question if they are too prescriptive and too narrowly focused? I began to question if our HEA-led national access policies allow for autonomy within HEIs to design bespoke access programmes that meet the learning needs of local communities.

Since taking up the post of access officer more than two decades ago I have engaged with regional networks and groups allowing me to establish working relationships with other educational providers, communities, and organizations. These professional experiences have shaped my view of education. I have been witness to many community learning practices and to many different school cultures. I have worked in community settings where the reality and consequence of poor access to third level has hit hard.

As access practitioner, I have established relationships with formal and non-formal learning providers in Cork. Cork was designated a Learning City by UNESCO in 2015 and I saw value in being involved in this initiative to work collectively with other stakeholders trying to achieve equity of access to education. Through my work and my engagements with stakeholders within the Cork Learning City, I became aware of community education initiatives within the city, but I had no direct engagement with community education providers. Through my work with mature students, I had encountered individuals who had come through the community education route and had successfully progressed into third level. I had seen the impact of the positive learning experiences within the communities through community education. I had attempted to move closer to engaging with communities through the Cork Learning City initiative. However, I did not have any formal engagements with community education providers prior to this research. I was unaware to what extent learning opportunities were happening on the ground within communities and so had not fully realised the full opportunity that community education provided me as an access practitioner.



Research has evidenced that community education can allow for positive learning opportunities to happen within the community (Connolly, 2008). Merriman (2018), advocates for an education system that allows for more meaningful learning experiences. She endorses Mezirow's transformative learning (Mezirow, 1978) process, which is focused on the cognitive process of meaning making. She proposes that transformative learning is when we make sense of our experience, and which results in change in belief, attitude or perspective. She also claims that the social context where the learning is taking place is critical. Community education provides a space for this. Connolly (2008) stresses the role of community education as having a social purpose, one that is ambitious in its commitment to social justice, equality and democracy. Community education is not merely about offering solutions to practical challenges such as family friendly timetables, affordable classes, childcare. Community education has a recognition, respect and value in the knowledge and expertise that the person brings to the learning experience. As my research journey evolved, I became curious to examine if there were opportunities for HEIs to build on the benefits of community education and use this as a vehicle to engage and develop meaningful engagements with communities.

## **1.2 Educational Disadvantage in Cork (Local Context)**

I have seen how third level educational qualifications can have a significant impact on shaping an individuals' health, life chances, employment opportunities, incomes etc. Limited opportunities to access higher education can perpetuate socio-economic disadvantage, with evidence that access to higher education can have significant impact on an individual, on their families and communities (Wodtke *et al.*, 2011; O'Sullivan and O'Tuama, 2017). In Ireland, there are areas and regions that evidence persistent educational inequality, and Cork, the region where I work, is no different (Cork City Profile, 2018).

Cork City has many formal educational establishments offering educational opportunities at all levels of the national qualification's framework. There are two higher educational institutions, (University College Cork and Munster Technological University (formally Cork Institute of Technology)) and three of the largest five further education colleges in Ireland are based in Cork. These three colleges have recently merged to form the Cork College of FET – Cork's Further Education and Training Service. Despite the number of

colleges and despite the level of educational intervention programmes, there continues to be stark inequalities between the numbers of people attaining third level qualifications between the north side and south side of the city.

In 2016 just over thirty-two percent of the population in Cork City and suburbs had obtained higher education qualifications. In parts of the north side the percentage ranges between 5-8% (Cork City Profile, 2018). While there has been a marginal increase since 2011, there is significant difference in attainment of third level qualifications compared to the more affluent electoral divisions on the south side.

Considering Electoral Divisions in Cork City in 2016, two stand out as having high proportions of lower levels of formal educational attainment. In Gurranebraher A, almost one in four people had ceased their education before age fifteen and in Gurranebraher E the ratio was one in five. (Cork City Profile, 2018, p. 115)

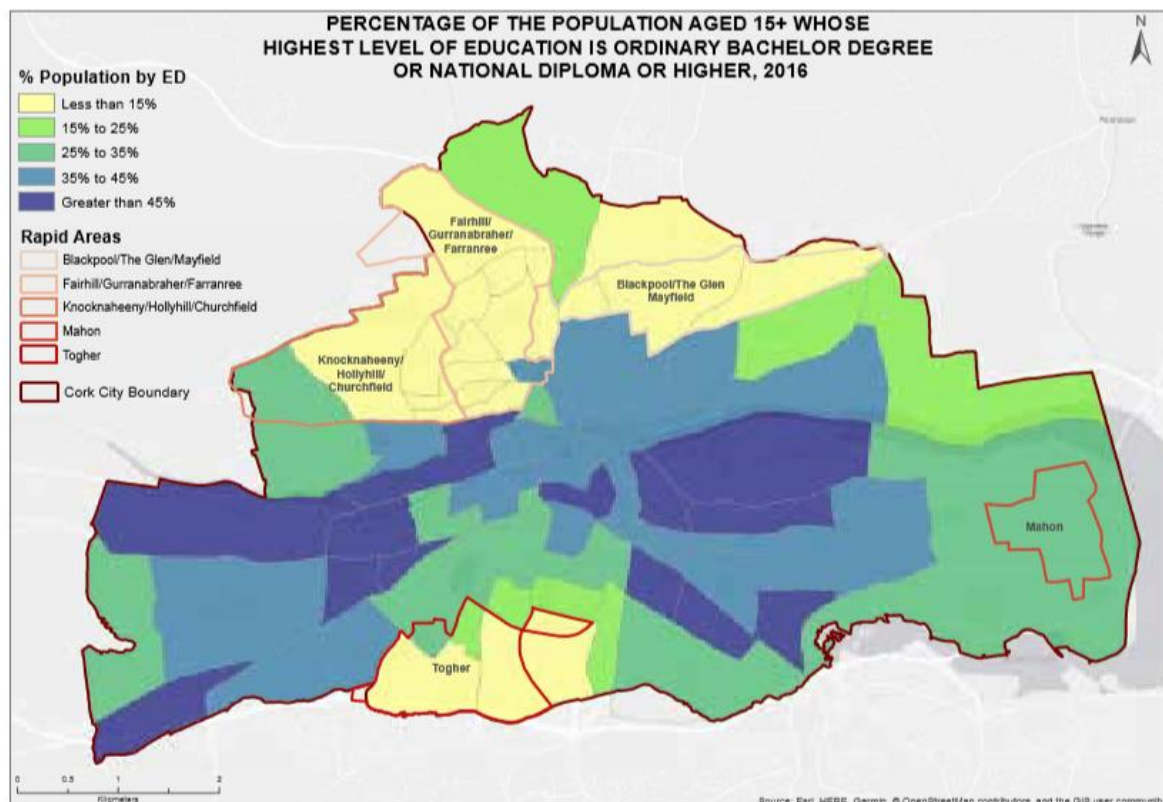


Figure 1: Percentage of the population aged 15+ whose highest level of education is Ordinary Bachelor Degree of National Diploma or Higher. (Cork City Profile 2018, p. 126)

Of the people who progressed to third level education, inequalities exist in terms of participation of students from working-class backgrounds. Despite the growth of access work within HEIs in the last couple of decades, huge disparities still exist in relation to access

to higher education by communities that experience disadvantage (Cork City Profile, 2018). Students from semi-skilled, unskilled, manual and non-manual backgrounds are still under-represented in higher education, notwithstanding the interventions of national access schemes such as the HEAR <sup>2</sup>(Higher Education Access Route). ‘Only 10% of students in higher education come from disadvantaged areas’ (HEA, 2022, p.5). Minority ethnic groups are also very under-represented, e.g. With only 1% of members of the Traveller community progressing to Higher Education (Cork Interagency Traveller Education Group, 2016).

These statistics relating to progression to third level are unjustifiable.

### **1.3 My Research Perspective**

Research suggests that structural and systemic inequalities are responsible for many of the access issues that have manifested, such as low progression rates, low educational attainment, marginalised communities (Reay *et al.*, 2001; Ball, 2010; Fleming *et al.*, 2017; Lynch, 2022). Access to higher education has received growing attention at governmental level in recent years. However, some scholars suggest that HE access policy to date has concentrated on a deficit model where the focus of action is on the individual rather than looking to create a higher education system that is more inclusive (Rogers, 2004; Lynch, 2006; O’Reilly, 2020). My professional experience of access policy is that it has encouraged higher educational institutions to focus on student targets and outcomes. Prior to this research this was certainly my experience, a lot of my focus as an access practitioner was on establishing pathways for learners, such as the HEAR, DARE entry routes, the Cork Colleges Progression Scheme (QQI entrants), mature student access, with very little of my time focused on critically analysing the HE access at a systemic level.

Lynch (2022) and Baker *et al.* (2009), claim that there are deep systemic inequalities in our education system, which made me stop and contemplate access practice at a deeper level. Similarly, Baker *et al.* (2009) claim that higher education institutions have a significant role to play in society with our formal education system playing a ‘central role in educating people to deny, challenge or ignore local and global injustice’ (Baker *et al.*, 2009, p. 144).

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<sup>2</sup> HEAR – Higher Education Access Route is a higher education admissions scheme for Leaving Certificate students (under 23) whose economic or social backgrounds are underrepresented in higher education. [www.accesscollege.ie](http://www.accesscollege.ie)

Lynch (2022), bringing an egalitarian, feminist perspective, believes that our governments are focused on creating privatised citizens who care primarily for themselves. This will be discussed in more detail in later chapters. Lynch (2006) believes that as a society we have become 'increasingly dependent on HE to drive the social, political, cultural and economic infrastructure of society' (Lynch, 2006, p.12). There is a huge emphasis and importance being placed on access to higher education and that this is being seen as the panacea for addressing inequality and 'is increasingly becoming a prerequisite for survival' (Lynch, 2006). She believes that higher education has become overly focused on the neoliberal agenda and she urges us to challenge this, as our education system is suiting the privileged few and leaving many people on the margins of society. She argues that HEIs need to engage with civil society and form relationships and alliances within the public sector so that the public interest values of higher education can be preserved. Lynch (2022) believes that higher education should be designed to cater for the weakest and most vulnerable as well as economic interests. She also believes that HEI's have a duty of care to the voluntary, community and care sectors.

My background in community development and my professional experience as an access practitioner made me curious about the potential benefit of engaging in a more sustained way with communities. I believed that community engagement could potentially have a part to play in addressing educational access and I wanted to take a step back and explore in greater detail existing access practice with communities. I wanted to fill a gap in knowledge being particularly interested in practitioner knowledge and community knowledge, and I really wanted to make sense of this for myself and for my practice.

I wanted to document and explore the reality of access professional practice. And given the emphasis in recent access policy as well as my community development background and my involvement with the Learning Cities initiative, I wanted to understand the role that community engagement has to play in achieving greater equity of access and participation.

I was keen to centre the experience, knowledge and practice of access professionals within this research. Access practitioners were in place in HEIs for over twenty years and in that time many initiatives aimed at increasing access to higher education were piloted and

mainstreamed. I wanted to critically reflect on access practice with a particular interest in understanding and enhancing community engagement. I wanted to tap in to the knowledge gained from this practice and the overarching research questions that I found myself asking was; how can access practice be enhanced and practitioners be better informed through community engagement.

This overarching question led me to a series of other sub questions; what is happening with access professional practice and how is community engagement understood and approached by these professionals? What do communities need from HEIs? And how do HEI access services build enduring, effective relationships with communities? I really wanted to think across the access to higher education landscape and not just look at a single component. I wanted to understand practice in a holistic way by attending to the experience and perceptions of professionals as well as the needs and interests of the disadvantaged communities which access is meant to serve.

#### **1.4 Definition of Access**

When the post of access officer was developed initially in the mid-1990s, the remit was to coordinate and develop support structures for ‘non-standard’ students. National policy has articulated that the vision for access to higher education is to ‘ensure that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland’s population’ (HEA, 2015, p. 6). In the latest National Access Plan, the goal is ‘to deliver positive and inclusive outcomes for all students at every stage of their higher education journey’ (HEA, 2022, p.23).

In the context of this research, ‘access’ will be understood as the access and participation of under-represented individuals and communities, where community engagement, pathways, admissions, pedagogy, student services and supports are designed to meet the needs of a diverse student body. Under-represented students as identified by the National Access Plan include mature students, students who experience socio-economic disadvantage, students with disabilities, further education award holders and communities which experience low progression to higher education.

## **1.5 Structure of the Thesis**

The following chapters of this thesis include my literature review, methodology, empirical findings and discussion. The next two chapters aim to offer a contextual summary of the educational landscape and the policy developments that have shaped and impacted on access within higher education. Chapter Two provides the higher education policy context giving an overview of the seminal educational policy documents that have laid the foundation for access policy. Chapter Three opens by looking at the justification for universities taking on a remit to address social inclusion and educational disadvantage. From here it offers significant criticism of the growth of access policy and the access structures and funding that operate within HEIs. The chapter also reviews existing access research and practitioner research in Ireland. In Chapter Four I focus on the theoretical perspectives that have shaped the research. Community engagement, community education, neoliberalism and the care agenda are all reviewed and discussed. Chapter Five is my methodology, where I present a rationale for choosing participatory research methods with my two research sites. I will explain my approach, the ethical considerations, the detail involved in working with the access practitioners and community participants and the recording and analysis. Chapters Six and Seven present my research findings. The participants' voices are largely captured within these chapters, as their knowledge is central to this work. Chapter Eight is my discussion chapter. In this I reflect on what I have learnt from the two research cohorts through a synthetic overview of the major empirical themes explored in relation to academic literature and principles for good practice. A critique of access policy, with strong neoliberal and new-managerial narratives, and its impact on practice is discussed. Chapter Nine is the concluding chapter which summarizes the research, restating the main arguments, suggesting why this research is important.

## HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY CONTEXT

### 2.1 Introduction

Ireland can be characterized as a country with substantial persistent inequalities in educational attainment. Numerous studies have demonstrated that rapidly rising participation and retention in education has been accompanied by remarkable stability and persistence in inequality in educational attainment (Byrne and McCoy, 2013, p. 297).

This chapter will provide context for the research in terms of the development of the Irish educational landscape and why and how higher education set an ambition to achieve greater diversity of access. The first section of the chapter offers a background to the evolution of the higher education sector in Ireland and outlines the development of educational and social policy. A contextual guide through the development of access to higher education in Ireland will be provided, including the development of the binary higher education system. The disparities in participation by social class that developed while promoting a mass system approach, will be also outlined. The second section of the chapter will outline some of the seminal policy developments that have shaped higher education in Ireland.

### 2.2 Higher Education in Ireland

There has been huge change within the higher education sector in Ireland in the past half a century. Education in Ireland has been an increasingly important public policy priority since the 1960s (Clancy, 1996; O'Connell *et al.*, 2006) with the expansion of the educational system believed to be an important contributor to the modernisation of the country. To achieve this modernisation, national policy transformation in the 1950s to the late 1980s was influenced by changing attitudes among politicians and international policy driven by the OECD, the World Bank and the European Union (EU) and focused on increasing numbers of participation and an ambition to meet perceived economic demands (Walsh, 2014, p. 5).

In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Irish Higher Educational Institutions had relative autonomy from the State but were very under resourced financially. Access to higher education at this time was monopolized by the elite (Walsh, 2014; Fleming *et al.*, 2017). The educational focus of these organisations such as the OECD, the World Bank and the EU, was on the expansion of participation, together with the diversification of the system and an increased

focus on economic growth and the production of a highly skilled workforce (Lynch, 2012; Walsh, 2014). At this time, acquiring educational qualifications was seen as an important determinant for career enhancement. There was a belief amongst policy makers that the expansion of education within a modern society would allow for both social and economic mobility. There was a focus on establishing a more educated and skilled population to meet the needs of the growing economy (Fleming *et al.*, 2017).

During the 1960s, education policy was very high on the government's agenda, prompted by an economic recession in the late 1950s (Fleming and Harford, 2014). A new commission on higher education was established in 1960 chaired by Justice Cearbhall Ó Dálaigh, comprising of representatives from a wide range of stakeholders, including academics, the religious orders and public servants. This commission highlighted the need for investment at higher education and pushed for capital investment to allow for more people to avail of third level.

The commission helped to ensure that the development of HE appeared on the government's radar for the first time in a generation. Moreover, the commission's argument that '[t]he well-being of university education and of the country are closely linked' had a long-term resonance which would be felt in future state policies (Government of Ireland, 1959, p.128) (Walsh, 2014, p. 12).

The make-up of these boards is particularly interesting, as the power to influence and shape policy direction was awarded to certain groups, such as Catholic and Protestant bishops, academics and the business community including stockbrokers and industry leaders. The Commission believed that universities should evolve to be more than 'professional academies', but rather places for the communication of basic knowledge. While the Commission recommended greater investment by the State in HE, in particular in relation to capital development, however, there was a strong theme of education for the benefit of economic development emerging through this report (Fleming and Harford, 2014; Walsh, 2014).

An Irish report produced under the auspices of the OECD in the mid-1960s, *Investment in Education*, highlighted social inequalities in educational participation in higher education and portrayed higher education as elitist and the preserve of the middle classes (Department of Education, 1965). The OECD had initiated a pilot study on long-term



educational needs and Ireland became the first member state to be part of this new programme. There were clear links made in this report between education, modernity and economic development (Fleming, *et al.* 2017). In tandem, under the stewardship of Seán Lemass, Irish government policy began to include equality of opportunity as a key feature in policy.

The *Investment in Education* report evidenced stark educational inequalities, with young people (15-19 year olds) from higher professional backgrounds being almost five times more likely to be in full-time education than young people from lower socio-economic groups. Free second level education introduced in 1967 and the increase of the school leaving age to 15 years, ensured that there was an increase in demand for third level education, which led to a demand for increased funding at higher education (Fleming, *et al.* 2017; Smyth, 2018a). Despite this report highlighting social class differences in educational participation, the main emphasis of policy from the 1960s to the 1980s was on expansion and increased admissions for the general population rather than policy focused on addressing access to education for under-represented groups and the impact on social inclusion (O’Connell, 2006; Smyth, 2018a; Smyth, 2018b). There was a belief that a focus on mass education and subsequently ‘universal education’ would consequently also benefit the marginal sectors of society (Walsh, 2014). Free second-level education introduced in 1967, did have a positive impact on the participation levels and the numbers of young people staying on to Leaving Certificate<sup>3</sup>, however, over the next decades inequalities persisted throughout the educational life cycle of young people, with ‘social differentiation in educational participation and performance’ (Smyth, 2018a, p. 134).

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) was also established in the 1960s, whose purpose was to advise the minister on matters relating to higher education and to allocate funding. The HEA became more than an advisory body however, as they had control over the financing of universities which gave them significant power over HEIs.

At this time, the expansion of higher education was coupled with structural diversification.

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<sup>3</sup> The Leaving Certificate is the final exam of the Irish second level school system and the university matriculation examination in Ireland.

The 1960s marked a fundamental policy shift. The pursuit of economic growth was established as the dominant project in Irish political life. Economic development was to be pursued through a policy of rapid industrialization, to be achieved with the help of foreign investment and to be sustained by export-led growth. A reoriented educational system was seen as being a key facilitator in this transformation process (Clancy, 2015, p. 20).

In the late 1960s, the government established a Steering Committee on Technical Education, to advise the minister on technical education. The Committee believed that by establishing Regional Technical Colleges, they would be able to provide courses ‘to educate for trade and industry over a broad spectrum of occupations ranging from craft to professional level, notably in engineering and science, but also in commercial, linguistics, and other specialities’ (Clancy, 2015, p.21). In the 1970s, Regional Technical Colleges (RTCs) were being established throughout the country, providing vocational courses to meet the economic needs of the country. This was seen as an essential layer of regional development. Programme offerings were applied in nature and provided higher educational opportunities to growing student populations at regional level (McCoy and Smyth, 2011). With the establishment of the RTCs, (which from the mid-1990s became Institutes of Technology through the Institutes of Technology Act), Ireland saw the emergence of a binary HE system (Stephens and Gallagher, 2021).

Up to the 1980s, higher education in Ireland was the preserve of the elite, with less than 20% of school leavers progressing to third level (Smyth, 2018). At this time there was increased attention on access and participation rates partly because of studies by Patrick Clancy (Clancy, 1982; 1988; 1995; 2001) highlighting educational inequalities at higher education level by address and socio-economic grouping (Smyth, 2018b). State policy started to focus on educational disadvantage but unfortunately measures introduced were to address underperformance as opposed to any interventions to address systemic educational inequities (O’Connell *et al.*, 2006). There was considerable expansion after this point and with the abolition of tuition fees, the numbers of people accessing higher education had dramatically increased (O’Connell *et al.*, 2006).

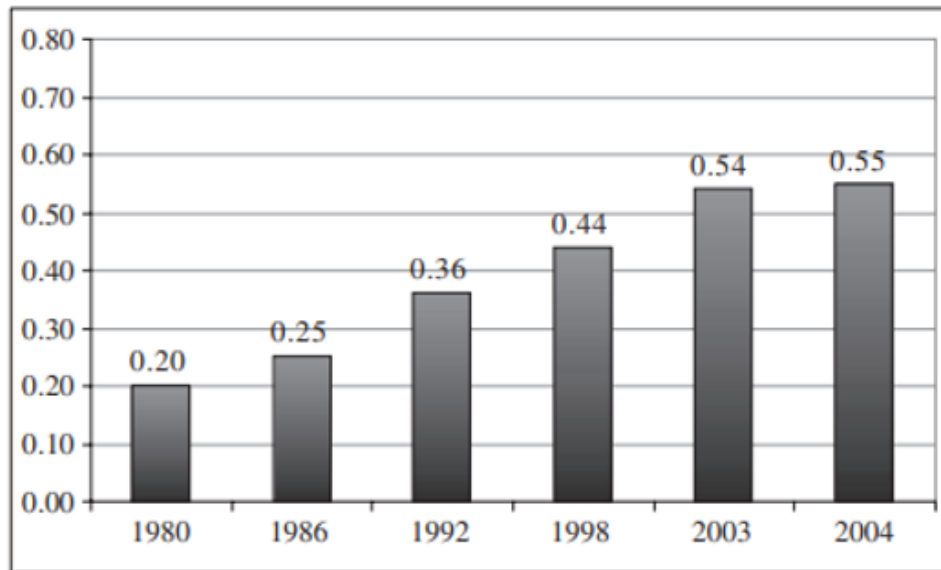


Figure 2: Number of people accessing higher education (O'Connell *et al.*, 2006)

The above table highlights the growing trend in admission rates to higher education, 1980-2004. In the space of two decades, the participation rates in higher education had more than doubled.

Although there was an increase in the overall participation rates, the tables below however, highlight the disparities in higher educational participation by social class.

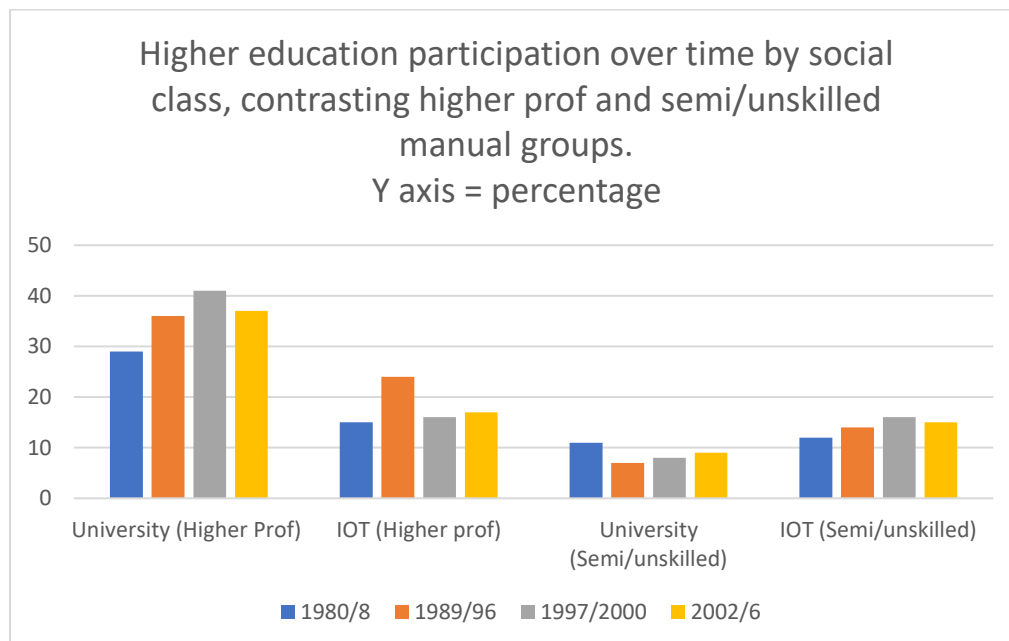


Figure 3: Higher education participation over time by social class, contrasting higher professional and semi/unskilled manual groups (McCoy and Smith, 2011).

|  |                              | 1980 | 1986           | 1998 | 2004 |
|--|------------------------------|------|----------------|------|------|
| A  | Employers and managers       | 19.5 | 18.2<br>(15.8) | 21.6 | 20.5 |
| B  | Higher professional          | 11.8 | 12             | 10.1 | 9.8  |
| C  | Lower professional           | 7.1  | 9.2            | 10.1 | 10.3 |
| D  | Non-manual                   | 11.1 |                | 9.4  | 7.9  |
| E  | Manual skilled               | 10.9 | 12.9           | 13.6 | 12   |
| F  | Semi-skilled                 | 12.7 | 2.5            | 7.4  | 5.1  |
| G  | Unskilled                    | 1.2  | 1.3            | 3.1  | 4.5  |
| H  | Own account workers          |      |                | 7.2  | 7.3  |
| I  | Farmers                      | 21.1 | 20.8           | 16.6 | 11.3 |
| J  | Agricultural workers         | 0.9  | 1.4            | 0.7  | 0.3  |
|  | All other gainfully employed |      |                |      | 11   |
| Source: Clancy (1982,1988) Clancy and Wall (2000), O'Connell et al. (2006) |                              |      |                |      |      |

Figure 4: Summary of Patrick Clancy's surveys of new entrants to higher education by SEG (%) (Fleming *et al*, 2017, p. 48).

As Ireland moved closer to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a move from an 'elite' system to a 'mass' system within higher education. It was argued that at that time Ireland replaced religious ideals, where the Catholic church had strong influence on education, to more economic ideals with a human capital goal (Hurley, 2014; Walsh, 2014).

It was predicted by the Government in the 1990s, that highly skilled professionals would be needed to support the growing economy and therefore there was always a focus on developing human capital (O'Connell *et al.*, 2006). There is a clear continuity and in fact a greater emphasis on the development of a mass higher education system with a growing belief that a well-educated population would lead to economic prosperity and social transformation (Lynch, 2012; Walsh, 2014).

The majority of higher education admissions at this time were almost entirely reliant on school leavers. There was some commitment by the Government to increasing students who experience socio-economic disadvantage, but most people accessing higher education were from the middle-classes and it was still recognised as being an 'elitist system' (Murphy, 2000, p. 78).

Achieving greater equity and thus developing varied pathways to higher education will require action which may pose a threat to the privileged position of the middle classes. Considerations of political expediency have meant that few governments have been willing to take such action (Clancy, 1996, p. 368).

In 2000, the European Council launched the Lisbon Strategy, which was a development plan to address the low economic growth in the EU (European Parliament, 2000). It was argued, following the Lisbon Strategy in 2000, that Ireland was well positioned within the EU, as an English-speaking country, to become the most competitive knowledge-economy in the world by 2010 (Hazelkorn, 2014). Ireland took note and followed with the development of national policy which embraced this objective of a competitive knowledge economy (Hazelkorn, 2014). Higher education for the middle classes began to reach saturation point in the early 2000s. Educational inequalities persisted however, with lower socio-economic groups remaining under-represented.

Before the 2000s, Ireland did not have a national research policy or investment strategy (Hazelkorn, 2014). Significant investment was given to research in the early 2000s to try to build Ireland's international profile. By the mid-2000s, with the impending economic downturn, questions were asked about the value being derived from research and its benefit to society. What followed was a 'Research Prioritisation Exercise' which promoted top-down, targeted policy. Hazelkorn (2014) believed there was a shift within higher education at this point from regulation towards 'steering'. Prior to this, the universities had their own autonomy, with very little oversight, while the IOTs were 'micro-managed' by the Department of Education and Science. I would contend that this 'steering' of policy can be seen in the shape of the National Access Policy and the National Strategy for Higher Education. This directed policy at national level has directed resources and funding at HEI level. 'Today, all HEIs are being brought within the same governance and funding framework; the common denominator is the move towards 'directed diversity' (Hazelkorn, 2014, p. 1346).

Higher education participation increased from 15,000 in 1980 to 42,000 in 2013 (St. John, 2017). However, by the mid-2000s, persistent inequalities remained in terms of social class within higher education (O'Connell *et al.*, 2006). Children of farmers and higher professionals were over-represented and other social cohorts were under-represented (O'Connell, 2006). Low-income students accounted for only fourteen percent of participation figures in 2013 (St. John, 2017). Research repeatedly highlighted that young people from the non-manual, socio-economic groups were under-represented in higher

education and were the only cohort to have seen a decline in admissions into HE from the late 1990s to the late 2000s (O’Connell *et al.*, 2006; McCoy and Smyth, 2011; Byrne and McCoy, 2013).

Cullinan *et al.*, (2013), highlight research (Denny, 2010; McCoy and Smyth, 2011) that indicates that the free fees initiative at higher education did not alleviate social class inequalities in relation to participation. They claim that the issue is much more complex with other factors such as high financial costs for individuals, family incomes, intergenerational issues and geographic location all impacting on educational disadvantage. The approach to increased access and widening participation is far more nuanced and complex than just providing increased places.

### **2.3 The Broad Policy Landscape**

The higher education landscape changed quite significantly in a relatively short period of time -1950s to date (Fleming *et al.* 2017). In 1965, there were 15,400 full-time students in HE (Fleming *et al.* 2017) and by 2021, there were 246,299 students in HE (HEA, 2021). Up until the 1970s, traditional universities dominated the higher education landscape, and at that point we saw the gradual introduction of thirteen Regional Technical Colleges. The government invested significantly in trying to provide increased participation at higher education for the ‘masses’, however, there was little impact on progression rates to HE by certain socio-economic cohorts.

For a small country, the Irish state seems to have acquired a habit over the past two decades of producing a large corpus of policy and policy related documents concerning HE and specifically access and WP (Fleming *et al.*, 2017, p. 50).

There have been almost thirty policy and evaluation documents produced in the past number of decades that have attempted to address issues of access to higher education and widening participation (HEA, 2000; 2005; 2006; 2007; 2008; 2010; 2013; 2014; 2015; 2017; 2018; 2019; 2022). Fleming *et al.*, (2017) highlight the significance of two national recovery plans following economic downturns, the Programme for National Recovery in 1987 and the National Recovery Plan in 2011. Separated by more than two decades, but both have a common narrative of the importance of education in achieving a more equitable society. In this section of the Chapter I will point to four policy developments spanning three decades, which I believe have significantly shaped the Irish HE landscape and strongly influenced my

access agenda; (1) the 'Charting our Education Future', the White Paper on Education (1995), (2) the Report of the Action Group on Access to Third Level (2001), (3) the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (2011) (otherwise known as the Hunt Report) and (4) the *Investing in National Ambition: A Strategy for Funding Higher Education* (2016) (otherwise known as the Cassells Report). These policy documents when launched impacted on access practice within HEIs and I believe shaped the role of access practitioners significantly. The first policy, the White Paper on Education, paved the way for the appointment of access practitioners. The second policy discussed, *the Report of the Action Group on Access to Third Level*, had a deep impact on my professional role as access practitioner as I was newly appointed shortly after this report was published. The third policy is the *National Strategy for Higher Education*. When this was launched in 2011, I was a member of the National Access Office Steering Committee, representing Access Officers at the time. The recommendations at the time seemed to be monumental, with mergers and consolidation being proposed for Institutes of Technology. The final document I will present is the Cassells Report, which relates to funding at higher education and the correlation between funding and educational access.

### **2.3.1. 'Charting our Education Future', the White Paper on Education (1995).**

The *White Paper on Education* (1995) is an important policy document which was developed in partnership with stakeholders setting the foundation for developing a responsive educational system. This was developed prior to the establishment of a National Access Office and to the appointment of access officers within HEIs.

The importance of widening participation, through lifelong learning, becomes evident when it first becomes embedded in legislation with the launch of the White Paper on Education – *Charting our Education Future* (1995). This policy document articulates that education is seen as key to economic performance. It states that lifelong learning is an 'economic necessity' to keep abreast of economic demands (White Paper, 1995, p. 6). This reflects the economic emphasis on policy direction at governmental level as explained earlier.

National and international bodies have identified the central role of education and training as one of the critical sources of economic and social well-being in modern society. This is the logical outcome of the increasing centrality of knowledge and

skills in shaping economic organisation and national competitiveness (White Paper, 1995, p. 6).

The importance of equality is also acknowledged within the policy, and it advocates for the state to ‘compensate’ where there is educational disadvantage. ‘The education system for the future should have a philosophy that embraces all students, female and male, on a basis of equality. A sustaining philosophy should seek to promote equality of access, participation, and benefit for all in accordance with their needs and abilities’ (White Paper, 1995, p. 8). There is an ambition within this policy to provide a partnership approach to educational provision and recognises the importance of a diverse student body. However, it also leans heavily on the need to evaluate and be accountable, given the financial constraints and demands on the state.

The White Paper does not detail how access within HE should be designed or delivered or who the HEIs should engage with to achieve greater access and participation. However, it now requires HEIs to legally incorporate access into strategic and operational plans (Fleming *et al.*, 2017). It also stated that each HEI in Ireland is now mandated to develop policies and programmes aimed at increasing the participation of students from lower socio-economic cohorts. The Paper also references ‘quality reviews’ which suggests that access policy and practice would now be open to appraisal.

### **2.3.2. Report of the Action Group on Access to Third Level (2001).**

A precursor to the series of National Access Plans in Ireland, was the *Report of the Action Group on Access to Third Level (2001)*. This was the first attempt at national policy on access. As an access practitioner appointed to a HEI in 2003, I recall relying heavily on this publication to help guide me through the role and to provide me with national context. In 2001, because of a commitment under the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness<sup>4</sup> the Minister for Education and Science at this time, Dr. Michael Woods, set up an Action Group to advise on the development of a co-ordinated framework. The Report of the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education highlighted that within communities that experience ‘cumulative disadvantage’, families not actually living in poverty are impacted negatively

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<sup>4</sup> The Programme for Prosperity and Fairness was an agreement between the Government and social partners to maintain economic competitiveness, achieve economic prosperity, improve social inclusion and quality of life and become a knowledge-based economy. (Government of Ireland, 2000)



from the general environment and consequently they are less likely to ‘succeed in getting to college, or even to try’. There were over seventy recommendations relating to mainstreaming and funding and it sets out an ambition to design a national framework. It was acknowledged in this report that people from communities who experience disadvantage face several barriers to participation.

The Report highlights the need for the ‘local dimension’ to be a key issue. Within the recommendations under the ‘Disadvantaged Communities’ chapter, the establishment of access initiatives for second level students and adults was endorsed (Government of Ireland, 2000b). This report acknowledges that there can be ‘cumulative exclusion experienced by people in certain identifiable districts’ (Government of Ireland, 2000b, p. 103). It provided national policy and a framework for community engagement, which included encouraging applications, facilitating entry, and supporting participations, for newly appointed access practitioners within HEIs.

### **2.3.3. The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (2011).**

A third seminal policy development came with the launch of a national strategy for higher education. In the early 2000s, Institutes of Technology stakeholders started asking questions about the binary higher education system (Stephens and Gallagher, 2021). Policymakers began to query cost effectiveness and discussions became centred on institutional partnerships. In 2004, the OECD reviewed the HE landscape and proposed that the binary system would remain. There was criticism from politicians at regional level and by 2008, a campaign to redesignate HE began (Stephens and Gallagher, 2021). At higher education level, a significant policy document was subsequently launched in 2011 – *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*, otherwise known as the Hunt Report. This strategy sets out a vision for an Irish Higher Education that is responsive to the social, economic and cultural needs of society.

The country was emerging from an economic recession from 2010 and there was a strong focus on employability and a belief that education was going to pull the country out of the recession faster. The Hunt Report aimed to set out a road map for the development and governance of higher education in Ireland for the next 20 years. The overriding themes of this report were accountability, outputs, efficiencies, and a knowledge economy. Within

this report higher education is expected to service the 'smart economy' and to 'strike a balance between the demands of the market and their academic mission' (Hunt, 2011, p. 92). Walsh and Loxley (2015), claim that it was the 'most assertive attempt by the Irish state to reconstruct higher education in accordance with economic utilitarian objectives' (Walsh and Loxley, 2015, p. 1128).

The restructuring of the HE system had already been promoted by government a few years previously and given the increasing alignment of the lifelong learning agenda with upskilling for the 'smart economy' (HEA, 2011, p. 2), the primary challenge was how to create a more efficient and productive HE sector in order to meet the 'human capital' needs of the economy at a time of significant economic constraint (HEA, 2011, p.10). Fleming *et al.* (2017), believe that the Hunt Report was essentially a bid to make the priorities of the HEIs more 'aligned' with the state priorities of enhanced economic performance and labour market requirements (Fleming *et al.*, 2017, p. 77).

The main provisions of the report were to (HEA, 2011, pp. 17-25):

- Encourage greater collaboration between HEIs.
- Align institutional missions and strategies, including expansion of research capacity, to national economic priorities.
- Increase variety and diversity of provision, such as putting more emphasis on postgraduate education and flexible learning / upskilling to contribute to economic growth.
- Present a vision for HE to meet social, economic, and cultural challenges and also to facilitate wider participation and fairness of access through appropriate funding mechanisms.
- Advocate for the introduction of institutional performance management – it pushed for greater accountability and efficiency, data, and performance metrics as a means of informing continual development of HEIs and of the sector.

- Advocate for the introduction of service level agreements (SLAs) between the State and HEIs, pushing for the introduction of “compact agreements”, introducing a business operational model into higher education.

The report spells out very clearly what the priorities are for the state; economic performance, accountability for higher educational institutions, efficiencies for the sectors and mergers.

While the strategy is primarily focused on economic imperatives, there is a nod to the importance of community engagement. Quilty *et al.* (2016), who are critical of Ireland’s formal educational evolution, argue that the strategy has ‘finally’ given a commitment to community and higher education. They state that the strategy recommends greater levels of engagement between HEIs and communities, stating that ‘higher education institutions need to become more firmly embedded in the social and economic contexts of the communities they live in and serve’ (Hunt, 2011, pp. 77-78). Quilty *et al.* (2016) however, argue that this commitment to community engagement is not strong enough and they advocate for more community-based access collaborations which challenge systemic inequality stating that the communities that have most to gain are those which experience social exclusion and inter-generational disadvantage.

In the wake of this report, the national objectives for the third level sector were identified as improve (1) the student experience, (2) the impact on society and the economy and (3) the recognition of the quality of Irish Higher Education qualifications internationally.

Such a system requires distinctiveness of missions at the institutional level, and diversity of missions at system level. This means having a range of institutional types with clearly differentiated missions and clear strategic orientations. These institutions should provide a complementary range of all the academic disciplines needed by individuals, by society and by the labour market (HEA, 2011, p. 6).

There was an ambition to have system-level approaches, with HEIs using their skills, talents, attributes, and strengths to benefit not just the institutions, but also society.

The *National Strategy for Higher Education* (2011) proposed the establishment of technological universities. This proposal was seen as an answer to Ireland’s economic and social challenges, producing graduates who play a pivotal role in Ireland’s economic

development. This policy recommendation has led to the merging of several Institutes of Technology, including my own HEI. My higher educational institution (Cork Institute of Technology) merged with another higher educational institution (Institute of Technology Tralee) located 120 km away.

A technological university will have a systematic focus on the preparation of graduates for complex professional roles in a changing technological world. It will advance knowledge through research and scholarship and disseminate this knowledge to meet the needs of society and enterprise. It shall have particular regard to the needs of the region in which the university is located (Hunt, 2011, p. 12).

Further, the report outlines an ambition that a technological university should meet local, regional, and national demands in respect of educational opportunities.

The student profile of the university will match its stated mission. Specifically, the university will provide programmes at higher education Levels 6 to 10 to meet local, regional, and national demand and to meet the university's responsibilities in respect of educational opportunities at these levels (HEA, 2011, p. 14).

With the merging of institutes of technologies and the establishment of the technological universities, the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* set out an ambition to create greater efficiencies and synergies. The Government has moved fast and to-date, the following Institutes of Technology have merged.

- Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin) was established in January 2019 and incorporated Dublin Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology Tallaght, and Blanchardstown Institute of Technology.
- Munster Technological University (MTU) was established in January 2021 and saw the merger of Cork Institute of Technology and Institute of Technology Tralee.
- Technological University of the Shannon (TUS) was established in October 2021 and included Limerick Institute of Technology and Athlone Institute of Technology.
- The Atlantic TU (ATU) was established in April 2022 and incorporated Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, Letterkenny Institute of Technology and Sligo Institute of Technology.

- Carlow Institute of Technology and Waterford Institute of Technology merged most recently in May 2022 to form the South East Technological University (SETU).

The Hunt Report was the beginning of the end of what was the third level binary system. The Institutes of Technology which had traditionally higher levels of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, also provided pathways and access to education through programmes from NFQ Level 6 and were located in regions which were not traditionally known for higher education (Fleming *et al.*, 2017, p.6). It remains to be seen if the new Technological Universities are going to maintain these characteristics.

#### **2.3.4. Investing in National Ambition: A Strategy for Funding Higher Education (2016).**

The financial resourcing of access to HE in recent years is also worth examining, as it has a direct impact on access practice. The *Investing in National Ambition: A Strategy for Funding Higher Education*, otherwise known as the Cassells Report, was produced in 2016 and focuses on funding issues and presents solutions. The purpose of the Report was ‘to identify and consider issues related to the long-term sustainable funding of higher education in Ireland and to identify funding options for the future’ (Cassells, 2016, p. 6).

It was felt that funding into higher education had to be reviewed, as it was seen as ‘not fit for purpose’. Demographic changes, pressure on students and their families and high living costs were all identified as having a major negative impact on the quality of the system and on Ireland’s ability to reach national goals.

Access is put forward as one of the guiding principles of the Cassell’s Report. While there is a strong statement around the commitment to widening participation and growing the diversity of learners within HEIs, the justification for equity of access is limited to the need to provide for economic growth and development. ‘It is imperative that these ambitions are realised to both ensure the availability of capabilities and skills and talent across the economy, and to provide everyone with the opportunity to reach their full potential’ (Cassells, 2016, p. 25). There is very little discussion on the nuances in relation to educational disadvantage and obstacles to access are limited to discussions around funding.

The report recognises and acknowledges that higher education needs to be supportive of diverse learners and responsible for the needs of society and the economy.

Higher education has made a hugely positive contribution to Ireland's development in recent decades and has proved to be a game changer for individuals, employers, society and for the state. Its role is as important now as ever as we seek to further embed our skills infrastructure, develop our innovative capacities and create a more equal society (Cassells, 2016, p. 6).

The report identifies three main sources of funding for Higher Education, those being, (1) the exchequer, (2) the student or the students' family, (3) employers and enterprise. They state very clearly that they see employers as a key stakeholder and direct beneficiary of a strong quality based higher education system and so argue that there is a strong case for structured financial contributions from them through philanthropic and donor sources.

This chapter provided context in relation to the evolution of higher education over the past half a century. Since the 1990s with the White Paper in Education, there is a clear commitment by the State to more inclusive educational opportunities for a diverse student population, there is a pledge to partnerships, including engagement with the wider community and there is a commitment to serving those with greatest need. The policy landscape articulated is important in understanding the focus and direction of the state in terms of addressing access and widening participation. The next chapter questions the role of the university in addressing social inclusion and delves more deeply into the growth and development of HEI access policy and practice in Ireland.

## CHAPTER THREE

### ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN IRELAND

#### 3.1 Introduction

My research aims to explore access practice and how engagement with communities affected by educational disadvantage is currently happening, from a critical, social justice and egalitarian perspective. The first questions I found myself asking with my research was, ‘*what* mandate do higher educational institutions have with regard to social justice, social inclusion, access to education and widening participation and *why* are they involved?’ These research questions are clearly linked to much broader questions about the social purpose of education and HE. The Government has now made access to higher education a strategic priority, with equity of access and an increase in the diversity of the student population, being one of eight key strategic themes within the HEA (HEA, 2018a). This being the case, before looking at access policy and practice in HEIs, I want to explore the rationale for why higher education institutions should play a role in addressing inequalities in society. In this chapter, I will commence by examining why HEIs have decided to take on this goal of greater equity and what the HEI role is in relation to addressing the ills of society. I will examine how the purpose of education is understood and will draw on researchers/scholars who have written about the university and their role in social justice.

I will then outline the development of HE access policy in Ireland, specifically looking at the National Access Plans and the objectives that they have set. To establish context on access structures within HEIs, I will briefly look at the organizational positioning within which access practitioners work and the funding arrangements that allow for access initiatives to be delivered.

The chapter will conclude with an outline of the existing research on access in Ireland. I have already noted the gap in access practitioner literature and as this study is primarily scholar/practitioner research, I will outline the importance of practitioner research and practitioner knowledge to access scholarship.

#### 3.2 The Purpose of the University

Many years ago, Oscar Handlin put the challenge this way: “[A] troubled universe can no longer afford the luxury of pursuits confined to an ivory tower.... [S]cholarship has to prove its worth not on its own terms, but by service to the nation and the world (Boyer, 1996, p. 27).

Many scholars despite varying ideological and theoretical perspectives, such as Wilhelm von Humboldt in the 1800s, John Henry Newman (2016), Michael Oakeshott (1967; 1972), Martha Nussbaum (2002) and Ronald Barnett (2011), agree that the university should be driven by the pursuit of enlightenment and advancement and the cultivation of community. Universities traditionally were considered by society as centres of knowledge and expertise and had a significant part to play in the development of society (McFarlane, 2014; Mahon, 2021). Baker *et al.* (2009) believe that universities should all have a common quest for knowledge and ensure that this knowledge is disseminated to the wider society. From an access perspective, what is interesting is that they also highlight the significant role that higher education institutions must play in achieving a more equitable society.

Saltmarsh and Hartley (2011) try to understand the role of the university in terms of the impact on the problems of democracy (unrecognised potential) and the problems *in* democracy (poverty, social inequalities and so on). They question if a HEIs' function is to help citizens become more informed 'customers' or are they more interested in developing citizens for collective action? What is noteworthy is that they articulate the importance of universities becoming democratic institutions and being civically engaged but argue that there are two challenges that impact. Firstly, engagement initiatives, such as access and diversity initiatives, service-learning programmes, that are stand-alone, separate, and disconnected, will never result in transformation. Secondly, mild, 'timid' civic engagement programmes do not impact on society (Saltmarsh and Hartley, 2011, p. 290).

Similarly, Breznitz and Feldman (2010) similarly acknowledge the importance of universities in society and claim that they have a 'unique role in society'. However, while stating some of the wider societal benefits of universities contribution to society (knowledge transfer, research, economic initiatives, policy development, community engagement), they believe that there is significant pressure on universities to make an economic profit. They state that universities can and should have impact on their regions having a service component, and coin the term 'multiversity', which is an institution very much embedded in the culture and economics of the region. They also state that universities have a 'third role', where they are 'obliged to make a contribution to society through research and development, collaborations and technology transfer with industry'



(Breznitz and Feldman, 2010, p. 141). Their purpose of the university has been articulated with a very strong economic development imperative.

There are various rationales and models presented by scholars as to the purpose of universities, such as, the liberal university where it is seen as a space for critical thought, slow contemplation, transformation for staff and students and the neoliberal university which focuses on increasing performance (Troiani and Dutson, 2021). Models such as the intellectual, managerialist and consumerist models present three competing paradigms, putting universities in an 'uneasy place' (O'Byrne and Bond, 2014). The rationale for the university to support efforts in tackling social injustice and inequality is also well articulated in research (Boyer, 1996; Longworth, 2003; Baker *et al.* 2009; Mahon, 2021). Boyer's (1996) contribution states that universities offer the greatest hope for 'intellectual and civic progress', but for this to be achieved, he asserts that higher education needs to commit to the scholarship of engagement, to be a 'more vigorous partner' in the quest for social justice and in answering societies challenges (Boyer, 1996, p. 17). He is critical of how universities have become and quotes Russell Jacoby (1989), *The Last Intellectuals*, stating that,

.... being an intellectual has come to mean being in the university and holding a faculty appointment, preferably a tenured one, of writing in a certain style understood only by one's peers, of conforming to an academic rewards system that encourages disengagement and even penalizes professors whose work becomes useful to non-academics or popularized (Boyer, 1996, p. 19).

Similarly, Longworth (2003) believes that universities and higher education institutions must lean towards becoming a learning society, one where everyone is empowered to meet their full potential. He pushes universities to create informed citizens and claims that HEIs are,

...keepers of the intellectual traditions of a nation, [and] they need to apply their considerable intelligence to act on behalf of the whole community rather than the section of it which affects their own sectional interest (Longworth, 2003, p. 96).

Smith and Webster (1997) also suggest that universities should have a fundamental role in the processes of cultural and social change. They call for universities to allow for critical reflection, as without it there is no possibility for social change and as a result we cannot act 'intelligently, rationally and humanely' (Smith and Webster, 1997, p. 57).

There is much evidence to prove that academic and civic benefits result from meaningful engagements between practitioners and scholars (Boyer, 1996). David Labaree (1997), cited in St. John *et al.*, (2017) articulates three goals (of equal weighting) for education, the first two goals are aimed at the public good and the last being focused on the individual. (1) Democratic equality which prepares an engaged and informed citizen, (2) social efficiency and the need to have a skillful and resourceful workforce and (3) social mobility, allowing for individual advances between social hierarchies. The public good and the benefit of education to the wider society is given prominence.

With relevance to this research, Barnett (2011) conceived the term the 'ecological university' stating that higher educational institutions' care for the world, should be shaped by worldwide issues. He states that dialogue with the community is essential to gain knowledge and information so that issues such as disadvantage, poverty and illiteracy can be addressed to the satisfaction of the people in the community (Barnett, 2011).

It can be maintained that a local university's developmental mission may be satisfactorily realized for the greater good of the local community and sustained when it is backed by policies and processes aimed at articulating a place of influence for community voices (Mbah, 2019, p. 12).

Barnett (2011) stresses the importance of the community voice and university policies being developed to support this.

Similarly, Baker *et al.* (2009) argue that our formal education system has a 'central role in educating people to deny, challenge or ignore local and global injustice' (Baker *et al.* 2009, p. 144). Mahon (2021) also recognises these ambitions and the role that higher education must play in creating a more 'humane society' but alerts us to the 'gathering shadows' of contemporary higher education institutions, where there is a growing focus on 'visceral ambition and intellectual cowardice, for blinkered individualism and professional competitiveness' (Mahon, 2021, p. 2).

Ireland's President Michael D. Higgins has argued that, in recent decades, the modern university has reached a '*perilous juncture*' (Higgins, 2021). He calls for a university sector that is concerned with societies challenges and one that plays an active part through critical theory and research in addressing the issues and contributing to the solutions. He believes in order to implement a change, HEIs need to be brave in orchestrating a change in

focus in relation to our current educational practices - teaching, learning and scholarship. He calls for universities to engage with the world and be an active part in finding solutions to the issues that present for society.

.....I believe that a university response, which is critically open to originality in theory and research, committed to humanistic values in teaching, is open to heterodoxy, has a unique opportunity to make a global contribution of substance to the great challenges and crises we face; that such a university can be and will be celebrated by future generations as the hub of original, critical thought, and a promoter of its application through new models of interconnection between science, technology, administration and society (Higgins, 2021).

In contrast to this argument, Fleming *et al.* (2017), claim however that there is a 'scarcity of writing and debate about the value of HE for social and community development, for the support of citizenship and the creation of a free republic, a democracy or a vision of the emancipatory potential of learning – even in universities' (Fleming *et al.*, 2017, p. 24).

In meeting the objectives and goals of social inclusion, and meeting the needs of the public good, research suggests therefore that it is essential for HEIs to recognize the significant role and power that they have not only in influencing and supporting societies' policy and practice, the transfer of knowledge, economic development, but also the role in social inclusion, supporting active citizenship, and social justice. This being the case, if universities have a role in supporting efforts to engage with cohorts of students and communities that experience educational disadvantage, then what is happening at a policy and practice level in Ireland to achieve this?

### **3.3 The Growth of Access Policy and Practice in Ireland**

From the outline of policy covered in Chapter Two, it is evident that the Irish Government believed that higher educational institutions have a role in supporting social and economic challenges and that they have a role to play in economic and social transformation. Irish educational policy has been impacted by global forces and the EU, and the OECD's human capitalist thinking has had some bearing on the development of Irish policy. There have been numerous policy documents in recent decades which have included commitments on equity of access and widening participation, with an increase in intensity of access policy since the mid-1990s with the launch of the White Paper on Education

(Fleming *et al.* 2017). Higher education legislation has ensured that access to education has now become a key strategic priority of higher education institutions.

The production of policy papers by the state and its agencies has been relentless, it seems, and continuous restructuring and re-setting of priorities, targets, programmes and practices makes for a constantly shifting terrain in the access field (Fleming *et al.*, 2017, p. 21).

Specific policies relating to higher educational access became more regular with the establishment of the National Access Office (NAO)<sup>5</sup>. The NAO was set up within the Higher Education Authority in 2003 following recommendations within the *Action Group on Access to Third Level Education* (2001). The work of this Office included the establishment of an Advisory Group (of which I was a member, representing access officers from 2010-2015) to focus on the development of a policy and practice on access. The Offices' remit was to work with institutes of technology, universities and other publicly funded institutions offering higher education programmes, to 'oversee policy and practice in educational access and opportunities for learners who are under-represented in higher education – those with a disability, socio-economically disadvantaged learners, those from the Traveller community and ethnic minorities, and mature students' (HEA, 2005).

The first three-year National Access Plan was launched in 2005 – 'Achieving Equity of Access to Higher Education in Ireland: Action plan 2005-2007'. A national plan was established because there was an acknowledgement that considerable work was underway nationally, but that 'inequity of access and participation remain as unacceptable and anti-democratic features of our education system' (HEA, 2005, p.9). There was consideration given to agreeing and evaluating local and national access targets. There was also an acknowledgement that in relation to community engagement HEIs can tend 'to operate in isolation and without an overall national policy to guide their work' (HEA, 2005, p. 10). As I noted in chapter two, working as an access officer at this time, I welcomed the launch of the first National Access Plan. When I was appointed to the role, I was given a one-page job description and freedom (albeit with very little resources) to direct the access agenda for my organisation. While the commitment to access was beginning to be formulated into

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<sup>5</sup> There have been twenty-five National Policy Documents on Access or with an Access agenda since 2003. (Fleming *et al.*, 2017, pp.51-2)

policy, the funding provided to higher education in the late 1990s was limited to the appointment of access officers. At that time, in the early 2000s, my role was very siloed, and I was hopeful that a commitment at national level to access and widening participation would provide me with ammunition to strengthen my organisation's commitment to access. I was also hopeful that financial resources would follow to allow for the expansion of initiatives. As an Access practitioner in the mid 1990s-early 2000s, with the establishment of the National Access Office, I witnessed the evolution of a commitment to addressing educational disadvantage at a policy level beginning to emerge. At that time, I was interested in how these pledges to equity of access at policy level would be implemented at a practical level.

Since then, there have been three further access plans. The 'National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education, 2008-2013', the 'National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019' (Extended to 2021) and more recently the 'Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in HE 2022-28'. O'Reilly (2020) whose research examines the contribution of community education models to access, argues that the access plans, especially the earlier two plans, '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' (O'Reilly, 2020, p. 7).

The 2008-2013 Plan, which was launched as the country faced into a recession, incorporates a human capital and neoliberal narrative. Targets include an 'evidence base and relevant data collection systems [that] will be enhanced,' along with specific percentages for target groups such as mature students, students with disabilities and all socio-economic disadvantaged groups (HEA, 2008, p. 12).

....it is clear that there are continued tensions between human capital and social democratic ideals within the stated objectives of the plan. Neoliberal tones can be found in the plan's emphasis on the importance of the knowledge society for Ireland's competitiveness; placing social inclusion alongside competitive advantage for a knowledge economy (Higher Education Authority, 2008, pp14, 15, 19) (Van Aswegen, 2013, p. 123)

Social inclusion and access are often combined in research publications and policy documents. The HEA have named social inclusion as being a key strategic priority within the

National Plan for Equity of Access and confirms the ambition that higher education has a direct role to play in contributing to social inclusion (HEA, 2008, p. 16; Van Aswegen, 2013).

The educational dimension of disadvantage is acknowledged as a complex relationship between the individual, family, and the community, resulting in some groups receiving less benefit than others from the formal system (O'Brien and O'Fathaigh, 2007, p. 598-599). Acknowledging this relationship, the [National Access] plan states that it will be necessary for educational institutions, families, and the wider community to work in partnership to remove educational disadvantage (Van Aswegen, 2013, p. 121).

In the 2015-2021 National Access Plan, there is a change in narrative. HEIs were encouraged to link more closely with communities. There was a stronger emphasis on social inclusion than in previous reports. There was an acknowledgment that collaboration with communities is crucial to making an impact on educational disadvantage.

We know that in building for social inclusion, we need to start early and start local. Starting early means that we put the building blocks in place as early as possible in the education lifecycle. Starting local means that we have to find ways of involving communities in creating their own future in education. (National Plan for Equity of Access, 2015, p. 1)

A key theme to this report was that 'Access is Everyone's Business'. This aimed to allow for access strategies at institutional level to become more embedded within the higher education institutions. There was still a very strong focus on targets and data collection, which were then linked to institutional compacts. The HEA began to identify HEIs' 'success' in relation to access based on data relating to new entrants. It was suggested in this plan that access funding would be awarded to HEIs based on these numbers, through the Recurrent Grant Allocation Model (RGAM). Data was to be gathered through the higher education Equal Access Survey (EAS), (which is non-compulsory for students to complete), on the disability, ethnicity, including members of the Irish Traveller community, and lone parenthood status. Metrics were introduced to calculate success. Because funding was linked to the increased numbers of access students accessing higher education, it can be argued that achieving student metrics then became the primary focus of HEIs.

A Higher Education Systems Performance Framework was launched in 2018 (HEA, 2018c). Six key system objectives were identified for the Higher Education System, with equality of opportunity and a student body that reflects the diversity and social mix of

Ireland's population, included. Equality of opportunity is now of equal weighting with the other objectives highlighted, such as, academic excellence, research, governance, national and international engagement. The HEA through this framework uses its weight to carry out a process of strategic dialogue with HEIs to agree individual performance compacts using metrics, which was proposed by the Hunt Report (discussed in Chapter Two), between the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and each publicly funded higher education institution. Each HEI through this process puts forward their individual institutional performance indicators and targets.

What does this mean in reality for Higher Educational Institutions? Is the Hunt report setting the mood music for HEIs while the National Access Plan sets the tempo? The Hunt Report is dictating the policy direction that the HEA wants the individual HEIs to follow. The development of institutional compacts has meant that HEIs are now more accountable, and performance is benched-marked against meeting targets and metrics. Is the level of flexibility, autonomy and creativity open to HEIs to think outside the box, in developing bespoke access initiatives limited and stifled? If the political focus is on successful immediate outputs, does this restrict long term investment by HEIs in supporting learning and educational opportunities within communities? There is a very short-term outlook in terms of attempts to achieve equity of access. Connolly *et al.* (1996) cautions of the pursuit of trying to 'get things done' and 'rolling up the sleeves', as they believe that 'it sustains systems of oppression rather than acknowledging the complexities of how power and ideologies operate. It doesn't, in the end, do anyone we care about any favours' (Connolly *et al.*, 1996, p. 25).

The establishment of targets has intensified HEIs to work as independent, almost competitive, entities, where there can be a scramble for access students to meet targets. 'The measure becomes the master determining the worth of the university.' (Lynch, 2014, p. 194). Lynch believes that measuring outputs reduces 'first order social and moral values to second-order principles; trust, integrity, care and solidarity are subordinated to regulation, control and competition' (Lynch, 2014, p. 195). Stephens and Gallagher (2021) reports that higher education has adopted a metricised system that produces 'significantly dysfunctional

effects caused by an obsession with measurement over judgement’ (Stephens and Gallagher, 2021, P.20).

Where two or more HEIs are within a common geographic region, collaborative practices between HEIs at pre-entry level should be the norm. Target setting can lead to HEIs operating as solo runners in establishing links with community groups, with DEIS schools, further educational providers, adult education groups, etc. Ball (2010) recognises this and claims that policy with neoliberal ideology has forced us into focusing on our own needs and to be ‘wary of needy others’. He says that HEIs are encouraged to seek out advantage and exclusivity. This can result in stakeholders being approached by many different HEIs, working separately, yet all looking for similar things. Access programmes can be isolationist, fragmented, disjointed, and uncoordinated, as a result.

More recently there have been attempts by the HEA to bring HEIs together through cluster funding initiatives, such as PATH. When funding is linked to policy, HEI autonomy to develop bespoke access programmes can be restrictive. The Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) funding, which was proposed in the HEA in the 2015-2021 National Access Plan, allowed HEIs to apply for funding for access initiatives. PATH 2 (1916 Bursaries) and PATH 3 (access initiatives) provided HEIs with an opportunity to think strategically and apply for funding. However, the conditions for application meant that only ‘Cluster’ applications were considered, which came as a direct consequence of the Hunt Report.

The building of regional collaborative clusters ... is key to the delivery of many of the most important objectives of the National Strategy and to the delivery of the overarching objective of achieving a more coherent, higher quality and more efficient higher education system (HEA.ie/policy).

While strong working relationships exist between the access offices in each of these HEIs, there were concerns around the differences in priorities, given the geographic distance between the institutes/universities. HEIs, with very different regional needs and priorities, were instructed by the HEA to work together to identify priorities for funding. The funding did allow for access support which was positive, however, issues regarding short-term injections of funding, differing regional priorities and lack of sustainability were identified by access practitioners as challenges.



It is vital that progress towards the achievement of these reform objectives is not obscured by over-concentration on the raw statistics relating to increasing student numbers (Schuetze and Slowey, 2002, p. 325).

### **3.3.1 New National Access Plan 2022-28.**

The fourth National Access Plan was launched in September 2022. There was a significant delay in publishing the report, with the previous plan initially planned to be in place until 2019 and subsequently extended to 2021. Certain elements of previous access plans were incorporated into the 2022-28 plan. The 2022 plan states that this new National Access Plan 'continues, and builds on, the vision of those previous plans and our ambitions for achieving a more inclusive and diverse student population in higher education' (HEA, 2022, p. 5).

The ambitions of this plan are encapsulated in the following two statements:

That the higher education student body entering, participating in and completing higher education, at all levels and across all programmes, reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population.

That our higher education institutions are inclusive, universally designed environments which support and foster student success and outcomes, equity and diversity, and are responsive to the needs of students and wider communities (HEA, 2022, p. 28)

The new plan recognises that there have been some achievements with certain cohorts of students, but that challenges still exist, and it confirms that only 10% of students in HE come from disadvantaged areas (HEA, 2022, p. 5). Target groups such as, people who experience socio-economic disadvantage, mature students, Travellers, and students with disabilities were again named in the 2022 plan. The new plan goes further however, specifically mentioning categories such as, students with intellectual disabilities, people who have experienced homelessness, people who have had experience of the criminal justice system and members of the Roma community. Providing access to higher education for these groups is again seen as a way to improve their life chances and employment opportunities.

The strategic goal of the Government and of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovative and Science is to;

Provide supports and opportunities for learning to all, recognising the needs of vulnerable learners and the most marginalised, and assist people in access to and progression through higher and further education and training, so as to grow prosperity across communities and build social cohesion (HEA, 2022, p. 27).

The plan is student focused, and the aim is to deliver inclusive and positive outcomes for all students throughout their educational journey. The goals as a result are student-centred.

- 1) Inclusivity – supported by embedding access, universal design across the whole HE.
- 2) Flexibility – Building and recognising that all students are individual and there cannot be a ‘one size fits all’ approach. Infrastructure and supports need to be flexible.
- 3) Clarity – Clear information on educational opportunities.
- 4) Coherence – This calls for collaboration and connected supports across the educational landscape. This includes recognising the role and contribution of the community sector and regional partners.
- 5) Sustainability – Is there adequate funding to support Access and support students through HE.

Underpinned by the final goal, being;

- 6) Evidence-driven approach – The monitoring and evaluation of impact is described as a ‘major objective’ of this goal.

There is significant focus in the plan given to targets and indicators and how performance is measured. There is also a commitment to having a progress review in 2025.

Measuring performance is at the heart of this National Access Plan and we propose to measure its impact in three ways: through key performance indicators, national targets and qualitative indicators....The key performance indicators will be measured yearly where possible (HEA, 2022, p. 24).

There is considerable attention given to baseline data, current datasets, monitoring targets, assessing the ‘system’s progress’. While this quantitative methodology is reflective of previous plans, there is a recognition in this new national plan of the importance of more qualitative analysis, such as pre-entry initiatives with schools and the community sector.

This most recent National Access Plan references the importance of taking a ‘whole-of-government’ approach and it states the importance of aligning with other government policies, such as the Programme for Government and the Roadmap for Social Inclusion. In this latter Government Policy, it recognises the need for the community voice to be heard and states that listening to and learning from communities are paramount. In the Programme for Government, it references the need to implement a new anti-poverty, Social Inclusion and Community Development Action Plan framed around the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals, underpinning sound community development practices.

A key concern of many community and voluntary groups is that they are heard by Government. They are concerned that they do not have the influence or leverage of other groups such as business, trade unions, and sectoral organisations. (Roadmap for Social Inclusion, 2020, p. 63)

Although the alignment of these policies is noted, the commitment given to engaging with communities which are challenged socially and economically, and have low levels of progression to higher education, is minimal and it does not suggest the engagement principles in addressing these issues.

The fourth goal of the plan holds the most hope in terms of community engagement. It aims to provide collaborative supports and approaches to inclusion throughout all levels of the formal educational system. Disappointingly, while it recognises the role of communities, it is limited to ‘raising awareness’ of educational opportunities. While it does mention that further and community education providers are important in providing ‘bridges’ to HE and it continues saying that a ‘holistic and joined-up approach’ is what is required to support a student through their educational journey, it falls short of opportunities to collaboratively address societal issues such as social inclusion.

National policy focused on equity of access and a commitment to addressing educational disadvantage at a State level is evident, with the number of access policy documents that have been adopted in the last twenty years. However, there is a tension between the ambition set out in the policies and the reality of how HEIs are expected to implement these policies on the ground. The political ambition sets out a commitment to social democracy and social inclusion, but the reality and conditions on the ground for access practitioners in trying to achieve this ambition is very different.

I want to note briefly here, as this will be important when I return to my findings, that the focus is on who we work with, as opposed to 'how' we work. While focus is given to flexible infrastructure and alternative access routes, the focus is on bending structurally as opposed to addressing any inequalities that exist at a systemic level. While universal design and a 'whole of institution' approach is stated, there is no mention of methodology of engagement or using community development principles in pre-entry work with communities.

The methodology and ideology identified within access policy has tended to focus on new-managerial ways of working. The focus of policy aimed at increasing access at higher education is very often linked to labour activation and to-date access policy has tended to thread the aim of an inclusive democratic education system and social democracy with goals related economic progress, achieved by incorporating bureaucratic ideologies.

### **3.4 Access Funding**

Funding is a key mechanism through which relationships of power are created and mediated across social space, on various scales and levels and through time. It connects communities, practitioners, the state, NGOs, corporations and other social institutions. Funding in this sense functions as a connective tissue within power configurations: it is not simply an enabler of community development, it is also constitutive of it (McCrea and Finnegan, 2019).

The Advisory Committee on Third Level Student Support (1993) was established as there was a perception that the state support which was means tested, was unfair and resulted in poverty-traps for some families (Clancy, 2015). Following this report, there was a recommendation to introduce a capital test which was met with resistance by the self-employed. Seen as being politically unwise, the government made the decision to abolish third level fees for under-graduate students. There was a concern amongst university governors that this move would result in an over-reliance on state support and that universities could be subject to cutbacks.

In earlier decades, the recurrent funding for higher educational institutions (universities, institutes of technology and other publicly funded HEIs) was based on an incremental budget system, taking into consideration the budget and expenditure of the previous year. Funding was negotiated and a 'block' grant was provided by the state through the Higher Education Authority. The institutes of technology, formerly the regional

technical colleges and the colleges of education were funded by the Department of Education and Science up to 2006. They then moved under the remit of the HEA from that year forward.

Since the early 2000s, the HEA have tried to move away from the incremental budget system favouring a more formulaic approach and introducing 'unit-costing' for teaching and learning. Data gathering and data management became a strong feature of this funding model. Funding in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century was allocated for strategic projects. The Strategic Innovation Funding was one such funding source, which aimed at improving equity of access. In 2005, the HEA finalised a new recurrent grant allocation model. The overall aim of this budget model was to allow for institutional autonomy, facilitate long term strategic planning, reward institutional responsiveness to regional needs, increase access and opportunities for students from all backgrounds and provide funds associated with supporting students who experience socio-economic disadvantage. The model was introduced in a phased way, being applied to the university sector in 2006 and the IoTs in 2009 and has three elements to it:

- (1) The main core funding element is the recurrent grant which is allocated using a formula and allows additional weighting for students from socio-economic disadvantaged backgrounds, students with disabilities and mature students. (Clancy, 2015)
- (2) The second element is the 'ear-marked' funding, which includes time-limited, competitive funding calls, such as the Strategic Innovation Funding and more recently the PATH funding.
- (3) The third element is the 'performance funding' which has a focus on targets and outputs. The third funding component adopts a penalty if certain targets and are not met. Up to 10% of funding can be withheld if agreed targets between the HEI and the HEA are not met. This is based on the three-year mission-based compacts where HEIs negotiate targets based on the institutional profile, region, and mission in line with seven key strategic priorities of the HEA. (HEA, 2016)

### Overview of the Components of the HEA Recurrent Funding Model

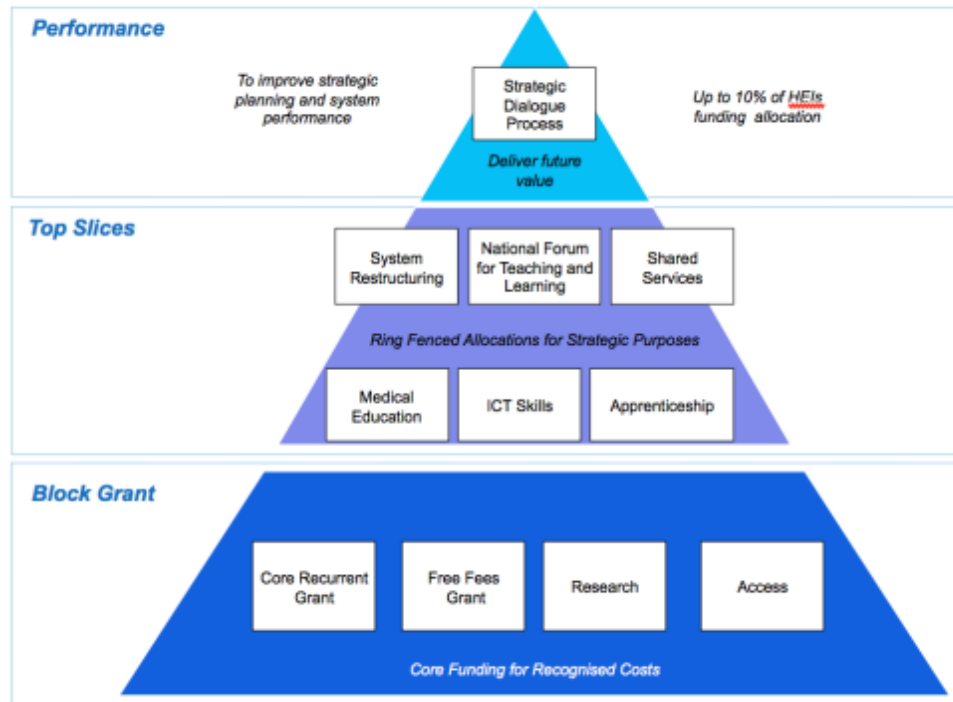


Figure 5: Overview of components of the HEA Recurrent Funding Model (HEA, 2016, p. 3).

Each HEI receives funding for access through the Recurrent Grant Allocation Model (RGAM), which is based on registered access students each year. This funding is intended to address resourcing required to implement access initiatives from pre-entry, entry and post-entry and provide ‘an adequate access infrastructure in each institution’. How the funding is to be spent is not prescriptive as the HEA wishes to allow HEIs to have the flexibility and the discretion to apply resources to different access student profiles, depending on the need and the challenges that present. The access RGAM allocation therefore isn’t ring-fenced for access.

The HEA has generally resisted calls to ring-fence elements of block grant funding for particular activities and has attempted to preserve the discretion of institutional management to allocate internal budgets in the way that best allows them respond and adapt to evolving challenges and meet agreed targets from one year to the next..... While keeping to the principles of a block grant system discourage formally ring-fencing amounts for specific purposes, there has been criticism during the consultation process that there is insufficient transparency with regard to how access funding is allocated within institutions (HEA, 2016).

The access funding framework was presented in the recent National Access Plan 2022-28. In the diagram below, two funding streams are presented – (1) funding that support students directly and (2) funding that supports HEIs to design and deliver access strategies.

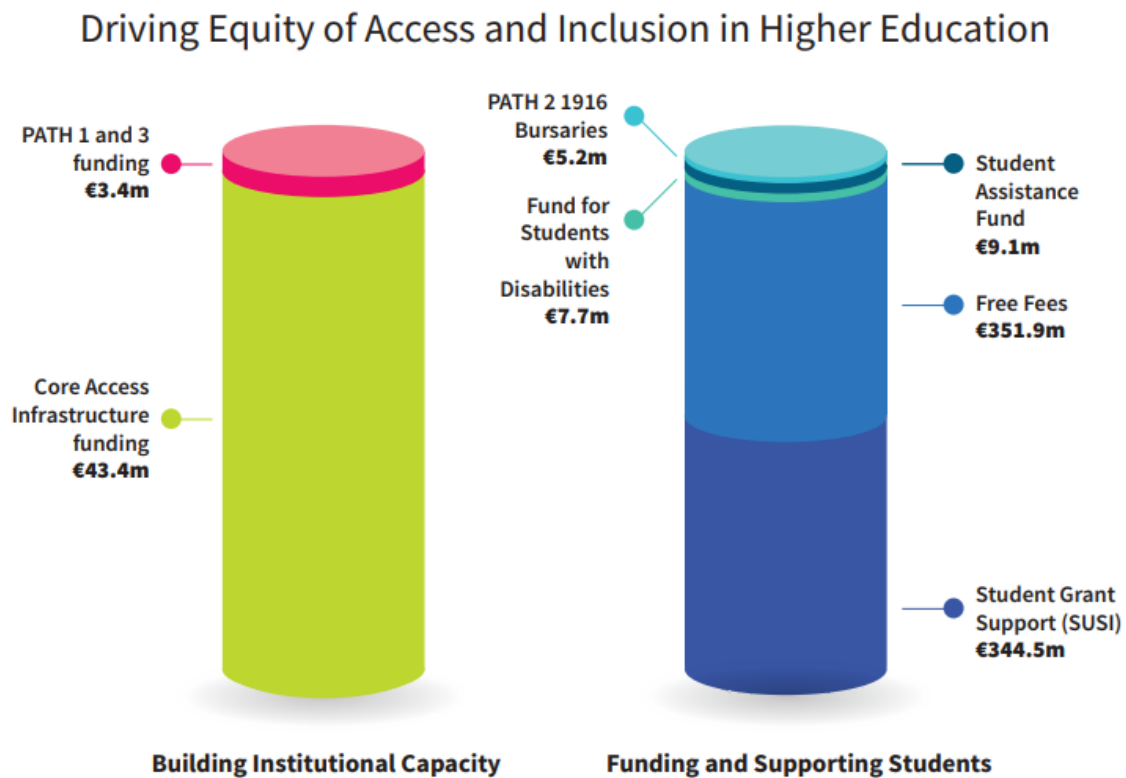


Figure 6: Driving equity of access and inclusion in HE (HEA, 2020, p. 45).

It is worth mentioning at this point that of the 49 countries that have signed up the Bologna Process<sup>6</sup>, which set out to define measurable targets for under-represented groups, only Ireland and the UK have put in place a system where funding has been established as an incentive for HEIs (Fleming *et al.*, 2017, p. 30).

These funding systems developments demonstrate considerable effort by Government into the integration of systems within higher education. The integration of excluded groups does not get the same level of attention.

<sup>6</sup> The Bologna Process aims to bring coherence to higher education within Europe. It established the European Higher Education Area to encourage staff and student mobility, allow for HEs to be more equitable and inclusive and make HE in Europe more competitive worldwide.

### **3.5 The Emergence of the HEI Access Offices**

Within the White Paper on Education in 1995, there was a commitment to addressing access and 'inequality in the system' and looked to support people with special educational needs and those whose experience of socio-economic disadvantage prevented them from participating in education (Department of Education, 1995). The Paper didn't stipulate how widening participation should be designed, delivered, embedded, but it did result in it being considered more seriously by HEIs because of the legal requirement. At this time, quality reviews were established within HEIs and because of the equality agenda within the legislative framework, access would now be included within this process. The Universities Act in 1997, the Education Act in 1998 and the Qualifications Act in 1999 and the Institutes of Technology Act in 2006 all ensured that access was to be addressed (Fleming *et al.*, 2017).

From the late 1990s, HEIs began to appoint access officers. I was one of the first access officers appointed within the Institutes of Technology sector in 2003. The role of the access officer at that point was to provide access and widening participation for 'non-standard' students. Students with disabilities, mature students and students from 'socio-economic disadvantaged backgrounds' were identified as priority groups on my job description (See Appendix for Access Officer job description).

#### **3.5.1 Access structures.**

Within the institutes of technology/technological university sector, access officers are graded within an administrative structure, aligned to a Grade VII post. When access officers were first introduced into HEIs, most access officers reported into the Registrar, as captured in the Report of the Action Group on Access to Third Level (2001). In the mid-2000s, the Academic Administration and Student Affairs Managers (Assistant Principal Officer Post) post was established resulting in an organisational re-structuring for some access offices. There was an additional layer of management placed between the access officer and the Registrar. Staff resources within access can vary, generally depending on the size of student population within the HEI. In some of the smaller HEIs/TU Campuses, the access team can be as small as one or two people.



Within the traditional university sector, there can be larger, more established teams of access practitioners in place (e.g. 25 access staff in TCD, 31 access staff in UCD, 43 access staff in UCC). The access functions tend to be segregated (Mature Student teams, Disability Support Services, Schools teams, etc) with a head of access in place to manage the various functions. Research carried out by one of the PATH Clusters estimated the number of access practitioners in Ireland as being 193 people, with the majority being female, over 40 years of age, white Irish, with most having security of contract however a minority have precarious contracts (Brennan *et al.*, 2024).

Nationally, there are active networks which support access practitioners and allow for practitioners to engage with national policy that impacts on local initiatives. E.g. DAWN supporting Disability Practitioners, Access Made Accessible (AMA) supporting Access Practitioners with a remit on socio-economic disadvantage, THEA Access Officers Network. These Networks have provided practitioners with opportunities to share best practice, to collaborate on initiatives and to debate policy directions. When first established, the National Access Office invited representatives from the DAWN Network and the Access Made Accessible Network to sit on the NAO Steering Group. I represented AMA on this Advisory Group from 2010-15.

The THEA<sup>7</sup> Access Officers Network is particularly vibrant and relevant to access officers within IoTs and affiliated TUs. The Network meets four times per year and agenda items centre on issues relating to policy, resources, issues on the ground for students, advocacy. Access officers set the agenda ahead of meetings, which are Chaired by a Registrar from a participating HEI, with the intention that issues at the coalface, experienced by access officers, can be brought up the management line to Registrar's level.

### **3.6 Access Research**

In the 1960s, policy and research on higher education was primarily undertaken by the ESRI, the OECD and government departments. There was a gap in the higher education research landscape at this time with much of the funding and focus being on human capital and economics. It wasn't until the 1980s, that 'a richer vein of research' on access and on

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<sup>7</sup> THEA – The Technological Higher Education Association – formed when the institutes of technology formerly represented by Institutes of Technology Ireland, joined to form an advocacy body to support the sector. ([www.thea.ie](http://www.thea.ie))

socio-economic disadvantage began to emerge with the work of Patrick Clancy, John Coolahan and others (Hazelkorn, 2014).

Research on access and widening participation in Ireland does exist, however it is limited (Slowey, 1990). Hazelkorn (2014) notes that there is limited research in higher education and as a result there are 'huge gaps' in our knowledge and understanding of Irish higher education.

Many of the studies on educational inequality in Ireland, have to-date concentrated on policy analysis, social class, class mobility, family income, human capital and the relationship between social class background and educational achievement (Cullinan *et al.*, 2013; Clancy, 2015). O'Reilly (2020) acknowledges a 'significant field of literature on access', mapping how educational inequalities at institutional level impact on various marginalised cohorts. Research exists on Irish HE access and widening participation policy and practice, on historical developments, programme evaluations, (e.g. Lynch, 2006; Grummel, 2007; Bleach, 2013; Keane, 2011; Fleming, 2013; Fleming *et al.*, 2017; Fleming *et al.*, 2022; St. John *et al.*, 2017; Shannon, 2019; O'Reilly, 2008; O'Reilly, 2020) but limited research exists on community engagement and its role by higher education in widening participation and increasing access (Cuthill, 2010; Cuthill, 2012; Nash, 2020; O'Reilly, 2020).

There is a scarcity of writing and debate about the value of HE for social and community development, for support of citizenship and the creation of a free republic, a democracy or a vision of the emancipatory potential of learning – even in universities (Fleming *et al.*, 2017, p. 24).

Bleach (2013) states that higher education research has focused significant attention to access and addressing inequalities in education, but that the focus has concentrated on educational disadvantage amongst older teenagers and within the formal educational settings. She claims that there is a lack of an integrated approach to working with communities and parents.

If, as the HEA (2008) and other research suggests, poverty and disadvantage are as much about the experiences of communities as about the experiences of individuals, the elimination of educational disadvantage requires [an approach], which combines both individual and community development as well as joined-up strategies across education levels (Bleach, 2013, pp. 12-13).

Meaningful research exists by Scull and Cuthill (2010) and Cuthill (2010; 2012) in Australia involving action research with communities, reflective processes and engaged outreach. This research aimed to determine if actively involving all stakeholders, including communities, in the access process, leads to enhanced access and widen participation. Similar studies in Ireland have not been undertaken to-date.

### **3.6.1 Practitioner research.**

Significantly, there is a minute number of research papers written by Irish access practitioners on access (Fleming, 2013; Creedon, 2015; McCann and Delapp, 2015; Hannon, 2017; Kelly, 2017; McTernan, 2019, Fleming *et al.*, 2022, Brennan *et al.*, 2024). Access practitioner research tends to focus on case studies, barriers to access, access programme analysis. Hannon (2017) an access practitioner/researcher, suggests that research has been focused through a human capital lens and while the argument for developing access and widening participation in this way can be convincing, she contends that it offers an ‘impoverished model for education’ as it does not focus on transformational outcomes, well-being, or human agency.

Access practitioners have been in place with HEIs for more than twenty years, and in this time have gathered extensive knowledge and experience, yet practitioner research has been very limited and Irish practitioner-led research focusing on access to higher education and community engagement cannot be sourced. When starting my research journey and reviewing existing literature I was surprised and disappointed to find that this was the case. It struck me early during the desk research phase that this was a gap in the literature. Kurt Lewin (1984), the social psychologist, promoted a practitioner’s reflection on knowing, and reflection on action, in order to develop actionable theory. Theory derived from practice can be applied to other situations where they can be tested and reinvented (Schön, 1995).

New forms of scholarship can be found within practice (Schön, 1995) and as a practitioner/scholar I was particularly interested in this. Dynarski (2010) advises that research and practice need to be intertwined, so that we can learn from evidence and examine the gaps. He claims that practitioners have the expertise on practice and researchers are experts on research and therefore urges a broad ‘exchange between the two’ (Dynarski, 2010, p. 64).

If the research and education communities do not collaborate, the two worlds will fruitlessly collide. Science could wind up as just an item on a checklist when educators are adopting a new program: “Looked at some academic journal articles. . . check.” The research and education communities need to collaborate — formally or informally — to exchange information from both research and practice and ensure that we take full advantage of scientific findings while recognizing their limits (Dynarski, 2010, p. 61).

Massell *et al.*, (2015), delve into the significance of practitioner knowledge and they examine if the ‘local voice’ of educational practitioners is included in the development of policy. They define practitioner knowledge as being ‘the information, beliefs, and understanding of context that practitioners acquire through experience about how strategies are working’ (Massell *et al.*, 2015, p. 114). Macintyre and Wunder (2012) believe that when educational practitioners are in isolation from educational researchers and from educational policy, their scope and influence is undermined. They argue that ‘practitioner inquiry mobilizes practitioner knowledge for reorienting, mediating and generating education practice-as-policy’ (Latta *et al.*, 2012, p. 4).

Practitioner knowledge is important to acknowledge, capture and value. Macintyre and Wunder (2012) examine the role of education and practitioner knowledge within that. They caution against the ‘what works’ political agenda, which is directed from the top. They accept that while this policy agenda is often well-meaning, there is limited capacity for critical analysis. They state that ‘in this environment, educators struggle to articulate what they are losing sight of and the reasons why this is so, typically seeing their practices away from, and/or beyond such efforts, as an impossible undertaking’ (Macintyre and Wunder, 2012, p. 7).

Sawyer and Mason (2012) discuss the separation of research and practice. They claim that while complex and nuanced across disciplines, there are two conditions that lead to this divide. The first being that there is no requirement or expectation for researchers to link with practitioners. Secondly, practitioners can very often be blind to the benefits of connecting with formal research. They cite Lewin (1984), who warned of the repercussions of this disconnect stating that society and practice would suffer.

Without equal weight and detailed attention given to higher education as a social field, it is likely that research will inadvertently collude with the minimal impact of

the widening participation agenda. That is to say, research using these light or pick and mix approaches has not really challenged the practices underpinning the status quo: that higher education is a contested space, subject to power struggles to shape or reshape the field, and further influenced by struggles in the field of power (Webb *et al.*, 2017, p. 144).

While there has been considerable research in Ireland focused on the policy, initiatives and programmes committed to widening participation and challenges faced by access cohorts, there is a dearth of practitioner-led research on access and community engagement. Significant research on access and widening participation exists in the UK but the absence of research into practitioners still endures (Rainford, 2021). Gazeley *et al.* (2018) claim that while the relationship between policy, research and practice can be nuanced, practitioner research has ‘high transformative potential as it is thoroughly grounded in the complexities encountered in routine practice’ (Gazeley *et al.*, 2019, p. 1008). I realised early in my research journey, as I became aware of this gap in knowledge, that I wanted the access practitioner and community to be central to the research.

This chapter commenced by outlining the universities rationale for addressing issues relating to social inclusion and disadvantage. Given this, the development, focus and influencing factors of access and widening participation policy in Ireland was introduced. The origins of the HEI access officers and offices were outlined, before moving on to outline the structures and funding that exists. It concluded with an overview of existing research on access to education and highlighted the gaps in relation to same. In the next chapter, the theoretical perspectives that have influenced my research will be explored.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **ACCESS AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT – THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

The previous chapter presented the higher education and the access context and explored some of the existing research in relation to access to higher education in Ireland. This chapter introduces themes arising from my theoretical framework. As explained in the introductory chapter, I have a strong passion for social justice and equity of access to learning and educational opportunities. I believe that there are deep systemic inequalities in our education system and that these inequalities have resulted in some communities being marginalised and under-represented within higher education. I stand within a critical and egalitarian tradition, and I am using some of these ideas, methods and practices to scrutinize and think carefully about that. This chapter will focus on the review of relevant literature to identify key questions relating to access and community engagement.

From my experience as an access practitioner, one of my biggest concerns is that we do not seem to be making the impact on equity of access to education as we had hoped. As outlined in earlier chapters, national policy seeking to increase and widen participation through the expansion of HEIs into ‘mass’ institutions, has been the primary way of thinking about educational disadvantage. Most national educational policies, for example, the White Paper (Department of Education and Science, 1995) and access specific policies, articulate the idea that we address educational disadvantage by making HEIs more open to disadvantaged communities. How practically does this work? The answer up to recently, given the policy and practice (pre-formalization of access and the first ten-fifteen years of the formalization of access within HE) was that awareness of educational opportunities is increased and access avenues are provided to increase targets, for example the HEAR and DARE access pathways. This did not fully achieve what it set out to achieve, as deep systemic, nuanced, and complex challenges are at play (Fleming *et al.*, 2017; Powell *et al.*, 2020).

I wanted to understand the barriers to accessing third level education, I wanted to understand the terminology that is being used in my field and how access practice and educational disadvantage is understood and presented in literature. I wanted to understand the long-term societal impact of increased access to higher education and how this impacts

on breaking cycles of disadvantage and exclusion. I sought out explanations in wider sociological and educational literature and I explored scholarship on educational disadvantage, social inclusion, access and widening participation to understand the context and to critically think about relations of power and policy.

Given my educational and professional background in community development, in seeking answers to the question of how increased access could be achieved, exploring Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy of education and community development was of particular interest to me. One of the answers that has been articulated in greater strength in access policy, has been a focus on community engagement and that working closely with communities can be incredibly effective (HEA, 2022). In this regard, Freire's thinking, which is of significance nationally and internationally in relation to community development, international development, critical pedagogy and education, is significant. Freire was an obvious choice helping me to think through access from a community engagement and community perspective.

There is a growing body of literature from developed countries claiming that a HEIs commitment to community service and the development of the traditional third mission of community service, can be of benefit to the region (Preece, 2013). In recent HEA policy documents and literature relating to social policy, this emphasis on community engagement is clear and as a practitioner/scholar I was interested in learning more about this and how it is understood by both access practitioners and the community.

I know from my professional experience as access officer that community engagement is not just theoretical, it is an established practice, often a set of experiments or pilots. I wanted to know more about how HEI community engagement is understood and to achieve this I reviewed over fifty scholarly works relating to civic and community engagement. In studying the literature, I found that existing scholarship has focused mostly on questions of power, equality and participation. Scholars have also looked at the conditions in which engagement happens, the modes of approach and the time invested. Scholarship generally suggests that community engagement practices are beneficial for the HEIs and the communities. Community engagement frameworks presented by scholars share many similarities and highlight essential principles, such as equal partnerships,

cooperative goal setting, collective impact, mutual benefit, long-term shared vision and evaluation of the impact. McNall *et al.* (2009) identify these university engagement practices but also suggest that they are 'worthy of deliberate cultivation'. Debates exist around the strategic commitment to sustainable partnerships and the development of individuals in the communities (Bidandi *et al.*, 2021), the distribution of power, unequal partnerships and ownership of partnerships (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2010) and questions relating to engagement on whose terms (Shaw and Crowther, 2017).

As I was interested in finding out what community engagement practices are taking place from an access perspective, the core animating question I wished to explore through the literature centred on how to build enduring, effective relationships between communities and HEIs. There are multiple ways of talking about HEI community engagement, in terms of research, in terms of service learning, in terms of social inclusion and civic responsibility. I wanted to explore these and I wanted to make sense of this for myself and for my practice. In approaching the literature review, I carefully considered the questions I sought to answer. I read extensively to synthesize existing knowledge and to bridge the gap between existing scholarship and the research I wished to undertake. I wanted the research to contribute to the theoretical understanding and practical application of access to higher education. Therefore in this chapter I will select literature relating to community engagement, community education and theories relating to pedagogical practices in order to determine how HEIs currently engage with communities and what frameworks are endorsed and promoted. I will explore philosophies and critical pedagogies of education and community development to determine how universities could apply these theoretical frames to enhance the access agenda and allow for social inclusion objectives to be met. I will explore scholarship relating to community engagement and critical pedagogies of education. Adult education and community education literature became an important aspect of this review as it focuses on educational curriculum and practices that meet the learning needs of communities.

In exploring how universities engage or not, the focus of a lot of scholarship concentrated on the importance of relationships, collaboration and partnerships. There are multiple, overlapping and sometimes conflicting ways of talking about community



engagement in research and policy (e.g. in terms of research, in terms of service learning, in terms of social inclusion and civic responsibility etc). I wanted to explore the idea of community engagement and I wanted to make sense of this for myself and for my practice. I wanted to explore how these relationships work, thus, the chapter concludes by looking at research focused on the importance of care, love and solidarity for higher education, in striving to achieve social inclusion and equality. Lynch (2009) claims that when 'societies endorse solidarity principles in public through equalizing power relations and supporting care work, this greatly enhances the quality of life for all people, especially that of the most vulnerable' (Lynch, 2009, p.410). As an access practitioner, which is reliant on the capacity to develop 'supportive, affective' relations, I was very much attracted to this perspective.

#### **4.2 Higher Education and Community Engagement**

The word community.... refers to an aggregation of people or neighbourhoods that have something in common. It is both a place and an experience of connectedness. (McKnight and Block, 2010, p.5)

There are various definitions of community. Fitzgerald *et al.*, (2010) define community not only as a geographic space with social relationships but also, a network of individual relationships, traditions and behaviours that develop influenced by their socio-economic situation. Shaw (2008) argues that the term 'community' has been appropriated to legitimise a variety of political perspectives. She contends that by looking at the definition alone, we lose the 'critical connection between value and meaning' (Shaw, 2008, p.27). She claims that most accounts of community are based on the ambition of creating 'the good life', even though this is not always explicit. Shaw (2008) continues to state that there are often opposing political positions in relation to community and its social significance. 'The relationship between individual freedom and the common good is, of course, one of the central concerns of social and political theory' (Shaw, 2008, p.25) making it difficult to define.

Some communities are challenged by multifaceted social and economic issues such as poverty, educational disadvantage and low levels of employment. Fitzgerald *et al.* (2010) claim that the challenge of educational inequality by low-income students is particularly obvious in urban centres because of their density, increased size, and divisions of labour,

which result in a greater sense of isolation among individuals with minimal opportunities for social networks.

.....neighbourhoods all too often are characterised by concentrated poverty, racial separation and isolation, low levels of academic achievement among children, low levels of quality-of-life indicators, a poor economic base for industry, weak neighbouring and social ties, low informal social control, and a sense of powerlessness and isolation. This lack of self-sufficiency and self-determination among those who live in urban core residential areas undermines the human and social capital that is essential to restoration of neighbourhood, community, and the preservation of democratic values (Fitzgerald *et al*, 2010, p. 6).

Communities with concentrated levels of poverty and disproportionate low levels of progression to higher education is something that is also evidenced in the Cork City Profile (2018) as noted in the introductory chapter. In my access role I was particularly aware of the regions in the city with low levels of educational attainment and I had made attempts to link with these communities mainly through partnerships with formal educational providers (DEIS schools and Further Education Colleges). My direct links with the community, on the ground, were non-existent and I was interested in learning through this research, the benefits of community engagement from an access practice perspective.

My involvement with the UNESCO Learning Cities initiative introduced me to academics (Dr. Seamus O'Tuama, Dr. Siobhan O'Sullivan, Prof. Norman Longworth) who have been advocating for proactive engaged universities and lifelong learning as a way to contribute to addressing social and economic challenges in communities and in society. I became interested in how HEIs engage with communities and what frameworks exist in establishing links with external organisations and communities. In undertaking the literature review on community engagement, I was keen to examine the relationship between educational institutions and the communities in which they serve. In exploring the literature relating to HEI community engagement, there were many similarities in the purpose, ambition, justification, benefits, and the contribution to society.

Higher education community and civic engagement to address issues such as educational disadvantage is not a new concept, however, in recent years it is gaining more momentum and is becoming a strategic ambition of many higher educational institutions (McNall *et al.*, 2009; Mtawa *et al.*, 2016). Scholarship on HE community engagement focuses

very often on the development of service learning, the positive contributions to communities and universities and mission and values in contributing to communities (Yamamura & Koth, 2018). The development of community engagement in higher education has grown significantly in recent decades as a result of regional, national and European political and legislative influences. HEI community engagement is commonly assumed as operating to support various types of communities (Shaw and Crowther, 2017). Research outlines this engagement as a reciprocal, two-way process (Jadhav and Suhalka, 2016), as addressing societal issues with greater accountability (Plummer *et al.*, 2022), as connecting the resources of the university to the most pressing societal challenges (McEwen, 2013). Preece (2017), however, claims that community engagement can often focus on academic service learning, where the student applies academic theory to address community needs and where HEI community engagement initiatives aim to 'embed, scale and promote civic and community engagement across staff and student teaching, learning and research' (IUA). Preece (2017) argues that this approach tends to be 'individualistic and university-led' (Preece, 2017, p. 153) with no opportunity for dialogical pedagogies or the co-creation of knowledge.

Head (2007) calls for a recognition that a shared responsibility is needed for resolving 'wicked issues' that are complex in nature and there is a growing appreciation for involving local citizens in addressing social issues so that social capital can be built as a resource (Head, 2007, p. 443). Fitzgerald *et al.*, (2010), state that in attempting to resolve these social issues, there needs to be a recognition that communities are complex systems, and they advise universities against the desire to 'fix' communities by addressing single programme initiatives, which do not allow for a transformational impact. Similarly, Boyer (1996) critical of some university community engagement programmes in the US, warned of university programmes which 'limp along, supported with soft money' (Boyer, 1996, p. 26). This suggestion grabbed my attention, given my experience of access funding during my professional career.

It has been argued that HEI community engagement with working class communities is typically very unequal (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2010). Academics and higher education institutions have been criticised for colonising working-class communities for their own

personal and/or professional gain. It is argued that there needs to be a recognition of privilege and that the disadvantage of one group is matched by the advantages of the other, as they are 'causally related' (Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998, p.452). Linked to this concern with asymmetries of power are the findings from Fitzgerald *et al.* (2010) who surveyed more than four hundred universities in the US, finding that community engagement approaches and partnerships which are 'owned' and 'managed' by the university can often have negative consequences on communities.

Thinking politically about community engagement means delving beneath the surface claims it makes for itself to ask questions about what it's really for. What is its purpose? This means looking at how it's funded, for what and why? Who is considered to be 'the community' and who is not? Who benefits and who loses out? Engagement on whose terms? How can communities operate within these circumstances to shift the balance of power in their favour? These are all questions that raise political issues (Shaw and Crowther, 2017, p. 3).

The purpose of community engagement includes a civic duty to the production and application of knowledge for the benefit of the academy and the community (Boyer, 1996) and the dissemination of knowledge, scholarship enrichment and citizen engagement (Campus Engage; Carnegie Elective Classifications; Slack (2004); Fitzgerald *et al.* (2010); O'Tuama *et al.* (2017)). If the essence of higher education is to become deeply connected within communities to serve them and recognise the university as having a responsibility to the public good (McNall, 2009; O'Sullivan *et al.*, 2018) then it is reasonable to 'delve beneath the surface' (Shaw and Crowther, 2017) to see how are HEIs meeting this objective. I was interested in learning more about the existing frameworks that are in place in HEIs and the rationale and challenges associated with these, before considering these frameworks in an access context.

#### **4.2.1 Community engagement frameworks.**

The theory and frameworks involved in successful engagement practices are well researched (e.g. Benneworth and Jongbloed, 2010, Fitzgerald *et al.* 2010, Mtawa *et al.* 2016, Maassen *et al.*, 2019, O'Brien *et al.* 2022). Internationally HEIs have adopted a wide range of criteria and frameworks for community engagement. Some understand community engagement primarily in terms of 'transferring' knowledge to communities, where engagement practices by HEIs are initiated to suit their own institutional purposes (Campus Engage, Carnegie Elective Classifications). Other definitions focus on a perspective solely

focused on meeting targets and increasing student numbers. E.g. 'These access initiatives are a blend of inreach and outreach and support the university to meet its own, and national, targets for widening participation' (Maynooth University). Then there are approaches which foreground exchange. For instance, the IUA define engagement as the embedding, scaling and promoting of teaching, learning and research within communities (IUA).

Community engagement pedagogies, such as service learning have become very common internationally, especially in North America, South Africa, South America and Australia. Comparatively, Ireland is at a very early stage in development. E.g. With regard to service learning specifically, a survey in Ireland in 2010 involving 24 HEIs, reported that only 9 claimed to be involved in community service learning (McIlrath, 2012,p.141). Interestingly, at this time McIlrath (2012) noted issues with 'definitional complexity' when surveying these HEIs which led to 'anomalies and difficulties' (McIlrath, 2012, p. 141).

Community engagement is defined as 'the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2010, p. 412).

This echoes a now commonly articulated view in research that community engagement should be a collaborative and respectful exchange of knowledge between the community and the higher education institute (Boyer, 1990; Longworth, 2003; Mtawa, 2016; Russell, 2020).

In making sense of these varying approaches Nabatchi's (2012) work is helpful. She presents an engagement framework which has been adapted by the International Association for Public Participation (IAPP is an international organisation aimed at promoting community engagement and public participation guided by values such as partnership, collaboration, integrity, sustainability (IAP2)) This framework identifies a sliding scale of five types of engagement, one being the least effective and five being most impactful.

(1) Informing

(2) Consulting

(3) Involving

(4) Collaborating

(5) Empowering

She proposes that high levels of shared decision-making involving the 'public' and communities on the ground, leads to a greater understanding of public values.

Part of the purpose of my research is to explore what level of engagement is occurring in Irish access initiatives. Of particular interest to me, given my access work with communities, was Yamamura and Koth's (2018) place-based community engagement initiatives, which it is argued can have significant and transformative impacts for both the university and the community. Yamamura and Koth (2018), offer five principles of deep community engagement; (1) concentrated on a geographic location, (2) equal balance between community and campus impact (the 50:50 proposition, where all stakeholders participate as equals), (3) long-term vision and sustained commitment, (4) university-wide engagement that embodies university missions and (5) collective impact. They state that community engagement by higher education, involves the interaction, collaboration and partnership between a university's staff and students with the wider community, to allow for the exchange of resources, knowledge and expertise which is mutually beneficial. This framework is useful for this study because it can be directly linked to my research context. Access services within HEIs have been encouraged to engage with local communities through national policy and as an access practitioner in Cork it was particularly relevant given my work with the Cork Learning City and Learning Neighbourhood initiatives and the place-based nature of these initiatives. The Learning City initiative works with neighbourhoods that have been designated as 'disadvantaged', with an emphasis on all stakeholders involved in learning within that 'place', working together for the betterment of the community. The place-based importance of engagement which builds on Freire's community development approach (discussed later in this chapter) is central to this framework where engagement is not imposed on communities. Yamamura and Koth's (2018) framework was particularly relevant to my research question relating to how HEI Access Services build enduring and effective relationships with communities. Their community engagement framework challenged my own experience of access and

community engagement. My community engagement experience as an access practitioner prior to this was in some ways place-based and concentrated on geographic areas, however, I had not experienced equal, long-term, sustainable and collective partnerships. The sustainability and long-term vision captured within Yamamura and Koth's (2018) framework is also significant, given the current access funding models described in the previous chapter.

Boyer (1996), Fitzgerald *et al.* (2010), McNall *et al.* (2009), Mtawa (2016) and O'Brien *et al.* (2022) all state that universities because of their considerable resources, together with communities should embrace their 'third mission' and look for answers to the most challenging social, civil, economic and moral problems. Boyer (1996) challenged higher education institutions to become pro-active with communities in finding solutions to challenges faced by society such as healthcare, homelessness, failing schools, poverty. In addition, Boyer's (1996) framework extends beyond the collective quest to seek answers to societies challenges and suggests a focus on the production of knowledge and the application of knowledge for the benefit of the academy and the community. He suggested four areas of engagement: discovery (new knowledge for the academy and/or the community), integration (making connections and allowing for inter-disciplinary opportunities), teaching and the application of knowledge (theory to practice and practice to theory) for the mutual benefit of communities and the development of the university. Subsequently Fitzgerald *et al.* (2010) suggest that Boyer would also consider economic and regional development problems.

Fitzgerald *et al.* (2010) argue that there are many benefits for all stakeholders when there is meaningful, collaborative, and equal partnership between higher education and communities. These researchers believe that when partnerships are working, communities can build capacity and community wealth. Students have the opportunity for transformational learning, self-development, practical skills, and a clarification on one's values. For the faculty within higher education, transformational learning, funding opportunities, personal fulfilment are all possible. For the university, transformational learning, engagement with prospective students, a chance to build reputation, and institutional accreditation may all be achieved (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2010, p. 204).

#### **4.2.1.1 Problematising community engagement practices.**

Dominant community development paradigms have inevitably been framed within existing relations of power, aimed at adaptive approaches to 'social inclusion', whereas radical versions have been more concerned with exposing and transforming those structures and relations of power which systematically marginalize and exclude (Shaw, 2007, p.27).

The previous chapter stated that many scholars believe that universities have a role and purpose within the wider social context (Oakeshott, 1967; Nussbaum, 2002; Barnett, 2011). One of the biggest concerns of HEI community engagement highlighted relates to the possibility that the academy interacts with communities when they perceive that engagement to be of benefit to their institution (Renwick *et al.*, 2020). Contemporary community engagement practices, Yamamura and Koth (2018) argue, place too much emphasis on the student learning opportunities or the research opportunities that these present for academics. This can lead to the HEI turning inwards, not making the most of the potential that exists in allowing communities to become agents of change in their own lives and communities (Yamamura and Koth, 2018). As an access practitioner with a community development background, I was curious to learn if and how access community engagement practices ensure opportunities for empowerment, ideally community-based or place-based that offer long term sustainable engagement. Scholars claim that providing these essential ingredients should ensure deeper levels of understanding and greater appreciation for public values.

Jacob *et al.*, (2015), recognise that engagements between HEIs and partnerships or 'notions of citizenship' (Renwick *et al.* 2020) between HEIs and communities exist where the community input and representation are often tenuous and superficial (Slack, 2004). Slack (2004) warns that professionals and management very often monopolise engagement processes. Based on my professional experience to date, Thompsons (2001) comments below are worthy of note,

We probably need rather less in the way of targeting the socially excluded via short-term initiatives that serve institutional interests and rather more in the way of sustained alliances between education workers and local people. (Thompson, 2001, P. 33).

Slack (2004), identifies essential recommendations for 'real' engagement and partnership between HEIs and community. She highlights that meaningful community



consultation is essential and if this does not happen, there can be implications for the partnership. In addition, community representation needs to be at the centre of the decision-making process. She calls for clear flat management structures that allow for transparent processes. She advises against short-term initiatives, as community partnerships need time and there is no 'easy' solution. This is particularly interesting given that access to higher education funding in Ireland tends to be fixed term in nature (e.g. Strategic Innovation Funding, Dormant Accounts, Covid Contingency Funding, PATH). While community engagement is suggested and endorsed by funding authorities, Slack (2004) suggests that fixed term projects are not beneficial for real engagement and forces certain approaches, to gain quick outcomes and outputs.

Not only would it be more beneficial for partnerships to have access to more secure sources of funding, but also to be sufficiently forewarned of future funding initiatives to allow them time to follow the more difficult route: time to seek out and involve community groups and members (Slack, 2004, p. 148).

Recognising these risks to community engagement, interestingly and significantly, Pennie Foster-Fishman community psychologist cited in Fitzgerald *et al*, (2010), establishes three key lessons for universities wishing to engage with communities; (1) community engagement is time consuming, (2) Community engagement means working at many different levels, (3) Community engagement approaches need to be flexible and responsive (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2010, p. 7). As an access practitioner I understood these risks and I wanted to engage in research that allowed me to learn if these key components were relevant to HEI educational access.

HEI access partnerships with communities have been encouraged through national policy, and with this research I was curious to learn about the level of engagement and practices that exists between HEIs access services and under-represented communities. I was interested in learning about the engagement and consultation with community partners and explore existing collaborative engagements. I wanted to know if communities in partnership with HEIs have decision-making powers and determine how sustainable these partnerships are. In seeking answers to these questions and as my review of scholarship developed, I became aware that the perspective of the educational institutions was too partial and I wanted to also understand the perspective of the community.

#### **4.2.1.2 Community perspectives.**

Weerts and Sandmann (2008) and Mtawa *et al.* (2016) believe that there has been a shift in thinking in relation to community engagement by some higher educational institutions, from a one-way to a two-way model. The two-way model advocating for a more collaborative and interactive partnership between universities and their communities (Mtawa *et al.*, 2016). They also claim that scholarship of engagement as opposed to engaged scholarship has emerged as an important focus for universities in recent years. The interesting difference is that the scholarship of engagement refers to the 'reflection' on the engagement, while the engaged scholarship refers to the 'doing' of the engagement with communities.

As an access practitioner I always considered myself and my occupation as a professional service to stakeholders, holding a certain level of expertise and knowledge in relation to access. Consequently, I was particularly surprised by McKnight and Block (2010) when they caution against the 'professionalisation' of services within communities. McKnight and Block's (2010) community perspective differed from other scholars who presented from an institutional perspective. They claim that 'community and family competence' can be outsourced and replaced by 'professional and communal incompetence' (Knight and Block, 2010, p.7). Russell (2020) who also writes from a community perspective, suggests that institutions that attempt to take ownership of civic life, doing things that communities can do themselves, turn communities into clients and consumers (Russell, 2020, p.3). In operating this way, Russell (2020) warns of the possible negative outcomes for the community; (1) People become problems that need to be fixed, as opposed to assets in addressing their challenges. This can have repercussions for the community as an institutional mindset can take precedence. (2) Funding for communities which experience disadvantage can be spent on service providers rather than the people themselves. When funding opportunities present within HE institutions, encouraged by national policy, HEIs very often promote an opportunity to communities to be involved in a programme. Government funding for HEIs which encourages community engagement is almost always awarded to the HEI not the community organisations (e.g. the recent PATH funding). (3) Active citizenship becomes threatened, favouring the professionals. The professionals become the lead partners, disempowering people on the ground. (4)

Communities start to see themselves as the outside agencies see themselves, i.e. 'helpless people populating hopeless places' (Russell, 2020, p.4). There is a danger that people in communities start to believe that services provided by salaried professionals are more important than the connections that can be found within the community (Russell, 2020).

Cousins (1998) also references McKnight (1995) who believes that professional services which encroach on communities are 'counterfeits', claiming that communities can be negatively impacted by this. 'In other words, neighbourhoods and communities that are already challenged by a host of internal and external problems tend to be made even weaker and "more impotent" by service systems that are in a sense too powerful, too authoritative, and too strong' (Cousins, 1998. P. 63). Reflecting on this research and HEIs community engagement practices from an access perspective, I questioned how cognisant access practitioners are of this reality when engaging with communities and do they ensure that an ethical balance is found.

With more and more emphasis being placed on community engagement within Irish access policy, access services are encouraged to establish links with external partners. In applying these HEI/community engagement frameworks to an access to HE context, there are many key components, as articulated in literature, to 'real' and meaningful engagement. Equal partnership, real engagement, two-way methodologies, mutually beneficial, responsive, long-term, and flexible, are some of the key ingredients articulated for effective community engagement. Recent attempts have been made through access cluster funding (PATH) to incorporate community engagement into access agendas. However, short-term, insecure funding, insufficient time, unequal partnership, and unequal power are often key components to current access initiatives in Ireland. Does current access practice mitigate against meaningful engagement with communities experiencing educational disadvantage as a result?

#### **4.2.2 Community engagement and access in public policy.**

Nationally, the role of higher education institutions in supporting communities through community engagement and lifelong learning has received considerable attention by policy makers and scholars, particularly in recent years. Earlier we have learned that Government policies and HEIs' mission statements very often focus on the engagement with

communities and supporting the economic and social development of regions. Reciprocal engagements between the learning providers, including the higher educational institutions and the community, where knowledge and wisdom are shared and valued and where social change is driven by the community, allow for social issues, including access to education and lifelong learning opportunities to be addressed (Longworth, 2003; O’Sullivan and O’Tuama, 2017; Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2010; Russell, 2020).

The HEA states that community engagement is essential for effective access programmes (HEA, 2006) and identifies a framework for successful access programmes in higher education; (1) Policy at institutional level, (2) Targeting (groups identified, targeted and monitored), (3) Partnership (Communities), (4) Practice (Pre-entry activities and Teaching and Learning) (HEA, 2006, p. 2).

In this evaluation, it was found that most access programmes organise initiatives aimed at supporting students who experience socio-economic disadvantage, with many HEIs working with designated disadvantaged (DEIS<sup>8</sup>) second level schools. While there was a recommendation that HEIs should create a greater emphasis on pre-entry initiatives, it can be argued that it falls short, being overly simplistic and limited solely on engagement with the formal educational sector. The report emphasises the value of institution-to-institution interventions and claimed that by enhancing links, primary and second level school access programmes will have greater impact. Little acknowledgment was made of community engagement with no reference to communities, related to the promotion of progression routes.

... it is vital that access programmes work with young people from the target groups as early as possible in primary school or at the latest in the junior cycle of secondary school. In this way, access programmes will more effectively be able to target the most marginalised students from all under-represented groups (HEA, 2006, p. 24).

According to O’Sullivan *et al.*, (2017), there are gaps in how universities relate to people who have been disaffected by education. Very often they claim access programmes within HEIs focus on links with formal learning environments, such as links with DEIS schools, thereby missing opportunities to engage with people within communities outside of

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<sup>8</sup> The DEIS Schools Programme is the Government’s main policy initiative to tackle educational disadvantage. DEIS Schools receive additional resources to ensure that all children have an equal opportunity to reach their potential. [www.gov.ie](http://www.gov.ie)

these formal structures. National access policy predominantly focuses on a deficit perspective, asserting that the individual must change as opposed to addressing any systemic attempt at making higher education more inclusive. Like Baker *et al.*, (2009), O'Sullivan *et al.*, (2017) claim that universities have a moral obligation to respond to educational inequalities. They believe that universities must provide opportunities for communities to become familiar with the university environment and engage with them in different settings, on different programmes and at various points, including the learner in the decision-making process. They also conclude that educational inequality cannot be addressed by short-term initiatives or by any one player in the educational landscape. They argue that these two crucial recommendations need to be accepted by policy makers and HEIs.

These criticisms have not simply emerged in academic literature. The 2006 HEA Evaluation of Access Programmes criticised some HEIs stating that they are not fully cognisant of the potential of partnerships and that access programmes are sometimes initiated from the top-down. The lack of user-friendly information and existence of 'random' initiatives were noted as being unhelpful. There was an acknowledgement that sustainable relationships need to be built with communities, adopting a 'lifecycle' approach where resources need to be applied. There was a clear recommendation that HEIs should engage with community partners and address access in a shared way, with HEIs not being 'too rigid' in directing this relationship (HEA, 2006, p. 40). Ironically, this recommendation on building partnerships was followed by a section devoted to target setting, data gathering, monitoring performance. Given this endorsement within a HEA evaluation document, of community engagement practices and the criticism of access practice operating top-down, 'random' initiatives, I was even more intrigued to learn about current access practice and how HEIs work with communities.

#### **4.2.3 Pedagogies and philosophies.**

With the knowledge, expertise and resources within higher education, there is often a call on universities to find solutions to social and economic challenges faced by society. If at the core of higher education is the 'cultivation of community and solidarity' (Mahon, 2022, p.2) and not just the accumulation of knowledge, then appropriate theoretical perspectives for community engagement must be considered.

Society in ways appears to be paradoxical. On the one hand, we have functioning governments, we have democracy, we have human rights and we have an education system that provides graduates to meet the needs of the economy. On the other hand, we have educational disadvantage, significant barriers to third level access and a student population which is very unrepresentative of society. Education is at times promoted as the answer to individual prosperity and education is also very often linked to economic prosperity (Dietsch, 2018; Kohout-Diaz and Strouhal, 2022). Scholars have warned of the 'danger hidden in this purely 'profit' orientated concept of education' and advise that 'when people encounter a value system based only on profit, they lose their feeling for the basic principles of human existence' (Kohout-Diaz and Strouhal, 2022, p.8). Consequently, these scholars call for an inclusive education system that endorses democratic thinking.

An engagement between communities, adult learners and higher education underpinned by the philosophies of Freire, Mezirow, and Habermas, was proposed by Murphy and Fleming (2000). They call for an ideal speech situation (full participation, no coercion, equal opportunity to participate) and communicative action, which are defining characteristics of democracy and transformative learning and have the power to transform the connection between the university and the student.<sup>9</sup> Fleming *et al.* (2017) state that 'communicative' universities are those which support greater dialogue, eliminates the focus on corporate culture, and give a clear priority to social justice and human rights (Fleming *et al.*, 2017, p. 39).

Murphy and Fleming (2000), suggest that,

...an academic community of enquiry ought also be engaged in a discourse free from domination, in a respectful, critical and collaborative process. The knowledge generated in such discourse is neither subjective nor objective but emancipatory and transformative. In this way it becomes possible to link ideas from adult education (dialogic interaction, transformative learning) with the interest of both students and the university in freedom, equality, tolerance, critical enquiry and valuing of rationality (Murphy and Fleming, 2000, p. 90).

As an access practitioner with a community development background, I was interested in literature which offered insight into how to work in a participatory and

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<sup>9</sup> This is something that also influenced my methodology.

dialogical way with communities. I explored critical educational theory in order to think through how learning, knowledge production and education are linked to power and read theorists such as hooks, Shor, Giroux, Dewey, Gramsci. In exploring my research questions I engaged with Freire's ideas on development and social change. Freire argues that people, organisations and institutions are always in 'a power relationship framework denying the possibility of a neutral positioning' (Suzina and Tufte, 2020, p. 414) which made me critically think about the relationship between higher education and community from an access perspective. Freire's ontology is associated with five underlying five principles - dialogue, humility, empathy, love, hope. Freire's thinking forced me to consider and reposition the power relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor. Suzina and Tufte (2020) argues that Freire's thinking does more than just present a pedagogical vision, 'but offers a larger and deeper vision of development' (p.412).

Freire has been criticised for offering an idealistic approach to education, a political bias, with Ledwith (2001) pointing to a 'dichotomous analyses and a failure to understand the complexity of difference' and him having a 'patriarchal bias' (Ledwith, 2001, p.180). However, Freire's thinking remains relevant to this research 'because it applies to every situation where a society is confronted with a dispute over its model of development, meaning the way it wants to protect, produce and share wealth and how its members take part in this process' (Suzina & Tufte, 2020, p. 413). Experiences of lack of participation, social inequality and being voice-less are the antithesis of the values and principles central to Freire's beliefs. Ledwith (2015) believes in a synthesis between Freire's thinking, an ambition for social justice endeavours and the field of community development. She claims that practitioners who apply these processes, work with community partners, use tools appropriate to their contexts, use participatory practices, will be successful in addressing inequalities that exists.

Community engagement which is underpinned by positive action for change and development, which is respectful, is value driven for both the communities and the organisations and is focused on critical pedagogy, is fundamental to Paulo Freire's thinking. Freire refers to '*the word*' as being essential to dialogue. He states that an unauthentic empty word, is unable to transform, and is reduced to an alienating '*blah*' (Freire, 1970, p.

87). Freire contends that a word that is not committed to transformation and does not allow for action, is '*idle chatter*' (Freire, 1970, p.87). Garavan (2010) applies contemporary relevance to Freire's thinking. Not unlike a form of colonialism, he claims that our education system is driven by economic goals and that as a result voices and words have been silenced and that certain groups experiencing injustice are forced to translate their words into a language that is not their own.

Couldry (2010) asks us to recognise voice as a process and a value and equates voice with capacity. He states that 'what matters is...voice's role as the means whereby people give an account of the world in which they act. As such, voice is socially grounded, performed through exchange, reflexive, embodied, and dependent upon a material form' (Couldry, 2010, p. 91). HEIs wishing to engage with communities to address social inclusion and develop inclusive citizenship approaches are encouraged to listen to voice and recognise the importance of learner needs (Johnston and Coare, 2003). Academic literature proposes that education should provide a safe and supportive environment for 'excluded' learners to engage with peers from their community and address challenges and issues that are real for them (Johnston and Coare, 2003). Scholarship suggests that listening to voices from the community is critically important, together with a recognition of how these can be supported, encouraged, valued and incorporated into the power structures in a meaningful way (Johnston and Coare, 2003, p. 197).

Although the importance of voice is given much attention in scholarship, it is recognised that the voices and experiences of [under-represented groups] point very clearly to the societal predominance of the 'weak' version of social exclusion where 'excluded' groups are largely expected to fit into society as it is. In educational terms, this leads to the problem of the institutionalisation, either explicitly or implicitly, of a 'deficit model' of learning for citizenship where the predominant emphasis is on filling assumed gaps, whether these be of knowledge, skill, or attitude (Johnston and Coare, 2003, p. 192).

Thomas (2000) and Slack (2004) similarly argue that the needs of the community should be addressed if HEIs are to tackle social inclusion and that participatory approaches are essential to identifying local needs and priorities. They advocate for partnerships which encourage opportunities for the community voice to be heard and facilitate 'tacit



knowledge' to be developed, where people on the ground have knowledge of what the challenges and the solutions are (Slack, 2004). From an access perspective this is relevant, as while policy in recent years has certainly endorsed and encouraged HEIs to engage and build relationships with communities experiencing educational disadvantage, my personal and professional experience of community partnerships did not allow for their voice or knowledge to be incorporated and valued.

Freire's work on the importance of dialogue and voice has deeply influenced scholarly thinking on community engagement and community development (McCormack, 2019). His ideology on linking knowledge to action, with an emphasis on dialogue, encourages deep meaningful, respectful engagements with communities. Later Paulo Freire in Horton *et al.* (1990) again stresses the importance of people being involved in the process of their own education, in the production of knowledge with the benefit for themselves and for democracy. He highlights the importance of loving people and of dialogical processes. Freire's philosophy is useful in this research context as it emphasizes the importance of community and empowerment with a move away from a top-down approach, which is the approach taken by national policy currently. Paulo Freire (1970), in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, articulates a critical pedagogy, which is a way of learning that helps to liberate people from oppression. For this to happen, he presented a radical repositioning of the purpose and role of education and presented two simple arguments that need to be acknowledged. Firstly, oppression exists within communities. There are economic and social forces at play that maintain inequalities and keep people oppressed. Secondly, transformation of the oppressed is possible, when the oppressed liberate themselves. While there are limitations to and criticisms of Freire's (1970) pedagogical thinking (such as a failing to recognize the intersectionality of class, race, gender), he suggests ways (outlined below) of achieving this educational transformation, which can be applied to community engagement methodologies.

- (1) Locate the social and economic causes of the oppression. Oppression is dehumanizing as to be human is to have freedom and control. People need freedom over their thoughts and actions. If this isn't achieved, we become alienated. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire is concerned about inequalities

in education. He asserts that with a 'banking' model of education, where students are passive, where dialogue doesn't exist, where engagement is limited, and where dissent is not encouraged, there is a danger that students become less critical. Myers *et. al.*, (2019) explains that this is a top-down educational model, where the person or organization at the top controls the knowledge. In reading Freire, I began to reflect on this and apply it to HEI access. These top-down practices are currently happening within HE access models of practice. I became increasingly conscious and critical of our current educational practices and approaches to community engagement and questioned if they are maintaining systemic inequalities?

- (2) The transformation of reality at the subjective and objective level, through praxis. Freire calls for critical reflection and action that will allow for change. Problem posing is what Freire calls praxis in education. He proposes that students must ask questions about problems that exist in their social contexts. What scope exists within higher educational institutions to allow for this to happen?

Allowing for collective thought, voice and action were some of the main pedagogical goals of Freire. Concern for humanisation was central to his beliefs.

At all stages of their liberation, the oppressed must see themselves as men engaged in the ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human. ... To achieve this praxis, however; it is necessary to trust in the oppressed and in their ability to reason (Freire, 1970, p. 41).

Freire (1970), espoused that a teachers' role is to help students to apply what the student already knows into a theoretical and critical context, rather than 'imposing' their world on people. Through a process of listening and mutual respect, students can become creators of their own worlds and a creator in the communities that they live. He also proposed that acknowledging community knowledge and supporting opportunities for active, creative, and theoretical developments, provide opportunities for higher educational institutions. In applying Freire's ideology to a higher educational context, HEIs should be places where knowledge is 'created and passed on to students, though not as passive recipients of knowledge (objects) but as active, creative and critical makers of knowledge (subjects)' (Fleming *et al.*, 2017, p. 39).

In considering meaningful community engagement from an access practice perspective, understanding and valuing Freire's (1970) philosophy is justified, as it provides a framework for participatory, inclusive and ethical practice. Government policy has recognised the value in linking with communities and has advocated for community engagement. However, as stated earlier, policy and practice to-date has typically focused on a deficit model of practice (Johnston and Coare, 2003), where the focus is on the individual and access initiatives are predominantly concentrated on links with other formal educational providers. Freire's philosophy offers a more radical perspective as he believed in working at the grassroots, fostering dialogue and providing opportunities for challenging the status quo (Freire, 1970).

Groundswell action for change always comes from grassroots, so reflecting on these bigger issues helps us to become more critical in challenging our practice and its purpose.....A form of problematising that helps us get to deeper levels of reflexivity (Ledwith and Springett, 2010, p. 9).

Freire (1970) also asserts that if action is not coupled with reflection, it is action for the sake of action, which 'negates the true praxis and makes dialogue impossible.' For dialogue to happen there must be profound love, faith in humankind, humility, hope and critical thinking (Freire, 1970).

Dialogue cannot exist, however, in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people....Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself....Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is a commitment to others. No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is commitment to their cause - the cause of liberation (Freire, 1970, p. 89).

Building on the call for dialogue - recognising tacit knowledge, lifewide learning and a deeper thinking in relation to how we see community engagement is called for by Longworth (2003). He emphasises and explains the importance of lifewide learning as learning that takes place throughout our lives, across the full range of our lives and at any moment in time. He recommends that organisations and agencies should consider not only engagement through lifelong learning but also through lifewide learning (Longworth, 2003). Longworth (2003) advocates for a 'whole' community approach to lifelong learning and encourages productive partnerships, where agencies, organisations, communities, and higher education institutions work together towards 'action for change' (Longworth, 2003).

Interestingly, given the current access policy focus on linking with DEIS schools, Longworth (2003) also asserts that schools are often isolated islands of education within a community and believes that they need considerable resources to apply the foundations of learning within communities.

Applying Freire's philosophy, to address deep-rooted social issues and seek transformation, engagement with communities which empower, which encourages reflexivity and allows for learning at grassroots level, should be central tenets of community engagement practices adopted by HEIs. Drawing on Freire's principles of critical pedagogy and community development, community and adult education in Ireland is significant for this study, in that it suggests that it provides an opportunity to value the voice of the 'otherwise silenced people', to recognise non-formal and informal learning and provide an opportunity for people to reflect and interrogate their own words. Research proposes that critical pedagogy also empowers people to become active citizens and more agentic in their personal lives and in their communities (Connolly, 2003, p. 9). In exploring critical pedagogies from a community perspective, an account of community education is necessary.

#### **4.3 Community Education**

Community-based education has over many decades carved out a centrally important offering on the Irish educational landscape. The growth, significance and innovation of the community education movement were acknowledged almost two decades ago in the White Paper on Adult Education in which it was posited ideologically as a process of communal education towards empowerment, both at an individual and a collective level (2000, pp.111-2). It was from the outset radical and political in intent (Quilty *et al.*, 2016, p. 36).

One of the main purposes of critical pedagogy for people involved in education, is to increase awareness of power, equality and opportunity, but it also has a 'crucial role in seeking to overcome the situation by empowering both the teachers and the disadvantaged learners' (Sanders, 2017, p. 351). Researching critical theory and pedagogy led me to explore community education and its relevance to achieving greater access to higher education. Community education has a social justice ethos, using a bottom-up educational approach, that acknowledges and values the lived experience of people within communities. The literature claims that community education has its roots historically in 'working class areas which experience social exclusion, poverty and oppression as a result of structural

inequalities (O'Reilly, 2020, p.115)'. The literature review suggests that acknowledging and valuing community education allows for partnership, opportunities for community voices to be heard, positive collaborations. As I explored fields of scholarship relating to critical pedagogy I began to question what can be done to deepen meaningful engagement? I was interested in building this into my research.

The Irish model of community education is useful to this research context as it focuses on 'adults wishing to take possession of a process that exemplifies community activism that empowers people in a fundamental way' (Connolly, 2008, p.5). Community education differs from mainstream formal education in teaching and learning, in that it generally focuses on the experiences and interests of people within communities. This is very different in approach to a higher educational context, where, for example, learning is usually campus based, prescribed by programme descriptors, module descriptors, specified learning outcomes. Community education is community-based, structured learning which takes place outside of traditional centres of education. Community education can take place in a variety of settings, e.g. community development organisations, adult learning centres, ETB centres, community buildings, literacy support centres, Family Resource Centres (FRCs), training centres, health centres, primary and second level schools. Community education mainly works with communities within a geographic location, but communities can also be groups of people who share common identities, objectives, challenges and needs (Fitzsimons, 2015). The primary goal is to engage and support people through lifelong learning with a curriculum that meets their interest (Tett, 2002). Notably, community education is focused on meeting the needs of the people, where the educational programmes are organised *with* the communities rather than *for* the communities and delivered in an accessible, fun and engaging way.

The motivation and purpose for learning of the participants will change over time but if education is rooted in the community 'it will allow genuinely alternative and democratic agendas to emerge at the local level' (Tett, 2002, p. 2).

Connolly (2003) states that community education provides space for learners to participate easily and freely, a space where the learners experience is central to the process, where feminist education, consciousness raising and emancipatory education are valued (Connolly, 2003, p. 11). She asserts that learning communities highlight that learning is not

an individual endeavour, but that group learning underpins the essence of community education.

Community development has been a very powerful agent in raising issues around social and cultural inequality, such as poverty, discrimination, neglect, and other disadvantages. Community development essentially entails members of a community - geographical or issue based - identifying their needs in terms of development, sustainability, and education, and collectively working together to meet those needs. Community education is the agent of community development (Connolly, 2003, p. 14).

Exercising control in the practice of education and building collective action through collective consciousness can be likened, in many circumstances, to what Freire termed 'conscientisation' (Freire, 1972). Similarly bell hooks (1994) referred to 'the practice of freedom' and 'transgression' – she asserts that anywhere there is learning in the neighbourhood and community, for all its flaws in terms of resources, can be 'paradise' for learners. Thompson (1996) claims that community practitioners, activists, educators are all resources that can be used to advance or inhibit political change. She challenges practitioners to create learning spaces and learning opportunities which allow for people who face discrimination and who are oppressed to identify 'what would be 'really useful knowledge' for them, to better understand their situations and to take action in pursuit of change. To turn theory into practice' (Thompson, 1996, p. 25).

Tett (2002), believes that building community capacity is crucial if communities are to be involved in the regeneration of their communities. Partnerships which include private and public sectors working together with communities have been identified as a way in which people who are otherwise socially excluded to become involved in addressing social and economic challenges that exist. This is significant in allowing for regeneration but if it is to be successful, it requires the active participation of community representatives in deciding and implementing appropriate action (Tett, 2002, p. 51). Tett (2002) as well as Shaw and Crowther (2013), believe that community education is focused on learning that has the power to introduce change, leading to a fairer and just society.

Community-university partnerships have been designed with an ambition to provide learning opportunities for people in their own local environments, following community education models. An Cosán is an example of university-community engagement initiative is

which offers degree programmes through a community education model in an area which experiences educational and socio-economic disadvantage in Dublin. O'Reilly (2020) claims that An Cosán's Freirean-inspired feminist mission and pedagogy allows for the voices of under-represented groups to be brought to the fore and asserts that active participation of the community, the learning environment and the pedagogical approach impacts favourably on access and progression to further and higher education. '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' (O'Reilly, 2020, p.274).

Another such partnership is the Communiversity three-way partnership between local LEADER Partnership Companies, local community based organisations and Maynooth University. The aim of this initiative is 'to engage people, for whom Higher Education appears distant, alien and unobtainable, in a university level course in a secure and familiar environment for personal development and capacity building at a community level' (Barter and Hyland, 2020, p. iv). With this initiative, learners are empowered to direct their learning and MU claims to have 'built deep and enduring relationships with areas deemed to be of severe disadvantage and this has garnered for MU a reputation of trustworthiness in those communities' (Barter and Hyland, 2020, p. 41). The success of an initiative such as this one however, is challenged by 'a lifelong learning culture that has been colonised by credentialism and skills acquisition for the economy' (Barter and Hyland, 2023). Institutional 'productive' objectives such as employability and job readiness can often impose limitations on the sustainability and success of these partnerships.

Scholars have argued that education can never be neutral. Fitzsimons (2015) challenges the concept of radical community education and calls on Freire's concept of praxis to achieve transformation.

Centrally, education alone is not considered the route to a more equal society, what is required is praxis, a cyclical process of collective action and reflection undertaken to effect societal transformation (Fitzsimons, 2015, p. 81).

Connolly (2008) believes strongly that community education has the potential to bring about social transformation and is different from outreach models, when she describes it as not just for the people, but of the people (Connolly, 2008, p. 6). Connolly

stresses the role of community education as having a social purpose, one that is ambitious in its commitment to social justice, equality, and democracy.

Community education is not merely about offering solutions to practical challenges such as family friendly timetables, affordable classes, childcare. Community education has a recognition, respect and value in the indigenous knowledge (Murphy and Fleming, 2009) and expertise that the person brings to the learning experience.

If this is the case, there are obvious benefits to HEIs recognising the role of community education, community-based educational programmes and community development, in addressing social inclusion, social justice, access to education and widening participation. I was interested in learning more about current community education practices and wanted to allow space to determine if HEIs and communities with low levels of progression to third level, recognised the opportunity to engage in this way. In trying to find the answer to this, in reading literature relating to HEI and community engagement, there was a body of research focused on the impact of neoliberalism and I was conscious that this theoretical perspective also needed consideration.

#### **4.4 Neoliberalism and the Care Agenda**

There is a view that as a society we have become more and more dependent on universities to push forward the social, economic, cultural and political set up of our society (Lynch, 2006). There is a huge emphasis and importance being placed on access to higher education and that this is being presented as the panacea for addressing inequality and 'is increasingly becoming a prerequisite for survival' (Lynch, 2006, p.12). Lynch (2022) claims that our educational institutions have morphed into systems that promote students who are 'self-reliant, individually responsible and entrepreneurial' (Lynch, 2022, p. 2). She believes that neoliberalism is the dominant political-economic ideology, which promotes freedom of choice and emphasises and values the market and she urges us to challenge this, as our education system is suiting the privileged few and leaving many people on the margins of society. Neoliberalism she describes 'as a market view of citizenship that is generally antithetical to rights, especially to state-guaranteed rights in education, welfare, health and other public goods' (Lynch, 2006, p. 3). The focus of neoliberalism is on creating profit and



efficiencies resulting in the creation of self-reliant, independent citizens who care mainly for themselves (Giroux, 2004; Lynch, 2006).

This argument intrigued me as I became cognisant and more critically reflective of my practice and the access agenda within HEIs. National policy on equity of access to higher education promotes access pathways for individuals who experience educational disadvantage. My experience as access practitioner has been supporting individuals to navigate through and around barriers to education, with minimal time spent on considering or address systemic challenges. In reading these scholars, I became very reflective of my own practice. I had spent many years designing and developing access interventions for access cohorts and was proud of my achievements in this space. My review of literature made me analyse and critically reflect on access becoming conscious of the extent to which neoliberalism is impacting.

Considering these neoliberal arguments, and in applying Freire's dialogical educational philosophy to HE access and community engagement there is justification for considering the need for care and love. Freire believed honouring an educative problem-posing 'dialogue about reality created a more humane world in which it would be easier to love' (Myers et. al. 2019, p. 63). It has been argued by feminist researchers that meaningful engagement and relationships based on dialogues which are rooted in love, care and solidarity (Freire, 1970; Noddings, 2003; Lynch, 2006; Lynch *et al.* 2021; Lynch, 2022) are essential to addressing inequalities in society, including educational inequalities. Freire speaks about 'false generosity' or 'lovelessness' which can be imposed by oppressors. I wish to apply this in a higher education and community engagement context. Freire claimed that 'true generosity consists precisely in fighting to destroy the causes which nourish false charity' (Freire, 1970, p. 45). Charity that exists to address the symptoms of oppression is not true generosity. True generosity challenges and addresses the systemic inequalities that allow for oppression.

The oppressors, who oppress, exploit, and rape by virtue of their power, cannot find in their power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves. Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both. Any attempt to "soften" the power of the oppressor in deference to the

weakness of the oppressed almost always manifests itself in the form of false generosity; indeed, the attempt never goes beyond this (Freire, 1970, p. 44).

Lynch (2022) states that an educational system which is underpinned by academic capitalism and does not focus on love, care, social justice and show respect for these values, cannot enable people to create a caring society. She argues that people are being primed to be rational economic actors. 'To develop care-centric thinking there is a need to rethink the epistemology underpinning academic scholarship because how we come to know, impacts on what we know' (Lynch, 2022, p. 9). Reading Lynch (2006, 2022) led me to consider how access practice is operating and where it sits on a spectrum (capitalism to care). In applying Lynch's thinking to an access perspective, are practitioners listening to communities and building in this learning to the design and delivery of access initiatives? Is knowledge from within the community being recognised and valued?

In considering care relations, social justice, and inequality from an access perspective, it is useful to be cognisant of three significant philosophical registers, a framework developed by Nancy Fraser (2003), i.e., Redistribution (equal share- economic systems inequality), Recognition (equal respect – cultural system's inequality) and Representation (equal say- political systems inequality).

Redistribution focuses on how wealth, power and resources are distributed. The redistributive register involves asking the government for more resources, funding. Capitalism and neo-liberalism reward the 'meritorious' (Lynch, 2022, p. 29), the hard worker. People who do not succeed in this way, by merit, are offered charity. Philanthro-capitalists have found ways to 'redistribute' on their terms, using business models and methods, which reinforce injustice and inequalities rather than challenge the systems. Equality under redistribution is concerned with the redistribution of wealth, resources and income. Access target setting by the HEA, with a focus on funding following the achievement of these targets promotes this redistribution register.

Recognition relates to how others see us and acknowledge us. Equality is focused on respecting difference, such as gender, religion, ability, colour, etc. The Recognition register acknowledges that the prime desire for people is recognition. If recognition is denied, psychological and social problems can begin to emerge. Recognition from a higher

education access community engagement perspective relates to how the communities are made visible within partnerships. If they are not recognised, the consequences are harmful to themselves and others.

Representation relates to social arrangements that allow for people to interact and participate as equals. Parity of Representation is concerned with equality in the exercise of power in formal settings, based on equal participation and equal representation at political levels. This should be a key component in HEI community engagement relationships, however my experience has been that access funding models (and arguably power) are predominantly awarded to HEIs. In applying Fraser's framework to HEI engagement with communities for the benefit of social inclusion and increased access, from my experience, it is questionable how many access programmes work in this way.

Baker *et al.* (2009) present an equality framework that allows for equality of condition, which aims to eliminate inequality and address systemic inequalities. The important element of this approach is that it is engrained in changing social structures and structures which foster oppression. They provoke thought around the difference between basic and liberal equality and equality of condition. In doing so, they advocate for equality of respect and recognition, equality of resources, equality of love, care and solidarity, equality of power and working and learning as equals.

| Basic equality, Liberal egalitarianism and equality of condition |  |   |   |
|--|--|---|---|
| Dimensions of Equality   | Basic Equality                                     | Liberal egalitarianism  | Equality of Condition   |
| Respect and Recognition  | Basic Respect                                      | Universal citizenship, Toleration of differences, Public, private distinction |   |
| Resources  | Subsistence needs                                  | Anti-poverty focus, Rawl's 'difference principle'                             | Substantial equality of resources broadly defined, aimed at satisfying needs and enabling roughly equal prospects of well-being |
| Love, Care and Solidarity  |  | A Private Matter? Adequate Care?  | Ample prospects for relations of love, care and solidarity  |
| Power Relations  | Protection against inhuman and degrading treatment |   | Liberal rights but limited property rights, group-related rights, stronger, more participatory politics                         |
| Working and Learning   |  | Occupational and educational equal opportunity, Decent Work, Basic Education  | Educational and occupational options that give everyone the prospect of self-development and satisfying work                    |
| Source: Baker et al., 2004, P.43                                 |  |   |   |

Figure 7: Basic equality, liberal egalitarianism and equality of condition (Baker et al, 2009)

Baker *et al.* (2009), builds on Fraser's work and other researchers such as Rawls (1971), Nussbaum (2000) and Okin (1989) argue that one of the main inequalities that exist in education relates to the lack of recognition and respect. They believe that an egalitarian educational system would not allow for these inequalities to persist. They reference the 'culturally marginal' and explain that they are perceived as 'other', claiming that this results in them being 'invisible or, if visible, subject to negative stereotyping or misrecognition' (Baker *et al.*, 2009, p. 154). They believe that the silencing of groups is one of the educational practices that sustains inequality.

These authors go further to suggest that educational systems are characterised by a systemic bias, based on gender inequality which subordinates the feminine. They propose that less focus, respect, and recognition is afforded to those with strong inter and intra-personal intelligences, which is related to the highly gendered nature of human service work and the caring professions. Baker *et al.* (2009) portray 'care and love' work, which is highly gendered, occupied mainly by women, as having a 'lowly status' (Baker *et al.*, 2009, p. 157). Similarly, Lynch (2022) claims that work involving care, love, and solidarity, requires significant resources, such as time and energy. She states that when this work is not acknowledged and recognized, those who are doing the caring feel a 'contributive' injustice. She goes further to say that this is a gender issue as most of the people in care professions are women and therefore 'intellectual and political silences about the primacy of nurturing work in producing and maintaining life make them vulnerable to exploitation' (Lynch, 2022, p. 21). This is interesting and appropriate to note, given that many access practitioners in Ireland are female.

Lynch *et al.*, (2021) suggests an additional dimension in considering care relations and equality of condition, that is affective care-relational domains of life. Affective care relations involve 'ethically informed, nurturing-led' (Lynch *et al.*, 2021, p. 58) social interactions, where people can be together, work together in 'non-exploitable' ways and where the burden and benefit of love and care work are shared. Affective care relations are essential to the work of care.

## **4.5 Conclusion**

As outlined in earlier chapters, the overall ambition of national higher educational policy is to achieve greater equity of access to higher education. Policy to-date has been preoccupied by a focus on economic growth, accountability, and key performance indicators. My personal experience of the consequence of this, has been an approach to access and community engagement using targets and outputs to measure success or performance. This chapter has explored research and literature on access and community engagement, as shaped by my conceptual framework. The chapter looks at the frameworks for meaningful community engagement and literature which outlines the importance of a dialogical and care approach that can sometimes be sacrificed in favour of more neoliberal agendas. Freire's ideology of community empowerment, dialogical engagement, critical reflection, and praxis are examined as a means of engagement with communities that experience disadvantage. An overview of community education and its relevance to meeting higher education widening participation objectives is presented before an exploration on the need for a care approach to community engagement.

My review of literature led me to question how HEI access is designed and delivered currently and what level of community engagement is taking place in HEIs from an access perspective. I wanted to understand how access to higher education can be enhanced and the role that community engagement has to play in achieving greater equity of access and participation. I became particularly interested in delving beneath the surface of access practice in Ireland and explore how HEIs currently work with communities that are challenged by disadvantage.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### METHODOLOGY

This man, my father, taught me the greatest lesson about the poor and about power, because when I looked out at the crowd gathered to march, he was there. None of those people in suits that I worked with on Madison Avenue were there, but busloads of people from our community – single moms pushing their baby strollers, pregnant teenagers, young people, the elderly, immigrants, everyone that this nation's paradigm of power had taught me to think of as powerless...they all came to this march. When I looked out at the sea of people, God said, "This is what power is." (Torres-Fleming, 2009)

#### 5.1 Introduction

In the earlier chapters, I outlined my background, motivation and perspective and a literature review of higher education, access, community engagement and education followed. In deciding on the methodology for my research I wanted to ensure that the methods engaged would be complementary to my ontological perspective, allowing for meaningful engagement with my participants. In this chapter I will explain the theoretical perspective that led me to my research choices. I will outline my rationale for the methodology used, while articulating the challenges encountered and the learning gained. I will detail and justify the reason for choosing my research sites and the methods for collecting and analysing data used with access officers and the community participants.

I am interested in research that was collaborative, dialogical, dialectic, reflexive and purposeful. With this research I wanted to engage with participants where their interests, voices and motivations directed the research. I read Freire (1970), Horton *et al.*, (1990) Alexakos (2015), Butterwick and Roy, (2020), Hegarty, (2020), Grummel (2007), Lynch, (1999; 2005; 2006) and Kemmis (2008) and I shared their views in the significance and contribution to knowledge by ordinary people and the capacity of people to influence and make decisions.

Exploring educational inequalities and the associated power dynamics is also of interest to me. I am also interested in doing something about this. I explored critical theoretical perspectives, such as Freirean pedagogy and egalitarian and feminist political theory. Horkheimer (1972) describes critical theory as,

a form of theorizing motivated by a deep concern to overcome social injustice and the establishment of more just social conditions for all people. .... Critical theory, he said, 'has no specific influence on its side, except concern for the abolition of social injustice. ... Its own nature ... turns it towards a changing of history and the establishment of justice' (Horkheimer, 1972, p. 242-3 cited in Kemmis, 2008, p. 8).

Social justice and addressing inequalities are at the heart of my access and widening participation work and I was most comfortable using this theoretical framework.

Grummell and Finnegan (2020) state that critical research is a 'collective learning process' which can lead to 'transformation, empowerment and even for some emancipation'. They state that critical researchers cannot just focus on 'data gathering' but seek ways to work collaboratively to build critical knowledge with participants. They argue that 'being critical in this sense is not only being aware of one's concepts, goals, and methods, but of constantly exploring how the means and ends of research are connected and enmeshed in specific contexts and power dynamics' (Grummel and Finnegan, 2020, p. 3).

Following the literature review, I realised that research on access and widening participation to higher education has tended to focus on narrow, single components of the higher education ecosystem, which I felt did not give the complete picture. Very little research to-date has focused on what the reality of access practice is within HEIs and it was not clear how that is linked to community engagement. I believed there was a need for more holistic research on access and widening participation, which focuses on an analysis and contestation of policy and social formation (construction and meaning of experience).

I wanted to ensure that my research connected with, and had an opportunity to influence my practice, through praxis. Totikidlis and Prilllenltensky (2006) define praxis as the link between our theoretical research, our practice, and our commitment for action. Critical research is concerned with inequalities, oppression, human flourishing, and questions of justice (Freire, 1970; Rowntree and Pomeroy, 2010; Grummel and Finnegan, 2020). It is interested in how power works, it thinks systemically. Within critical research traditions, the first step towards any type of praxis cycle is to understand with depth, with acuity, with precision (Alexakos, 2015). It is important to understand things before you seek to change things. My primary research goal was to really understand what was going on

within access and I was particularly interested in the relationship between institutions and communities.

Lowery (2016) states that a scholar/practitioner can be generally defined as a leader who applies 'a method of academically informing one's practice in a given field' (Lowery, 2016). As a practitioner-scholar, concerned about power and voice, I reflected on the knowledge I wanted to explore an appropriate methodology to achieve this. I was interested in what knowledge on access to HE exists and in engaging with actors who are significant within the access landscape. I was interested in looking at power from an access perspective; who has the power? And what power is held by access stakeholders, namely, practitioners and communities experiencing educational disadvantage.

Webb (2017) asserts that, 'research design needs to consider not the isolated experiences of individuals, but how people and institutions interact and function in the field in which they operate' (Webb, 2017, p. 142). I wanted to ensure that my research applied a broad lens, capturing the practice in relation to access and community. I was interested in allowing the access practitioners voice to be heard but equally interested in exploring and engaging with a community group to get a different perspective on access to HE to address a major gap in research and ensure that an important body of knowledge and lived experience is documented and reflected upon.

I was particularly concerned about why, despite access practitioners being in place within HEIs for many years, there is very little research and documented knowledge about their profession and practice. I was aware anecdotally from conversations with my access peers over the years, that there was an understanding and commitment to social justice and that their experience in the field of widening participation was significant. I was aware that there was untapped knowledge by access practitioners, and I wanted to delve into that. I was interested in probing into the challenges and opportunities access practitioners encounter and was influenced by participatory action research to achieve this.

As a critical researcher interested in questions of power, I knew it would be challenging to delve into the issues and really understand what was happening without speaking to access practitioners in-depth, on a one-to-one basis. Access practitioners have been in place within HEIs now for more than twenty years and I was confident that



considerable knowledge, experience, and insights exist with this group of professionals. I knew that heretofore, the access practitioner voice was untapped and I felt it was important to allow for the practitioner voice to be heard. I wanted to understand how they did their work, the conditions under which the work is undertaken, how they feel about it, how they view it, but I was particularly focused on how this all links to community engagement.

Given my community development background, my professional work as access officer led me to start building relationships with communities, but due to workload demands and time constraints, meaningful engagement with communities was heretofore very limited. I was very interested in working with communities in an exploratory way, using participatory methods within this research to determine how best higher educational institutions could work together with communities to address equity of access. Using participatory methods, I wanted to engage with people within the community to identify, assess and evaluate the strengths and challenges in relation to HEI access (Krieg and Roberts, 2008). In developing my methodology, I hoped that my research would allow me to operate in a different, more meaningful way with a community group, thereby experiencing an approach that would be a beneficial learning experience for me personally and professionally.

I was influenced by participatory methods to examine the problematic situation (access to higher education) to seek to change it for the better (Kindon *et al.*, 2008). I reflected on the best method of engagement with access practitioners, and I believed that the one-to-one interviews would be conducive to more honest, open discussions, allowing for a greater interrogation of what was happening in terms of practice and engagement.

Applying my critical-egalitarian lens, (Freire, 1970; Kemmis, 2008; Ozerdem and Bowd, 2010; Grummel and Finnegan, 2020) I developed qualitative participatory methodologies and identified two research sites engaging with two key stakeholder groups. (1) The access practitioner, using in-depth interviews (semi-structured, open ended-questions). (2) A community group within a Learning Neighbourhood, using photovoice.

## 5.2 Critical Research

As a critical researcher, influenced by egalitarian and Freirean philosophies, my intention was to engage in a meaningful way with research participants. Freire (1970) encouraged 'critical and liberating' dialogue as it assumes equality between participants. He wrote about 'conscientisation', which encouraged a process of critical reflection and awareness about one's own reality and the reality of their community. He believed that action was crucial to the transformation of reality and that learning was a fundamental aspect of uncovering issues and challenges that need to be addressed. Freire's (1973) concept of conscientisation is applicable to research which aims to achieve democratisation and social change. I felt consideration to these concepts was essential in planning my research methodology on equity of access to education.

I sought to build the research on relationships of trust with both the access practitioners and the community group. As discussed in Chapter Four, Freire (1970) suggests that critical consciousness starts with people's lived reality, where people question everyday life, where they develop a critical understanding of the systems and structures that create and maintain inequality. Freire believed that critical consciousness leads to enlightenment, empowerment, and emancipation. He asserted that liberation is transformative when it is a collective process, where dialogue takes place between people (Freire, 1970; Ledwith and Springett, 2010; Freire, 2013). He also understood participation to be transformative with potential to counteract powerlessness and marginalisation. This transformative practice also involves critical listening (praxis) by the researcher. I wanted my research to raise my consciousness as well as my participants. I was not only interested in listening to and learning from my access practitioner and community participants, but I was also interested to understand what I, as a researcher and access practitioner, could learn from the experience and the process of engagement. I was curious about this dialogue process and critical consciousness from an access perspective, and I was influenced by Freirean pedagogy in deciding my research methodology.

Freire (1970) believed that it was not enough for people to simply come together, he believed that people need to critically reflect and act within the environment in which we

live. I believe that we live in a society that is very interconnected and therefore we need to recognise these inter-connections and work through them and within them as equals. This is something that organisations and structures can find difficult as they can crave power, and wish to maintain control (Ledwith and Springett, 2010). Participatory approaches must seek to ensure that any bias is resisted, approaches are ethically considered, and any power differentials are minimised. Participants and researcher must allow for the research design to be flexible. The power over the research process must be shared and Ledwith and Springett (2010) argue that the question, design, and analysis must be decided by all involved. Research methods that are transformative involve research design which does not involve 'subjects' of research, but that those involved are real partners.

### **5.2.1. Participatory research.**

In studying research methodologies, I was drawn to participatory methods, and action research, in particular participatory action research (PAR) and as noted above I have drawn on this body of work in a selective fashion. The democratic ethic of varied forms of action research was crucial to my inquiry. As noted by the two best known writers on action research.

Action research is always conducted with other people who constitute social situations, and because those other people can think for themselves, the way to influence trajectories of social change is to encourage them to act differently, through influencing their thinking (McNiff and Whitehead, 2010, p.73).

Linked to this ethic the researcher needs an active and reflexive role in the process, collaborate with others to arrive at new understandings.

Critical participatory action research holds a similar democratic ethic but situates research somewhat differently. It aims to determine how perspectives, social structures and practices work together to yield negative impacts, with an ambition to address these impacts, bringing about social good (Kemmis, 2000). I was drawn to this research practice as the research is owned by the researcher and the research participants and collectively social practices and situations are explored. My objective was to work with participants in communities and access colleagues aimed at uncovering injustice and empowering citizens.

Kemmis (2009) stated that action research 'aims at changing three things: practitioners' *practices, their understandings of their practices, and the conditions* in which they practice. These three things – practices, how we understand them, and the conditions that shape them – are inevitably and incessantly bound together with each other' (Kemmis, 2009, p. 463).

Kemmis (2008) stated that action research must 'work in the conversations and communications of participants about crises and difficulties confronted by social systems and the lifeworlds in which people find meaning, solidarity and significance' (Kemmis, 2008, p.123). In developing my research design I sought to maximise participation and open dialogue orientated to what Freire (1972) calls 'problem posing', that is to say surfacing issues, conflicts and dilemmas that disclose something significant about the social world and which open up space for critical inquiry and for praxis. In the pursuit of achieving equity of access to education, I felt that problematizing conversations with access practitioners and community participants were important. I needed to identify a method of engagement that would allow for open discussion and active participation.

Hall (2005), a key figure in the history of the development of PAR argues this methodological approach involves the following key principles;

- 1) Participatory research involves powerless groups of people, e.g. The marginalised, the oppressed, the poor.
- 2) Participatory research aims to have the active involvement of the community in the entire research process.
- 3) The research subject is defined, analysed and solved by the community.
- 4) The goal is the transformation and improvement of society and there are benefits of the research to the community.
- 5) The process is a learning experience for participants allowing for the greater awareness of their own resources.
- 6) Results in a more authentic analysis of social reality.
- 7) The researcher is a committed and involved participant and learns from the research process. (Hall, 2005)

PAR methodology can be a powerful tool for investigating and promoting social issues. I was interested in engaging in open dialogue and a mode of active listening as a way to explore what is going on for communities. I was not necessarily interested in orientating my research towards collective political action, however, I was particularly interested in a participatory method of engagement that allowed me to connect with a community negatively impacted by educational disadvantage. I wanted the active participation from the group. Recognising that undertaking PAR research fully is time consuming and given the limitations on my time, I applied some of Hall's principles to my research. I had ambition that the research would allow for social improvement and that the field research would be a learning experience for all participants.

Using PAR, advocates contend, allows people who are marginalised to 'generate their own knowledge from their daily experiences to liberate them from social oppression.' Community based participatory action research attempts to 'equitably involve community partners in research, draw on their knowledge and experience, share decision-making responsibilities, and build community capacity' (Giannakaki *et al.*, 2018). The purpose of participatory action research is to allow the research to be functional, empowering and potentially contribute to society. It also acknowledges and allows space for people's lived experience, including the researcher.

Kemmis (2008) refers to Habermas' communicative action for public discourse. He speaks of communicative spaces where participants have communicative freedom and everyone aims to be inclusive, where hierarchical roles and rules are ignored.

Habermas (1996) observes that communicative action in such groups builds solidarity among participants, in turn giving them a sense of communicative power and lending legitimacy to their emerging agreements, understandings and decisions (Kemmis, 2008, p. 14).

This describes well some of what I sought to achieve with my research. In planning my research engagement with the community, I wanted to allow for this type of a communicative space. I wanted participants to feel safe, feel free to share and express their opinions and thereby feel empowered. As an access practitioner-scholar I realised that I had to ensure that I made the 'familiar strange' (Heaton and Swidler, 2012). I had to find a

balance by creating some distance from practice, while being 'prepared to ask questions about social phenomena that prove obscure in ways that still take advantage of the fact that the practitioner is part of the phenomenon' (Heaton and Swidler, 2012, p. 92). I aimed to produce practical knowledge that is useful for people and organisations and that could have impact on people's/communities' lives (Gergen and Gergen, 2008).

In doing this I was strongly influenced by PAR in terms of how I engaged with a specific community and the desire to support collective reflective practice to explore challenges and barriers to education for communities that are under-represented at higher education. But it is important to note that the research is not PAR, in the sense of a collective, community driven process which moves towards emancipatory political action.

I was aware as a researcher, as a person employed by a higher educational institution that I was not a member of the community that I wished to engage with. I was aware of the potential power imbalance, and I did not wish to adopt an 'othering' approach with communities. Community engagement practices by higher education institutions can often be led by HEIs, so I was conscious of the power imbalance with me as researcher and the community participants. I didn't want to create a 'me' and 'them' situation where I the researcher was a step away from the process, observing the community from afar. I wanted to ensure that the research was not my interpretation of the 'inside' (Maclure, 2003, p. 99). I also wanted to ensure that I was conscious of my situation as researcher and as an employee of a higher educational institution, not a member of their community. O'Reilly (2012) cautions researchers, saying they should be aware of their own voice and situatedness and should aim to not assume the voice or take over the voice of the participants in the research. With this in mind, I was open and honest with my participants from the outset, explaining that I was an employee of a third level institution and that I was a Doctoral student looking at access to higher education and community engagement. I explained that I wanted to engage with a community group so that we could draw on our knowledge and experience to collectively understand and analyse the situation. I suggested that I too would be an active participant in the research process and that we would draw inspiration from participatory action research.

Following data analysis, I also shared draft findings with the participants to ensure that I had not misinterpreted or misrepresented their voice.

### **5.3 Ethical Considerations**

In advance of the interviews there were ethical considerations that I was mindful of. DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) assert that we need to consider unanticipated harm, maintaining anonymity, adequately informing interviewees of the study and reducing any risk of exploitation. While engaging peer to peer, I was conscious that there might be situations during the interview where the access practitioner could feel strong emotions. As the interviews progressed, I learned that the existing rapport prior to interviews allowed for a deep connection, which led to honest and open exchanges. I was conscious to listen intently and supportively, thereby minimising any risk of unintended harm.

I was particularly intent in maintaining anonymity for the participants. The number of access practitioners within the country is small and I felt a responsibility to protect their anonymity. To achieve this I have slightly edited quotations and applied pseudonyms to the practitioners and higher educational institutions.

Information was provided to the access practitioners in advance of the interview. This information outlined the purpose of the study and also presented an overview on the questions that would be asked. Participants were invited to ask questions at the start and at the end of the interview process. Following analysis, when preliminary findings were drafted, these were shared with participants and their input and comments were invited.<sup>10</sup>

I was considerate of the power imbalance when shaping the methodology for community engagement. While no direct power imbalance, I was conscious that formal educational institutions, such as Munster Technological University, University College Cork and Cork Education and Training Board are government structures. I am a paid employee of MTU and sit on the Steering Group of the Learning City and the Learning Neighbourhoods. I engaged with community groups, which are voluntary organisations. People are involved in community groups in a voluntary capacity. I was aware that engaging with these groups

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<sup>10</sup> I received an email back from only one Access participant who said “Well that made for depressing reading on a Thursday evening 😊. .... You have summed it up there perfectly.”

could present as a power imbalance. To counteract this, I drew on participatory action research so that this power imbalance was minimised. By engaging with the community group through a number of workshops, my methodology allowed for deeper engagement, so that trust was built up and participants became part of the research.

The purpose of participatory action research is to allow the research to be meaningful, beneficial, empowering and potentially contribute to society. I wanted to add insight and value to these Learning Neighbourhoods. By working collaboratively and respectfully with these neighbourhoods, we together shaped the goals of the research and I ensured that participants knew that they have the power to control how the research is carried out. Time was devoted to how the participants were to be involved in the decision making and governance of the research. Participants were given the opportunity to withdraw from the process at any point, ensuring that communities held the power as the research evolved. All participants were made aware of how the data would be used and how the findings would be disseminated.

#### **5.4 The Access Practitioner**

In planning research, I wanted to ascertain who is going to benefit from this research, what are the aims, who are going to be the participants, what methodological approach is going to be taken, and which approach is going to have the most significant impact on development (Hall, 2005).

As noted in Chapter Three there has been very little academic research on or by access officers/practitioners. Many of my access colleagues have been in post for several years and have a wealth of knowledge and experience built up in that time. At institutional level, they have designed, developed, and delivered initiatives aimed at increasing access, they have first-hand experience of implementing national access policy, they are on the ground supporting students who experience disadvantage. The knowledge acquired by the access practitioner is significant and therefore their voice is very important within this research. Fleming *et al.* (2017), reference the fact that there is a lack of research, writing and debate on higher education institutions' support for social and community



development, and HEIs support for active citizenship. Some of the areas that I wanted to explore with access practitioners were as follows:

- (1) I wanted to determine the level of practitioner knowledge and ask what they felt were the current obstacles and opportunities to achieving success in relation to equity of access.
- (2) I wanted to identify key aspects of access officers practice and tease out the realities of the role.
- (3) I wanted to determine what/if any level of engagement is currently happening with communities.
- (4) I was curious to determine if access officer's feel they have a role in community engagement and if they believe community engagement is a way to address issues of educational inequality.
- (5) Finally, to assess the breath of engagement with other access stakeholders in the wider educational landscape, I wished to assess what their views were on working collaboratively with other agencies, organisations, and educational organisations.

#### **5.4.1 Recruitment of participants.**

As access officer for more than two decades, I have a very good working relationship with other access officers in both the THEA (Technological Higher Education Association) and IUA (Irish Universities Association) sectors, brought closer by the shared professional experience of being an access officer/manager.

The strength of the interviewer-participant relationship is perhaps the single most important aspect of a qualitative research project: It is through this relationship that all data are collected and data validity is strengthened (Adler and Adler, 2002; Kvale, 1996). In addition, the quality of this relationship likely affects participants' self-disclosure, including the depth of information they may share about their experience of a particular phenomenon (Knox and Burkard, 2009, p. 569)

Many access officers who I work alongside were appointed at the same time as me, in the early 2000s. These access practitioners have seen the role grow and evolve over many years and the networking and relationship between access officers is very strong. As access officer with these existing professional relationships, I was uniquely positioned to engage in a peer-to-peer, familiar and non-threatening way. I also had contextual knowledge of being

an access practitioner, with an understanding of the role and where the conversations needed to be directed. I would argue that an access practitioner being interviewed by another access practitioner is more comfortable and at ease in conversations about the role, as researcher and participant share an understanding and appreciation of the role. I believe that the empirical findings that have emerged from interviews have done so because of this relationship.

I had initially planned on interviewing three access officers (two access practitioners within the THEA HEIs and one access practitioner in a university), but as the research developed and themes were beginning to emerge, I felt that one additional interview would allow me to determine if there were thematic patterns developing, such as neoliberal practices, support from senior management, the level of engagement with communities. In total I approached four colleagues who I have strong working relationships with and who have many years' experience of working as an access practitioner. My connectedness to the participants worked very well from a research perspective, in that it allowed for deep, meaningful, open, and honest conversations. Together we have over 100 years' experience of working on access to higher education.

The access practitioners who agreed to be part of the research will remain anonymous in the research. The number of access professionals within the technological university sector is relatively small, with most access services having teams of less than five practitioners. There are larger teams of access staff within the university sector. I was conscious not to reference names of HEIs, or any other reference that could allow the participants to be identified. I assigned each participant with a gender-neutral pseudonym and I use they/them pronouns throughout. I use these pseudonym's (i.e. Sam, Pat, Jodie, Jean) when using a direct quote. Because of my commitment to keeping their input anonymous, I believe access officers spoke more freely and openly about their role, allowing for unique insights. Because of my contextual knowledge and understanding of the role, I also believe a greater degree of honesty and openness transpired.

#### **5.4.2 Research bias.**

I was conscious of the bias that I could bring to this element of the research. I am an access officer; I have strong views on the role of the access officer. Maclure (2003) refers to

significance of bias when talking about autobiographical narratives, saying they are 'subject to incompleteness, personal bias and selective recall in the process by which the narrative is constructed' (Maclure, 2003, p.121). However alternatively, being an access officer, I was in a unique position, knowing the issues that are at play, having the inside story. I held a position of trust which was already established with the participants. I was their peer, the power imbalance was minimised. I wanted my practitioner knowledge to be used as an advantage to this research, by bringing an understanding of the situation at play for access practitioners.

#### **5.4.3 The interviews.**

In deciding on the best methodology for engagement with the access practitioner, I reflected on which participatory method I would be drawn to if I were asked to take part in a similar study. I believed that if the group of access practitioners were together in a workshop situation, participants might become more conscious of voicing their opinions, not wanting to present a negative impression of their HEI. Because of the professional roles people hold, I knew that the discussions were going to be sensitive and in terms of really getting an in-depth account of what people do and the levels of threat to that, I decided to use one-to-one, in-depth interviews, as I felt that the dialogue between peers and I would be more open, more honest. Cohen *et al.* (2018) state that interviews allow for an exchange of opinions between people on a subject of mutual concern, relying on the interaction for knowledge production, with an emphasis on the social situatedness. I was interested in allowing for space where knowledge is co-constructed and wanted the experience to be rewarding for both parties (Kvale, 2007). In-depth interviews provided opportunities for my personal relationships to be acknowledged and for responses people gave, to be probed. I used the interviews to explore how access practitioners view and understand their world, providing a unique take on their lived world (Kvale, 2007). These interviews allowed for discussions about power and an opportunity to explore, in greater depth, the educational inequalities. I asked my peers about their work, with a particular focus on community engagement.

Interviews are used to understand other people's experiences and capture the meaning they make of those experiences (Knox and Burkard, 2009; DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006). Interviews allow for the exploration and sharing of rich experiences with

the interpretation of these and the analysis being left to the researcher (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006). In planning for the interviews, I considered how structured the questions were going to be in advance. To allow for comparable findings across cases and also to provide a framework for discussions, I decided to create a set of four semi-structured open-ended questions as a way to maintain focused discussions but allowing for some freedom to delve deeper into discussion items if needed (Flick, 2002; DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2019) encourage researchers to be brave and be comfortable in the unknown.

If you're interviewing for the first time and want to cling to your interview guide like it's a life raft I'd say, 'No! Learn the questions, so you know what you want to ask. But then set it aside and just talk.' The flexibility in the method allows you freedom to follow up on things, it allows messiness in data collection. It's really vital to get to the unexpected and unanticipated, which I think is the most exciting thing about qualitative research – when you're surprised by your data (Braun and Clarke, 2019, p. 92).

The freedom to be 'messy' and to allow the dialogue to move in the direction that the interviewee saw fit, was very important to me as researcher. I did not want to influence or sway the discussions in any overly prescribed way. These interviews also allowed for sensitive topics, such as recognition, respect, and support, to be addressed and needed to be explored in great detail.

In advance of the interviews, I emailed an information document to the participants, outlining the focus of my study and informed them of the overarching questions that I wished to discuss. The purpose of this was to allow the participants a chance to reflect on the discussion points in advance.

The four access participants are located across the country and in the early stages of my research planning, for practical reasons I had initially intended interviewing them by phone. When the pandemic hit and evolved, online platforms took over as the main method of communication, I then decided to interview participants via Microsoft Teams. The interviews via Teams worked well as I had the benefits associated with phone interviews (i.e. efficient use of economic and human resource) but I also had the benefit of seeing non-verbal and facial gestures and expressions. I believe that having face to face interviews (albeit online) allowed for space to build a rapport that allowed participants to share

experiences more readily than might have occurred on the phone. All four access practitioners said that they were grateful for the opportunity to be involved, to reflect and share their experiences. My post-interview reflections captured the following.

I was pleased at how the AO had reflected when giving answers. I was also impressed that they had made some notes in advance of our meeting, in case they forgot to say these during the interview. (Researcher reflections – 6/11/2020)

DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006), describe the various stages of in-depth interviews, noting participant and interviewer apprehension as the first stage. One access officer chose to leave their camera turned off for the duration of the interview. The other three access officers turned their cameras on. The access officer who switched off their camera, also said that they would also try to answer emails during the interview, which I was surprised and disappointed at initially, but on reflection, this is the reality of the role of access officer – constantly multi-tasking. During this particular interview, a student also arrived at the participants' office door, so the participant got distracted and the interview was interrupted for a few minutes. This was a downside to the online interviews, but this experience only occurred in one interview and I believe it did not impact negatively on the input of the participant or from the discussions that developed. Once the interview progressed in this case, the interview moved onto the next stages of rapport which were exploration, co-operation, and participation (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006).

The workloads of access practitioners can be significant and therefore they can be time poor. I planned one interview per access officer and invited participants to re-engage a second time if they wished to add to the dialogue. Each interview was scheduled to last 1.5 hours, but the reality was that these interviews went over the time allowed as the discussions were rich and provided participants a rare opportunity for reflection.

I planned to build in opportunities for my own reflections between interviews. I wanted each interview to inform my next interaction.

Reflexivity on the part of the researcher is essential. In this process, the researcher gives thought to his or her own social role and that of the interviewee, acknowledging power differentials between them and integrating reciprocity into the creation of knowledge (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006, p. 317)

I allowed at least a week between interviews so that I could reflect on dialogues and begin to note codes and themes. As I used thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke), I wrote reflections following each interview and noted key themes that were discussed.

#### **5.4.4 The interview questions.**

In planning the interviews, I identified four areas for discussion. In drafting these questions, I wanted to know about practitioner knowledge and practice and their opinions on community engagement. While these questions allowed for a structure for the interviews, participants had the freedom to concentrate on some areas more than others. The four discussion areas planned were as follows:

##### **(1) Institutional commitment to access**

In this set of questions, I wanted to determine if there is a strategic commitment to access, social justice, equality of opportunities and widening participation within your HEI.

##### **(2) Community engagement**

Here I wanted to assess what level of engagement exists with communities that have low levels of progression to HE. What programmes are in place? How are these working? What level of consultation takes place between the HEI and communities.

##### **(3) Working collaboratively**

I wanted to determine if the access practitioner, worked together with other agencies/departments/organisations in addressing access to higher level education.

##### **(4) Vision**

In this section, I wanted to discuss what their vision was for access within their HEI. Throughout all interviews, I was particularly interested in the practitioner knowledge and expertise on access and widening participation.

#### **5.5 The Community Group**

My professional practice to date has focused on addressing educational inequalities. As access officer within a higher education institution, I work with individuals and communities where social and economic disadvantage is visible and stark. In my professional capacity as access practitioner, I have had experience of designing and

implementing many programmes to address the educational inequalities. I believe that citizens and communities need to be empowered so that their voice can be heard, valued, and respected in the shaping of solutions. Freire (1970) argues that there are systemic inequalities in education and society and that transformation is possible through critical consciousness and dialogue. My experience prior to this research was that engagement with communities can be ad-hoc and peripheral. In my capacity as access officer, I have endeavoured to build relationships with communities which experience socio-economic disadvantage and work with them to address equity of access to higher education. The demands of the role mean that building meaningful and sustainable relationships with communities can be challenging. In undertaking this research, I was interested in not only capturing the voice of the access practitioner but in addition I wished to engage with a community group in a way that I have not had the opportunity to, heretofore.

The working-class perspective on educational inequalities is very often neglected but is essential to ensure sufficient theoretical analysis on access to education and widening participation (Lynch, 1999). It has been suggested that if the working-class perspective is ignored, policies can be developed to 'manage rather than eliminate inequality in education' (Lynch, 1999, p. 41). I was determined in planning my research methodology to include an opportunity to engage with a working-class community and listen to members of that community to capture voices that can contribute to the development of socially useful knowledge (Preece, 2017), to determine what their learning needs are, and how they believe access to higher education could be enhanced. In so doing, I wanted to engage with a community in a dialogical way and strive for a methodology that would allow the participants, in so far as was possible, own the process as much as me.

By owning data about oppressed peoples, the 'experts' own part of them. The very owning and controlling of the stories of oppression adds further to the oppression as it means that there are now people who can claim to know and understand you better than you understand yourself. (Lynch, 1999, p. 42)

I firmly believe communities should have an active role in the shaping of solutions (Connolly, 2008; Hegarty, 2017). In designing my research, I was interested in allowing for

the community voice to be heard. Facilitating the community voice must be ‘care-fully’ considered to ensure that it is heard, valued and respected (Lynch, 2022).

#### **5.5.1 Photovoice.**

In planning my methodology, I explored many participatory methods in advance of deciding on the approach I would take. These methods included group work discussions, interviewing, etc. Freire wrote that the visual image was a powerful tool in allowing people to critically reflect on their communities and allow for dialogue to commence on the everyday social and political issues that influence their lives (Wang and Burris, 1997, p. 370). Similarly, Butterwick and Roy (2020) believe that artistic and creative endeavours which are carefully planned, can allow for environments that are conducive to speaking and listening. Additionally, in my work as access officer, I had previously successfully engaged with communities and schools using creative processes, e.g. Traveller art initiative and the ‘My Education, My Future’ art programme delivered by CIT Access Service. Because of this professional experience, I felt comfortable with this methodology.

Luttrell (2010) who worked on a participatory image-based research project with working-class immigrant children in the US, used photovoice as an ethnographic study of how the children perceived aspects of their school. A strong advocate for photovoice, she believes that giving participants an opportunity to take photographs can be a useful way to introduce content and topics that can sometimes be ignored. Photographs can also trigger new meaning and provide information for participants. Hall (2005) similarly claims that photographs as a visual medium are familiar, accessible, even universal, and can provide an unthreatening tool in participatory research. Luttrell (2010) found that providing participants with an opportunity to use a camera, gives power to the people who have been left out of political decisions or who have been denied access to and participation in matters that impact on their lives.

Within adult education practice, education and research, the role that creative expression can play in providing spaces for voices to be heard, is receiving growing attention (Butterwick and Roy, 2020). Freirean approaches place huge emphasis on the participant voice. Community-engaged practices, which amplifies voices, challenges ‘the dominant norms in higher education of who holds knowledge, expertise and authority’ (Sondag, 2021.



P. 240). Razack (1998) and Garavan (2010) warn however that some practices of storytelling which allow voices to be amplified, can enforce inequalities, when people share their stories to someone in a more powerful position, thereby producing the 'colonizer' and the 'colonized'. I was conscious of my position as a professional working within a HEI and how this could lead to a colonized/colonizer situation. To mitigate against this, I was keen to involve participants in the research process as much as possible, also suggesting that I also become a participant in the research to endeavour to achieve a more equitable partnership.

Butterwick and Roy, (2020) advocate for research that is accessible and allows for active listening. They claim that communicative practices, through empathetic means is what is required.

Communicative practices where citizens speak their truths and share what matters to them are central to the creation and sustaining of a dynamic and vibrant pluralistic democracy. Due to their location on the margins created by unequal power dynamics, there are individuals and groups who are left out of these processes..... the issue is not about finding voice, rather, the time has come for these voices to be heard and acted upon (Butterwick and Roy, 2020, p. 89).

When I studied photovoice I could see how this creative method could allow space for reflection and for the development of insights into my research questions. I could visualise how it would work successfully in a community setting. Freire held that visualisation can be powerful in allowing people to be participants in their own learning and to allow for discussion, reflection, and action (Freire, 1970; O'Reilly, 2013). I saw the potential in photovoice as a method to allow me to get to know participants and establish a deeper engagement.

Photovoice allows for engagement in an accessible way, and it is typically used for participants who have less power. This method allows individuals opportunities to reflect on their community. Hegarty (2016) claims that 'photographs interpret and represent the world and hold meaning for people.' Photovoice uses participants' photographs to engage participants in group dialogue for social change. It aims to achieve three things;

(1) to allow participants an opportunity to engage, record and reflect on select community strengths, concerns, issues.

(2) to allow for small and large group dialogue on these issues and

(3) to reach and influence policymakers.

(Castleden *et al.*, 1997; Wang and Burris, 1997; Hergenrather *et al.*, 2009)

Photovoice appealed to me as an accessible, non-threatening tool for engagement. I did not have a relationship with the participants prior to the research and I realised that photovoice would allow for easy and fun interactions, providing a toolkit for participants to help them articulate their opinions and perspectives.

Photovoice does not necessarily require community participants to be able to read or write; therefore, the methodology also accommodates participants who do not speak English, are illiterate, or have physical or developmental disabilities.

Photovoice .... provides participants the opportunity to enhance personal power through photographing variables of community concerns, speaking in photograph discussions to collectively identify common themes, writing plans of action for change, creating community exhibits presenting themes, and collaborating with (Hergenrather, 2009, p. 688)

#### **5.5.2 Identifying a community.**

Cork became a UNESCO Learning City in 2015. There are six Learning Neighbourhoods within the Learning City Structure. Learning Neighbourhoods are geographic areas in Cork, where communities strive to build a culture and a love of learning. These Learning Neighbourhoods aim to provide inclusive and diverse learning opportunities through lifelong learning, working collaboratively with formal and non-formal learning providers. I have a strong working relationship with the Coordinator of the Cork Learning Neighbourhood initiative, and I sit on the steering committee for the programme. As there are educational and learning programmes already being delivered by educational providers within these communities, I was interested in identifying a community group within one of the six Learning Neighbourhoods. The Learning Neighbourhood steering committee was aware of my wish to engage with participants within a Learning Neighbourhood in Cork and they were supportive of my research from the beginning.

I linked in with the Cork Learning City Coordinator and the Learning Neighbourhood Coordinator to identify a Neighbourhood that might be willing to get involved. One Learning

Neighbourhood was suggested to me, as this Neighbourhood has a strong community involvement and has a very involved and supportive Community Development Worker. I approached the Community Development Worker within that Neighbourhood to discuss my research. I have a long-standing working relationship with the Community Development Worker in this Learning Neighbourhood. I had conversations with her to discuss my research, my methodology and my proposal to use photovoice. I valued the Community Development Worker's advice around how best to engage with participants in the community and my proposed way of engaging using photovoice was well received by her.

I liaised with the Community Development Worker and the Cork Learning Cities Coordinator (who both have a background in Community Education and know the Learning Neighbourhood) at the early stages of the research planning. Lynch (1999) claims that when the voices of those 'named' in the research are involved at planning stage, there are possibilities for transformative emancipatory research practice (Lynch, 1999), therefore this preliminary engagement with the community workers was essential for me. Both had informed me that many researchers had engaged with the community in the past, using various research methods and there was a bit of scepticism, wariness, and uncertainty about the benefit of the research process for the community. I was very conscious and mindful of this in deciding my research methodology. I discussed with the Community Worker my wish to undertake participatory action research. I informed her that the proposed methodology would allow for a collective process, where researcher and participants would engage as equals in a dialogical process to discuss themes relating to access to education, barriers to education and learning within the community. We also spoke about the possible outcomes for the research and how the findings could be used by the community. She was very supportive of this methodology from the outset.

Before I started working with this community group, I was determined that I did not want to take advantage of any group for my personal research. Aligned with an egalitarian theoretical framework, I wanted to ensure that my time with the community would involve the building of relationships with the community that would be possible to go beyond the timescale of the research and that would benefit me in my capacity as access practitioner and the community. I wanted the workshops to be relational and reciprocal (Hegarty, 2017).

### **5.5.3 Agreeing the research method with the community.**

Before deciding on photovoice, I wanted to ensure that the community were interested in using this method. I presented it as a suggestion to the Community Development Worker in the Learning Neighbourhood I worked with. It was important to me that the community had a say in what method was finalised. There was immediate interest in it by the Development Worker as she saw that it could allow for interesting, creative, and fun ways to engage with the community participants. Photovoice allowed me, (essentially, an outsider), an opportunity to engage with participants in an informal and non-threatening way. It allowed for the social interaction, which Freire (2000), Jarvis and Illeris (2018) say is crucial to learning. I hoped that the capturing of images allowed participants an opportunity to reflect on what learning and what equitable access to education means to them.

I also felt that photovoice would be an attractive methodology for participants because in recent years, Learning Neighbourhoods in Cork organised an initiative called 'Faces of Learning'. Learners from within the communities, of all ages, had their photographs taken by a professional photographer. These photos were then developed and enlarged and displayed throughout the community. It was a very positive experience for communities, bringing conversations about learning to the fore. By using Photovoice as a method, I had hoped to again use a camera, but this time give the control to the community learners themselves.

### **5.5.4 The impact of Covid and the government lockdowns.**

I had planned to use participatory research as my methodology and initially I wanted to have the workshops in-person, face to face in a setting within their community. I was hoping to identify a communicative space that would allow for collaborative engagement and allow for issues of equity to be addressed (Bevan, 2013). I had planned on the workshops being held within the Learning Neighbourhood, in the Community Centre which is familiar to participants (Tracy, 2010). My initial timeline for running these workshops was intended to be in the Spring/Summer 2021. Unfortunately, the Covid-19 situation turned very bleak in January 2021 and the country was forced into a level 5 Lockdown for all of Spring 2021. I tried to push out my timelines to have the workshops in person, but after

weeks of deliberation, I needed to decide on how I was going to proceed. Guided by my contact in the community, when I discussed the possibility of moving the workshops online, I was reassured by the Community Worker, who felt confident that a positive online engagement would be possible. She reassured me that because we were more than twelve months into the pandemic at that point, people in the community were now comfortable with online platforms and that they also had access to digital devices. She also told me that participants would have the technical support of the Community Development Project, which was very reassuring. I was initially disappointed that the engagement could not be in-person as I was nervous that the opportunity to build a relationship with participants would be impacted. In advance of the online workshops, I had a certain anxiety about engaging with a group through a screen, who I had not met and had no relationship with.

I had concerns about whether the online environment would be appropriate to the establishment of a communicative space. Bevan (2013), states that the nature of communicative spaces are conceptual and physical. Conceptually, these spaces must allow for people to have a voice and for these voices to be heard and respected. She uses interpersonal theory to describe the three phases that a group must develop: inclusion, control and intimacy. In the 'inclusion' phase, the group discusses the purpose, the ground rules, the commitment involved. During the 'control' phase, the group begin to get comfortable with each other and discussions allow for debate. Finally, the 'intimacy' phase sees the individual identities of people being formed and the group begin to complement each other.

Physical space needs to be accessible and safe, to allow for communication to happen where none existed previously (Bevan, 2013). I was confident that the online space would allow for a communicative space, but I did have concerns prior to the workshop if the 'physical', now online space, would be appropriate.

All five workshops were held online. My concerns about the online space being a suitable 'physical' space were allayed following the first online sessions. Participants were comfortable online and twelve months into the pandemic, were now very familiar with the technology.

As we moved through the workshops, the pandemic restrictions were beginning to ease and the country was beginning to open back up. Although the five workshops were all online, I did have the opportunity to meet four of the five participants for a face-to-face informal gathering and a cup of tea a few weeks after the workshops were complete.

#### **5.5.5 Recruiting participants.**

I informed my contact in the community that I wished to recruit up to eight participants and that my plan was to engage face-to-face over five workshops. I asked for her advice in relation to recruiting the participants. With the decision made to move the workshops online, my contact in the community recommended that I would prepare a pre-recorded video message explaining my research with a call out for volunteers. She said that she would then share this via WhatsApp with prospective participants. This proved to be a very successful way of sourcing participants. I received an indication of interest from seven people, but unfortunately the time commitment did not suit two of these people, so five people signed up to be involved. Given the proposed structure of the workshops (1.5 hours), I felt that having five people would be a manageable number to allow all voices to be heard in all workshops. The number allowed for a variety of voices to be heard and allow for different perspectives to be discussed and debated.

At the beginning of this research I had questions relating to what communities need from HEIs and how do HEIs build enduring relationships with communities that experience educational disadvantage. I did not have the answers to these questions and from the outset I acknowledged this with the research participants. I was aware that I could not find the answer to these questions on my own, but with my experience as an access practitioner for more than 20 years, I had something to add in finding the solution. Therefore, I was keen to be part of the research process, and I presented myself to the community group as the sixth participant. The community participants and I were in it together, bringing together our different perspectives. I was always conscious of my bias and subjectivity and the potential power imbalance, being an employee of a third level institution and being a member of the Cork Learning City Steering Committee. I wanted to listen and allow for us to explore collectively. Braun and Clarke (2019) see the researcher as an active participant in the research process and believe in embracing researcher subjectivity. They call for the

researcher to be visible, rather than passive. Freirean principles were very much in my mind in becoming the sixth participant.

How can I dialogue if I always project ignorance onto others and never perceive my own?.....At the point of encounter there are neither utter ignoramuses nor perfect sages; there are only people who are attempting, together, to learn more than they now know (Freire, 1970, p. 90).

I was open with the participants from the beginning, explaining my subjectivity and the professional roles that I had. I explained that I did not have the answers to the research questions and that I valued their knowledge. I presented to them that by being involved as a sixth participant, I too had the opportunity to reflect on the themes presented and be part of the discussion and part of the solution. By being involved in the process, I wanted participants to feel that I was their equal, that there was no hierarchy and that we could collectively discuss and debate the issues and collectively find solutions.

Once recruited, all five participants attended all five workshops.

#### **5.5.6 Community participant profile.**

Four women and one man volunteered for the research. The group ranged in age from early 30s to 70 years of age. (I did not ask participants to share their age with me. The average age break-down was approximately as follows: 2 in 30-40 age group, 1 in 50-60 age group, 1 in 60s and 1 in 70s.)

One participant was not originally from Cork but had married someone from the area and was now living in the community. Another participant considered herself a 'blow-in' even though she was originally from the neighbouring parish. The other three lived in the area most of their lives. All participants were actively involved or had been involved with the local community development programme (e.g. Active members of the CDP Board of Management, Volunteers at the CDP, involved in Community Development and Community Education initiatives) and were familiar with the Learning Neighbourhood initiative.

#### **5.5.7 Pre-planning the workshops.**

Once the five participants were recruited, I communicated with them via email to identify a suitable day and time in the week to meet. I shared the research overview with them, and I emailed them the Consent Form (see Appendix) in advance of meeting them. I also asked them about their level of digital literacy to determine if they would be

comfortable using an online platform. My community contact had initially suggested that I would use Zoom as the online platform as people in the community were familiar with this, but unfortunately the Ethics Committee in Maynooth University (MU) informed me that this platform was not supported by MU and they suggested that I use Microsoft Teams. I sourced and shared a YouTube video online explaining how to set up Teams on a digital device. I asked the participants in advance to download the MS Teams App onto their digital devices. The move to online workshops did add a layer of complexity and anxiety in advance of the workshops, as I was reliant on the technology working and the connectivity to be strong enough for everyone.

#### **5.5.8 The workshops.**

I endeavoured to implement the guidelines for ethical research in reflexive relationships, as outlined by Etherington (2004, p. 614). I remained aware of the power imbalance between me and the participants, especially given that I worked in a higher education institution. I wanted to work with integrity and respect with the participants. I was keen to allow for transparent, ethical practice and dialogue so that I could build a sustainable relationship with participants. I planned research decisions openly and transparently with participants. I provided information to the group as it became available. I outlined in my research any of the dilemma's that I encountered throughout the process.

In the first workshop, I spent time going through the consent form to explain to participants each point, so that they were aware of the research plans from the outset and had an opportunity to input. In the first workshop there were many opportunities to ask questions. A working agreement was discussed to set boundaries. The agreement included how the participants were to be involved in the decision making and governance of the research. Participants were given the opportunity to withdraw from the process at any point, ensuring that communities held the power as the research was evolving. All participants were made aware of how the data was to be used and how the findings would be disseminated. There was also discussion around how we as a group could decide to use the data when finished.



From the beginning, I was very conscious that while I have a very good working relationship with the Coordinators of the Learning Neighbourhood, unfortunately prior to my research any meaningful opportunities to engage at community level was limited. In identifying a way to engage with participants, I was aware that the approach taken would have to allow for me to get to know the individuals and establish a way to build that relationship. Also, while cognisant of the timeframe of the research, I wanted to explore a participatory form of engagement with communities that I had heretofore not had an opportunity to do.

Five online workshops were held in total. Each workshop was planned to take 1.5 hours. I planned on creating a virtual space that ensured collaboration and creativity using photographs through co-creation, the sharing of stories without it being overly prescribed by me (Ball, 2013). As the workshops continued, the relationship with participants deepened and everyone in the group, including myself, became more comfortable with the process. The consultation and dialogue throughout provided for deep and meaningful contributions from all participants. It was incredibly powerful to be part of the workshops and gain insights into the community knowledge.

Below is a brief overview of each of the five workshops:

#### *Workshop 1 – Introduction, Methodology and Agreeing Ground Rules*

The first workshop was an introductory workshop, which allowed me to give some context to the research. I asked participants to take photos that would allow them to introduce themselves to the group. I requested that these be emailed to me prior to workshop. This workshop was very informal in tone as I wanted participants to feel comfortable and for them to get to know me and for me to get to know them. Some of the participants knew each other, but not everyone.

I explained the methodology that I wished to use explaining that I wanted us to work together to understand a problematic situation and explore how we might change it for the better. I also explained the purpose of participatory action research (PAR) saying that it is an approach in which a project is co-led in all phases by community members and

academic researchers, with the intent that findings will be used to change inequitable practices and systems.

I spent some time explaining how photovoice works, explaining that it is a qualitative method used in community-based action research to document and reflect reality. I suggested that I would also take photographs and that we could all express our points of view by photographing scenes that reflect the theme. I suggested that these photographs would be collaboratively interpreted through discussions, and narratives would be developed that explain how the photos highlight the research theme. All participants were interested and motivated by the suggested methodology and agreement was reached with the group to proceed using photovoice.

Before the close of the first workshop, I suggested three questions that would be discussed in Workshop Two.

- What does learning mean to me and what are my learning needs?
- What does learning mean to my community and what are my community's learning needs?
- Learning is strongly supported within my community.

*Workshop 2 – What does learning mean to me and my community?*

Participants took turns in presenting. The time allocated to the workshops was just adequate to allow all six inputs (including my input).

At the end of this workshop, the following statements for reflection were posed.

- Access to higher education is possible for anyone in my community
- Universities and third level are real options for me and my community

*Workshop 3 – Access to Education is possible for me and my community*

In this workshop I spoke about access to education from my perspective as an access practitioner within a higher educational institution and how access to higher education is not happening for all. I used images of maps taken from the Cork City Profile 2018, which presented a statistical and geographical profile of Cork City Local Authority area focused on health and social inclusion. I presented two maps. The first highlighted the percentage of the population whose highest level of education is primary level or less. The second map

highlighted the percentages of the population whose highest level of education is a Bachelor Degree or higher.

Each participant was asked to reflect on the following statements and questions:

- What can/should universities do to meet my learning needs?
- What can/should universities do to meet my community's learning needs?
- How can Cork Learning City meet my community's needs?

*Workshop 4 – What can HEIs do to help my community?*

Participants spoke one by one using the photographs/pictures they chose.

*Workshop 5 – Future Action*

The final workshop was scheduled for one hour and it held two purposes;

- Evaluate the workshops and discuss how participants felt about the process – look at the method, what worked, what didn't work?
- What can we do with this learning?

#### **5.5.9 Photo rules.**

I explained the ground rules for taking photos. We discussed how the photos were to be taken by them (at any time). The photo could be of a place, an item, an animal, an occasion, but could not be any identifiable person. The photo could be abstract or concrete/real. The photo would be used by the participant to introduce themselves and say why they are interested in getting involved in this research. I presented an overview of what the workshops would entail, saying that questions would be presented prior to each workshop. Each participant would then reflect on these questions and suggested that everyone take up to 4 photos on this theme. The photos were emailed in advance of each workshop.

#### **5.5.10 Consent form.**

There was significant time given to the Consent Form (Appendix X) at the first workshop. I read through the document and invited questions on any part of the form. I asked that they sign and email me the form if they were happy to be involved.

This process of engagement over a five-week period, allowed me to develop a relationship with participants. This process focused on building trust and mutual respect, so

that we could collaborate and explore the research questions collectively. While the online platform allowed for the research to progress, I think that there were certain limitations to establishing a deeper level of connectivity with participants.

### **5.6 Recording and Analysis**

With consent from all participants, interviews and workshops were recorded on Microsoft Teams. The data was transcribed using Microsoft Stream. The recordings were strong and no issues presented in the sound quality. The transcription software was not as effective and the technology at times did not pick up the spoken word in text form and often mistook words and phrases for others. In most cases, I transcribed each word in each interview and workshop by listening to the recordings and typing the transcriptions. While time consuming, this time allowed me to become very familiar with the data and helped me in the analysis stage.

Each interview and workshop session was recorded and themes were coded and analysed. There was a simultaneous, iterative process of analysis between workshops (Creswell, 2014).

As researchers then, we are, in Haraway's terms, 'non-innocent' (1997): if method is performative, not only describing the world, but influencing, producing and interfering with it, then it is necessary to consider what type of reality we wish to create or in which ways we wish to create changes. How we go about gathering data affects not only the outcome but also, especially in the social sciences, the participants in the research, and society itself (O'Reilly, 2012, p. 93).

The participatory methodological approach taken, very much acknowledged my role in the research (Peer-to-peer interviews and becoming the sixth participant in the photovoice community workshops). Rather than be overly objective in the analysis phase, removed from the research, an outsider to this research, I wanted to embrace my subjectivity, acknowledge my 'non-innocence', and use this to interpret the data to allow for reflective professional practice. This subjectivity impacts on data interpretation, and I wanted to identify a means of analysis that would allow for this. I chose thematic analysis to describe and interpret the data from my research.

While the methodology for engagement with the community group was drawn from PAR methods, I called on thematic analysis to identify the research findings. Participants

gave a commitment to five workshops, and I was conscious that five workshops would not allow time for participants to analyse, interpret and collate the findings. Thematic analysis was used to generate draft findings which were then disseminated to the participants, allowing them an opportunity for input, comment, and agreement.

Thematic Analysis is a means of identifying, analysing and reporting themes and findings. Lainson *et al.* (2019) believe that the researcher interprets people's input. They believe that the researcher must be visible and take responsibility for interpreting people's words. They call for bias to be called out and to acknowledge the 'value' that this brings to the research. As a critical researcher, I chose Thematic Analysis as I wanted my researcher subjectivity to be seen as an asset and a resource. Lainson *et al.* (2019) see the researcher as being active in the process and should value and embrace the researcher subjectivity. The researcher role should be visible. The research and the thematic analysis process give voice to participants, and the researcher edits and interprets. Lainson *et al.* (2019) believe that as a critical researcher it is important to capture that we are not only active in the research process, but that the responsibility for interpreting people's words must be acknowledged.

It's really important to acknowledge the power in the process, to acknowledge that you're not merely describing or 'giving voice'. You are editing and interpreting. All of you as a person shapes how you make sense of people's words. To make the researcher visible is part of taking responsibility for how you've interpreted people's words. It's responding to the power in research relationships. (Lainson *et al.*, 2019, p. 6).

I was always conscious about the power dynamic with participants in my research, in particular the community participants. From the outset I was honest with them about my background and my research ambitions. Rather than hide from this reality, I wanted to bring this potential power imbalance to light. As a critical researcher interested in power, this was important to me.

Thematic analysis involves looking at the various parts to help understand the data as a whole and these parts cannot be grasped unless viewed in relation to the whole. Themes need to be identified which link to the research focus, the question and the theoretical framework. By doing this, data sets can be interpreted and meaning can be incorporated (Roberts *et al.*, 2019).

Braun and Clarke assert that themes don't simply emerge from data or that researchers do not 'discover' themes. Similarly, they believe that researchers do not just give voice to participants. They state that this is a passive account of the process (Braun and Clarke, 2006). They suggest that researchers have an active role and articulate these findings which leads to reflexive Thematic Analysis. They acknowledge the active and subjective role of the researcher in the process. They also suggest that when the researcher edits and analyses data, they become 'our stories' about 'their stories', rather than reporting the situation directly (Lainson *et al.*, 2019, p. 7).

The language of 'themes emerging': can be misinterpreted to mean that themes 'reside' in the data, and if we just look hard enough they will 'emerge' like Venus on the half shell. If themes 'reside' anywhere, they reside in our heads from our thinking about our data and creating links as we understand them. (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 80).

Using this analysis process gave permission to me as a researcher to be reflexive, to be visible in the research also. It allowed me to reflect on the dialogues with access and community participants to make sense of the data, acknowledging my own practice and experience as an access officer also.

#### **5.6.1 Transcribing the data.**

Technological advancements have led to software being created that can transcribe data sets very quickly. Between my interviews and my workshops, I had generated more than 15 hours of recordings. Over 63,500 words of transcriptions were recorded. Using technology to help me transcribe this data was of great interest to me. My recordings were captured on Microsoft Teams and initially for access officer recordings I used Microsoft Stream to produce the transcripts. I found that the software mis-read certain words and inputs, and as a result I spent significant time in editing the transcripts. Some researchers believe that there can be benefit in qualitative researchers transcribing data themselves, as this can allow for greater familiarity with the data and develop 'immediate fluency with interviewees work' (Bergin, 2018, p. 151). When the issues presented with the Stream transcripts, I made the decision to transcribe the workshops data myself. While time consuming, this process did allow me to become very familiar with the data and presented an opportunity for me to critically reflect on the preliminary data analysis. Once codes were captured, themes were defined and named. A theme was identified when there was a

number of mentions/discussions of the codes across the transcripts. These themes are captured in the Findings Chapters.

### 5.6.2 Identifying themes.

I followed the phases of analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). I became very familiar with the data sets; I created a data note book; I generated initial codes; I looked for themes; I reviewed these themes; I defined and named these themes; I produced the findings.

Identifying themes began at the first stage of engagement. Writing and journaling became an integral part of this process. After each interview and each workshop, I wrote reflections and noted ideas and possible codes. This continued throughout the field research phase and I endeavoured to look for patterns of meaning.

#### Initial thoughts following first interview with Access Officer

The AO left the screen off, which was a pity as I would have liked to have had face to face conversation. ■ also said that ■ would also try to answer emails during the course of the interview, which I was surprised and annoyed at initially, but on reflection, this is what our job is like – multi-tasking. Double jobbing all the time.

Having had that shaky start, we both settled into a good flow of conversation. Towards the end, ■ did say that ■ got distracted by a student at his door at one point, but ■ continued on and regained concentration.

I was really happy with the conversation and I was pleased that I used the interview questions as a guide, but when it was appropriate I added/amended/omitted some questions. This allowed the interview to flow easily and naturally.

I was pleased at how the AO had reflected when giving answers. I was also impressed that ■ had made some notes in advance of our meeting, in case ■ forgot to say these during the interview.

■ background is in adult education, ■ was familiar with Paulo Freire, ■ was committed to community engagement and ■ believed in the need for an educational philosophy.

■ mentioned ■ 'personality' a few times, in relation to getting things done. This is something that resonates with me in my practice.

■ spoke about collaboration in an interesting way. ■ felt that when collaboration moves away from informality, the formality can stifle productivity. 'no sense of oxygen'

Engagement – ■ said that it is work that you can't fake, nurture, it needs to be in your value system. ■ spoke about finding the right people for this engagement. We need to know what music someone is dancing to. |

Figure 8: Extract (with gender identifier deleted) from personal reflection following interview with the first access practitioner (November 2020).

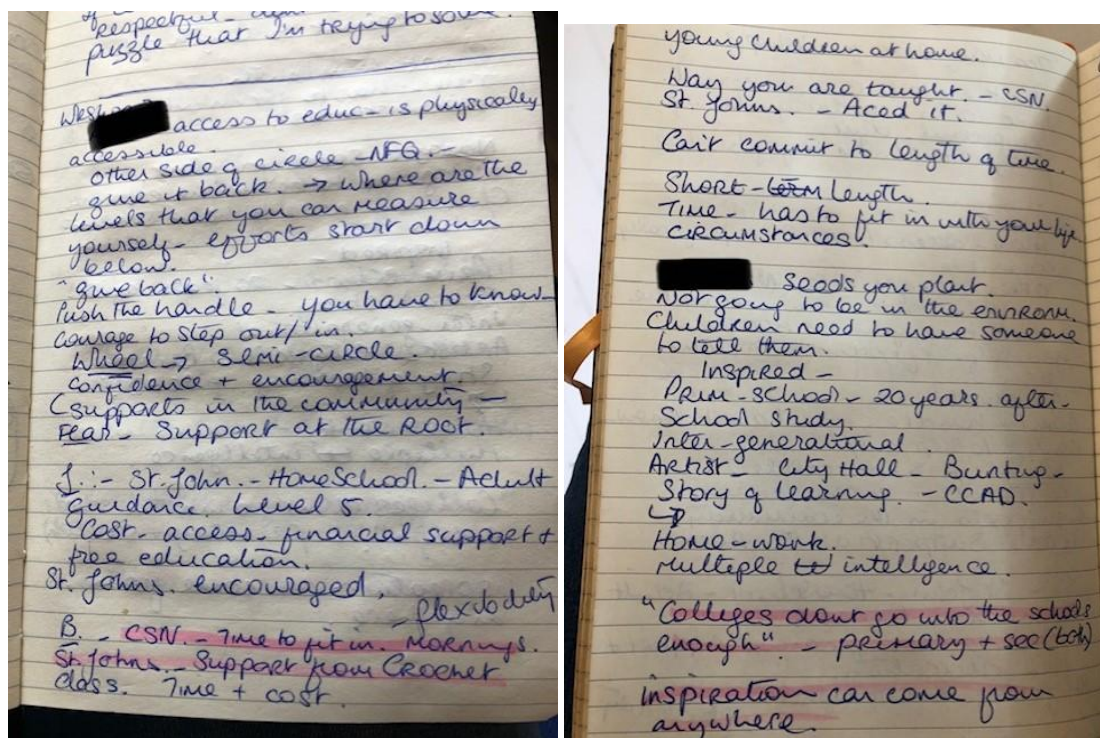


Figure 9: Extract from my workshop note book June 2020.



### Workshop 1 Reflections

My first workshop is done!!!!!! Delighted to have it off the ground. I had planned on having my first workshop on the 17<sup>th</sup> May, but there was a bereavement in the community. A founding member of the [REDACTED] Community Development Programme passed away the weekend prior to the workshop. I had seen the news on Twitter and had wondered how this might impact on the workshop. On Monday morning, I received an email from Slobhan O'Dowd suggesting that I would postpone the first workshop, as the funeral was on Monday evening. I emailed all participants and passed on my condolences, I also informed them that we would be postponing the workshop for a week.

#### Correspondence in advance of the workshop

I was mindful not to overload the participants with too much information. I emailed them a copy of the consent form, but I advised them that we would go through that in the first workshop. I kept the message as simple as possible. I instructed them to download Microsoft Teams in advance so that they could connect on the evening. I sourced a YouTube video on how they could do this. I provided my mobile number in case anyone had any difficulties and encouraged them to call me if they had any problems.

#### Technology

I received a phone call from one participant about an hour before hand as she couldn't locate the link. I had cc'd my personal email on the invite list, so I could see what she was seeing, so I was able to talk her through it. I was fearful of how the technology would work, but thankfully all the participants joined without any major difficulty. I was so relieved to see the faces appear when the workshop commenced. Everyone connected without issue and no one, including myself, had broadband issues.

I replaced the backdrop photo that I normally have on Teams (which is of the MTU Campus) to a scene from Cork City. This was more appropriate I felt, as I didn't want participants to feel that it was a MTU Cork event).

It did strike me during the workshop that the experience would be better if we were face to face in a room. However, given that we were almost 15 months into the pandemic, the participants seemed to be comfortable in the online space. All communicated very naturally.

#### Number of participants

I had five participants on the first night. I thought I had managed to get a 6th person, but unfortunately the Monday evening didn't suit her, so she was ruled out. In a way, I think 5 is a good number, as I think it would have been tricky to have had a 6th input in the timeframe.

#### Workshop 1

The workshop started in a very light-hearted way. As people were joining, we started talking about Anne, who had recently passed away. They shared stories about her and her loss was felt by the participants who knew her. I expressed my sympathies and I was glad that the space was given to speak about her.

The purpose of the first workshop was to get to know the participants. There was only one person in the group who didn't seem to know the other participants well. I was glad that this was the case, as I felt that I wasn't the only unknown person. From the start, even though I hadn't met any of the participants previously, I felt at home with the group. They were friendly, chatty, warm and interested. I felt like I had known them for years.

#### Photovoice

The photos worked really well. In my initial communication I had asked participants to email me through photos (up to 4 photos each) prior to the first workshop. I gave them a deadline of the Friday evening before. I also asked them not to send photos of people who could be identifiable. By Friday at 5pm, I had only received in one set of photos. I was a little panicked, but I decided that if people were to turn up without photos on the first date, then I could still make it work. One woman called me to say that she didn't know how to email the photos. I was trying to talk her through the process, even though she was using a Samsung phone (which I am unfamiliar with) and I was getting a little anxious. She then nonchalantly suggested that she could WhatsApp me the photos. I was relieved and agreed that she could do that.

By late Friday evening, I had all the photos in from all 5 participants. I was so delighted and this gave me great confidence heading into the first workshop. As the photos were coming in, I was intrigued to hear the stories behind the pictures. I placed the photos onto a Powerpoint presentation, one slide per person, and used this during the first workshop.

In the workshop, I asked for a volunteer to go first. The group were hesitant in coming forward. I stepped up and went first. I used the opportunity to demonstrate how to speak to the photos, I introduced myself, spoke a little about where I come from, my family, my career, my hobbies. After this, the other participants were happy to do the same, as the process was made a little bit clearer.

The photos worked really well. I think it allowed the group to speak about themselves in a way that wouldn't have been achieved if they didn't have the prop. The photos allowed for a deeper introduction into people's lives, for example, with one of the participants sharing about his experience at school having a learning difference, another participant who spoke about loss.

#### My reflections

From my recruitment video, participants were aware in advance of the broad research area, being access and community engagement. I think some participants incorporated elements of this into their introduction. It was like they were really eager to start the discussions in relation to adult learning and community learning. I had to try to reign that in a little, as I want to build slowly to this discussion.

Listening to those brief discussions on adult learning, to my shame, I found that I was surprised at knowledge and expertise they had in relation to community learning. I don't think I was prepared to learn in my first workshop. When I was in the workshop, I felt that this is exactly the type of work that I as an Access Officer needs to do. The potential, the power, the opportunities in the group was really present. It struck me that one of our Access Linked Schools is in the Ballypheehane area, and I had never met with this group previously. What a missed opportunity for Access. This type of engagement is what needs to be embedded in access activity.

They are a grand bunch of talkers, which is good, but I might have to hone my facilitation skills a little to make sure that everyone is heard and has the chance to speak. I felt the photos worked really well. Even when I received the photos from them during the week, I was excited to hear the

Figure 10: Extract from workshop one reflections from— June 2021.

This process continued with the transcriptions. I read and re-read the transcriptions. I wrote comments, thoughts and ideas into the margins of the transcriptions to begin to decipher meaning and understanding. I reviewed the data, initially noting prominent keywords, ideas, thoughts and opinions (Roberts *et al.*, 2019). Topics of discussion were identified and highlighted in the transcript documents. Iteration involving identifying a keyword and the main discussion point and dialogue were copied into a document. If a similar discussion point was made at a subsequent interview or workshop, the text was copied and noted under that discussion point. To ensure rigor and reliability, this became an iterative process so that the minutia was observed, until codes were identified, and patterns began to be developed. Extracts below taken from access officer transcriptions.

Deirdre: I love that, OK? OK, and do you think that 15? I mean, given what you said about the fact that your college you know has maybe up to 90% of the cohort, that would tick the access Target groups - 15 people enough?

XXXX: {Pause} Definitely not enough. {another short pause} But then again, it comes down to approach, I suppose, Deirdre. **You know the crew keep creating units to look after different problems and stuff like that.** So obviously it's better if everybody takes responsibility, so I just as an aside, maybe as as a useful thing to get your head around it when, let's say I'd have been interested in math when I started out because a lot of our programs, technical sort of stuff, that's a physics and stuff like that. So we set up the math Learning Center.

Deirdre Creedon  
Resourcing for Access

Reply

Deirdre Creedon  
No vision being applied – ad hoc developments  
01 December 2021, 18:44

Reply

J: **If** they were really driven in resourcing this, they'd be making sure it was high up on the agenda, that they would look at the infrastructure and like, because, one of the things I've seen over the years is that, you know, Access like students are often, kind of kind there's a polarization that happens in the college around, well they're in access, they're in access, they are one of yours. Whereas I think, and I've said this before and recently as well – it's everybody's business. **They don't see it as being that because the voice of the AO is not heard at those management tables and if it was, I think then you could shout that a little bit louder when they talk about 'your student'.** You could say back to them, well, they're not just my student, they're actually a student of the college. I think that has then created a lot of gaps and spaces and in terms of, **and if we don't shout loud we're not going to be heard, but it's being given the opportunity to shout loud.** So, it is deemed as important, but at the same time, like I often wonder if I was a fly on the wall in conversations around resourcing on where funding has to go – how important is it – really compared maybe to other

Deirdre Creedon  
Access seen to be the business of Access Offices  
Not seen as everyone's business.

@mention or reply

Deirdre Creedon  
Not heard – voice.

@mention or reply

Deirdre Creedon  
Voice less

@mention or reply

Figure 11: Extracts from access officer transcriptions.

#### Preliminary Coding

##### Workshop 1:

| Discussion   | Theme              |
|--|--------------------|
| Step by step (NQF)   | NFQ – Step by Step |
| CDP – running courses, providing learning opportunities (Importance of Ballyphehane CDP) | CDP                |
| Stiofaio, Naofa (FE)   | FE                 |
| ICA – Women – Interest Group   | Women              |
| Bit by bit (NQF)   | NFQ                |
| Someone on the inside (Inside contact/power of an insider)                               | Insider            |
| Accidental nature of Education (Unplanned educational opportunities)                     | Unplanned educ     |
| Hobbies leading to educational opportunities and qualifications                          | Hobbies            |
| Welcoming experience of FE (FE)  | FE                 |
| CDP being established allowed for courses to be developed (CDP)                          | CDP                |
| Nervous of taking up education (Fear)  | Fear & Confidence  |
| Resilience and courage – 'This <u>is</u> not going to get me' (Fear/Resilience/Courage)  | Fear & Confidence  |
| Stepping Stone (NQF) – Picture   |                    |

Workshop 2:

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Idea of Learning v Education   | Learning v Education   |
| CDP opened up huge opportunities   | CDP  |
| Fear of being exposed/failing  | Fear & Confidence  |
| Support of CDP – providing learning opportunities  | CDP  |
| The community recognises the learning needs of individuals and community   | CDP – Community insights   |
| CDP – So connected – any info you want or need – the amount of good it does – benefit of connections                                 | CDP  |
|  | Connections  |
| Tree of life – picture – constantly learning   | Importance of learning/love of learning  |
| Benefits of community education, support, affordable, suitable time  | Time<br>Community Support – CDP<br>Cost  |
| Links with secondary school can be hit or miss (inconsistent) – benefit of intergenerational learning                                | Insider<br>Second level<br>Intergenerational learning                                    |
| The school approached the CDP and asked how do we work with community  | CDP – recognising the importance of community in learning environments                   |
| Swimming against the tide – difficult when not everyone is working together – intergenerational                                      | CDP<br>Intergenerational<br>Frustrations   |
| Who is in charge – the person at the top – the right person  | Insider<br>The right person  |
| Link with formal educational setting not always the best place – CDP is better – negative experiences of the past can be off putting | Negative School Structures and practices<br>Community Support – CDP<br>Fear & Confidence |
| CDP – Creche – mothers - Coming in/out – way to connect – non-threatening community base   | Community Support – CDP<br>Family/Women/Children first                                   |
| Learning Needs identified in a non-threatening way – eg. Through ‘reading a pattern’   | Fear & Confidence<br>Community Support - CDP   |
| Community is where its happening   | Community Support - CDP  |
| English class not literacy – positive, non-critical, not focused on the deficit  | Literacy<br>Positive approaches  |

**“We’ve no policy the work goes on and it’s building all the time”**

**(No Policy, Strategic Plan or Vision)**

Access Officers were asked if their HEI had an equity of access and participation policy. When asked about their HEIs commitment to Access and how embedded it was within the Institutes strategy, initially the responses from AOs were positive, there was a belief that their HEI was doing their best and doing a good job in relation to equity of access. Interestingly, all AOs changed their opinion on this as we got deeper into the interview. It was as if as they automatically articulated the positive spin in relation to Access and their HEI, and by engaging in conversation with another Access Officer who is aware of the realities of the role, it allowed them an opportunity to reflect honestly on this and enabled them to critically analyse the situation.

C: I do believe that it's not just all talk in one way, you know what I mean, they do think it's important and luckily there's a lot of people that support the access, and I'm talking about lecturers, you know, management – there's a lot of people who support the work of the access office on the ground and understand what we're trying to do. That being said, there are a lot of issues around how it's resourced and where it's positioned within the institute.

**HEI Access Policy**

Access policy development varied within the HEIs of the four AOs. One HEI had a policy relating to the Access Office only, not the HEI itself. Another didn't have one policy on Access, but an access section within several different policies. A third had a policy that was written by their financial manager and the final HEI had one which was out-dated and they were unfamiliar with. One thing that was common across all, was that none of the AOs interviewed were involved in the Access policy development.

T: There is a policy that was written back in the day. I think maybe oh 10-15 years ago. But it's really just covers the access office itself. Yeah, and at that time I think that was the understanding of management of what access was. They didn't see the bigger picture.... And despite the fact that we've no policy, the work goes on and it's building all the time, you know.

For one AOs, she surmised that she was not invited to take part in the policy development because of management not wishing to over-burden her with work.

C: I believe that there is something there that is out of date for years and years, and that's all because, we, we don't just have the time..... and I have never been invited to engage in any discussions around that or the development of a new policy or... now, I know they acknowledge that the workloads are already... they mightn't be coming to me for another job.

The interviews allowed for a rare opportunity for reflection and from the dialogue exchange, this

In one of the interviews, the AO shared that the person who had written the Access policy was from the Finance Office and spoke about the accidental nature of the development of the Access policy. He had earlier indicated that Access was very important to the HEI mission, but that it wasn't 'derived, sort of theoretically or strategically, from a policy point of view, it's from a practicality point of view.'

B: the Head of Finance is the guy that seems to write policies for everything. Now maybe that's just down to his aptitude for that particular job or whatever. So, what does he know about access? Nothing. [laughing] Weird one.....One day he put up his hand and didn't realize what he would let himself in for.

This same Access Officer later proposed that the Institute has too many little policies, without one big policy or educational philosophy that dictates practice.

B: You know there's just a plethora of little mini strategies or mini missions or many objectives around different things. As opposed to there being a clear mission, and a big headline thing and that the sort of objectives and stuff sort of flow out of that if you know the difference I'm trying to make there.

The policy discussion with AOs involved deep discussions in relation to educational philosophy and the need for bigger picture policy framing, as opposed to stand alone policies. There was a belief that policy is being developed in a siloed way.

B: Siloed thinking. There's no educationalist like you know.....looking at all these different policies and saying well you know this is how they actually fit together. This is how they make sense. This is the sort of education that we're trying to provide for students. That is, in my view, sadly lacking.

Similarly, the Access Officer from the University sector stated that no one Access Policy existed.

O: "There's policies around accessibility as well. So there are a number of different policies that have come about as a result of... one overarching? – no"

**National Access Policy**

In all interviews, there were dialogues relating to National Access Policy and the impact that this can have in moving access agendas forward within HEIs. There were frustrations amongst the practitioners that national policy is not meaningful or impactful and while national policy exists, what value is it really having, who is it benefiting and what impact is it having? All interviews suggested a disconnect between policy and practice.

C: And I suppose the question I would have gswell, is like, who is the policy for? Who is the policy for? Like who are we trying to satisfy? So, are we trying to satisfy the voters by having this fabulous policy, you know, and you know this is what the government has done, and this is fantastic and this is what they aim to do or are we actually really meeting the needs of the

Figure 12: Discussion points, keywords, codes, themes.

Once I colour coded the main points on the margins of the transcripts, preliminary codes were identified. For the Access Officer data analysis, I initially identified prominent ideas and opinions resulting in 42 codes. For the community workshops, I captured over 100 codes at first. There was commonality between some of these codes and I began to organise

the data into potential themes and proceeded to gather data into these themes. I reviewed the transcripts again to ensure that the process had captured all the salient themes and checked that themes worked with the coded extract.

| Statement/Discussion Point   | Keywords              | Code  | Theme                       |
|--|-----------------------|---|-----------------------------|
| <i>"But yeah, I would personally be still fearful of entering formal education because of my experiences".</i> | 'Fearful'             | Fear & Confidence<br>Nervous of taking up education | Fear and Lack of Confidence |
| <i>"This is not going to get me"</i>   | 'not going to get me' | Fear & Confidence<br>Resilience                     | Fear and Lack of Confidence |

The table extract above highlights the process involved in establishing the codes and themes from the community workshops .

| Statement/Discussion Point  | Keywords                   | Code   | Theme           |
|---|----------------------------|--|-----------------|
| <i>"No, and I have never been invited to engage in any discussions around that or the development of a new policy"</i>  | Never invited to engage    | Respect and recognition  | Access practice |
| <i>"There was a reporting piece that needed to be done there a few months ago and I was looking at figures, and I was saying 'where did these figures come out of?' I wasn't involved in setting any figures around any of the targets"</i> | I wasn't involved          | Respect and recognition  | Access practice |
| <i>"So there was a big whallop of work over the last two or three years. So for about two years, I was asking saying I'm not getting enough support. And I think they felt there was enough resources within the</i>                        | Not getting enough support | Resources<br>No understanding by management<br>Respect and recognition | Access practice |

|  |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|--|
| <i>department. Ok, but that was no help to me"</i> |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|--|

Figure 13: A sample from the access officers interviews and the coding process involved.

The table extract above highlights a sample from the access officers interviews and the coding process involved.

Once workshop and interview transcripts were analysed, and key themes identified, I reviewed the data to identify common themes across both research sets. Once the over-arching themes evolved, I undertook a winnowing process to refine the themes identifying the lighter themes from the more prominent themes and I documented and named these.

My interpretation may be different to what the group interprets, therefore I informed the participants of the emergent themes, to ensure I was not misreading their input (Creswell, 2014, p. 262). When the workshops and interviews were finished and the thematic analysis drafted, I shared the findings with all research participants and requested their input and feedback. I did not receive any amendments back from participants.

### **5.6.3 Reflexivity.**

Uncovering the power dynamics at the heart of the research process is central to reflexive practice. This challenges the researcher to design a research process that is aware of the potential of research encounters to further oppress or dominate research participants (Hegarty, 2017, p. 162).

As an access practitioner-scholar, with many years' experience of working with groups and individuals who have experienced educational disadvantage, my interest in issues relating to social justice, inequality and power were always to the fore. Taking a critical theoretical perspective with this research, led me to consider how and what knowledge needs to be captured. I was always aware of my researcher subjectivity as an access practitioner, but rather than ignore or hide this, I was interested in capturing this within the research. I believed that it was important for me to be aware of my contribution to the construction of knowledge. I wanted the opportunity to reflect on my research and on my work, to actively construct interpretations of my experiences in the research sessions and puzzle over how these interpretations came to light. Berger (2015) suggests that

researchers need to understand the 'role of self in the creation of knowledge' and build in ways to evaluate our own beliefs and biases on the research. Reflexivity is important at all stages of research, from establishing the research question, the collection of data, the analysis of this data, to the formulation of findings. (Crabtree, 2019; Guillemin and Gillam, 2004)

The community workshops were held once a week on a Monday evening, with a gap of an extra week between the second and third workshop (because of a bank holiday). The access interviews were held a minimum of one week apart. Providing space between research sessions allowed me to reflect and consider the dialogue following each workshop and interview. Immediately after each research session, I wrote a reflection on the experience, noting not only the practical issues, such as technology but also my feelings in relation to the discourses. I noted my preconceived ideas and any learning or new thought processes that emerged. In every session I was conscious of the potential power imbalance and the reflections allowed me to capture this and work towards minimising this imbalance in each workshop.

Alley *et al.* (2015) refer to knowledge translation as being an iterative process involving the creation, sharing and application of knowledge, which leads to a way of bridging the divide between research and practice. They believe that reflexivity can be used as a practical tool to facilitate practitioners to 'identify, understand, and act in relation to the personal, professional, and political challenges they face in practice' (Alley *et al.*, 2015, p. 426). They believe that reflexivity that is used to inform the knowledge that is produced has very beneficial impacts for the practitioner and researchers. Reflexivity can provide an opportunity to critically assess 'assumptions, underlying values, and preconceptions' impact on knowledge production (Alley *et al.*, 2015, p. 426). The significance of my reflexivity in this research is demonstrated in the discussion chapter, as I call on my research journal notes to evidence how my 'motives, feelings and experiences' contributed to the research conclusions' (Crabtree, 2019).

## **5.7 Conclusion**

This chapter explained how, as researcher/practitioner, I was drawn to a critical theoretical paradigm, as I was interested in understanding systemic issues relating to educational inequality. I was also interested in power and voice and how power is used to maintain social and educational inequalities. From the outset I knew that I wanted to engage collaboratively with research participants and believed in the knowledge creation from social interactions.

Many theoretical perspectives helped to shape my research methodology. Critical inquiry, Freirean and egalitarian philosophies and feminist political theory all influenced my thinking. Participatory research methodologies were explored and implemented to determine and understand what and how access practice was occurring and the relationship between higher educational institute and community. Participatory research methods appropriate for both research sites were adopted.

The practical implementation of my field research was presented, highlighting some challenges encountered along the way. An overview of the analysis to empirical data was presented and a rationale was explained for the use of thematic analysis.

## CHAPTER SIX

### ACCESS PRACTITIONER FINDINGS

#### 6.1 Introduction

As outlined in my methodology chapter, I engaged with two research cohorts – the access practitioners and the community participants as part of my inquiry. For the purposes of clarity and to make sure the voices of each of the main research cohorts are properly heard I have decided to present the key findings from each cohort separately. I want to ensure that the nuances and complexities and the distinctness of these cohorts experiences, perceptions and needs are held in view. That said a key aim of the research is to approach access in a holistic, community orientated fashion so the discussion chapter (Chapter 8) will then synthesise and integrate the data to offer a unique and heretofore untold story of the Irish educational access landscape.

Access practitioners have worked within higher educational institutions for more than twenty years. As an access practitioner with strong working relationships with access colleagues in other HEIs, I was confident that there was considerable expertise and knowledge on educational disadvantage, on equity of access and social inclusion held by this group of practitioners. Through the access practitioner networks, I was aware that there was a good understanding of access policy and practice and that access colleagues have a lot of experience in designing, developing, and delivering access initiatives aimed at improving access to higher education. I was also aware that my access colleagues had deep insights into the world of access to higher education, many of whom have grown the services within their HEI from inception. My research aimed to engage with this cohort of research participants, to allow for the unheard practitioner voice, to understand how they work, in particular in relation to community engagement and how this can enhance equity of access and improve educational disadvantage in the future.

The access practitioners invited to be involved in this research have worked in their respective roles for many years. Three of the four access officers (Sam, Jodie and Jean) interviewed were the first access practitioners appointed within their HEI, resulting in them being in post for more than twenty years. The fourth access officer (Pat) was almost thirteen years in post. Just before the interviews, Pat had resigned from the access post to take up



employment outside of higher education. Sam, Pat and Jean are access practitioners within the Technological University sector and Jodie is an access manager within a university affiliated to the Irish Universities Association (IUA<sup>11</sup>).

All the access officers interviewed had experience of linking with communities at various stages and at various levels and three of the four participants had been employed in community settings prior to taking up their access roles. Between them, they have supported thousands of students at post-entry stage and have also been involved in designing and delivering many pre-entry access and widening participation programmes with DEIS schools, Further Education and marginalised communities. They have a very good understanding of the impact of educational disadvantage and the consequences of lack of educational opportunities. These practitioners were insightful, knowledgeable, and offered a perspective on access to higher education and community engagement that is very rarely articulated or heard by policy makers or institutional leaders.

All access practitioners interviewed openly shared their experiences, their opinions and the challenges they faced in their role. The interviews resulted in almost ten hours of recordings, and they revealed many frustrations and challenges faced by this group of professionals. The interviews with the access practitioners provided a rare opportunity for these practitioners to be reflective. The trials and tribulations of their day-to-day practice were captured, and the consequences of these practices were critically discussed.

This chapter focuses on highlighting findings from the access officer interviews. Three main themes emerged: (1) key aspects of access officer practice, (2) the issue of funding and resources and (3) experience and reflections of community engagement. While these emerged as independent themes, they are interconnected and interdependent.

One of the main themes identified from the access practitioner interviews relates to practice, access practitioners' visibility, workloads, and recognition for their work. These have had deep emotional impacts on the participants interviewed. There was an overwhelming belief by all access officers interviewed that they were not visible, valued, nor respected within higher education. All the AOs interviewed spoke about not having a voice

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<sup>11</sup> The Irish Universities Association represents, supports and advocates on shared issues of concern for affiliated universities.

at management level. The organisational structures which operate within HEIs were discussed by all access practitioners. The significance of the position of access within administrative structures was highlighted with Jean being especially vocal and animated on this issue.

Ad hoc funding was identified as having an impact on resources and the sustainability of projects. In this section, the findings suggest that funding and resources available for access is too short-term, leaving practitioners unable to think strategically or with any vision. While all four of the access practitioners had something to say on this theme, Pat's voice shines through in this section.

And finally, the access practitioner role and community engagement was a strong theme in which practitioners had deeply held views. There are obvious overlaps in this section to the earlier sections on practice and funding. Sam's voice is particularly highlighted here as Sam had a background in community education prior to taking up the access post and consequently offered deep reflections on access practice and how it relates to community education.

The chapter will contain many direct quotes from AOs, ensuring that this research will allow their voice to be heard. Incorporating the participants accounts through the integration of their voice was very important to me, as I felt access practitioner knowledge is not captured often in scholarship. Some of the quotes have been lightly edited for readability. Direct quotes are captured by "...". In some situations I have added words to clarify my interpretation and in these situations, they are captured with "[ ]". Quotations are followed by the pseudonym of the participant. I have used "{...}" to note participant tones and expressions.

## **6.2 Access Officer Practice**

Without exception, all interviews with access practitioners devoted significant time on discussions relating to dimensions of practice. The challenges, trials and tribulations of the role were made very clear by participants. Factors including, (1) organisational structures, (2) workload and support, (3) respect and recognition and (4) impact on health, were all highlighted as impacting on practice. I have identified sub-headings within this theme to allow for clarity of the points articulated.

### 6.2.1 Organisational structures.

Higher educational institutional structures are typically divided into the academic and administrative areas. Staff within administrative structures are often tightly bound by grades; with pay, responsibility and conditions defined by those grades. The access officer post within the technological university sector is aligned to a grade VII administrative post, which is the second highest administrative salary category. The grade involves supervisory duties. Within the THEA HEI structures, most access officers report into the Academic Administration and Student Affairs Manager (AASAM), which is an assistant principal officer post (the highest administrative post), who in turn reports to the Registrar. Administrative structures vary slightly, and are less rigid, within the universities affiliated to the IUA, with posts such as access managers, heads of access, access officers. However, access practitioners within the traditional universities are still located within administrative structures. This was seen as problematic by access practitioners in this research, as it was seen to be restrictive and siloed.

There was significant time in all the interviews with access officers focused on the positioning of access within HEIs administrative structures. All access officers referred to the role being inappropriately aligned to an administration grade. The access officers believed that the role and the responsibility they hold do not mirror any other function within administrative structures in HEIs.

*"I think it comes back to access officers being linked to an admin grade....which happened back in the day before my time and then seen as an admin person. And like the people who didn't see me as an admin person were the other admin people... You know when they found out I was clocking they were saying 'What! Do you Clock?'. You know? But management as well. Somebody said to me recently who is also an access officer said 'when it suits management, you're part of management. And when it suits them, you're access, you're administration.'" Pat*

During the interviews, where discussions focused on the positioning of access within HEIs, the inappropriate grading of staff within the services/offices was often highlighted. There was recognition given to the excellent staff working in access. Because of resource issues, access officers expressed the challenge presented with a high turnover of staff.

*"the wonderful staff with the great commitment to access and all of those things and the support that we do get from members of the institute –the opportunities and the*

*challenges remain the same and they always come down to the resourcing, the infrastructure, the funding pieces. You know, dependent on these piece-meal funds that operate for about a year, changes of staff, staff moving on, better opportunities - is always a problem for access because we just don't have a grading structure ... appropriate and suitable to hold on to really good skilled people." Jean*

Access officers found the positioning within administration was very limiting, resulting in limited authority or preconceived opinions in relation to competencies. In the extract below, Pat speaks about organising an access programme and how they were restricted in how much they could deliver because they could be perceived by colleagues to be assuming too much authority.

*"But that was really under control of the [name of academic] department and the academics, you know. So, I didn't really have a lot of input into that ... And there was a guidance module on it, that I had nothing to do with because that's delivered by a lecturer and so I wouldn't be allowed into a classroom to deliver something because that might be 'lecturing', you know {Said sarcastically}. So, you're limited that way. I think it was, it's very much seen as an administration post you know. They see it as 'there now, recruit them and bring them in', you know." Pat*

One of the most common threads that presented from the interviews was the inflexibility presented by being within administrative structures, the growth in administrative workloads, the lack of opportunities to include access on management agendas, which all impact on the access practitioners' power, visibility, and status. Participants unanimously believed that this impacted negatively on access agendas. There was a belief that being located within administrative structures was not helpful in relation to shaping policy but also not helpful in relation to the delivery of initiatives. This was articulated well by Pat who shared an example of where they collaborated with an academic department to organise and deliver an access foundation studies programme.

*Pat: "... so there's this guy who looks after it and he'll contact the business, science and social studies groups ..... Which is fantastic because I couldn't. I wouldn't have the power to do that."*

*Deirdre: "No? What do you mean by 'power to do that'?"*

*Pat: "He would have been a Head of Department..... so when he goes to other Heads of Department says 'I want, I want', he gets. If I was to ask for it, I wouldn't get it."*

*Deirdre: "Because you're seen to be administration?"*

*Pat: "Admin and I have no role in the delivery of an academic course." {Said sarcastically}*

*Deirdre: "And, do you think there's, kind of, a certain perception that 'what are you doing making this request when you're only coming from such...?'"*

*Pat: "Oh 100%"*

In expressing their sense of powerlessness and frustration in not having opportunities to engage with management to shape, resource and advocate for access, access officers felt that there is a disconnect between the access officer and senior management, with many layers of management between the access practitioner and the decision makers. As a result of institutional positioning within administrative structures, the access participants felt that any commitment to access by HEIs can be superficial, insincere and disconnected.

*"AOs are mostly reporting to managers that report in then to the Registrar's Office. We don't have a direct link with the Registrar's Office – that is a problem – the voice isn't heard at the table –I do think that there is a gap in the rhetoric, between the rhetoric and what is actually in practice on the ground, and I've had this conversation so many times in my head, if they really were that interested in driving this agenda forward and making it important, then they would be resourcing it adequately." Jean*

There was a slightly different experience from Jodie. This access professional was operating at a more senior level within their university. Jodie shared that there was much more involvement in policy development and Compact agreements with the HEA. They were at the table with management in setting targets and they were provided with opportunities to '*negotiate for aspects of access work*'. There was an acknowledgment that there was more that can be done in embedding access across the university, but Jodie was confident of their universities' commitment to access and their ability, because of their position in being able to impact on this.

*"it's quite valued by our senior management.....So, within the Registrar's area? Yes. Has it permeated across all of the university management team and all of the vice presidents? No, there's still work to go there. So, I think there are a core group of people who are very au-fait with it and very knowledgeable of it and supportive of it, but there's more that can be done at a senior management level and more that I need to do at a senior management level". Jodie*

Jodie also commented on the structures that existed prior to the creation of the head of access post. Jodie spoke about work being uncoordinated in terms of access with strategic importance and they also stressed the importance of voice.

*“So, we didn’t have a voice at the table who was knowledgeable and up to speed on the issues across all of the areas, and able to speak to that and influence that. So sometimes when policy documents came in or submissions were required, they might have been filled in an ad hoc, less coordinated manner”. Jodie*

Jodie spoke about how the new position provided more structure in bringing the various access strands together within the university. However, within this structure, they mentioned there is still a management layer between the Head of Access and the Registrar, which excludes the Head of Access from certain management meetings.

*Deirdre: “and in terms of the structures that are there now .... is it allowing for a voice to be at senior management level?”*

*Jodie: {sigh} “Not really. ...., there was an extra layer put in..... but we’re still in the same area and we’re relying on the <name of management layer> to be that spokesperson for us at other tables. ....in terms of sitting at any of the university management teams or anything like that? No. There hasn’t been any additional visibility at that level.”*

Interestingly Jodie spoke about a way they had identified that facilitated an opportunity to influence and get access on the agenda of senior management. They had formed close alliances with the advisory teams within senior management offices, which allowed them to ‘*make them know that I’m the person in the know about that*’. This has worked in their favour, as they mentioned that,

*“Even though we are a couple of rungs down, I don’t think that has had any major impact, .... access being a national strategic priority has really worked to our advantage in terms of getting that opportunity to influence”. Jodie*

There was a belief amongst all the participants that the position is unique with no similarity to any other service within HEIs. They believed that the role of access is so complex and that practitioners operate at both a strategic and operational level. The participants also believed that the level of work and responsibility is not acknowledged in the title or in the position.

*"The way I see it is, that we are expected to operate very strategically as access officers. We're expected to operate at a very high level compared even to other services in the college, in terms of what's required of us, in terms of developing plans and reporting on those initiatives, you know. And we're managing big services. You can't be assessing application forms and the laptop scheme and the student assistance fund and filling in a form for disability or doing an assessment and at the same time operating at that level. Because the way I see it is, who else is expected in the college to do that? We don't have the title of manager, but if we were given that title even, what other manager would be expected to operate like that? There is nobody, that I can compare myself like in <name of HEI> certainly that would be expected to operate at such a strategic and operational level." Jean*

The professional title of access 'officer' was noted by Jean as also being an obstacle to progress and does not reflect the level of responsibility that practitioners have in relation to managing a service. Jean below suggested that the title creates problems and obstacles for them.

*"I do believe that if colleges are singing from the roof-tops about how important access is to us, there should be some space whereby executives of the college and the Governing Body even has a conversation with the person on the ground, who's actually running the service and we are running services - we don't have the title of managers and ..... 'access officer' is not a suitable title at all for any of us, in that it causes huge problems for me". Jean*

Jean expanded on this issue a little later. They also explained that because there are a few project officers within the access team, there is no clarity for stakeholders on who the 'manager' of the Service is. They believed that to be heard at the senior management table representing access, then the appropriate naming of the position is essential.

*"There's no idea of even the structure within access because of all these project officers that we have and even the title is just no longer - maybe 21 years ago it was appropriate because it was new thing in the colleges. But even back then my line manager, my AASAM [Academic Administration and Student Affairs Manager] at the time, wanted to change my title. [The AASAM] said to me, within months, ... 'I hate your title; it says nothing about what you do'. And I just thought that was an interesting take on it, even back then, but she's the only person that said it to me. But I actually said it to my manager recently, people don't know what really I do, because they see everybody else with the same title essentially. I know it might sound quite small, but if you are the person in the college that is the voice really, which we technically are, of access, then that naming of it is actually very important, you know." Jean*

All research participants believed that there is little understanding from colleagues and management of the specialist role that access practitioners does. In addition to excellent administrative and communication skills, access practitioners believed that practitioners must have specialist skills as well as attributes such as compassion, understanding, a commitment to social justice and a belief in equity of access. With access practitioners situated within administrative structures, there can be perception that a low-grade administrator can step in to lighten the load. The responsibility and specialisation of the work involved is often not considered, meaning that the delegation of work is often not possible.

*“It’s got more and more administratively heavy over the years and the reporting pieces on PATH have made that just really, really challenging to even think about any initiatives or projects that you’d like to do ....Somebody said there recently, ‘no, give that to somebody else’ you know or ‘hand that over’ – I can’t – I can’t because it’s not fair to ask somebody maybe at a grade III<sup>12</sup> to do that, somebody who is only in the door – you know, there’s an experience and a knowledge base that you build up in access over the years and you can’t expect someone who is only in the door to do that”. Jean*

Access officers felt that reporting structures were often vague. For all access officers interviewed within the THEA structure, they were positioned within the Professional, Management and Student Services area and felt very much pigeonholed within administration by colleagues and by management. Most access officers interviewed were left to their own devices, and while access officers were at times isolated because of this, there was an initial perception by Sam that this allowed for the flexibility to move access towards areas that needed attention.

*Deirdre: “....reporting structures. So, who do you currently report to?”*

*Sam: “Gosh, are you sitting down? I have many heads.....I report both of the Registrar and the Head of Development”*

*Deirdre: “OK. How does that work?”*

*Sam: “It works well because neither of them bother me {laughs}”*

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<sup>12</sup> Administrative grades within the Technological University sector start at Grade III. The Access Officer is positioned at a grade VII.



Sam, however, when asked about access practitioners being able to get access on the agenda of senior management, also alluded to the restrictions that administrative structures impose.

*Deirdre: "Would the current structure allow for [you] to get access really on the agenda in terms of incorporating it in a strategic way?"*

*Sam: "..... So [an] access Officer...if you look at it in this sort of black and white, of what's on paper and the grade ..... they're under the administrative sort of worlds and all reporting, mostly anyway to Student Services ....and eventually to the Registrar. So, I guess I'm saying, 'No', it wouldn't be so strong."*

Sam continued to say that they are recognised internally within their Institution as having the responsibility of a Head of Department and that senior management are currently reviewing their grade. The workload and responsibility falls to Sam, but formal recognition within organisational structures does not exist.

*Sam: "[the role is] under review at the minute Deirdre actually and because they realized that, .... [I'm] essentially [doing] all the duties and everything of a SL2 [Senior Lecturer 2<sup>13</sup>]. It's what we are all doing, I would say".*

*Deirdre: "Yeah, absolutely, because you know, certainly, it's probably going off point, but I mean I would be seen for most circumstances as Head of Department. But that's you know, it's all....."*

*Sam: "Yeah, yeah, with a small 'd'"*

While the specific experiences differ, the overarching point is that HEI structures are not conducive to allowing access to be addressed as a social process or in a systematic way at senior levels. Access practitioners lack power to influence. Some access practitioners have found ways to navigate through this by creating linkages and alliances within their HEIs that allow them to influence agendas.

### **6.2.2 Respect, recognition, and influence.**

Overall, as noted earlier, there were many references to a lack of respect, recognition and support from colleagues and management. In each interview the lack of visibility of access officers within the HEI structures arose. They felt that there was no visibility of them personally or of their role within their HEIs. There was a strong sense from

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<sup>13</sup> A strategic and operational senior management/lecturing role within Higher Education.

all access officers that the positioning of the service within administrative structures had an impact on how access was perceived, supported, and advocated for within HEIs.

An increase in workload was identified as an issue. These access practitioners spoke about being burdened in recent years with significant reporting requirements. These challenges have been highlighted to senior management and to decisionmakers but have fallen on deaf ears.

*".... <in relation to the Access Annual Report> .... you're trying to be positive and have it quite balanced in how you present your information, but you know the challenges really are never addressed. And one of the things that I've noticed, we spend months writing the annual report.... a huge amount of work goes into it, it could be about 100 pages long and it breaks down in huge amount of detail all of the areas of access. Never once in all the years I am writing that report, for a long, long time, has anybody ever come back and saying, 'you're bringing up the same challenges every year.'" Jean*

All the participants shared hopelessness and fatigue in relation to working on access in HEIs, particularly in the THEA sector and especially from Jean. Jean believed that they were not being listened to and that this has deteriorated over the years.

*"But the sense that I get, even from our meetings [access officers meetings], is that like nothing has changed over the years, in fact, things have gotten worse. Nobody feels they are being listened to anywhere in the access piece at all, and I'm really struggling to find a good news piece in access from access officers – really struggling – I haven't heard one good news piece about where somebody in our sector has managed to actually change the structures around the colleges or get the resources.....We're [THEA access officers] very light on the ground and therefore our voice isn't even at a national level. Like 13 people in the country, like that's a very, very small group of people when you think about it – trying to cover a national agenda." Jean*

As we see here, Jean was frustrated by the lack of understanding by and the opportunity to engage with senior management. They believed that senior management offer lip service to the idea of access. Jean who was very animated by this, expressed hurt and anger because of the lack of acknowledgement, lack of visibility, lack of respect.

*"...and they haven't seen all of the other pieces that happen behind the scenes and that's why I think that you know a greater understanding of actually what access does and ... that connection with the Registrar would be really welcomed, you know, like I'd love to sit down and have a cup of coffee with the Registrar and talk, or the*

*President, you know. I've never had a conversation with the President on access and I wonder how many of us have? and <my line manager> has often said this to me, that 'you know that he's always talking about access' - but not with me!..... like, there's a lack of respect for the role maybe, you know, and I'm not saying this, personally against anybody, that's just how I feel as an access officer – that there is a lack of respect – now interestingly, if I said that to my manager or somebody at <my HEI>, that I feel I don't have respect, they'd say 'Oh God Jean, you are respected, you are', they would say 'of course you're respected and we respect what you do', but I don't feel it. So, I think if you don't feel it – it's saying something."* Jean

Jean later stated that this inability to be heard had directly impacted on resourcing. Despite having the expertise and knowledge on access, there are no opportunities to have a voice at decision-making, senior management executive levels. They reflected that even though access is deemed to be of strategic importance, other voices are heard, and resources follow those who shout loudest.

*"If we don't shout loud we're not going to be heard, but it's being given the opportunity to shout loud... you know in terms of putting forward the challenges but they're just not being heard and I don't know where the block is and I have concerns more and more as the years going on.....I'd love for once, for me to be the voice in the room. Without another voice, you know, jumping in on their view because we can all view things differently – our life experiences and whatever our professional experiences bring those different views to the table."* Jean

The lack of opportunity to be heard, to have a voice has resulted in a frustration, a feeling of being patronised and of hurt.

*"I would like someone to listen to me, as someone who has worked in access for a long, long time and I don't know I just... I struggle with that piece, again I don't know is it because I'm around quite a long time or is it because I kind of feel, well you know, 'dammit it, look, I know what I'm talking about here and I know what needs to be done and if you just give me a chance or hear me out'. And ... its personal as well at this point Deirdre – it becomes personal after being so many years working in a field, where you feel you're still really not recognized for the contribution we've made to higher education in this country. ....we should feel very proud of the contribution we have made and it has gone completely unrecognized as far as I'm concerned.....I don't want to hear anymore 'You're doing a great job' –I'm gone past that, maybe when I started my job in my 20s whatever, and I was delighted to hear things like that, fair enough, but not anymore and that comes probably with age and experience as well, where you're just not – you're gone beyond, past that – so yeah I do think that it's unrecognized the contribution that has been made, and the changes and the differences that we have made as well to people's lives."* Jean

In a further dialogue with Jean a discussion on organisational structures and the importance of the access voice at senior management level ensued. This led to them stating that as a result they felt like they were working without any direction or vision.

*“I really believe that that’s crucially important for anything to change, there has to be a Head of Access that can devote time to strategically work towards, and actually plan, it’s like long term sustainability you know, that just gives a sense that we know where we’re going. Like at the moment, I feel like we are in this never-ending long tunnel of darkness and you can quote that if you want.....I just feel like it’s just this never ending tunnel, it just feels like we’re on the same train and the train .. has no destination and we’re just in a tunnel of darkness because we don’t really know where we’re going with the way structures are right now. And the problem is, the access officer, we’ve spoken about this, just doesn’t have the time to think into next year, never mind next month – you know, into where or what we are going to be doing, so I think that’s crucial, it has to happen”. Jean*

The access officers interviewed felt isolated from the operation and management of the HEI and were very much left to their own devices in moving on the access agenda within HEIs. Three access interviewees felt like they are working in limbo, receiving support only from other access officers through the access officer networks. In this extract below, the access officer speaks about the support received from colleagues involved in the access officers’ network.

*“Yeah, there was never a conversation like in the 12 years I was there, there was never a conversation about access with anybody <in Senior Management>. So it was, you know, the fact that we had the access officers, that group, that was handy as if you were stuck you could ask something.....” Pat*

Pat and Jean both suggested that the role wasn’t ‘professionalised’ enough, with two access officers coincidentally comparing the access role to that of the Head of Counselling, referencing the status, support, and recognition that the Head of Counselling is afforded within HEIs. These two access practitioners compare the access role to that of a Counsellor and suggests that because of this lack of professional standing, the access role is invisible. In these extracts below, Pat, who had just left the access post prior to the interviews and consequently perhaps, felt more at ease discussing this theme, highlights the lack of respect and recognition they experienced.

*“I wasn’t being listened to, I wasn’t being heard and there was no long-term solution coming in.....There needs to be a change at national level. Which we’ve identified -*

*like access officers, there needs to be some acknowledgement that they exist. There should be some professionalization of it, you know. A more representative approach taken and then at college level it needs to change because I don't know what it's like in your college, but like the access officer is not at the table for any meeting, on anything – ever! You know they're happy that you're working later and that you're doing the business, that they can then report to the HEA. But yeah, you're not actually consulted on anything really much. You know in a realistic way.” Pat*

Pat continued;

*Pat: “There needs to be a more professionalisation of the role. If you look at the Guidance Counselling, they have a body which is linked to Department of Education which oversees the work of it and there’s continuous professional development. There’s membership over a professional group. I had to give my [new] employer a job description and I said I'm in the job 12 years, I don't have a job description and if I did, it wouldn't in any way resemble my job today. So, I actually started Googling and I could find nothing. Nothing that would describe the work of the access officer. And when I looked....”*

*Deirdre: “Sorry now, did you say you never got a job description?”*

*Pat: “I would have 12 years ago alright, .... it wouldn't resemble the job as it is. But when you look at all of the publications on the National Access Office, it's all about the great work that National Access Office is doing. It very rarely, if ever mentions the access officers or their role, their responsibility, or their position within a college. It's like we didn't exist. It's like we didn't exist and that was a bit of a shock to me, actually. When I actually started looking into it, it's like we just don't exist, you know? In comparison to a Guidance Counsellor or Careers Officer.... And the last thing I'd say to you is, like, I did feel when I was doing that research for the [new] job and realizing that there was nothing there on access officers, I thought that's so unfair and so wrong, you know, and so the outcome of your PhD needs to be brought to the Department of Education and the HEA and said ‘here lads, this is the story’, you know.”*

As discussed in Chapter Two, in recent years national educational policies have incorporated an emphasis on social justice and inclusion, which is evident in the National Access Plans. In the last number of years there is also a growing political focus on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. However, even with this momentum access participants felt that there is no recognition, appreciation or understanding of the important role that access services do in relation to addressing social inclusion.

*“you know the college of sanctuary <sup>14</sup>thing would have raised issue and, you know the whole notion of migrants and direct provision, and how long they are there. And people are more aware of it, you know, and I think staff ... became more aware, more engaged and they’d often come into me and say, ‘Did you see that programme on the telly, this case and that case,’ and I’d say, ‘I don’t really need to watch a telly program. I’m actually meeting the people.’ But it was sparking, and they were now understanding it, you know?..... There is a raised consciousness happening with regard to social injustices which is a good thing in society. Media coverage is helping to raise awareness among the general population, but there is still limited understanding, even amongst colleagues, of the work that AOs do in relation to social inclusion.” Pat*

There was a perception by the access officers in the THEA sector, that the university sector had better structures in place for access, which allow for the recognition and promotion of access not only internally, but externally. Sam spoke about the lack of recognition of access within the TU sector and appeared dismayed at the lack of recognition and profile that access has within their HEI. The frustration and disappointment felt by Sam is evident.

*“They [access officers] need to be seen in more esteem, anyway, I think in all colleges. They should have a much higher profile, they should be your Heads of Department, again, you know it’s demoralizing. .... [at a national level], we’re never asked for our view on anything, and we are wall to wall access students. You know I just.... my days being fit to bite my tongue at national meetings on this sort of stuff are coming to an end. Sorry, I’m ranting off there.” Sam*

### **6.2.3 Access at strategic levels.**

The relationship between access officer and senior management was a common discussion thread in the access officer interviews. Mostly these relationships were non-existent or tenuous at best. Earlier in this section, the relationship between access and management was mentioned. This will be developed further now and the theme as it relates to access strategy will be outlined.

As noted in Chapter Three, access to higher education was moved centre stage in recent years at national level and is now one of eight key strategic themes for the Higher

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<sup>14</sup> College of Sanctuary – an initiative that originated in the UK in 2005. The College of Sanctuary is a commitment to support asylum seekers, focusing on learning, positive action and sharing experience. Since 2016, eight universities in Ireland have achieved College of Sanctuary status.

Education Authority. Even with this emphasis at a national level, the access officer interviews highlighted that within HEIs, the understanding, support, and commitment to access at senior management levels was not evident.

*“Support from senior management? - no, because they were at a loss themselves, so I was really their guide in <name of HEI> at the time, as to where we wanted to go, and I suppose, there was a lot of learning..... I suppose really, there was a sense of unknown and looking back now, there was this sense of what was expected of us – our roles weren’t very defined as such”. Jean*

During the interview, Jean spoke about the time they learned about the HEA Compacts. Jean was informed of the strategic dialogue process at an access officers meeting in Dublin, not by their senior management. Jean shared that they were not involved in the Compact’s process and that targets are set without their involvement, which they had taken offense to.

*“There was a reporting piece that needed to be done there a few months ago and I was looking at figures, and I was saying ‘where did these figures come out of?’ I wasn’t involved in setting any figures around any of the targets – and I know I wasn’t the only AO that wasn’t involved in that – we were at a meeting in Dublin when we heard about these Compact statements, so that was just an example of where the AO is not being brought into conversations and these are very important conversations that we have a right to be involved in and it’s a bit insulting at this stage that we’re not brought into those conversations”. Jean*

Pat shared an experience where they approached senior management for support in making an application for funding for extra staff resource. At an access officers meeting, Pat was made aware that the HEA was considering additional funding to access services in light of the growing workloads around the Student Assistance Fund and the Laptop Loan Scheme. When Pat approached their management for support to seek this funding, their request was not entertained.

*“I know the HEA had said they were surprised that the colleges weren’t looking for money for resources to deal with the increased SAF and the laptop on loan. So, I sent that to the management in the college and said, ‘Well, really, that money should be going towards replacing somebody. Are you not putting an extra body in access?’ And the answer to that was ‘No’.” Pat*

Later Pat spoke about how management are happy that the work is happening, but this is not backed up with support in terms of financial and staff resources.

*"It kicked off because two volunteers brought in one woman. And said to me, 'can she do the access course?' And I said 'God, I don't know, she's an asylum seeker'. And then I thought, 'sure, ok, we will'. And then, about 10 of them arrived at my door the next day and I was going holy \*\*\*\* {both laugh}. So, I took all their names down and then I went upstairs and I said to one of the managers, the VP's, I said 'look it, there's all these people, what will I do?' He said 'sure if you have spaces, give them space'. So that's what we did. So that was how.... It started with that one person coming in really and then, you know, me just asking and that's what I'm saying - I wasn't stopped. Do you know what I mean? So, there is that there, not being stopped, that has value, even though you know I wouldn't have been more supported as well. That was asking too much {laughs}". Pat*

Earlier in this section, the impact of administrative structures on practice was noted. For all access officers interviewed, they believed that an absence of a proper communication channel or opportunity to inform or influence senior management had resulted in a huge disconnect between the access practitioner and the decision makers. In most cases, the access officer had, in theory, the freedom to shape the access agenda as they deemed appropriate, and on some level, they are seen as the experts in the field. When Sam was asked if access was strategically developed within their institution, they claimed the following.

*"No, it's just organically grown that way. Without sounding too full of myself or whatever, I suppose that's always been my agenda. And when you have that agenda for 20 years, you know, senior management just leave me at it." Sam*

However, when this is not coupled with an opportunity to be at decision-making tables, to have influence on policy, to have access to resources, to have a line of communication with management, then access is disconnected and not embedded within the fabric of the HEI. The participants shared that they had autonomy on the ground at operational level being recognised as having the expertise, but this knowledge could not and did not filter through easily to management levels.

*"There's no communication from management down to me. The only time I heard from management was when they wanted something. So, when they wanted to put [name of access initiative] into some application for something else, I get an email or a phone call. 'What's this [access initiative] about, can you write something up there?' Otherwise nothing, absolutely. 'What can you tell us to put in the Compact?'" Pat*



Pat continued;

*“I suppose it comes down to me deciding what I'm going to do, you know? And I get that from the National Access Plan. Linking with the access office, the other access officers from the [Cluster] project. You know? I'm not sure anyone in [name of HEI] even read the PATH 3 proposal, apart from me, I doubt anyone did”. Pat*

Pat later returned to the access programme for asylum seekers. In sharing this story, they made a distinction between not being stopped and not being supported by senior management in developing these initiatives. The distinction is subtle, and the interview provided the chance for the access practitioner to reflect on the situation.

*Pat: “like I had freedom to do let's say, like, I did work with the asylum seekers. And again that was just me doing it, and I had worked with lecturers who are interested in it... We got it accredited. Yeah..... So, management are happy enough for you to do stuff – just go off and do it there yourself, you get no extra resources or money to do it.”*

*Deirdre: “So if you did show any kind of initiative in ... bending in one way or another to meet the needs of stakeholders, then that wasn't really supported?”*

*Pat: “I wouldn't say it wasn't supported, it was just if I found the time to do it.....{pause} Well, actually you're right, it wasn't. It wasn't supported, but it wasn't blocked. Maybe I mistook that for support. {laughs} In retrospect, ‘Well they're not stopping me doing it, that's great’, but that doesn't amount to support. There was no support in terms of people or money.”*

As access is a key strategic priority at national level, there are opportunities for HEIs to share best practice and press opportunities present and national coverage can be sought. One access officer spoke about how senior management within their HEI basked in the glory of this national coverage, but the reality was the initiative happened because staff (not management), with a commitment to social justice, made it happen.

*“They're happy to have it happen and are happy to run with kudos that they get from it..... it was just a group of people <lecturers> that were making that <access initiative> happen..... they weren't doing it for the colleges benefit. Yeah, you know they were doing it to benefit the people who are actually benefiting from it.” Pat*

Similar experiences of management chasing the limelight were echoed by Sam. In this extract below, Sam acknowledges that management are supportive of the good news story.

*Deirdre: "But are [management] supportive of getting access addressed at top levels, governing body levels, even?"*

*Sam: "Well, they're good at taking the plaudits when access goes well. Let's see the latest examples.....Probably giving out these laptops and stuff like that. Yeah, if it's a good news story, they'll want it. You know, they'll gladly bring it up at governing body. Governing body will gladly have a little press release saying how wonderful they are and stuff like that."*

To return to an important point made earlier, one access practitioner suggested that access professionals are strategic and can see the bigger picture, but the pressure of workloads and the pace of work means that thinking strategically cannot always be enacted.

*"do I think there's an absence to strategic thinking in any of the sectors? I don't think so, I think that all of my colleagues that I've worked with, you included, are very strategic. The challenge is the time and the energy needed to operationalise the strategic thinking isn't there, because people are so bogged down and they're worn out and they're kinda going 'oh my god....', you know when you hear people saying, 'I don't want to apply for any more money', we need to stop and think, you know, why is that happening actually, why are people who are in a situation where we've been very successful in securing funding and implementing good projects, we're actually so tired and so worn out from doing it consistently, we're now saying actually we don't want to do that anymore." Jodie*

#### **6.2.4 Administrative workloads.**

All four access officers spoke of the pace of work, the workloads and the level of bureaucracy that loom large today. They recounted times in the early 2000s when resources were limited, and access policy was underdeveloped. They reflected on the evolution of access work in Ireland and within their HEIs. There was a sense that when access was first initiated in HEIs, there was greater autonomy resulting in a more student and stakeholder centred approach. Sam recollects that the administrative burden was not at the same levels as they are now. Sam believed that there is a level of bureaucracy that has seeped into the access way of working, stifling real meaningful access opportunities.

*"Before administration overload, there was a student focused approach, the learner came first. Before formality.....and it's very definitely worth noting Deirdre, before things became too formalised. OK, the phone would ring, it could be anything. It could be social welfare, could be ETB, it could be... 'Oh we gotta a guy here, what should we do? Maybe we'll put him on one of your access courses or something'. 'Yeah, no problem, send them down and we'll look after them'..... where did all this formality and sort of stiffness come into the system? I am not too sure. Mostly by*

*bureaucrats and accountants and stuff like that I suspect, that mentality I'm talking about like you know." Sam*

Sam also articulated that this was not confined to the access services and because of this level of bureaucracy across the HEIs, the student-centred approach has suffered.

*"But when I arrived 20 years ago it was very much all technicians [technical staff] here would sit down with students and they would work through things with them. They'd go into labs with them. That is all gone. It's now, take a ticket. Sit behind a glass door somewhere and somebody grunt at you if you're lucky {laughs}." Sam*

This was echoed by Jean who suggested that it results in a choice between completing the administrative demands and supporting the students.

*"Why is it that we are still in this situation years down the road, where we have to make a choice between ringing a student and finishing a report?" Jean*

Pat spoke about the tension between supporting students and the administrative requirements on one of the access officers' work practices, i.e. the Student Assistance Fund<sup>15</sup>.

*"You know, with the Student Assistance Fund it's basically a financial administration fund which is audited. Whereas the work with our students is not audited. So, you're going to spend time on your SAF making sure it's OK." Pat*

There was a belief that the administrative requirements and the surge of growth in workload has left little time and space to engage with colleagues to ensure that, as the policy slogan states, 'Access is everyone's business' (HEA, 2005). This is an important piece of work as access impacts on many different functions across the HEI, such as Teaching and Learning, Technology Enhanced Learning, Universal Design, etc. The access interviewees felt that without these opportunities to engage with colleagues, this vitally important connection with the wider third level community cannot happen.

*"I think we've grown at such a pace that in some ways that growth has disconnected us, here in <my HEI> anyway, from our academic colleagues, in that they don't have any part in that process now and in some ways that's right – they shouldn't have any part in the process, it should be mainstreamed but we need to find a way of*

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<sup>15</sup> Student Assistance Fund (SAF) provides financial support to students who experience financial hardship. The Fund is managed by the HEA on behalf of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. SAF is allocated to HEIs annually and Access Services have responsibility for the assessment and distribution of the money to students. (HEA)

*reconnecting with our academic colleagues to share with them the experiences of the students and the work that's there and not only in a negative way." Jodie*

According to the research participants their administrative workloads result in there being a lack of opportunities to think strategically. They spoke wearily about the demands of the Student Assistance Fund, the Fund for Students with Disabilities, PATH and eCohesion. Jodie shared their experience of not having the opportunity to think strategically because of the lack of time.

*"We are the practitioner experts in our field but if we don't have time to put our head above, take in air and do a bit of higher zone scanning, all we are, are practitioner experts in what we currently do, we don't have that time to see what else it is". Jodie*

### **6.2.5 Workload and impact on health.**

In the above section I have presented the challenges experienced by practitioners because of the growing workloads, the bureaucracy, the heavy administrative burdens and the seemingly never-ending HEA reporting. All access officers referred to the impact of this workload on their health and wellbeing. The relentless, fast-paced, growing workloads, creates high levels of stress and burnout. With the role being so demanding combined with inadequate resourcing, Pat wished for access funding to be discontinued. With 'no light at the end of the tunnel', Pat resigned from the access role.

*Pat: "You know all the extra work, and then you know the eCohesion <sup>16</sup> was going on and you were thinking, well, that's going to end. So, you could, keep up a stupid pace of work knowing that that was going to end. And then the <Cluster PATH Programme> was going to end. .... so you're thinking when that ends, things will get better, but in reality there's somebody sitting in an office in Europe at the moment thinking 'What stupid thing can we put in now for the access officers in Ireland to do to record on SAF' {Deirdre laughs} You know that's the reality and what's coming down the line in the next two or three years too, about three years into the funding process, they'll say, 'oh, by the way, could you do this', you know, 'and go back for the last 10 years as well' and then also, I was afraid that the PATH 3 that they would be 'Here's more money. Continue with that.' And I just thought I can't be hanging around for all that, you know."*

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<sup>16</sup> eCohesion was an EU data reporting system for capturing data relating to the Student Assistance Fund (SAF) and the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD)

*Deirdre: "And do you think that pushed you out of access? The level of work - did that push you out of access?"*

*Pat: "Yes. No doubt about it. Yes, you know, ... that's one of the reasons it was so hard to leave this because I actually loved the job, and I loved working in the college. For my own mental health, I couldn't stay there. You know?"*

Access practitioners felt that colleagues and stakeholders know that they are over-worked and can see the pressure they are under. There are high levels of frustration at the lack of care, support and action in relation to addressing this issue. The impact of this level of work, combined with a lack of hope in terms of the issue being addressed impacts negatively on individuals. Pat referenced this as being one of the reasons for being pushed out of a job that they loved.

*"I left with a very heavy heart, you know. It was very hard to leave the students..... the pace was frantic for me, absolutely frantic. And everyone could see that, you know. Even though I said I can't, this is too much and there was no action on it you know. And I said I could've went down the route of HR. I couldn't be bothered, it's not worth it you know.... and I just said, 'ah no, I'll go off and do something else'". Pat*

The interviewees say they are exposed to vicarious trauma and can experience compassion fatigue, when overworked and dealing with growing numbers of students to support at post-entry. From the interviews, it was apparent that these access officers care deeply about the work that they do and feel privileged to work as practitioners making a real and significant difference to people's lives. In doing this, there is a cost to the caregiver, in this case, the access practitioner. The access participants queried who is looking after the caregiver? What supports are in place to support the access officer? Where is the minding of access officers?

*"And they know at the same time that we are dealing with very difficult and challenging cases and hard stories, you know, .... where is the supervision and the minding of the access officers in all this? Like we deal with very harrowing stories, we have, I mean for years, a lot of our work is positive and it's exciting and it's great to be able to hand money over and you know, it's fantastic to be able to do those things and to know that .... you've actually made a difference to somebody actually having food on their table this week or not. Or a student staying in college or not. I mean that's a privilege and I will say that - that's the part of my life that I think ok, I'm actually doing something with my life that makes a difference. And then in another way I feel that what we do is not really recognized in terms of the supports that we do give to students and the minding that we do of students so I'd just compare it to*

*Counselling Services – like counsellors are entitled to supervision as part of their role, it's part of their jobs. When were access officers ever afforded an opportunity to have supervision? ..... and as access offices have got bigger in colleges, that's going to become more of a challenge, because if you're a project officer and you're a grade 3 or a grade 4 and you're working on something you know, you could have got the phone call that day from a student about a very harrowing... there's nowhere to go with that. There's a whole care piece there that is being ignored and if Access Services are to grow, well then that's something that needs to be looked at." Jean*

This access officer continued to say that in not addressing this issue of support, there is a danger that this will impact on access officers' ability to do the job.

*"We are working with these communities and the most vulnerable in our society and we want to listen to their voices, it's not that we don't, but we are expected to pay heed to that piece and do what we can do to support them but there's no follow through at the other side of it to actually support us to do our jobs and it all just comes back to that, what our colleges are doing to make sure that we can do our jobs and meet the needs of the communities we are working with." Jean*

The workload requires access officers to work long hours into the evenings and weekends. Meeting deadlines and completing reports has taken its toll on access officers' health and well-being, impacting on family life and personal time. In this extract below Jean refers to the commitment in meeting the demands of work, the work being invisible, and in undertaking this work there is a huge personal cost to the access officer, in terms of health and well-being.

*"Sometimes I feel ... that we are our own worst enemies – we do give so much and I can assure you that every access officer in this country worked some amount of hours this year to get stuff over the line, eating into their evenings and lunch times and getting the work done and over the line – that piece goes, that's invisible work right. So basically, we're not getting paid for that work, right, and this is personal.... Our personal time is being eaten into and I'm not a time watcher, by the way – I'm not one of these people who has to log off at a certain time – I'm not like that, I just want to get the work done. But there comes a point and you're coming to a Friday and you're still working at 7 o'clock on Friday evening and then you're hammered tired because its late maybe, you've worked every lunch hour, you've worked late every evening – you've come to the point where you're exhausted and you're burnt out and that's no good for anybody. And as well as that, I think over the years, people have become resentful of what it has taken from them as people. And we have seen it, we are aware of people in this country who have suffered, their health has suffered because of what we do – so that's where the disrespect feels as well. I feel from others, not just from myself, but I feel it from other people in the sector in our*

*particular group, you know, there's that sense of like, it doesn't matter what I do, it's never enough to get the job done. And I know it's lovely to get a thank you email and all of that, but it means nothing anymore to me."* Jean

Jodie spoke about being at 'breaking point' from the workload, prior to the launch of a new access initiative by the HEA. In this HEI, on this occasion, Jodie was listened to by their senior management, when they explained the reality of the role they were undertaking, and subsequently a new access post was created at a more senior level. They spoke about how access officers are faced with having to constantly grow, to constantly add more in a visionless vacuum.

*"When I think back and think of what was happening around the time of the PATH application, and that was the impetus for this new role happening here, was that we had a number of different things that came together, and I literally came to a breaking point, and I said I can't do anymore. The PATH funding came into the institution, and I said to the Registrar, 'I can't do my day job and all of these other jobs as well, something has to give, cos I'm actually doing two jobs', and I was lucky that they advertised a new role, and I was successful in getting it. We are still back doing those two jobs, three jobs, four jobs, you know they haven't lifted off your desk. And I think that's the bit that really needs to be looked at. And it's that sense of constant growth and development, it's always new, adding on another bit, adding on another piece to the jigsaw without stopping and looking and saying actually where do we need to fit the next piece of the jigsaw. Is this piece of the jigsaw best going over here or over here, or you know that stuff?"* Jodie

It was also said that the role of the access officer is so all-encompassing, it can be difficult to manage all elements. Access practitioners start to doubt their own abilities when they are not able to cope with the demands.

*"And is that because we're not good at planning, we're not good at managing, or we're not good?...I used to think that. I used to think that there was a deficit within me, that I wasn't able to plan and I wasn't able to manage my time enough and I've invested in my own professional development.....[and] no, it's not that we're inefficient, ineffective or not doing much, we're actually burnt out and over-worked and we're trying all the time to do too much, we're so used to going at such a pace and everybody in our sector or our equivalent, is working at that pace, that we're kind of going, 'oh my god, we have to keep going' and we're all burnt out from it, because you can't sustain that level of activity and constant new initiatives, and new engagements and we're trying to bring everybody along, we're trying to maintain the relationships with community partners, we're trying to maintain the relationships with our colleagues across the institutions, it's exhausting."* Jodie

During the interviews the access officers were asked what their vision for access was. The access practitioners all articulated responses that promoted strategic thinking and meaningful engagement with groups that are under-represented. They called for an alternative approach to target setting and highlighted the need for people-centred, meaningful approaches to access. However, Jodie suggests that it is almost impossible to think strategically, when AOs don't have the bandwidth to think beyond the operational day to day demands.

*"It's hard to do that and it's hard to think about that when you don't have bandwidth.... It becomes this big mountain that you're beating yourself up on, saying 'why can't I get up this mountain?' And then you look and say well I actually can't get up because I'm carrying loads of rocks in my pockets {Laughs} and we won't be able to get past a certain bit." Jodie*

### **6.3 Inconsistent Funding and Lack of Sustainability**

This section presents a key issue for access practitioners that concentrated on access funding and the implications of this in terms of access practice within HEIs. This was a strong theme throughout all the interviews with access practitioners. All agreed that the fixed term nature of funding models is not conducive to long-term, sustainable practice. In this section, the block grant is highlighted, the limitations of fixed term funding, resource constraints and reactionary practice is brought to the fore.

#### **6.3.1 Block grant.**

The access funding model within higher education was discussed in Chapter Three. HEIs have discretion over the spend of the access block grant allocation. In most cases this access budget is not 'ring-fenced' for access initiatives. For Jodie, the access practitioner within the university sector, the access block grant is managed by the access unit, within the Registrars area and this presented opportunities for access.

*Jodie: "But I think there's opportunities like, like in the {laughing}, I won't use the word 'ringfenced', in the recurrent grant allocation, for access, which"*

*Deirdre: "Which, just to put it on the record, is given directly for access initiatives within your institution?"*

*Jodie: "Yes, in <my HEI>, we manage that through the Registrar's Office..... there's an opportunity for us if there's surplus budget to look and see how we use that and*



*one of things that I'm doing at the moment is; there was the Teaching and Learning (T&L) enhancement fund came through there recently, and again there was substantial funding to all our HEIs around T&L enhancement, and so I've engaged with the VP for T&L and with the team in T&L to say well is there a way to use T&L enhancement fund and access to look at this whole area of inclusivity, universal design".*

The management of the RGAM access allocation (discussed in Chapter Three) by the access unit in this HEI, allows for proactive collaborations between the unit and other departments within the HEI. The funding is used to resource the access staff and initiatives, but it is also used by the head of access to allow for strategic alliances internally to move forward the access agenda. (For most HEIs within the Technological University sector, the access allocation is not distributed for that specific purpose.)

Most access officers are not informed how the Access Block Grant Funding is spent within their HEIs. The annual allocations are made to each HEI and in many cases, access officers are not informed of what that allocation is. Funding allocations within HEIs are very often not explained to access officers. There was a sense amongst access officers that this access funding is not necessarily allocated to widening participation and access, but on other areas within the HEI. This perception, rightly or wrongly, persists because access officers are not given clarity on where RGAM access allocations are spent and where budgets are sourced.

*"I remember shouting at the table years and years ago with the HEA about that funding, and saying if we don't see it and if it's not ringfenced for access, we'll never see a penny of it. And I think I'll speak for everybody around the country and say that we don't see a penny of it, you know, and if we do, we're not told where the money is from, or we're not told what part of access that's going in to, you know. So, there's a whole piece there, where I feel there's a huge amount of money going into the college from the HEA that is not going to where it should be in terms of access and participation. That has a knock-on on services, which ultimately has a knock-on in terms of what we can do for our communities, which ultimately has a knock-on in terms of what we can do for equality and participation. So, it's the whole way down."*  
Jean

### 6.3.2 Fixed term funding.

In recent years the HEA PATH initiative <sup>17</sup> was launched to allow HEIs to work in clusters to address access and widening participation. At government level, there was an expectation that this funding would allow for access to be addressed strategically between HEIs and that a regional approach would allow for collaboration between HEIs. At the front line, the access officers were not as optimistic about the funding opportunity. The already over-stretched access officers, saw the reality of this funding adding to their workloads and because of the short-term nature of the funding, there was a perception that this funding could be damaging in the long-term.

*Pat: "And also some funding came in there. And this was the issue and you know this yourself with funding – is that we had the <Cluster> fund, so we put in place [a new recruit within access], right? And there was one put in place in each of the four colleges.... Loads of people said to me 'that's fantastic now you're getting somebody' you know, but they were actually coming in to work on the <Cluster> project not to work on my workload, which was already at tipping point and then because they were new to education and didn't know anything about it, it actually was more work on me, you know, not less. Then we took on a student support worker, again funded by the <name of Cluster> for two days a week and again as you know, at the start of that, you have to be the one explaining everything to them so that was even more work again. And then they're funded for maybe one more year and I had him for maybe a year and a half. So, I was looking at them doing more work and then [after] the year and a half, going back to just me. With an even higher workloads than what I already had and being expected to support it on my own - so that prospective for the future, was just, like what was the point, you know."*

*Deirdre: "yeah, so like that kind of short-term funding is kind of worse in the long term?"*

*Pat: "Absolutely, pointless".*

Since access became one of the HEAs Strategic Priorities, there have been many different short-term funding streams provided to HEIs. E.g. Strategic Innovation Funding (2006-2010), Dormant Accounts (2008-9), PATH 3 (2018-21), Dormant Accounts for Travellers (2021), Covid Contingency Funding (2021), PATH 4 and 5 (2022). The common thread between all these funding opportunities is that they provide short and fixed-term funding to develop access initiatives.

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<sup>17</sup> HEA Programme for Access to Higher Education, 2017

All the access officer participants believed that this ad-hoc short term, inconsistent funding is detrimental to stakeholder and community engagement.

*“You run a project for two years and they <the schools> get involved and engaged and then it’s dropped like a hot potato and that is detrimental, like, to the point where I’d be nervous about approaching some of those...For example again, to go back to them in <name of location> and say ‘oh look, I know we offered you this brilliant programme, you know about ten years ago and we were heavily involved and ye invested a lot from ye’re side in terms of teacher time particularly’, you know, and schools struggle so much with teacher time anyway, ‘and ye invested in that and we’ve dropped ye’, I think it’s detrimental what we’re doing, like even as I said to you, I have two PATH Project Officers at the moment you know, and their contracts are dependent, and I’m there thinking like, it’s a choice – do I have enough money to offer them another six months here? You know, or can I offer them a year and actually make a plan for the next year – at least make some kind of a plan – and a plan for when they’re gone. We talk about making a plan, for what they’ll do for the next year, but how are we going to plan for when this person’s gone? And that’s a worry as well in terms of PATH because, these people, like you know, we’re very, very lucky in that we’ve got highly intelligent, educated people working on these projects you know and how long will they stay? Realistically like, if you’re given a contract for six months and got a contract somewhere else for three years, you know, it’s detrimental, and it is our reputations – it’s not just the reputation of the access offices, it’s the reputation of the college.” Jean*

Jean shared that, if and when funding is secured to appoint staff within access services, short-term contracts are issued. The funding is ad-hoc, insecure and unsustainable. Proper long-term, sustainable funding measures are needed to ensure an adequate long-term service.

*“They’re two full time posts - contracts. Their contracts are all dependent on how long can I keep them with the money that I have. They’re very volatile – very difficult to plan with those posts because those posts will end as soon as the money is gone. So, you’re always kind of looking ahead, well how many more months can I add on to that that contract, you know, which has huge implications for the community and the partnerships that we work with.” Jean*

Jodie explained that these piecemeal funding streams, with strict, rigid guidelines and criteria, means that HEIs are always left chasing the money. The funding also dictates the direction that HEIs have to move, providing very little opportunity for access to be developed in a strategic and visionary way.

*"I suppose with PATH funding, in some way I always feel like we're chasing a bus and the bus mightn't be going in the direction we want to go in, but you feel like you have to run after it and get on the bus and actually find yourself at the wrong stop, gone in the wrong direction {laughs}. But you have to get on it anyway, cos you know, it's a bus!" Jodie*

With these prescribed funding guidelines, very often comes strict reporting requirements. There can be ambiguity for access practitioners in deciphering the reporting requirements from the outset. The requirement to provide data is almost guaranteed but it may not necessarily be clear what data is required.

*"It mightn't be explicit, you mightn't be able to pull the data – I suppose with half of the HEA funding as well, we're not knowing what the reporting requirements are going to be." Jodie*

### **6.3.3 Resources**

A key challenge for access practitioners was the scarcity of resources. It was felt that staff resource levels are generally insufficient in meeting the needs of students and the administrative demands within the access services. The pressure felt by access practitioners is enormous as a result.

*Deirdre: "And in terms of the numbers of staff and that staff resource and the level of work that you were doing. Is it enough?"*

*Pat: "Have I enough staff?"*

*Deirdre: "Yeah?"*

*Pat: "No.....That's why I don't work there anymore Deirdre. {both laugh}"*

*Deirdre: "Fair enough, fair enough. .... were senior management aware of the level of work that you were carrying"*

*Pat: "Absolutely 100%"*

*Deirdre: "yeah, yeah. And how come.... Was the issue addressed in terms of trying to support you in the role that you were doing?"*

*Pat: "No. Funnily enough it wasn't that there's no commitment to access, or it wasn't that they'd no understanding, cause they knew I was flat out. And they knew I had asked for support, maybe for last two years before we got into the [cluster] project. As you know we had the eCohesion as well, so there was a big wallop of work over the last two or three years. So, for about two years I was asking, saying 'I'm not*

*getting enough support'. And I think they felt there was enough resources within the department. Ok - but that was no help to me."*

Jodie interestingly suggested that there can be a perception among senior management and colleagues within HEIs that access has several funding streams and that there is ample budget to deliver on access related initiatives. They felt that this worked against them when trying to form allegiances with colleagues.

*"I've very clearly said from the outset, I'm not looking for any money from this for access and the answer was 'good, cause ye've loads of money', so there's this perception that we have all of these avenues, and they hear PATH coming in and the PATH 1,2 and 3 and they hear the laptops and they hear the covid-19 grant and they're like, 'ye have loads and loads and therefore we don't want to include you in these things', but like include us without it costing money, include us because we need to be there, at the table and we need to influence them and we need to have a part to play." Jodie*

There is always a struggle for resources within HE and an effective Access Service, like other departments and offices, need sufficient staffing resource, time and strategy to undertake meaningful community engagement, to adequately deliver and support the needs of prospective access students, and support students to successfully complete their studies. Many of the HEIs within the IoT sector are now merging or have already merged to form technological universities. With this monumental shift, access services are working together in reviewing, evaluating and aligning access policy and practice and are presenting models of practice that are needed to ensure that access and widening participation are embedded within the fabric of the new universities.

Pat spoke about how they had engaged with another access officer from the HEI they were merging with, to determine how many staff were deemed as essential in the new university access service. The exercise while useful in identifying the resources required, was deemed to be pointless when it wasn't considered.

*Pat: "We're going to be a Technical University. I worked with [Joe Bloggs] in [X Institute of Technology] and we put together what would be the ideal access department across the Technical University. We required 23 staff and that would be to cover now.... Like there is about six of us and is about 10 of them, so it's about 16 at the moment, so you're looking at maybe another 10. And that would be by not going mad, you know"*

*Deirdre: "that's to keep the ship afloat?"*

*Pat: "To do a little bit extra, but what you would need to properly resource it and do stuff you really wanted to do. You need at least 23-26 people you know. So, we went through that exercise which fell on deaf ears as well. {laughs}"*

#### **6.3.4 Reactive practice.**

Understandably, given the demands of the role they described, all interviewed felt that the access services were not adequately resourced with staff. Sam alluded to the ad hoc nature of appointments which results in the creation of units and silos, as opposed to more strategic planning approaches.

*Deirdre: "...[is] 15 people [staff] enough?"*

*Sam: "{Pause} Definitely not enough. {another short pause} But then again, it comes down to approach, I suppose, Deirdre. You know the crew keep creating units to look after different problems and stuff like that."*

Access officer participants believed that there can be a lot of reactive practice, in some instances brought about by funding with unrealistic deadlines. This reactionary practice means that there is no space to plan, to organise and to think of the bigger picture. access officers are constantly firefighting.

*"Yeah, there's not enough admin support. You know, definitely not. Then we end up doing things. An example again, the laptop loan scheme there. Now I could have waited to get an administrator to help me with that or whatever, and then we would never have got a laptop to the student. So literally I spent 10 days and evenings flat out. Processing all of those so at least then they did get an administrator that everything was decided on, and here are the students that are getting whatever 400 computers or whatever. So again, that's a lot of administration and you could say, oh well, you know it would be better if you were sitting back and you were thinking about strategies and policies and you name it, but some things you just gotta do."*

*Sam*

Three of the four access officers alluded to there being a lack of vision on access at a national level and very little joined up thinking in relation to funding and policy. There is a sense that funding announcements can be made hastily as a political move, rather than necessarily thinking things through in advance. The result of this adds to significant pressure in terms of reporting, in having to change direction, in having to manage new initiatives, on access services jumping to the tune of the funding authority.

*Deirdre: "So do you think that that 'joining up the dots' needs to happen at, you know, we'll say at Simon Harris's level, where it's national or do you think that it also needs to be happening within the colleges?"*

*Sam: "Yeah, well, you gotta look at the way they take responsibilities for these things. Like you know, at the political level they want the good news story, OK. So, we're just getting off and bang! And they don't think things through and the responsibility is down to the HEA or the Department or whatever....."*

*Deirdre: "Or the access {Laughs}"*

*Sam: "Or the access officer and you get on with it and then, you know, you probably get nailed later then for not, you know, picking up some bit of data that some administrator or bureaucrat and the department's looking for, you know what I mean? .... getting on with the job you know."*

The access brief was seen to be too all-encompassing for the resources in place currently. Access services are juggling pre-entry, entry and post-entry initiatives, all without adequate resources. With the growing numbers at post-entry level, the demand for supports here can often leave pre-entry, community engagement work under-accomplished. Opportunities to engage with communities who are hardest hit by educational disadvantage are left without adequate support.

*"The pre-entry piece ..... it can often get lost, you're trying to look at your post entry, the Student Assistance Fund is an absolute monster, that takes up way too much time. We've been talking about it for 10-15 years at this stage. But the post-entry piece, you know, can often eat up so much time and then the pre-entry piece is often forgotten about, and then, that's not being addressed. It's not being addressed nationally, at a level whereby we have enough resources to put into the pre-entry piece." Jean*

#### **6.4 Meaningful Community Engagement**

*"It's the building of the relationship and ultimately trust, you know it comes down to trust and it takes years to build up with some of the communities you would want to work with" Jean*

A focus of the research was to explore the existing relationships that exist between access practitioners and communities that experience educational disadvantage. All participants were asked how much community engagement happens as part of their professional role. I was interested in finding out what engagement practices HEIs are currently undertaking to improve access to higher education and I probed access participants about their access practice and their existing and desired levels of community

engagement. I did not define what I meant by 'community' in the question. When asking the question, I assumed that the definition would be local regions that experience socio-economic disadvantage. Interestingly, there was a mixed understanding to the concept of community engagement. For some, they perceived it to be working with stakeholder organisations, such as schools and Further Education Colleges. For others, it was working with advocacy groups. There was very little discussion about engaging with community groups, resource centres, local development organisations, community education centres, etc. For the purposes of this section, the definition of community as understood by the access officers encapsulates schools, Further Education, advocacy groups and community organisations.

All access officers interviewed believe in building relationships and promoting the work of the access service within their HEI. They understand the difference between promoting and marketing their service and having meaningful engagement with them.

*"I think people mistake marketing for engagement with communities. You know, that's not engagement. That's just marketing. You know, to engage with communities, you have to get out there and build relationships. And I think for me it will be relationships with providers of, say, FETAC. That would be a big one, you know? Also, um Schools Liaison. You know, you know yourself, Tusla, health care professionals, OTs, you know endless list of people that should know that access exists. You know, especially with the access course, which is a one-year thing that can really get people in who've lost their way or who needs that year". Pat*

Sam stated;

*"Well, I think it's hugely important <engaging with community groups>. Valuable, valuable to the learning community. You know? If we're missing out on learning, that's very real for different cohorts of students and the community that aren't coming in here for one reason or the other, then it's at the whole institution is as poor as a result, like you know, it's a shared learning." Sam*

Access officers strongly believe that consultation and collaboration with community stakeholders is key in many functions of access work.

*"So, whether that was a principal in a school, a guidance counsellor, somebody within a Traveller organisation - saying we've a gap here, that's where all of the programmes and initiatives came about. There were very few, that were the access staff deciding 'oh we think we should do this'..... our work is very much about collaboration, about partnership and making sure that there's people sitting on all of*



*our groups who are holding us accountable to our deliverables – that we’re not sitting in this hallowed place in university deciding this is what we should be doing and not bringing people along the way with us.” Jodie*

All access practitioners articulated what community engagement meant to them. All could see the value in engaging with the community. Jean, Sam and Jodie believed that there are varying perspectives on community engagement, even within HEIs. The access participants understood community engagement to be the building of relationships with key stakeholders, the involvement in initiatives for the ‘betterment’ of communities, they believed that it was meaningful collaborations not just ‘marketing’, or ‘tokenistic’. They understood the reality of meaningful community engagement and stressed that meaningful engagement requires a huge investment of time, energy, resources. It needs to be sensitive to the needs of the community, it needs to be of benefit to the community, not just the HEI and significantly it needs time and resources.

*“I would like to see access more engaged in that [community engagement] and I was hoping that through some of this work on .... the PATH project, that that would bring about and re-energize some of those connections between access staff and those communities, because I think we have to be in the communities, hearing what’s going on. And I think schools have become the easier option, and I won’t say it’s easy – maintaining the relationship with schools is very challenging at times as well, but you know, as you said, they’re another state formal structure, you know when you go back in September, the likelihood is that there’ll be someone that you know in one of those contacts, that you can get in touch with, whereas if you’re linking in with community development projects, you’re not guaranteed that. Things might have moved on, albeit at a different stage. But I think the community development projects and community groups are the heart of the community, and they can give us much more insight into what the challenges and what the barriers are. I think it’s a lot more resource intensive to carry out some of that work and I think it requires greater commitment and a greater sensitivity because I think we need to be sure when we’re engaging with those communities that we’re not doing it for our own gain, that we’re doing it because we want to work with them and we’re committing to x, y and z over a period of time. I think there needs to be really strong community, I think it’s there in Cork in different guises, through the learning neighbourhoods and the city of learning initiative, I think that’s been fantastic in embedding communities.” Jodie*

#### **6.4.1 Restrictions on engagement.**

Because of issues such as resourcing, workloads, policy, HEI structures, access officers are very restricted in making links with communities. Time was identified as being

the biggest issue and obstacle in terms of making links and establishing relationships with groups who experience disadvantage. This extract below, highlighting a community engagement initiative, returns to the dialogue held with Pat and their work with the Direct Provision Group they worked with.

*Pat: "There's a direct provision centre.... with [people with] nothing to do. And here are we with a big college that's empty half the year. So, I said 'oh, we'll have to do something about that'".*

*Deirdre: "Yeah, that's a great example. And OK if community engagement practice is limited at the moment, what is stopping this from happening currently?"*

*Pat: "Lack of time, lack of time because you're so busy, meeting the students who are already in the college, yeah, and supporting the ones that are already in the college and you know yourself, the level of support that they need. And then you're trying to do all the administration as well and you can't. You can't do everything, you can't, you know".*

For this access officer, community engagement was limited to one week in the year. Because of the lack of resources available, College Awareness Week <sup>18</sup> was identified as the week to bring groups on campus. Other than this week, there was no other community activity.

*"...but working with communities....there's a bit of big knock-on effect, you know if you can work with communities. And you end up linking more people into the college all the time in different ways, you know, and it becomes more acceptable to people to just walk into college and look for stuff and talk to people. The more time you can get people to spend in the college, the more they feel that it's theirs as well, you know. That it's not this organization that they're not welcoming, you know..... College Awareness Week <sup>19</sup> would be all.... I don't go out in college Awareness Week if I can help it. I try to bring everybody in so you might have 200-300 people. I mean it is down to if I had more resources, I'd spread bringing people in over the whole year. Yeah, you know at the moment I cram into one week." Pat*

All access participants saw great value in bringing under-represented groups on campus in an effort to take the fear out of higher education. There was a recognition that

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<sup>18</sup> College Awareness Week is a national campaign which aims to promote the benefits of going to college, to help students of all ages to become college-ready and to showcase local role models. ([www.collegeaware.ie](http://www.collegeaware.ie))

<sup>19</sup> College Awareness Week - College Awareness Week is a national event across Ireland. It aims to help students learn about the opportunities available at third level and the programmes available to study. ([www.collegeaware.ie](http://www.collegeaware.ie))

trust needs to be established between the HEI and a community group, this cannot be rushed, that this all takes time.

*"I'm thinking of, let's say a group like Youthreach<sup>20</sup> students, for example, like, I remember the first time that cohort of those came in and you know spent their first three or four visits just drinking tea and coffee and walking around the place. You know when you could see they were terrified and not to mention their tutors {laughs} They were terrified as well, so it took a long time to sort of build up a little bit of, well come here, 'These aren't all pointy headed guys in here'. You know 'they 're a bit of craic' and you know I can come in here anytime I want and I don't feel like there's people watching me or I don't belong here'. And you know, all that takes time, you know". Sam*

Participants believed that HEIs need to build trust with communities. They all noted that time and resources must be invested to build the relationships with communities and to allow for trust to be established.

*Deirdre: "Would you see a key part of the access role establishing those relationships with communities, do you see that as being one of the priorities, if you had the capacity to do it?"*

*Jean: "I would, yeah, absolutely, I think that, you know, it's the building of the relationship and ultimately trust, you know it comes down to trust and it takes years to build up with some of the communities you would want to work with – they feel that they can trust us to be as good as we can for them and we start to develop a relationship."*

All four access officers were challenged to define access and community engagement and working collaboratively. They all understood that the engagement needs to be valued by all stakeholders and the objectives and planned outcomes need to be clear and understood by all. Sam spoke about the importance of 'nurturing' relationships. Jodie mentioned the significance of 'building' relationships and 'engaging with key stakeholders'. Jean believed that community engagement was about 'partnerships and relationships'. All participants noted time as an essential ingredient to engaging with communities.

*"I suppose the biggest thing in working collaboratively is time. It's having that time for that engagement and making sure on both sides that the engagement is valuable for people but also that when you have that engagement its structured and its organised in such a way that its getting the most out of it, that people don't feel that*

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<sup>20</sup> Youthreach is managed by the ETBs. The programme is for early school leavers who do not have a formal qualification, and they can avail of basic education, personal development and work experience.

*they're coming into a meeting and at the end of two hours, nothing has been achieved or not sure where we're going so, and a time to plan, do a little of stakeholder engagement and consultation maybe even prior to a big consultation, that you have a sense of what's happening on the ground and yeah, bringing in the multiple different agendas. And also for us, the biggest challenge in this area of work is our agenda as well and we are access services, and we are about access to higher education, and sometimes the work that we're being asked to do is very much at a different level – it's around countering educational disadvantage, primary or second level and it's a much broader remit than what we have and we're often being pulled into rabbit holes where, you know, plug holes where really the work should be the department of education and skills or a particular school itself and that can be a big challenge actually – trying to define – is this access work?" Jodie*

There was a perception that the reality of meaningful community engagement for access practitioners is impossible. In the earlier section, the current workloads and the demands on the services were noted, all of which impacts significantly on engagement with communities. These administrative and workload demands result in light-touch relationships with communities. Pat, below, speaks about attempts to build relationships and make connections. They articulate the reality of demands of access work and resign themselves to the fact that not much more can be done, under the current situation.

*"I would go out to the VTOS centres. I'd go out to the NLN {National Learning Network}. I'd go out training for employment centres - all around the [region] and that had dwindled down to practically nothing. You know? Because September to December was all SAF<sup>21</sup> totally. And then in January you might get out a bit, you know. But again, then eCohesion took over February March, then you know. And then they're pushing out their courses as well. So even trying to get into organizations and then it's all about building relationships with the people who are on all these organizations as well. And if you don't have the time to talk to them, all you can do is answer questions when they contact you. That's about as much as you can do". Pat*

#### **6.4.2 Meeting community learning needs.**

The access officers I interviewed are aware that systems and structures within a HEI can sometimes be too rigid and processes too time consuming to accommodate a community's learning needs. This can be very frustrating for access officers, who have made

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<sup>21</sup> SAF – Student Assistance Fund is available to eligible students in higher education who are in financial hardship.

connections with the community, have a vision of what could be achieved and who want to support and facilitate learning opportunities for these communities.

*“Well, hopefully we're solving a few problems for them, and you know, we try to modify our offerings as best we can to whoever is looking for them. So, it's not all totally off the shelf, you know, and there's always a tension there because you've got to keep to certain, as you know, you have heads in department screaming at you ‘Oh well this learning outcome needs to be met and that learning outcome needs to be met’ and stuff like that. That can really slow down your reaction time to a need from the community, you know? So, a good example of this would be maybe five or six years ago there was a community development group and they were looking for a community development award ..... The college of course wanted it accredited through our systems or whatever, but sure the whole thing took maybe two years, and by the time we got to two years, the whole curriculum and everything had changed and needs changed. Nobody wanted to do the damn course by the time it came about.” Sam*

The interviewees believed that the relationship between HEI and community needs to be very fine tuned. There was a belief that everyone, including the HEI and the community, need to be on the same page when it comes to community engagement.

*Sam: “But really, when you do think about it ..... if you do know somebody, if you know what the music somebody's dancing to, then you can anticipate their next move. You know that the dance will turn out well. They might make a few mistakes, but you know that they're doing their best”.*

*Deirdre: “And are you talking about <name of HEI> dancing to that music?”*

*Sam: “I'm talking about everybody.”*

#### **6.4.3 Meeting the needs of the region.**

Access participants believed that engaging with communities to design, develop and deliver is essential to ensure that HEIs are meeting the needs of the region. The course offerings must be appropriate and responsive to the needs of the region.

*“You can take some very simple examples here, like online education. Sure, why would you do it ....in [my HEI], why don't you do it in Harvard? You know, and get better quality content and whatever, you know? But my answer to that is, well, you know, hopefully the institutions are creating their content with their regions and people in mind so that they know it's appropriate and it's going to be more fruitful. Otherwise everybody goes online to Harvard and we close all these places.” Sam*

There was a strong view, held by all participants, that HEIs need to ask communities what their needs are, listen to them and higher educational institutions need to respond. The access participants argued that if this proactive engagement with communities does not happen, there is a danger that HEIs engagement with communities will be reactive and ineffective.

*“Who is listening to what the needs of people are, you know. How are they being shone through a prism? That hasn't got any sort of fault lines in it or hidden agendas? Or maybe not so hidden agendas. Like who can truly sort of listen to what's needed and then figure out how to do things either in a different way or by using whatever resources we have and whatever structures we have at the minute to make those things happen. But I suppose to listen and to have a view of what's needed is the first step. Otherwise you're doing things and you're reacting to things either nationally or wherever the money is or whatever, in an incoherent way. And I think if you aim for things like that then you're never going to be satisfied. You're never going to get anywhere you know...So you know again, surely as an education provider we should be helping students to address stuff like that, because otherwise what are we doing”. Sam*

#### **6.4.4 Meeting private sector needs versus community needs.**

The access officers interviewed could see how HEIs need to reach into communities, build sustainable relationships and invest time into determining what their learning needs are. There was a belief that HEIs, in particular the technological universities, are very adept at working with the private and industry sector and determining what their needs are. It was suggested that the same needs to happen with communities.

*Deirdre: “...yeah, so, in terms of ... that engagement and the responsibilities that we have within our institutions; do you think that linking with communities and engaging with communities, does that responsibility fall in the access offices?*

*Sam: “Umm, Yes, yes and no, um. It depends how you look at community as well. I'm slagging off the multinational companies, but they're also part of the community. If you know what I mean, so they come into...lifelong learning and they need, you know, some specialized program, in programming or something like that. Then I try and work with them and get in the solution and get them students. They can do this sort of thing and blah de blah. But less so the developmental bit that's needed for very weak community groups or whatever to actually realise that maybe themselves. That OK, exactly this is what we need or that is what we need, you know, that that has to be what has to be nurtured.”*

Both Sam and Pat believed that a disproportionate number of resources goes into industry links. Resources on a similar scale needs to be applied to community engagement. Pat, below, referred to the active response by HEIs to industry needs.

*“I think colleges look to industry to say what is industry looking for. How should we design our courses? That's their focus. And community links - it's thrown in there as a ‘We should be doing that because we're expected to.’” Pat*

#### **6.4.5 Competitive engagement.**

National target numbers applied through the HEA Strategic Compacts can force HEIs to forcefully promote learning opportunities for their HEI only, without looking at the broader educational landscape and identifying the appropriate learning opportunities. It can be argued that because of the ‘access target’ metrics imposed on HEIs, they are encouraged to work competitively in recruiting access students. From discussions during the interviews, it emerged that access officers are not interested in promoting only access to education for their HEI specifically. They believe in building relationships in an ethical way and encouraging people to consider all appropriate learning opportunities, be it higher or further education, not just encouraging pathways into the HEI that is paying their salary.

*“Normally when I go out to an organization, and I don't use the PowerPoint, I just sit and it's always a small group anyway, so you just sit and talk to them and you're talking about education, and you know the framework of qualifications and the different levels. You talk about the funding and you're talking about the supports within a college. And I always say like whatever college you'll decide to go to they'll all have these supports. Lots of things. But at same time then I talked about the access course, which is very specific to [name of HEI] and I'm selling the access course. And is that what I should be doing?” Pat*

Because of institutional compacts, HEIs are encouraged to work independently to liaise with communities and most act alone in any outreach work. All access participants expressed some concern that there is a lack of ‘joined up’ thinking between the educational organisations.

*Deirdre: “Do you see a role for access in ..... community engagement and working very closely with communities?”*

*Jean: “Yeah, I do see a role for access, I do think however, that it's ... I don't want to use the word ‘silo’. I do think there's pockets...going on. Like there's, again, to use the word - there's a disconnect, so there's things happening all over the place – there's ...*

*possibly a lack of joined up ... conversation around what we're doing with the different communities".*

There was a recognition that there are limitations on what Access Services within HEIs can provide. Sometimes, AOs support prospective learners and engage with communities who have had very negative experiences of systemic educational inequality. There was a realisation that there is an opportunity and a need for AOs to work collaboratively with other educational providers and community organisations to ensure that the bigger picture is observed and that everyone works together and plays a part in addressing educational inequality.

*"... when people talk about the equality agenda, the access agenda is kind of similar – it can be everything from literacy to numeracy, to visits to campus, so it's that bit of – is this direct and relevant and will this have an impact and will this change progression rates from school into higher education – otherwise we could find ourselves doing an awful lot of lovely things that actually don't have any impact in terms of progression to higher education and I think that's a big challenge because when we go out into schools and communities - like when we're talking to Travellers and we hear some of the inequities in society, you know - the class differences, the community challenges, some of those are all contributing to the issues of educational disadvantage but they're way beyond our capacity to fix them and we're coming down saying 'actually we want to help you with this piece of it' but actually we won't be able to get to plug that piece in unless these other three pieces beforehand are fixed.... And where do those two cross-over? I think that'll be the biggest challenge in our work, it's knowing where it is, where are we going to have the biggest impact and looking at other agencies too and that has been successful and bringing other agencies together and saying 'well that bit is more your part of the work' and it gives – again the time and energy for that and making sure the right people are at the table for the right meetings, and I think that can be a struggle because we can't be at three or four places at the same time." Jodie*

#### **6.4.6 The right person.**

More than one access officer referred to the importance of the right person working on access engagement with communities. One access practitioner when asked about the success of the access foundation studies programme within their HEI, they answered;

*"But why are they so successful or why they've stood the test of time, Deirdre? I suppose way back when I spent two- or three-days interviewing people to get the best teachers we could find, and we're very lucky at the time we got those teachers and they're all still with us. And they are still loving what they do, you know?" Sam*



Sam later in the interview stated;

*Sam: "You know it's the sort of work that you can't fake Deirdre. If the wrong person, not the wrong person, but maybe if your best, best person doesn't go out to your community group and stuff like that or whoever. And like you know, people know straight away what you're about, and you know what your value system is .... You know? ..... The key person is essential ....."*

This access officer again alluded to this concept of 'the right person' further on in the interview when the access officer spoke about rigid and overly structured procedures.

*Deirdre: "..... it's interesting and I think it's crucial. It's crucial that as you mentioned it already, it's crucial in our work that we have the right people."*

*Sam: "Absolutely! Give me a person with the right bit of humanity and the right value system and all the other things, all the other skills are requirable."*

The right person extends beyond community engagement into the internal HEI access advocacy. In this extract below, one access officer presented an example where colleagues were getting involved in access for the wrong reasons.

*"And you don't want the person who is going to use it on.... you know obviously being on a committee, or being part of this work counts for promotion.....we were coming out of a meeting one day and one guy said to me 'I'm only sitting on this because the promotions will be coming up' and I was saying 'oh', you know these are not the people we need on these groups. We want somebody who's sitting on it because this is what they value and that is a tight rope. And that's why sometimes we keep going back to the same people, who we know are in it for the right reasons, who get, you know, huge satisfaction from supporting and engaging with our work."*  
Jodie

#### **6.4.7 Constraints on community workers.**

In Sam's interview, they suggested that not only can HEIs be constrained, but community workers can also be too tightly constrained by their brief, as defined by their funders. This can be limiting and doesn't always allow for strategic development.

*Sam: "So first on community development, OK, as a concept. It has evolved over the last twenty years, obviously. When I arrived here first, and you have to think of all the other factors that are out there too. You know we had a lot of <funding source> money....and stuff like that, you know and a lot of particular problems and stuff .... too....and the little point that I want to make was that there's an awful lot of community groups. It's now a bit of an industry. I've found some of the advocates, groups, it's their job, do you know what I mean? You know, sometimes maybe they're a little bit conflicted between their job and keeping their job and actually, you know,*

*representing the group that they were supposed to be representing. Oh God, headache. I really fumbled through that”.*

*Deirdre: “No, I hear what you’re saying, I think. Yeah, so they are in an appointed position where they’re getting paid to do the work. And are you suggesting that sometimes it’s that they may not be coming with the right energy or the right commitment to it?”*

*Sam: “That sort of thing, or they’re just coming with other constraints because maybe they’re being funded by <funding source> or they’re funded by the ETB and maybe they don’t want to step out of line.”*

*Deirdre: “OK, so they’re kind of following a particular agenda?”*

*Sam: “Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah”.*

A little later, Sam added that with community development and community education, too often community coordinators can get caught chasing the funding. A similar point was made earlier in relation to access practitioners chasing access funding.

*“.... too many initiatives in the past have being funding led, so yeah naturally enough then people start chasing the money .... firefighting stuff like you know you’re chasing the fire for a bit of heat. Chasing the dollars and where is it going, you know? Like I remember back in the day, I think the community development is sort of thing, was Paulo Freirean stuff wasn’t it? .... It was bigger than education .... It was a big thing. It was like a revolution sort of stuff. It wasn’t just ‘Oh well, we will keep that little bit now in that little silo, in that little box and it will not affect anybody else or any other thing we’re thinking about.” Sam*

Sam held the belief that community work has become too sanitised and formal, falling into bureaucratic and neoliberal practices. Sam wasn’t comfortable with this evolution and distanced themselves from involvement, favouring a more informal, organic network without any predetermined outcomes.

*Sam: “The County Development Board now would have a group that looks at adult education or lifelong learning or whatever they’re called. Everybody, all the good and the great are invited into that. And they meet periodically, maybe once or twice a year or whatever.”*

*Deirdre: “Are you at that?”*

*Sam: “I’m at that yeah, if I choose to go. I don’t choose to go too often because the whole thing has been very sanitised .... is probably... bureaucratized. There is no sense of oxygen in the room if you know what I mean”.*

*Deirdre: "Do you think that there's a danger then in that these kinds of formal structures can take hold or is that on the one extreme? Is the other end of the spectrum, maybe where networks can be established that are of benefit to the communities?"*

*Sam: "It used to be networks when it was less formal. Now, now it's more of a ticking boxes and formalities and having a report at the end of it than anything really happening. I find that very frustrating, you know?"*

#### **6.4.8 Doing our communities an injustice.**

There was a belief by Sam, Jodie and Jean that we are potentially doing our communities an injustice by not addressing the challenges and issues that access officers find themselves working in. Time and resource issues means that engagement is prohibitive. As a result, there was a strong belief that we are doing more harm than good to communities with our current practice.

*"I started to see things happening as well around PATH and 1916 and I was like 'Where's all of this going to end up?' ..... I just think it's actually getting worse. We're going to be doing our communities an injustice longer term if the changes don't happen – if those pieces don't happen now. Because we can't meet the needs of the communities that we're working with and our students." Jean*

Sam suggested that policy and practice in relation to community engagement had disempowered communities, making them helpless and powerless. This practitioner suggested that funding alone is not the answer to addressing social inclusion and engaging with communities that experience socio-economic disadvantage.

*"It's an area that has been disempowered because, it's got [designated] status. You know what? If you get up in the morning, you get a grant for it. So, it's been very disempowered. And even though the government and various schemes and stuff like that have thrown money at the area, that's never worked really. You know what I mean? They're no further on. Because they haven't taken responsibility for their own situation that they find themselves in and you know, what are we going to do about this? You know, and this guy [within the community]....I'm challenging him a bit, but not too much. It's sort of me doing, 'well, what is it you want to do?', you know? 'Where do you want to go?' But how do you see <name of area> in 10 years' time?' That sort of thing like you know. But well, let's start working towards it." Sam*

Sam later referenced Paulo Freire's work again in the conversation. When asked if they believed in this philosophy as a way of engaging with communities, they

wholeheartedly agreed but believed that the reality of implementing this philosophy seemed too unrealistic.

*Sam: "That's a consistent, wholesome way of...you know of education and education in its broadest sense, as well."*

*Deirdre: "And do you see Access as being a part of that?"*

*Sam: "{pause} Ah God. {longer pause} Yeah, it is and it isn't, it isn't, you know,"*

*Deirdre: "Yeah? I'm curious about the pause and want to know more on that."*

*Sam: "yeah, no it's not grasping the nettle the way it should, you know, and it's not providing the leadership that it should. It's grand when certain little issues from time-to-time bubble up, boiled to the surface and there's a nice neat solution of a tiny little course that looks after a particular thing. That's fine - but you know, as far as Access being out in the community you know sifting through the gravel? No, it is not. You know?"*

*Deirdre: "Do you think we should be?"*

*Sam: "{a bit wearily} Ahhh. I think we should be showing some sort of leadership. Yeah, I do. I do, yeah. But again, what authority have we in that space like, really? Only earlier we were talking about, Institutes not having any educational philosophy. How? How can they have any credibility? Unless they can, you know, show what they're all about."*

Sam also claimed that one of the roles of the access office is to work together with communities and go beyond providing information only and highlight the larger educational/learning landscape and the relationship between the various stakeholders within that.

*"You know an education is THE most important thing. But education is more than just bringing information to people, whoever they are, or whatever they're doing. You know, it's got a lot of hooks in it, so Institutions and access offices have a responsibility in my view to demonstrate and show people how different things knit together you know so different bits of information, they might look like, hey, one thing hasn't got any relationship to another, but in fact they have". Sam*

Interestingly, despite the challenges, most of us have all remained in the role for many years. Pat, who was in post when I initially contacted them to be involved in the research, had reached breaking point and had just left the position prior to the interview. For all others, it appears that their commitment and desire to work towards social justice and improve educational opportunities for under-represented groups and the rewards of

supporting students, over-rides their challenges and frustrations. But for how long? And at what cost; their professional career, their mental health, burnout?

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### FINDINGS FROM THE COMMUNITY GROUP

#### 7.1 Context

Area-based partnerships with HE emerged in the late 1990s. The aim was to 'raise individual, family and community expectations, remove barriers to participation in education and create a climate in which progression to further and third-level education becomes a realistic goal' (Murphy and Fleming, 2003, p. 27). With community partnerships, which differed from engagement with schools and further education colleges, it was recognised that community education models of practice were incorporated in most situations. Murphy and Fleming (2003), claim that community partnerships generally did not involve the formal educational provider at the centre, but rather non-formal and voluntary organisations were to be found there.

The idea of HEIs partnering with other stakeholders to achieve greater access to higher education, gained momentum at EU and National levels from the 1990s. When access practitioners were appointed into HEIs in the late 1990s/early 2000s, HEIs commenced access initiatives with various stakeholders aimed at widening participation. These stakeholders mainly consisted of formal educational providers such as second level schools and FE Colleges and to a lesser extent with non-formal and informal learning providers (Clancy and Wall, 2000). Murphy and Fleming (2003) state that there was a growing interest in developing outreach programmes to increase access to higher education and Clancy and Wall (2000) claimed that there was increasing momentum in establishing links with lower socio-economic groups because HE had reached saturation point with the middle-classes. Many of these outreach programmes were built on the premise of changing people's attitudes towards higher education and promoting opportunities available at higher education. In my interviews with access practitioners I discussed these HEI outreach programmes, the majority comprised of programmes which link with schools, with Further Education Colleges and to a lesser extent with communities.

HEIs have reached out to stakeholders in recent times through access initiatives. St. John *et al.* (2017) suggest that higher education access outreach programmes for students from lower socio-economic communities have to-date focused on what the HEIs can do *for*

communities, rather than *with* communities (St. John *et al.*, 2017, p. 210). Russell (2020), pushes us further however to consider initiatives that are designed and delivered *by* communities.

I wanted my research to explore current HEI access community engagement and I was particularly interested in hearing the community perspective. In Chapter Five, my motivations for working with a community group were articulated. Drawing on Participatory Action Research, Photovoice was used in the community workshops to provide for reflection and discussion with participants. The workshops, which were just under two hours each, led to one hundred transcript pages. Five community participants took part in the research, Brendan, Carmel, Ellen, Lilly and Mary. The discussions in each workshop were lively and all participants fully engaged.

I found the input from the participants in the workshops to be insightful and their contributions into each workshop were strong, articulate, profound and gave a perspective on access to education and community engagement that I'm convinced is not widely heard by higher educational institutions. I wish to let the voice of the participants tell the story. I have included many direct quotes as they articulate clearly not only the issues and challenges, but also opportunities and recommendations for improving community engagement and access to higher education.

Four main themes from a community perspective of education and higher education were developed, and these will be presented in this chapter.

(1) Fear and lack of confidence was highlighted as a significant barrier to learner participation. It emerged that negative past educational experiences by adult learners have deep rooted impacts in terms of having the confidence to take on any educational offering. This was seen as a major barrier to educational progression and opportunity.

(2) The second theme relates to the importance of community education and support within communities, in facilitating increased access to learning experiences. The support, encouragement and motivation needed to undertake learning opportunities is essential for many adult learners.

(3) There was discussion within all five workshops on the importance and opportunities in further education. Participants believed that having local formal educational providers in your community can provide steppingstones to further and higher education.

(4) The last theme highlights the role that HEIs have and can play in providing learning opportunities for communities and how that engagement needs to be designed.

Like the access officer's findings chapter, I have edited slightly some of the quotes to enhance readability. They are captured by "...". In some situations I have added words to clarify my interpretation and in these situations, they are captured with "[ ]". Quotations are preceded by the pseudonym of the participant and followed with the workshop number. I have also noted the workshop numbers, as I believe that the discussions became more reflective and more considered as the workshops progressed.

## **7.2 Fear and Lack of Confidence**

The impact of fear and lack of confidence on the likelihood of educational opportunities was discussed in all the workshops. This theme arose in all five workshops, even though the prepared questions at the start of each workshop didn't necessarily suggest this as a focus for participants.

Negative words such as 'fear', 'nervous', 'scary', 'embarrassment', lack of 'self-esteem' and feeling 'stupid', were very present in the dialogues that took place around education, in particular in relation to past experiences of formal education. I got a sense that there was real trauma in the community, felt by people who have low levels of literacy, those who have specific learning differences or have had negative experiences at school. The impact of this trauma was embedded in many conversation threads, focused on people's fear and lack of confidence in their learning, their low self-belief, their inability to progress into formal education.

When fear and lack of confidence surfaced in discussions, it was often linked with stories of resilience and determination. In the first workshop, which was aimed at allowing the group to get to know each other, Brendan shared at this early stage his experience of how he struggled in school and college as a result of having a specific learning difference. He



shared a deeply personal experience relating to a situation where he was belittled by a lecturer in front of his peers because of his learning difference.

*Brendan, Workshop 1: "I struggled in school..... I would have had terrible difficulties...if you said left to right to me, forget about it, B and Ds, 11s and 12s. Handwriting can be illegible at times, my ability to read is quite low, but I've managed to go through education and get a degree you know.....I suppose the most enjoyable part of college for me was actually the social side of it, not exactly the education. I liked the education, I loved it, but difficult....I remember one [lecturer], ... writing up on the board, 'somebody here in third level education can't spell..' whatever particular word it was and I sunk into my seat, right down into my seat....."*

Brendan continued to share his experience by explaining that he confronted his lecturer explaining that he had a learning difference, demonstrating a certain courage; however, despite talking to the lecturer, the experience left him lacking confidence to proceed with formal education at that time. He concluded this story by saying;

*Brendan, Workshop 1: "So, I suppose it was ... tough. I still remember it and I suppose .....I stopped learning at that point in my head. I found it very, very difficult to have the confidence to do it..... But yeah, I would personally be still fearful of entering formal education because of my experiences. When I think of education, I suppose that was my biggest thing in education is not feeling adequate within it. It's an awful feeling like."*

For this participant, even though his previous educational experiences instilled fear and anxiety towards formal learning opportunities, the desire to learn was very much still there.

*Brendan, Workshop 1: "It's like education, you always have to keep doing it and I do try to keep doing as much education, not on the formal route, but I educate myself you know, YouTube or whatever it is, or online courses. But yeah, I would personally be still fearful of entering formal education because of my experiences."*

Mary also shared that she had commenced a part-time computer class in her community some years ago. She spoke about her own nervousness in taking this class on and spoke of a classmate who had a fight to achieve, a resilience and a determination. She informed the group that this person subsequently became a computer teacher.

*Mary, Workshop 1: "I was kind of nervous of it really and Martina said 'this is not going to get me' and I always think of it for her. She said 'it's not going to get me'"*

There were echoes of these experiences across all workshops and contributions on this theme by all participants.

While I was aware of the impact of negative educational experiences for individuals, I did not necessarily expect to hear this theme coming through in workshops as strongly as it did. Interestingly, this theme did not surface in the access practitioner interviews as strongly. It was a powerful reminder to me of what access officer's need to know and be cognisant of in their practice.

### **7.2.1 Educational experiences.**

Reference to traditional teaching and learning experiences of primary and second level educational institutions were given much attention by the participants. These references were predominantly negative, with the legacy of these experiences impacting on their educational experiences as adults. Ellen shared an experience of learning to knit in school.

*Ellen, Workshop 1: "I remember the bane of my life was with the four needles and the heel of the sock, oh Deirdre, oh Jesus, I'll never forget it. I couldn't do it, I used to get murdered over it, you know. You have the four needles and ... I never got it anyway. Oh, flipping hell, I was such a tight knitter. I used to nearly break my fingers trying to get the needles out of the ahhh. I know that's why they all go to Penney's now {laughing}"*

In the second workshop, one participant showed a photograph of a beautiful picture that was hand painted by her friend and she recounted a story about her friend's negative educational experience as a young person. Mary told this story with such sadness; she was very upset to hear of her friends' experience at school and frustrated that her artistic talents were not recognized at school.



Figure 14: Photograph of hand painted picture presented by Mary in Workshop 2.

*Mary, Workshop 2: “You know what happened me at school was when I came out of school’, she said, ‘... I didn’t know if I was turning left or right, because the nun used to kill me because I was left-handed’, ..... she actually said, ‘I didn’t know if I was turning right or left”.*

Ellen felt that the negative school experiences of adults impacted accessing what can be argued to be the most important of life skills, i.e., literacy. She felt that for some adults, the experience they had in school, prevented them from accessing any learning opportunities with any formal learning provider.

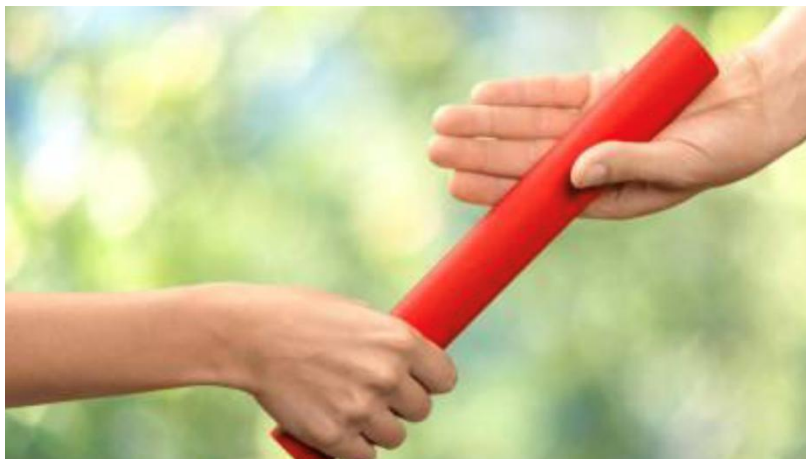


Figure 15: Photograph of a parchment scroll presented by Mary in Workshop 2.

*Ellen, Workshop 2: “There is an awful lot to be said for the people coming in looking for help with their literacy skills, they wouldn’t go in to school. They didn’t want to go in to school.....they’d much prefer to go to, we’ll say the CDP<sup>22</sup>, we would have some*

<sup>22</sup> CDP – Community Development Project

*people up in the library. They had a hang up about schools, they had bad memories about school..."*

Other participants agreed, adding that sometimes the step to avail of learning opportunities can be so difficult that people become immobilized.

*Brendan, Workshop 2: "I suppose if you think about it from a community point of view, if people are working, may have gone to work at a young age, may have poor literacy skills, sometimes going somewhere is not going to happen and people will live with the embarrassment of not knowing or not knowing what to do."*

The impact of the teaching and learning environment was mentioned in a number of workshops. One participant, Ellen, spoke about multiple intelligences on a few occasions. There were general discussions on the impact of an overly academic and exam focused curriculum and the impact that this can have on learners. Because of negative formal educational experiences, the academic curriculum and assessment of programmes of study can be daunting for people. Participants spoke about how the formal exam structure can be very disconcerting for people. Ellen continued to suggest that HEIs need to consider alternative methods of teaching and learning, to engage a much more diverse student body. The current emphasis on exams is off-putting to those who lack confidence in their academic ability.

*Ellen: "So I think even if the third level, [could]...recognize that there's more than one way of proving what you know. People..... would be much more comfortable and they wouldn't be as frightened and they might take things on board... like you know, writing essays and sitting exams. It's a no-no like."*

*Carmel: "Isn't that just the thing – like, if your experience – coming up through secondary school is a bad experience and you don't hit the high grades.....you come out feeling that you're, you know, you're not capable of doing these things. And I think that's what happens to an awful lot of people."*

*Ellen: "There has to be a way because they're not stupid like, they're very bright, very intelligent people in the field that they're interested in, but they may not have the ability or the way of proving it. D'you know?" [Workshop 5]*

### **7.2.2 National Qualification Framework.**

As I outlined earlier, fear and confidence were openly identified in workshop three where one of the participants discussed the importance of these challenges, through a photograph. Brendan claimed that at a national level, within formal education there is an over-emphasis on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). In his photograph below,

he had presented an image that he had drawn where he amended the widely recognized semi-circle fan NFQ diagram, into a circle. The top half of the semi-circle presented the NFQ levels 1-10. In the bottom part of the semi-circle he presented hopes, fears and challenges as part of the foundational needs that must be addressed before we can tackle the formal education steps.



Figure 16: Proposed new framework presented by Brendan in Workshop 3.

*Brendan, Workshop 3: "I just thought of that because everybody is kind of guided by QQI level one, QQI level two and all the way up to the higher levels. But where are the levels that you can measure yourself within community education. And it starts off with more of the hopes and fears and challenges, now you know the effort really starts down below"*

Mary agreed with and supported Brendan's revised framework. She relayed a story where she had availed of a community education programme that gave her the courage to go back into college as an adult learner.

*Mary, Workshop 3: "I would agree with all of the sentiments that Brendan has expressed in the community ed .... [Education] was more accessible to me, [being] an early school leaver, to go back to college as an adult, because of the support that myself and the other 12 and 14 of us did get from [Community CDP] at the time. But it was because of someone who believed as well in us, I mean we'll say, the ages were from 35 right up to 70 and without somebody giving us a bit of confidence,*

*giving us a bit of encouragement, you know, we wouldn't have the fear when we went to the first night and thinking 'jeez, how do we do this?'".*

In the final workshop, this theme did not diminish. The intention of this workshop was initially focused on review and analysis, but discussions around fear, lack of confidence and courage all emerged again.

In relation to community access to education at third level and educational opportunities at this level, Ellen said;

*Ellen, Workshop 5: "So I think people are achieving, Mary.... they probably got lots of encouragement along the way, and that's what's needed as well. Like I said, people start off doing basic courses in the community. But there's a lot of self-doubt there, they don't think that they be able for the you know, academic stuff or anything higher, d'you know what I mean? And it's for them to realize that there is...what's out there, let them know, what's out there and then if they felt that you know, if they got the right encouragement and that's from the third level as well, you know. It's not too bad, you know, you will be able to manage. You know, that's the first thing we tell them, because they know we're on their side, you know that kind of a way. They're scared Deirdre, a lot of them are scared to go forward".*

### **7.2.3 Interest in learning.**

It was suggested by most participants that learning is made easier if you are interested in the subject area. Ellen shared how she got involved in community mentoring, provided through the PATH funded initiative. Interestingly this participant, who has many years' experience of informal community mentoring, spoke about the fear that she felt prior to taking up her place. Once she overcame this initial nervousness, she really enjoyed the course as it was focused on what she is interested in and passionate about. She was comfortable with the subject area and found the learning to be enjoyable and of interest.

*Ellen, Workshop 3: "I actually got my place, ... I was as nervous as a kitten.... even applying for it. Because it's so long since I actually did anything like that, you know..... ... I have to say I've been very excited about it. Do you know, that's because I was comfortable with it."*

She continued to develop this point about being comfortable with learning. She spoke about learners having to be interested in what they are studying.

*Ellen, Workshop 3: "That is key to it as well....., you need to have a certain amount of courage to take on something, or you can't be, to the point where it turns you off and it's not accessible. You're much more open to the learning once you're*

*comfortable...And interested in it, because like that, that's what I used to always say to other tutors was, find out what the learner is interested in and work around it. There's no point in working with somebody, even if they're brushing up on their reading skills, and if you have a man that comes in there, we'll say and he is mad into gardening, you might try and source a book about gardening, about plants, and things like that. Why would you bring in a book about we'll say golf or maybe soccer, that they mightn't be interested in. But it's the same with children though if they're interested in whatever they're at, they'll blossom in it, because they have an interest in it. It's to find their strengths and recognise what their interests are in, and work on that."*

#### **7.2.4 Community education in addressing fear.**

There was considerable interest in the learning being appropriate to the needs of the learner and these learning opportunities being non-threatening and accessible. The importance of the role of the Community Development Project in supporting people in the community overcome confidence issues, in building self-esteem, in allowing people to take a step that is comfortable and appropriate to their needs, was given prominence by all community participants throughout the workshops. The step-by-step learning opportunities within the community were identified as being very significant in allowing learners an opportunity to get involved and progress their learning journeys.

*Lilly, Workshop 1: "I was doing little bitty courses all the way through with the kids in school, that was my first introduction back to learning. I actually found the flyer up in the kids school for the course that I went back to and then as soon as I went in there, .... and I started in [the local FE College]. And I started another course in the CDP as well and what did I do? ECDL<sup>23</sup>? I can't even think, so I started doing more courses down there then and it went on from there and I suppose it was maybe five years ago now at this stage. And since then, I've gone out and done a whole kind of different community learning in different courses and that down through the years".*

Mary agreed, and used an abstract picture of steppingstones to explain how peoples' educational journeys commence. She also reflected on the importance of the community CDP in facilitating this first step and she remarked on the importance of the person at the front desk of the CDP in assisting people make this first step (in the process praising Lilly for the role she played when working at the front desk).

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<sup>23</sup> ECDL – European Computer Driving License

*Mary, Workshop 1: "But it was steppingstones.... we had our first meeting about what's the role of the person at the desk, and I can still remember the role of the person at the desk was that whoever came in the door, it was their first step, it could be their first [step] to doing something in their life. That meant it would move them forward and it was never to be forgotten. And Lilly I must say, you did it very well".*

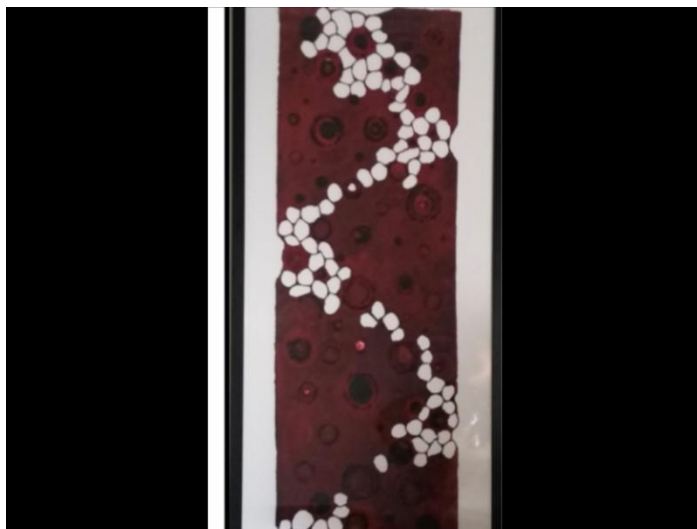


Figure 17: Stepping stones presented by Mary in Workshop 1.

Ellen, who had a role as a literacy tutor in her community previously, spoke about the significance of the CDP and community education.

*Ellen, Workshop 2: "it's a fantastic pathway to maybe keep going once the confidence is built, so you can go further - if you want to. You know it's a feeling of building peoples' confidence. It helps to build peoples' confidence and .....I used to say that was 70% of my job - you know the persons confidence to allow themselves.... to give people confidence to go further or to do whatever they want to do it. An awful lot of it is lack of that, a lack of confidence and lack of self-esteem and that's one thing that would be built up for you in the community."*

As she spoke, she became very passionate about the power of community education. She expressed that people's feelings of self-doubt, inadequacy and lack of confidence can be a real barrier to education and results in opportunities not being realised.

*Ellen, Workshop 2: "Community education saves lives ..... It really does and I don't say that lightly. I really think that's such a massive thing for people, is that one initial barrier can throw somebody off - so that initial thing of I can't afford that, I can't go there, because it's not where we went, it's not how we did, who's going to see me, judge me, whatever, you know this feeling of it being above a person's station. And then when they actually realise that everybody is actually in the same boat - as I often say to myself, I'm really thick, but I'm not stupid."*



During this workshop Ellen spoke about how people, who had negative experiences of education, who she supported through the literacy service, could be self-deprecating and believed that they were not able to learn.

*Ellen, Workshop 2: "I remember people coming into me telling me that they were stupid and I'm telling you it was like a red rag to a bull for me. And I know if you're told often that you're stupid you believe it, as you know. And I used ... to say, I really don't like you using that expression. This might be a woman now who might have reared five children like, they're all going to college and she still thinks you're stupid and I'm saying hold on a second there now, I said 'who brought up your children?'. And I said 'I mean if you were stupid and able to do that, who had them educated, who dragged them around from A to B to all the different things?' Do you know, it used to annoy me like, people believe that in themselves. That's why I'm saying, we have to really instill the value of what they do know..... You have to find out what they're interested in and then bring it down, get it at a level that they are comfortable with and you can build on that..... You know, because of the fear, this hang up that they are going to be thrown in at the deep end. How will I be able to cope, I won't get to cope. But take a couple of steps. Build on a good solid foundation of where they're comfortable and you can do anything really."*

This opinion was echoed in the following workshop with one participant claiming that without community support, the fear factor resulting from poor educational encounters is substantial.

*Mary, Workshop 3: "Without the support in the community you'd never do it ...the fear is bigger according to however you left school"*

Some of the participants spoke about fear in a contextual way. Very often the dialogue topic wasn't focused on fear, per se, but it was part of the background to the experiences that were presented, the backdrop for many of the stories that were told. Fear and lack of confidence was also brought up by the participants when they spoke about support and guidance that they received through their learning journeys. Two participants shared how they received support from a member of their community and the difference this made in helping them overcome this lack of self-esteem, which was holding them back. People within the community were held in a position of trust. Their advice and guidance were acknowledged and accepted.

*Ellen, Workshop 1: "I only applied for it because, well [Margaret] encouraged me to go for it, you know. I used to go to lots of meetings and things about .. the literacy, but like I had been at home for the guts of 20 years and it was my first time actually*

*going back out to work. If somebody had told me two years previous to that, that you were going to end up with a full-time job, with your wages and a job that I actually loved, I wouldn't have believed it like."*

Lilly spoke about how she was encouraged by Mary to participate in a felting class. She shared how her initial feeling was one of dread, not wanting to be exposed. But because of the support of Mary, she took the first step into learning.

*Lilly, Workshop 2: "You were doing the felting class in the CDP for a few weeks and then you were doing another one, and I think it was [Patricia] asked me, did I want to do it. My reaction first was 'God I'd never be able to do that, I'm not going up there, with all them making a fool of myself doing all this with them', because they just had a look at it and they you know, well that's what I did with them and I was like blown away. I don't like making a fool of myself in front of all these brilliant people...., but I did it and I was kind of grateful to the girls for giving me the opportunity."*



Figure 18: Photograph of felting presented by Lilly in Workshop 2.

This participants' experience of the felting class was also discussed in Workshop Four. Lilly was asked by Ellen about her experience. Once again, Lilly spoke about her initial fears and concerns but acknowledged the communities support and encouragement in allowing her succeed.

*Ellen: "Do you know Lilly could I ask you, do you know when you came in above working and you did some of the courses with us, how did you feel about them? Doing the felting, doing the different courses? How did you find that very first time, coming in doing crafting with the group, how did you find that?"*

*Lilly: "Well when you said it to me first - will you excuse my language but I nearly sh\*t myself.... my first reaction is when anyone asks me to do anything like this, I say, 'and*

*what day of the week is that now', 'who is going to mind the kids', or do you know, or 'what's on?'. And then when I thought about it, I was like.... then I got past that hurdle, I can't go up there with all of them and do that - are they mad? Am I mad to even think this? ....But no, I did it and I did one or two things with you, didn't I? And I loved that actually, I enjoyed it. And if you give me instructions, I'm fine, but don't ask me to come up with an idea of how to do any kind of an art thing. But sure you all helped me along ..... everyone pulled me through it and I really enjoyed it, [it] was fabulous and if I hadn't been there in the CDP, I would never have had that, do you know what I mean, like I wouldn't have known the extent of all that you do with the art in the community. No, sure it was fabulous". [Workshop 4]*

Similarly, Carmel spoke about how support and guidance within the Community Development Project led to her availing of learning opportunities, and the positive outcome of this.

*Carmel, Workshop 2: "I was encouraged on to do loads of different courses and things so again I suppose it was a confidence thing as well and then the opportunity arose and it kind of gives you a chance to bloom really".*

In later workshops, other participants also referenced how the desire to learn was there in the background but taking that first step was very difficult. For some people this first step can take years to take, as can be evidenced from this comment below.

*Carmel, Workshop 4: "Even for myself, when I went back to the education course, I think I would've seen that on the City Hall [Adult Education Exhibition<sup>24</sup>] and I might have been thinking about that for a couple of years before I actually had the courage to actually go and do it.....So if you're interested, it comes in, and you can pick something out and do it for a couple of months, you don't have to do the whole year and whatever. Everything kind of builds on top of everything else, like a Lego house. Even start small, even if you start small with doing something that's of interest to you, whatever that is. If you really build on that then."*

All of the participants spoke very positively and passionately about community education and the opportunities for learning within the community. There was unanimous agreement that learning opportunities that are delivered within the community can allow for learner centered approaches and allow people to build self-confidence and courage to progress with their learning journey. This extract below is from one participant who strongly believes in the possibilities provided by community education.

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<sup>24</sup> Cork Adult Education Exhibition was an annual event held in the city to encourage adult learners to retrain, upskill, avail of learning opportunities. It was organized by the Cork City VEC and Cork City Council.

*Ellen, Workshop 2: "I think it's a bit of the informality about it [community education], you know, where somebody can just explain something from one's life experiences. That's Education. Do you know, that's learning ..... encouragement is a huge thing because people feel, if they, for some reason or another, that they wouldn't be able to keep up with the class, you know, because they might not understand the lingo or they might be just too self-conscious or whatever. But coming into community setting, like that edge isn't there....I think it's important that we are learner centred and we go with the students own pace and things like that and you're allowed to do that through community education. You're allowed to do that, it's comfortable doing it, which can make a huge difference to the person if they constantly feel they're under pressure to perform. Or that they have to do A, B and C to get to receive their goal. It's just that I think the whole method is different and it taps into the softer skills a bit more I think, do you know. I'm not against formal education by any means don't get me wrong but, I just do think it's a fantastic pathway - we spoke about that last week it's a fantastic pathway to maybe keep going once the confidence is built so you can go further - if you want to. If you want to. You know it's a feeling of building people's confidence."*

Confidence is built up by being involved in community settings. People can commence their learning with non-threatening and accessible classes that can lead on to more advanced learning opportunities.

*Ellen, Workshop 3: "By being involved in the community education, you're able to tap into other skills you know what I mean. ....when you see what the ladies with the crochet did on computers, and things like that. It's you know, it's fantastic like, and have those things recognised, and then when your confidence is built up, in those areas you know you might think about going forward, and even become a teacher".*

#### **7.2.5 A safe environment.**

There was a consensus that the community offers a sense of security for people who wish to avail of learning opportunities. There is a safety net for people who are struggling with confidence and who have not the courage to take a learning journey on their own.

*Lilly, Workshop 2: "I was like blown away, I don't like making a fool of myself in front of all these brilliant people, but I did it and I was kind of grateful to the girls for giving me the opportunity because..... if I hadn't been in there, I wouldn't ever have done... and that was another learning curve for me as well you know."*

The participants believed that the community recognizes the learning needs of individuals and community. One participant shared how she had been advised to join a

course that was running in the community. She explained that it was others in the community who saw this as being an opportunity for her and admitted that she wouldn't have been aware of that herself. She also spoke about passing on this knowledge to others in the community. The individual and the community benefit from this learning experience.

*Lilly, Workshop 2: "It's kind of geared towards 18 to 35-year-olds to kind of get them in a healthy place, healthy mind, kind of from work and life, I suppose but I did it then to facilitate it, bring it back to the community and pass on the knowledge that I learnt so I think that you know being over in the CDP and being in the community, the community recognises learning needs in different people, I suppose. .... I couldn't tell you what my learning needs are, but other people saw that. Yeah, you going to this and this will be good for you to get knowledge and pass on the knowledge and I think that all came from the community side of it".*

The community setting offers a safe, confidential, encouraging and non-judgmental space for people to take the first step into learning. The participants throughout all the workshops espoused the benefits of the community. In the extract below, the dialogue shared between the group, highlights an example of how this confidential space allowed for women to be engaged in a literacy programme.

*Ellen, Workshop 2: "It was brilliant having my base [literacy tutor] in the CDP because mothers coming to the creche now, do you know, they might see something up on the wall or Carmel might cop on that there was a need there and she might say 'you know there's classes going on down the hall there that you might be interested in it', you know.....and we always made very sure that if anybody came in - confidentiality was huge part of it and I think it's with most areas and especially with literacy it was huge thing ..... I mean I was tutor training for 10-12 years like so you know, I was very conscious of it - the value of the community aspect was enormous".*

There was strong agreement to this input, with Mary adding to the discussion.

*Mary: "Ellen, .....when we started the crochet in the CDP there were a lot of people who would've been saying to us, ..... I can't read a pattern, I can do it if you show me....We said we'll invite [Margaret, literacy tutor] in ... and we said 'you know Margaret, some of us when we came here first we had to go get help with this, that and the other ..... And the number of people who went [to the literacy class] would've told us that they went there ... to get support. So, you can see, community is where it's happening Deirdre.*

*Ellen: "I was a Tutor that time now Mary, as you know, and I had a group of I'd say it was about 12 or 13 and ....that time t'was the FETAC level three communications and it was brilliant and they were all women that I knew coming in and they all knew*

*each other. But the buzz that used to be at the class was fantastic. Because of the stigma was broken, the stigma of having to face up to your difficulties, because they had been introduced to it in such a nice way and they came together as a group ..... we took our time doing it, we did it may be over two years, but t'was brilliant like, in the sense of achievement...They were thrilled with themselves”.*

### **7.3 The importance of community**

Outside of the benefit of addressing low confidence levels in availing of educational opportunities, the role of the community and community education was seen as having much wider positive impacts on learning. Every participant extolled the virtues of the Community Development Project and spoke highly about the role that the CDP plays in providing opportunities for learning and supporting people through their learning journey. From the discussions, it became obvious that each participant was personally touched by being involved in their community.

#### **7.3.1 Wider benefits of community learning.**

There was agreement that community education not only provides opportunities for engagement in learning, but also provides other wide-ranging benefits such as making friends, making connections in the community and opening opportunities into new experiences. In this extract below, the community went further in reaching out to connect with this participant and support and encourage her to proceed with her learning.



Figure 19: Photograph of crochet blanket presented by Carmel in Workshop 1.

*Carmel, Workshop 1: "... I suppose learning to crochet and [joining] Mary's group in the crochet class opened a huge door for me, opened a door of creativity, of community, of making friends, of making connections, that I never would've had if I hadn't joined the class. I suppose I started out because they had reached out, and had helped my mum, and I just went along to support my mum and they brought me in and taught me to crochet. There was fierce encouragement through the class, to go on for all different kinds of education".*

One of the benefits suggested was the transformative power of community education and community learning. Carmel went further to claim that the experience of being involved in community learning changed her life completely.

*Carmel, Workshop 1: "I suppose before I had been involved in the crochet class, I had gone to [the local FE College] and I did three years there first, I had done the 'Access to Education', and then I did the business with the language over two years, and I suppose it's just that, at the time the kids were young enough and they were settled in primary school, and then I had time on my hands, and it allowed me the freedom to join the crochet class. As I say that just opened up a huge amount of creativity. It, I don't know, it changed my life completely. It changed the direction of my life."*

All participants spoke positively about the support within the CDP stressing how the learning opportunities they wished to avail of were always affordable, run at a suitable time and local. Carmel, in Workshop Two, presented a photo depicting a deer surrounded by other deer. This participant felt supported.

*Carmel, Workshop 2: "One of the things around the CDP is that they're very supportive about making things affordable, in as much as possible. So that again is another benefit to running classes or attending classes in the CDP that they might run. They're non-profit...the classes are affordable to attend..... And they are usually run at a time that's suitable that you can make time to make the classes."*

There is an ethos of learning within the CDP that ensures learning is not strained or pressurized. It is enjoyable and relevant. This ethos allows for people in the community to become aware of learning opportunities, to engage with learning and to push themselves beyond what they thought they were capable of.

*Lilly, Workshop 2: "It's people that are there constantly learning something new as well and updating their knowledge.... And that was a big eye-opener to me like.... Like I'm after doing more in the past two years than I've done say most of my life. Since I went over there, I'm after doing things that I would never have gone near, would never have thought I would've done. But everyone over there is constantly ticking over doing some kind of a learning thing. I don't know, the last time....I didn't even*

*realise I was learning, ....obviously I knew I was doing a course, but you know, you don't think of it, it's not learning as such like".*

Mary who alluded to the health benefits of being connected in the fourth workshop, returned to this again in the final workshop. She believed that community education at any stage in your life has positive health impacts, mentally and physically. By being involved in learning within your community, you are remaining connected and aware.

*Mary, Workshop 5: "...I always felt that community education was never valued, wasn't valued for what it does. But I think maybe in the times we're in, with the lockdown and the pandemic and the whole thing now, is that education and learning at any time of your life is good for your mental health, your physical health, your well-being, like you're connected with your community, you're connected with what's happening around you, and that has to be good".*

This participant later in the workshop returned to the health impacts, this time alluding to mental health benefits, stating,

*Mary, Workshop 5: "If you're learning and if you're engaged, you're happier in yourself, you wouldn't have the mental health and depression and anxiety, ... you know".*

Ellen, who had been involved in the Learning Neighbourhood (LN) initiative, spoke very positively about the opportunity to be engaged with other Learning Neighbourhoods in Cork. The Learning Neighbourhood initiative aims through agency collaboration, to provide inclusive and diverse learning and educational opportunities for people within their own localities. She spoke glowingly about the value and benefit of this initiative in highlighting opportunities for community education.

*Ellen, Workshop 2: "I was involved in the learning neighbourhoods [name of LN],... about four years ago we had we teamed up with ... [another LN in Cork] at the time. It was brilliant, that was a brilliant project because I remember being above in the community centre to see that poster you know – 'how to build a learning neighbourhood'. They had people from all over the parish, all over the community - there were school children there, there was people from the ICA<sup>25</sup>. Mary, there were people from the secondary school, from all the different projects. And I just remember there was one there and they're asking like, 'How do you learn?' and then there was this little young fella next to me and he said 'listen to your mam', {all laugh} you know..... it kind of opened up people's minds, do you know, this was really*

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<sup>25</sup> ICA – Irish Countrywomen's Association



*pure neighbourhood community project and it really gave people food for thought. But they all interacted and reacted, d’you know, it was fantastic. .... you know .... until you get involved in the community, you really don’t realise the value of what’s there, do you know?”*

### **7.3.2 Invaluable connections.**

The participants felt that the information and the networks within the community are invaluable. It was felt that by having these connections that people are guided and supported through their learning interests.

*Carmel: “Just want to make the remark that the one thing about the CDP is that it’s so connected within the community. Going there in any shape or form gives you more information about the community than what you, if you weren’t connected in the community you’d never under...would never know .... It’s amazing. It’s unquantifiable really the amount of good and the way it spreads the information.”*

*Deirdre: “Absolutely”*

*Lilly: “And I think as well that you could go over looking to know about something and you might get a thought about something else and somebody would say I know the exact person you need to contact about that, you know, there’s always somebody who knows somebody, who’ll help you no matter what you want. And I think that’s a very community-based type of a thing.” [Workshop 2]*

The networks, the connections, the interactions were all mentioned as being benefits of community learning and education. Participants believed that these connections facilitated learning opportunities for people.



Figure 20: Photograph presented by Brendan in Workshop 2.

*Brendan, Workshop 2: "... it's about everybody fermenting different ideas and sharing them and adding to that whole mixed up jumble of what is learning and the biggest thing I think of learning in the community, is signposting. Be it from the library to a development project, to somebody you know within your community. It's all about that, it's about somebody in your community asking or seeking advice. I think that's why it's so important to have the likes of the community projects and for people to be more aware of what's going on so that they can get the support and advice".*

Community connections can benefit the well-being of individuals within the community. This extract below highlights how the CDP allowed for support and encouragement to be given to someone who was in a difficult place emotionally.

*Mary, Workshop 2: ".....she was over in the [primary school] and she was in a very low place, and one of the girls that was there was coming over to do the crochet class, ....in the community centre. And she said, look come over with me, and sit down in the class, so she came in to the crochet. She'd no intention of crochet. And we were chatting and whatever, and I said to her, 'it's great to see you, you're grand, but do you know there's loads of stuff down in [the local FE College] as well, you can come here, but you can go down there'. When she went down to [the local FE College], saw what they had ..... she loves learning."*

The participants felt that while community settings offer so many benefits, people can sometimes be oblivious to the learning opportunities within communities. People are not necessarily exposed to the information or the opportunities if they are not connected through schools or formal educational and community settings. This can be a missed opportunity for people within the community. The participants believed that being involved with the community is essential to being aware.

*Lilly, Workshop 4: "...you might not necessarily know about all these things that are there. I know I was talking to somebody recently about the lifelong learning festival and they had never heard of it and like my eldest daughter she's going on 16 now next month, [that's] how long [the] lifelong learning [Festival is] going on. She was in the creche for it first and it continued with schools and like if you don't have somebody in schools, or in the creches and they always partook in it every year for the past 16 years,.....you don't know these things are on. There's a lot of things going on but I don't think people realise the extent of them in the community. If you're not involved in the community, and I think it's the same in the universities, there is an awful lot of night courses there that people could do that are .... affordable, that are deducted, that are free, that are subsidised in some way and I think it's about getting that message out there to people that these things are there, and I don't know what*

*is it. Is it through radio or poster?..... That there's a lot of people don't know that that these things are there, you know? It's by pure chance that I saw the flyer for the course that I did in the school, and then if you're not in the school, you know, if you don't have someone in the school..."*

She continued to explain that she believed that the educational institutions are providing a wide variety of course offerings but they are going unnoticed by people in the community. Two other participants agreed and suggested that there is a 'disconnect' there.

*Lilly: "I don't think people realise it is there for them because the colleges and universities are supplying the courses, they are putting them on and they're doing them in a wide variety of subjects from art, solicitor to whatever, to computers, whatever - there is fierce variety of adult education. But I think a lot of people don't realise that it's there and that it is accessible to people who can't afford it ..... don't think a lot of people realise that it is there"*

*Mary: "I think ..... the whole thing... that there is a disconnect somewhere.....I think Lilly is dead right. There is the disconnect for those who are disconnected from the community or choose to be, or just aren't connected in any way and hitting them in the places where it's actually in front of them. So, the likes of the GP, you know, there is the stands in the GP waiting rooms and sometimes that can be the moment where you get your lightbulb."*

*Ellen: "I don't know - it's to find a balance somewhere to get it to people you know, to all of them, but I think there is that disconnect between people in the community that are not as involved in the community". [Workshop 4]*



Figure 21: Photographs presented by Lilly in Workshop 4.

The participants were puzzled as to how to best connect with people in the community who aren't aware of learning opportunities. There was genuine interest in understanding how to solve this dilemma. The dialogue was concluded by acknowledging

that for people to engage in learning and education, the easiest way to start that journey is within the community.

Ellen: *"...but you see how do you get the people that need it, to engage with it, you know? We're here now and we know that that they have in their advertising on Facebook and I've heard a couple things on the radio now as well..... because we are interested in it and we'd be kind of listening out for it. But for the people who aren't, we have to try and find a way of engaging with them really you know."*

Brendan: *"There is younger people that you know are getting more disengaged from community, you know? They're more sucked into kind of being insular in their own group be it social media or whatever it is, or they go down the wrong path, once or twice... Say, somebody loses their job in construction and they've never been to school properly, you know, how do they know about the Springboard, do you know? The way they'll find out is by somebody within their circle and how do you infiltrate that, you know?"*

Lilly: *"But it's how..... to create the awareness and let them know that these things are out there and that's why they find it easier to go to the community way rather than the pure academic ways". [Workshop 4]*

### **7.3.3 Experts within the community.**

In the extract below, it's acknowledged that people at times may not have the resilience to proceed but credited the community support and the learning gained from other community members. The community holds the knowledge and there are people in the community who are willing to support and help with this learning. Mary spoke about availing of the expertise of the community first, before going outside for the knowledge if needed.

Mary, Workshop 1: *"...sometimes you give up too soon. And like you know I would've felt myself awful at some things in my life. I mean I left school much earlier than most of my friends, they'd be going on doing things and then, when you meet people that are in the CDP now and you realise there is a body of people who are only ready to do anything for you, who'll teach you anything you want to know and they won't if they can't, they'll find someone and that's how I think it works."*

Ellen expanded on this statement. There was a strong belief that there are people within the community who have vast experience and knowledge but may not have the formal qualifications. Ellen in this instance spoke about the expertise of literacy tutors.

*Ellen, Workshop 1: "...like good tutors from all their years of experience, they mightn't have had the bit of paper so they've never been regarded as teachers. But they were in their own areas they were experts but it was a different way...."*

#### **7.3.4 Community mentoring.**

Earlier we learned that participants spoke about the importance of connection, the sharing of information and the benefits that these have to individuals in the community who wish to avail of learning opportunities. Ellen shared that she had commenced a community mentoring programme, which was organised by the PATH Three initiative. She spoke very positively about this opportunity and also articulated that this programme of study was providing her with a qualification for what she and others in the community are doing already. She also spoke about the benefit of her student peers who were coming from a similar background to her and the learning possibilities that this presented.

This participant returned in a subsequent workshop to say that informal community mentoring has been taking place in the CDP for years. She credited Mary in the group for being this mentor and for doing this role, impacting on people's lives for many years.

*Ellen, Workshop 4: "...when you're taking on that course in the CDP .... it's great to get encouragement and support just to say you can do it, you know, to take that step and that's where the mentoring is going to come in, so it's going to be so important Deirdre and we've been doing it for years. I mean Mary is a typical example of a mentor sitting in the kitchen in the CDP years ago. She'd say 'that would be great for you now, go on now and do that' ..... she was so encouraging anybody, everybody. She'd encourage you the whole way, you know, no matter what you'd be kind of saying.....[There] was another woman remember [Sheila]. [Sheila] was 'you can do it now girl', she was saying. .... she used to be saying to me 'do you know you can do it' and 'don't let that put you off now' and 'you're only a learner'."*

During the workshop another participant spoke about the importance of having a community ambassador or community mentor. The group felt that there is real power in a person from the community advocating for education and promoting learning. This validated the pilot community mentoring programme.

*Carmel: "I think .... nobody [educational organisations] goes into the school early enough. And I think they should nearly go to primary school, before they ever get to secondary school."*

*Mary: "There you are. See, you know, this is the path that you can take."*

Deirdre: *“And who is the best person to deliver that message, is that somebody from the university, or is it somebody within the community? .....Or is it someone like the home-school<sup>26</sup>, who’s the best person to give that message?”*

Mary: *“Say a past pupil, or someone, it’s coming from the horse’s mouth then Deirdre, you know. A past pupil [who] has made that transition. Who can explain it, and they’ve experience of it, and they usually are passionate about it, then if they’re prepared to talk about it. You have no idea how much hope that could give to somebody. Somebody that’s not maybe hugely academic, that there are options open and that there are different paths there, and that just because you don’t make it in one route, that you can go another route. They don’t know about it soon enough almost like community ambassadors, do you know, what I mean - that kind of an idea”. [Workshop 3]*

### **7.3.5 Community neglected.**

The group expressed their frustration at the lack of awareness and appreciation by formal educational providers that they experience at times. The communities work so hard at community education level and there are rewards to be had. Participants believed that being involved in community education and providing support to people within the community can have transformational impacts on people’s lives. These supports are not always found in mainstream education.

Mary, Workshop 5: *“I kind of thought, why would you be bothered – sometimes I’d be thinking ‘why would you bother’ but if you could even just set a seed in someone to.... Yeah, I think it's worth it..... [people] would open up and say ‘I can’t read or write – I can work if you tell me, but I couldn’t be reading’, but eventually when they started coming into the class, like a lot of people would have told us, they went back and they learned, they went to Read Write Now <sup>27</sup>and they were able to read their patterns. .... so, it's all about the backup, the support that's not in mainstream.”*

The group felt that there was very little understanding by the formal educational providers of the transformative potential of community education. Mary, below, was frustrated by one of the participants who felt angry that she needed to justify community education teaching hours for a craft class.

Mary, Workshop 5: *“...even when you're talking about the achievements of we’ll say of arts and crafts, and the CDP's different things they did, but I used to be feeling like a bit defensive trying to have to prove that this was really a good thing. Like, you*

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<sup>26</sup> Home School Liaison Coordinator – Position within DEIS Schools to establish partnerships between parents and schools.

<sup>27</sup> Read Write Now – A free, confidential, adult literacy class within the community

*know, it was, 'yeah, yeah, how can you justify giving hours to a class where they're knitting'. I mean come on, that was what I heard".*

#### **7.4 Further Education and Community Education**

There is a large further education college situated in the Learning Neighbourhood where the participants are from. Three further education colleges (now amalgamated to form the Cork College of FET) are located within easy commuting distance to the neighbourhood. There was discussion of the role and opportunities provided by the further education colleges in all workshops. Participants recognized the value of the further education sector and saw the opportunities that were presented by having a FE College within their community.

##### **7.4.1 Benefits of further education.**

Much of the exchange on further education centered on the opportunity that it presented by allowing for education to be availed of in a step-by-step way, allowing for progression into higher education. This was particularly interesting given existing access links which are focused on partnerships between formal educational providers such as HE and FE. Participants saw great value and opportunity in this. There was also recognition of the significance of the FE college being physically close by.

*Lilly, Workshop 3: "it's so important to have the likes of [name of a local FE College] and [another Local FE College] within reach of communities. You know because it is a very important steppingstone into to the likes of the universities and that".*

This extract below highlights the opportunities provided by taking a step-by-step approach to education and using the further education colleges to progress learning. Carmel shares her experience of studying a 'Back to Education' programme at FE and how it allowed her to excel academically, even though her second level experience was not positive. The significance of 'fear' as a deterrent is addressed as a finding earlier in this chapter and Carmel speaks about how her positive experience at FE, provided her with the courage and confidence to take the next step on her learning journey.



Figure 22: Photograph of qualifications presented by Carmel in Workshop 3.

*Carmel, Workshop 3: "Well I suppose I wouldn't have thought myself very bright at school, I wouldn't have had a very successful endeavour in secondary school, but it surprised me when I went to <local FE College>, when I did the 'Back to Education'. That was for one year and I aced it really and I loved it and it just opened up... I did the business then for two years after, and I went on and I did the City and Guilds in <FE College> for year and a half I think, at night time. I went back again years later to <local FE College> and I did another course there for another 12 months. So, I don't know, it's proved very beneficial to me."*

While Carmel managed to work her way through various programmes of study in different further education colleges, she acknowledges the support of the community in giving her the confidence to do this.

*Carmel, Workshop 3: "I would've started myself in <local FE College>, that was the first step and it came at a time in my life where I was at home minding two boys and they were well established in school but actually I had time to fit in around doing the courses in <local FE College>. It was actually up as a part-time course. I think it was something like five mornings and one afternoon or something like that, at the time when I started doing it. And my husband actually took time off work on the Thursday afternoon, to mind the boys, when I was doing the course. And from there I went on and did the business studies there, through being involved in the crochet class I was encouraged. And I did the City and Guilds course in the [FE College] for the tutor training, again that was someplace new as well and another kind of environment again. I wouldn't have done it without the encouragement from the crochet class from Mary and all the rest of them, and that gave me the courage and the confidence really like, to take the chance on it."*



In dialogues centered on further education, there was a belief that FE provided not only benefits in terms of academic achievement, but also that it provides for confidence building. Mary shared a story about someone who had made a conscious decision to avail of further education, availing of this opportunity, not because they did not gain the points for their chosen HE programme of study, but because they wanted a year to explore the area of study. In the process, this student gained great confidence from her time in FE. Her anecdote suggested that a year spent at further education can not only allow you progress and gain a qualification, but also build confidence.

*Mary, Workshop 3: "One of the teachers I met through the quilting and her daughter did the Leaving Cert and ....she wanted to go to Trinity, and then I said 'how's she getting on?' She said, 'Oh no she's not going until next year, she's going up to [Local FE College] to dip her hands in. You see, those people came from a background that they knew how valuable this was going to be, she had the points for Trinity and held them over.....she was also very good at the fiddle, but she couldn't stand in front of people, but she said that when she went up to Trinity after [name of FE college] she could [perform in] Croke Park."*

#### **7.4.2 FE and the value to the community.**

There was unanimous acknowledgement that the further education colleges provide people with accessible links to formal education. The participants saw the value of having access to further education opportunities within the community but believed that people within the community do not see the educational opportunity presented by their local FE or other formal educational institutions. They felt that it is recognised more widely by people outside of the community.

*Mary, Workshop 1: "Everyone was welcome - so to me CDP was the steppingstone and I used to always think there weren't enough kids from [the local second level school] going down there [to the FE College] and I used to have this conversation with [the Deputy Principal of FE] and he used to say 'one of these days they might make a path from there to here'. Well a lot did, because myself and Carmel and other groups went in and did textile with them..... but I think for such an amazing college, that it's not seen in our community for what it does. It's seen maybe further afield".*

This belief that people from within the community don't see the opportunities presented by FE, emerged again in the third workshop. One of the participants spoke about her experience of studying in the local FE college but she remarked that there were very few local people in her class. Another participant agreed with her and from her perspective

believed that the teachers within the FE colleges didn't see the potential in people from the local community. She believed that the support of the community gave her confidence in going beyond these teacher attitudes.

*Carmel: "But I can say a lot of people that were in my classes weren't from [the local area]. There was very few people from [here]."*

*Mary: "I think Carmel, I have to agree there. I couldn't understand why more people in [the local area] weren't seeing what was available. Or used to get into a passion over like, I could see what was up there, and see the supports we got there when we did go in. Same can be said about [another FE College in Cork]. But a couple of years ago, I had met two of the teachers, at the beginning, they were looking at us like as if, what are you doing, they were doing what people might have thought was, 'oh my God', they'd think locals – 'what would they have to offer us', but they weren't long finding out. But I mean unfortunately if you didn't have the community behind you.... you couldn't go back there again". [Workshop 3]*

Participants spoke about how the strong reputation of the local FE college is acknowledged in the wider region. People from far afield recognize what the [local FE college] has to offer. This extract below relates to a conversation about someone from Kerry whose two daughters had studied in the local FE college in Cork. There was an awareness and recognition of the opportunities that this FE college provides. The participant shared how these two students had achieved success in their chosen field, having commenced their studies in this FE college.

*Mary, Workshop 3: "They had come up from Kenmare to do that year and I said to the mother, 'why would you be sending them all the way there', and she said there is no woman in Kerry that wouldn't send their child to the best place that's there for them..... Now one has big job in the Arts in Dublin and one of the other girls is writing a book and a PhD in Australia".*



Figure 23: Photographs presented by Carmel in Workshop 3.

All five participants had experienced further education and spoke of the benefits that it provided them personally. They were truly baffled by how the further education sector is not more widely acknowledged and valued within their community. There were anecdotes provided by participants highlighting the merits of FE in providing opportunities for progression into HE.

*Mary, Workshop 4: "We know one lady in our class, both her daughters are artists filmmakers, whatever they did, the year they came out without enough points [from the Leaving Cert]. Spent a year in [local FE college] and they always say it, when they have finished the year in [the FE College], they got offered the four colleges in Ireland. And I know a young girl who went there two years ago and that NCAD [National College of Art and Design], Limerick, Galway, they're amazing. But what's happening now is that there are people hearing about it from up as far as Dundalk and coming down here and while it is becoming better known, most of people that I met there- one was from Dublin, one was from Kenmare, the other two girls were from <the local area> and they did amazingly... but what is it, that it never got the proper recognition. I really don't know because we saw what we learned there".*

All five participants had experienced further education and all could see the value and opportunities that FE provide. In the fourth workshop, they reflected on how they were the 'converted' but were puzzled as to how to promote the opportunities that FE can

provide to people in the community. The participants puzzled how to connect people within the community with the educational opportunities in the local further education colleges?

*Carmel, Workshop 4: "... we were the actual converted talking to you because we had been through it and experienced it but a lot of people aren't there yet and it's how do you get them to take that step".*

#### **7.4.3 Value, status and prestige.**

In the third workshop the participants got very animated about status and value placed on further education (FE). Participants suggested that there was more value and status attached to studying at higher education rather than further education. There was a suggestion that people attended the FE colleges because they didn't achieve academically, they didn't achieve the necessary points for higher educational institutions. Mary did not understand why there was a lesser value placed on FE, emphasizing the specialist and practical programmes of study within the FE colleges and how these are very different to more theoretically focused programmes of study in HE.

*Mary, Workshop 3: "Like if they weren't going to UCC or the Regional [MTU – formerly the Regional Technical College] or whatever, there wasn't the same value put on it, like. Lots of people went to [the local FE College], or we say [another Cork FE College], because they mightn't have had the points to go to college or to CIT. And then you think of the range of subjects that they did there.....like the arts and you know the ceramics, and all this kind of stuff. The Physical Ed. You weren't getting those in the colleges anyway.....You did have the business studies and things like that. Or [they] used to have furniture making and they used to have carpentry and they used to have horticulture, and things like that, but you wouldn't get them in the other colleges, you see, they were more academic".*

Brendan picked up on this and shared how he felt 'embarrassed' to say that he studied at further education at that time. He did suggest that this attitude is beginning to change now but that a lesser value is still perceived.

*Brendan: "Yeah I went to a PLC over 20 years ago. I wouldn't have gone to college. No, I wouldn't, not a hope and I think even saying you into a PLC, you are nearly embarrassed about saying that because it meant you didn't get the points".*

*Deirdre: "Do you think it's changed a bit now?"*

Brendan: *"I think in some ways they kind of proved themselves, what they offer, I suppose, overtime, they've actually proved themselves to be as good as they are. It wouldn't be full of glory to be going to them."* [Workshop 3]

A little later in the workshop Brendan offered further reflection in relation to his time in FE. Interestingly, while saying that he was almost ashamed of having to take the FE route, he is aware of the benefit of the year spent in college.

*Brendan, Workshop 3: "I think about my own experience of education, in doing a PLC, I'd never say to anybody that I did a PLC course. I don't know why - it would be something that you would almost be ashamed of, that you had to go that route, but I think they're getting a lot better if you look at [local FE college]. It's becoming very much... they're marketing themselves better. Their logo is nice. Feeling that you're walking into a place where you're going to be encouraged. And then it comes back to the reason why all those people are successful. It's because that year that they had there, set them up."*

Carmel shared her experience of studying within the local FE College. Her personal experience of studying at FE was very positive and she could not understand how the opportunities within the college were not more recognized in Cork. She mentioned how she did not see the value in it until she went there. On reflection and following the discussion with participants she believed that the FE College does not have the prestige like other educational institutions.

*Carmel, Workshop 3: "I didn't see the value of it, I suppose. Yeah, I always thought it was just amazing up there and like the people that we have, encourage you to go, and got the access to go to UCC and up to CIT, after they've all done amazingly well, with what they learnt above. But I just, whatever it was, it was kind of, it was kind of missing the publicity and the profile, or I just think there was something missing. But they weren't showing the true picture of what you can do above there. It didn't have the prestige".*

Lilly agreed and the conversation continued. There was a suggestion by one of the participants that CIT at one point also struggled to gain that recognition and prestige and referred to CIT as not being 'a real college'.

*Lilly: "Status? Yeah. They weren't offering diplomas and they weren't offering degrees. If you were being encouraged at all, you'll always be encouraged to, .... if they thought you had the potential ... go to college and get your degree get that under your belt, or get your diploma, and whatever...But you see the prestige wasn't in the PLCs, because you couldn't actually get those degrees, and things in the*

*colleges. You could move on from there and get it, but you still have to go up to UCC. There was a time when they didn't have the prestige either out in CIT, Deirdre".*

*Deirdre: "Yeah, oh yeah. That was a big thing for the RTC at the time. The prestige and status, we weren't at the races at all."*

*Mary: "And I suppose parents with their children, and everybody wants the best for their children, they do, but it was the 'Tech' like. If you want to do a course in [name of two FE Colleges] but if they had the ability you would encourage them to go to UCC or CIT, do you know what I mean. Unless it was a specialised subject, that they couldn't get out in other colleges, do you know....."*

*Ellen: "...But up to a few years ago Mary, that was still the way it was looked at. It's still that way it is a bit. The prestige was missing Mary - the prestige. Or people's ideas about what it had to offer it, didn't have the same value as what you would get in the University, or whatever." [Workshop 3]*

The dialogue centred on there being a hierarchy of formal educational providers, with universities having the most prestige and status. Even though the participants spoke about the merits and benefits of FE, they believed that there is a perception that programmes of study at FE are of lesser importance. They did accept that there is a change in attitude towards further education in recent years, but concluded that if someone had the 'ability' to study at university, they would be encouraged to take this route.

#### **7.4.4 The impact of recent FE policy and structural changes.**

Throughout the dialogues there were suggestions that the policy and focus of the further education colleges had altered in recent years. There was a sense that the FE colleges were losing their specializations and moving to more generic, 'academic' offerings. Mary spoke about a collaboration that existed between the community CDP and the local educational providers, including at one time, the FE college. She referred to a change in policy that resulted in the link being broken. This was substantiated by Carmel who suggested that the focus became more 'academic' and choices had become constrained.

*Mary: "Things changed. It was all going great. Then all of a sudden..... We still continued ..... into the school, but the link with [the local FE College] – the policy – that's what it is"*

*Carmel: "There was about 10 years between when I went first and when I went the second time. And when I finished the second time, anything outside of the art classes and the printing, were gone, the textile side of it - they moved away from that and it was all more geared towards academic". [Workshop 5]*

A discussion then ensued about the structural change from the Vocational Educational Committees to the Education and Training Boards and also the amalgamation between the City and County ETBs. Participants felt that this move resulted in a change in policy that impacted negatively on community links and on course offerings. There was a sense that there was a growing focus on institutional imperatives, such as efficiencies and accreditation which impacted on communities.

*Ellen, Workshop 5: "We had the old VEC, the Cork City VEC, then they changed it, they amalgamated with the county and the city. And there's always a bit of competition there and then there was the one. Then it changed to the ETB, so that's when the policy started changing. So, we were in the literacy class stage and we were told that they were trying to get rid of the one-to-one tuition and I said 'over my dead body', you know. But what they wanted was people to be in groups. And then the groups had to have accreditation, they had to be doing FETAC or QQI - all the policy started changing but .... their own structures changed so much over a short period of years like".*

In the final workshop, following four weeks of reflection and discussion on community learning and education, the group articulated a change that occurred within the local further education college. The group spoke about how the relationship and the collaboration with the college was at one point very strong, there was positive initiatives in place, but that something changed. The group articulated this as a change in policy, where the focus was no longer on people. This extract followed a discussion regarding the ending of support for a community initiative by the local FE college.

*Mary: "...But then all of a sudden, as it was getting, as it was getting really good, it began to fade away – it kind of, you know what I mean, it kind of....."*

*Carmel: "There was a change of policy there".*

*Mary: "Yeah, there you are".*

*Carmel: "and the focus is much more than..."*

*Brendan: "People"*

*Mary: "People, Brendan, yeah. I'm think that might be because things changed. It was all going great. Then all of a sudden....". [Workshop 5]*

Participants felt there was a change of emphasis and change of policy at ETB level, with a move towards new managerialism, resulting in a focus on accountability and strong focus on accreditation. There was a belief that this focus impacted detrimentally on community education.

*Ellen, Workshop 5: “this is my own personal opinion ..... when it changed to the ETB ....it was getting, as you said, more academic and they were looking for [certification]..... you know and that was blatant like – that’s when they kind of lost the community education things. There was no kind of certification, you know, and what they wanted was all accountability. They had to have something to show for the funding that they were putting into it. And how were they showing it? By people getting accreditation and getting certs”*

### **7.5 HEIs Engagement with ‘The Poor Relations’**

HEIs collaborate with many stakeholders for many purposes. In the previous chapter, access participants spoke about the formal links with DEIS Schools, the further education colleges and other universities. National policy and funding lead HEIs in particular directions. One of the most recent initiatives launched by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science is a joint initiative between the National Tertiary Office, SOLAS and the HEA. This initiative formalizes progression opportunities for students who commence their degree in FE and who complete it in HE, claiming that it is the single biggest transformation to education access in many years (HEA). While links and collaborations with formal educational providers are being promoted through national policy, the discussions with the community participants on their experience of HEI collaboration was very different.

All the participants shared their learning journeys and their experience of community education. One person in the group, who had been involved in community education for several years, spoke about how proud she was to hear of the groups’ experience of learning within the community. She was disappointed that the HEIs in Cork didn’t see the possibilities from and the benefits of community education.

*Mary, Workshop 2: “..... I would think, the likes of UCC and the likes of the MTU, they really do not see the gold that’s in the community.”*



There was dialogue within workshops about how accessible the higher educational institutions in Cork were. There was mixed experience of this, and the group presented examples of initiatives where the HEIs welcomed communities onto their campus and equally presented examples of where this wasn't the situation. In the example below, one of the participants shares her experience of a programme which left young people in the community interested and excited by their learning experience in UCC. On this occasion, she presented two photographs. The first was of a bunch of children with their hands in the air asking questions. The second was a picture of a building in a HEI.

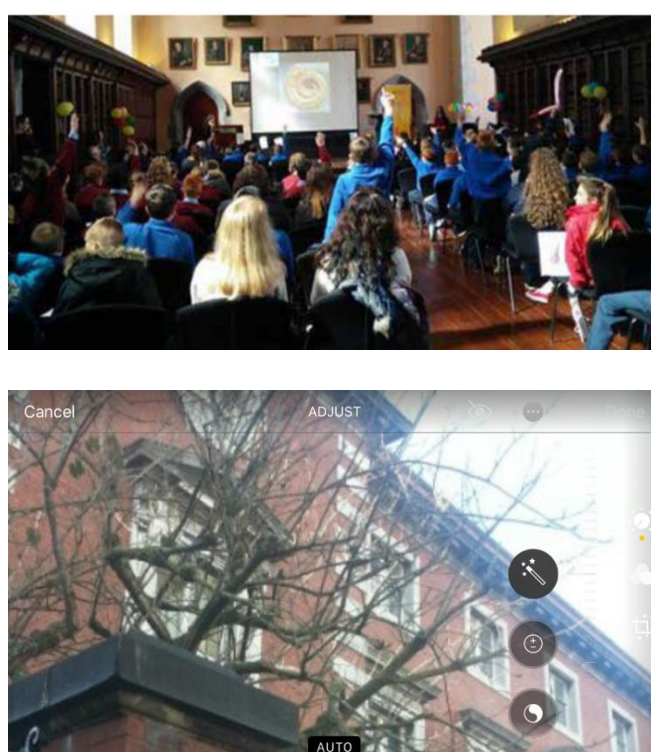


Figure 24: Photographs presented by Mary in Workshop 4.

*Mary, Workshop 4: “the (first) picture here is the kids up in UCC at an open day for kids and all you can see the backs of them, but they’re animated asking questions about science or whatever. So it shows you the difference of like the kids learning....getting the experience of going up there walking in there and feeling ‘God I’ve been in there’. And then (the second photo) I’m coming onto the building which is the [name of HEI] which ... I’d say I’d get into the White House quicker”.*

She communicated the different experiences that her community had with the two HEIs. The benefits to opening the doors of the university and welcoming people on campus were evident in the first photo. The children were enjoying themselves and she explained

that they could see themselves becoming part of the university community. She spoke with remorse about her experience with the HEI in the second photo. Mary explained that the former Head of Department (in the second picture) was acknowledged for her enthusiasm and support but because this support was coming from an individual as opposed to it being embedded in policy, the connection with the HEI was short-lived and unsustainable.

*Mary, Workshop 4: “[The Head of Department] thought we were brilliant. But [she] vanished as quick as she came. She went back out, but she could see it. And I thought maybe somebody [else] could see this... we were like the poor relations ...”*

As this discussion continued, Mary shared an encounter she had with a staff member from the second HEI. The HEI staff member was acknowledged for understanding the importance of community links, but in this extract below, the community participant felt aggrieved by the meeting. While acknowledging the HEI staff for being interested in community links (to the point that they are promoting these collaborations far and wide), she believed that her community on the ground were unsupported and disconnected. The connection between the HEI and the community was not valid from her perspective and in the extract below there appeared to have been only one beneficiary of this engagement - the HEI.

*Mary, Workshop 4: “Now [name of HEI staff member] did see that we did have skills that they didn’t have. And she would’ve been .... maybe a little bit [positive] towards like what we were doing.....I met [HEI staff member] one day in town before the lockdown and she said to me they had been in America at a university, because it’s all about community learning and sharing skills are embedded in the community in America. And they spoke at the conference and they mentioned us. So, like where to go from there? They never like, there never seems to have been a pathway ....It was the ETB that gave us the opportunity Deirdre...”*

This participant became despondent when she reflected further on this situation. She was almost frustrated that the HEI could not see what the community had to offer. She was also uncertain of this situation changing in the near future. In this exchange below, I also shared her opinion and agreed with the missed opportunity that the participant presented.

*Mary, Workshop 4: “and it’s just such a pity because there are good people in there. It’s a pity that the pathway.... it isn’t more. It’s not there. Now [local artist], who is the leading artists now around, [said] to myself and Carmel, we are to the forefront*

*of community arts ... And health is to the fore, but like they don't see it. And I suppose it's just maybe, it's not the right time. I don't know will I see it in my lifetime, Deirdre....."*

Deirdre: *"No, it's a pity, it's a missed opportunity ..... I think really. You know when there is that rich tradition of craft on our doorstep and it's not being kind of recognised or that kind of partnership isn't there, which is a pity."*

Mary: *"It's a pity we can't change the world, but we are as a group. I would be speaking for the arts and crafts initiative now, we ...are doing this for the last 20 years in the primary school and secondary school ... and it's actually being missed - the connection".*

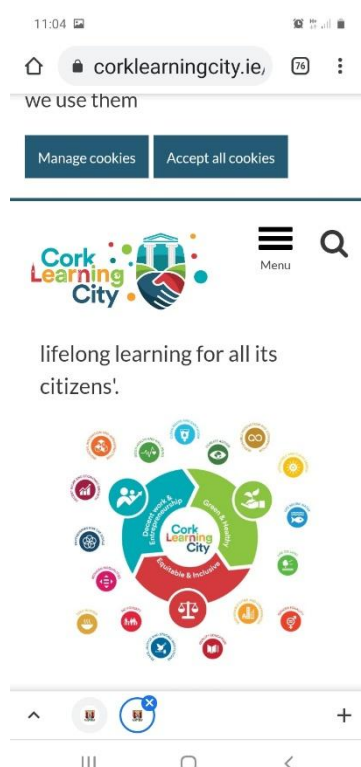


Figure 25: Photograph presented by Ellen in Workshop 4.

In workshop four, the participants delved deeper into the connection between HEIs and communities. Ellen argued that the connections between communities and the HEIs are not formal enough. She added that the names of the offices, with responsibility for community engagement within HEIs, are not explicit enough in allowing for these connections to be established and sustained.

*Ellen, Workshop 4: "They're not connecting and it's like there is no formal connection between community and universities. Do you know the way, I just thought the words are there, Adult and Continuing Education in UCC - it should be Adult and Community*

*Education, you know that would link it in. Like it gives respect and values the work that's going on I mean all over the city".*

#### **7.5.1 Voice and value.**

The participants in the workshops were mostly active members of the Community Development Project, some of whom have been community activists for many years. Discussions often focused on the power and impact of knowing the 'right person' or someone on the inside of an educational setting. Having a community education advocate on the inside, allows for conversations to happen and requests to be made for learning opportunities to be initiated. These insiders are seen as people who open the door, people who are willing to listen to the community, advocates for community learning and people who want to support access and widening participation. The participants shared stories about how their inside connections very often allowed them to pilot and develop learning initiatives. Without these inside connections with these community education advocates it appears that the community learning needs may not have been realized. It appears that the community advocates or the insiders facilitated access, where institutional/organizational policies and commitments to educational access did not exist.



Figure 26: Photograph presented by Brendan in Workshop 4.

The picture of the 'right people' which was presented by Brendan in the fourth workshop resonated with many of the participants. This was a black and white internet image of two people sitting opposite each other with the phrase 'Deep conversations with

the right people are priceless' written at the top. One participant returned to this picture in the final workshop. The participants want understanding, recognition, and acknowledgment that communities have a significant part to play. Participants want HEIs to think about their processes – to think outside the box in relation to engagement with communities and recognition for community education.

*Ellen: "Well, what Brendan came up with a while ago <picture of the right person>, I think is a gem....honest to God, it's a gem. .... And I'm gonna say it Deirdre, there's one thing out of all the weeks that stood out in my head and that I'll hold on to it forever was that one picture you put up last week Brendan, of the two black figures - I thought that was powerful....."*

*Brendan: "Everyone of ye is, you know, the stories, everything is gold, everything is just on point, on the money - it's just to get it to the right ears. And when the right ears hear this, and it's not like that you want the floodgates to open, and next thing UCC, or MTU will have a room inside in the CDP and we'll be writing doctorates for everyone who comes through, it's not that you want that. But you just want to make some sort of a difference to the way that they actually think about their processes when people are coming to the door looking to get educated – be it somebody who may not have got the points or an early school leaver or a late returner to education, that there is somebody there that can guide them and support them through it and that once they get their piece of paper it's the same value as anybody else in that room". [Workshop 5]*

There was a strong sense that the communities are not being heard and a frustration at the lack of awareness by formal educational institutions of the value in community education and community engagement. The communities know that they have knowledge and expertise that is important and significant to HEIs, and that if listened to, the HEIs would have a better understanding of community. The community participants believed that people at the senior management level of the HEIs and those with decision making ability must listen to community groups.

*Brendan, Workshop 4: "There is definitely a disconnect like you know - leaders and presidents of say the likes of the university will have their very clever people. They're very articulate and intelligent and I do understand the value of this. How do you get them, grab them in front of the likes of us or other people and I tell you they'd get a schooling. And they'd go back with a different kind of understanding and a different kind of value of what [we're] trying to do - like without community there is no colleges, there is no universities, we are the people that go like, whether it's our children or whether it's the broader communities. But like that, to them they could*

*segregate the marginalised communities because there are some areas may have different socio-economic backgrounds or you know, just - there is a kind of a lack of understanding or awareness that people can actually do this. To me, it's cutting off your nose to spite your face you know, it really is."*

In the final workshop, Brendan returned to this idea of getting an opportunity to meet with the 'right people'. He felt strongly that communities need an opportunity to be heard. He suggested that a meaningful way to engage would be to ask them to engage in a similar methodology to the workshops, using Photovoice to allow for reflection.

*Brendan, Workshop 4: "Wouldn't it be great if some of them came in front of us with their three pictures of what they thought the community education, and then you know, Ellen, Carmel, Lilly, Mary, you could all tell them, well, this is what it actually is. These are our photos....and look everybody knocks on these guys doors. You know everybody has the story, comes with their hands out in front of them, 'support us, do this for us', but it's the people they'll remember who came up with a really you know, yeah. If you get to teach them a trick or two, well, then they bring that forward".*

Bringing this suggestion to fruition was considered. The initial enthusiasm was met with the reality of how HEIs have engaged to date. The discussion leads to a conversation around how the HEIs operate and how they value something when there is a monetary value attached. The agendas of HEIs are evident to community groups.

*Brendan: "But I suppose that's how you'd put it like, if somebody just comes to us once, and we get the right heads to us once, would they just come and do it and throw the pictures in front of us and then leave? How would you get them to kind of...."*

*Deirdre: "Engage properly".*

*Brendan: "You need a hook; you need to reel them in. You know, you need to reel them in so, I suppose we need to think a little bit about that."*

*Deirdre: "Absolutely yeah."*

*Carmel: "Universities have to see it as it's a valuable resource really". {Ellen: Yeah}*

*Brendan: "If we would charge them, they'd pay for it. Probably. Because they don't see any, ...because there's no monetary value, we haven't put that on us, so therefore, you know, .... It's like the plastic bags before we started having to pay for them. Plastic bags were blowing in the wind, but now that we have to pay for them.... {laughs}"*

There was a perception that the HEIs value certain skills and qualities in individuals, and certain professions, such as business leaders and sports people who excel. One participant quizzically asked if a HEI ever honoured someone for their work in the community. There was a belief that there isn't any value or respect in community work. There was a suggestion that achievement and success can be different for everybody, it is a spectrum. Incredible success and achievement for some people can be completing a course at community level. How is this honoured by HEIs?

*Brendan, Workshop 4: "...Has anybody ever got an honorary doctorate? From MTU or UCC or for work in the community or for developing education? Has anybody ever got that? Or is it always kind of the preserve of somebody who was a successful individual in whatever aspects, be at a sports person or business leader or whatever? They're really just feathering their own nest, rather than actually doing something? So, I think that something that could be considered and you can imagine if we were to have an honorary doctorate in the CDP for somebody who is worthy of it, do you know, that alone would bring a bit of prestige. But then going right down to the ambassadors, do you know it could be just somebody who has been successful in a course".*

#### **7.5.2 Needs assessments and meaningful community engagement.**

Workshop four focused much attention on the HEIs current community engagement. As well as highlighting examples of good practice, there were suggestions made on what needs to happen to improve community engagement and improve HEIs response to community learning needs. This participant in the extract below spoke about how long it took her to sign up for a learning opportunity. She proposed that HEIs would carry out a needs assessment with communities to determine what learning opportunities communities wish to avail of.

*Ellen, Workshop 4: "I went back for years and years and years, to the Adult Education Exhibition down in the City Hall and that's where I signed on 31 years ago to do the tutor training in literacy. And you know I was thinking about it, if the universities and the MTUs are really serious about engaging with people I suppose, would they consider doing a needs assessment, do you know what I mean?"*

This participant continued by proposing that HEIs should design programmes of study around the needs of communities, instead of presenting a prescribed list of courses. She spoke about how HEIs are beginning to be more present within the community but is

this engagement superficial, is it lacking coordination and is it happening in silos? Is it lip service?

*Ellen, Workshop 4: "Instead of the people looking at the courses and stuff to see what's there that suits them, I think of the universities, if they could kind of be more open minded and more approachable, that if they could engage and network with the communities and somewhere have a joint effort in doing a needs assessment, to find out what the people want, what do the people need, and then they could build courses around, do you know what I mean? It's, I know in recent years they definitely have been a lot more communication, you know like, with the ACE program now and things like that and you know you go to meetings and you will get a representative from UCC or CIT. It is helping a bit more now. Now sometimes you just wonder ... I'd love to know how sincere are they about it? Not the people that we're meeting - but the whole institution? Is it really part of their ethos you know? I think they're only learning, I think they're kind of just, is it piecemeal, is that the word I'm trying to use? Sometimes they're all 'that's good, that's great', but sometimes I wonder like they only pick certain people that they know were interested in it from their own side, but that there's a lot more going on. That as you said there while ago Brendan, are they really willing? And do they really want to? Is it really in the culture is really embedded in? Or is it just lip service? Lip service that's the word I was trying to think of. Now the people that we have met, they're marvellous,... but I think they're trying a bit, but I think there's a lot more research has to be done for the people, you see I was trying to think of it, from the universities side, you know, what could they do? What should they? What could they do? Or what can they do to encourage people we'll say from the community education sector or the more non- academic sectors, do you know what I mean".*

She continued to reflect on the HEIs current engagement and questioned if this engagement operated at a certain level which is not adequately supported. She did state that HEIs have improved in recent years but she pointedly stated that whatever is offered by HEIs needs to be in consultation with the community.

*Ellen, Workshop 4: "But I just wonder how really interested are the higher education systems in engaging with people coming through the community, do you know? Community arts or community education do you know, whatever, I hope it's not lip service, you know? But I think they're improving, they definitely are improving compared, going back to say 10 or 15 years, they're definitely improving but I think, d'know what, if they could engage with the people that need it do you know, that if they do the needs assessment, if they engage with the people on the ground what's on, you're going to know what the people want, and you're going to be able to facilitate them or then what they need. There's no point in somebody up there saying that we think now, [that] they'd really benefit from this now or we'd like to do this."*



Engagement between the HEIs and the Community has to be deliberate, respectful and not tokenistic. HEIs must reach out to communities and invite them into the HEI. The invitation to engage must be of interest to the HEIs and initiated by the HEIs.

*Ellen: "Like they'll just bring you in just for the sake of it....you know the difference."*

### **7.5.3 Programmes designed without consultation.**

Communities have experience of organisations designing and developing products or initiatives that are not fit for purpose, that are often designed without consultation with the community or without an understanding of what is needed by the community. This extract below highlights an example of how health information aimed at the community was initially drafted without consultation. Following consultation with the community literacy group, the publication was amended so that it was more accessible for the intended audience.

*Ellen, Workshop 4: "I remember when I was in literacy I remember a few times they were talking about Plain English. You know NALA is big into the Plain English.....There was one leaflet now came out from the HSE, it was about postnatal depression and we were constantly saying we could use a language that people will be able to understand right and I remember I had a group, what they did was they brought it in, they had a draft of what they had and I brought it in and we discussed it with the students, people who are coming for 'Lunch for Literacy', and we went through every paragraph and we rephrased an awful lot of stuff, what I'm getting at is - why didn't they ask these people to come on board with them when they were doing the leaflet....."*

This participant who shared this experience continued to state that this consultation piece between the HEI and the community is so important from the beginning. She concluded this input by saying that this consultation is important to allow for their values to be respected.

*Ellen, Workshop 4: "If they could kind of bring themselves down and did engage with the people and find out what they really want, then encourage them and then they could, you know, develop courses that would suit them and if they're doing recognition for what they're doing, acknowledging them you know, the value of what they're doing. That it's done together. Yeah it has to be done together and that's where the networking comes in and that's where we say in the advertising ..... it's not them and us, do you know? They have to find a way of bringing them in at the start*

*of the process..... I was really trying to think about it during the week and I was trying to put myself now in the position of UCC or MTU and I was saying what could I do now to encourage or to bring on the people who want to go to higher education, we'll say from the community, from the community base, like there's no point in putting on courses, there is loads of courses and they're marvellous, but talk to the people that you're hoping that will benefit from it and then you can develop from that you know and encourage people that want to go forward and get involved in the setting up of courses, instead of you putting the course up there and these people expecting that people will get there naturally without that curiosity, whereas if you involve the people in the process you know, it'll make it's more enjoyable for them anyway and aiming towards something that they really want you know, and they won't be scared they feel that their values are going to be respected you know*

#### **7.5.4 Fancy language – ‘words the length of the Mardyke’.**

As noted earlier, Ellen was a literacy tutor in the community for many years. Her experience was shared and incorporated into the dialogues in many of the workshops. Mary advanced these discussions, and presented the importance of language and how this is used by HEIs in community settings. Mary shared an example of how she first became involved in her local community where she attended meetings with HEI representatives present. She spoke about how she was lost with the exclusionary language used. She continued to say that she attended a six-week programme on ‘Community Development’, delivered by UCC, and this is what allowed her to understand the more academic words and language being used.

*Mary, Workshop 4: “I think it’s important that for somebody like myself now getting involved in community development not having a clue about what it was about....Going to these meetings at the start and the language, the words were the length of the Mardyke and like we’re sitting there,..... we sat looking at one another and ... we haven’t a clue..... When [the lecturer] came in to do six weeks of the community development [course] most of the girls weren’t interested, they were saying, ‘ah Jesus what’s this about?’. But Deirdre when she started speaking, I thought I had died and went to heaven, I was – ‘Jesus spot on’. ‘Oh my God, this is what it means, oh yeah that’s what they’re talking about’. I fed off every word of that girl for six weeks and we went to another meeting after ..., I was saying all about ‘inclusion’ and about all that and Ann said ‘Jesus, where were you since the last meeting?’. I remember her saying it to me, because I was saying ‘oh is that what that means – ‘inclusion’ and all this. Yeah, you see all the buzzwords, we were saying ‘bring them all together’ but they were [saying] ‘inclusion’ you know?”*

Interestingly, another participant challenged her when she claimed that they didn't know what was going on. He suggested that her knowledge and expertise in community development was as advanced as theirs but that they were able to frame it academically, in 'fancy language'. He also proposed that the academics learned more from the community member than the other way around.

Brendan: *"But Mary did they actually know any more than you? Do you know what I mean, and I mean that from the point of view, they were able to frame it in a way, but you were already doing it? They had the fancy language."*

Mary: *"They had the language"*

Brendan: *"But in essence you are the expert. But they have the words."*

Mary: *"And I thought they were the experts!"*

Brendan: *"I bet you they learnt more off you than you off them! I can guarantee you." [Workshop 4]*

HEIs recognize that there is value in linking with Communities, but there is a danger that HEIs use language and teaching methods that are inappropriate for the learners. UCC delivered a community development programme – but the initial interaction was strained. The teaching and learning approach assumed certain knowledge. In this extract below, the participant shares how the first class was received. Once there was a recognition of the learning needs, the learners were equipped and their learning potential was achieved.

Mary, Workshop 2: *"..... if you were in our first meeting, ....a girl stood up and said 'this is what you're going to do, this is your essay, and this is your journal'. And we all looked at one another and I came up and they were saying, 'Jesus Mary, sure we'd have none of that', so I went up to [the coordinator] and I said, 'we're going to have to cancel UCC, we haven't a clue'. She said hang on a minute, now what do you need? I said 'we need to know how to write an essay, we need to know how to put a journal together', Jesus I said 'we'll never do it now'. She said we can do it every Saturday morning. Deirdre for as long as we needed, the 10 of us were up in the room in [the CDP] and we had sociology, philosophy, art, and history and you name it from a Master in Philosophy, who was our coordinator..... They didn't know what hit them down in UCC. They were saying 'my God the information that's coming', but it was because somebody was there to help us."*

This participant continued to say that this initiative was really strong but that there was a recoiling of supports from UCC for a period, with some more positive moves in more

recent years in linking back in with the community. There was a pointed (and justified) remark about MTU's lack of engagement in this regard.

*Mary, Workshop 2: "...that was great going on with UCC in the community and bit by bit they started putting them back and back into UCC, but now they're coming back out again, so I think MTU would want to move out now to the community."*

#### **7.5.5 Second thoughts.**

In Workshop Four, Ellen was negative about the HEI support to date. When the group returned for the final workshop, the participant who had been critical in relation to the HEI engagement, had second thoughts about her input.

*Ellen, Workshop 5: "When I came away last week, I was just saying, you know, I have to say one thing before I say anything else is that you know things have definitely improved Deirdre, it's not all negative. You know.....I mean I'm going back now say 20 years. I do think that the higher education that they are definitely more forthcoming and they're more.... willing to... communicate, you know, and I mean there's always room for improvement, and that's hopefully that's what we'll be able to, to maybe discuss as well, but it's not all doom and gloom, .... the president of UCC. He came to that session ....about the neighbour in the community...the learning neighbourhoods. So, I mean, it's not as if they're ignoring us, they're not. But having a bit more, you know what I mean?"*

Not everyone was willing to support this. One of the other participants' comments brought the situation back to reality. While the presence might be there, the comment at the end of this exchange suggests that HEIs aren't linking in the right way. Without a need's assessment, HEIs will never know what communities want.

*Ellen, Workshop 5: "I came away [from last week's workshop] and I said 'oh God..... maybe I was a bit harsh', but you know ... I think there's ... plenty room for improvement, but I was kind of saying like years ago there was none of that - but they are improving. They are improving but you know they probably need a bit of...they need to know how to move forward aswell. Do you know what I mean? And I suppose that's up to the community, that's why I said maybe if they had their needs assessment done. D'you know they have that to work with then, you know?"*

The participants were animated by this discussion. Another participant wanted to have community education acknowledged and asked why community education numbers are not counted or valued. In this extract below, there is no recognition that the origins of some peoples' learning journey grew from within the community.

*Mary, Workshop 5: "Do they ever look at the number of people that are....you know the way you're talking about access, the number of people that we know even in our own community and that I know from others, that have gone through the Community. But it seems like it....it kind of loses.... they don't seem to look at the numbers. Like someone might have gone up and done a small course and ended up going on and do the masters, but that came from the community it didn't come from an MTU or UCC, it's coming from the community."*

Later on in the discussion, this participant reflected on why community education is not valued more. Again, there was a sense of frustration that the HEIs and other educational institutions cannot see the potential within the communities, cannot see the value of community education. Participants were puzzled as to why community education is not recognised as a valid route and why school leavers progress is what is tracked and recorded? The participants believe that focus is too concentrated on Leaving Certificate achievement – there is not enough focus on 'achieving in other ways'.

*Mary, Workshop 5: ".....Is it because there are people going in straight from school? Is it because they're going in that, it's kind of recorded more?..... you know the way so many come out of their Leaving [Cert] now, are they doing anything like that for people who are achieving in other ways?.....I can't explain it, but I just think, Jesus tonight, ...Are they blind up there that they don't see what's happening because it was as long as we were going to meetings .... with the VEC, then with the ETB and maybe UCC for a while as well, that you were like there was no doubt that you were like the poor relation and you're always trying to make it.....I don't know how ye think of it about it now, but that's what I thought always and the talent and the expertise and the knowledge that was within those groups."*

The participants felt patronised by educational institutions. In this extract below, a participant speaks about a former HEI President who acknowledged his community roots and the role education in the community had in his learning journey. There was a discussion around how this President had reason to be interested in the Learning Neighbourhood, as he was originally from the locality. There was a concern about how to connect with the people who can make decisions. Community engagement was identified as the 'right thing to do' and engaging in this way was seen as 'modern thinking'. There are huge benefits of community education and moving it out of the traditional classroom, grey building structures.

*Mary: "I think that there's a thing about community, 'Ah sure God love them there', you know..... I just think that there needs to be a change.... And as you say that*

*[former President of HEI] came and he said, 'you know, I came here today, it's my first time going anywhere since I came into [the HEI]'. But he said 'without this library and community, I wouldn't be where I am today'. Didn't you hear him saying that Ellen?"*

*Brendan: "that's the thing like, but for somebody to buy into it, and for those to buy into it at the top of it. But it's like that chap who came out to the learning city. He was from the neighbourhood, so that's [I] suppose his motivation to be there. But if he was from somewhere else, would he be still as motivated to be there? You know, so it's interesting. How do you actually get people? How do you reverse engineer this conversation back to those who can make the decisions, thinking 'that this is, yeah this is the right thing to do?', you know it's modern. It's actually modern thinking. It's not backward thinking. Thinking that education can be in the community. It's quite radical in a way. Isn't it? Like it's taking it out of the classrooms and the big grey buildings, and have it where it should be because the community then benefits more people who are going through processes of skilling themselves up be it anything, you know, working with their hands or knowledge base. You know you increase the wealth you know not just economically, but like you know, just as you said, if you look at that, [my community], it's a neighbourhood that's very vibrant because of education". [Workshop 5]*

#### **7.5.6 Equality, equality and more equality.**

The participants were animated by the disconnect between the HEIs and the communities, they were also very frustrated by the engagement that is currently happening. They felt treated as inferior and unequal. Their experience of the engagement with HEIs made them feel like a hierarchy existed, with HEIs being on the top and communities being at the bottom. They felt that there was more value put in the system, than in community education.

*Ellen: "You may be thinking something there Brendan, you know - you're talking about them like the hierarchical thing. You know, like .. inside me, I keep on shouting like equality, equality, equality. It's not there. They don't, they don't regard the people coming up from the community base as being equal. You know what I mean? Even though they are in a different way. Just in a different way".*

*Brendan: "Is it intentional? Maybe it's not, its just a little bit of, kind of...."*

*Ellen: "I don't think its intentional but it's just the way it is and it's the way we've all been conditioned..... The same value isnt put on what we have to offer, than we'll say a person going through the system." [Workshop 5]*

### **7.5.7 Care and support as a business model for HEIs.**

Mary, in the final workshop, articulated the need for more care and support for community education. This concept of love, care and solidarity (Lynch, 2022; Baker *et al.*, 2009) is often neglected by institutions which favour a neoliberal way of working. Lynch (2006) believes that HEIs need to engage with civil society in a care-full way to build meaningful relationships. Interestingly, this participant, who from experience could see how HEIs operate, justified the need for a focus on care and support and presented this as a business model, arguably to speak the language of the HEIs.

*Mary, Workshop 5: "But I heard someone saying lately about community education and about the care that people get within community and the support they get and the thing was whoever thought that care, support and... I forget the other word was, was an amazing business model.....But it's really to find the person that really believes that above it being good for human kind really and for their own people and for the future, that is actually a fabulous business model. Cause that's what it boils down to. It's all about it being a business and about it being a success. But we only want the success...will come when people are being taken care or supported".*

My interest in linking with the community was borne out of a desire to understand access from a community perspective and by engaging with a specific community in a sustained way, harvesting insights that I could use in my future practice and that would be of use to other practitioners. The community participants provided insightful, reflective discussions. They interacted at ease and they built on each other's points. They reflected on the questions posed and as the weeks progressed, I could see that the participants had considered the topics very carefully and were enthusiastic to share their opinions in the group. I learned so much from my engagement with this group of inspirational people. The discussions were extremely invaluable to me in my capacity as access officer within a HEI. I realised that this engagement was fruitful and necessary if equity of access is to be achieved for communities that are under-represented at third level.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### **‘IT’S ABOUT EVERYBODY FERMENTING DIFFERENT IDEAS TOGETHER?’<sup>28</sup>**

#### **8.1 Introduction**

My commitment to educational equality in general and equity of access to higher education specifically provided the impetus for me to undertake this research journey. Having worked as an access practitioner for more than twenty years, I have spent my entire professional career trying to positively impact on access to higher education. In this time, I have been interested in the potential benefits of engaging with communities and many of the access initiatives that I have been involved in have attempted to link with disadvantaged communities, albeit in a limited capacity. As noted earlier at a national policy level, HEIs are increasingly being encouraged to develop ‘partnerships’ with communities and address educational inequalities (HEA, 2022). There is an assumption that HE access services have the capacity to do this. There is an assumption that the HE access funding models and organisational structures provide the infrastructure to achieve this. There is an assumption that HEIs are driving the access agenda in a strategic fashion. There is an assumption that HEI engagement with communities allows for a ‘shared responsibility’. My research findings challenge these assumptions.

Earlier I noted that there is relatively limited scholarship on access to higher education in Ireland. Scholarship to date has largely concentrated on the student experience, educational pathways and policy evaluations. In taking on this research I was interested in a professional world which is a key part of access which has not been brought into view. I am especially interested in thinking through how access practice has, and can, engage in a sustained way with communities impacted by educational and social disadvantage.

Drawing from my literature review and empirical research findings, this chapter will provide answers to my research questions, discussing my interpretations of the research and the implications of these. I will draw together the various elements of an intricate story,

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<sup>28</sup> Brendan, Workshop 2, “... it’s about everybody fermenting different ideas and sharing them and adding to that whole mixed up jumble of what is learning’



calling on the existing research discussed in chapters three and four and empirical evidence identified in chapters six and seven. Having researched and reflected on the community and access worlds in rich detail, I now want to synthesise these to think across both. In doing so, I will identify this study's contribution to scholarship. Some of the findings confirm and advance existing research on higher education alongside, and related to, findings which offer us a new and deeper understanding of the reality of access practice as it connects to community engagement.

This research is fundamentally a piece of practitioner research. I wanted to use doctoral research to understand my world, my practices, and my motivations better. Ultimately, I wanted to contribute to my field of practice. Being a critical researcher, I am also profoundly interested in questions of power, in questions of equality, how inequality is reproduced and how inequality is addressed. Like most people in my field, these questions animate me. In trying to find answers to my research questions I was drawn to various strands of critical thinking research. I called on Freirean critical pedagogy and on equality studies research because it helped me understand the power of education, rooted in a bottom-up way of doing things. This intrigued me because it gave me a strong sociological lens for making sense of what is going on across society and relationships between HEIs and access.

As outlined in Chapter Three, there is very little research on what it is like to be an access practitioner in Ireland and how they are doing their work to achieve greater equity of access. If we do not capture access practitioner knowledge, there is a missing piece of the puzzle in understanding what works and what does not work in the access to higher education space. As a scholar-practitioner my research aimed to contribute to a deeper understanding of how access practitioners work and how they engage with communities experiencing educational disadvantage.

This research delved into the world of HEI access practice, drawing on tacit knowledge from professional access practitioners and communities that experience educational disadvantage. I wanted to determine how HEIs engage with communities to advance their access agenda and how this can be strengthened in the future. In exploring this, the realities of the access practitioner role were uncovered. I asked research

participants to reflect on their experience of access and sought to determine what level of engagement was currently taking place and how this engagement was designed and delivered. I wanted to know if HEIs worked strategically and systematically with communities to enhance access and widen participation and I wanted to explore the dynamic nature and complexities of access practice. In asking these questions of my research participants, many heretofore untold realities were unveiled.

As outlined in the methodology chapter, I chose to work with two research cohorts, one from my own professional peer group and one from a local community. I was aware that there was untapped knowledge by practitioners, and I wanted to draw on this knowledge. The interviews were designed to allow for frank discussions around power and an opportunity to explore in greater depth some of the systemic and institutional failings of our shared work. The practitioners were asked about their practice and the conditions and environment in which they work in HE and also the commitment that was given by their HE to advancing the access agenda. A key part of the interviews and the workshops- and the concern which of course is central to thinking across the datasets and to the whole inquiry, was the topic of 'community engagement'. I wanted to find out how access professionals make sense of the community partnership and to also consult with community members and activists and to reflect carefully on the extent communities are involved in addressing or shaping the access agenda for HE.

My research sought to achieve a deeper understanding of access practice and community engagement. This study relates to the reality of access work, the obstacles to building meaningful relationships with communities, the struggles to move beyond the bureaucratic demands, the impact of current access practice on communities as understood from 'within' the university and from the community. The empirical data from these two distinct research sites were kept separate in the findings chapters to offer clarity. Thinking across the two research cohorts is crucially important as scholarship to date has not focused on this. While the experiences of the two research cohorts were unique to them, there were compelling overlaps in themes relating to power, respect and recognition, community engagement. Now that the two perspectives have been outlined clearly, in this chapter I am

going to offer an integrated and synthesised account of the findings, offering a unique insight into the world of access practice and community engagement.

Before I discuss this let me pause and summarise some of the key findings outlined in the previous two chapters, chapter five presented the research findings, exploring the experiences of access practitioners and their engagement with communities impacted by educational disadvantage. The interviews with access practitioners provide invaluable insights into the world of access practice that has not been captured in scholarship heretofore. Key themes to emerge related to organisational and systemic challenges associated with current access practice, inconsistent funding and the impact of this, and the reality of community engagement. Organisational structures, reporting lines, status and recognition were very prominent themes and discussed by all participants. The impact of ad-hoc, restricted, fixed-term access funding cycles were commonly discussed and were always negatively portrayed in discussions relating to policy and practice. Meaningful community engagement was seen as desirable but challenging given the constraints. The research presents revealing insights and perspectives from practitioners; the people expected to implement access policy, but whose voice is seldom heard. It highlights in great detail the working environment of access practitioners, the knowledge and expertise held by practitioners and the reality of engagement from their perspective.

The story I am about to tell is not a positive one. It is not one that any university or HEI would be proud of. In a time where a duty of care by employers is perceived to be important, where HEIs commit to equality, diversity and inclusion at strategic levels, this research proposes that access practice within HEIs is in real trouble. What I learned from my research is that access work is very complex and access practitioners work in very challenging professional environments. They struggle to move between pre-entry, entry and post-entry supports. They struggle under the expectation of operating at grassroots level, on the ground supporting students, as well as more strategic levels aimed at influencing and growing target numbers. They struggle to balance the administrative and bureaucratic demands with the desire to engage with communities. This study evidences that the reality of access practice is far more complex than the universities or the HEA acknowledge or understand.

Having a community development background, as access officer I had previously attempted to build relationships with communities and I remain convinced that community partnership is vital to widening access. This is also of course the view of many other access professionals and of policymakers in Irish higher education. With my research I wanted to build on the good sense and insights of access professionals and to complement and critically extend this by engaging with a community to determine their interest and motivations in relation to access and widening participation. As a researcher influenced by egalitarian and Freirean philosophies, I explored ways to engage with a community to build critical knowledge with participants. By working with a community in a participatory way, I was able to assess and evaluate the strengths and challenges in relation to access from a community perspective, capture and listen to community voices and contribute to the development of socially useful knowledge (Preece, 2017) in relation to HEI access and community engagement. The community participants took the opportunity to remind me of the fear and lack of confidence many people carry in relation to education, the importance of the community in supporting individuals through their learning journeys, the potential of further education and of embedded and integrated access pathways. The participants also shared their experience of HEI community engagement. Additionally, the data suggests that communities do not feel visible, valued or respected in existing HEI models of practice.

This chapter will commence with a discussion on access practice. Common themes between both cohorts include a frustration at the inability to build relationships effectively and engage sustainably. Narratives from both cohorts were very strong on their perceived powerlessness in addressing educational inequalities at any systemic level. Interestingly, even though for different reasons, all research participants spoke about feeling disrespected, invisible and not having a voice. The community participants felt that they were not treated fairly by HEIs in access partnership and called for 'equality' in partnerships. Access practitioners are caught in an institutional quagmire, resulting in piecemeal access delivery with communities. They felt invisible within their institutions and all spoke about the difficulty of impacting at any strategic level.

Both community participants and access practitioners felt strongly about the negative impacts of the existing community engagement practices. Community participants

spoke about the impact of this practice on their community, feeling 'neglected' by formal educational providers. Dialogues relating to HEI community engagement were insightful and for me, one of the more interesting themes to emerge was the difference conceptions of community between the research cohorts. As an access officer, I had not considered this prior to the research and this will be discussed.

All research participants felt very strongly on the negative impact of ad-hoc, time-specific funding arrangements and imposed criteria and this was seen as a major deterrent to meaningful community engagement. Participants spoke of fragmented, piece-meal access activity with communities and all participants recognised that this was not beneficial. As already mentioned, as a critical researcher, I wanted to reflect on the findings to attempt to discover and challenge power structures, questioning if educational inequalities stem from social structures rather than from individuals. I was also interested in critically reflecting on my own practice, hoping to learn and transform my reality. Therefore, later in the chapter, in addition to the evidence provided by the access practitioners, I will offer my own personal reflections through the research journey, to document my transformational learning.

As my research goal was to understand what is going on in access, seeking to influence my practice locally and policy nationally, the second section of this chapter will identify core principles needed for access practice and meaningful community engagement.

## **8.2 The Institutionalisation of Access**

Institutionalised: If someone becomes institutionalised, they gradually become less able to think and act independently, because of having lived for a long time under the rules of an institution (Cambridge Dictionary).

One of my main objectives with this research was to take a deep dive into the world of access practice, to understand how access practitioners work with communities to improve access to third level. My primary interest is on reflecting upon and enhancing my practice and to create knowledge that might be directly relevant to my peers. A key element of the inquiry was to document the experience and insights of access practitioners. The research achieved this, painting a very clear picture of how access work is being organised and delivered and how this is linked to community engagement. Access practitioners openly shared their professional experience in this research. They offered a clear account of their current practice and shared what they thought good practice engagement should entail and

clearly articulated the obstacles that exist to implementing this practice. Questions I posed to access practitioners were mainly centred on policy and practice and their vision of what access to higher education should look like. By exploring how they work in general and how they approach community engagement, I discovered that they believe their working conditions, institutional location, and pressures on time, make any real meaningful attempts at community engagement practically impossible to achieve. The data reveals the stark reality of doing access work in HEIs and this is one of the key findings of this research. Grummel *et al.* (2009) and Kidd (2021) had warned of 'greedy' institutions and the reality of this is observable in the day-to-day experiences of access practitioners. Their challenging work environment negatively impacts on communities, who conveyed a fragmented and piecemeal experience of HEI engagement. Community participants spoke of feeling disrespected by current practice, not being heard or visible by HEIs, not being equal in the management of programmes. Institutional conditions actively hamper access and widening participation. This reality of access practice and the evolving institutionalisation of access practice is not conveyed in any way in existing research.

### **8.2.1 Access in practice.**

The empirical data evidence very clearly the reality of the access practitioner role; their working environment, their organisational structures, their funding models, their institutional commitment. The research suggests that access officers are outputs focused, resulting in, at best, an ad-hoc, time specific, top-down practice of community engagement. Access practitioners were tired, weary and disillusioned from trying to work towards improving access to higher education. They spoke about bureaucratic demands and workload, they spoke about targets and compacts, they spoke about post-entry demands, they spoke about ad-hoc funding. They spoke about their powerlessness in operating at strategic levels within their HEI and the lack of recognition for the work that they do. They portrayed access as being an entity hidden within administrative structures in HEIs, where meaningful community engagement was unrealistically ambitious.

Community participants shared their experience of being at the receiving end of HEI engagement which is led in this way. Like the access practitioners, the community

participants spoke of an imbalance of power - being the 'poor relations', they felt they have no voice and no value, they shared that they experience a 'disconnect' between them and the HEI. Mary, in workshop 4, openly shared an experience where a HEI wasn't open to engagement, saying 'I'd get into the White House quicker'. Communities understand when the engagement is authentic and when HEIs genuinely want to engage. As a result of current practice, they feel neglected and feel that current engagement by HEIs is patronising, superficial and tokenistic. They called for 'deep conversations' between HEIs and communities and a recognition and understanding of what the communities can bring to the access agenda.

There was strong evidence that access practitioners find themselves in a double bind of trying to adhere to the dominant institutional logic and wanting to establish community relationships. Many HEIs use very privatised practices to promote their institutions, they have marketing units, promote their courses and colleges by the numbers of graduates who gain relevant employment, and they place value on metrics associated with employability. Access practitioners spoke about pre-entry practices such as linking with schools, quotas attached to the admission of students from under-represented cohorts, the 'marketing approach'. They understood however that this is not engagement as it should be. The data clearly highlights that access practitioners know the difference between meaningful, respectful access and genuine community engagement, and a type of marketing exercise. They argue it is vital to distinguish between 'marketing', and engagement that is focused on the 'betterment' of communities. They believe there is a danger that marketing is taking over from engagement and 'meaningful reflection' is neither encouraged nor possible (Mahon, 2022, p. 6). Pat, one of the access practitioners, explained that 'people mistake marketing for engagement with communities. That's not engagement. That's just marketing. To engage with communities, you have to get out there and build relationships.' This research suggests that this type of engagement is not sufficient in building relationships with the communities, as the communities as a result feel like they are not visible, they are not equal and the knowledge and 'gold' in the community is not realised by HEIs.

There was palpable frustration at the inability to apply visionary thinking and strategy to access and widening participation within their HEIs. The interviews with access

officers evidenced the personal struggles they have in wanting to engage in more meaningful ways with communities, but time and bureaucratic demands leave them unable to do so. All access practitioners spoke about the growth in workload and the endless bureaucracy operating at an 'absolutely frantic' pace, leaving them 'burnt-out', 'exhausted' and at 'breaking point'. A 'culture of speed' (Kidd, 2021, pp. 19-20) has emerged within higher education access which has negatively impacted on reflective practice. There is a concentration on the bottom-line and targets, ad-hoc and unsustainable ways of working, and access services as a result are stretched beyond capacity. While there have been students who have benefitted from current access provision, access practitioners neither have the authority nor the capacity to challenge or impact on systemic inequalities that have a bearing on access and widening participation within higher education. Higher education institutions have become 'greedy' demanding more and more from employees, 'imposing expectations of performativity that only a care-less worker can fully satisfy' (Grummel *et al.*, 2009, p. 192).

In articulating the vision and purpose of the university in chapter three, scholars such as Smith and Webster (1997), St. John *et al.* (2017), Boyer (1996), Barnett (2011) claim that there are benefits to HEIs taking an active role in tackling social inclusion and inequality. Fleming *et al.* (2017) acknowledge however, the contradictory discourses about HE, where on the one hand social inclusion and access are presented as being key priorities for HE and on the other hand there is a strong narrative which gives priority to 'entrepreneurial, acquisitive, individualistic and competitive values as a route for national economic well-being' (Fleming *et al.*, 2017, p.12). There is criticism for what higher education has become, with a move away from accepting a responsibility for social change (Lynch, 2006; Grummel *et al.*, 2009; Kidd, 2021; Lynch, 2022).

### **8.2.2 New-managerialism and access.**

In Chapters 2 and 3 I presented an overview of access policy and practice in Ireland and documented to the growth and evolution of same. In the late 1990s, there was an acknowledgement that there were inequalities in terms of access to higher education with disproportionate numbers of people accessing higher education from more affluent backgrounds. The achievement of equity of access to higher education became a priority. The Report of the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education recommended the



establishment of a National Access Office, within the HEA and this was established in 2003. Governments enthusiastically promoted the knowledge society as a means of achieving competitiveness and addressing economic demands and they used this focus as a way of addressing social and educational inequalities. The first three National Access Plans had a strong emphasis on 'target groups' and measuring progress. The most recent plan is more ambitious setting out to involve other governmental departments to provide a cross-sectoral approach.

The access agenda and access policy has achieved greater levels of participation for under-represented groups and in ways shifted the culture in higher education, allowing HEIs to become more sensitive to educational disadvantage. However, the way access is being adopted and implemented means that it has hit certain limits. I argue that the focus is still very much on trying to solve the symptoms of educational disadvantage as opposed to addressing any systemic issues. Therefore the access policy story is a mixed one, where we see some successes but also a neoliberal ideology with significant emphasis on targets, indicators and measurement. Access to higher education and engagement with communities that are most impacted by educational disadvantage involves a different way of working. This research evidences how inappropriate new-managerial access policies are in trying to achieve equality of condition, which aims to eliminate systemic educational inequalities rather than address the barriers causing educational inequalities.

Research on both access to higher education and community development has highlighted the growth of neoliberalism over the past forty years and is seen by a number of scholars as the dominant ideology in Ireland and that this has had a deleterious impact on educational structures, systems and processes (e.g. Deem and Brehony, 2005; Fitzsimons, 2017; Fleming *et al.*, 2017; Ivancheva *et al.*, 2019; Lynch *et al.*, 2021 *inter alia*). There is robust evidence from my field research to suggest that neoliberal access policy and specifically new managerial practice are significantly at play and is strongly influencing work patterns, community engagement, access and widening participation.

New managerialism is a prime tool of neoliberalism which ascribes great importance to an audit culture or performativity, and uses targets and KPIs to 'drive, evaluate and compare educational 'products'' (Thompson, 2016, p.89). There were strong similarities in

narrative from both research cohorts relating to the impact of new managerial practices. E.g. The community participants shared how community education had 'changed' with a growing focus on 'accountability' and access practitioners spoke about the 'formality' of practice and inflexibility that this provided. This research suggests that access practice within HEIs is currently very constrained given the positioning of access within administrative structures, the workload, the funding models. New-managerial ways of working have evolved within HEIs, demanding more and more of practitioners, leaving little room for strategic thinking. Neoliberalist access policies are dictating what is and what is not possible for access officers. The research evidences the frustration felt by access officers at the lack of visionary thinking and strategy on access within their HEIs. It was evident that all access officers had deep commitments to social inclusion and social justice but their struggle to operate in an institutionalised, neoliberal system, focused on performativity, meeting targets, surveillance of work and fulfilling bureaucratic demands, was obvious. Existing policy and practice on access to higher education have left access practitioners tired, frustrated, cynical and disillusioned.

National policies relating to equity of access have had impact and power at institutional level on the direction of resources, the development of HEI policy and the focus of energies. From the empirical data we see that access policy developments and institutional positioning have impacted on the professional capacity of access practitioners and target chasing and output driven goals are deflecting from real engagement with communities. The neoliberal focus and the new-managerialist modus operandi of HEIs is becoming more and more prevalent, where deadlines, funding cycles and targets have added significant pressures on academic and professional, management and support staff. This focus gives HEIs permission to pursue the economic self-interests of students which results in a student cohort that believe they are accessing higher education with the purpose of gaining employment.

Berg and Seeber (2016), articulate the repercussions for working in this way and warn that it can result in people becoming less caring towards others. Kidd (2021) asserts that HEIs should establish environments which are careful, thoughtful, conscientious, and diligent. Environments that foster cultures of speed, where the pace of work is hurried and

fast can lead to a form of “self-harm”, which leaves one unable to ‘generate compassion for others’ (Berg and Seeber, 2016; Lynch, 2022). The access practitioner findings evidence this ‘culture of speed’, with access officers being overwhelmed by workloads, deadlines, bureaucracy and feeling the impact of this physically and emotionally. All interviewed articulated that they didn’t have ‘time’ to think or operate with intent or with purpose. This practice, the impact of which is also felt by communities, has become hurried with no opportunity for reflection. Lynch (2022) calls for HEIs to recognize and value ‘slowness’ where calm, respectful, care-full approaches are given priority over fast, controlling, aggressive and stressed behaviours. Without an opportunity for reflection, there is no chance for ‘objectification’, which is required to ‘better see practice’ (Macintyre and Wunder, 2012, p. 92). There is no prospect of practitioners standing back and considering access practice, to critically assess its impact.

### **8.2.3 Different conceptions of ‘community’.**

The economic imperative of the widening access agenda nationally was given much attention by access practitioners. My research suggests that access practitioners are operating within this frame, prioritising links with DEIS schools, promoting educational opportunities to individuals, marketing programmes and promoting access pathways. The previous section argues that access practice has become institutionalized and that HEIs are forced into looking at access through a neoliberal lens, looking at widening access in terms of meeting targets and outputs. Initiatives are consequently designed and developed by practitioners focused on links with formal educational providers rather than communities, with minimal direct connection or links with communities. This way of working does very little to allow for community input or to address the greater educational inequalities at a systemic level.

The access practitioners who were interviewed were deeply committed to social justice and equity of access, and articulated a vision based on encouraging and supporting long-term, sustainable, equal collaborations with communities. The access officers were asked to reflect on what their vision for access was. They were also asked how much community engagement happens as part of their professional role. When posing the

question, I did not define what a community was. My personal definition of community very much mirrored McKnight and Block's (2010) definition which refers 'to neighbourhoods that have something in common... a place and an experience of connectedness'. Incorporating the access perspective, I had intended that the definition would be local communities and regions that experience educational disadvantage. Access practitioners conveyed responses that promoted meaningful engagement with communities that are under-represented and agencies that support marginalised communities.

Interestingly however, while there was a recognition by access practitioners that engaging with communities is important and necessary and there was an understanding of the benefits to engagement, it transpired that how access practitioners and community participants envisaged 'community' is different. For the access practitioners, they understood community to be stakeholder organisations, such as schools and further education colleges. For others, it was working with advocacy groups. Very little focus was given by them to community groups, resource centres and local development organisations.

We learned in the literature review chapter that Lynch (2022) argues that an educational system that is led by neoliberalism and managerialist ways of working, does not create people who care for society. She states that people in these circumstances become rationale economic actors. My research suggests that access practitioners who are working in this way have very little time to 'develop care-centric thinking' (Lynch, 2022, p. 9) and I would argue have not had the space to fully consider the wider definition of community. Given Connolly's (2018) argument regarding the potential of community engagement and community development to positively impact on and transform society, I believe that opportunities to address access through community engagement are not fully considered by practitioners because of their institutional mindset.

Furthermore, in the access practitioner interviews there was no discussion on community education, while as you might expect given the setting and cohort - community education was a particularly strong focus in the community workshops (there were 24 references to community education in total). The importance of the role of the community education in supporting people in the community overcome confidence issues, in building self-esteem, in allowing people to take a step into learning that is comfortable and

appropriate to their needs, was central to discussions throughout all community workshops. Community participants were emphatic about the crucial significance of learning being appropriate to the needs of the learner and learning opportunities being non-threatening and accessible. This type of community education, education that meets the needs of the people, where learning is organized *by* and *with* the community, rather than *for* the community, allows for democracy to flourish and local agendas to be elaborated and addressed (Tett, 2002; Connolly, 2003). There was unanimous agreement amongst the community participants that learning opportunities that commence within the community allow for learner centred approaches which support people to build self-confidence and courage to progress with their learning journey. Significantly, these ideas and concerns were not mentioned at all by access practitioners.

#### **8.2.4 Fragmented practice.**

The introduction of market forces into public sector settings meant that, henceforth, resources would be allocated to client demand. As a result, public sector organisations were forced into competition with each other for funding in order to grasp an ever-diminishing crock of gold (Thompson, 2016, p. 96).

The research indicates that ever increasing importance of meeting targets and key performance indicators (KPIs) has led HEIs to work as independent, almost competitive entities, where there can be a scramble for access students to meet targets. 'The measure becomes the master determining the worth of the university' (Lynch, 2014). The research data highlighted discussions with access practitioners and communities where they spoke of 'silos' and 'pockets' when engaging and named a lack of 'joined up thinking' as being a significant issue. Lynch (2014) believes that measuring outputs reduces 'first order social and moral values to second-order principles; trust, integrity, care and solidarity are subordinated to regulation, control and competition' (Lynch, 2014, p.195).

The research indicates that neoliberalist policy has a detrimental impact on access practice and on HEIs' ambitions to achieve greater access and widened participation. HEI access practitioners, because of the increasing focus on neoliberal agendas and new managerial ways of working, have limited opportunity to impact on social justice, social inclusion and class and educational inequality. The limited range of metrics demanded by the Higher Education Authority distract from their overall mission and vision in relation to access to higher education. For access practitioners in pursuing these metrics, this focus

encourages competitiveness, a sense of self-importance, egotism and insincerity (Mahon, 2021).

Target setting encourages HEIs to operate as solo runners in establishing links with community groups, with DEIS schools, further educational providers, adult education groups, etc. Ball (2010) recognises this and claims that policy with neoliberal intent has forced us into focusing on our own needs and to be 'wary of needy others'. He says that HEIs are encouraged to seek out advantage and exclusivity. Sam, one of the access practitioners referred to community engagement as 'a bit of an industry'. Sam claimed that community engagement can often be constrained by funding and that stakeholders do not want 'to step out of line'. This can result in communities being approached by many different HEIs, working separately, all looking for similar things. Access programmes can be fragmented, disjointed and uncoordinated, as a result. Jean similarly presented this as an issue, speaking about the 'disconnect' and 'things happening all over the place' in relation to community engagement.

National policy and funding models focused on target setting and measuring outcomes create competitive institutions, encouraging independent, siloed approaches to engagement. Lynch (2006) observed that universities operate as 'islands of affluence', they use privatised practices to promote their institutions, have become consumed by their own self-importance and unashamedly pursue commercialisation. The data highlights these approaches where HEIs work independently to achieve access targets. This focus gives HEIs permission to pursue the economic self-interests of students which results in a student cohort that believes they are accessing higher education with the purpose of gaining employment.

The communities feel the impact of this approach. Communities have experience of organisations designing and developing products or initiatives that are not fit for purpose, that are often designed without consultation with the community or without an understanding of what is needed by the community. The community informants who took part in this research told me they are frustrated by the 'disconnect' between the HEIs. They are very frustrated by the engagement that is currently happening, feeling patronised by educational institutions. Ellen in Workshop 4 forthrightly asked if HEIs are 'really willing [to

engage]? And do they really want to?' Is it really in the culture?'. Their experience of the engagement with HEIs made them feel like a hierarchy existed with HEIs being on the top and communities being at the bottom. They also 'know the difference' (Ellen, Workshop 4) when HEIs 'bring you in for the sake of it'. They felt that from their experience there is more value put in the formal educational system, than in meaningful respectful community engagement. The communities know that they have knowledge and expertise that is important and significant to HEIs, and that if listened to, the HEIs would have a better understanding of the learning needs of the community. E.g. Brendan in workshop 4 provocatively asked how do communities get HEIs to listen, claiming that if they did, they would 'go back with a different kind of understanding and a different kind of value of what [we're] trying to do.'

Community engagement by HEIs was seen as an ethical matter and as the 'right thing to do' by community participants and engaging with communities that are under-represented in higher education was seen as 'modern thinking'. While access practitioners realised that working independently with communities on fixed term projects results in a 'diservice' to communities. HEIs need to acknowledge that there are other stakeholders that need to be considered when engaging with communities. Both research cohorts for example acknowledged the potential role of further education in increasing access to learning and allowing for a pathway to higher education. This research suggests that a lifelong and lifewide approach to access, with a recognition of the formal, informal and non-formal learning providers is key and the networking and collaboration between these providers is essential, to ensure that communities are not approached separately by formal educational institutions looking for them to be involved in similar but unconnected access initiatives. There is a wider educational landscape that exists that needs to be considered and organisations need to work together to address access in a strategic and systematic way. This collaboration and consultation between the HEI, other educational providers and the community is important from the beginning so that community values are respected. Engagement and investment into communities need to be sustainable, collaborative and consistent, not piecemeal and ad-hoc.

### **8.2.5 Personal reflection as access practitioner.**

I have come to the understanding that one of the consequences of spending too much time in any large institution, even as a professional, is that you too can become institutionalised and disconnected from life on the ground just as much as the people who are traditionally thought of as clients (Russell, 2020, p. xv).

Having worked as access practitioner for more than twenty years, I had prided myself in having a good understanding of the issues relating to access to higher education. I had piloted and mainstreamed initiatives in my HEI to support and encourage progression and access. Prior to the research, because of resource constraints, any community engagement was very much light touch. Connections and relationships were gaining momentum and were developing with community workers; however, my interaction and engagement with people on the ground within the community was non-existent. In taking on this research, I was interested in going beyond my current practice and move into a space that allowed for deeper connections with people within communities that experience low levels of progression to HE. My methodology, which was influenced by participatory research, facilitated greater levels of connectivity with a community than I ever had experienced to date. As an access practitioner, the experience led to a significant personal awakening and critical reflection that I didn't expect to experience.

In undertaking this research, I had the opportunity to reflect on my own practice as an access officer. In attempting to answer questions about access and practice with my research cohorts, I developed a deeper understanding of my practice and my beliefs about power, knowledge and practice. The experience provided me with a rare opportunity to reflect and consider the world of access practice.

In chapter four, Freire's 'false generosity' or 'lovelessness' which can be imposed by oppressors, was explored. Freire (1970) claimed that 'true generosity consists precisely in fighting to destroy the causes which nourish false charity' (Freire, 1970, p. 45). Charity that exists to address the symptoms of oppression is not true generosity. True generosity challenges and addresses the systemic inequalities that allow for oppression. More recently, Ahmed (2007) suggests that 'institutional preference for the word 'diversity' is a sign of the lack of commitment to change, and might even allow organisation, such as universities, to conceal the operation of systemic inequalities under the banner of difference'(Ahmed,



2007, p. 236). As my research study evolved, these arguments particularly resonated with me, and I became more critical of my own practice.

During my research journey I began to question if the busy-ness of access services, in working to neoliberal agendas within HEIs, facilitates 'false generosity' (Freire, 1970), legitimizing the neoliberal agendas of governments and educational institutions. While it appears that there is a commitment to educational inequality at strategic levels - the structures, the resources and the practices all indicate that 'true generosity', where the causes (as opposed to the symptoms) of inequality are addressed, may not be a real priority for the government. Meanwhile, the access practitioners are working on treadmills, firefighting, jumping through hoops in trying to meet targets and deadlines, as directed by national policy and the individual HEIs.

Having engaged with access professionals and a community in this research, I would argue that there is clear evidence that social and educational policies, most notably from the HEA have, perhaps inadvertently, 'prescribed' the course of access within HEIs, resulting in the 'imposition of one individual's choice upon another' (Freire, 1970, p. 47). This transforms the practitioners' consciousness into one that mirrors the prescriber. Access practitioners are working from an institutional mindset, where a particular agenda and direction of travel is set out by policy makers. There is little space to be critical or to deny the logic. HEA policy and funding dictate practice and as such access officers do not have the 'freedom' (Freire, 1970) to act independently or with responsibility. For this to happen, praxis - a cyclical process of meaningful engagement, critical reflection, collective action - (Freire, 1970) by access practitioners is needed, but appears to be almost impossible to foster within the current institutional arrangements.

I had hoped that the workshops would allow me to listen to community voices and for these voices to be heard in research and my field of professional practice. I had expected that I would learn about the process and the mechanics of engagement. What I didn't expect was the knowledge and the insights on access to HE provided by the community participants. Shamefully, I hadn't expected them to be experts on their learning needs; I subsequently learned that communities are equally interested in meaningful HEI/community engagement, and they have worthy insights into on how it should happen.

From the first workshop, I became aware of the participants' lived reality and knowledge around issues on educational disadvantage and social inclusion but, in addition, I also became cognisant of my preconceived opinions on what I had to gain from the experience. I was interested in dialogue and in exploring a bottom-up approach. I captured my reflections after each workshop and considered how these impacted on my learning and growth through the process. Following each workshop, I wrote my reflections.

#### Workshop 1 Reflections (24<sup>th</sup> May 2021)

*"Listening to those brief discussions on adult learning, to my shame I found that I was surprised at the knowledge and expertise participants had in relation to community learning. I don't think I was prepared to learn in my first workshop. When I was in the workshop, I felt that this is exactly the type of work that I, as an access officer, need to do. The potential, the power, the opportunities in the group were really present. It struck me that one of our Access Linked Schools is in the community area, and I had never met with this group previously. What a missed opportunity for access. This type of engagement is what needs to be embedded in access activity."*

*"There were some really interesting insights/comments/discussions around adult learning, education, community learning and the impact of positive educational experiences. The knowledge and experience in the group is humbling and I was reassured on the first night that this is where I need to go with my research."*

When I first engaged with the community group, I think I came with an institutional mindset, a habitus if you wish (Bourdieu, 1977), which is characterised by 'the embodied sensibility that makes possible structured improvisation' (Calhoun, 1996, p. 304). I did not fully anticipate the vast knowledge or expertise that this group could impart even though I thought of myself as doing participatory research. As the workshops progressed, they went from strength to strength each week as the relationship grew between the participants and me. The discussions were articulate, very insightful, and thought-provoking. E.g. Discussions relating to the 'disconnect' between HEIs and the community, the significance of the 'right people', the value of undertaking 'needs assessments', the importance of 'equality'. My institutional preconceptions were being eroded week by week. I began to see access from the community perspective and how HEI practice impacts on them. The practice of this engagement to progress access work, where there was a respect for everyday knowledge, became more and more evident as the weeks went by. The community participants had deep levels of insight and knowledge and I gained personally and professionally from these connections. They were insightful in how HEIs should engage, they articulated very clearly

what doesn't work from their perspective. They presented opportunities for enhancing access, such as building on community education, that I had not thought of previously. I had thought prior to engagement that I was community focused, however I now believe that my understanding of true community engagement was coloured by an institutional, managerialist perspective. I hadn't considered the real value of the everyday knowledge held by the community and the use of this knowledge in helping to address issues of educational inequalities.

I also became aware of my own insecurities as a practitioner, my ability to engage and how this engagement pushed me out of my comfort zone. I became aware that genuine dialogue is challenging and requires skills and capacities that I was not entirely sure I had.

#### Workshop 2 (31<sup>st</sup> May 2021)

*"Again, it hit home to me that what I am doing in these workshops is important access work. This is the type of engagement I should be doing regularly with different community groups. Why hadn't I considered the knowledge, strengths and resources within the community? From my reading and my engagement with this group, I am growing particularly conscious and critical of the HEI riding into town to solve the problems of the community. The answers are within the community. The challenges that I face with the community workshops stem from my own insecurities and lack of confidence. I wish that the participants are getting as much from the workshops that I am. I don't want to be the only one benefitting."*

By the time the third workshop was delivered, it became evident from my reflections that my confidence was growing, the relationship with the community was getting stronger and everyone was feeling comfortable with each other, allowing for honest, open and frank discussions. In the last two workshops, the energy in the workshops was really growing. I wrote in my notes that the atmosphere was 'electric' and as a practitioner, I became energised, enthusiastic, excited. I realised that in my professional career I did not have many of these experiences where I felt something positive could come from this engagement. The engagement shifted something in me, the engagement was rewarding and fulfilling. It was a very cathartic experience as an access practitioner.

#### Workshop 4 (21<sup>st</sup> June 2021)

*"They are a fantastic group! It's mad but I feel pretty emotional about it all. I'm not sure why, is it because I've reached this stage in the process after months of*

*agonizing about whether I should go down this route; or, is it because I feel that this is true access work and that I'm putting into practice what Freire, Lynch and others have advocated for in relation to transformational education and social change??? I think it's both."*

My research findings suggest that HEI engagement which is developed respectfully with communities and values community knowledge, is not commonly practiced by access practitioners. Current policy and practice on access is projecting the HEI as the expert, some might even describe this as the 'colonizer' (Razack, 1998; Freire, 2005; Garavan, 2010; Lynch, 2022), with the authority and agency to supposedly make things better for communities that experience disadvantage. Funding models are designed and implemented to reinforce this rhetoric, where the HEIs are awarded the funding, giving the power and status to the formal educational provider, not the communities. Access practitioners operate within these parameters and widening participation practice is embedded within these narratives.

Participatory research with a community allowed for a level of engagement and exchange that is not common in access work Ireland. My research suggests that access practitioners are negatively impacted by neoliberal political narratives, and bureaucratic demands and they have not had the opportunity or capacity to test or deny the logic. On a practical level, the access practitioner is consumed by managerialist bureaucracy, with little time to engage on any meaningful level with communities. Access practitioners are not encouraged to have a 'care-consciousness' (Lynch, 2022), and current practice does not allow for this to be developed. Lynch (2022) encourages that these practices are not suppressed and that they should be named and claimed. My personal experience as access practitioner is that my 'care-consciousness' was not activated, rather it has been 'silenced' (Lynch, 2022).

Pedagogy that begins with the egotistic interests of the oppressors (an egoism cloaked in the false generosity of paternalism) and makes the oppressed the objects of its humanitarianism, itself maintains and embodies oppression. It is an instrument of dehumanisation (Freire, 1970, p. 30).

The opportunity for access practitioners to engage with communities, influenced by Freirean principles, is limited because of administrative workloads, inadequate resources and conflicting demands. As a result, there are limited opportunities for practitioners to

connect in any meaningful and impactful way with communities that are currently under-represented at higher education. The opportunities to hear the community voice are limited, and the access practitioner as a result does not have the capacity to support, learn, reflect, challenge and act.

I think current structures and policy imperatives are forcing access practitioners, inadvertently, into disempowering practices. Access practitioners are complicit in not addressing the very root causes of oppression. We currently do not have the time, and we do not have the capacity to critically reflect on our practice. Policy dictates a certain pace and practice, focused on addressing the symptoms of educational disadvantage. HEIs and access practitioners are in danger of being the ‘colonizers’ where the ‘white privileged teacher(s)’ engage with minority students as a ‘do-gooder’ without questioning the privilege or the power (Freire, 2005, p. 21).

### **8.3 Rethinking Access and Community Engagement**

Engaged universities and community engagement have grown in significance in recent years and are now strategic priorities for most HEIs. For many, engaging with communities is ethically motivated, with an ambition to address ‘societal challenges, ‘with and for’ society (IUA). Existing frameworks of best practice in community engagement call for ethical practices and equal partnerships. The empirical evidence from this research suggests that existing engagement with communities by HEIs and access practitioners falls short of best practice. One of the main aims of my research was to think through what I knew and my peers know and also, by listening carefully to community voices and through desk research, what access professionals have missed and through this develop grounded robust principles for good practice which I, and hopefully others, can benefit from. By working through the empirical data from my inquiry, reflecting on my long experience as a practitioner and through extensive desk research I have sought to identify characteristics of good community engagement practice. In this section of the Chapter, I will outline access community engagement principles for HEIs, which could impact positively on access practice for communities and practitioners.

### **8.3.1. New principles for community engagement.**

From the outset with my research, I wanted to understand how HEIs approach community engagement in progressing the access agenda. I wanted to determine what collaborative practices exist and if HEIs are free to establish strategic alliances with communities to address systemic educational inequalities. The empirical data evidences the challenging reality of current access practice that prevents any real meaningful engagement practices from being established and sustained. Access practitioners are committed to enhancing access and strongly support social inclusion but their current practice, however, is stifled by bureaucratic and managerialist work patterns. They are frustrated, despairing, over-burdened and exhausted. Their positioning with the HEIs' organisation is not conducive to making an impact on the strategic direction of access with HEIs. While there are many access initiatives being delivered throughout the country, short-term access funding cycles makes sustainability a longed-for dream. Communities because of this reality, experience HEIs dipping in and out, dictating the terms of engagement, imposing a hierarchical structure on engagement. Having interpreted the research findings, this section presents new principles of community engagement for access practitioners and HEIs.

The access officers and the community participants in this research were both very interested in establishing partnerships with each other and saw great benefit in this. The community group stated very strongly that it is important that HEIs meaningfully engage with communities, encouraging HEIs to be 'more open minded and more approachable....in a joint effort' (Ellen). They recognised the importance of learning within their community and saw huge advantage in HEIs reaching out to communities on an equal basis. Community participants wanted 'pathways' into HE but they also wanted visibility within HEIs with a 'formal connection'. Equally the community participants valued what they have within the community and spoke with great confidence about community knowledge and what the HEIs can and should learn from the communities.

The community group believed that current HEI community engagement practices are not effective. The community spoke from experience about how HEIs engage in very superficial and tokenistic ways and present a veneer of community engagement which does not have much substance. They longed for HEIs to have meaningful engagement and partnerships which values and respects the community. The community felt unheard and

experience frustration at the lack of awareness by formal educational institutions on the value in community education and community engagement. They persuaded me that they have knowledge and expertise that is important and significant to HEIs, and that if listened to, HEIs would have a better understanding of community needs and see the value in equal partnership to achieve social inclusion, increased access and widening participation. The community participants stressed the importance of people at the senior management levels of the HEIs being available to listen to what communities have to say and ask 'what would be really useful knowledge' for them (Thompson, 1996).

The community strongly believed that consultation between the HEI and the community is important from the beginning so that community values are respected. They presented a disconnect between the HEIs and the communities, which leads to communities feeling very frustrated by the engagement that is currently happening. Communities have experienced organisations designing and developing products or initiatives that are not fit for purpose, that are often designed with minimal consultation with the community or without an understanding of community needs.

My research shows that communities have had experience of being treated as inferior and engagement being unequal. Engagement by HEIs often adopt a hierarchical approach, with HEIs being at the top, directing operations and communities being at the bottom with minimal input. Communities do not feel like they are equal partners as a result.

*'They [HEIs] don't regard the people coming up from the community base as being equal'* (Ellen)

In addressing educational inequality, access and widening participation, participatory approaches allow for an awareness of the complexity of many of societies challenges. To avoid the power imbalance between partners, one suggested approach for higher educational institutions is to ensure that they take an asset-based community development (ABCD) approach (Russell, 2020), utilising the resources within the HEI and undertaking community-based participatory action approaches to research. There can be an assumption that academic knowledge is of greater value than the 'common', indigenous knowledge within the community (Fleming and Murphy, 2000). Tandon *et al* (2016) claim that it is beneficial to be conscious of the diversities of knowledge, the means by how knowledge is

produced and how knowledge is disseminated. My personal reflection through the research highlighted that I too assumed a lack of recognition and respect for local knowledge held by the community. I learned that knowledge and the 'experience of the wise' within the community is as credible and valuable to achieving a successful community-campus partnership than that of the academic institution (Fleming and Murphy, 2000; Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2010; Russell 2020; Tandon *et al.*, 2016). The community informants had great insights into the barriers to education that present for people, suggesting an analysis of learning needs, and proposing that community education as a way to engage with adult learners in an accessible way.

In applying the asset-based community development approach, Russell (2020), and Fitzgerald *et al.*, (2010), asks institutions to reconsider community engagement approaches and to think about 'what's strong?' within communities, rather than 'what's wrong?'. Russell (2020) asserts that HEIs need to redefine democracy and shift focus from being institution centred to citizen centred.

When institutions begin to replace civic life – doing things to or for citizens that they can do themselves or with each other – a shift from a democratic to a technocratic way of life takes hold. Technocratic governing relegates citizens to second place. (Russell, 2020, p. 3)

This research suggests the need for HEIs to acknowledge the expertise and knowledge within their community and recognise the merits in the knowledge acquired through the 'act of surviving in the world' (Tandon *et al.*, 2016). Community support and the learning from within allows for resilience and determination to succeed. The community holds the knowledge and there are people within communities who have strengths and talents and who are willing to support and help with this learning. My research found that there was a strong belief that there is 'gold in the community' (Brendan) that needs to be realized by access practitioners, educational providers and agencies.

Lynch and O'Neill (1994) claim that research on and programmes for working class communities have been 'written from the outside in', by people from middle class sections of society. By recognizing and valuing the expertise within the community, there is an opportunity for oppressed communities to become the 'experts'. 'The very owning and



controlling of the stories of oppression adds further to the oppression as it means that there are now people who can claim to know and understand you better than you understand yourself; there are experts there to interpret your world and to speak on your behalf. They take away your voice by speaking about you and for you' (Lynch and O'Neill, 1994, p. 309). This way of working was portrayed within the research data and was particularly evident when Mary shared an experience about a HEI that delivered an education programme in the community but used 'fancy' language and 'buzzwords' that were not understood by the community. This experience leaves communities feeling inadequate and establishes a hierarchy with the HEIs presenting as the experts. This research suggests that HEIs need to redefine how engagement works with communities and think in novel ways about this engagement.

Many of the essential components for engagement described in the existing research were also noted by participants. Research participants articulated the need to collaborate effectively, the importance of equal partnerships, and the value of sustained relationships. In seeking answers to my research question relating to how HEIs engage with communities to advance equity of access, I realised that there were gaps. As I wanted to use the research to inform and improve my practice I was drawn to propose essential community engagement principles specifically for access practitioners and HEIs, with the key and over-arching principles being:

- Building on practitioner and community knowledge
- Care
- Collaborative practice
- Time

If higher educational institutions are going to engage with communities in an equal, respectful, meaningful way, where partnerships allow for mutual benefits, where there is a recognition and appreciation of the pluralities of knowledge and methods of engagement allow for outreach and inreach, then there are principles that need to be accepted by all parties. Resources need to follow any commitment to engage.

#### **8.3.1.1 Building on practitioner and community knowledge.**

Traditionally higher education institutions were given the authority by the State to manage knowledge on behalf of society. The role assigned to HEIs as knowledge producers and disseminators became more significant as knowledge was seen as the key driver for economic development. Knowledge democracy has gained traction in recent years however, with a growing appreciation and understanding that knowledge is created and represented in a variety of ways and that valuing this is crucial to achieving a more equitable society (Hall, 2014; Tandon *et al*, 2014).

Society's future directions have to be based on universally accepted values of equity, justice, inclusion, peace and sustainability. The pursuit of these values has to be integrated into the very design of the productive economy, settlement planning, community development, democratic governance and knowledge creation, recognition and sharing. The invention of such models, approaches and formulations has to include at the forefront new ways of knowing, new ways of interpreting cosmologies of knowledge and a diversity of perspectives on knowledge (Tandon *et al*, 2016, np)

Before undertaking this research, anecdotally I was aware that my access peers held expertise on access practice. I wanted to tap into this, to document the knowledge held by this group of practitioners, so that best practice can be identified and that the constraints are known. I had identified a gap in existing research where this knowledge had not been captured and I wanted to change this. In exploring access community engagement practices, I wanted to see if 'practice knowledge was at odds with scientific knowledge' as Dynarski (2010, p.64) claims that exploring the differences would be beneficial. As a scholar/practitioner, I wanted to study access, I wanted to engage with my access peers and I wanted to provide colleagues with a space to step back and reflect on their practice in an objective way.

The research data generated from practitioners was enormous. The methodology allowed for time to reflect on practice and engage in dialogue about practice, with a peer. There was an opportunity to make the 'familiar strange' by analysing their reality of access practice (Macintyre and Wunder, 2012, p.92). The knowledge production process adopted through this research allowed for practitioner knowledge to be unearthed which had not been captured previously in research. Their voice has now been captured, their reality of access practice has been captured, their vision for enhancing access and community

engagement has been captured. They shared insights into the difficulties with funding, the problems associated with being positioned within administrative structures, the realities of bureaucracy and the tribulations of wanting to engage with communities in sustainable ways but not being adequately resourced to do so. This knowledge is crucially important to capture as it can positively influence and enhance access practice and engagement. Without this knowledge we do not know what the constraints are, and do not know what is possible.

Schön (2016) emphasises the limitations to this practitioner knowledge however, and advocates for practitioners to be reflective and to have deep levels of communication with their clients to bring about a 'fuller grasp of one another's meanings' (Schön, 2016, p.296).

The reflective practitioner tries to discover the limits of his expertise through reflective conversation with the client. Although the reflective practitioner should be credentialled and technically competent, his claim to authority is substantially based on his ability to manifest his special knowledge in his interactions with his clients (Schön, 2016, p.296).

At a practical level, practitioner knowledge needs to be understood and valued at institutional and national levels. This research evidence that opportunities for input at strategic levels within HEIs are sadly lacking. An access practitioner voice at senior management levels is called for so that policy and practice can be influenced. The knowledge and experience that an access practitioner could bring to strategic discussions centred on a HEIs responsibility to social inclusion, to increasing access and widening participation is invaluable. Practitioners insights at senior management levels into the challenges facing under-represented groups could provide the impetus needed for HEIs to develop sustainable partnerships with communities that experience educational disadvantage.

As discussed earlier my preconceptions – rooted in the expectations and practices of the institution - meant that I completely underestimated the level of expertise and knowledge that exists within the community. Ellen captured it accurately in the last workshop when she said 'I don't think its intentional but it's just the way it is and it's the way we've all been conditioned..... the same value isn't put on what we have to offer'. By reflecting and communicating with the community, by giving up my 'claim to authority'

(Schön, 2016, p.298), I learned that the lived reality of the community participants led them having insights on HEI community engagement which have helped to present core principles of engagement that should be incorporated into all access programmes.

This research shows that to-date policy and practice on increasing access and widening participation has developed and evolved with minimal recognition and value placed on practitioner and community knowledge. The need to acknowledge and value the 'gold in the community' and the expertise of the access professionals is essential to ensuring the success, sustainability, and longevity of HEI/community partnerships. Preece (2017) argues that 'a pedagogy of listening to multiple voices contributes to building socially useful knowledge in and outside the university curriculum. But listening and dialogue are skills that also have to be learned by all participants' (Preece, 2017, p.154). Active participation by communities is required to identify what the learning needs of communities are and how best HEIs and other educational providers meet these needs. Engagement which values community knowledge and expertise and provides for meaningful, ethical and genuine collaborations is what is required. Research participants called for HEIs to engage on a community needs analysis as a first step. This is a very practical initiative that could allow for the production and harvesting of community knowledge. Reflective access practitioners have a role in supporting the process of engagement, using their knowledge, skills, and expertise in facilitating learning pathways for individuals and communities. This research spells out the need for HEIs to value the existing, indigenous knowledge of all stakeholders and incorporate ways of working that acknowledge, co-create, appreciate, and value this knowledge.

At a practical level, a pivot at pre-entry stage from a focus on establishing links with formal educational providers to engagement with communities on the ground, using participatory, collaborative approaches to engage, to learn, to work together, is required.

#### **8.3.1.2 Care.**

New-managerialism, as discussed earlier in the chapter, is the institutionalizing of market values into the governance of all organizations, including public sector bodies. The focus is on the product and measurable performances in educational settings, plus there is a

leaning to define students as 'customers' (Grummel *et al.*, 2009; Fleming, 2016). Giroux (2004) states that neoliberalism by promoting 'self-interested' and 'calculating' individuals, has shifted the balance of power to the wealthy and has negatively impacted on education. Lynch (2022) advocates for a move to a more care-centric, relational development of the person. She believes that people have a 'care-consciousness' that gives people meaning and this needs to be encouraged and nurtured (Lynch, 2022, p. 3).

A society that is not caring, cannot create people who are flourishing, as 'citizens are produced and reproduced through care' (Tronto 2013, p.26) and individuals cannot flourish without love, as it is fundamental to their 'subjective and objective' well-being.' Although the nurturing values that underpin care relations are generally politically domesticated and silenced, naming and claiming them can help reinvigorate resistance to neoliberalism (Lynch, 2022, p. 4).

Societies are 'full of emotion' and public emotions can impact on a country's pursuit of its goals (Nussbaum, 2013). 'They can give the pursuit of those goals new vigor and depth, but they can also derail that pursuit, introducing or reinforcing divisions, hierarchies, and forms of neglect or obtuseness' (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 2). Noddings (2003) endorses a relational ethics of care and states that when we enter a relationship with others we need to incorporate a care approach.

Access work is largely human service work that relies on relationships between communities, students, academics, teachers, colleagues, and the access practitioner. Access could be defined as 'nurturing work' producing love, care, and solidarity (Lynch *et al.*, 2021, p. 54) based on social relationships. Because of the relational aspect of the role, access work is very often emotional work. Love, care, and solidarity should be central tenets of the work of the access practitioner, because of this human service element. From a Freirean perspective, education and social interactions more widely should be focused on nurturing and liberation (Freire 1970; Baker *et al.*, 2009) and we can extrapolate from this and make a case that access policy and practice should be grounded in principles of dialogue. When love, care and solidarity are not considered or acknowledged there is an argument that this can have negative consequences for dialogue and engagement with access groups.

Access officers, have significant impact on the lives of people who are supported through access. Access practitioners spoke of their commitment to supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Support and care were implicit in the discourses amongst

access practitioners. They believed to be an access practitioner, you need to be someone with ‘the right bit of humanity and the right value system’ (Sam), someone who was working ‘in it for the right reasons’ (Jodie). Care and support were inferred in many dialogues and while all practitioners shared these sentiments, discussions relating to workloads, deadlines, bureaucracy and targets were much more prominent. Interestingly, Lynch *et al.*, (2021), believe that ‘care is fluid, it has no clear boundaries, and no career structure; it is governed by its own ethical-relational logic and cannot be completed in the measurable time that bureaucratization and commodification require’ (Lynch *et al.*, 2021, p. 54).

We learn from this research that access practitioners operate in HE environments that do not work in ‘care-centric’ ways. The interviews with access practitioners highlighted their desire to provide a care focused access service, however their current practice mitigates against this. Consequently, having a personal commitment to care and wanting to provide a care-full access service in an environment which discourages this, takes a personal toll and is impacting on their physical and mental well-being. The access practitioners see the value of working and collaborating in care-centred ways with communities, but resources and policy and practice is leading to conflicted agendas.

Lynch (2022) suggests that resources, time and energy are essential ingredients to work involving care. These essential components were missing for the access practitioners involved in this research.

*‘Nobody feels they are being listened to anywhere in the access piece at all, and I’m really struggling ....really struggling’ (Jean).*

The access practitioners in this research did not feel that their work was acknowledged, respected, or valued, resulting in them feeling a contributive injustice, as predicted by Lynch (2022). They are not recognised for their contribution to the good of society and circumstances do not permit them to engage in care-full practice.

The access practitioners shared the reality of their role, which involves supporting some of the most vulnerable students in their HEI. All spoke about the stress and strain of the role, with Jean calling for professional supervision and a care approach for access practitioners.

*“you could have got the phone call that day from a student about a very harrowing... there’s nowhere to go with that. There’s a whole care piece there that is being ignored and if access services are to grow, well then that’s something that needs to be looked at.” (Jean)*

Noddings (2003) believed that everyone is a care-giver (one-caring) and should aim to protect the well-being of the person being ‘cared-for’, this was deemed to be challenging under current access practice. Similarly, Lynch (2006) believes that we need to engage with civil society in a care-full way and form relationships and alliances within the public sector so that the public interest values of higher education can be preserved. Furthermore, Lynch (2006), believes that higher education should be designed to cater for the weakest and most vulnerable as well as economic interests. She believes that HEI’s have a duty of care to the voluntary, community and care sectors. While access practitioners want to work in this way and strive to work in this way, in striving to do so there is a negative impact on their health and wellbeing.

Interestingly, the care approach was also highlighted by the community participants. Mary, one of the community participants, similarly called for HEI engagement based on ‘care and support’. It was clear that while others did not use these terms, they were in agreement with her suggestion. This research highlights that meaningful engagement and relationships based on dialogue which are rooted in love, care and solidarity (Freire, 1970; Noddings, 2003; Nussbaum, 2013; Lynch, 2022) are essential to addressing inequalities in society, including educational inequalities. Freire refers to ‘the word’ as being essential to dialogue. He states that an unauthentic empty word, is unable to transform, and is reduced to an alienating ‘blah’ (Freire, 1970, p. 87). Freire contends that a word that is not committed to transformation and does not allow for action, is ‘idle chatter’. He also asserts that action that is not coupled with reflection, is action for the sake of action, which ‘negates the true praxis and makes dialogue impossible.’ For dialogue to happen there must be profound love, faith in humankind, humility, hope and critical thinking. Current HE access policy results in practice that does not permit dialogue with communities and as evidenced in this research I would argue, reduces any engagement to idle chatter.

The research suggests that HEIs consider reorientating to practices that prioritise relationships focused on love, care and solidarity over market driven metrics. The data

indicates that emphasising care values may serve as an alternative to the prevailing managerialist ideology. A care-centric approach would not only be beneficial to the well-being of practitioners but also to the benefit of communities.

Applying Baker *et al.*'s (2009) equality framework, which allows for equality of condition, as a way of working, would help to address and eliminate systemic inequalities and make social relations legible within the wider landscape. The emphasis is on participatory approaches, deep-rooted in relations of love, care and solidarity. Lynch (2022) stresses that to work in this way requires considerable resources, including time and energy.

#### **8.3.1.3 Collaborative practice.**

We learned in chapter four that many scholars (Boyer, 1996; Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2010; McNall *et al.*, 2009; Mtawa, 2016; O'Brien *et al.*, 2022) believe that universities need to embrace their 'third mission' and seek answers to societies social, economic, civic and moral problems. Boyer (1996) endorsed a collective quest and integration (making connections and allowing for inter-disciplinary opportunities) to address challenges that present for communities. What this research shows however is the fragmented nature of access and community engagement, highlighting that educational institutions often work independently, 'in silos', in trying to increase access numbers. Target driven policy encourages HEIs to take this approach. Access work that is organised in this way has minimal impact on addressing the systemic issues that are at play. At best it only addresses the symptoms of educational inequalities. The Government has encouraged HEIs to work in clusters through the PATH initiatives, but from my professional experience, and having analysed the research data, I would argue that this has resulted in horizontal, top-down collaborations, where geographic distance between HEIs has had limited impact on community engagement practices. This research proposes that HEIs need to work collaboratively with communities and other formal, informal and non-formal educational providers in their regions to support communities that have low levels of educational attainment.

As an antidote to this fragmented experience of engagement, a stronger focus on the Learning Neighbourhoods and Learning City initiative could be considered. The community participants mentioned in the workshops their engagement with the Cork



Learning City initiative. One of the access practitioners referred to the activity through the Learning City programme. The purpose of the UNESCO Learning City programme is to promote inclusive learning opportunities and revitalise communities through learning. In Cork, the Learning City programme aims to 'facilitate individual empowerment, build social cohesion, nurture active citizenship and lay the foundation for sustainable development' (Cork Learning City). Initiatives such as the Learning City and Learning Neighbourhoods provide a structure for formal, informal and non-formal learning structures an opportunity to work together, to move outside of existing silos, to collaborate and to begin to address real systemic educational inequalities in a strategic way. These initiatives encourage organisations to work beyond their own individual institutional agendas, effectively drawing resources from all sectors and domains to support inclusive educational opportunities. Nash (2020) interestingly, signals that while support for these models might exist amongst educational and learning organisations, 'challenges and threats including funding, maintaining commitment and giving time and losing leaders due to burnout, feeling overstretched or moving on' are very real concerns (Nash, 2020, p. 65).

The UNESCO Learning Cities initiative offers an opportunity to mobilise resources from every sector to promote inclusive learning opportunities for individuals, families, communities. 'In doing so, the city enhances individual empowerment and social inclusion, economic development and cultural prosperity, and sustainable development' (UNESCO). Cork was the first city in Ireland to be awarded with this title. Limerick, Belfast, Dublin, Derry and Strabane have subsequently also achieved this award. The Cork Learning City aims to offer 'a vibrant, inclusive, quality infrastructure of education from basic to higher education and is home to enthusiastic, involved and committed learning communities' (Cork Learning City). There is a framework established through this initiative that brings educational providers together to collectively address educational disadvantage, social inclusion and equity of access in an integrated, cross sectoral way that moves beyond the logic of individual 'providers' or 'sectors'. It also brings stakeholders outside of education to the table, such as the City Council and the Health Service Executive, offering a better chance of challenging systemic obstacles. For this to be truly effective, participating organizations need to throw off the shackles of their institutional agendas and collectively commit to the pursuit of social justice and equity of access.

#### **8.3.1.4. Time.**

The empirical data in this research captured the importance of time as being a key ingredient for access and community engagement work. All four access practitioners stressed on numerous occasions how the lack of time impacts on their ability to form sustainable, trusting and collaborative engagements with communities and stakeholders. The workloads and the demanding brief of access practitioners juggling pre-entry, entry and post-entry initiatives results in a practice and community engagement that is frantic and non-strategic. Jodie stated that 'the challenge is time and energy'. Jean called for a senior access post so that time could be devoted to strategically working towards long term sustainability. Sam stressed the necessity of time in building relationships with communities so that communities realise that they belong in university. Pat explained how their community engagement work is 'crammed' into one week because of bureaucratic demands and workloads. All access practitioners spoke about access initiatives and projects in very piecemeal ways and community engagement endeavours were almost being fitted in around the other post-entry demands of support students. There was certainly no room for reflexive action.

Thompson (1996) writes about the awarding of pragmatism as a virtue to 'get things done' and she cautions against this approach (Thompson, 1996, p. 19). She claims that there was an emergence within education of an ethos of not 'wasting time on theories', a focus on outputs and throughputs and argued that education was being turned into training. Like Grummel, *et al.* (2009), she claims that 'academics have become managers and students, and adult learners are spoken of as consumers' (Thompson, 1996, p. 19). HEIs that operate with a neoliberal focus, where emphasis is placed on self-satisfaction, a reluctance to respect other people's point of view and where higher education is commodified, can lead to an 'egotist culture' or 'greedy' institutes (Grummel *et al.*, 2009) with no capacity for 'romantic sentiment' (Llanera and Smith, 2021, p. 62-63). Llanera and Smith (2021) claim that this can be detrimental for the university. They call for universities to seek and maintain 'romantic enthusiasm' so that transformational opportunities can be realised.

Denying theory in the pursuit of practicalities and 'rolling up the sleeves' to 'get things done' is a form of action without reflection. Much of the dialogue with access practitioners concentrated on how their work operates at a 'stupid' pace and the impact that

this has both on their wellbeing and on the ability to engage with stakeholders. Operating in this way sustains systems of oppression rather than acknowledging the complexities of how power and ideologies operate. It does not, in the end, do anyone we care about any favours (Thompson, 1996, p. 25).

I would argue that universities need to move away from practice that is frantic and instead emanate warmth towards their stakeholders as this is essential to fostering good relationships. The cultivation of nourishing interpersonal relationships is essential to receiving the necessary intellectual guidance and advice. Kidd (2021) argues, and my empirical evidence suggests, that the essential component in allowing these relationships to be built is *time*. This is a commodity which is in very short supply by access practitioners operating through new managerial agendas, as articulated by one access officer.

*“And the problem is, the access officer, we’ve spoken about this, just doesn’t have the time to think into next year, never mind next month – you know, into where or what we are going to be doing, so I think that’s crucial, it has to happen”. Jean*

Time is a vital resource which is needed to build relationships with under-represented communities and facilitate meaningful community engagement. As we have noted earlier Kidd (2021) claims that this ingredient is essential to building rapport, being comfortable with each other and allowing for the creation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships. The ‘time’ commodity is essential to building relationships with communities and was voiced by all participants in the research. Both the community and access practitioner participants sought long-term, sustainable engagement with the HEIs, anything short-term is not conducive to facilitating meaningful engagement. ‘Mere proximity and exposure are often insufficient to spark any real professional or personal relationship. Social relationships are not measured in duration and distance, but in warmth and depth’ (Kidd, 2021, p.26).

Time is also significant in relation to access funding cycles. All participants referenced fixed term, ‘volatile’ funding for access initiatives that can be ‘pointless’ and even ‘detrimental’ and ‘can have huge implications for the communities and the partnerships that we work with’ (Jean). Opportunities to influence policy decisions lie through the Compact dialogue process. HEIs have a chance to stress the importance of long-term, sustainable, collaborative approaches with communities. HEIs must articulate that access work cannot be

approached through a neoliberal managerialist way of working. There is a need for a long-term commitment to addressing equity of access. Short term and time specific funding streams are not the answer.

#### **8.4 Final Reflections**

As a practitioner, my ambition with this research was to offer not just a critique of the access landscape, but to also provide insights into enhancing HE access practice. In planning my research, I was interested in allowing for critical, collective and creative knowledge production with people. I wanted to combine the creative and the critical to allow for epistemologies that recognise the complexity of social phenomena (Grummell and Finnegan, 2020). Taking a critical perspective, I explored the reality of access practice and how it related to a deeper and more relational knowledge. The experience of the practitioner and their voice is at the centre of this inquiry and provides an important context for the community engagement currently being delivered by HEIs. I examined the social conditions under which knowledge on access is articulated and worked with research participants to understand how to transform in a 'practical sense' (Thompson, 2017). By involving the practitioners and the voice of the community in this qualitative inquiry, their stories reveal how HEIs are addressing educational inequality and provides a space for their vision of community engagement to be highlighted.

I was ambitious in undertaking this research. I wanted the research to be transformative, on a personal level but also, I wished to make a contribution to policy and practice at a local/regional and national level. The research provided me as a practitioner an opportunity to explore access from a theoretical and practical perspective. This qualitative research offers a unique insight into HE access practice and community engagement in Ireland and highlights the deeper systemic issues such as power imbalances and institutional framing. Now at the end of the process, I have some final musings.

- (1) As outlined in the Methodology Chapter, I was interested from the outset in critical research that allowed for a collective learning process (Grummell and Finnegan, 2020) and which provided an opportunity to influence practice. As my engagement with communities on the ground heretofore was limited, I wanted to

take the opportunity to engage with a community in a participatory way and was hopeful that the research would allow for this. Unfortunately, the field research for this study was undertaken during the global pandemic. Attempts to hold the community workshops in-person were halted because of countrywide lockdowns. This resulted in the workshops moving online and while they worked really well and I did learn a lot, my chance to engage with a community using participatory methods in a communicative space (Bevan, 2013) was impacted. For me as a scholar/practitioner, the true engagement experience of working face to face, in their community setting, with community participants was unfortunately lost. I am left questioning if I had had the opportunity to have in-person workshops, would the experience have been more beneficial to me as an access practitioner?

- (2) One of the key findings from this research was the need for collaborative practices between formal and informal educational providers. The Learning City initiative was suggested as a vehicle to facilitate this collaboration. The Learning City initiative aims to promote lifelong learning across all communities in cities. It seeks to foster partnerships and a culture of learning at local level, forging links and promoting policy dialogue (unesco). Could the Learning City initiative be a way of envisioning engagement in terms of a locality across institutions and sets of practices? More research is warranted on exploring the opportunity for HEIs to engage with Learning Cities in addressing social inclusion and enhancing access to higher education.
- (3) The higher educational landscape is continuing to change and how this is going to impact on access and community engagement is not entirely clear. The binary HE system is no longer evident 'because of the drift between the two sectors.....[and] any uncertainty in the mission and role of a TU creates a vacuum that will leave policy and institutional entrepreneurs a significant margin to reinterpret the role of an institution' (Ludovic, 2020, p.654). This study was undertaken just as the Institutes of Technology were transitioning to Technological Universities. This monumental transition will involve significant changes to the educational institutions involved. All activity within the new

universities is potentially facing change. The reality for access practitioners now may be very different to their practice in the coming years.

This research has significantly contributed to access theory and practice. Brendan in the second community workshop stressed that 'it's about everybody fermenting different ideas together'. This research highlights the importance of recognising and valuing different voices, different sources of knowledge and working together to address educational disadvantage. The research emphasises that there is no one organisation or agency that can increase access to higher education; everyone needs to work together - the HEIs, the communities, the further education colleges. HEIs have to engage strategically, ethically and consistently with communities.

## CHAPTER NINE

### CONCLUSION

When practice is a repetitive administration of techniques to the same kinds of problems, the practitioner may look to leisure as a source of relief, or to early retirement; but when he functions as a researcher-in-practice, the practice itself is a source of renewal. The recognition of error, with its resulting uncertainty, can become a source of discovery rather than an occasion for self-defense (Schön, 2016, p.299).

My ambition at the start of my research process was to create a body of research that would have impact on access practice and potentially influence access policy at institutional, regional and national level. In scoping out my research and literature review, I could not find any practitioner-led research that highlighted the professional experience and role of the Irish access practitioner. This research is fundamentally practitioner research. I tried to use doctoral research to understand my world, my practices and my motivations better. I was aware of the lack of practitioner research on access to higher education and I wanted to contribute to this field.

As a critical scholar/practitioner, I was interested in questions of power, questions of equality and how it is addressed. From friendships with access colleagues for many years, I was aware anecdotally of the experience and knowledge that access practitioners have. I was confident that my colleagues in the access world had something to contribute, to finding solutions to increased access for groups who have traditionally been excluded from higher education. My goal from the outset was to allow a space for their voices to be heard. The research highlighted that amongst access practitioners there is an awareness of the obstacles and challenges that exist in relation to moving access centre stage within HEIs. There is an appetite for more engagement with communities and an understanding that relationships must be built in a respectful and sustainable way. There is also a belief that existing models of access practice are restricted and can damage community engagement, 'doing our communities an injustice', as funding with short timelines and new managerialist practice dictates. Interestingly, in the discussions on community engagement with access practitioners, the focus was very often on engagement with formal educational providers within disadvantaged communities, such as DEIS schools and further education colleges. While there were some examples of access initiatives with disenfranchised groups (e.g.

asylum seekers), none of the access practitioners shared examples of long-term engagement with communities. The unanimous sentiment was that this is not possible.

The interviews with access practitioners provided a rare opportunity for analysis of practice and reflection. The hands-on experience on access that this group has offers a unique insight into the reality of trying to achieve greater participation by under-represented groups at higher education. My colleagues were grateful for the opportunity to discuss the issues and challenges in trying to meet access targets. There was palpable frustration at the perceived inability to influence agendas within their organisations. There was an anger towards the harrowing and relentless bureaucracy that has crept into practice because of neoliberal policy. There was an exhaustion from trying to meet targets and reporting, while trying to support students.

Policies with neoliberalist undertones and short-term funding have meant that access practitioners must be agile and flexible in moving to the beat of the government drum. Because of the access brief (which incorporates pre-entry, entry and post-entry) there is little to no opportunity for long-term engagement with communities that have low participation at higher education. Their focus is restricted to supporting the students who have managed to already access higher education.

The two-pronged approach taken in this research, linking with both practitioners and community, produced very in-depth findings articulating the need for collaborative, sustained, meaningful engagement. New managerial and neoliberal practice by HEIs is stifling opportunities for access practitioners to work together with communities in addressing social inclusion and access to higher education. Access practitioners need to be afforded time and resources to engage, listen, reflect and act.

My own professional experience led me to wanting to engage with an under-represented community in a way that I have not had the opportunity to heretofore. As access practitioner, aware of the importance of working with communities experiencing educational disadvantage, I had established links with the formal educational providers and with the Cork Learning City initiative. These links were not at the grass roots level. As a practitioner/scholar I was interested in engaging with a community group in a way that I had



not had the opportunity to do heretofore. I wanted to explore ways of engaging with communities that would improve my professional practice, allowing for a deeper level of engagement. The methodology used allowed me to establish greater levels of connection with people within the community, allowing for a shared exploration of the issues at play. In moving in this direction, I experienced firsthand the enormous benefit in listening to the community voice, in recognising the expertise within the community, in engaging in 'real' communicative ways in trying to address the issue of educational inequality. I had underestimated the levels of knowledge that the community had in relation to access to higher education. While I had realised that engaging with communities was important to promote learning and encourage participation, I initially approached the engagement from an institutional perspective, with a deficit lens. I was completely humbled by the knowledge that existed by the community participants and regretful that it took me so long to recognise the true value in working in this way. HEIs and the access practitioner cannot address issues relating to educational disadvantage without the communities being involved. The communities have the tacit, indigenous, insider knowledge needed to tackle educational disadvantage and HEIs must recognise this and work together as equals to address this.

In the previous chapter, four principles for access-community engagement were identified. The implications and recommendations at policy and practice level for these core principles are now given consideration.

### **9.1 Knowledge in policy and practice**

The community participants called for HEIs to acknowledge and value the 'gold in the community'. The community participants involved in this research had been involved in various initiatives with HEIs and on occasion felt aggrieved by their experience and the approach that has been adopted. Communities very often feel patronised and inferior by the engagement practices of HEIs. Participants in this research questioned why organisations have not 'asked people to come on board with them'. Communities have the knowledge and need to be front and centre of any access initiative, on an equal basis with HEIs.

The insider knowledge by the 'experts in the community' needs to be recognised and respected when designing and developing access initiatives. The community participants called for a greater awareness 'that the people can actually do this' and that there is 'gold in

the community'. They called for their voice to be heard, so that they could influence how HEI initiatives could benefit their communities. Voice was also a theme that developed with the access practitioners, calling for their voice to be heard, respected and acknowledged at strategic levels within HEIs and by the HEA.

The research also evidences that the expertise of the access professionals is essential to ensuring the success, sustainability, and longevity of HEI/community partnerships. Policy and practice on access to higher education has grown and evolved with very little recognition and value placed on practitioner and community knowledge. This research calls for engagement that values community knowledge and expertise. HEI and community collaborations must allow for meaningful, ethical and authentic engagement.

To-date many access initiatives focus their outreach work on links with DEIS schools or with other formal educational providers such as Further Education Colleges. This type of outreach engagement does not allow for community voices to be heard and does not place value on community knowledge. Relationships of trust must be established so that communities feel safe to engage and share their knowledge. At a practical level, pre-entry engagement needs to focus on communities on the ground, using participatory, collaborative approaches to engage, to learn, to work together. Community research participants called for HEIs to engage on a community needs analysis as a first step. This is a very practical initiative that could allow for the production and harvesting of community knowledge.

This research highlights the need for HEIs to be cognisant of the learning needs of disadvantaged communities. HEIs need to be aware of the fear and lack of confidence that can exist within communities and explore ways to address this. At a practical level community education needs to be considered by HEIs as a means for engagement with communities, as community education can help to address this fear and HEIs need to appreciate the benefits of linking with and supporting community education providers.

## **9.2 Care in policy and practice**

Care is a significant backdrop to this research. The research highlights the absence of care in relation to access practice and to community engagement. Neoliberal and new-

managerial practice which is now embedded within educational policy and practice, does not allow space for care and care-full engagement. The culture of speed and the new-managerial emphasis is taking its toll on the wellbeing of access practitioners, resulting from a disconnect between how access practitioners would like to work and how they are currently working. Access practitioners' work is frantic, bureaucratic and unrelenting. This has resulted in the institutionalisation of access practice, where new-managerial practices do not permit practices which are based on love and care. While policy acknowledges the importance of HEIs engaging with communities experiencing educational disadvantage, the reality is that meaningful, respectful, care-full engagement is not practiced. The opportunity to work in that way is not possible given the focus on outputs, targets, deadlines, funding cycles, etc.

This research highlights that authentic engagement and relationships based on dialogues which are rooted in love, care and solidarity (Freire, 1970; Noddings, 2003; Nussbaum, 2013; Lynch, 2022) are essential to addressing inequalities in society, including educational inequalities. Freire refers to 'the word' as being essential to dialogue.

For dialogue to happen there must be profound love, faith in humankind, humility, hope and critical thinking. Current HE access policy results in practice that does not permit dialogue with communities and as evidenced in this research I would argue, reduces any engagement to idle chatter.

Applying Baker et al.'s (2009) equality framework, which allows for equality of condition, as a way of working, would help to address and eliminate systemic inequalities and make social relations legible within the wider landscape. Equality of resources, participation, respect, recognition and power should be at the root of all HEI access engagements. The emphasis must be on participatory approaches, deep-rooted in relations of love, care and solidarity. Lynch (2022) stresses that to work in this way requires considerable resources, including time and energy. She states that when this work is not acknowledged and recognized, those who are doing the caring feel a 'contributive' injustice. Access policy and practice needs to emphasise equal partnerships between HEIs and the communities that experience educational disadvantage. Governance of funding and access programmes must have communities and HEIs equally represented.

### **9.3 Collaborative Practice**

This research highlights that educational institutions often work independently, ‘in silos’, in trying to increase access targets, and indicates the fragmented nature of access and community engagement. Target driven policy endorses HEIs taking this approach. Boyer (1996) advocates for a collaboration and integration (making connections and allowing for inter-disciplinary opportunities) to address challenges that present for communities. Indigenous, tacit knowledge held by communities was presented earlier and meaningful collaboration is what is needed to ensure that learning opportunities that are relevant and accessible are provided and supported.

A stronger focus on the Learning Neighbourhoods and Learning City initiative could be considered to counteract this fragmented experience of engagement. The purpose of the UNESCO Learning City programme is to promote inclusive learning opportunities and revitalise communities through learning. In Cork, the Learning City programme aims to ‘facilitate individual empowerment, build social cohesion, nurture active citizenship and lay the foundation for sustainable development’ (Cork Learning City). Initiatives such as the Learning City and Learning Neighbourhoods provide a structure for formal, informal and non-formal learning structures an opportunity to work together, to move outside of existing silos, to collaborate and to begin to address real systemic educational inequalities in a strategic way. These initiatives encourage organisations to work beyond their own individual institutional agendas, effectively drawing resources from all sectors and domains to support inclusive educational opportunities.

### **9.4 Time in policy and practice**

The research data highlights that time is a crucial factor in access and community engagement efforts. All four access practitioners repeatedly emphasized that insufficient time impacts negatively on their ability to build sustainable, trusting, and collaborative relationships with communities and stakeholders. The heavy workloads and demanding responsibilities of managing pre-entry, entry, and post-entry initiatives lead to a frantic and non-strategic approaches to access practice and community engagement.

Time is a crucial resource for building relationships with under-represented communities and fostering meaningful community engagement. As noted by Kidd (2021), time is essential for establishing rapport, building trust, and maintaining relationships. All access participants in the research emphasized that time is crucial for building relationships with communities.

To-date access funding cycles have been bound by time and are mostly fixed term. All participants referenced time-bound, 'volatile' funding for access initiatives that can be 'pointless' and even 'detrimental' and 'can have huge implications for the communities and the partnerships that we work with' (Jean). Access policy and associated government funding has to be mindful of the need for time in initiating, developing and delivering on collaborative community/access engagement projects.

### **9.5 Final thoughts**

The wealth of knowledge by access practitioners and community groups needs to be seriously considered in the production of any access policy at a national level. More access practitioner research would be welcome so that the practitioner knowledge is captured and has an opportunity to influence policy development. Participatory research practices with communities should also be prioritised so that the community voice is heard and valued.

At a policy level we need to stop planning and organising educational and learning opportunities through a neoliberal lens, where the focus of access to higher education is based on a deficit model. We need to develop dialogical pedagogical opportunities that allow for transformation and that meet the learning needs of all of our society. At a practical level HEIs need to allow access practitioners space and time to work respectfully and ethically with community partners to support them to become active citizens shaping their own educational futures. In so doing access practitioners need to be conscious of their privilege and power in supporting communities which experience educational disadvantage, engaging in practice that operates in a support role to communities.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Access Officer Job Description (provided to Deirdre Creedon on appointment)

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#### ACCESS OFFICER - GRADE VII

##### JOB DESCRIPTION

**Reporting to:** Head of Educational Opportunities Department

##### Main Duties

1. To draft, implement, develop and update as appropriate an Equal Access and Participation policy for the Institute.
2. To co-ordinate and develop the Institutes support structure and facilities for non-standard students.
3. To liaise with statutory and voluntary agencies which provide support for people with disabilities.
4. To liaise with academic and administrative staff in relation to non-standard students and their programmes of study.
5. To establish a forum of representatives from the Institute, local schools and other relevant organisations to help identify potentially suitable applicants and to explore mechanisms for encouraging and facilitating additional access to the Institute.
6. To instigate and develop an access programme in respect of students from disadvantaged socio economic backgrounds.
7. To monitor the progress of students in the programme and to act as mentor.
8. To develop and maintain a network of links with other third level institutions with a view to establishing national co-operative ventures.
9. To represent the Institute on access and disability issues at external meetings as appropriate.
10. To undertake an evaluation of the Institutes access initiatives with a view to making them more effective in achieving higher representation from disadvantaged groups.
11. To devise in conjunction with academic staff actions to support non-standard students with their studies in the Institute.
12. To co-operate with the Institute authorities and other relevant parties in the design and provision of specialist facilities and equipment.
13. To promote awareness of the special needs of diverse groups among staff and students.
14. To draft and implement in conjunction with other relevant staff in the Institute a comprehensive programme of induction which will provide for the integration of such students into both the academic and social systems of the Institute.
15. To prepare and operate budgets as required.
16. To report and provide information on the services and operation of the office as required from time to time.
17. To undertake other relevant duties from time to time as directed by the Director or delegated member of the Institute staff.

## Appendix B: Ethical Approval MU

### Maynooth University research ethics committee

MAYNOOTH UNIVERSITY,  
MAYNOOTH, CO. KILDARE, IRELAND



Dr Carol Barrett  
Secretary to Maynooth University Research Ethics Committee

26 June 2020

Deirdre Creedon  
Department of Adult and Community Education  
Maynooth University

**Re: Application for ethical approval for a Project entitled:** Access and Community Engagement: Is the Learning Cities Initiative a Vehicle for Enhancing Access to Higher Education?

Dear Deirdre,

The above project has been evaluated under Tier 2 process, expedited review and we would like to inform you that ethical approval has been granted.

Any deviations from the project details submitted to the ethics committee will require further evaluation. This ethical approval will expire on 30/06/2021.

Kind Regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Carol Barrett".

Dr Carol Barrett  
Secretary,  
Maynooth University Research Ethics Committee

C.c. Dr Fergal Finnegan, Department of Adult and Community Education

|  |
|--|
| Reference Number<br>SRESC-2020-2410253 |
|--|

## Appendix C: Consent and Information for Access Officers



### INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

#### Information Sheet

**Purpose of the Study.** My name is Deirdre Creedon. I've been working in Cork Institute of Technology for more than 24 years, and most of my career has been focused on increasing access and widening participation for under-represented groups. I am passionate about access to education and I'm interested in the role of Higher Educational Institutions in supporting learning opportunities within communities. My research is concerned with Learning Cities and if and how this initiative can enhance access and widen participation to higher education.

I'm a Doctoral student in the Department Adult and Community Education, Maynooth University and Access Officer in Cork Institute of Technology.

I am undertaking this research study` under the supervision of Dr. Fergal Finnegan.

**What will the study involve?** The study will involve interviewing Access professionals to assess current practice and determine opportunities for and benefits of community engagement, which may lead to increased access to higher education. The study will also involve linking with a community group in Cork to identify learning opportunities.

**Who has approved this study?** This study has been reviewed and received ethical approval from Maynooth University Research Ethics committee and Cork Institute of Technology. You may have a copy of this approval if you request it.

**Why have you been asked to take part?** You have been asked to take part in this research because you are an Access professional with many years experience. Your knowledge, expertise and insights on Access to Education, are invaluable and have to date been under-researched. Your input and opinions are important to the research.

#### **Do you have to take part?**

No, you are under no obligation whatsoever to take part in this research. However, I hope that you will agree to take part and give me some of your time to participate in a MS Teams interview with me. It is entirely up to you to decide whether or not you would like to take part. If you decide to do so, you will be asked to sign a consent form and given a copy and the information sheet for your own records. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and/or to withdraw your information up until the anonymising of data. A decision to withdraw up to this time, or a decision not to take part, will not affect our relationship.

**What information will be collected?** A recording of the interview will be taken, with your consent. Notes will be taken during the interview. A summary of the main themes from our consultation can be provided to you, for your approval, if desired.

**Will your participation in the study be kept confidential?** Yes, all information that is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept confidential. No names will be identified at any time. All hard copy information will be held in a locked cabinet at my place of work (Cork Institute of Technology), electronic information will be encrypted and held securely on CIT servers and will be accessed only by me.

No information will be distributed to any other unauthorised individual or third party. If you so wish, the data that you provide can also be made available to you at your own discretion.

*'It must be recognised that, in some circumstances, confidentiality of research data and records may be overridden by courts in the event of litigation or in the course of investigation by lawful authority. In such circumstances the University will take all reasonable steps within law to ensure that confidentiality is maintained to the greatest possible extent.'*

**What will happen to the information which you give?** All the information you provide will be kept at Cork Institute of Technology in such a way that it will not be possible to identify you. On completion of the research, the data will be retained on the CIT server. After ten years, all data will be destroyed. Manual data will be shredded confidentially and electronic data will be reformatted or overwritten.

**What will happen to the results?** The research will be written up as a doctoral thesis. Subsequently, conference papers or reports may be disseminated at National and International conferences and may be published in journals. Opportunities to present research findings to Access practitioners may present. A copy of the research findings will be made available to you upon request.

**What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?** I don't envisage any negative consequences for you in taking part. Topics may be highlighted in the thesis which may be professionally sensitive, but all inputs from Access Officers will be fully anonymized.

**What if there is a problem?** At the end of the interview I will discuss with you how you found the experience and how you are feeling.

If you feel the research has not been carried out as described above, you may contact my supervisor, Dr. Fergal Finnegan, [fergal.finnegan@mu.ie](mailto:fergal.finnegan@mu.ie).

**Any further queries?** If you need any further information, you can contact me: Deirdre Creedon, [REDACTED], [deirdre.creedon.2019@mumail.ie](mailto:deirdre.creedon.2019@mumail.ie)

If you agree to take part in the study, please complete and sign the consent form overleaf.

## Consent Form

I.....agree to participate in Deirdre Creedon's research study titled 'Learning Cities – A Vehicle for Enhancing Access to Higher Education.'

Please tick each statement below:

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me verbally & in writing. I've been able to ask questions, which were answered satisfactorily. ☐

I am participating voluntarily. ☐

I give permission for my interview with Deirdre Creedon to be audio recorded ☐

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether that is before it starts or while I am participating. ☐

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data right up to the anonymizing of data ☐

It has been explained to me how my data will be managed and that I may access it on request. ☐

I understand the limits of confidentiality as described in the information sheet ☐

I understand that my data, in an anonymous format, may be used in further research projects and any subsequent publications if I give permission below: ☐

Select as appropriate:

- I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview ☐
- I do not agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview ☐
  
- I agree for my data to be used for further research projects ☐
- I do not agree for my data to be used for further research projects ☐

Signed.....

Date.....

Participant Name in block capitals .....

*I the undersigned have taken the time to fully explain to the above participant the nature and purpose of this study in a manner that they could understand. I have explained the risks involved as well as the possible benefits. I have invited them to ask questions on any aspect of the study that concerned them.*

Signed.....

Date.....

Researcher Name in block capitals .....

*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 Maynooth University Ethics Committee at [research.ethics@mu.ie](mailto:research.ethics@mu.ie) or +353 (0)1 708 6019. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.*

*For your information the Data Controller for this research project is Maynooth University, Maynooth, Co. Kildare. Maynooth University Data Protection officer is Ann McKeon in Humanity house, room 17, who can be contacted at [ann.mckeon@mu.ie](mailto:ann.mckeon@mu.ie). Maynooth University Data Privacy policies can be found at <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/data-protection>.*

***Two copies to be made: 1 for participant, 1 for Researcher***



## Appendix D: Consent and Information form for Community Participants



### INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM Information Sheet

**Purpose of the Study.** My name is Deirdre Creedon. I've been working in Cork Institute of Technology for more than 24 years, and most of my career has been focused on increasing access and widening participation for under-represented groups. I am passionate about access to education and I'm interested in the role of Higher Educational Institutions in supporting learning opportunities within communities. My research is concerned with Learning Cities and if and how this initiative can enhance access and widen participation to higher education.

I'm a Doctoral student in the Department Adult and Community Education, Maynooth University and Access Officer in Cork Institute of Technology.  
I am undertaking this research study` under the supervision of Dr. Fergal Finnegan.

**What will the study involve?** The study will involve engaging closely with a community group to determine what access to education means for the community. Participants in the group will use photographs to explore and reflect on what learning and access to education means to them. I hope to work with eight participants as part of the study and they will be involved in a total of five workshops. These workshops will introduce you to the research, examine photography ethics and practicalities, interpreting photographs and reflecting on the photographs.

The study will also involve consultation with Access Officers, to identify practice and operational structures and positioning within the Higher Educational Institution.

**Who has approved this study?** This study has been reviewed and received ethical approval from Maynooth University Research Ethics committee and Cork Institute of Technology. You may have a copy of this approval if you request it.

**Why have you been asked to take part?** I am interested in conducting a study involving community participants in a collaborative enquiry to determine what learning opportunities exist and what access to education looks like in your neighbourhood. I am using collaborative enquiry methods so that participants can have an active role in shaping the research. Ballyphehane Community Development Project, which is a Learning Neighbourhood, has agreed to be part of this research and I would very much like you to be involved.

**Do you have to take part?**

No, you are under no obligation whatsoever to take part in this research. However, I hope that you will agree to take part and give me some of your time to be involved in five workshops. It is entirely up to you to decide whether or not you would like to take part. If you decide to do so, you will be asked to sign a

consent form and given a copy and the information sheet for your own records. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and/or to withdraw your information up until such time as the write up of the findings. A decision to withdraw at any time, or a decision not to take part, will not affect your relationship with me or with Ballyphehane Community Development Project.

**What information will be collected?** With your consent, I will ask you to use your mobile phone device or a tablet to take photographs that will be used to stimulate discussion in the workshops. The photographs that you take and provide as part of the workshops may be used in the doctoral thesis and in reports that may follow regarding the research. With your consent, the workshops will be audio recorded and notes will be taken by me throughout the workshop.

**Will your participation in the study be kept confidential?** Yes, all information that is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept confidential. No names will be identified at any time. All hard copy information will be held in a locked cabinet in my office in MTU Cork Campus, electronic information will be encrypted and held securely on the MTU Cork Campus server and will be accessed only by me.

No information will be distributed to any other unauthorised individual or third party. If you so wish, the data that you provide can also be made available to you at your own discretion.

*'It must be recognised that, in some circumstances, confidentiality of research data and records may be overridden by courts in the event of litigation or in the course of investigation by lawful authority. In such circumstances the University will take all reasonable steps within law to ensure that confidentiality is maintained to the greatest possible extent.'*

**What will happen to the information which you give?** All the information you provide will be kept in MTU Cork Campus in such a way that it will not be possible to identify you. On completion of the research, the data will be retained on the MTU Cork Campus server. After ten years, all data will be destroyed (by me). Manual data will be shredded confidentially and electronic data will be reformatted or overwritten.

**What will happen to the results?** The research will be written up as a doctoral thesis. Subsequently, conference papers or reports may be disseminated at National and International conferences and may be published in journals. Opportunities to present research findings to Access practitioners may present. A copy of the research findings will be made available to you upon request.

**What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?** It is possible that talking about your personal educational experience may cause some distress. If this happens, you will be supported by me, the researcher and by your Learning Neighbourhood.

**What if there is a problem?** At the end of each workshop I will discuss with you how you found the experience and how you are feeling. You may contact my supervisor, Dr. Fergal Finnegan, [fergal.finnegan@mu.ie](mailto:fergal.finnegan@mu.ie) if you feel the research has not been carried out as described above.

**Any further queries?** If you need any further information, you can contact me: Deirdre Creedon, [REDACTED], [deirdre.creedon.2019@mumail.ie](mailto:deirdre.creedon.2019@mumail.ie)

If you agree to take part in the study, please complete and sign the consent form overleaf.

**Thank you for taking the time to  
read this**

## Consent Form

I.....agree to participate in Deirdre Creedon's research study titled 'Learning Cities – A Vehicle for Enhancing Access to Higher Education.'

Please tick each statement below:

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me verbally & in writing. I've been able to ask questions, which were answered satisfactorily. ☐

I am participating voluntarily. ☐

I give permission for Deirdre Creedon to use my photographs in the workshops ☐

I give permission for Deirdre Creedon to use my photographs (which do not include people who are identifiable) in her doctoral thesis and future publications Yes ☐ No ☐

I give permission for my participation in the workshops with Deirdre Creedon to be audio recorded. ☐

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether that is before it starts or while I am participating. ☐

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data right up to summarizing of data . ☐

It has been explained to me how my data will be managed and that I may access it on request. ☐

I understand the limits of confidentiality as described in the information sheet ☐

I understand that my data, in an anonymous format, may be used in further research projects and any subsequent publications if I give permission below: ☐

Select as appropriate;

- I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my workshop ☐
- I do not agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my workshop ☐
  
- I agree for my data to be used for further research projects ☐
- I do not agree for my data to be used for further research projects ☐

Signed.....

Date.....

Participant Name in block capitals .....

## **Appendix E: Community Group Workshops Plan**

### **Community Group Photovoice Workshops**

#### **Workshop 1: INTRO**

*“The aim of the first workshop was to develop a good working relationship in the group, to support dialogue and to reclarify the research purpose, process and consent procedures.” – Ann Hegarty, P. 170*

In advance of the workshop, participants will be asked to identify a photo that they would like to use which would allow them introduce themselves to the group. The photo must have been taken by them (at any time). The photo can be of a place, an item, an animal, an occasion, but must not be of any identifiable person. The photo can be abstract or concrete/real. The photo can be a montage of a few photos. The photo will be used by the participant to introduce themselves and say why they are interested in getting involved in this research.

Online MS Teams – Day and time to be agreed with the group

I welcome the group and present a brief overview of the research and why I am doing this work. I share the photo that I have taken to give the group an introduction of who I am and my background. I ask the participants to do the same.

I will give a brief overview of the plan for the coming workshops and we will discuss and agree a terms of reference for the group. The purpose, the scope, meeting arrangements (frequency, quorum, etc.), communication between meetings, reporting and we will agree a group contract/ground rules for participation (eg. Respectful of opinions, confidentiality, allowing everyone to input)

I will explain my research methods and the significance of Participatory Action Research and the community voice. I will explain that I would like the participants to be co-creators of this research and emphasize the importance of their input into this research.

Before the workshop finishes, I will ask the group how they felt about this exercise and if they feel the photos allow them to express themselves more easily.

#### **Workshop 2: BUILDING CAPACITY**

I will introduce the Photovoice research method and the aim of using photographs to allow for meaningful engagement. Using examples of photos I will commence a discussion around the ethics of photography and speak with them about the importance of informed consent (If taking photos of people – why are we taking this photos, how are we going to use the photos, where are they going to be seen).

I will explain the assignment that the participants will be tasked with for the next session. Each participant will be asked to reflect on the following statements and questions

- what does learning mean to me and what are my learning needs?
- what does learning mean to my community and what are my community's learning needs?

- Learning is strongly supported within my community.

Each participant can capture up to four images. These images will be forwarded to my email address two days in advance of the next workshop.

### Workshop 3: PHOTO PRESENTATION

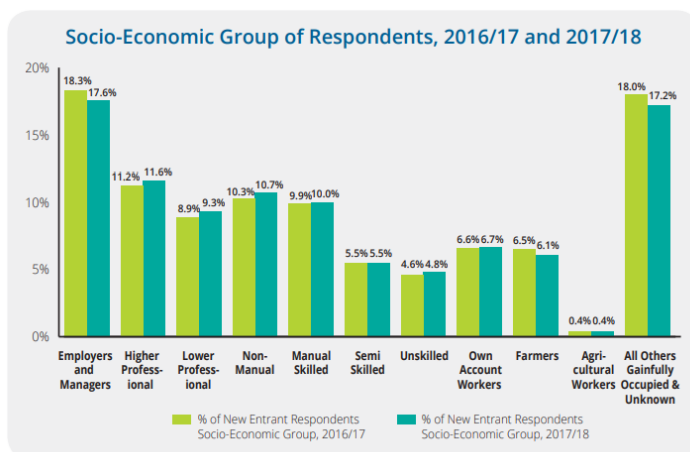
*“Discussion and analysis of these images and the story behind the taking of the images was the focus of the second workshop.” A Hegarty*

The participants will have shared the photos in advance and I will have them ready to share online with the group. I will ask each participant, one at a time, to speak about their photos and what they mean to them. I will invite the group to ask questions of each other and open the conversation up to the group.

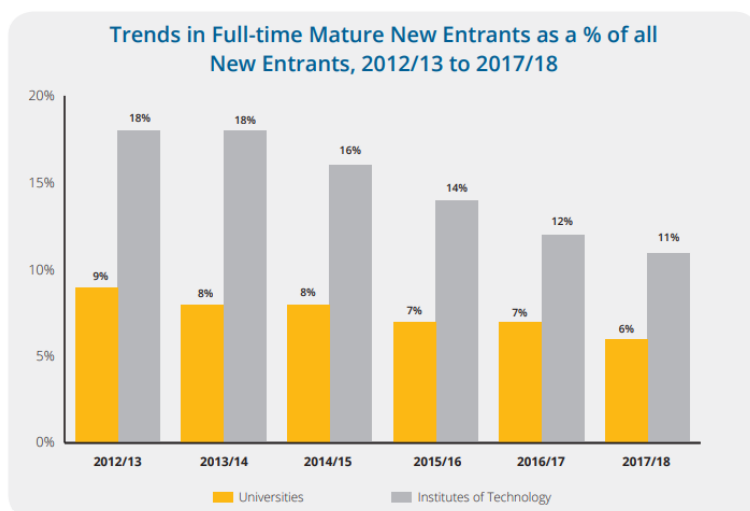
*“In photovoice there are no ‘wrong’ interpretations of a research participant’s photograph. The one they offer is valid. Individual interpretations can however be puzzled over in the collective space and images can be a starting point for discussions about diverse topics which are evoked by the image itself. The viewing of the photograph and its interpretation gives rise to the active co-construction of knowledge.” Ann Hegarty, P. 182*

Freire believed that empowerment begins with challenging the status quo. *“Groundswell action for change always comes from grassroots, so reflecting on these bigger issues helps us to become more critical in challenging our practice and its purpose.....A form of problematising that helps us get to deeper levels of reflexivity”*. Ledwith and Springett P.39.

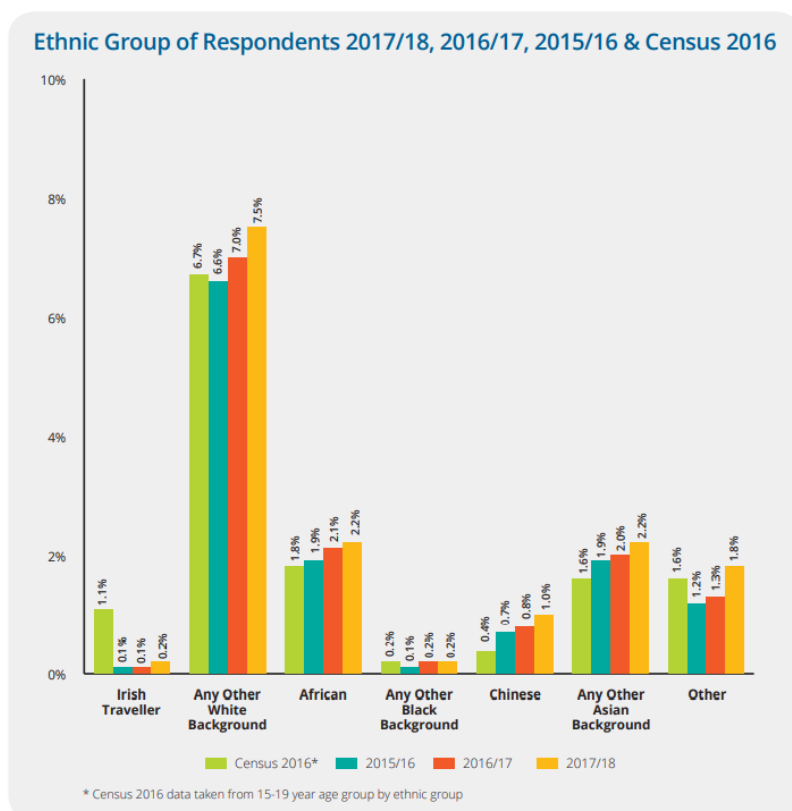
With this in mind, I will speak a little bit about my work as Access Officer and what my role is trying to achieve in terms of meeting national Access targets. I will speak about Access to Education from my perspective and how access to higher education is not happening for all. Using images of data such as these below, we will look at some trends in relation to access and higher education.



[Higher Education Authority – Key Facts & Figures 2017/18 \(hea.ie\)](#) P. 23



[Higher Education Authority – Key Facts & Figures 2017/18 \(hea.ie\)](https://www.hear.ie/higher-education-authority/key-facts-figures-2017-18) P. 27



[Higher Education Authority – Key Facts & Figures 2017/18 \(hea.ie\)](https://www.hear.ie/higher-education-authority/key-facts-figures-2017-18) P. 25

I will explain the assignment that the participants will be tasked with for the next session. Again, each participant will be asked to reflect on the following statements and questions:

- What does Higher Education mean to me?
- What does Higher Education mean to my community?

Each participant can capture up to four images per question. These images will be forwarded to my email address two days in advance of the next workshop.

#### **Workshop 4: PHOTO PRESENTATION 2**

I will summarize what we discussed from the previous session and present the analysis based on the discussions from the previous workshop. I will ask the participants if it is an accurate reflection of the discussion and if the analysis is fair.

The participants will have shared the photos from their second task in advance and I will have them ready to share online with the group. I will ask each participant one at a time to speak about their photos and what they mean to them. I will invite the group to ask questions of each other and open the conversation up to the group.

The final assignment will be explained to them. Again, each participant will be asked to reflect on the following statements and questions:

- Universities and third level education are real options for me and my community.
- What can/should Universities do to meet my learning needs?
- What can/should Universities do to meet my community's learning needs?
- How can Cork Learning City meet my community's needs?

#### **Workshop 5:**

This workshop will have a similar format to the last workshop. I will summarize what we discussed from the previous session and present the analysis based on the discussions from the previous workshop. I will ask the participants if it is an accurate reflection of the discussion and if the analysis is fair.

The participants will have shared the photos in advance and I will have them ready to share online with the group. I will ask each participant one at a time to speak about their photos and what they mean to them. I will invite the group to ask questions of each other and open the conversation up to the group.

#### **Follow Up: INTREPRETATION OF FINDINGS AND EVALUATION**

*"A final research meeting with participants was planned. Here emergent themes would be presented and discussed in order to strengthen the trustworthiness, accuracy and validity of the analysis of the research data (Karnelli-Miller et al, 2009)" Ann Hegarty, P. 172*

***'When the analysis is complete, participants share ideas on how to act on the findings as well as how to evaluate any action taken.'* P. 93.**

***National Access Plan – consultation process????***

***Annual HEI Community Dialogue Sessions through Learning Neighbourhoods***

***Exhibition within the community of the photographs where participants speak to about their images***



## Appendix F: Interview Overview for Access practitioners

### Interview overview for Access Officers

Thank you for agreeing to be part of my research. To allow you to reflect on and consider your thoughts in advance, please see below four areas which I would like to discuss with you on the day. I plan on asking you a number of questions under each of these headings.

#### (5) Institutional commitment to Access

*In this set of questions, I'd like to determine if there is a strategic commitment to Access, social justice, equality of opportunities and widening participation within your HEI. What policies exist to support Access within your HEI? Is your Access Office adequately resourced to fulfil strategic objectives around widening participation and increasing access.*

#### (1) Community Engagement

*In this section I wish to assess what level of engagement exists with communities that have low levels of progression to HE. What programmes are in place? How are these working? What level of consultation takes place between the HEI and communities. I also want to determine if you think from an Access perspective there is merit in building relationships with communities and if so, what benefits could follow.*

#### (1) Working Collaboratively

*In this section, I wish to determine if as Access Officer/Manager, you work together with other departments/organisations (internally and externally) in addressing access to higher level education and if so, what your experience of that has been. Has it been a positive way to work for the AO, the HEI and the communities?*

#### (1) Vision

*In this section, I wish to discuss with you what your vision is for Access within your HEI. What do you wish to achieve in the future and how do you see the role of Access Officer within your HEI.*

## Appendix G: Photovoice Photographs

### Workshop One: Welcome and Introduction

Participants were asked to use photographs to introduce who they are.



Carmel

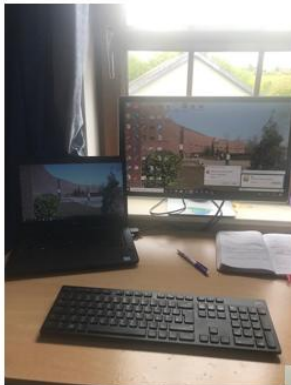


Brendan

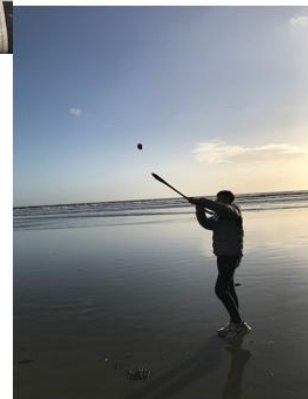




Ellen



Deirdre





Mary



Lilly



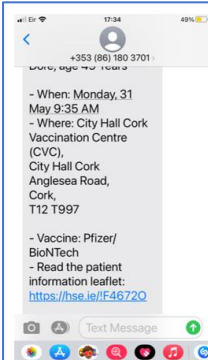
## Workshop 2: Building Capacity

The assignment – Everyone was asked to consider the following questions -

- what does learning mean to me and what are my learning needs?
- what does learning mean to my community and what are my community's learning needs?
- Learning is strongly supported within my community.

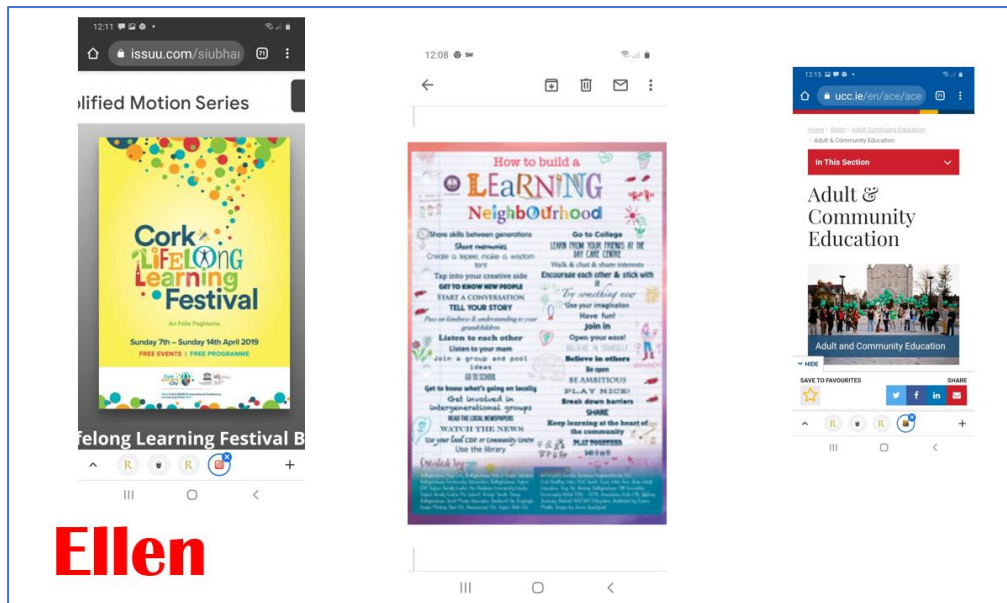


**Brendan**



**Deirdre**





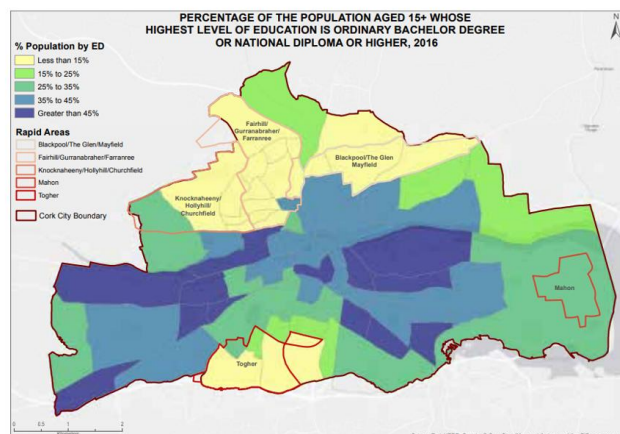
Ellen

## Workshop 3: Access to Higher Education

The photo task for the week was to focus on the following statements:

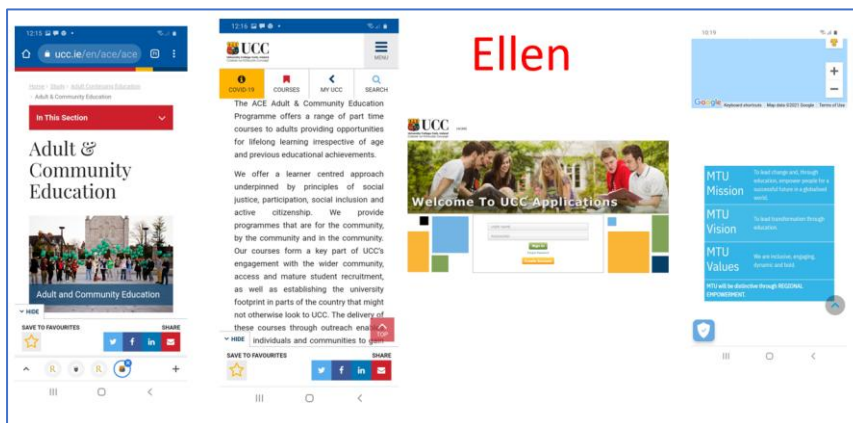
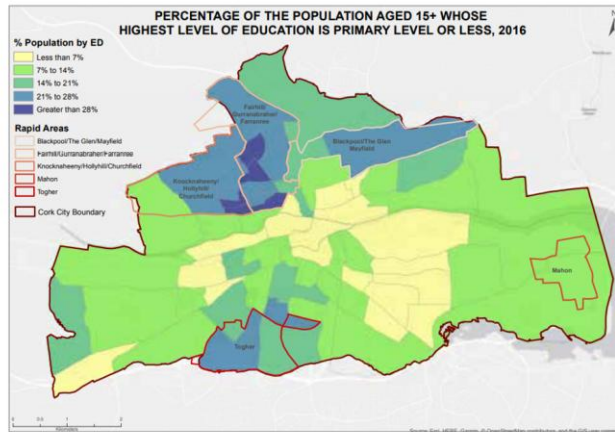
- Access to Higher Education is possible for anyone in my community
- Universities and third level are real options for me and my community

→  
**Figure 30:**  
PERCENTAGE OF THE  
POPULATION AGED 15+ WHOSE  
HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION  
IS ORDINARY BACHELOR'S  
DEGREE OR NATIONAL DIPLOMA  
OR HIGHER, 2016 (SOURCE: CSO)

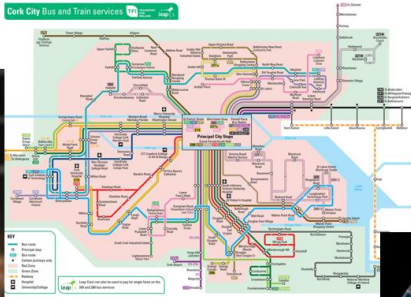




→  
**Figure 29:**  
 PERCENTAGE OF THE  
 POPULATION AGED 15+ WHOSE  
 HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION  
 IS PRIMARY LEVEL OR LESS, 2016  
 (SOURCE: CSO)







Brendan



Today 00:59

How many college students are in Ireland in 2020?

Feedback

<https://www.irishtimes.com/news>

**Record number from Deis schools progress to third ... - The Irish Times**

8 Jan 2021 — Feeder School data shows private schools continue to ... record 64 per cent of students from disadvantaged or Deis schools went ...

Missing: public | Must include: public

<https://www.irishtimes.com/pr...>

**Deis schools receive €60m in public funding - The Irish Times**

1990

The **Home School Community Liaison Scheme** was established in 1990. Teachers were initially appointed as liaison officers in a number of primary schools throughout the State in areas of urban disadvantage. In 1991 the scheme was extended to post-primary schools. 21 Dec 2020

<https://www.citizensinformation.ie>


**Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL) - Citizens Information**

About featured snippets

Feeds

Mary








**Information Booklet for DEIS schools participating in the Home School Community Liaison Scheme**

"It is clear from the Irish experience that educational initiatives based in schools can raise the educational level of the adults involved, and result in a general sense of empowerment in the local community. Parental involvement, especially in areas of socio-economic deprivation, does not just benefit the children and the school - it is a crucial aspect of lifelong learning."  
Parents as Partners in Schooling, OECD 1997

March, 2019







**FUTURE STUDENTS**

**Course Content**

| Code   | Title                          |
|--------|--------------------------------|
| IN0763 | Digital Presentations          |
| IN0783 | Desktop Publishing             |
| IN0810 | Business Administration Skills |
| IN0400 | Marketing Practice             |
| IN0490 | Communications                 |
| IN1356 | Work Experience                |
| IN1977 | Spreadsheet Methods            |
| IN1358 | Word Processing                |
| IN0783 | Database Methods               |
| IN1356 | Work Experience                |

**Entry Requirements**

Leaving Certificate (J.C. Equivalent), LCPV or (CA) or equivalent

For mature applicants appropriate experience will be considered in lieu of formal qualifications.

**Duration**

One Year (part-time only)

**Applicants**

The Home School Liaison and the Special Computer Training Centre are run in co-operation with the Cork Education and Training Board - SE, South Central College, the Department of Social and Social Protection (DSP) and the Cork City Partnership through the Local Employment Service (LES).

**STUDENT CHARGES**

*Fee Exemptions may apply.*

|                  |             |
|------------------|-------------|
| Materials        | €70         |
| QQ Fee           | €50         |
| Student Services | €200        |
| Gov. P.C. Fee    | €200        |
| <b>TOTAL</b>     | <b>€520</b> |

**Special Features**

- Parent-friendly focus
- Educational, career and personal guidance
- The opportunity to undertake work experience and apply new skills in the work environment
- On-campus canteen facility
- Applicants in receipt of a Social Welfare payment may apply for VYOS or SEEA

**Contact Details**

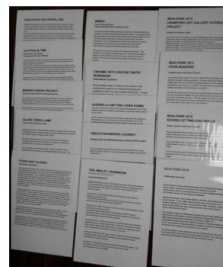
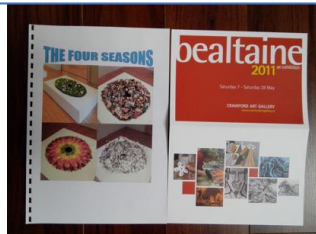
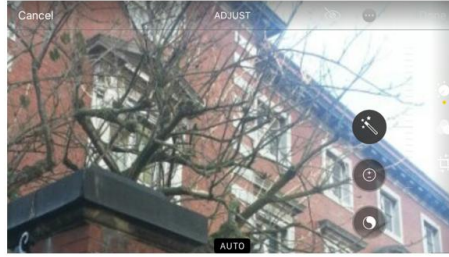
Tel: 021 4233300  
email: [info@epnnewschool.ie](mailto:info@epnnewschool.ie)

**Education Progression Opportunities**

SIXTH FORM: Business, SHAPES, ICT, CR036, CR023, CR022, CR150, CR400, CR403, LIT, LIT222, LIT223, LIT24, LIT25, LIT26, LIT27, LIT28, LIT29, LIT30, LIT31, LIT32, LIT33, LIT34, LIT35, LIT36, LIT37, LIT38, LIT39, LIT40, LIT41, LIT42, LIT43, LIT44, LIT45, LIT46, LIT47, LIT48, LIT49, LIT50, LIT51, LIT52, LIT53, LIT54, LIT55, LIT56, LIT57, LIT58, LIT59, LIT60, LIT61, LIT62, LIT63, LIT64, LIT65, LIT66, LIT67, LIT68, LIT69, LIT70, LIT71, LIT72, LIT73, LIT74, LIT75, LIT76, LIT77, LIT78, LIT79, LIT80, LIT81, LIT82, LIT83, LIT84, LIT85, LIT86, LIT87, LIT88, LIT89, LIT90, LIT91, LIT92, LIT93, LIT94, LIT95, LIT96, LIT97, LIT98, LIT99, LIT100, LIT101, LIT102, LIT103, LIT104, LIT105, LIT106, LIT107, LIT108, LIT109, LIT110, LIT111, LIT112, LIT113, LIT114, LIT115, LIT116, LIT117, LIT118, LIT119, LIT120, LIT121, LIT122, LIT123, LIT124, LIT125, LIT126, LIT127, LIT128, LIT129, LIT130, LIT131, LIT132, LIT133, LIT134, LIT135, LIT136, LIT137, LIT138, LIT139, LIT140, LIT141, LIT142, LIT143, LIT144, LIT145, LIT146, LIT147, LIT148, LIT149, LIT150, LIT151, LIT152, LIT153, LIT154, LIT155, LIT156, LIT157, LIT158, LIT159, LIT160, LIT161, LIT162, LIT163, LIT164, LIT165, LIT166, LIT167, LIT168, LIT169, LIT170, LIT171, LIT172, LIT173, LIT174, LIT175, LIT176, LIT177, LIT178, LIT179, LIT180, LIT181, LIT182, LIT183, LIT184, LIT185, LIT186, LIT187, LIT188, LIT189, LIT190, LIT191, LIT192, LIT193, LIT194, LIT195, LIT196, LIT197, LIT198, LIT199, LIT200, LIT201, LIT202, LIT203, LIT204, LIT205, LIT206, LIT207, LIT208, LIT209, LIT210, LIT211, LIT212, LIT213, LIT214, LIT215, LIT216, LIT217, LIT218, LIT219, LIT220, LIT221, LIT222, LIT223, LIT224, LIT225, LIT226, LIT227, LIT228, LIT229, LIT230, LIT231, LIT232, LIT233, LIT234, LIT235, LIT236, LIT237, LIT238, LIT239, LIT240, LIT241, LIT242, LIT243, LIT244, LIT245, LIT246, LIT247, LIT248, LIT249, LIT250, LIT251, LIT252, LIT253, LIT254, LIT255, LIT256, LIT257, LIT258, LIT259, LIT260, LIT261, LIT262, LIT263, LIT264, LIT265, LIT266, LIT267, LIT268, LIT269, LIT270, 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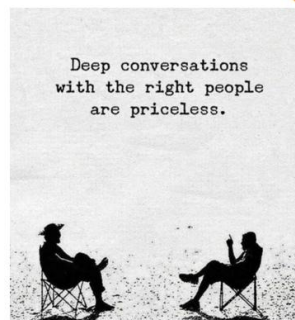
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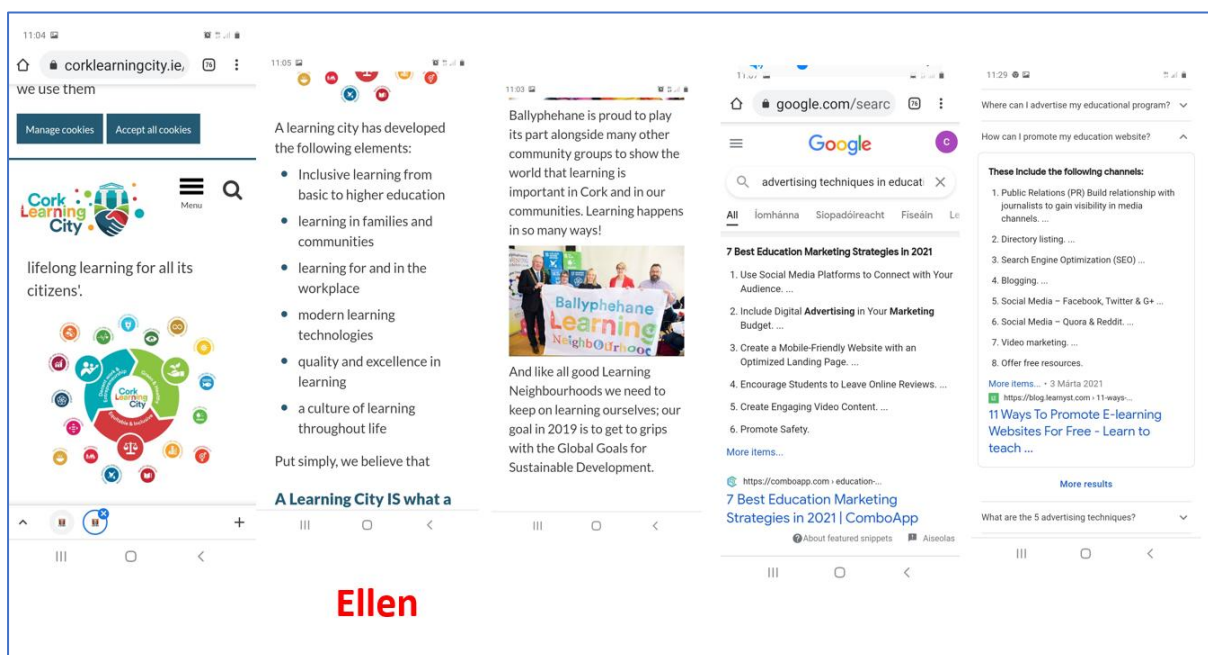
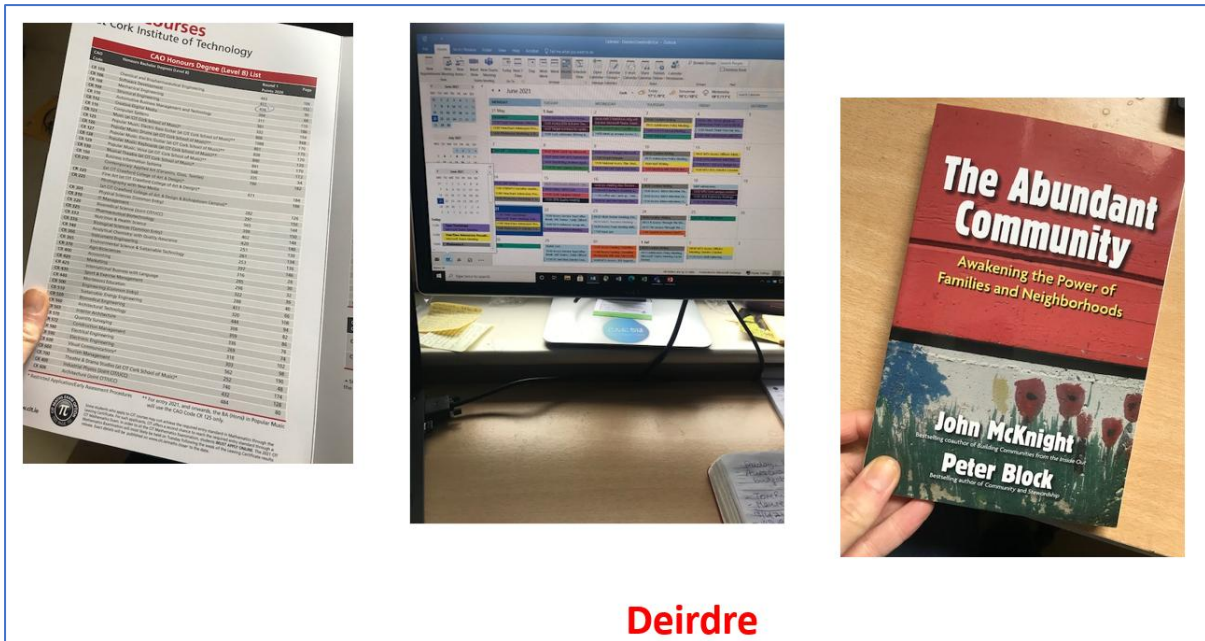
Carmel



Brendan







## Workshop 5 Reflections

There was no photo assignment for this workshop.