

National Access Plan 2022-2028

Impact Case Studies 2023-2024



An Roinn Breisoideachais agus Ardoideachais,
Taighde, Nuálaíochta agus Eolaíochta
Department of Further and Higher Education,
Research, Innovation and Science



PATH
Programme for Access
to Higher Education

HEA

An tÚdarás um Ard-Oideachas
The Higher Education Authority

Introduction

We are pleased to present the National Access Plan: HEI Impact Case Studies for 2023/24.

In response to the publication of the National Access Plan: A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022-2028 (NAP) in 2022, higher education institutions (HEIs) have developed new and strengthened existing innovative initiatives and interventions to increase the access and successful participation of priority group students in higher education and to enhance their graduate outcomes. These initiatives further the goals in the NAP and progress the NAP ambitions for a more inclusive higher education system.

HEIs are required under the Higher Education Authority Act, 2022, to report annually to the Higher Education Authority (HEA) on their progress towards meeting the objectives and actions outlined in the NAP. The first two years of reporting under this process informed the Mid-term Progress Review of the NAP, which assessed performance against the NAP goals and identified priorities for the second phase of NAP implementation.

In 2024, HEIs were invited to also submit a case study on an initiative that has delivered meaningful impact for priority group students, with a view to supporting system-wide knowledge sharing. The case study submissions were independently assessed and the four initiatives presented in this publication were identified as best demonstrating approaches that could enhance system-wide learning and serve as exemplars of good practice. An overview of all submitted case studies is also provided in the appendix.

The featured case studies from Trinity College Dublin, Maynooth University, Technological University Dublin, and South East Technological University highlight the valuable and innovative ways in which HEIs are responding to the challenges facing disadvantaged students and supporting their success within and beyond higher education. While diverse in their focus from pre-entry to post-entry support, there are clear common success factors, including the prioritisation of the student voice; a holistic infrastructure of support and responsiveness to the evolving challenges facing priority group students; and meaningful partnership and collaboration within and across higher education and the wider community.

We would like to thank all of the HEIs that submitted case studies for sharing their expertise and thereby supporting the enhancement of activity to support priority group students across the system.

Dr Louise Callinan
Head of Access Policy



Trinity College Dublin



Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

Enhancing Access to Employability through Inclusive Employment Pathways

Trinity College Dublin – Widening Participation and Building Inclusive Futures

Across Ireland, students from under-represented backgrounds continue to face barriers not only in accessing higher education but also in progressing to meaningful employment. At Trinity College Dublin, a suite of inclusive initiatives is transforming how universities can bridge this gap, not through isolated interventions, but by creating structured, sustainable pathways that connect education to opportunity.

From Pathways to Law and the Inclusive Internship Programme for disabled students, to the Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities (TCPID) Employment Initiative, these programmes have redefined what it means to deliver equitable access. Each initiative is rooted in collaboration, between academic staff, employers, professional services, and community partners, ensuring that every student, regardless of background or ability, can thrive and develop a sense of belonging in both education and work.

A Shared Purpose: Opening Doors to Opportunity

The genesis of Trinity's inclusive employability programmes lies in a shared recognition: access to higher education alone is not enough. True inclusion must extend beyond admission, embedding supports that enable every student to complete their degree and transition successfully into employment.

The Pathways to Law (PtL) initiative was launched in 2010 to support students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds to enter competitive legal careers. It has since evolved into Pathways to Professions (2018), expanding to business and STEM disciplines.

Meanwhile, the disAbility Service, Inclusive Internship Programme, introduced in 2022, provides structured, paid internships and mentoring for disabled students across professional units and academic disciplines. And through the TCPID Employment Initiative (2016–present), graduates with intellectual disabilities are connected with more than 50 business partners to build sustainable employment opportunities.

These initiatives are united by a common purpose, to remove barriers, widen student access and participation, and ensure that employment outcomes reflect the diversity of Ireland's student population.

Aligning Policy with Practice

All three initiatives align closely with the National Access Plan 2022–2028 and with Trinity's own Strategic Plan (2025–2030). They embody the NAP's goals of inclusivity, flexibility, coherence, and sustainability, targeting priority groups such as socio-economically disadvantaged students, disabled students, and individuals with intellectual disabilities.

This alignment ensures that institutional policy translates into real-world outcomes. By embedding inclusion within employability strategies and using data-driven evaluation, Trinity has created scalable models that can be adapted across higher education and beyond.

Declan Treanor, Director of Trinity's disAbility Service, explains: *"Our vision is simple: inclusion must be built into every stage of the student journey. From pre-entry to post-graduation, we want every student to have access to the networks, skills, and confidence they need to succeed."*



Photograph of disabled graduate internship programme with Provost Linda Doyle

Turning Vision into Action

Each programme has evolved through thoughtful design, careful implementation, and continuous feedback from students and employers. Pathways to Law connects secondary school students with university life through career talks, application workshops, and mentoring by legal professionals. Over time, it has expanded into other disciplines, supporting the next generation of diverse professionals.

The Inclusive Internship Programme has created 52 internships to date, with participating students gaining paid experience in inclusive settings across Trinity and partner organisations. Hybrid and remote models introduced in 2022 have expanded access for students with mobility or health-related challenges.

The TCPID Employment Initiative has provided 111 paid internships since 2016, with 34% of graduates moving into full-time employment, far exceeding national averages for people with intellectual disabilities. Employers now work closely with TCPID to develop long-term careers rather than short-term placements, embedding inclusion into their organisational culture.



Photograph of TCPID graduate, Mark Hogan, with Neil Byrne (EY Partner).

Measuring What Matters

Evaluation and continuous improvement are at the heart of Trinity's approach. Each initiative integrates robust systems for tracking progress and assessing impact: Baseline data on student progression and graduate outcomes informs programme design and refinement. Student and employer feedback is gathered through surveys and focus groups to identify barriers and opportunities for improvement. Annual reviews ensure that evolving needs, from digital accessibility to flexible placement models, are addressed systematically.

The data tell a powerful story: 91% of Pathways to Law participants progress to higher education. 77% achieve first- or upper-second-class honours degrees. 52 paid internships were created for disabled students so far, with strong employer demand. Over 50 industry partners collaborate with TCPID, embedding inclusive hiring practices across Ireland's corporate and public sectors.

Impact Beyond the University

The reach and significance of these initiatives extend well beyond Trinity's campus. For students, the impact is deeply personal, the chance to access education, gain confidence, and build a meaningful career. For employers, it is transformative, prompting the adoption of inclusive recruitment and workplace practices that benefit all staff.

One participant in the Inclusive Internship Programme captured this experience best: *"Eis internship gave me the confidence to see my disability not as a limitation but as part of who I am, and to know I have something valuable to offer."*

At a systemic level, the initiatives contribute directly to national goals on widening participation and equity of access. They demonstrate how universities can act as catalysts for societal change, turning policy ambition into measurable outcomes.

The reach of PtL and Trinity's other inclusive employability initiatives extends far beyond the campus. For many students, these programmes provide not only academic support but a pathway to belonging and success in professional life.

"I have come to the end of my degree programme in Trinity. It was a long four years but the Trinity Access Programme (TAP) and PtL Initiative really made my college experience so much easier. I leave Trinity with a first-class honours degree in law and two summer internships with leading Dublin law firms. The TAP Legal Speed Meet and the partnerships with these firms definitely helped me to achieve this."

PtL Graduate

Lessons in Leadership and Partnership

The success of Trinity's employability pathways lies in their collaborative foundation. Strong partnerships between students, staff, employers, and national agencies ensure that inclusion is not a project but a practice.

Key success factors include data-driven design, employer engagement, student-centred support, and continuous learning, all combining to create what the HEA has recognised as one of Ireland's most innovative examples of inclusive access and employability practice.

Looking Forward: Scaling Inclusion

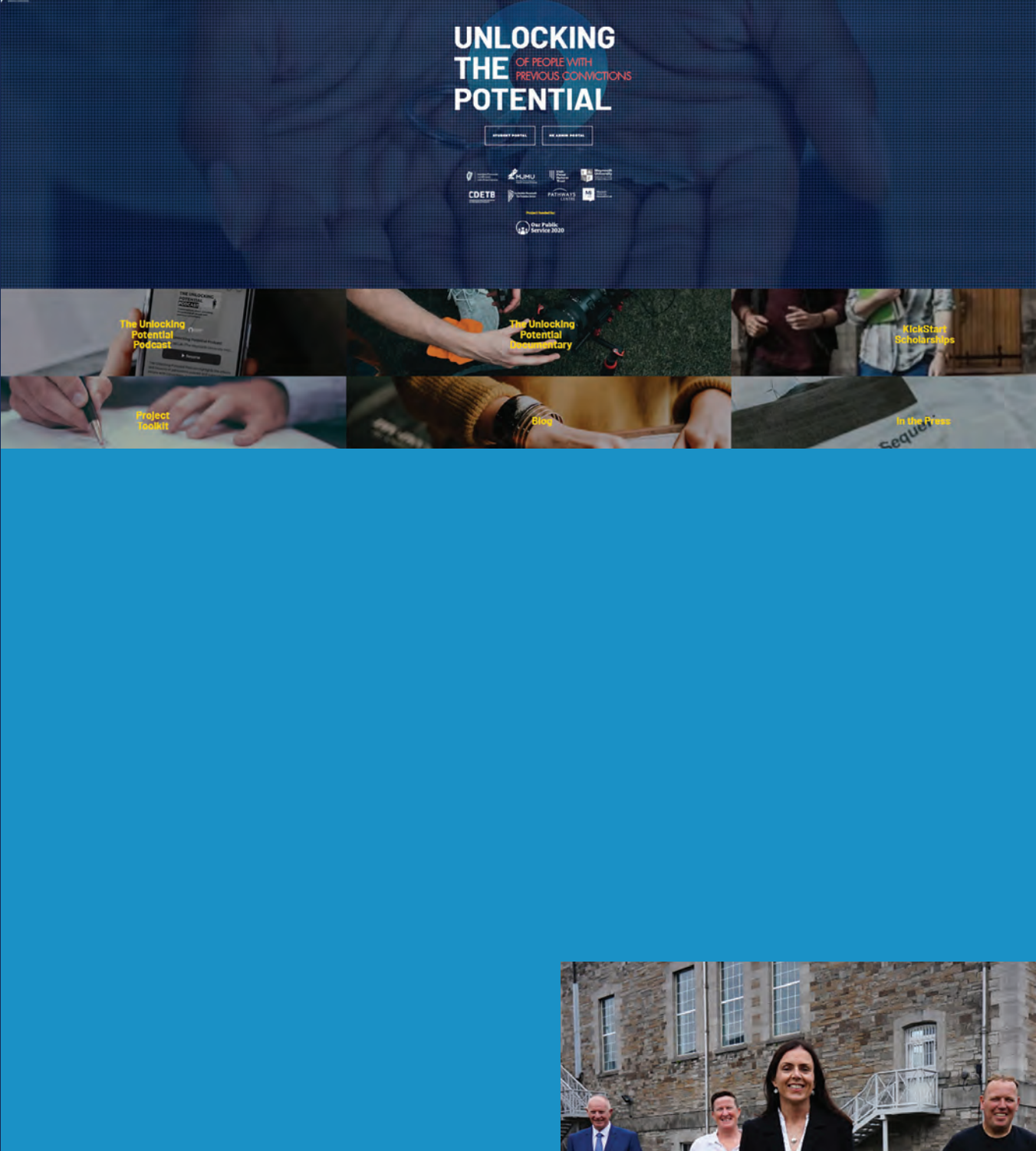


Photograph of TCPID graduate, Margaret Turley, with her Business Partner mentor.

While these initiatives have achieved measurable success, Trinity's vision extends further. Plans are underway to scale employer engagement, secure sustainable funding, and deepen impact across professional sectors.

As Ireland's higher education landscape evolves, Trinity aims to model how universities can foster inclusive employment not as an add-on but as a fundamental outcome of equitable education.

"Inclusion is everyone's responsibility," says Treanor. "The success of these programmes shows what can happen when a university truly commits to equity through the embedding of meaningful and focused widening access initiatives, not just in theory, but in practice."



Maynooth University



Grassroots to Government Community Needs Analysis Model of Community Engagement

How College Connect Is Redefining Access to Higher Education

When Maynooth University and its regional partners set out to understand why some communities remain on the margins of higher education, they didn't just design another outreach project. College Connect, a PATH 3 funded collaborative initiative of four higher education institutions — Maynooth University, Dublin City University, Dundalk Institute of Technology, and Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest — has been quietly revolutionising how universities engage with communities most excluded from education.

At the heart of this transformation is a deceptively simple idea: listen first.

A New Kind of Research: Listening, Learning, Leading

College Connect's **Community Needs Analysis (CNA)** is not a top-down research project; it's a peer-led conversation. Rooted in *Participatory Action Research (PAR)*, the CNA model treats community members as experts in their own experiences. The PAR approach engages stakeholders in leading and developing projects and adopts the change-focused and PAR-influenced EERS (Elicit; Evidence; Resourcing action; Start again) model (Fig 1).



Figure 1: EERS evaluation model for College Connect (adopted from Bland (2017))

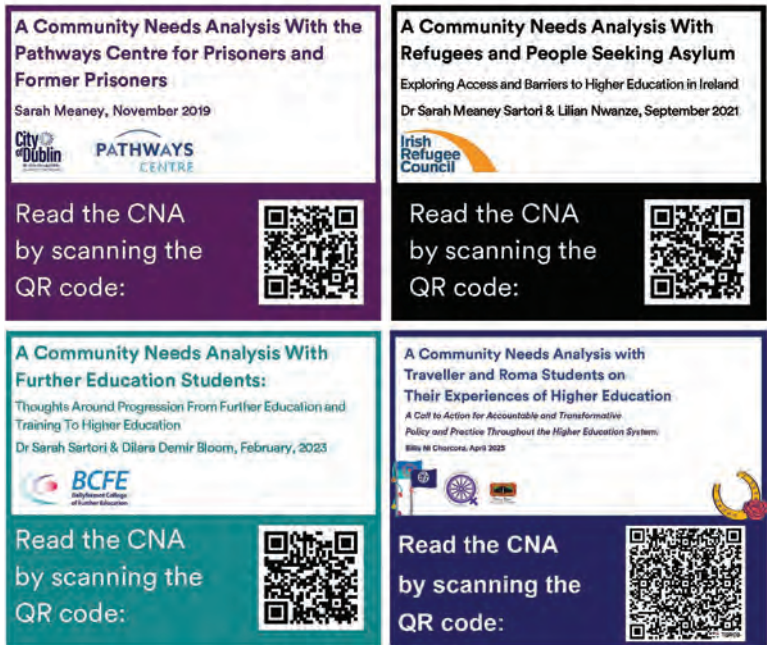
Each CNA brought together university researchers, community organisations, and people from the target group, whether they are prisoners, refugees, students in Further Education, or students from Traveller and Roma communities, to identify the real barriers that hold them back. The process is democratic, respectful, and grounded in equality.

"It is isn't research about communities; it's research with communities," says the College Connect team.

Each CNA is co-created from the start: community connectors are recruited, peer researchers are trained, and partnerships are formed with local organisations. Together, they map barriers, co-design solutions, and ensure that findings lead to real change.

From Insight to Impact

Since 2018, College Connect has completed four major CNAs, focusing on (i) Prisoners and former prisoners, (ii) Refugees and people seeking asylum, (iii) Further Education and Training (FET) learners and (iv) Traveller and Roma communities.



Each CNA is a story of transformation. The first, conducted with the Pathways Centre, shone a light on the stark realities facing people with criminal convictions who dream of returning to education. The findings were sobering, with over half of Irish prisoners having left school before the age of 15, most without completing a State exam. Many described childhoods marked by poverty, exclusion and early school leaving. Yet the study also revealed powerful motivations with education seen as a lifeline, a second chance, and a way to rebuild dignity.

“Education gave me back my sense of self-worth,” said one participant.
“It showed me I could still have a future.”

Policy Change Starts with People

What began as a local research initiative soon began to influence and shape **national policy**.

The CNA findings helped secure official recognition for people with criminal justice experience in Ireland's **National Access Plan for Higher Education 2022-2028**. This recognition ensures they are now explicitly included in access schemes such as the PATH 2 1916 Bursaries.

The CNA also sparked a wave of innovation across the higher education landscape.

Partnership in Action: From Mountjoy Prison to Maynooth University

In 2019, Maynooth University and Mountjoy Prison formalised Ireland's first **University–Prison Partnership**, creating shared learning spaces where students in custody and on campus learn side by side. This collaboration, supported by the Public Service Innovation Fund, builds a tangible bridge between prison education and mainstream higher education.

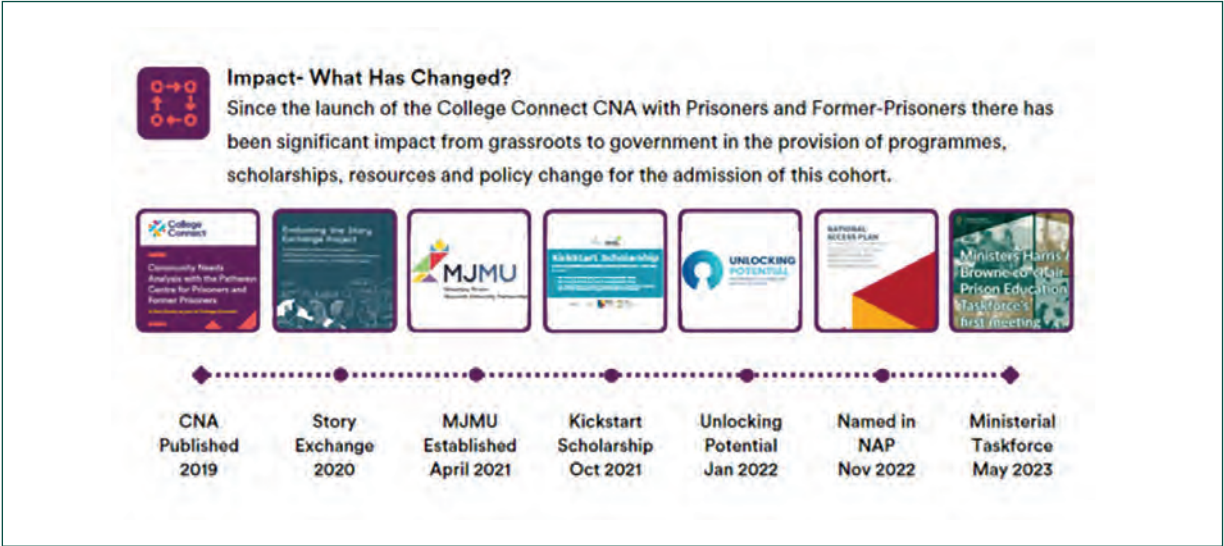


Figure 2: Impact on Policy and Practice of CNA with Prisoners and Former Prisoners

Unlocking Potential: A National Resource

The **Unlocking Potential** website, born directly from the CNA recommendations, has become a go-to national resource for people with convictions who wish to enter higher education. It offers:

- A **Fair Admissions Toolkit** to help universities create inclusive admissions policies
- Guidance on **Garda vetting** and **financial supports**
- **Peer stories** that challenge stigma and inspire others to take the next step

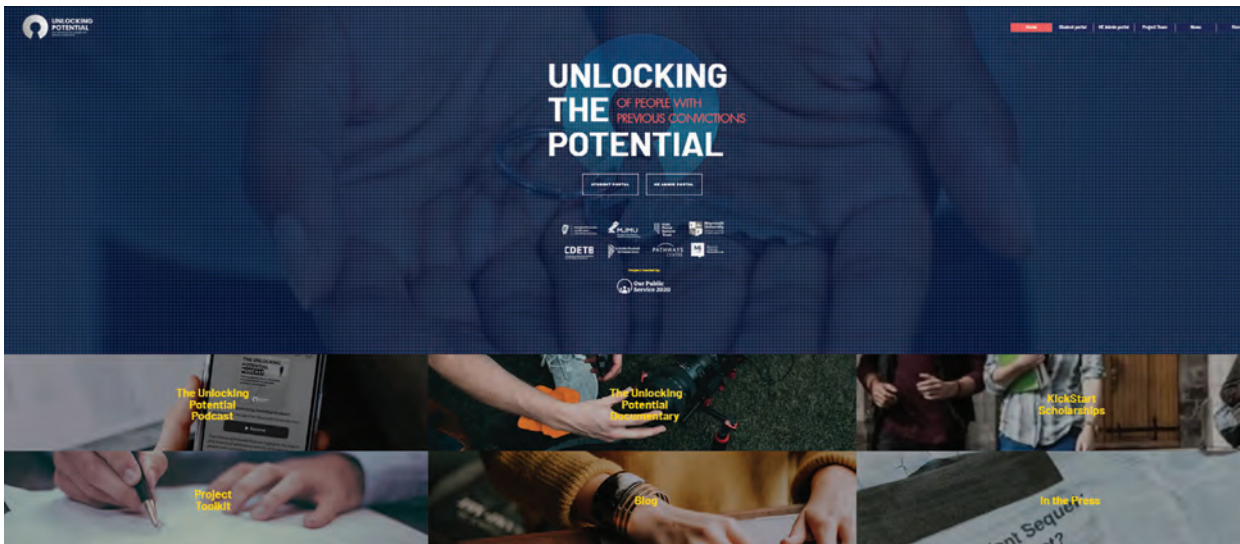


Figure 3: Unlocking Potential website

By breaking down practical and psychological barriers, the platform empowers individuals to see themselves not as ex-offenders, but as future graduates.

Financial Support for Change

Money should never be the reason someone can't return to learning. That's why, in 2021, Maynooth University and its partners launched the KickStart Scholarship, funded by the Irish Probation Service and the Irish Prison Service.

So far, €100,000 has been awarded annually across the MEND cluster, supporting 18 students since 2022. For many, this has been the crucial step that turned possibility into reality.

"The scholarship didn't just pay for my fees," said one recipient. "It told me that someone believed in me."

"I recently completed a Degree in TUS Midlands with a distinction. I couldn't have done this without the help of the Disability Office, the Access Office, and the *KickStart* scholarship. I hope my story will inspire others to fulfil their true potential."

KickStart Scholarship Recipient

"When you're reading stuff in the media or the news or online or whatever, you always get this image of what people who are in situations like this are like. But then when you come here it's completely different. It gets rid of that stigma."

Story Exchange participant

Systemic Change: The Prison Education Taskforce



In 2023, Ireland's **Prison Education Taskforce**, chaired by Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Minister of State at the Department of Further & Higher Education, Research, Innovation & Science, was established to improve pathways between the prison and higher education systems. The Taskforce is working with national stakeholders including the Irish Prison Service, SOLAS, the National Apprenticeship Office, Education and Training Boards Ireland and the Probation Service to enhance data collection, expand Open University-style learning, expand widening participation initiatives across the higher education sector and ensure family access to education.

This taskforce signals a systemic shift where higher education is no longer an afterthought for people in the justice system; it's a central part of their reintegration and recovery.

Changing Minds, Changing Lives



Photograph of Dr. Sarah Sartori with Assistant Governor of Mountjoy Prison, Donnacha Walsh, Willie White (Project Participant) and Marion Irwin-Gowran and Niall Barrett from the Gaisce Award Team

College Connect's work hasn't stopped at policy and partnership. Through creative projects like **The Story Exchange**, delivered with Gaisce: The President's Award, and Narrative 4, an educational programme that uses storytelling to build empathy and connection, students and prisoners have been engaging in peer-to-peer workshops that foster empathy, challenge stereotypes and inspire mutual learning.

Since 2019, 86 participants — 50 prisoners and 36 university students — have taken part, with the programme expanding to Wheatfield Prison and featuring in RTE's *Changemakers* documentary.

Beyond the Walls

The College Connect model shows what happens when higher education truly opens its doors, not just to students, but to their stories, struggles and strengths.

It demonstrates how universities can partner with communities to create research that matters and policies that endure.

"It is more than outreach," says Dr Rose Ryan of Maynooth University's Access Programme. "It's about transformation, of systems, of attitudes and of people's lives."

A Model for the Future

As Ireland's higher education sector works to deliver on the **National Access Plan 2022–2028**, the CNA model offers a blueprint for genuine inclusion. Its strength lies in its humanity: research led by those who know the barriers best, partnerships built on trust and policies rooted in lived experience.

From prison classrooms to university lecture halls, College Connect has shown that when we co-create education, everyone wins.



Technological University Dublin

Taste of TU Dublin

T*aste of TU Dublin* is an initiative that promotes pathways to third level education among adult learners. It provides them with the opportunity to experience TU Dublin, explore higher education options and pathways, and gather information on the support and assistance available. *Taste of TU Dublin* events cultivate a welcoming atmosphere, helping attendees to feel included. It is adaptable, generally featuring information sessions, sample lectures, workshop activities, and tours of the campus.

Supported by the HEA under PATH 3 (Programme for Access to Higher Education), the programme was developed and successfully piloted in 2021. Since then, the University has increased engagement with community partners to expand and develop the programme across all campuses, increasing the number of participants from 10 in 2021, to a cumulative total of 399 in 2024/2025.

Community Stakeholders



Photograph of Mairead Murphy, TU Dublin, with representatives from Empower at the launch of a Guide for International Protection Applicants, Refugees and other Migrants

Purpose

Taste of TU Dublin supports the national objective of enhancing access to third-level education by adult learners. It is grounded in a clear understanding of the barriers to higher education that adult learners face, such as the complexity of the application process, uncertainty around course selection, financial constraints, and the perception that university is not for me. The initiative is designed to offer clear information, personalised guidance, and foster a sense of belonging within the university environment.

Design

In 2020, a mapping exercise was undertaken to identify any relevant organisations with whom we could partner in the Greater Dublin Area. The process involved consultations with local community organisations and further education providers, to pinpoint gaps in service provisions and understand the barriers faced by individuals from under-represented groups when considering higher education.

These engagements highlighted the importance of tailoring events/initiatives to meet the specific needs of participants, of recognising the cultural and social factors involved, and of co-designing each event with the relevant partners. A logic model was used to support the design, implementation, management and evaluation of the initiative. This captured how the initiative was supposed to work and how it would provide a good solution to the problem at hand.

Central to the programme operational design is the carrying out of a needs assessment with stakeholders prior to each event, to ensure that the design, content and timing of each Taste of TU Dublin event meet the needs of participants.

The NAP Priority Groups Targeted

We collaborate with community partners that work with the priority groups identified in the National Access Plan: people who have experience of homelessness, disability (including intellectual disabilities), first and second-time mature students, lone parents, members of the Traveller and Roma communities, migrants, refugees, ethnic minorities, and people from areas that are socio-economically disadvantaged. They have benefited by receiving clear information about higher education opportunities, including understanding entry routes, education pathways, the application process, financial supports available, and career and employment prospects.

In terms of programme roll-out, a pilot event was held in May 2022 in collaboration with Blanchardstown Adult Education Service. Following its success, the initiative was expanded across all campuses to engage a broader range of under-represented groups.



Photograph of Siphwe Moyo, TU Dublin Graduate and Community Development Worker at Empower, Fingal.

Impact

Between May 2022 and April 2025, TU Dublin facilitated 22 Taste of TU Dublin events, with 399 participants. The University has progressively expanded its partnership network. Attendees and their accompanying staff reported that they found the sessions extremely helpful in providing clear information and overcoming obstacles.

A summary of the impact in terms of the number of participants and partnerships is illustrated below.

Figure 4: Taste of TU Dublin events and participants by academic year

Academic Year	Number of Events	Number of Participants
2021/22	1	10
2022/23	5	67
2023/24	8	151
2024/25	8	171
Total	22	399

Some of the feedback from the attendees includes:

"Ete session made me feel that I am able to be in university even though I have ASD"

"It has made me more excited and confffident about applying"

"It helped me to gain more information about gefting back to university and what career path to choose"

"Ete accessibility, the breaking down of barriers. Very useful that Springboard is open to Ukrainian students"

"Talking to the lecturer. Which gave me great insight into the course and speaking to the third-year students"

Feedback from partner organisations:

“When our learners start with us, many do not even dream they can progress to higher education. As they progress on their course their confffidence grows, and they begin to believe in possibilities - a Taste of TU Dublin helps to build their belief, and our learners deserve the opportunity and support that a Taste of TU Dublin affords them. Our learners deserve to believe in the possibilities and to be supported in their attainment”.



Photograph of participants at a Taste of TU Dublin Event on Campus

Feedback from partner organisations:



"It was magniffcently prepared and organised from start to ffnish. Etere were planning meetings beforehand and a huge warm welcome to our students. It really is a superbly organised event and thoroughly engaging with participants".



Photograph of Taste of TU Dublin Partnership Network

Learning & Insights

- **Collaboration.** This is the cornerstone of this initiative's success. A diverse range of partners have contributed to strengthening and amplifying the impact of these events.
- **University Application Process.** It was identified that attendees and accompanying staff needed clarity and support with the university application process. To help with this, the University developed some resources, including: *A Pathways to Education* poster, which is a visual aid that illustrates the key steps involved in the application process; a *Financial Support and Assistance in Higher Education* document to clarify financial entitlements; and a guide on *Writing a Supportive Statement when Applying as Mature Applicant* for mature students or people returning to education.
- **Engagement with Faculty.** This engagement was identified as the main motivating factor for attendance. Both attendees and accompanying staff indicated a need for more in-depth information about university courses and subsequent career paths. This was addressed through stronger engagement with academic staff and departments, and the facilitation of future/ongoing connections with academic staff.

- **International Protection Applicants (IPAs).** Discussions identified that people working in community settings were unsure of the rights and entitlements of people in the International Protection Process. To address this, it was decided to:
 - Create and deliver *Taste of TU Dublin* events specifically for people in the IPA system, including for those living in direct provision centres.
 - Develop specific information sessions for professionals working with IPAs, to meet the needs of (i) education providers in the community and (ii) university access practitioners and mature student support officers.
 - An information sheet was created called 'Immigration Status and Entitlements to Financial Supports for Higher Education' to outline the funding supports available to IPAs and recipients.
 - An *Education Fair* was organised for 60 people currently in the IPA system and accompanying staff. This showcased the educational opportunities and funding options available before and after IPAs receive a decision on their status.
 - A *Guide for International Protection Applicants, Refugees and Other Migrants* was produced to provide comprehensive information on immigration status/residency permissions, and financial supports available. This is beneficial for both people in the IPA system and professionals working in the field. The University has subsequently established a "Migrant Further & Higher Education Support Network (MFHESN)" that brings together the stakeholder organisations.

In July 2025, TU Dublin achieved *University of Sanctuary* status. *A Taste of TU Dublin* contributed to the University receiving this recognition.

TU Dublin would like to thank our partner organisations for working with us!



South East Technological University

SETU Assistive Technology Outreach Programme

Under the auspices of PATH 3, SETU developed an Assistive Technology Outreach Programme. This is a two-strand evidence-driven model of practice aligning to the National Access Plan (2022-28).

SETU "ATTAINS" (Assistive Technology Training Assisting Independent Success) and "Enabling Successful Transitions" – Assistive Technology Outreach Programme strands, demonstrate an innovative approach to improving access and supporting underrepresented students transitioning to higher education. The programme introduces these students to assistive technology (AT) aiming to build AT competency and adoption through both the Student-Focused and Train the Trainer approaches. This article presents the development, design, implementation, and impacts of the programme, highlighting the alignment with the National Access Plan (NAP 2022-28).

Programme Development

Both strands began as pilots following collaborations between the disability supports service in SETU and a number of stakeholders including: Waterford Schools Completion Team (WSCP), AHEAD, DAWN, ETBs (KCETB & LOETB), Education Centres and Prison Services.

Through ATTAINS, SETU introduced AT training into DEIS Post Primary Schools in Waterford. This strand initially commenced as part of a homework club programme where students attending a DEIS Post Primary School were identified by their schools' Special Education Needs Coordinator (SENCO), and invited to participate in an afterschool AT Homework Club Programme. This was later expanded and delivered to targeted students either during or after school as part of the structured ATTAINS six-week programme.

An experienced AT facilitator with experience working with students with disabilities led the programme and introduced students to AT software and hardware to assist with the completion of their schoolwork, homework and study using technologies to support independent learning.

The second strand was developed as a Train the Trainer model aimed at educators, student mentors and staff to embed AT in educational settings including a programme for TY students. Collaboration with ETBs and primary educators has advanced the Enabling Transition AT Programme, emphasising the role of AT and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in meeting diverse classroom needs. Ongoing support was also provided to SETU tertiary students through this initiative which was later expanded into higher education, and the Disability Support Services.

Programme Design

The strands were informed by an educational based approach "learning by doing," where students and educators navigate their learning through active participation. Furthermore, both strands draw on best practices in AT training for students with disabilities, backed by research demonstrating the positive impact of AT on academic outcomes, such as improved literacy skills, increased autonomy, and enhanced self-confidence (National Council for Special Education, 2021).

Impact

The programme has yielded significant positive outcomes. Over six academic years (2019-2025), Strand 1 has engaged 906 students across seven post-primary schools delivering 267 training sessions. The programme has also expanded its reach by providing continuing professional development (CPD) to 253 educators, staff, and parents. The second strand has engaged 2765 students and educators and delivered 131 sessions.

The figures (see Table 1) provide a clear indication of its effectiveness and appeal to the target demographic, which consists predominantly of students from underrepresented groups who face additional challenges in the educational system.

Each academic year, the programme has seen growth in the number of participating schools, students, educators and training sessions, as outlined in Table 1 below. This expansion can be attributed to the increasing recognition of the programme’s value in fostering inclusive educational practices, as well as its alignment with the NAP targets and goals.

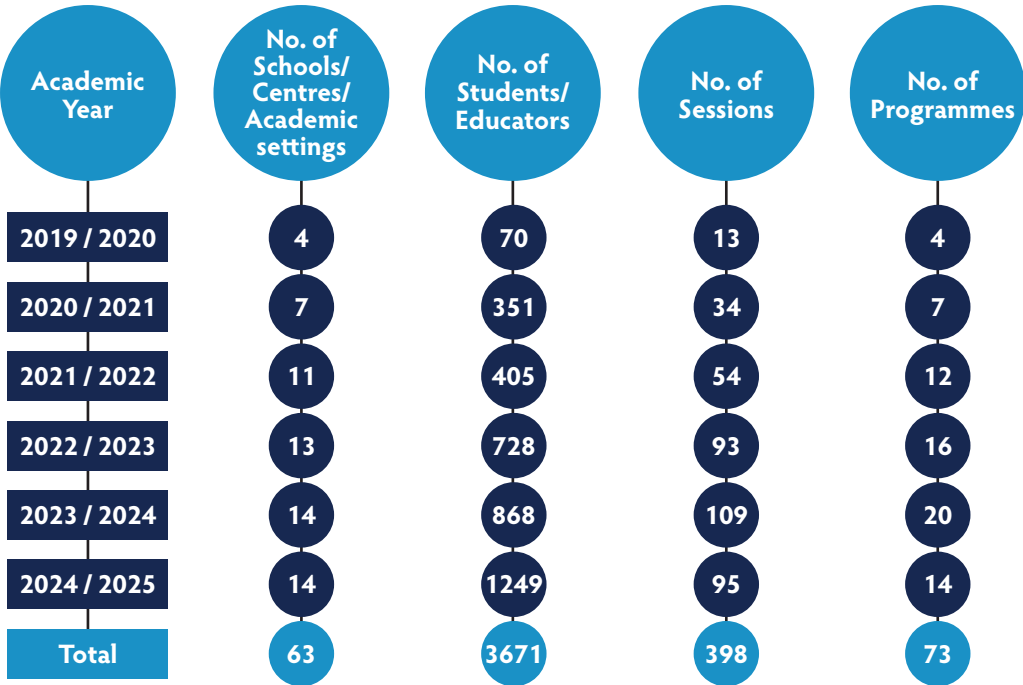


Table 1: Total Programme Engagement Figures

From this data, it is evident that the programme has not only expanded in scale but also in its scope, reaching a larger cohort of participants each year. The targeted training sessions have allowed the programme to engage participants meaningfully, providing them with hands-on learning experiences in the use of assistive technologies informed by the educational approach and active participation. This consistent growth is a testament to the programme’s success in addressing the needs of students with disabilities and those from underrepresented groups.

One notable achievement is the successful integration of exam reader pen training into the programme, which was introduced in response to the growing use of these technologies in educational settings. In 2023, 31 students from three schools were trained to use the exam reader pen, ensuring they could participate fully in formal state examinations. This expansion demonstrates the programme’s adaptability to emerging needs in educational practices.

Key Outcomes Include:

Evidence based programme - aligning to the NAP (2022-2028) which calls for “evidence-driven approaches in delivering positive and inclusive outcomes for students”.

Strand 1 programme embedded in the Digital Learning Curriculum (Junior) and Computer Science Curriculum (Senior) in some participating schools.

Enhanced digital literacy and increased use of assistive technologies among students, enabling them to engage more effectively with the curriculum.

Enhanced Transition Support for Neurodiverse Students. This is achieved through a universal design approach that emphasises clear, descriptive, and visual information, ensuring accessibility for all students.

Developed greater awareness and training by recognising the pivotal role of AT in developing a more inclusive learning environment.

Adaptable and transferrable - expansion of the programme’s scope to include additional student cohorts.

Strand 1 was delivered as part of Government’s Summer Programme targeted at SEN Students.

Development of peer-led AT training in schools by TY students.

Establishment of stronger connections between SETU’s Disability Service, local schools and education providers, supporting smoother transitions for students with disabilities into higher education.

The programme has proven to be an innovative and effective model for enhancing access to education for students with disabilities. The programme’s alignment with the NAP (2022-28), its adaptability to local community groups and schools, and its success in fostering partnerships among schools, communities, and higher education institutions make it a valuable model in advancing inclusive education practices.

The programme holds great potential for expansion. With continued funding, the model could be expanded to additional schools across the wider SETU catchment area, increasing its impact and supporting more students as they transition to higher education. The positive outcomes already achieved such as the integration of Strand 1 ATTAINS programme into school curricula and the continued demand for training ensure the programme’s sustainability and long-term benefits.

The programme builds on established local connections and also has a broader reach through its online presence via training conducted through the Education Centres. Sustaining and expanding these partnerships is essential for the programme’s long-term success and supports a comprehensive, ‘whole-of-education’ approach to widening participation.

In conclusion, the programme represents an evidence-driven approach in the use of AT to improve access to education for underrepresented groups, demonstrating the importance of evidence-based, student-centred and train the trainer approaches to enhancing inclusivity in higher education. The evidence of success both qualitative and quantitative, positions SETU’s Assistive Technology Outreach Programmes as a national model for inclusive practice in higher education access.



Photograph of Tutors from Waterford College of Further Education (WCFE) on completion of AT Training Day delivered by SETU.



Photograph of Programme coordinators Angela Costelloe and Majella Mc Carthy SETU presenting at the AHEAD Panorama Conference 2024, Croke Park



Photograph of Transition year students from Knockbeg College, Carlow on completion of AT Training Programme delivered by SETU.

Appendix

Summary of Impact Case Study Submissions



Ollscoil Teicneolaíochta an Atlantaigh

Atlantic Technological University



HEI	Atlantic Technological University
Case Study Title	Evaluation of Traveller students' experiences on the Certificate in Community Development.
Summary	A Special Purpose Award (SPA) in Community Development Practice was developed and offered on ATU Mayo and Galway City Campus specifically welcoming applications from members of the Traveller Community in response to an expressed need in the community. The HSE approached ATU to support and respond to a distinct training/education need amongst Travellers in Mayo. As planning progressed, it was also recognised that this training/education needed to be extended beyond Mayo, into Roscommon, Galway and other areas. To respond quickly to this, an SPA in Community Development Practice was developed and commenced in early 2024.



HEI	Dublin City University
Case Study Title	DCU Access to the Workplace Programme (ATTW)
Summary	DCU's ATTW programme is a targeted initiative to support the professional development and graduate outcomes of students from NAP priority groups (socioeconomically disadvantaged and students with disabilities). DCU's ATTW programme, in collaboration with the DCU Educational Trust, provides fully paid, professional summer internships to Access and Neurodivergent students during their undergraduate degree. The DCU Access Service developed a student-centred internship programme to address the earnings and social & cultural capital gap experienced by students from underrepresented backgrounds early on in their educational/career journey and support their employability and social mobility.



MTU

Ollscoil Teicneolaíochta na Mumhan
Munster Technological University



HEI	Munster Technological University
Case Study Title	Traveller STEAM Exhibition & Competition
Summary	Travellers have long incorporated STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Mathematics) into their culture, exemplified by wagon building and tin smithing, and this initiative aimed to inspire and highlight this element of Traveller Culture. The initiative showcased Travellers' use of STEAM in 13 Access Linked Schools, where students were tasked with creating an art piece incorporating their heritage and STEAM elements. Students showcased their STEAM heritage through an exhibition at MTU's James Barry Exhibition Centre, part of the Cork Lifelong Learning Festival in April 2024. This initiative is the first of its kind; no research has been conducted on Irish Travellers and STEM education to date.



TUS

Ollscoil Teicneolaíochta na Sionainne:
Lár Tíre, An Iarthar Láir
Technological University of the Shannon:
Midlands Midwest



HEI	Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest
Case Study Title	A partnership of the TUS and Roma Community exploring Higher Education opportunities
Summary	In 2022, Roma were named as a key priority target group in the National Access Plan for the first time. Cognisant that these targets and the focus on the Roma cohort are relatively new, this case study showcases an innovative project focused on engaging with students from the Roma community. Using PATH 3 and PATH 5 funding, the project engaged 22 Roma students by leveraging collaborative partnerships with a multitude of stakeholders aimed at promoting inclusion of the Roma Community and their progression to third level. The project encompassed a series of workshops for Roma Students with the TUS Media and Design Academic Department and the TUS Access Service. This was followed by a showcase event to celebrate Traveller and Roma cultures. This bi-location event involved a visit to TUS where participants heard from current TUS students from the Traveller and Roma community. The rich Roma tradition and heritage of music and dance were celebrated by showcasing a beautifully crafted video of the talents and work created by the 22 students involved in the project. The outcome of this initiative is an inclusive, culturally responsive project operating both on and off campus for Roma students to meaningfully participate in.



HEI	University College Cork
Case Study Title	Access UCC, FE Transitions Programme
Summary	The FE Transitions Programme was established to increase the number of students from underrepresented groups progressing to higher education. Access UCC has decades of experience successfully supporting socioeconomically disadvantaged students through targeted outreach programmes and providing tailored support that enhances retention and student success at the third level. Additionally, UCC has strong partnerships with FE colleges. While existing FE support structures serve the general student population, they lack targeted initiatives for underrepresented groups. This programme bridges the gap in targeted support for underrepresented students, supporting their transition from School to FE, their retention and success in FE, and facilitating transitions to HE or other pathways. Dedicated Transition Support Officers are available on FET campuses, and their role involves outreach to DEIS schools, Youthreach Centres, Cork Life Centre, and Traveller and Roma communities, in addition to providing one-to-one support and guidance for these students in FE.



HEI	University College Dublin
Case Study Title	Open Learning - using what we have to create part-time opportunities
Summary	Open Learning was developed in 2012 and now includes over 400 UCD modules, with the option of progressing to 15 degree programmes. Our vision of flexible, part-time education coincides with our national ambition to offer full equality of provision and support for all learners, regardless of mode or duration of study. Using PATH 3 funding, this initiative focuses on providing flexibility to the student. The programme enables students to self-select what they study and the pace of their engagement is inclusive. This programme appeals to students who are distant from education and has been successful with mature students, students with disabilities and early school leavers. The application process is simplified, and all students receive student cards, with access to UCD facilities and mainstream student support. Students can opt in or out of the programme each trimester, to allow students to pause their learning and then return when they are ready. Students that complete this programme can exit with either a University Certificate or a Diploma in Open Learning and can use this qualification for a variety of purposes, including access to UCD degree programmes.



UNIVERSITY OF GALWAY



HEI	University of Galway
Case Study Title	Widening Participation for Care-Experienced Students at University of Galway
Summary	This programme addresses the unique barriers faced by care-experienced students by establishing Ireland's first full-time higher education support role for these students, aimed at improving their access, retention, and success rates. The role focusses on three key objectives: – Expanding Outreach & Awareness: Collaborating with alternative care practitioners to raise awareness of educational opportunities for care-experienced students. – Enhancing Student Supports: Developing tailored support structures, including pre- and post-entry supports, to ensure care-experienced students thrive academically and personally. – Informing Policy & Practice: Collecting baseline data and conducting research to shape future university initiatives and improve long-term outcomes.



HEI	University of Limerick
Case Study Title	AccessCampus: UL in the community
Summary	AccessCampus was established in 2003 as a partnership between UL and the Limerick Enterprise Development Partnership (LEDP), an initiative dedicated to addressing educational disadvantages in Limerick's Southside communities. A satellite campus in the heart of the southside of the city, it provides academic support, university-community engagement, and outreach programmes to facilitate educational progression for underrepresented groups. By fostering sustainable pathways to higher education, AccessCampus integrates university resources with community needs, enabling access for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. By collaborating with UL faculty, students, and local organisations, AccessCampus exemplifies a best-practice model for widening participation and promoting social mobility.

Notes



