

TU Dublin

Review of approaches and models of partnership working

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5 Key learning and recommendations

Models

Very few theoretical models have been developed and evaluated in relation to widening participation partnerships. Adopting 'a model' may not be appropriate to the nuanced nature of partnership working in widening participation. A framework that provides flexibility and adaptability to various contexts may be more appropriate to support the development of consistent good practice while promoting innovation.

Recommendations for higher education institutions:

- » Define what is meant by the concept and ethos of partnership working for widening participation activity. Ensure it is closely aligned with and linked into the wider institutional approach to partnerships.
- » Co-develop with staff and stakeholders from community organisations, a set of principles to guide partnerships with the community sector. Develop further into a framework that clarifies key activities, success measures, programme management and funding, monitoring and reporting and quality assurance arrangements.
- » Assess how various models can add value to current practice.
 - o A collaborative continuum model acknowledges the evolving nature and the levels and stages of partnership working. This can be used as a guide in developing sustainable partnerships that deliver social change/good.
 - o A Theory of Change model can add value in documenting partnerships: inputs, activities, intermediate and longer-term outcomes. This can support evaluation, measuring the contribution of widening participation activities to outcomes while acknowledging the complexity.
 - o A social change community development model can inform the concept and principles of partnership working with community organisations. These models will also facilitate engagement with the community sector; co-design, co-creation and co-delivery, identified as significant for success. Evaluate to capture these processes to inform learning and improvement.

Structures to support effective partnerships

There exists a range of structures and processes that support partnerships for success and sustainability. This research highlighted mutually beneficial relationships as more important than structures. Structures add value in ensuring good governance, promoting consistent good practice across partnerships, and driving organisational learning and improvement. Their use should be adapted and tailored to the context of specific partnerships.

Recommendations for higher education institutions:

- » Establish structures and processes that facilitate clear decision-making, transparent communication, and effective knowledge transfer for widening participation activity. Ensure these are proportionate to the activity and balance governance requirements with innovation and the infrastructure in community organisations. Align these structures and processes closely with, and link to wider institutional structures and processes around partnerships.
- » Assess how structures and processes can add value to current practice.
 - o Steering groups and subgroups provide a practical way to ensure strategic and operational issues can be progressed. Ensure community organisations and underrepresented groups of learners are appropriately represented and their engagement is facilitated e.g., timing of groups, funding.
 - o Lead the development of a widening participation strategy that engages staff from across the institution e.g., faculty/academia, student support, access services to create a joined up institutional approach to widening participation that is aligned to the EDI strategy. This process should include internal structures (e.g., common budget, shared staff posts, cross-directorate project teams) that will enable the development of a joined-up evidence-based approach to widening participation.
 - o Establish knowledge management structures and processes to support partnerships across the institution. These will promote the development of consistent practice and a corporate identity, support knowledge transfer, and leverage learning and improvement.
- » Develop resources and templates to support staff through the process and stages of building, deepening and sustaining a partnership.
 - o Prioritise and invest at the early stages of partnership formation to provide sufficient time to build relationships, clarify roles and expectations, explore shared goals and sustainability, and identify how the partnership can be mutually beneficial. This should include adequate funding for staff from both the institution and from community organisations.
 - o Use a partnership agreement that is appropriate to the context to formalise the relationship.

Building and maintaining relationships in partnership work

Good relationships premised on trust and integrity are core to successful and sustainable partnerships. This includes relationships with community organisations, other education partners (schools, further education and training (FET)), underrepresented groups, internal staff working in faculty/academia and other partnership roles, and learners. Relationships require significant investment of resources and time to engage underrepresented groups in widening participation activity. This research confirmed these learners are managing significant issues and barriers. Tailored support is important to ensure they progress in higher education. Community organisations play a key brokering role and should be resourced to do this.

Recommendations for higher education institutions:

- » Make effective use of meetings to facilitate relationship building, two-way communication, and ongoing review and learning. Ensure the discussion is relevant to the information needs of community organisations and underrepresented groups.
- » Adopt an open and honest approach to communication that welcomes diverse perspectives and manages conflict.
- » Establish knowledge transfer processes (e.g., practice sharing networks, communities of practice, newsletters, blogs, business intelligence learning events) that promote organisational learning about partnership working and increase awareness and visibility of this work across the institution.
- » Formalise and fund partnerships with community organisations to broker and manage relationships with underrepresented groups. This will help to ensure that widening participation activities address identified gaps and expressed needs and are designed to take account of the cultural nuances and behavioural mechanisms relevant to underrepresented groups.
- » Scope the potential to partner with community education and further education and training (FET) on collaborative/linked provision. The wraparound support provided in these contexts has been identified as important to learner retention and progression in higher education. This should complement the important support services provided within higher education. Not all learners interviewed as part of this research were aware of available support. Further publicity of these services is required to raise awareness.
- » Acknowledge and resource the important role played by faculty/academia in widening participation; relationships with students, adaptations to teaching, learning and assessment, and curriculum development. Raise their awareness through training on the needs of underrepresented learners prioritised in the National Access Plan.
- » Engage the voice of underrepresented learners meaningfully in decision making, designing and delivery of widening participation work across the institution.

Resourcing frameworks and staff skills to support partnership working

Adequate resourcing of staff time and capacity is needed across higher education institutions and community organisations to establish and nurture partnerships. Short-term funding cycles and narrow funding streams limit the development of a strategic approach to partnerships aimed at widening participation. Job insecurity results in a loss of tacit knowledge and expertise. This prevents the deepening of relationships and work of the partnership.

Staff engaged in partnership working require training to develop skills in communication, participation and engagement, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion and trauma informed practices, and in the management and use of data for learning and improvement.

Recommendations for higher education institutions:

- » Advocate for a more strategic approach to funding from the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and the Higher Education Authority, that provides greater flexibility in how funding can be used.
- » Secure additional funding through new funding streams from philanthropic sources. Additional funding is required to cover and deepen work with the broad range of priority groups identified in the National Access Plan. Critical costs not currently funded include community partners time in forming the partnership, early intervention approaches that provide early and seamless support to children from primary school through their higher education journey, and incentives for underrepresented groups to engage in partnership working.
- » Secure core institutional funding for partnership working aimed at widening participation to meet institutional requirements in relation to the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty and United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4.



- » Develop comprehensive training on partnership working for all staff across the institution that aims to increase knowledge, awareness and skills in partnership working in different contexts. This evidence review is a resource that can be used to inform the content of training. Training should be available online and incorporated into induction and professional development provided by the institution to all staff members. It should be developed in a modular way so access can be tailored to staff roles and types of partnership activity. It can also be made available to community organisations to build their capacity. The training should include:
 - o Concepts and definition of partnership working.
 - o Useful models, structures and processes adopted by the institution.
 - o Types of partnerships; widening participation, industry, research.
 - o Skills in empathy, communication, negotiation, inclusive engagement process with underrepresented groups, conflict management, data management, evaluation and business intelligence, knowledge exchange, trauma informed approach to education.
 - o Embedding Equity, Diversity and inclusion practices across higher education including curriculum design and delivery, mentoring and assessment practices.
 - o Awareness of issues experienced by priority groups identified in the National Access Plan.

Sustainability in Community Education Partnerships

Mutually beneficial relationships are a key factor in the success and sustainability of partnership working. Funding, an evidenced based approach, and organisational learning and improvement are also closely linked to partnership sustainability.

Recommendations for higher education institutions:

- » Undertake a strategic project that aligns partnership activity around widening participation with all other partnership work across the institution. This should scope and formalise links with ongoing institutional work in Equity, Diversity and Inclusion.
- » Build the mutually beneficial internal partnerships needed to foster the development of an evidenced based approach to widening participation activity e.g., collation and sharing of data, research and evaluation, and publication and knowledge transfer.
- » Assess how a Theory of Change approach can add value to programme evaluation. This will seek to measure the contribution to outcomes within the complex context that widening participation programmes are delivered.
- » Build the data infrastructure and capability to collect, evaluate, share and use data for learning and improvement.



1.0 Introduction

Persistent gaps in access to and progression within higher education remain for underrepresented groups in Ireland and internationally, despite intervention and improvement over the last two decades. The Irish Government's response in the National Access Plan - a strategic action plan for equity of access, participation and success in Higher Education 2022- 2028 seeks to address the multiplicity of socio-cultural barriers. Partnership working has an important role to play. While poorly defined, measured and evaluated, the existing research evidence points to benefits of partnerships in this arena through enhanced student readiness for higher education, reduced attrition and improved progression, as well as a more diverse student body, a more cohesive higher education institution and richer student experience.

This report presents the key learning from a research study that reviewed approaches and models of partnership working to inform current and future partnership work as part of TU Dublin PATH 3 programme. A comprehensive desk review of published national and international research and reports was undertaken alongside a series of qualitative focus groups and interviews with 25 professionals engaged in a range of partnership types, structures and sectors. Qualitative interviews and an anonymous survey were also used to engage the voice of the learner in the research. Seven current and past students took part.

The findings and learning emerging from this research study indicate the following.

- » Very few theoretical models have been developed and evaluated in relation to widening participation partnerships. Adopting 'a model' may not be appropriate to the nuanced nature of partnership working in widening participation. A framework that provides flexibility and adaptability to various contexts may be more appropriate to support the development of consistent good practice while promoting innovation.
- » There exists a range of structures and processes that support partnerships for success and sustainability. This research highlighted mutually beneficial relationships as more important than structures. Structures add value in ensuring good governance, promoting consistent good practice across partnerships, and driving organisational learning and improvement. Their use should be adapted and tailored to the context of specific partnerships.
- » Good relationships premised on trust and integrity are core to successful and sustainable partnerships. This includes relationships with community organisations, other education partners (schools, FET), underrepresented groups, internal staff working in faculty/academia and other partnership roles, and learners. Relationships require significant investment of resources and time to engage underrepresented groups in widening participation activity. This research confirmed these learners are managing significant issues and barriers. Tailored support is important to ensure they progress in higher education. Community organisations play a key brokering role and should be resourced to do this.
- » Adequate resourcing of staff time and capacity is needed across higher education institutions and community organisations to establish and nurture partnerships. Shortterm funding cycles and narrow funding streams limit the development of a strategic approach to partnerships aimed at widening participation. Job insecurity results in a loss of tacit knowledge and expertise. This prevents the deepening of relationships and work of the partnership.
- » Staff engaged in partnership working require training to develop skills in communication, participation and engagement, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion and trauma informed practices, and in the management and use of data for learning and improvement.
- » Mutually beneficial relationships are a key factor in the success and sustainability of partnership working. Funding, an evidenced based approach and organisational learning and improvement are also closely linked to partnership sustainability.

Research evidence points to positive outcomes from participation in higher education for individuals in terms of employment and earnings as well as for communities and society through active citizenship and cultural diversity. This research is timely as recently national Census data 2022 highlights that Irish society is becoming more diverse, with a recorded increase of 18% in the number of non-Irish citizens. This group now makes up 12% of the population and includes people who identified as Indian/ Pakistani/ Bangladeshi, Arab and Roma. Moreover, the Pobal HP Deprivation Index¹, updated with Census 2022 data has confirmed that the gap between Ireland's most disadvantaged areas and the national average has increased. Higher education Institutions can play an important role in addressing society's complex issues through partnership working.

Learning from this research is important to inform TU Dublin's practice in meeting its legal obligation, as a public body under Section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Act 2014, the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty to promote equality² (Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC), 2019). In addition, it will inform practice to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all³" as set out in the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

This report has been prepared as an internal report for TU Dublin.

¹ Pobal HP Deprivation Index Launched - Pobal
² Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty - IHREC - Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission
³ Goal 4: Quality education | Sustainable Development Goals | United Nations Development Programme (undp.org)





2.0 Background

Persistent gaps despite intervention and improvement

Persistent gaps in access to and participation in higher education for particular groups of students in Ireland are acknowledged in The National Access Plan - a strategic action plan for equity of access, participation and success in Higher Education 2022-2028 (Higher Education Authority (HEA), 2022a). “Some targets identified in the last plan have been achieved; but significant challenges remain. For groups such as students from the Irish Traveller community, students from disadvantaged areas and first-time mature students, participation rates are too low..... It is clear that our student population is still unrepresentative of wider Irish society” (HEA, 2022a p5).

This is the fourth successive plan published by the Irish Government since 2005 and it signals the ongoing need and commitment to promoting access and widening participation in higher education. The most recent data published by the HEA describes the level of participation and profiles the ongoing gap for some of these groups:

- » 10% of the 2020/21 student cohort (19,852 students) were classified as disadvantaged. Fewer of these students, 13%, were undertaking postgraduate study compared to 24% of students classified as affluent. Mature students completing undergraduate courses were more deprived than students aged 23 and under. (HEA, 2022a; 2022b⁴).

⁴ Equal Access Survey (EAS) is an annual, voluntary set of questions asked of first year undergraduate students in HEA-funded institutions. Deprivation Index Scores (DIS) measures the relative affluence or deprivation of a particular geographical area. This uses data from the 2016 Census, and is measured right down to street level, based on small-area statistics (on average, 80-100 households).

» 17.8%⁵ of the 2022 cohort (6,035 students), that completed the Equal Access Survey⁶, reported having a disability and within this group, 10.2% of new entrants are from disadvantaged areas. With regard to type of disability among new entrants, 37% reported having a Learning Condition, 31.2% a Psychological/Emotional condition, 14.5% Multiple Equal Access Survey (EAS) is an annual, voluntary set of questions asked of first year undergraduate students in HEA-funded institutions. Deprivation Index Scores (DIS) measures the relative affluence or deprivation of a particular geographical area. This uses data from the 2016 Census, and is measured right down to street level, based on small-area statistics (on average, 80-100 households). 5 A decrease from 18.1% in 2020/21 cohort 6 Overall, 74.1% response rate by Institute, ranged from 2.4-98.9%, Tu Dublin 71.1%, 71.8% and 88.7% across Tallaght, Blanchardstown and City campus respectively. <https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/students/widening-participation-for-equity-of-access/studentdisability-data-2023/appendix-eas-disability-2023/Conditions>, 10.2% Other Conditions, 2.2% Blind/Deaf and 2.5% Physical Condition. There is a higher representation of mature students among those reporting Multiple (13.7%) and Physical Conditions (11.2%) (HEA, 2022)⁷.

Research and policy evidence confirms that gaps in access and participation are not unique to higher education in Ireland and are consistently and widely documented internationally (Ni Chorcora, Bray and Banks, 2023; HEA, 2013). This includes in the United Kingdom (UK) (Renbarger and Long, 2019; Barkat, 2019; Gorard et al., 2006), the United States (Breakthrough Collaborative, 2022; Crump, Ned and Winkleby, 2015) as well as Australia (Barney, 2021; Geagea, 2019) and New Zealand (Hamerton and Henare, 2017) with poorer rates of access reported for students with lower family income, minority ethnicity (Breakthrough Collaborative, 2022; Barney, 2021) and students living in areas designated as deprived/ disadvantaged (Barkat, 2019; Crump, Ned and Winkleby, 2015).

In a robust review of international research concerned with the effectiveness of widening participation programmes in post-primary schools, Ni Chorcora, Bray and Banks (2023) note, that while overall participation rates have increased, unequal access for low socio-economic status students remains an issue. Other researchers draw attention to related inequalities and gaps; that students from disadvantaged areas are less likely to apply to and attend the more selective prestigious universities (See, Gorard and Togerson, 2012; Gorard et al, 2006), and that these groups of students experiencing unequal access are less likely to progress and complete their course once they have entered higher education (See, Gorard and Togerson, 2012; Thomas, 2012; Nagda et al., 1998).

5 A decrease from 18.1% in 2020/21 cohort

6 Overall, 74.1% response rate by Institute, ranged from 2.4-98.9%, Tu Dublin 71.1%, 71.8% and 88.7% across Tallaght, Blanchardstown and City campus respectively. <https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/students/widening-participation-for-equity-of-access/studentdisability-data-2023/appendix-eas-disability-2023/>

7 "A disabled person has been classified as someone who responded 'Yes' to any of the following five categories: (i) blind or deaf, (ii) physical disability, (iii) learning disability, (iv) psychological, emotional, or mental health, and (v) other condition. Furthermore, note that for the purposes of this report, a person with multiple conditions has been classified as someone who responded 'Yes' to two or more of the above five categories". (HEA, 2023 <https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/students/widening-participation-for-equity-ofaccess/student-disability-data-2023/>)

HEA (2018a; 2020) research investigating the non-progression of full-time 1st year undergraduate new entrants in the academic year 2014/15 to the academic year 2015/16 found that the rate of non-progression for students who attended disadvantaged (DEIS⁸) schools at 19% was much higher than the average for students across all school types (14%) and for those who attended fee-paying schools (10%). More recent HEA data⁹ also highlights an overall non-progression rate of 9% for new entrants in 2019/20 with significant variation by institute and course type as well as student characteristic, e.g., mature students have a higher rate of non-progression at Level 8 and a lower rate at Level 6. Overall, this is an improving trend, down from 14% in 2015/16 and 13% 2016/17.



8 Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a3c9e-extension-of-deis-to-further-schools/#about-the-deisprogramme>

9 Data returned from HEA-funded institutions to the HEA's Student Record System database (SRS) 2022

Ongoing need to address barriers to participation and promote access as a strategic policy priority

Promoting access to higher education continues to be a strategic priority in Ireland and this is reflected in the functions of the HEA (Government of Ireland, 2022): one of which is to support “equality, diversity and inclusion in higher education, including the participation and success of students in priority groups, or persons in such groups seeking to be students, in higher education” (p17). It is also evident in the “equity of access” strategic theme of the current HEA Strategic Plan 2018–2022 (HEA, 2018b) and the identification of “access and participation” as one of four pillars of the new Higher Education System Performance Framework (HEA, 2023).

Approaches and activities aimed at promoting access to higher education seek to address a range of barriers faced by learners. The international research suggests that these barriers are multi-faceted and therefore require a multi-faceted approach (Ni Chorcora, Bray and Banks, 2023; Geagea, 2019; Renbarger and Long, 2019; See at al., 2012 Gorard et al., 2006; Nagda et al., 1998; See Barkat, 2019 for a review of UK evidence) and should seek to tackle disparities not only in academic attainment but also social and cultural capital. According to Geagea (2019) social capital concerns the opportunities, information, support and norms available through family, school and community links that promote and nurture the development of positive expectations of higher education among learners. Cultural capital refers to knowing the accepted norms and learning the skills required to negotiate access to the academic culture of higher education that enables learners to manage opportunities and challenges, and to progress within the system. Having conducted an independent review of the existing relevant evidence on widening participation in higher education for the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), Gorard et al., (2006) categorised barriers to access and progression into the following 3 types.

- » “Situational – such as direct and indirect costs, loss or lack of time, and distance from a learning opportunity, created by an individual’s personal circumstances.
- » Institutional barriers – such as admissions procedures, timing and scale of provision, and general lack of institutional flexibility, created by the structure of available opportunities.
- » Dispositional barriers, in the form of an individual’s motivation and attitudes to learning, may be caused by a lack of suitable learning opportunities (e.g., for leisure or informally), or poor previous educational experiences” (p5).

They also noted the limitations of focusing on barriers in understanding widening participation as this does not account for the impact of various social determinants at various stages and in various ways over the course of the learners’ lifecycle.

Current research with learners across the education sector in Ireland highlights that they continue to face an array of barriers and challenges in accessing and progressing in higher education. These can include structural, institutional and psychosocial barriers. The results reported from the most recent Irish Survey of Student Engagement 2022¹⁰ highlights that more than one in three students, 36.6% had seriously considered withdrawing from their degree course including for financial (9.8%), personal or family reasons (13.3%), health (6.4%), employment (5.3%) (HEA, Union of Students in Ireland (USI) and Irish Universities Association (IUA), 2023). The rate was highest among final year undergraduates at 44.7% compared to 35% among first year students. As the research evidence summarized below documents, often these barriers are experienced most severely and have the greatest negative impact on the underrepresented groups of learners identified as priority groups within the National Access Plan.

- » Mental health is a key issue and challenge with college, exams and finances identified as the main sources of stress (Jigsaw and HSE Mental Health and Wellbeing, 2023; Mahon et al., 2022). Results of the My World Survey completed by 9,935 students aged 18-65 registered at 7 universities and 5 Institutes of Technology (now Technological Universities), identified that students who had accessed higher education through the HEAR¹¹ and DARE¹² access routes were particularly vulnerable. When compared to other students, these students reported significantly poorer mental health i.e., “higher levels of depression and anxiety, greater likelihood of self-harm and suicidal ideation and higher absenteeism from college. HEAR and mature¹³ students reported greater exposure to cumulative stressors and were more likely to be highly stressed about financial pressure. HEAR students also reported greater pressure to work outside of college” (Mahon et al., 2022p4). Importantly, students attending Institutes of Technology, as classified in March 2020 when data collection took place, reported poorer mental health than those attending universities. These students also reported greater financial stress and pressure to work outside of college.

¹⁰ 42,852 students responded to the 2022 survey representing a national response rate of 27.8%. These included 19,526 first year undergraduate students, 13,125 final year undergraduate students, and 10,201 taught postgraduate students.

¹¹ The Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) is a higher education admissions scheme for Leaving Certificate students (under 23) whose economic or social background are underrepresented in higher education. See <https://accesscollege.ie/hear/what-is-hear/> for further detail

¹² DARE is a third level alternative admissions scheme for school-leavers under the age of 23 as of 1 January 2024 whose disabilities have had a negative impact on their second level education. See <https://accesscollege.ie/dare/> for further detail.

¹³ HEA defines mature students as those “23 years or over on 1 January of their year of entry to higher education.” (Indecon, 2021 p2).

- » Indecon (2021) research¹⁴ commissioned by the HEA identified that “financial cost is viewed as the single greatest barrier to participation for mature students. This is a particularly important barrier for the NAP [National Access Plan] target groups. Other barriers include family responsibilities, job commitments, timing of study, and distance. Those in NAP groups reported higher barriers than other respondents” (pxvii).
- » Learners¹⁵ in further education report facing a range of obstacles to progression to higher education that include the ‘hidden costs’ of food, accommodation, transport, and loss of earnings, as well as “fear about ‘not fitting in’ to the ‘middle-class institution’ and general student body representative of higher education institutions” (Sartori and Bloom, 2023 p10). Other obstacles identified in this participative and creative research with 58 learners included fears about managing the academic workload as well as balancing study with work and caring responsibilities.
- » Research with refugees and people seeking international protection in Ireland also confirms very significant barriers to accessing higher education. Community needs analysis research reported by Meaney Sartori and Nwanze (2021)¹⁶ noted these barriers included the charging of international student fees, inability to access student grants or supports, and often, food or transport while attending college, as well as experiencing racism, being stigmatized and feeling ‘separate’.
- » Research with prisoners and ex-prisoners identified five types of barriers concerning their access to higher education. These were educational e.g., “not having their adult status and experiences understood and appreciated” (Meaney, 2019¹⁷ p9), structural e.g., garda vetting processes getting in the way of taking up work placement opportunities, psychological e.g., low self-esteem, lack of accessible information on financial support, and lack of supports e.g., addiction supports.

¹⁴ Methods included a survey completed by 1,390 current mature students, 368 past mature students, and 147 potential mature students. This included 23 students identifying as members of the Traveller Community; 315 students with disabilities; 285 lone parents; and 684 students from a disadvantaged socio-economic background.

¹⁵ Research sample comprised 58 students over the age of 18, studying at seven Further Education colleges/centres in the Dublin and Dublin City University catchment areas in the academic year 21/22.

¹⁶ Methodology used peer research and photovoice approaches to conduct in-depth interviews (40 participants) and a survey (104 respondents) in 2020.

¹⁷ Participative, experiential, and creative methods were used to explore the views and insights of 34 participants on the factors that may either encourage or discourage participation or progression in higher education.

- » An evaluation of the SAOR project confirmed barriers faced by members of the Traveller Community in accessing higher education. This evaluation, which involved 22 Traveller women completing a Level 6 Leadership in the Community course through the Southern Traveller Health Network and Access and Participation, and Adult and Continuing Education at UCC, found that learners experienced a range of challenges that included access to childcare on campus, feeling “out of place” on campus, balancing coursework with care responsibilities, access to computers at home, digital literacy and literacy. “Support from HEIs, family, lecturing and tutoring staff, Traveller organisations and classmates” were identified as key enablers (Cummins et al., 2022 p6-7). These and other barriers were confirmed in recent action research completed by Blanchardstown Traveller Development Group and TU Dublin (McGlynn, Noctor and Joyce, 2023). Many of these barriers may be rooted in the obstacles parents and children from the Traveller and Roma communities face within the education system at primary and post primary level. These include a lack of understanding of Traveller culture in schools and experiencing discriminatory and negative treatment and low teacher expectations at school, particularly at post primary level (Quinlan, 2022¹⁸).
- » Research¹⁹ with young people who help care for parents, siblings, relatives or friends who experience chronic illness, poor mental-health, disability, alcohol or substance misuse has highlighted that many experience barriers when engaging with education. Young people reported loneliness and poor mental health and that they are struggling to balance school/ college work with their caring responsibilities. Between 27-51% reported that they do not have adequate time to spend on schoolwork and studies (Family Carers Ireland, 2023).
- » Accessibility barriers faced by students with disabilities were emphasised in recent research by AHEAD²⁰ that engaged disabled learners in higher and further education in reviewing their experience of returning to post lockdown learning. For many, the return to on-campus and in-person learning was viewed as eroding the accessibility benefits enjoyed during lockdown. Many learners noted that online and hybrid delivery with the availability of recorded lectures, the use of captions in webinars and continuous assessment/ open book exams helped overcome traditional barriers to access that improved their learning experience, revision and retention of knowledge (Healy, 2023).

¹⁸ Qualitative and participatory methods including photovoice and photo-elicitation were used in 15 interactive workshops and 4 case studies to engage 132 pupils, parents, and members of the school community.

¹⁹ National survey and 7 participatory workshops with 131 young carers (up to and including 17 years) and young adult carers (18-24 years)

²⁰ Research employed mixed methods with 169 surveys and 7 semi-structured interviews of learners registered with Disability and Learner Support Services in Further and Higher Education institutions.

- » Research indicates that the educational experience of learners who have experience of the care system is often disrupted and delayed due to the impact of cumulative adversities experienced in childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. These include “negotiating housing concerns, navigating the loss of key relationships, and managing the accelerated transition to adulthood that so often follows leaving care at the age of 18... [and] a variety of alternative roles and transitions that may be experienced in the years after leaving care including becoming a parent, caring for sick relatives, and working” (Gilligan and Brady, 2022 p1374). Secondary analysis of data concerning 109 care experienced applications to the 2016 HEAR programme identified that 51.4% accepted an offer of a course, a lower rate of acceptance among this group compared to all applicants (71.2%). The data also highlighted that applicants were not clustered in disadvantaged areas or DEIS schools but included a disproportionately high share of young people from non-EU countries (Brady, Gilligan and Nic Fhlannchadha, 2019). Gilligan and Brady (2022²¹) found that care experienced adults’ re-engagement with education at a later stage is influenced by their readiness often prompted by a life transition such as parenthood, support received and work experience opportunities that foster confidence and a positive learner identity.

Partnership working is considered key to addressing barriers and promoting access

Partnership working is widely regarded as a key mechanism to promote access and widen participation in higher education. The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Department of Education and Skills, 2011) states “the relationship between the [Higher Education] institution and the community is particularly important in the context of the promotion and achievement of greater equality in higher education (p67). “Across the various levels of education and training, there is a clearly identified need for more community-based approaches and for greater coordination between institutions and sectors. Services need to be more appropriate and locally responsive. This is particularly the case in the relationships between higher education, schools, further education and training providers and the wider community, where there is now much greater emphasis on principles of partnership, empowerment, participation, and capacity building” (p119). This is echoed in Future FET: Transforming Learning - The National Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy (SOLAS, 2020) with the inclusion of specific goals concerned with building on and improving “partnerships and collaborative pathways between the FET and HE sectors, community education providers, community partners and employers as part of future development of PATH” (p62).

²¹ Methods included 2 studies: (1) Interviews with 22 care leavers aged 23-33years (10 in Ireland, 12 in Catalonia) and (2) education life history interviews with 18 participants aged 24-36 years in Ireland.

Review of the published international research literature concerned with promoting access to higher education asserts the importance of collaborative and partnership working (Tangney et al., 2022; Cummins et al., 2022; Empower, 2022; Osuji, Deekor and Uriri, 2022; Naylor and Mifsud, 2020; HEA and Department of Education and Skills, 2018; Saunders, Payne and Davies, 2007; Gorard et al., 2006; Morgan, Saunders and Turner, 2004; Smith and Betts, 2003). This includes changing the structure and content of higher education provision by tailoring the curriculum to meet the needs of local stakeholder groups, as well as providing access in a range of sites/locations that are more local and accessible to learners. “Local or regional partnerships also offer a way to overcome issues of institutional differentiation and to facilitate mobility in the sector” (Gorard et al., 2006 p93).

Partnerships concerned with promoting access and widening participation described in the research literature vary in type and purpose, and include higher education institutions partnering with schools (Ni Chorcora, Bray and Banks, 2023; Renbarger and Long, 2019; Younger et al, 2019; See at al., 2012), with further education colleges (Gorard et al., 2006; Morgan, Saunders and Turner, 2004) with communities and community organisations (Empower, 2022; Cummins et al., 2022; Hamerton and Henare, 2017) as well as internal partnerships across departments and faculties of higher education institutions themselves (Tangney et al., 2022; Parkes et al., 2014). In addition, this literature confirms that higher education institutions are also engaged in a range of other partnerships with business and industry and partnerships concerned with the conduct of research (Voller et al., 2022; Plummer at al., 2021; Drahota et al., 2016).

However, the need for further development and improvement in partnership working is also clearly acknowledged and emphasised in the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Department of Education and Skills, 2011). “Over the years, higher education institutions have undertaken a wide range of engagement activities, but this has not been as coordinated as it might be, and in the future, this needs to be developed more firmly as a core element of the mission of higher education in Ireland. Higher education institutions need to deepen the quality and intensity of their relationships with the communities and regions they serve” (p77).

Partnership working, a concept that is poorly defined.

While embedded in key policy documents concerned with promoting access and widening participation in higher education, the lack of conceptual clarity and definition surrounding partnership working is highlighted consistently in the research literature. This presents a significant issue for promoting good practice and for measuring progress and success through monitoring and evaluation activities (Castañer and Oliveira, 2020; Drahota et al., 2016). Writing in 1993, 30 years ago, Mackintosh noted that “the concept of partnership contains a very high level of ambiguity” (Mackintosh, 1993 p210) and this theme has continued to permeate the research literature spanning a range of disciplines and issues to the present day (Sarmiento-MárquezSarmiento-Márquez et al., 2023; Plummer

at al., 2021; 2020; Castañer and Oliveira 2020; Drahota et al., 2016; Horton, Prain and Thiele , 2009; Clifford et al., 2008; Butterworth and Palermo, 2008). The concept is described in various ways, including a “host of different ways in which organisations work together”, “collaborative arrangements” and “alliances” (Horton, Prain and Thiele, 2009 p77), “joint ventures, collaboratives, advice networks, strategic alliances and cooperatives” (Clifford et al., 2008 p11) as well as “alliances, coalition, network, consortium or collaboration” (Wiggins, Anastasiou and Cox, 2021 p93). This body of research confirms that partnerships are complex (Mackintosh, 1993), that diverse types exist for different purposes (Clifford et al., 2008; Horton, Prain and Thiele , 2009), that partnerships are dynamic and developmental in nature, and that “one type may evolve into another, so that a fluid, information-sharing partnership may transform itself into a more highly structured and formalized relationship with more elaborate goals” (Horton, Prain and Thiele, 2009 p79).

Notwithstanding this lack of clarity and definition, there is strong agreement in the literature on the following key elements of partnership working (Sarmiento-Márquez et al., 2023; Horton, Prain and Thiele, 2009; Mackintosh, 1993).

- » Sharing assets, competencies, decision-making and governance through complex structures, as opposed to offloading cost or risk (Horton, Prain and Thiele, 2009).
- » Mutually agreed objectives that satisfy each organisation’s aims, and agreement between partners on the aims of the specific partnership in question (Drahota et al., 2016; Clifford et al., 2008; Horton, Prain and Thiele, 2009).
- » Sustained joint working (Mackintosh, 1993).
- » Additional social benefit created from the synergy of organisations working together that could not have been generated by a purely public or charitable project or by a commercial project. One partner should pursue/ represent a non-commercial end/ interest (Austin and Seitanidi, 2012a; Mackintosh, 1993).
- » Collaboration across organisational boundaries (Mackintosh, 1993; Castañer and Oliveira 2020). Clifford et al., (2008) note that “whether involving people who work in different organisations or those who work in different subdivisions of the same organisation, partnerships achieve goals by accessing previously isolated financial, intellectual, cultural and social capital developed by diverse groups and directing this capital towards improvement (p3).

There is also strong agreement on what is not partnership working and this includes buyer supplier relationships, contractual agreements, outsourcing arrangements (Castañer and Oliveira, 2020; Horton, Prain and Thiele, 2009; Mackintosh, 1993). These types of arrangements premised on power imbalances have been labelled “pseudo partnerships”, “partnerships in name only”, “transactional partnerships” and “partnerships of convenience” (Horton, Prain and Thiele, 2009p78).

Partnership working, a concept that is poorly measured and evaluated

The lack of conceptual clarity and definition of partnership working significantly impacts measurement and evaluation (Wiggins, Anastasiou and Cox, 2021). Clifford et al. (2008) notes that “without a definition, attribution of outcomes to partnership is difficult to establish” (p10). Consequently, there exists clear gaps in empirical evidence about the effectiveness of, and the inherent processes in partnership working and this is evident in the research literature concerned with partnerships in promoting access to higher education (Ni Chorcora, Bray and Banks, 2023; See, Gorard and Togerson, 2012; Barkat, 2019; Renbarger and Long, 2019; Crump et al., 2015; Gorard et al., 2006), other partnerships in higher education (Mu et al., 2023; Plummer et al., 2021) as well as partnerships across other sectors (Fynn et al., 2022; Wiggins, Anastasiou and Cox, 2021; Austin and Seitanidi, 2012a, 2012b; Hamzeh et al., 2019; Horton, Prain and Thiele, 2009). Horton, Prain and Thiele (2009 p93) note that “surprisingly little attention has been devoted to the evaluation of partnerships. This is true of partnerships generally few partnerships are subjected to formal evaluation, and of those that are evaluated, only a minority receive sufficiently systematic or comprehensive treatment to gauge their overall performance and impact. Alternatives to partnering approaches are seldom considered in evaluations”. In a similar vein, Austin and Seitanidi (2012a) commenting on partnerships between business and non-profit organisations conclude that “it is clear from the literature review that value creation through collaboration is recognized as a central goal, but it is equally clear that it has not been analyzed by researchers and practitioners to the extent or with the systematic rigor that its importance merits. Although many of the asserted benefits (and costs) of collaboration rest on strong hypotheses, there is a need for additional empirical research— quantitative and qualitative, case study and survey—to produce greater corroborating evidence” (p744).

Particular evidence gaps have been identified in relation to:

- » Outcomes and impact - “there is a notable lack of systematic in-depth analysis of outcomes beyond the descriptive level; in effect, the full appreciation of the benefits and costs remains relatively unexplored” (Austin and Seitanidi, 2012b p948; Ni Chorcora, Bray and Banks, 2023; Wiggins, Anastasiou and Cox, 2021; Plummer et al., 2020, 2021; Barkat, 2019; Harrison et al., 2018; Drahota et al., 2016; Gorard et al., 2006).
- » Partnership processes (Drahota et al., 2016; Horton, Prain and Thiele, 2009) and development over time (Drahota et al, 2016), including the evolutionary dynamics in “how the co-creation process operates, renews, and grows” (Austin and Seitanidi, 2012a p745).
- » The contribution of partnerships to the objectives of individual partners (Horton, Prain and Thiele, 2009)

- » The contribution to/ value added towards sustainable development goals (Horton, Prain and Thiele, 2009).
- » Longitudinal evaluation that enables the tracking of programme progress over time (Ni Chorcora, Bray and Banks, 2023; Harrison et al., 2018; Drahota et al., 2016).
- » Effective use of administrative widening participation programme data for monitoring, evaluation, learning and improvement (Ni Chorcora, Bray and Banks, 2023; Barkat, 2019).
- » Disaggregation and analyses of data at the level of subgroups (Nagda et al., 1998)
- » Availability and sharing of relevant partnership data e.g., widening participation enrollment and programme data across partners (Ni Chorcora, Bray and Banks, 2023; Plummer et al., 2021; Harrison et al., 2018).
- » Reporting of widening participation programme and context implementation processes and mechanisms that impact on outcomes, in what way and why. (See et al 2012; Barkat, 2019).

Fuller detail is provided in Table 2.1 below which summarizes learning and insights from the most robust research on partnership working across a range of sectors, including higher education, and specifically partnership working aimed at widening access.





Table 2.1 Summary of Best Practice Research on Partnership Working across Sectors and Disciplines, including Higher Education

Research context	Research focus	Research methodology	Key learning points
<p>Ni Chorcora, Bray and Banks (2023)</p> <p>School of Education and Trinity Access Programme, Trinity College Dublin Ireland</p>	<p>Evaluating effectiveness of 18 widening participation outreach programmes for students, 12-18 years in post primary schools</p>	<p>Systematic review of 19 studies published between 2012-2021 Quantitative or mixed method data. International studies (5 USA, 3 Australia, 1 Chile, 5 Europe: UK, Germany, Italy)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Centralised sharing of data across different sectors in the education system should be » enabled by policy makers so progression can be measured and used as a source of learning as a child grows and moves through the education system. » The quality, completeness, accessibility and availability of administrative enrolment data should be improved to allow the measurement of access and progression outcomes and the impact of widening participation programmes. » College admissions and access teams require data and research skills/ support or joined up collaborative working with their research departments. » Greater focus should be placed on measuring programme effectiveness including defining and measuring success/ hard and soft outcomes, conducting longitudinal studies with large samples that track change over time and identify which student subgroups benefit and in what ways. » Data and evidence should be used to inform learning and improvement across widening participation partners, programmes and activities. » Local evaluation should provide evidence specific to the local policy context. Should include a range of data types across hard (e.g., enrolment data, college application rates, academic records/achievement, graduate rates, college intentions) and soft outcomes (e.g., attitudes towards school and education).
<p>Mu, Gordon, Xu and Cayas (2023)</p> <p>University of South Australia, Queensland University of Technology, Nanchang University, University of Calgary</p>	<p>Partnerships among families, schools and universities</p>	<p>Systematic review of 24 studies Qualitative or mixed methods data. USA (23) Brazil (1)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Theoretically light, at early stages of development with mainly qualitative exploratory research. » Partnership working should emerge from and focus on a real school necessity /grass roots issue not university projecting agenda onto schools. » Partnerships can have multiple benefits for children, parents, school professionals and universities. Cultural capital shared through partnerships “in the face of unequal distribution of cultural capital, social change-orientated partnerships among families, schools and universities creates, through rational pedagogy, empowering opportunities for marginalised groups to access resources that they would not normally have” (p8). » Sustainability promoted by shared ownership and responsibilities, grass roots approach and distributed leadership and power, committed resources and time, student-centredness, and progress monitoring for improvement.

<p>Plummer, Witkowski, Smits and Dale (2021)</p> <p>Brock University, Canada</p>	<p>Performance of Higher Education Institution – Community partnerships</p>	<p>Survey research with convenience sample of higher education institutions (HEI) and community partners 27 completed HEI Office Questionnaires 44 completed HEI Community Partner Questionnaires</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Gap in evidence on assessing performance of HEI Community partnerships. Challenges due to complexity of partnerships (definition, types, timescales, evolving nature), and collection/availability of relevant data from HEI and also community partners. Data capacity and skills gap exists across partners. » While survey respondents report partnerships are important to their organisation: ‘very high priority’ (70%)/ ‘very central to mission’ (78%), there exists <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o a gap in use of structures and processes to support performance measurement: 60% report partnerships often/ occasionally entered into without any formal written documentation, 25% report they do not employ any form of monitoring and evaluation – influenced by project size/prestige, 25% report receiving formal partnership related training and 75% report having limited or no training. » Two thirds provide incentives for faculty, staff, administrator & students to engage in HEI-community partnerships: awards & recognition, release time, staff support, dedicated facilities. Almost all report in-kind incentives; faculty staff/student time/technology. Only 50% provide direct financial support. » Most important inputs for success: motivation for partnership, human and financial resources & transparency. » Most important processes for success: communication, shared decision-making, trust, mutual respect & adaptability
<p>Wiggins, Anastasiou and Cox (2021)</p> <p>Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) Australia</p>	<p>Identify factors associated with synergistic multisector alliances in public health</p>	<p>Systematic review of 24 studies published between 2009–2019 International studies (16 USA, 4 Canada, 2 Australia, 2 Europe) with range of stakeholders</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Many models lacked theoretical robustness as not underpinned by evidence from application. » Key attributes reported as present in synergistic alliances: clear project purpose, effective coordination, and information sharing, aligning partner motives, clear governance structures, committed partners, effective leadership for making decisions. » Poorer reporting of partner complementarity & fit (by 64%), organisational learning (by 50%), decision-making structures (by 29%) and conflict resolution (by 29%), partner satisfaction as part of evaluation (by 57%), and governance (by 29%). » No summative evaluations (results at the end of project) reported. Most common types were process (29%), impact (21%), outcome (17%), formative (13%).

<p>Devaney, Kealy, Canavan and McGregor, 2021</p> <p>UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, National University of Ireland Galway, Ireland</p>	<p>Review of international experience on implementing a statutory duty for interagency collaboration to ensure the protection and welfare of children</p>	<p>Scoping review of published and grey international research literature</p> <p>5 case studies based on 5 English speaking jurisdictions:</p> <p>individual interviews with 7 key informants.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Lack of clear definition of interagency working leads to confusion as to what exactly it is that should be achieved, and what processes, tools and strategies are most effective (p3). » No single model for multiagency working; variation in level of integration, elements of collaboration, remit and function of approach, and level of centralization/ prescription. » Models are contextualized to local policy and legislative context and substantive area of child protection and welfare. » Legislative basis for interagency working with complementary guidance to support implementation. Statutory duty needs to include all agencies with a role to play. » Identified barriers include ineffective protocols and guidance, lack of resource including funding, staffing and time, lack of organisational support, differing organisational cultures and history, insufficient role clarity, insufficient communication, lack of accountability. » Identified facilitators include programme funding and agency provision of staff time and funding for coordination, relationship building, trust and understanding of partners roles and responsibilities, meaningful joint training and emphasis on shared knowledge that leads to a shared language, understanding and mission, joint working arrangements and protocol that has secured high level review, sign off and monitoring.
<p>Barkat, 2019</p> <p>University of Birmingham, UK</p>	<p>Evaluation of the effectiveness & impact of the Academic Enrichment Programme (AEP) tracking under-represented students' progress across 1-year engagement with AEP towards securing places at selective Russell Group universities.</p>	<p>Mixed methods longitudinal study. Quantitative and qualitative data collected across six cohorts/ groups of students. Theory of Change (TOC) logic model framework used for evaluation across a range of outcomes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Lack of rigorous evaluation means little is known about the impact of widening participation programmes, about what works and why. » Evaluation meets Level 2 of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA, became Office for Students (OfS) in 2018) Standards of Evaluation Practice developed to support impact evaluation of widening participation practice in UK Standards of evidence and evaluation self-assessment tool - Office for Students. » Applicability of Theory of Change (TOC) approach to evaluation which acknowledges complexity of widening participation programmes and the context/ environment where they are implemented and helps understand transformational changes. Alternative to experimental design which may not be practical/appropriate. "Value in evidencing the contribution the intervention has made to observed outcomes and long-term impact" (p1180) » Administrative programme monitoring data used in evaluation - mapped to TOC to identify other supplementary data needed for evaluation. » Range of evaluation data included: AEP monitoring, Knowledge & Attitudinal surveys (pre & Post AEP, engagement with programme information, advice & guidance), End of AEP survey (application rate), Post AEP survey (progression rate), AEP documentation, Interviews with AEP staff on programme delivery & implementation.

<p>Drahota, Meza, Brikho, Naaf, Estabillo, Gomez, Jnoska, Dufek, Stahmer and Aarons (2016) San Diego State University</p>	<p>Identifying facilitating and hindering influences on Community Academic Partnerships collaborative process and outcomes</p>	<p>Systematic review of 50 studies published Jan 1993-2015 involving 54 partnerships across public health, social work, education, environment. Most qualitative case studies, fewer using mixed methods.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Collaborative partnerships are poorly defined though do involve a range of community stakeholders and focus on a wide range of issues/areas. » Gap in reporting on partnership characteristics/approach: initiation, number of members & membership over time, duration of partnership, funding sources or processes, models of collaborative working » Lack of robust longitudinal evaluation around outcomes/ impact: 96.3% case studies, 81.5% used qualitative methods, 3.7% quantitative and 14.8% mix of quantitative & qualitative but 87.5% did not integrate the methods/ analysis. » Identified 12 facilitating factors and 11 hindering factors e.g., related to operational and interpersonal processes and funding. » Reported outcomes: Proximal outcomes - partnership synergy (18.5%), knowledge exchange (25.9%), tangible products (72.2%). Distal outcomes - development of or an enhanced capacity to implement programmes (13%), improved community care (18.5%), sustainable community-academic partnership infrastructure (5.6%), and changed community context (1.9%)
<p>Austin and Seitanidi (2012a and 2012b) Harvard Business School University of Hull, UK</p>	<p>A review of partnering between nonprofits and businesses: creating value, collaboration stages, partnership processes and outcomes</p>	<p>Literature review</p>	<p>Partnerships can be multidimensional and multi-level and can help address complex social issues no one organisation can solve on its own. Lack of clarity and evidence on the value that is created by partnership working. Different types of partnership create different types of value, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Associational value (respect) » Transferred resource value (transfer of money, assets, skills, competence, capability) » Interaction value – intangible co-created by working together (learning, knowledge, reputation, trust) » Synergistic value (achieve more together than separately social innovation and change) » Stages of partnership: » Partnership formation: planning and preparation to determine fit between partners (linked interests, organisational characteristics & structures, goals & objectives) agree resource flows, identify leadership partnership champions, risk assessment). » Partnership implementation: design processes for decision making & operations, structures & management, » Partnership institutionalization: partnership working embedded within strategy, structure & processes of organisations.

<p>Horton, Prain and Thiele (2009)</p> <p>Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research, International Potato Centre, Peru</p>	<p>Improving the role of partnerships in development</p>	<p>Review of cross disciplinary and cross-sector research on partnership working. Included research studies, professional evaluation literature, practitioner-oriented reviews and guidelines & assessment tools</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Definitions differ across contexts and disciplines. » More consistent agreement of elements of partnership working and what is not partnership working. Not all evolve into formal arrangements. Formal does not equate to effective. Good leadership motivates and facilitates processes, not controlling decision-making. » Few empirical studies or systematic evaluations of partnership working are reported in the literature. Informal reporting presents knowledge management risk of loss of tacit knowledge/institutional memory over time. Published guidelines & tools are not premised on research evidence or learning. Few practical guidelines for developing interorganisational relationships, trust and mutuality in partnerships. » Success factors: common vision & purpose, realistically defined goals, legitimized and supported by parent organisations, equitable sharing of resources, responsibilities and benefits, transparent governance & decision-making, trust, capacity development & learning. » Gap in systematic evidence underpinning partnership working towards SDGs. Few approaches to evaluation have been tested or widely applied. Gaps include evaluating partnership processes, contribution of partnership to objectives of partner organisations, evaluating perspective of multiple partners. Awareness that improved evaluation needed to sustain funding.
<p>Clifford, Millar, Smith, Hora and DeLima (2008)</p> <p>University of Wisconsin - Madison</p>	<p>K-20 Partnerships (involving primary and secondary US equivalent schools and universities)</p>	<p>Systematic review of 36 studies Quantitative and qualitative data from case studies, multi-case studies & surveys across partnerships of different sizes/structure (69% single case studies; 83% convenience samples).</p>	<p>Weak empirical evidence underpinning partnership working in this context: Gaps include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Few implementation studies describe formation and early development of partnerships. Insufficient detail on how partnerships form and function » Ambiguity in defining partnerships – limits ability to understand, isolate and test what were the key factors determining success or failure. » Little focus or reporting of wider context within which partnership operates – limits understanding of how learning can/should be transferred across contexts. <p>Features suggested by the research as being linked to successful partnerships include partnering organisations leadership will and endorsement, policies, and incentives; Shared purpose and expectations of tangible mutual benefits, open communication, focus on goals, trust and respect, established governance structure, adequate resources, accountability measures, power equalization, shared language, organisational learning.</p>

<p>Gorard, Smith, Thomas, May, Admett & Slack (2006)</p> <p>University of York</p>	<p>Addressing the barriers to participation in higher education. HEFCE.</p>	<p>Review of empirical research published between 1997-2005 with a focus on England</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Limited evidence about the effectiveness of different pre-entry interventions with young people or adults. The focus has been on students' perceptions of interventions rather than collection of data to track progression, and this has limited the ability to isolate cause and effect. "No evidence that partnership provision of new programmes and/or in new locations increases the numbers of students from under-represented groups entering HE" (p85). » While HE and FE partnerships can promote access by changing the structure and content of higher education provision, collaboration raises challenges. » Elements of success include shared strategic aims/ objectives and commitment to agreed strategy, focus on people in the partnerships, results oriented procedures, effective resource use, effective & cost-effective structures, minimize the number of partners. » UK research indicates that changing the location and type of provision and facilitating progression into HE from other sectors is associated with more students from under-represented groups entering higher education, yet evaluation methodology does not allow for cause and effect to be determined.
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Learning from the existing evidence

Review of the existing body of evidence on partnership working suggests there are benefits for individuals, organisations, communities and society. Depending on the type of partnership and nature of partnership working, Austin and Seitanidi (2012a), Drahota et al. (2016) and Plummer et al. (2021) highlight that these can include the development of employees' leadership and managerial skills, technical and sector knowledge, personal development and wellbeing and job satisfaction. Organisations may benefit from learning, brand awareness and the enhanced reputation associated with contributing social value. At a community and societal level, the benefits may include community development and capacity building (Plummer et al., 2021) and the joint planning and delivery of solutions, interventions and programmes that target social issues enhancing social inclusion and wellbeing (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), 2023; Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD), 2019).

Research evidence concerned specifically with widening participation programmes delivered through partnership working between higher education institutions, schools and community organisations also points to important benefits. While evaluation has been limited in focus and by the methodology employed, positive effects reported include:

- » Enhanced university readiness, educational aspirations and university enrollment among post-primary level students (Ni Chorcora, Bray and Banks, 2023)
- » Improved progression of socioeconomically disadvantaged students (Barkat, 2019; Renbarger and Long, 2019; Gorard et al., 2006)
- » Progression and reduced attrition among students from ethnic minority backgrounds (Cummins et al., 2022; Hamerton and Henare, 2017; Crump, Ned and Winkleby, 2015; See et al., 2012; Nagda et al., 1998)
- » Positive relationships fostered between students, community, and higher education institutions in delivering programmes relevant and supportive of local economic development (Mu et al., 2023; Hamerton and Henare, 2017)
- » A more integrated and cohesive higher education institution and more diverse student body with enhanced student experience (Macqueen, Southgate and Scevak, 2023; Wanti et al., 2022; Parkes et al., 2014).

The challenges and costs associated with partnership working, also reported in the literature, include mismatches of power, of timescales, of values, and of resources (Drahota et al. 2016; Austin and Seitanidi, 2012a; Plummer et al., 2021; Mackintosh, 1993), as well as gaps in structures and processes to support performance measurement (Plummer et al., 2021). As Table 2.1 above also highlights, challenges in relation to the availability, accessibility and use of data for learning and improvement is a recurrent challenge (Ni Chorcora, Bray and Banks, 2023; Wiggins, Anastasiou and Cox, 2021, 2021; Barkat, 2019; Horton, Prain and Thiele, 2009). Gorard et al. (2006) conclude that while partnerships

are important to promoting access to higher education, “collaboration poses practical, organisational and cultural challenges” (p83).

Table 2.1 also confirms that enabling or success factors for partnership working consistently reported in the research literature include.

- » having partnership champions at leadership level (Austin and Seitanidi, 2012b)
- » linked interests, shared goals, and expectations of mutual benefit (Austin and Seitanidi, 2012b)
- » distributed power, leadership and decision-making, and a grassroots approach to development (Mu et al., 2023)
- » adequate financial resources (Plummer at al., 2021)
- » clear governance structures (Wiggins, Anastasiou and Cox, 2021), transparency, trust, and mutual respect (Plummer at al., 2021).

Notwithstanding the limited focus and methodological limitations of existing research on partnership working, it points to the costs and barriers, and the enabling and success factors, and is an important source of learning and insights for those seeking to develop partnerships.





3.0 Methodology

This research study included a comprehensive desk-based review of published national and international research on approaches and models of partnership working. In addition, nine focus groups and interviews were held with 25 professionals engaged in a range of partnership types, and structures across sectors. Qualitative interviews and an anonymous survey were also used to engage seven current and past students representing the voice of learners in the research.

Evidence review

The following methodology was employed in conducting the review.

- » • Literature was searched to identify key terms used in widening participation research and policy nationally and internationally. A list of key search terms was compiled (see Appendix A) and used to search the literature across the following electronic databases; Educational Resources information Centre (ERIC), PsychInfo and Web of Science.
- » • Relevant empirical studies were identified through these database searches.
- » • Electronic searches were supplemented by hand searching of reference lists of systematic reviews and other relevant research literature.
- » • The websites of national and international government agency and policy organisations mentioned in research articles were searched for relevant reports.

Focus groups and interviews with professionals.

Overall, three focus groups and six semi-structured interviews were facilitated online using Microsoft Teams between 6 - 28 September 2023. These lasted between 45 minutes to 1 hour. Participants working in a similar sector or partnership structures e.g., Local Development Companies, health and social care interagency partnerships or adult and community education, were invited to join a focus group rather than an individual interview. In this context, it was anticipated that the synergy from the group discussion would facilitate a fuller exploration of stakeholder's experience from a range of perspectives and contexts.

These focus groups and interviews aimed to engage participants in:

- » Describing their experience of partnership working, including the most effective partnership, most sustainable partnership and the best structures and governance processes that facilitate partnership working.
- » Reflecting on good practice and insights for learning regarding models, structures and governance, relationships, resourcing, budget frameworks and staff skills and sustainability.
- » Identifying good practice examples and key learning for higher education institutions and TU Dublin widening participation and PATH 3 work.

Sample of participants

The sample included 25 professionals.

- » 18 professionals external to TU Dublin, working in statutory and voluntary organisations and partnership contexts across education, social inclusion and community development, and social care within the geographical area surrounding the three TU Dublin Campus.
- » Seven TU Dublin professional staff with experience of working on the PATH 3 programme or other partnership programmes.

A purposive sampling approach was used to identify and recruit participants with a wide and diverse range of experience of interagency partnership working, with the potential for transferable learning and insights for this TU Dublin research project.

Participants were first approached by email which explained the nature and rationale for the project and what taking part involved. A Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form was included to support informed decision-making regarding participation in an interview/focus group. Follow-up email communication and telephone calls were also facilitated with some participants to clarify queries and agree a suitable date and time.

Table 3.1 Professional profile of focus group and interview participants

Number of participants	Role designation	Sector
4	Senior Manager	Education
6	Middle Manager	
3	Staff Officer	
3	Senior Manager	Social Inclusion and Community Development
3	Middle Manager	
1	Senior Manager	Health and Social Care
5	Middle Manager	

Qualitative analysis of the focus group and interview data confirms the breadth and depth of participants’ experience with partnership working. This includes experience of international, national and cross border partnerships, higher education partnerships with schools, community organisations, further education institutions, other higher education institutions and government, industry partnerships, as well partnerships in other sectors (Children and Young People’s Services Committees (CYPSC), Child and Family Support Networks (CFSN), Prevention, Partnership and Family Support (PPFS)) and on specific projects such as National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy (NTRIS) or the local and regional Drug and Alcohol Taskforce. Some of the partnerships described during data collection had sustained for 20- 30+ years. Participants also brought experience of a range of partnership models and structures including cooperatives and consortia.

Interviews and survey with students – Learner Voice

The Learner Voice element of the research provided participants with a choice to take part in a focus group/individual interview or to complete an anonymous online survey. No one wished to take part in a focus group.

- » Interviews were semi-structured, lasting on average of 32 minutes, ranging from 23 to 56 minutes and were facilitated on Microsoft Teams between 22 October and 9 November 2023.
- » The survey was comprised a mixture of 7 open and 2 multiple choice questions and was devised on Microsoft Forms.

Participants also completed a short online survey prior to their interview. This set out to capture their socio-demographic profile (age, gender, home location during and outside of university semester time, member of priority group identified in the National Access Plan²²) and key details of their engagement with higher education (current/past student, name of institution, course name, attendance at DEIS school, HEAR/DARE status, nature of any ongoing engagement with Access programme/support).

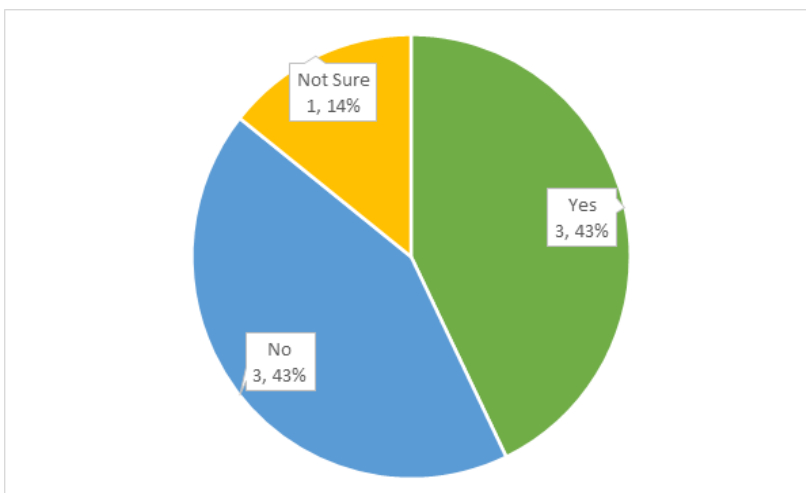
The individual interview or survey aimed to engage current and past students in

- » exploring their journey and experience of accessing and progressing in higher education; pathways, issues, successes, and challenges.
- » evaluating support received along their journey from their school, community organisations, college/university.
- » making recommendations for higher education institutions Access programmes and the provision of support to students in priority groups identified in the National Access Plan.

Sample of participants

The sample comprised seven students. Six took part in an individual interview while one opted to complete the anonymous online survey. This included three current and four past students. Five participants reported most recently accessing Level 6-8 courses at TU Dublin while two participants reported accessing Level 7-9 courses at other higher education institutions. One reported dropping out before completing their Level 6 course. Participants were aged between 18-22 years (2, 28.5%), 23-30 years (2, 28.5%) and over 40 years (3, 43%). Figures 3.1 and 3.2 below describe participants' school experience and representation of priority groups identified within the National Access Plan.

Figure 3.1 Attendance at a DEIS Post Primary School



²² Students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged, are members of Irish Traveller and Roma and other ethnic minority communities, mature students, carers, lone or teen parents, students who have disabilities and students who have experienced the care system, homelessness, domestic violence or the criminal justice system.

In describing the path followed to into university, one participant came through the HEAR/DARE path while four completed a course in a further education college first. The remaining two participants had completed a university access programme.

A purposive sampling approach was used to recruit participants through:

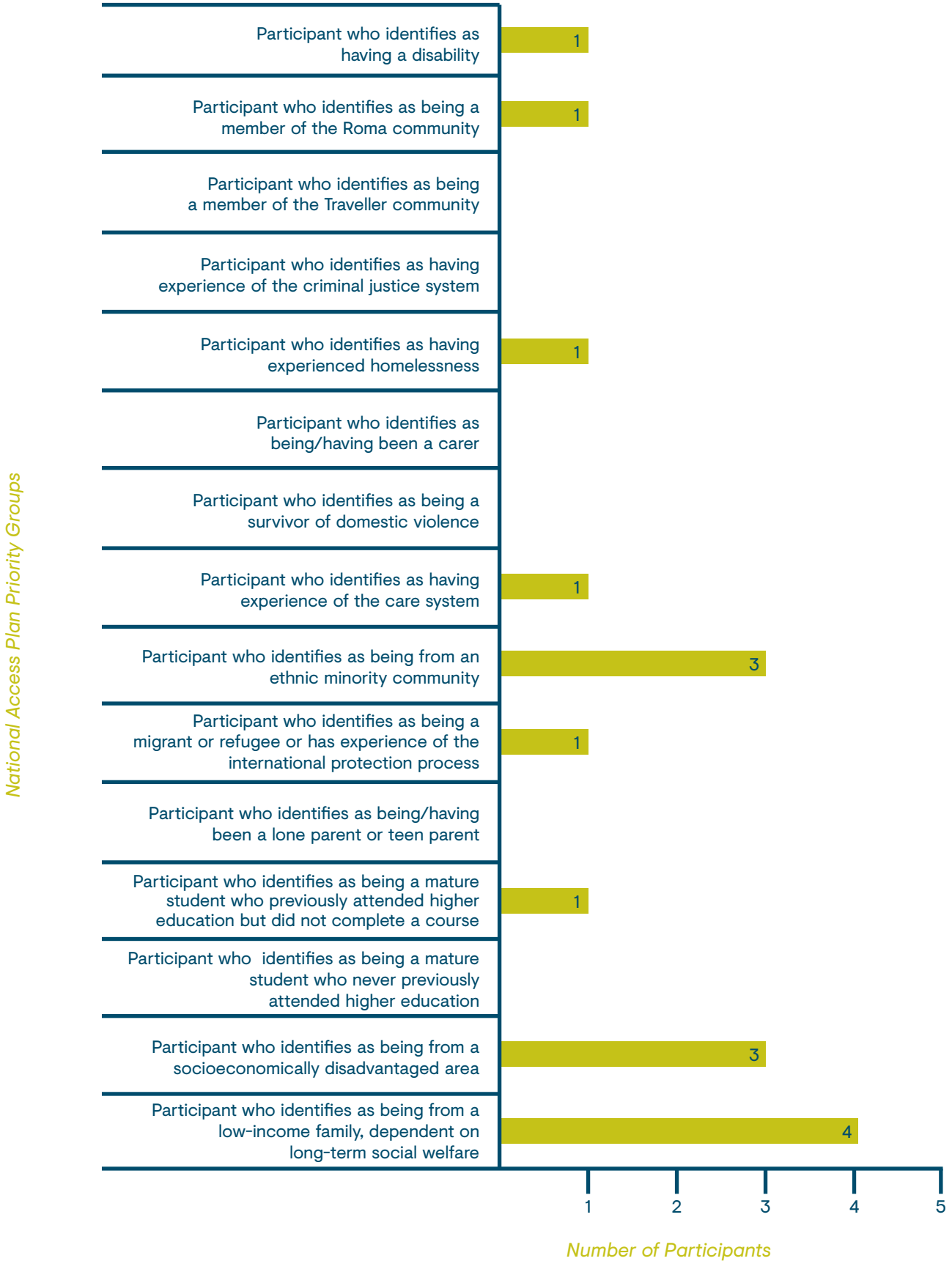
- » Members of the Research Stakeholder Group²³ comprising key stakeholder organisations across the statutory, community and voluntary sectors were asked to identify and provide recruitment information (Flyer, Participant Information Sheet) on the research project to potential participants that have a relationship with their organisation. They were asked to share this information with
 - o students who have completed their courses within the past few years,
 - o students who are currently progressing on their course, and
 - o students who started but did not progress on their course.

It was agreed that initial recruitment would focus on TU Dublin students but that other higher education institutions would be considered in the event that sufficient students from TU Dublin could not be recruited. Recruitment commenced in July 2023 and completed at the start of November. Five participants were recruited in this manner.

- » A targeted email to students listed on the TU Dublin Access and Disability registers held by Recruitment, Access and Participation shared a Recruitment Flyer with students during the week beginning 17th September 2023 and requested they make contact with the researcher directly, if interested in taking part in the research project. Once participants contacted the researcher to express an interest in taking part, they were provided with a Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form to facilitate informed decision-making. Follow-up email communication and telephone calls were also facilitated with some participants to clarify queries and agree a suitable date and time. While 12 students initially expressed an interest in taking part, only one was recruited in this manner.

²³ Primary and secondary schools, Schools Completion Programme, EPIC Empowering People in Care, AHEAD, Family Carers Ireland, Pobal, Children & Young People's Services Committee, The Tower programme: North Clondalkin Probation Project, National Learning Network, Women's Collective Ireland, STAR (Supporting Travellers and Roma) Project, Northside Partnership, Empower Local Development CLG, An Cosán, Irish Association for Social Inclusion Opportunities (IASIO), Care After Prison

Figure 3.2 Participant representation of priority groups identified in National Access Plan



» A targeted email was sent to students known to the TU Dublin Access Office who have previously volunteered to share their experience as an access student. One participant was recruited in this manner.

Consent

Written informed consent was sought prior to the research participants' taking part in an interview/focus group. The Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form described what the focus group/interview data collection process, researcher, rationale and how the data would be collected, stored and used. This information was also explained at the start of the focus group/ interview where participants were also advised they could change their mind at any stage during the focus group/interview and no longer take part, as well as the practical ways they could do this. Students completing the anonymous online survey were not required to provide any identifying personal data. They were provided with a Participant Information Sheet and were advised that in completing the survey, they were providing their consent.

Confidentiality and GDPR

Participants were advised that the data would be collected anonymously. This meant that for professionals neither their personal names, job titles nor the names of their organisation would be reported. Similarly, students' courses or year of study would not be reported to protect their anonymity and create a 'safe' space where they could share their experience and perspectives as honestly as possible. It was agreed that professional participants would be identified as Senior Manager²⁴, Middle Manager²⁵ or Staff Officer²⁶ in either the education, social inclusion and community development, or health and social care sectors. Students would be described as undergraduate or post graduate and attending TU Dublin or other institution. All participants were also made aware that their data would be stored confidentially on a password protected computer and would be destroyed at the end of the project.

Limitations of the research

Purposive and convenience sampling of students for the Learner Voice element of the research may have resulted in those with more positive experiences of support and Access services volunteering to take part. This may not represent the experience of all students and must be acknowledged as a limitation of the research.

While TU Dublin staff were included in the interviews and focus groups, this did not include representation from academic/ faculty staff. This must also be acknowledged as a limitation of the research.

²⁴ Director/CEO/Head of Department/ Regional Manager level

²⁵ Manager below Director/CEO/Head of Department/ Regional Manager level

²⁶ Role not at a managerial level



4.0 Findings

Key findings and learning for developing and sustaining partnerships and inter-agency working between community and higher education institutions are presented in this chapter. This includes findings emerging from the evidence review and primary research with professionals and learners.

4.1 Community Higher Education Institution Partnerships

Key Findings and learning

Very few theoretical models have been developed and evaluated in relation to widening participation partnerships. Adopting 'a model' may not be appropriate to the nuanced nature of partnership working in widening participation. A framework that provides flexibility and adaptability to various contexts may be more appropriate to support the development of consistent good practice while promoting innovation.

Models lack theoretical robustness: few have been applied and tested.

Beyond the enabling and success factors documented in the research literature and summarized in Table 2.1, relatively less attention has been devoted to understanding, categorizing, building or testing models of partnership working between higher education institutions and communities.

This is confirmed by robust systematic reviews of relevant research including that reported by Mu et al. (2023) on 24 studies of partnerships among families, schools, and universities, by Drahota et al. (2016) on 54 studies community academic partnerships, and by Clifford et al. (2008) on 36 studies on K-20 partnerships in the United States. The evidence has been described as “theoretically light” (Mu et al., 2023). Drahota et al., (2016 p166) note that “relatively few community-academic partnership models have been described at length in the literature” while Clifford et al. (2008 p14) concluded that there is insufficient detail on “how partnerships form and function” and that published studies place little emphasis on reporting the wider operational context. Survey research reported by Plummer et al. (2021) of those engaged in partnership working across higher education institutions and community organisations found that while more than 70% identified partnership working as either “a very high priority” or “very central” to the mission of their organisation, many also reported a lack of structures and processes including monitoring and evaluation, and training. Review of studies of partnership working across other sectors confirms this is not unique to partnerships between higher education and community organisations. Wiggins, Anastasiou and Cox (2021) documented a “lack of theoretical robustness” across multisector alliances concerned with public health, while Horton Prain and Thiele (2009) commented that partnership working guidelines and toolkits were seldom premised on research evidence or learning.

This is also confirmed in analysis of the focus group and interview data, including that collected with internal TU Dublin staff. Professionals, in seven of the nine focus groups and interviews, emphasized the centrality of collaborative and partnership working, “bread and Butter” (Interviewee, Middle Manager, Education), to their professional roles; yet the data highlighted that practice differs across organisations in relation to formalisation of partnerships working, and in particular with regard to training on collaborative working, evaluation of outcomes and impact, and the use of business intelligence use of data for learning and improvement. These themes emerged consistently across focus groups and interviews with participants across disciplines, sectors and partnership types. Some participants highlighted the variation in practice across the organisation in relation to the availability and adoption of formal frameworks, processes and resources to support partnership working.

“

I've been working through various initiatives and trying to set up what are more formalized partnerships with colleagues that in some instances we've been working with for many years, but on a much more ad hoc basis and what I'm finding at the moment is, is that that there's very good relationships in place between people, but sometimes we don't have the structures or the templates to launch...It's like people are looking for, well, what agreement, what template, what framework?"

(Focus Group Participant: Senior Manager, Education)

”

This presents an opportunity to leverage learning across departments and faculties through the establishment of knowledge management and knowledge transfer processes to support organisational learning.

Existing models are varied in type and purpose.

Models of partnership working reported in the cross-sector and cross disciplinary literature are varied in type, form, and purpose (Austin and Seitanidi, 2012a, 2012b). Devaney et al. (2021 p2) concludes from a scoping review of international research concerned with interagency collaboration to protect the welfare of children that “there is no single model for multiagency working, with models reflecting varying degrees of integration across the different elements of collaboration, and in particular the remit and expected function of the multiagency approach. Furthermore, approaches can be centralised or can use more localised structures, with degrees of prescriptiveness on how collaboration is implemented evident in both approaches”. Table 4.1 below presents the key models reported in this cross-sector literature.

This theme emerged within the focus groups and interviews with professionals. While the lack of models for partnership working particularly between higher education institutions and community partners was acknowledged, their value was questioned in light of the variation and tailoring that is required across setting and contexts.

“

How many of them would you have? Because every institution, every circumstance that you deal with could be different. Now there are multiple types that you could have. There's different types of so for example... Even if you take industry engagement, so you could have them just wanting, ... the academic institution to provide all of the education and they will provide students and they just don't really want to be involved thereafter. There are other industry partners who want to be right in the thick of it. There's other industry partners they want to deliver some of the content because they know best. So that's just that's another, that's a different model. Again, some of them want you to accredit what they do on site...So if you're talking about a model and in every one of those instances there will be nuances and differences about what they want and what they have, by way of documentation, by way of what they have as process, so would it be useful to have a model - as a starting point yes, but not that it would be smother or constrict what might organically happen within the partnership.

(Interviewee: Senior Manager, Education)

”

“

So, community partners, we don't dictate to them what they should do and they collaborate with us and we discuss it and work it out... we have a different partnership with each one. Some of them need us to lend them the curriculum, some of them need us to help them with quality assurance, some of them just want the money... and then we have a monthly meeting where all the partners come together.

(Interviewee: Senior Manager, Education)

”

Participants emphasised the importance of the process over a partnership model. The need for clarity and to define partnership working emerged within the focus groups and interviews with professionals as being important to its operationalization in practice. Understanding the organisational ethos around partnership working would provide a clear purpose.

“

To start off, I think we need to be clear about what we're talking about when we're talking about partnership working. Is it inter-agency working? Is it collaboration? What are we talking about? That will help us with success.

(Focus Group Participant: Middle Manager, Health and Social Care)

”

Taking time at the outset to clarify the partnership and what was involved was also considered very important for success.

“

You know, people talk about clarity all the time and what it really means, but sometimes people can kind of jump and think that, you know, interagency worker collaboration means that everybody does everything, like everybody can do everybody's job but that's not what it means. And so, we would have had to take time to explore that with the wider team and the other manager locally. We did take time to do it, but you know, workers often don't understand partnerships. Managers don't either sometimes.

(Focus Group Participant: Senior Manager, Health and Social Care)

”

Participants were also clear that contracted supplier arrangements were not partnership working. Some participants, particularly those working in social inclusion and community development, noted a move towards this and away from the ethos and ideology of partnership working based on equal and inclusive consultation, collaboration and co-design.

Table 4.1 Summary of Models of Partnership Working; Type, Purpose and Context.

Governance Structure	Context of application/ example	Type of partnership	Purpose of partnership	Learning for partnerships aimed at widening participation in higher education
Strategic Governing Board, Implementation Group & Working Groups/ sub-groups & Programme Office	Long term social and economic regeneration of Dublin's North East Inner City (NEIC) (Department of an Taoiseach, 2022)	Multi-sector, multilevel partnership of key government departments statutory, private, community and voluntary organisations	Social change within a community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Structures provide means to ensure clarity on role and purpose of partners as well as checks and balances to ensure good governance. » Publication of minutes and progress reports document inputs and activities to stakeholders. Evaluation is needed to investigate processes and outcomes. (Cleary, 2019)
	Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC)	Multisector, multi professional and multilevel partnership working among agencies that deliver services to children and young people.	Local coordination of services to children, young people and families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Partnership working is an ongoing process that takes time even with structures, and other mechanisms. Strategic plan, Committee structure & roles, practice sharing networks & events support the adoption of standard operating procedures and good practice, as well as engagement (DCEDIY, 2023). » Resources²⁷ & templates available to share practice.
Statutory Committee with mandated membership led by government agency	Local Community Development Committee (LCDC) led by Local Authority. (Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD), 2019)	Cross sector partnerships involving statutory providers, businesses and the community and voluntary sector	Deliver public services in local communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » A statutory duty and guidelines support the establishment of partnership working. » Other enablers include having a strategic plan, producing an annual report, progress work through subcommittee structure, share minutes of meetings. » Ongoing need to resource engagement of voluntary partners, communicate purpose and develop mechanisms to share good practice and learning (DRCD, 2019).

²⁷ A supporting suite of resources include a blueprint document and guidance (Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), 2015), templates including 3-year plan, Quality Assurance and Planning and Reporting Frameworks (CYPSC, 2017).

Co-operative	Inner city local community development Dublin City Community Co-op (Tasc think tank for action on social change, 2023)	13 local community organisations form co-operative for jointly funded activity alongside autonomous organisational activity	Address social exclusion and poverty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Benefits to small community organisations in networking and collaboration, accessing funding, technical support and shared resources. » Benefits communities and practice as organisations are embedded and trusted in the community. » Limited resource: to build capacity of cooperative/ to keep pace with emerging need/ inflexible funding. » Administrative data collection system needs to capture full range / depth of outcomes across partnership working
Consortium ²⁸	Delivery of education and training to promote employability	Industry and education and training providers.	To develop and deliver foundation degrees, apprenticeships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Statutory guidance and Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) provide a framework while allowing flexibility and agility to meet local needs (McManus, Peck and Vickery, 2022). » Need to balance/manage representation, input and power of statutory agencies relative to other partners. » Need to manage different organisational cultures and ways of working e.g., quality assurance processes (Morgan, Saunders and Turner, 2004).
Federation ²⁹	School improvement policy in England	Group of schools in a geographical area	To promote school improvement by collaboration, sharing resources and expertise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » • Autonomy is important for schools/partners. Lack of trust and fear takeover/ full integration. » • Need to manage staff perceptions and expectations through effective communication (Chapman et al., 2010).

28 A consortium, a partnership formed by groups of organisations coming together to work towards a common goal
29 “In England, federations are defined as groups of schools that have a formal agreement to collaborate with the aim of raising achievement and promoting inclusion and innovation” (Chapman et al., 2010 p53).

Collaborative Continuum with varied levels and stages account for evolving dynamic nature of partnerships.

As Table 4.1 above confirms, the concept of a collaborative continuum which takes account of the varying nature and purpose of collaboration/partnership working is widely documented in the international cross-sector literature that includes child protection in social care (Devaney et al, 2021), school university partnerships (Sarmiento-Márquez et al., 2023) and corporate social responsibility partnerships between businesses and non-government agencies (Austin and Seitanidi 2012a).

In reviewing interagency collaborative working to provide services to families, Barnes et al. (2017 p8) highlighted that “while partnership between agencies can progress by stages towards full interagency working, inter-agency may also involve different degrees or levels of partnership simultaneously”. The varied levels and stages are detailed and illustrated below in Figures 4.1 and 4.2.

Levels

Figure 4.1 presents a Hierarchy of four levels of partnership working by Frost, 2005 cited in Barnes et al. (2017 p8).

Figure 4.1 Hierarchy of four Levels of Partnership Working by Frost (2005)

1. Co-operation: This is the weakest form of partnership with organisations working together towards consistent goals while maintaining independence.
2. Collaboration: Organisations plan and work together to achieve shared goals through avoiding duplication addressing identified gaps
3. Co-ordination: Organisations work together in a planned systematic way towards achieving shared goals with formal decision-making processes and a continuum of joint action.
4. Merger/Integration: This is the highest form of partnership with organisations become one to achieve goals and outcomes.

In a similar vein, Devaney et al. (2021 p3) cite the work of Himmelman (1992) which includes four accumulative levels.

1. Networking (exchange of information).
2. Co-ordination (exchange of information and altering activities).
3. Cooperation (exchange of information, altering activities and sharing resources).
4. Collaboration (exchange of information, altering activities, sharing resources and “accruing of benefit to each of the agencies involved”).

Stages

Barnes et al. (2017 p8) also present the four stages of change in inter-agency working developed by Tomlinson (2003) and detailed in Figure 3.2 below.

Figure 4.2 Four Stages of Change in Inter-agency Working by Tomlinson (2003)

1. Change in inputs/processes e.g., new management structures.
2. Change in routines and practices.
3. Change in outcomes for clients/service user stakeholders.
4. Change is embedded across partner organisations.

Sarmiento-Márquez et al. (2023 p4) noted from a systematic review of 100 articles documenting school university partnerships concerned with promoting change in teaching and learning practices, that such partnerships are often modeled on their lifecycle stage. The SURF Framework developed by Hauth et al. (2019) is one example. The following four stages of partnership working have been identified in relation to pre-service teacher training: Setting the stage (exploratory stage), Understanding methodology and PD (planning resources and training for teacher professional development), Research in action (early implementation in schools and data collection), and Follow-up and sustainability (teachers continue to practice, review and improve their practice in school).

Austin and Seitanidi (2012a) also present a four-stages of collaborative relationship model for partnership working between business and non-government agencies that builds on the work of Austin (2000, cited in Austin and Seitanidi, 2012a p736) and is focused on the intensity and interaction in the partnership relationship.

1. philanthropic (a unilateral transfer of resources from business/corporate donor to non-profit organisation),
1. transactional (reciprocal exchange of more valuable resources across partners through specific activities),
2. integrative (where missions, strategies, values, personnel, and activities are integrated across organisations),
3. transformational collaborations (builds on but moves beyond integrative stage to co-create societal change).

Reflecting the literature, there is variation in how partnerships are conceptualized and operationalized in practice, and this is clearly evident in the data from focus group and interviews with professionals. More than half of the participants spoke about how partnerships differ, “horizontally and vertically at different depths” (Focus Group participant: Middle Manager, Social Inclusion and Community Development) depending on the partners, social issues and needs at a given time, as well as the lifestage of a programme.

It was acknowledged that these can be formal with partnership agreements or informal based on mutual relationships, and that they evolve over time. One participant, aligning their experience with the concepts of levels and stages of embedding and integration and that of transformational collaboration below, spoke about the need to deepen and further develop collaborative relationships over time to sustain the work, rather than repeating cycles of the same activities..

“

You know if we start a relationship with Traveller organisations and we do a nice event on campus and we'll bring Traveller students on campus so they know that we're Traveller friendly ...in three years' time .. we need to deepen that. We need to be doing more and so it's not that we can trot out the same activity year after year. The relationship needs to deepen. It needs to get to another level and that requires more effort and more resources.

(Interviewee: Middle Manager, Education)

”

Participants working in the health and social care sector highlighted examples along the collaborative continuum that ranged from transactional with organisations implementing a shared critical incident protocol to transformational whereby organisations were seeking to bring about systemic change and adopt new ways of working in response to school absenteeism.

“

There's different types of interagency experience, like where you're maybe addressing a gap and bringing a new service or new approach to work, and that requires different engagement or you're just trying to bring you age to work together, collect and share information, share resources, and respond to an ongoing need that that can happen more seamlessly.

(Focus Group Participant: Middle Manager, Health and Social Care)

”

The research participants' experience and the wider research evidence both highlight the flexibility and applicability of a collaborative continuum to a variety of settings and contexts is to be recognized as a strength (Devaney et al., 2021). “The use of a continuum is important conceptually because it recognizes that collaborations are dynamic and that stages are not discrete points; conceptually and in practice a collaborative relationship is multifaceted, and some characteristics may be closer to one reference stage while other traits are closer to another. Nor does a relationship automatically pass from

one stage to another; movement, in either direction, is a function of decisions, actions, and inactions of the collaborators. Furthermore, one need not pass through each stage but rather could begin at a different stage. A continuum captures more usefully the dynamic nature and heterogeneity of evolving relationships and the corresponding value creation process” (Austin and Seitanidi 2012a p737).

Figure 4.3 below presents the Austin and Seitanidi (2012a) collaborative continuum model that includes both stages and levels of partnership working. Using a model of this type supports organisations entering into partnerships to design, develop and implement their approach to working in partnership, and it provides an approach to review, evaluate and learn for improvement (Sarmiento-Márquez et al., 2023).

Figure 4.3 Collaborative Continuum by Austin and Seitanidi (2012a)

Nature of relationship	Stage I Philanthropic>	Stage II Transactional>	Stage III Integrative>	Stage IV Transformational>
Level of Engagement	Low <-----> High			
Importance to Mission	Peripheral <-----> Central			
Magnitude of Resources	Small <-----> Big			
Type of Resources	Money <-----> Core Competencies			
Scope of Activities	Narrow <-----> Broad			
Interaction Level	Infrequent <-----> Intensive			
Trust	Modest <-----> Deep			
Internal Change	Minimal <-----> Great			
Managerial Complexity	Simple <-----> Complex			
Strategic Value	Minor <-----> Major			
Co-creation of Value	Sole <-----> Conjoined			
Synergistic Value	Occasional <-----> Predominant			
Innovation	Seldom <-----> Frequent			
External System Change	Rare <-----> Common			

Theory of Change model accounts for contextual factors, and measures programme contribution to impact.

Drawing on the work of Connell and Kubisch (1998), Barkat (2019) applied a Theory of Change model to evaluating the contribution of the Academic Enrichment Programme, an outreach widening participation programme at the University of Birmingham while Pickering and Self (2022) applied it to document and describe a community outreach programme aimed at supporting mature learners to access higher education through the Higher Education Progression Partnership funded by Sheffield Hallam University and the University of Sheffield.

A Theory of Change approach seeks to explain how and why a programme works, taking into account the wider context in which the Programme is being delivered. “Typically, the theory is articulated in graphic form [see Figure 4.5 below] as a map of the causal pathways describing how the intervention will bring about change by illustrating the relationship between intervention activities and the desired intended short-term, intermediate and long-term impact. The Theory of Change also requires making explicit assumptions about how change will occur, so that it can be understood how and why the activities were implemented. The Theory of Change approach gives due consideration to the context in which the intervention operates and acknowledges that the context can positively or negatively impact on the intervention leading to the desired outcomes. Usually, the Theory of Change is developed based on a range of stakeholders’ views and information sources. Once the Theory of Change has been articulated, it is used to plan the evaluation to test and evidence whether the change theory actually materialised by testing the assumptions, implementation of activities and monitoring intended (and unintended) outcomes” (Barket, 2019 p1165).

While this did not emerge within the focus groups and interviews completed as part of this research, Figure 4.4 below details the Theory of Change for the NEIC³⁰ Initiative in Dublin. Figure 4.5 below presents the Theory of Change developed for the Train the Trainer Community outreach widening participation programme developed by the Higher Education Progression Partnership funded by Sheffield Hallam University and the University of Sheffield (Pickering and Self, 2022 p8). It documents and describes the evidence base for the programme as well as the inputs, activities and outcomes in the short, medium and longer term.

This approach is widely applied in evidenced based medicine and healthcare where multifaceted interventions are also delivered in complex environments and are subject to the influence of a multiplicity of social and environmental factors that impact their success (Romão et al., 2023).

³⁰ The North East Inner City Initiative was established in 2016, by the Irish government to oversee the long-term social and economic regeneration of Dublin’s North East Inner City. This initiative is premised on the Mulvey Report ‘Creating a Brighter Future’ published in 2017 following extensive consultation local stakeholders. The Mulvey Report outlined the drivers for change, presented a clear vision for the future and recommended a number of new structures and appointments to lead this work. This resulted in the establishment of the North East Inner City Programme Implementation Board and Subgroups, and a set of recommendations to address current and future social and economic challenges in the area (Department of an Taoiseach, 2022 <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/7f602-taoiseach-launches-2022-north-east-inner-city-progress-report/>).

Figure 4.4 Theory of Change for North East Inner City (NEIC) Initiative (Cleary, 2019 p2)

	Overall Initiative	Pilot Social Employment Programme
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To support the long term social and economic regeneration of the NEIC area. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To support continued and enhanced delivery of priority childcare, youth-work, eldercare and environmental services in the NEIC area.
Inputs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exchequer funding. Staffing resources/admin. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exchequer funding. Staffing resources/admin.
Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Oversight and co-ordination of supports in the NEIC area. Financial assistance/support for the implementation of 54 actions in the following areas: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tackling crime and drugs. Maximising education, training and employment opportunities. Integration of family, children and youth services. Improving the physical landscape. Financial support for the implementation of actions to address substance use and misuse in the area. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identification and allocation of financial assistance for hiring employees in a selected number of organisations. Administration of application and interview process. Managing and monitoring the implementation of the PSEP.
Outputs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Completion of actions recommended in the Mulvey Report (2017), and actions to address substance use and misuse in the NEIC area. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff placements in priority service areas across a number of community organisations in the NEIC area.
Outcomes	<p>Social and economic regeneration of the NEIC area by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creating a safe place to work, play and visit/travel (through a high visibility policing presence, tackling drug dealing and enhancing relationships with the community). Alignment of education, training and employment supports and creation of career pathways/opportunities for the local community. Greater co-ordination of social, educational and trainings services for families and children. An improved physical landscape (through refurbishment and replacement) that is attractive to live in. An integrated and enhanced approach to addiction treatment and rehabilitation services. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continued and enhanced provision (such as an increase in service provision) of childcare, youth-work, eldercare and environmental services in a number of community organisations in the NEIC area.

Figure 4.5 Theory of Change for Community Outreach Train the Trainer Widening Participation programme (Pickering and Self, 2022)



Applying the Theory of Change model in the context of widening participation in higher education programmes and interventions will take account of the complex context shaped by the range of “situational, institutional and dispositional” barriers that learners face (Gorard et al., 2006 p5; Geagea, 2019). This approach also facilitates the impact of widening participation programmes and interventions to be investigated and understood in terms of a “series of transformational changes” (Barkat, 2019 p1165) and as a contribution to observed changes and longer-term impact, helping to address one of the key challenges to evaluating and isolating the impact of such programmes and interventions (Plummer et al., 2021). Moreover, while not reported as an element of the evaluation undertaken by Barkat (2019), the process of developing, agreeing and co-creating the Theory of Change³¹ model with partners provides a significant opportunity to establish and nurture relationships between partners, agree a shared language and vision as well as negotiate partner inputs and activities and expected outputs.

31 <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/75c0bc68-0bfd-40ee-a002-e7ecc10fb19e/appendix-1-theory-of-change-models-exeter-uni.pdf>

Social Change Community Development focus on collaborative processes to enhance partnership working for social good/change.

The systematic review of 50 studies of community academic partnerships, reported by Drahota et al. (2016) and detailed in Table 2.1 above, noted that while many of these partnerships were premised on community development models, “descriptions of these collaborative models include guiding principles (e.g., partnership in all phases of research, building on the community’s resources and strengths, providing benefits to partners) rather than a formal conceptual definition of collaboration between community partners and academic researchers” (p167). This included Community Based Participatory Research undertaken in and with the community to deliver interventions and benefits for the community as well as Participatory Action Research which engaged communities in identifying and addressing issues and creating social change.

Drahota et al. (2016) found that only 16.7%, 9 of the 50 studies reported a conceptual definition of their collaborative partnership and noted that “much of the literature has neglected to cover important information about the Community Academic Partnership’s characteristics. For example, most studies did not disclose who initiated the Community Academic Partnership, the funding sources or processes of obtaining funding for the partnership, the composition of members at the beginning of the Community Academic Partnership and the retention of Community Academic Partnership members over time, or the Community Academic Partnership’s duration. This information would benefit the continued study of Community Academic Partnerships, as it would help confirm whether Community Academic Partnerships positively affect the relevance and feasibility of research, as has been hypothesized. Furthermore, this information might show when members of Community Academic Partnerships evaluate their collaborative process to determine whether the Community Academic Partnership is meeting its goals” (p193).

They proposed a new model, presented in Figure 4.6 below, that included partnership processes. According to Drahota et al. (2016 p167), this “model identifies specific collaborative processes important to the development of a Community Academic Partnership, proximal outcomes (e.g., partnership synergy, knowledge exchange, tangible products) that occur during the execution of Community Academic Partnership Activities, and distal outcomes (e.g., community improvements) that occur as a result of the Community Academic Partnership’s proximal outcomes”. Mu et al. (2023) reported from their systematic review of school university partnerships, that these provide an important means to share resources with children, parents, and school professionals and address cultural capital deficits in marginalized communities. However, they emphasised the importance of partnerships focusing on and addressing issues of “real school necessity” (p8) identified at grassroots levels within and by communities rather than by universities.

Figure 4.6 Community Academic Partnership Process Model



Adapted from Brookman-Fraze et al. 2012.

The primacy of the community development approach and principles that meaningfully engage underrepresented groups in a process that provides them with a voice and space to identify their issues and needs and to co-create solutions emerged as a key theme in three quarters of the focus groups and interviews. It was noted by some participants working in social inclusion and community development, that the most sustainable partnerships were those that adopted participative democracy as opposed to representative democracy, and that the government has recently published a new resource to promote the inclusive engagement of the community and voluntary sector and address ongoing power imbalances in some areas.

A social change and community development model emerged as the preferred model for most research participants, particularly those working with and advocating on behalf of underrepresented groups. Engaging and tapping into the lived experience of target groups was considered critical to identifying expressed needs and addressing gaps in provision. The gap in pathway and provision for young people lost to education between Junior and Leaving Certificate was highlighted in this regard.

“

It's about the people who fall out of the system in second level and getting them an alternative route. I mean we have shifted hugely from a kind of work-based learning programme into higher education and it's not for everybody. Take a look at something as simple as catering which you know there's a crisis in terms of the lack of skills and the skills shortage around that. That's a Level 7 programme now. That's just ridiculous. Why does it need to be a Level 7?

(Focus Group Participant: Middle Manager, Education)

”

Moreover, often, the cultural and social norms and nuances, and behavioural change mechanisms of underrepresented groups are neither understood nor acknowledged by policy makers who design programmes. The benefit of adopting a community development model for the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy pilot was identified as an example of good practice.

“

So thinking about engaging with people in person was critical, and I know engaging with the groups and the service users within the services to actually think about how they'd like this to work”. And so I think that the trust in the relationship and the pace and honesty that when things aren't working, we're not sure that that's OK, but we're going to stick together to try and see where it goes.

(Focus Group Participant: Senior Manager, Health and Social Care)

”

“

In the initial phase, we had such difficulty getting a Traveller organisation to come on board as partners for the reason, you know, there was such a lack of trust and there and people didn't want to be seen.....And you know there are Traveller and Roma education workers employed directly and they work in a team alongside an education welfare officer and a home school community liaison coordinator, but work in our community development principles. But it has been really successful really because of the work I would feel of the the Traveller workers ...and they're really, really embedded in the community and through them we were able to build partnership with local Traveller organisation then to do the project in common with them.

(Focus Group Participant: Senior Manager, Health and Social Care)

”

Research participants also highlighted the value of adopting a community development approach in facilitating a focus on early intervention and prevention to address the expressed needs of underrepresented groups. Some emphasized the importance of targeting widening participation activity upstream, to working with children from a young age, in early years and primary school settings.

“

We're looking to go further back into primary school to try and support children because, you know, we close doors to our future at a very early age and that's what we're finding. We're seeing, for example, some of the kids being drawn into criminal networks at 8, 9, 10, 11 12 years of age and at that stage they're making a choice because they're getting money, they're getting income. A lot of the networks are in essence operating like dysfunctional networks of care. They're providing the whole infrastructure that the kids need that they're not getting either through family or society or neighbourhood or whatever but they're getting everything they need through this which is setting them up for a pathway into it maybe a prison sentence.

(Focus Group Participant: Senior Manager, Social Inclusion and Community Development)

”



Legislative Framework Model: to include all relevant partners, complementary guidance supports implementation.

The review of international evidence concerned with protecting the welfare of children, reported by Devaney et al. (2021) highlights that legislation is a key tool for promoting collaborative partnership working in the delivery of key services. The Irish government has, through the Child and Family Agency Act 2013, placed a statutory duty on the Child and Family Agency, Tusla to facilitate and promote interagency collaboration to ensure services to children and families are co-ordinated, and that children and families receive an integrated response to their needs. Towards this end, Tusla has established and embedded a number of partnership-based models in their practice, including the Child and Family Support Networks (CFSN³²) and the Prevention, Partnership and Family Support (PPFS³³) programme and Meitheal model. Tusla also plays a key role in Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC³⁴) which are local partnerships responsible for co-ordinating service delivery to children, young people and families across the country.

However, Devaney et al. (2021) concluded from their review of international experience on implementing a statutory duty for interagency collaboration, the importance of a statutory duty to collaborate being placed on all relevant partner organisations. The 2013 Irish legislation did not extend to agencies other than Tusla and this has been identified as a challenge to progressing effective interagency collaboration in the delivery of services for families. This is due to be addressed in forthcoming amendments to the Childcare Act 1991. The Mid-term Review of Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC³⁵) Shared Vision Next Steps 2019 – 2021 published by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY, 2023) earlier this year reviewed progress in the three years to 2021 on 37 target actions across 10 high level goals. The review identified progress on collaborative working. Three of the nine targets set for the high-level goal of collaboration were rated complete while the remaining six were rated 'in progress'. Further progress is required on collaboration between Government Departments and State Agencies and in joint commissioning of programmes of work at individual local CYPSC level. It was reported that 522 community & voluntary and 253 statutory organisations took part in CYPSC Sub-groups during 2021 and that 146 young people also took part in these Sub-groups during this period.

³² Child and Family Support Networks (CFSNs) are established in Tusla areas across the country and support a localised, area-based approach to supporting families. CFSNs consist of all services that play a role in the lives of children and families in a given area. This includes local statutory children and family service providers and local voluntary and community children and family services (Devaney et al., 2021 p5).

³³ A move towards a more integrated approach to support and protection is reflected in Tusla's Prevention, Partnership, and Family Support (PPFS) programme. A core feature of the PPFS programme is the Meitheal model, which is a case coordination process for families with additional needs who require multiagency intervention. Meitheal supports the integration of services because it facilitates an interagency, partnership-based approach to meeting complex needs through providing access to specific services to meet the needs of children and young people and their parents (Devaney et al., 2021 p5).

³⁴ Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSCs) are responsible for securing better outcomes for children and young people in their area through more effective integration of existing services and interventions. The overall purpose is to improve outcomes for children and young people through local and national interagency working (www.cypsc.ie).

³⁵ CYPSC bring together a diverse group of agencies in their local areas to engage in joint planning and coordination and delivery of services for children and young people to deliver better outcomes for children and young people around the country www.cypsc.ie/.

In the area of community development and public services delivered in local communities, the Local Government Reform Act 2014 set up Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs³⁶) in Local Authority areas, with responsibility for “developing, coordinating and implementing a coherent and integrated approach to local and community development” (Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD), 2019 p8). The Review³⁷ of Local Community Development Committees (LCDC)³⁸ published by the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD, 2019) highlighted the need for increased collaboration with the community and voluntary sector, which was felt to be hindered by the size and structures prescribed in the guidelines. The review also highlighted the need for formal links with other national and local partnership structures was also identified e.g., Children and Young People’s Services Committees, and that, despite available guidance, there was a lack of clarity locally on the purpose of the LCDC and on the role of LCDC members.

Professionals who took part in the interviews and focus groups brought experience of partnership working within the context of legislative frameworks and this included LCDCs, CYPSC, PPFs and CFSN. Overall, these participants were unequivocal in their view that the legislative imperative was a much less important determinant of success than the engagement processes, relationships and tacit knowledge held by those coordinating the partnership. Participants across four focus groups and interviews spoke about the quality of mandated engagement and the potential for ticking attendance boxes rather than meaningful engagement with the work of the partnership.

“ You can have people at the table but they’re reluctant participants.
(Focus Group Participant: Middle Manager Health and Social Care) ”

³⁶ “LCDCs bring together local authority members and officials, State agencies and people working with local development, community development, and economic, cultural and environmental organisations. They draw on the expertise and experience of the members to plan, oversee and deliver services for individuals and communities, particularly those most in need of those services. They comprise between 15 and 21 members depending on council size and local circumstances, with the balance of membership weighted in favour of the private sector – a minimum 51% of members must be drawn from private sector interests” (Department Rural and Community Development, 2019 p9).

³⁷ Review methodology include an online survey (n=210 stakeholders), 3 workshops/ focus groups (58 Local Authority, LCDC representatives), a review of documentation and observation at meetings.

³⁸ Our Public Service 2020 sets out a firm commitment to new Local Community Development Committee (LCDCs) and Local Economic and Community Plans (LECPs) as primary mechanisms for delivering more integrated services at local level. It provides, under Action 9: Strengthen Whole of Government Collaboration, that Government will – continue to support the new Local Community Development Committee (LCDC) structures as the primary vehicle for collaboration between all national public service providers at local level. For example, LCDCs and the Local Economic and Community Plans (LECP) provide a governance, planning and evidence-based framework for the co-ordination and management of local funding including EU supported community-led local development funding from 2020-2027” (DRCD, 2017 p11)

“

You do have a reporting process in central government or local government so there is an element of tick box to it. There's sometimes people who are there that don't want to be there. You might sit through a meeting and never speak once and if it's an online meeting they'll log in, they'd mute their microphone and camera off, and you don't know whether they're there because they've never spoken but they're obliged to be in attendance.

(Interviewee: Senior Manager Social Inclusion and Community Development)

”

Guidance documents are often issued to complement the legislation providing direction on key elements of partnership working. Examples include the Blueprint for the development of Children and Young People's Services Committees (Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), 2015) and Revised Guidelines for the Operation of Local Community Development Committees (Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, 2015). Guidelines prescribe governance and decision-making structures and processes as well as membership (see Figures 4.7 and 4.8 below).

Focus group participants with experience of operating within the context of these government guidelines reported it as helpful in providing a structure to drive the work of the partnership as well as governance. The NTRIS pilot was cited as one example where membership and engagement are determined by the Department of Education, protecting against other local organisations seeking to exert influence.

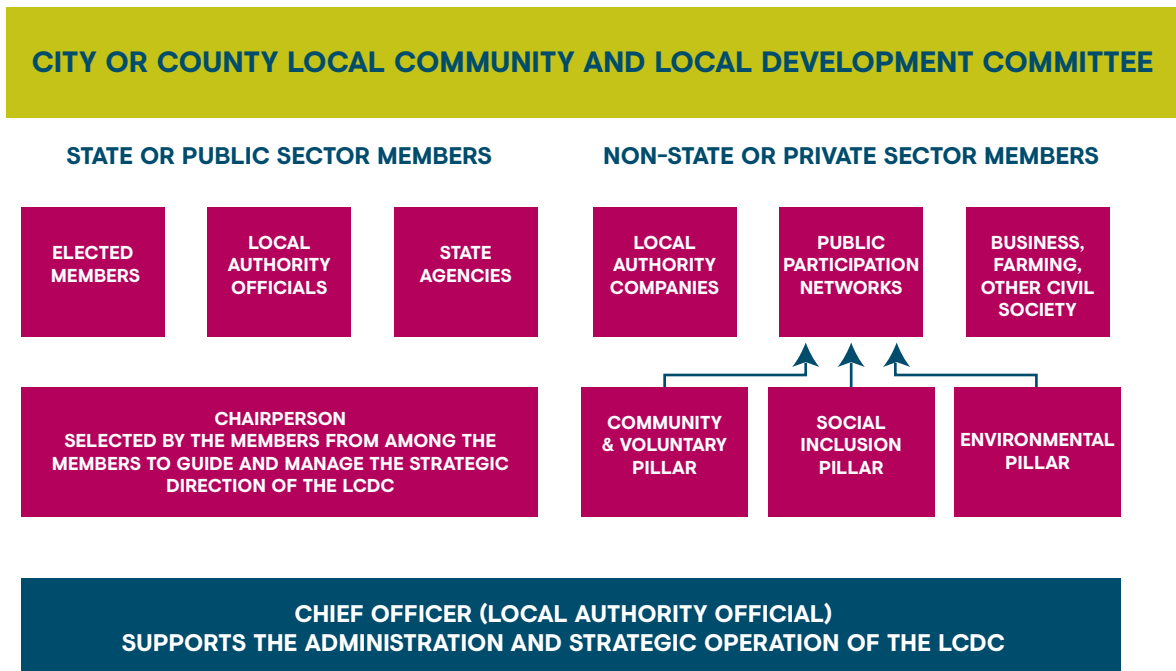
“

It brings a bit of oversight, consistency and a bit of rigour as well.

(Interviewee: Senior Manager Health and Social Care)

”

Figure 4.7 Overview of LCDC Membership (Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, 2015 p9)



Horton Prain and Thiele (2009) also identified that guidelines and normative prescriptions are often not based on evidence or any “analysis of partnerships” (p85). Voller et al. (2023) noted that even when available, they are often not used in higher education research partnerships. However, Devaney et al. (2021) noted the value of such guidelines as “limited direction and prescription can lead to large differences in local implementation with regard to the extent of interagency collaboration and coordination, as well as accountability issues” (p79-80) yet also highlighted that over prescription inhibits flexibility and adaptability to local context.

Figure 4.8 LCDC Membership (Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, 2015 p9)

<u>Sector</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Members</u>	<u>Selected</u>
Local authority elected members	Minimum 3	Elected Members	Council
Local authority officials	Minimum 2	Chief Executive or their nominee Head of Local Enterprise	Prescribed
Public authorities (including State agencies)	Minimum 2	Health Service Executive Dept. of Social Protection An Garda Síochána Education and Training Boards Údarás na Gaeltachta Third Level Institutions Teagasc	Nominations sought by Chief Officer in consultation with Corporate Policy Group
Local development and community development bodies	Minimum 1	Local development companies Other local/community development bodies	Nominated through agreed local arrangements
Community & Voluntary	Minimum 5	Community and Voluntary Social Inclusion Environment	Nominated through Public Participation Networks
Other civic society or 'local community' interests	No prescribed minimum	Employers/Business Agriculture and Farming Trade Unions Others community interests	Determined by Chief Officer and Corporate Policy Group

4.2 Structures to support effective partnership.

Findings and key learning

There exists a range of structures and processes that support partnerships for success and sustainability. This research highlighted mutually beneficial relationships as more important than structures. Structures add value in ensuring good governance, promoting consistent good practice across partnerships, and driving organisational learning and improvement. Their use should be adapted and tailored to the context of specific partnerships.

Transparent decision-making and clear roles and responsibilities are critical to successful partnerships yet not always reported or implemented.

Governance concerned with the roles, responsibilities and relationships within the partnership, and in essence, who makes decisions and how these decisions are made (De Backer and Kelly Rinaudo, 2019) is an important aspect of collaborative partnership working as it enables members and partners to work together (Business for Social Responsibility (BSR), 2022). The research reviewed and presented in Table 2.1 confirms that many of the key inputs, processes and factors associated with success in partnerships relate to governance, and include clarity of purpose, transparent governance and decision-making structures, shared decision-making, effective leadership for making decisions, communication and information sharing as well as leadership will and endorsement (Wiggins, Anastasiou and Cox, 2021; Plummer et al., 2021; Horton, Prain and Thiele, 2009; Clifford et al, 2008).

This body of research also highlights that detail on governance is not always reported. Wiggins, Anastasiou and Cox (2021) found that almost a third, 29% of studies included in their review of synergistic multi-sector public health alliances, did not report on decision-making structures, governance or conflict resolution. Plummer et al. (2021) documented from survey research with 27 higher education institutions and 44 community partner organisations in Canada, that 60% stated they often or occasionally entered into a partnership without any formal written documentation. In addition, 25% reported that they do not employ any form of monitoring or evaluation while 75% reported having limited or no partnership-related training.

The process of building and sustaining a partnership: key stages and actions to promote success.

In their review of business non-profit partnerships summarized in Table 2.1, Austin and Seitanidi (2012b) identify five stages in the process of building and sustaining partnership working with relevant learning for the structures and processes that support good governance and successful partnerships. This learning is presented in Table 3.2 below.

This research also places particular emphasis on partnership formation and selection processes for mitigating issues down the line in partnerships. “Underestimating the costs and negative effects of poor organisational pairing can be the result of insufficient experience in co-creation of value, planning, and preparation. Often managers “think about it,” but they do not usually invest “a huge amount of time in that process”. Such neglect carries consequences, as due diligence and relationship building are key process variables that can determine the fit between the partners. This process will increase managers’ ability to anticipate and capture the full potential for the partnership” (Austin and Seitanidi, 2012b p931).

Analysis of the data collated from focus groups and interviews with professionals asserted the importance of some form of partnership agreement and the inherent process of clarifying goals, roles and expectations around the work, at the outset. This emerged consistently as a theme in three quarters of the focus groups and interviews, with participants highlighting the significance at a strategic level with regard to governance and risk management, as well as at a practice level.

“

There is something about the clarity of the partnership agreement that you have in place for the partnership and the extent of how attention has been given to that in a way that it is completely understood and informed by practice.

(Interviewee: Senior Manager Social Inclusion and Community Development)

”

“

You need your terms of reference. You need to know where you’re going. You need to know what’s the purpose?.

(Interviewee: Senior Manager Education)

”

“

It’s a huge challenge, but you have different staff engaged and some of the partnership you see I think some staff if they don’t know what their real role and remit and how far they can bring things, things can fizzle out. So, somebody’s on a committee and they’re not sure what they can promise or what they can sign up to. Then, I think that’s a problem.

(Interviewee: Senior Manager Education)

”

These agreements varied across the range of partnerships represented in the research sample of participants and included legal and other agreements e.g., Terms of Reference, Memorandum of Understanding, Statements of Intention, cooperative and consortium agreements as well as linked and collaborative provision agreements under QQI quality assurance procedures. In some groups, participants acknowledged governance as an organisational driver for formalising partnerships through agreements.

“

And it's because some people want certainty, and there's a reluctance to start something new not knowing what impact it's going to have on your time, your budget.

(Focus Group Participant: Senior Manager Education)

”

“

It's one thing to say an organisation is geared or oriented towards working in partnership. It's another thing to build a culture within your organisation that enables that, because you do have to carry risk.

(Focus Group Participant: Senior Manager Social Inclusion and Community Development)

”

Participants experienced in working with community organisations, including those in higher education institutions, noted the challenges for community organisations in managing the contracting process and reporting of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs).

“

We have very large structures around policies and structures and funding and as quite different some of the Community organisations who would have very dissimilar structures around funding arrangements, so trying to communicate them structures can take a while, but I suppose we have the advantage of having the infrastructure here to let community organisations get on with the community piece and we can look after the structures, the management and the funding.

(Focus Group Participant, Middle Manager Education)

”

In one focus groups participants described how standard partnership templates borrowed from another department within their organisation were more than 30 pages long and had likely scared community organisations. The need to ensure that such templates were adapted to suit the context of working with community partners was emphasized within the wider organisational drive for greater formalisation of partnership working.

“

I think with the community partners as well, there has to be an understanding of sometimes the lack of certainty that they are dealing with in terms of funding sources, facilities that are available to them. They work in sometimes a very precarious job, their job situation and they're people sometimes on schemes working with them so they don't enjoy some of the certainties that we do as employees in the university or are those industry partners and I think it's important that that anything that we put in place, those policies when they come to things like academic council for approval, that there's a voice saying, well, this may work for industry but you're gonna have to adapt it or change it. ...

I think we just have to put a context on those decisions when things go to different committees for approval that that we are represented and we're very clear about what the implications for those type of templates and formats are for the Community partners.

(Focus Group Participant, Senior Manager Education)

”

Table 4.2 *Stages in the Process of Building and Sustaining Partnership Working (Austin and Seitanidi, 2012b)*

Stage in the Process of Building and Sustaining Partnerships	Key Learning
Partnership formation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Assess potential for organisational fit/compatibility – through articulating linked interests in common issue for partners. » Identify nature of resources each partner has potential to contribute (tangible & intangible), directionality of flow and use. » Review history of past interactions between partners » Identify partnership champions in partner organisations.
Partner selection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Risk assess internally and externally through formal and informal meetings & networks, employees, stakeholders within and across sectors to collect intelligence on partnership working
Partnership implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Partners to be embedded in communities to maximise benefits and potential to create value for all partners. » Consider implementation at level of organisation and at level of partnership/collaborative
Partnership design and operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Set objectives & specify structures. » Form rules & regulations » Draft Memorandum of Understanding » Establish leadership positions. » Decide organisational structures. » Agree partnership management
Partnership institutionalization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Embed collaboration in strategy, mission, structures and administrative systems. » Engage in multi-layer interactions and organisational change processes. » Build shared or consensus decision-making and decentralized control to allow multiple stakeholders voice concerns, incorporate feedback and develop shared accountability.

Identifying partnership champions at this early stage is also identified as critical. Pre-partnership senior leadership champions with a long-term commitment have a key role in developing cross functional teams within and across the partnership. At the stage of partnership design and operations, “coordination is required to codesign mechanisms that will collectively add value to the partnership (p937). This is viewed as an iterative adaptive process that develops over time as partners work together.

A range of structures to govern partnerships applied in different contexts.

Table 3.3 below summarizes the range of structures reported in the research literature that support partnership working. This includes statutory and non-statutory boards, committees and sub-committees, co-operatives, consortia and federations. Many of these were also described in the partnership practice reported by professionals who took part in the focus groups and interviews.

Table 4.3 Summary of Structures that Support Partnership Working

Governance Structure	Context of application/ use	Type of partnership	Purpose of partnership	Learning
Strategic Governing Board, Implementation Group & Working Groups/ sub-groups & Programme Office	Long term social and economic regeneration of Dublin's North East Inner City (NEIC)	Multi-sector, multilevel partnership of key government departments statutory, private, community and voluntary organisations	Social change within a community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Structures provide means to ensure clarity on role and purpose of partners as well as checks and balances to ensure good governance. » While publication of minutes and progress reports document inputs and activities to stakeholders, evaluation is needed to investigate effectiveness.
	Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC)	Multisector, multi professional and multilevel partnership working among agencies that deliver services to children and young people.	Local coordination of services to children, young people and families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » An ongoing process that takes time even with structures, and other mechanisms including MOUs/TORs, guidance, frameworks and the provision of templates to support the adoption of standard operating procedures and good practice partnership working.
Statutory Committee with mandated membership led by government agency	LCDC led by Local Authority.	Cross sector partnerships involving statutory providers, businesses and the community and voluntary sector	Deliver public services in local communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » A statutory duty and guidelines support the establishment of partnership working. » Other enablers include strategic planning and sub committees. » Ongoing need for awareness raising, communication and mechanisms to share good practice and learning.

Co-operative	Inner city local community development	13 local community organisations form co-operative for jointly funded activity alongside autonomous organisational activity	Address social exclusion and poverty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » • Benefits in accessing funding, networking and collaboration, accessing technical support and shared resources. » • Limited by resources/capacity, access to flexible funding. » • Administrative data collection system does not capture full range /depth of outcomes
Consortium	Delivery of education and training to promote employability	Industry and education and training providers.	To develop and deliver foundation degrees, apprenticeships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Balance representation and manage input and power of statutory agencies to neglect of employers and community/voluntary sectors/learners. » Manage different cultures and ways of working e.g., quality assurance processes.
Federation	School improvement policy in England	Group of schools in a geographical area	To promote school improvement by collaboration, sharing resources and expertise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Retaining autonomy is important for schools. » Manage staff perceptions and expectations through effective communications.

Statutory and non-statutory boards, committees, and sub-committees

Dublin's North East Inner City (NEIC) initiative and Children and Young People's Services Committees have adopted non-statutory boards, committees, and sub-committees structures to support partnership working. Figure 3.9 and Table 3.4 below set out and describe the implementation structures that support good governance among the government departments and agencies, businesses and community and voluntary sector partners working together in Dublin's North East Inner City (NEIC) initiative.

Figure 4.9 NEIC Committee and Sub-Committee Structure (Cleary, 2019 p5)

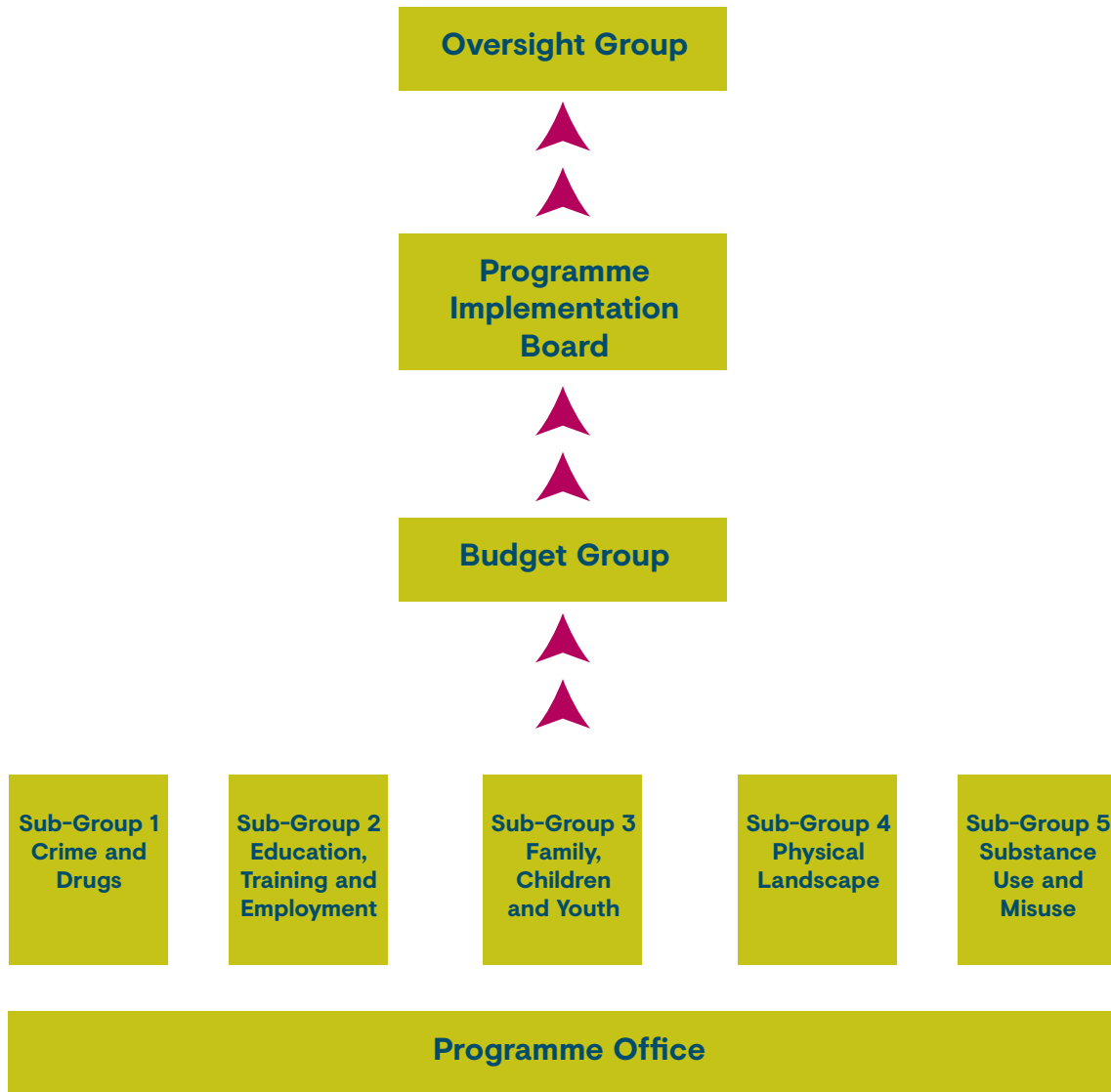


Table 4.4 NEIC Implementation Structures Description and Purpose (Cleary, 2019 p5)

NEIC Implementation Structure	Description and Purpose
Oversight Group	<p>Chaired by the Secretary General of the Department of the Taoiseach and comprises senior officials across relevant Government Departments and agencies, the Chair of the Programme Implementation Board and senior members of the Programme Office.</p> <p>Purpose: Ensures engagement at senior level across all Government Departments and agencies, and to deal with any barriers or structural issues highlighted by the Programme Implementation Board.</p>
Programme Implementation Board (PIB)	<p>Reports to Oversight Group. Consists of community and business representation, Government Departments, and agencies who have statutory responsibility for delivery of key services.</p> <p>Purpose: Oversees implementation of the NEIC initiative and is accountable for delivery of the project plan and management of ring-fenced funds.</p>
Budget Group	<p>Chaired by the Department of the Taoiseach. Consists of Sub-Group chairs, a community representative, Department of Rural and Community Development, and a representative of the Programme Office.</p> <p>Purpose: Assesses projects before they proceed to the PIB for their consideration for approval.</p>
Subgroups	<p>Six Subgroups chaired by a member of the PIB.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Enhancing Policing 2. Maximising Educational, Training and Employment Opportunities 3. Family Wellbeing 4. Enhancing community wellbeing and the Physical Environment 5. Substance use, mis-use and Inclusion Health 6. Alignment of Services <p>Comprise stakeholders from statutory, business, community and voluntary sectors who work together to progress subgroup actions.</p>
Programme Office	<p>Purpose: Supports work of NEIC initiative by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Managing funding and administration. » Supporting the Chair of the PIB. » Assisting all Sub-Groups. » Meeting with the community. » Communications and engagement

Minutes of Programme Implementation Board meetings and Annual Progress Reports (NEIC, 2023, NEIC, 2019) published on the website suggest joint planning, resourcing and delivery of services with collaborative working at strategic and community levels. For example, the 2022 Progress Report notes the involvement of 12 government departments and agencies, and that 26 community representatives sit on NEIC structures (NEIC, 2023; Department of an Taoiseach, 2022). A range of inputs and activity is reported including government investment of €7.5m in 2022 and in excess of €38m since 2016 (see <https://www.neic.ie/publications> for detail).

A Spending Review published by the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service (Cleary, 2019) notes progress in key areas of action including tackling crime and drugs, education, training and employment, and the delivery of integrated social services but highlights the importance of outcome and impact evaluation. “Work is currently being undertaken to examine how best to evaluate the impact of the initiative. It is important that this work is progressed, and evaluation of processes and outcomes, including efficiency and effectiveness, is undertaken to help identify the impact of the initiative (p14).

Children and Young People’s Services Committees are another initiative that uses a Board, Committee and Subcommittee structure. Fuller detail is provided in Figure 3.10 and Table 3.5 below. The following mechanisms were also established to support partnership working,

- » In 2017, a Memorandum of Understanding between DCYA (now DCEDIY) and Tusla was agreed to ensure strategic management, coordination, and operation of the CYPSC initiative between the Department and Tusla (DCYA, 2015; 2016).
- » Terms of Reference are to be developed by each local CYPSC to support the development and implementation of “standardised operating procedures” (DCEDIY, 2015 p21).
- » A 3-year Children and Young People’s Plan (CYPP) is to be developed jointly by members of each CYPSC locally in consultation with stakeholders.

A supporting suite of resources were also developed, and these include a blueprint document and guidance (Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), 2015; DCEDIY and Department of Housing, Planning Community and Local Development, 2016), templates, as well as Quality Assurance and Planning and Reporting Frameworks (CYPSC, 2016; 2017).

Figure 4.10 CYPSC Structures and Planning and Reporting Framework (CYPSC, 2017 p5)

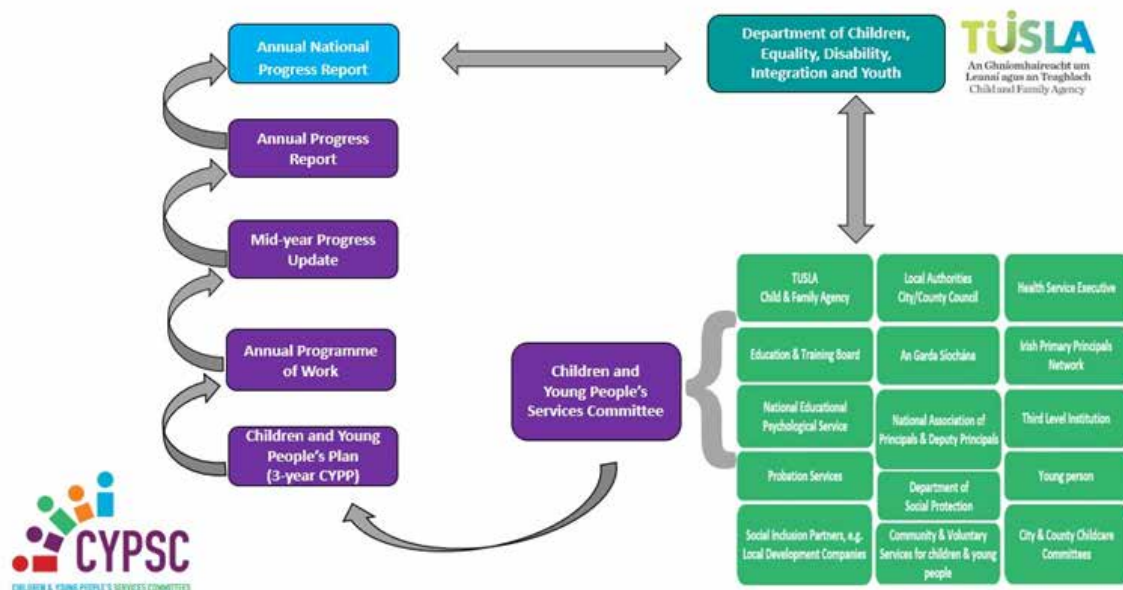


Table 4.5 CYPSC Implementation Structures Description and purpose (CYPSC, 2017 p4)

CYPSC Structure	Description and Purpose
Department of Children Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) Children and Young People's Policy Consortium	DCEDIY sets policy and strategic direction for the CYPSC Initiative through Better Outcomes Brighter Futures 2014-2020. Children and Young People's Policy Consortium is chaired by DCEDIY Minister. Comprises senior officials from government departments and agencies and representatives from advisory and local operational fora. Oversight of and drives cross-government implementation of Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures. Receives CYPSC national progress updates
National CYPSC Steering Group	Supports effective operation and practical implementation of CYPSC at local level: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » • provides guidance on and advice on strategic, policy and operational issues relevant to CYPSC. » • receives the CYPSC Annual National Progress Report for consideration. addresses arising issues and obstacles that need resolution at national level. » • Chair is a member of the National Children and Young People's Policy Consortium and utilises that forum to promote the work of CYPSC and escalate any pertinent issues that require a national response.

<p>TUSLA, Child and Family Agency</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » National Co-ordinator » Local CYPSC Chairperson » Local CYPSC Co-ordinator 	<p>Provides national level operational leadership of CYPSC</p> <p>A National Co-ordinator for CYPSC is employed by TUSLA to support the implementation of the strategic plan for CYPSC and to realise oversight of progress and impact of CYPSC, co-ordinating collective reporting to the CYPSC National Steering Group and DCEDIY.</p> <p>CYPSC Chairperson is drawn from TUSLA to provide local leadership to ensure the effectiveness of the committee and ensures sign-off of local CYPSC plans and reports.</p> <p>CYPSC Co-ordinator, employed by TUSLA co-ordinates the development and implementation of local plans and the monitoring and reporting of local CYPSC implementation. Works closely with CYPSC members and CYPSC Subgroup members and promotes local engagement and communication with other relevant stakeholders.</p>
<p>CYPSC National Implementation Group</p>	<p>An inter-agency mechanism for the strategic management, operation, co-ordination and implementation of CYPSC to ensure effective communication regarding CYPSC between DCEDIY and Tusla.</p> <p>Supports the operationalization of CYPSC via the TUSLA workforce assigned to CYPSC implementation.</p>
<p>Children and young People Services Committee (CYPSC)</p>	<p>Members are from the range of statutory, community and voluntary organisations that have a remit for children and young people.</p> <p>Five Subgroups are structured around the following five national outcomes for children and young people.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » • Active and healthy, physical and mental wellbeing » • Achieving full potential in learning and development » • Safe and protected from harm. » • Economic security and opportunity » • Connected, respected and contributing to their world. <p>CYPSC Subgroups inform the development of local CYPSC plans, realise implementation of those plans and input to the preparation of local CYPSC reports. A sixth 'Change Management' Subgroup comprises the Chairs of the other five Subgroups and is concerned with co-ordination activity across all Subgroups and national outcome areas.</p>

A national evaluation of CYPSC is planned and pending changes to the Child Care Act 1991 may place a legislative duty on CYPSC member agencies to collaborate and work together. A mid-term review of CYPSC progress between 2019–2021 on 37 target actions across 10 high level goals, recently published by the DCEDIY (2023) highlighted that in relation to the high level goal of collaboration, six target actions rated 'In Progress' concerned ensuring better partnership working locally with other networks, partnerships and organisations including City and County Childcare Committees, Tusla Child Family Support Networks (CFSN), Local Community Development Committees (LCDC) and Education and Training Boards. The following learning, relevant to the structures and mechanisms that support effective partnership working, was also highlighted.

- » Leadership was strengthened through the National Coordinator role and the Children and Young People’s 3-year strategic plans helped standardize practice across CYPSC.
- » Committee roles assigned to key organisations and the committee structure with Subgroups helped to promote engagement and collaboration across partner agencies.
- » Sharing good practice through national events, workshops, seminars, the CYPSC website and DECDIY communications activity has promoted learning and helped build capacity across local CYPSC.

Local Community Development Committees (LCDC), established under the Local Government Reform Act 2014 as the primary mechanism for joined up service delivery at local level, have a statutory committee and optional sub-committee structure. Their structure and membership are detailed in Figure 4.7. The rules covering their establishment and implementation³⁹ is set out in government guidelines (Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, 2015) which stipulate that each Local Authority assigns resources for the work of the LCDC and appoints a Chief Officer to provide support in the exercise of its duties. Under the guidelines, LCDCs are required to:

- » Prepare and submit an annual report by 31 March each year that presents key actions taken in relation to their duties.
- » Facilitate a minimum of 6 meetings per calendar year.
- » Draft and publish detailed minutes of meetings.

In addition, LCDCs contribute (community elements) to the development and implementation of the six-year Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP) with the Local Authority (DRCD and Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2021). The LECP is considered a key mechanism for identifying, coordinating and implementing actions that promote and support the economic, local and community development of the local authority area (DRCD, 2019 p10). A review of progress and good practice⁴⁰ (DRCD, 2019), noted that since first established in 2014, LCDCs⁴¹ report varied practice in implementing the guidelines. “While the legislation and guidance underpinning LCDCs detail the structural, operational and governance requirements, there is a wide range of processes and systems in place to support LCDC work at local level. This can

³⁹ As per section 128E (4) of the Local Government Act 2001, as inserted by section 36 of the Local Government Reform Act 2014 (Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD), 2019).

⁴⁰ Methodology included: online survey of 210 stakeholders, 3 workshops/ focus groups with 58 Local Authority and LCDC representatives, a review of documentation and observation at meetings.

⁴¹ “Our Public Service 2020 sets out a firm commitment to new Local Community Development Committee (LCDCs) and Local Economic and Community Plans (LECPs) as primary mechanisms for delivering more integrated services at local level. It provides, under Action 9: Strengthen Whole of Government Collaboration, that Government will – continue to support the new Local Community Development Committee (LCDC) structures as the primary vehicle for collaboration between all national public service providers at local level. For example, LCDCs and the Local Economic and Community Plans (LECP) provide a governance, planning and evidence-based framework for the co-ordination and management of local funding including EU supported community-led local development funding from 2020-2027” DRCD, 2017 p11)

range, for example, from locally developed processes around sub-groups or written procedures to support decision-making, to associate membership to secure greater inclusivity and participation in LCDC work. These arrangements are driven largely by local contexts and not consistently applied across LCDCs” (DRCD, 2019 p29). It was found that Sub-committees, where used, enabled LCDCs to achieve a better balance between operational and strategic issues addressing a key challenge presented by Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP)⁴² and LEADER⁴³ programme operations in the work of LCDCs.

The LCDC structure and mechanisms were identified as a barrier to the meaningful and full engagement of community and voluntary sector partners through the Public Participation Network (PPN). The review reported that “there is a sense PPN members can feel isolated because of a lack of resources to support their full participation in decision-making and training and capacity development initiatives. Moreover, respondents indicated that the timing of LCDC meetings and training or capacity building events is not ideal for members working full-time” (DRCD, 2019 p32).

Also, of key importance with regard to decision-making, governance and participation in established structures is the lack of clarity on purpose among members. “Overall feedback suggests clarity is required, not just on the general role and purpose of the LCDC, but also on the role and functions of the different members. Respondents indicated that some of the challenges faced by LCDCs resulted from the lack of clarity around the role of LCDC members, as well as confusion at local level as to the purpose of the LCDC generally” (DRCD, 2019 p19). The review identified a need for comprehensive induction training programme to promote attendance and meaningful participation in meetings, stronger guidance on managing conflict of interest/ quorum at meetings to ensure good decision making, and the establishment of processes to share good practice and promote learning and improvement across LCDCs.

Analysis of the qualitative data collected through the focus groups and interviews identified the value of a strategic plan, and the engagement process through which it is developed, to guide the work of partnerships.

42 <https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/6609f4-social-inclusion-and-community-activation-programme-sicap/#:~:text=SICAP%20is%20the%20Social%20Inclusion%20and%20Community%20Activation,reduce%20poverty%20and%20promote%20social%20inclusion%20and%20equality>.

43 <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/23c96-our-rural-future-minister-humphreys-announces-details-of-new-180-million-leader-programme/#:~:text=LEADER%2C%20a%20key%20intervention%20of%20Our%20Rural%20Future%2C,private%20enterprises%20and%20community%20groups%20in%20rural%20areas>.

“

And I just I think it's really important to sit down and have those discussions because partnership is so time consuming. You can't just drop into a community organisation... 'oh, you wanna do this work'? There's so much time to build up and to make sure that you're on the same page, so having those strategic discussions and making sure that... sometimes as a larger organisation we can sometimes inadvertently approach this in a very extractive way. We wanna go in and get something from this community organisation and then move on and I think those strategic discussions are important to make sure that you are all on the same page ... because that's the only way you'll have a sustainable partnership is if you are all on the same page.

(Focus Group Participant, Middle Manager Education)

”

“

Our internal strategic plan, I have to say this time worked extraordinarily well.it was, I think the time and space for your partners to say things in a space that they knew that their voices were being respected and how it was fed back to them so where they could see their voice?.

(Focus Group Participant, Middle Manager Social Inclusion Community Development)

”

Steering groups, committee and subgroup meetings were also identified as important to progressing the work of partnerships.

“

A 3-year plan is a is a critical component of the work because it ... identifies gaps in service provision. It gives a sort of shared vision or shared outcomes that we can deliver on. Then the subgroups would support the implementation of that three-year plan and we all have subgroups across different needs.

(Focus Group Participant, Middle Manager Health and Social Care)

”

Another participant highlighted the value for organisational learning in the process of compiling and sharing an annual report on the work of the partnership.

“

For us it's been a priority of mine every single year to do an annual report ... it's really important that you take time to reflect but I think it does require a manager who sees the benefits in documenting what we've done, who sees the benefit and actually being curious is this working and how can I see if this is working? I think that is important to have that within the organisation.

(Focus Group Participant, Senior Manager Health and Social Care)

”

Co-operatives

Dublin Inner City Co-op have adopted a cooperative structure with a Board and standing sub-committees to formalise joint and partnership working across 13 local development organisations working across 41 Electoral Divisions in the most disadvantaged areas in Dublin City. Autonomous member organisations deliver a range of programmes aimed at addressing social exclusion and poverty, and together in the legal entity of a co-operative with a governing constitution, they tender for and implement SICAP in the inner city.

Figure 4.11 and Table 4.6 below describe the structures that support this type of partnership working and decision-making. Stakeholder consultation and a SWOT⁴⁴ analysis completed as part of the collaborative process of developing the Dublin City Community Co-Op Strategic Plan 2023-2027 noted key strengths in the Co-op's understanding of communities, culture of transparent and consultative decision-making and the central capacity provided by the Co-op office. However, “a key barrier across the entire organisation is capacity, with the needs in the community always outpacing the Co-op's ability to respond, let alone find time for non-frontline work such as research, policy, learning and training. In the Co-op office, the core team that supports the administration and coordination of the Co-op has remained the same size despite a growth in the Coop's work and complexity” (p19-20).

44 <https://www.mindtools.com/ambj63/swot-analysis>

Figure 4.11 *Dublin Inner City Co-op Implementation Structures (Dublin Inner City Co-op, 2023 p18)*



Table 4.6 *Dublin Inner City Co-op Implementation Structures Description and purpose (Dublin Inner City Co-op, 2023 p16)*

Dublin Inner City Co-operative	Description and Purpose
Board with Independent Chair	<p>Comprises 1 representative from each member organisation who holds decision-making powers on behalf of the organisation. All organisations have 1 vote irrespective of size or financial/other contribution. Board member is a voluntary role with no financial benefit for any representative.</p> <p>An independent chair with no links or affiliations to any member organisations is appointed by the sitting board and provides oversight of the board.</p>
Sub-Committees	<p>4 sub-committees: Governance, Finance & Audit, Advocacy-for-Change, and Performance & Resources.</p> <p>Comprise a number of nominated board members.</p>
Co-op CEO and Staff	<p>SICAP tender and implementation, co-ordination, policy, research, advocacy and communications, funding bids.</p>
Practitioners Forum	<p>Meets several times a year.</p> <p>Comprises nominated staff from each of the 13 member organisations, usually heads of their organisation, as well as Co-op CEO and senior Co-op staff.</p> <p>Focuses on delivery of activities, programme implementation and quality, coordination of work, developing and maintaining on-going relationships and designing working practices and joint projects.</p> <p>Provide resource, insight, and guidance to draw upon in ensuring the Co-op remains true to its original vision and stated purposes</p>

An independent evaluation⁴⁵ of the impact of the work of the Co-op and its member organisations, reported by Tasc Think-tank for action on social change (2023) found one of the key strengths of the cooperative structure was that “each of the organisations in the Co-op is embedded in the community, many for the last 25-30 years. As a result of this, these smaller organisations are trusted by the community and can implement flexible, nuanced responses to local issues as they emerge in a way many larger organisations will not be able to... Another strength of the structure is that each organisation can draw on the knowledge, skills, and networks of the other Co-op organisations” (p25-26). Members cited benefits in securing funding and grants that promoted a longer-term focus, capacity building and sustainability; networking and collaboration to share experience and undertake joint projects as well as access to technical and strategic support, and pooled shared resources.

⁴⁵ Methodology included analysis of administrative data captured on the Integrated Reporting and Information Structure (IRIS), focus groups and interviews with 26 beneficiaries and 13 staff.

Consortia

A consortium, a partnership formed by groups of organisations coming together to work towards a common goal, emerges commonly in the research evidence concerned with the provision of training and education to promote employability. Smaller and less formal than federations, these partnerships usually involve industry and business organisations alongside those from community, adult, further and higher education as well as schools and the community and voluntary sector, also engaged in the delivery of training and education. Examples documented in the research evidence include the delivery of Foundation Degrees in the UK (Smith and Betts, 2003), the development of statutory Community Consortia for Education and Training in Wales (Morgan, Saunders and Turner, 2004) and the implementation of Consortia led apprenticeships in the Republic of Ireland (McManus, Peck and Vickery, 2022). In the latter, statutory guidance (Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), 2016) guides the approach adopted with a Consortium Steering Group⁴⁶ identifying and overseeing a Co-ordinating Provider⁴⁷ to develop, validate and deliver the apprenticeship programme and this is formalized through a Memorandum of Agreement.

An evaluation⁴⁸ of 39 consortium led apprenticeships developed between 2016–2022 across the Republic of Ireland note many benefits that include meeting industry skills needs as well as staff recruitment and retention. Importantly, this evaluation highlighted “positive and regular working relationships between stakeholders’....‘we work very well together’, ‘everyone’s voice is heard’, ‘so little ego is involved’. Emphasis is placed on collaboration and a ‘collective will to make change happen” (McManus, Peck and Vickery, 2022 p17). With regard to the structure, the lack of standard approach to developing consortia was identified as a strength allowing for flexibility and agility to meet emerging industry needs. “The ways in which consortia have assembled to initiate a new apprenticeship and configure their governance, management and operating structures with education and training providers vary. This is unsurprising, given the diverse industry and occupational profiles represented. Importantly, the review findings do not indicate that there is a singular approach that represents a ‘preferred’ or ‘best practice’ model for consortia-led apprenticeships. This is seen by the review team as a strength, reflecting that the model is adaptive and can facilitate a diversity of occupations and industries. Similarly, the findings of this review suggest that the guidance, support and facilitation needs of different consortia vary substantively. This suggests that flexible and bespoke supports from central agencies will be best placed to foster development and growth” (McManus, Peck and Vickery, 2022 p1).

46 A consortium steering group is a governing entity that might be usefully constructed and established and whose role would be to ensure that the apprenticeship programme conforms to, and evolves with, the requirements of the occupation. Its purpose would be to ensure that the apprenticeship programme is enterprise-led and meets labour market needs (McManus, Peck and Vickery, 2022 p68).

47 A Coordinating Provider is a relevant or linked provider who is ultimately responsible for providing (as defined by the 2012 Act) an apprenticeship programme. Among its responsibilities are the development and maintenance of the curriculum and assessment procedures for the programme and leading the collaborating providers involved. To act as a Coordinating Provider for an apprenticeship programme, the entity must be a relevant or linked provider under the 2012 Act. This means, among other things, that it must be a legal entity and the provision of education and training must be one of its principal functions. If an entity is not already a relevant provider, it may become one through a QQI process” (McManus, Peck and Vickery, 2022 p68).

48 Methodology included survey (n=500), focus groups (26) and interviews (17) with a mix of stakeholders and a review of documentary evidence (170 documents)

Importantly, the evaluation did find that similar to education and training related consortia in the UK and in Wales, there was an ongoing need to acknowledge, accommodate and manage different ways of working including quality assurance cultures and processes across industry and education sector partners (Smith and Betts, 2003; Morgan, Saunders and Turner, 2004). Morgan, Saunders and Turner (2004) reported challenges in establishing Community Consortia for Education and Training in Wales, in securing appropriate representation and a common voice from the disparate community and voluntary sector, in sustaining the contribution of employers and in engaging learner voice. Smith and Betts (2003) noted that consortium delivery of Foundation degrees provided an opportunity for collaboration on delivery rather than competition between the further education and higher education sectors in the UK, providing a further education route into higher education, promoting access and widening participation.

Federation

In researching the governance, leadership and management in federations⁴⁹ of schools in England, Chapman et al. (2010 p57) noted, in their sample of nine case study federations, a continuum of federations (a group of schools that have joined together to form a larger organisation) with varied practice. This was driven by local context and available resources. They identified four types of structure, and the characteristics of these are presented in Table 4.7 below. They draw on the work of Sullivan and Skelcher (2002) who “use the rules of governance to categorise within such a continuum, moving from “network” at the loosest end of the continuum, through “partnership” and “federation” to the full merger or “integration” of one or more organisations” (p55). At the network and loosest end, collaboration based on informal ad-hoc relationships self-governs through mutual norms, shared values and trust. Across the continuum, as collaboration becomes more formalised governance is managed through a formal governing body or federal structure created where partner organisations have devolved some autonomy to the governing structure. At the most formal and farthest end of the continuum where partner organisations have merged into a single organisation, they are governed hierarchically through the new organisation. This move towards an integrated structure and single organisation represents a shift from a soft to a hard governance arrangement.

⁴⁹ “In England, federations are defined as groups of schools that have a formal agreement to collaborate with the aim of raising achievement and promoting inclusion and innovation” (Chapman et al., 2010 p53).



Chapman et al. (2010) also reported the following learning from this research.

- » Pre-existing collaboration and relationships helped establish and progress the collaborative work of the schools as a federation.
- » Suspicion between partners related to a fear of takeover by other schools. Autonomy proved very important to schools.
- » At the outset, partners were unclear about leadership, management and legal roles and responsibilities.
- » School level challenges that need to be managed include the perceptions of staff and existing ways of working.
- » Having a dedicated partnership development resource and their personal style and commitment was identified as a success factor.

Table 4.7 Continuum of Federations and Governance Characteristics
(Chapman et al, 2010 p58-59)

	Non-Statutory		Statutory	
	Informal Loose Collaboration	Soft Federation	Soft Governance Federation	Hard Governance Federation
Governing Body	Each school has own governing body and meet up informally on ad hoc basis	Each school has own governing body. Federation has joint governance /strategic committee without delegated powers	Each school has own governing body. Federation has Joint Strategic Committee with delegated powers	Single Governing Body shared by all schools.
Statutory	No, schools can form information collaborations without having to follow statutory regulations	No, schools can set up soft federations without having to follow statutory regulations	Yes, Soft federations are set up under statutory regulations	Yes, hard federations are set up under statutory regulations
Common Goals	All schools share common goals and can work together on ad-hoc issues and informal agreements	All schools share common goals through protocol; Joint committee can make joint recommendations, but it is up to individual governing bodies to authorize plans	All schools share common goals through Service Level Agreements & protocol. Joint Strategic Committee can make decisions in some but not all areas	All schools share common goals through Service Level Agreements & protocol. A Single Governing Body makes decisions in all areas.
Common Budget	No, individual governing bodies could approve common budget if needed for a project.	No, can make budgetary recommendations for the group which require approval by individual governing bodies	No, can make budgetary decisions for group only if Joint Strategic Committee has budgetary authority delegated to it	No, but Single Governing Body makes decisions on behalf of group.
Shared Staff	No, unlikely to have shared positions	Common management roles/shared posts underpinned by protocol/contract	Common management roles/shared posts underpinned by protocol/contract	Common management roles/shared posts agreed. Option to have 1 headteacher across group of schools.

Formal and informal mechanisms and processes that support effective partnership working

Austin and Seitaindi (2012b p938) note that while developing strategic plans and annual reports, and structured meetings all support the building of good partnership working across organisations, informal mechanisms often help manage emerging tensions arising from lack of clarity, uncertainty and different ways of working, and these include:

- » managing the culture of the partnership to blend and harmonize two different organisational cultures.
- » charismatic leadership that promotes and inspires employee participation.
- » methods of communication that build trust and encourage open dialogue.
- » mutual respect, openness, and constructive criticism continual learning
- » managing conflict

4.3 Building and maintaining relationships in partnership work

Findings and key learning

Good relationships premised on trust and integrity are core to successful and sustainable partnerships. This includes relationships with community organisations, other education partners (schools, FET), underrepresented groups, internal staff working in faculty/academia and other partnership roles, and learners. Relationships require significant investment of resources and time to engage underrepresented groups in widening participation activity. This research confirmed these learners are managing significant issues and barriers. Tailored support is important to ensure they progress in higher education. Community organisations play a key brokering role and should be resourced to do this.

Introduction

The centrality of relationships to the success of partnership working is consistently highlighted in the cross-sector research literature (Fynn et al., 2022; Plummer et al., 2021; Wiggins, Anastasiou and Cox, 2021; Devaney et al., 2021; Drahota et al., 2016; Horton, Prain and Thiele, 2009). Key research studies from this literature, presented in Table 2.1, point to the importance of information sharing, conflict resolution (Wiggins, Anastasiou and Cox, 2021); open communication, trust and mutual respect (Plummer et al., 2021; Clifford et al., 2008), and interpersonal processes and knowledge exchange (Drahota et al., 2016) as key elements of building and maintaining successful relationships in partnerships. Conversely, behaviours indicative of poor relationships such as insufficient communication are identified as barriers to success in partnership working (Devaney et al., 2021). In a similar vein, Gorard et al. (2006) also note the importance of a focus on people in partnerships in their review of barriers to participation for higher education for HEFCE in England.

The body of research concerned specifically with higher education shows that university relationships with the community and with their students are important not only for promoting access but also for ensuring progression and reducing attrition once students have entered higher education (Wanti et al., 2022; Parkes et al., 2014; Thomas, 2012; Nagda et al., 1998). Australian research on school-based outreach programmes for students from low socio-economic backgrounds found that a whole community approach founded on relationships between universities, schools, communities and parents addressed deficits in students' social and cultural capital as relationships with key socialisers nurtured students' aspirations and positive expectations about going to university (Geagea, 2019). This was also reported in a qualitative process evaluation of a tertiary vocational education programme for indigenous Māori students in New Zealand (Hamerton and Henare, 2017). Nagda et al (1998 p57) noted "the effects of weak student-with-student and student-with-faculty contact have been cited repeatedly as causes of student withdrawal from college and the absence

of sufficient interaction with other members of the college community as the single leading predictor of college attrition. As important as integration is for the retention of students in general, it appears to be even more crucial in retaining under-represented minority students at largely majority institutions”.

Furthermore, research conducted in higher education has also highlighted the importance of internal and inter-departmental relationships within the universities, between academic faculty staff and those providing support to students, for student retention and progression (Nagda et al, 1998). “Collaborative working by professional and academic staff at the intersection of these spheres [academic sphere, professional services and social spheres of institutional activity] has therefore emerged as being particularly important for student engagement, retention and success” (Parkes et al., 2014 p5; Wanti et al., 2022; Thomas, 2012).

The importance of relationships to effective partnership working also emerged as a key theme in the primary research with professionals and was raised in seven of the nine focus groups and interviews that took place. In many of these relationships were identified as the key success factor in sustainable partnerships.

“

People, the personal relationship that you have is the most important thing - people deal with people. They don't deal with faceless organizations. You have to have a consistency of the people that they're dealing with....you have to understand....their side of the story because as educationists, we can be very prescriptive in what we do, what we deliver and how it works, but without any understanding of their side of it. It can become very black and white, and a lot of roadblocks and impasses can be set up.

(Interviewee: Senior Manager, Education)

”

“

We'd have agreements as to funding and who would get what funds for what, we have agreements about their time and what time they're doing different things and but to be honest with you, a lot of it runs on goodwill and understanding between people you know and kind of being friends. I think those formal things are to avoid misunderstanding, but they're not the real thing that drives it, you know.

(Focus Group Participant, Middle Manager Education)

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Building relationships requires investment of resources from the start and ensure co-design.

In the five-stage process of building and sustaining a partnership proposed by Austin and Seitanidi (2012b p931-932; see Table 3.2), the critical importance of investing time in relationship building during the partnership formation stage is emphasised. The process of exploring the mission, experience and linked interests of potential partners to assess strategic fit and suitability of the collaboration as well as its potential to create mutual benefit helps partners to get to know each other, understand motivation and values, and build relationships.

Moreover, the processes of co-designing structures, processes and mechanisms to support partnership working during the partnership implementation and partnership design and operations stages helps build and deepen relationships as partners collectively work through iterations to get to final structures and processes (Austin and Seitanidi, 2012b). Fynn et al (2022 p295), in research with 31 stakeholder organisations involved in Sport England partnerships to deliver physical activity programmes, noted how “continuity of staffing facilitates consistency of approaches, relationships and communication”.

Analysis of the focus group and interview data also highlighted the importance of investing in relationships early in the partnership. Participants working with underrepresented groups, many of whom are identified as priority groups in the National Access Plan, emphasised the need to invest continually in nurturing and minding these relationships on an ongoing basis. This required significant time and resources, often not recognized or covered adequately in planning and budgeting.

Key processes that support relationship building

Structures and meetings

The value of effective liaison structures and meetings to support two-way communication was highlighted in a number of research studies (Hains and Hains, 2023; Barnes et al., 2017; Gorard et al., 2006). Drahota et al. (2016 p184) identified “well-structured meetings” as a facilitating factor in successful partnerships and this related to meetings that were held with “satisfactory or effective frequency”, the logistics of which “facilitate productivity, satisfaction, effectiveness, partnership, opportunities to interact, etc.” and the style of which is “satisfactory (e.g., face to face, telephone, web-based)”.

In the context of partnership working between the University of Nebraska and community colleges, Ali et al. (2004 p75) reported that regular meetings facilitated discussions where “perceptions between faculty at both institutions regarding respective academic rigor and course articulation and transfer [were] discussed openly and directly in a positive manner to dispel and replace previous misunderstandings and faulty perceptions with the goal of gaining understanding and insight of each other’s current situations. A history of misconceptions

between . . . [organisations was] broken down to create a new platform for productive and effective planning”.

Parkes et al. (2014 p20) noted the importance of structures in managing challenges relating to communication in internal inter-department partnerships within universities. “Ensuring that effective communication mechanisms exist, such as committees, working and/or special interest groups and other formal and informal channels of communication, was a key theme in effectively working in partnership. Indeed, evidence from the ‘What Works’ programme suggests that facilitating communication between colleagues from disparate areas of the university is vital in enabling them to implement change and take a more student-centred approach”.

Analysis of the focus group and interview data confirmed that when well-structured and managed with a focus on outcomes, meetings were considered important to building relationships and sparking discussions about new and related projects. It was acknowledged that in-person meetings provided greater opportunity for relationship building than those hosted online. However, the relevance of discussions on operational matters to all partners emerged as an issue within four of the nine focus groups and interviews. Participants considered meetings would be more effective with less focus on bureaucratic and operational issues.

One participant highlighted the additional value of meetings in reviewing practice and promoting organisational learning.

“

Meetings, ...and they would discuss.....but also take feedback and discuss how are things going, what works for you, what doesn't work for you and how can we accommodate what you need.

(Interviewee, Senior Manager Education)

”

Communications processes and approach

From their systematic review of 50 research studies concerned with community academic partnerships, Drahota et al. (2016) documented that “effective and/or frequent communication”, described as partners engaging in “ongoing communication that is open and respectful” and “communication that encompasses personal and professional matters” (p184), was identified as a facilitating influence in 24.1% of the studies. Furthermore, this research identified that “poor communication among partners” described as “limited or unclear methods of communication” and “partners experience difficulty in maintaining communication”, as one of 11 hindering influences. Indeed, communication is also intrinsically linked and fundamental to a further seven of these hindering influences that include control struggles, unclear partner roles, differing expectations, mistrust among partners and a lack of common language/shared terms.

In a similar vein, respondents in survey research with officers in 27 higher education institutions and 44 community partner organisations in Canada strongly agreed that the quality, manner and timing, and frequency of communications was key to partnership performance (Plummer et al., 2021). Conflict resolution has also been identified as an important element of communication to support partnership working. “Effective dialogue requires people to explore, confront and contest diverse perspectives; however, research finds that groups are more likely to avoid conflict and engage in consensus- confirming discussions, hereby undermining their effectiveness. Conflict avoidance stifles shared understanding of governance, norms and administrative practices, negatively impacting multiple processes that are important to sustainable collaborations” (Carpenter, 2023 p1).

The importance of communication was also noted in other partnerships outside of the context of higher education, in the review of Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs) operating across the Republic of Ireland. “Communication both within and across LCDCs was identified as an important element of LCDC work. Dissemination of information important to decision-making, as well as allowing sufficient time to consider this information, was raised as an important issue” (DRCD, 2019 p29). This review also highlighted how gaps in communication had contributed to a lack of awareness of the work of the LCDC within communities and consequently poorer community engagement. With regard to sports partnerships, Fynn et al. (2022 p296) found that “communication was described as a key process to facilitate knowledge exchange and in turn to build capacity to both do and use evaluation. Communication that was regular, timely and appropriate was seen as critical to effective partnership working, whether between funders, delivery staff, project leads or evaluators. Participants also acknowledged the wider value of bringing people together and initiating conversations”.

These findings were echoed in the primary research with professionals who took part in focus groups and interviews as part of this research. In particular, trust, integrity and conflict management emerged within a number of the discussions, as critical to effective partnership working.

“

I suppose, to be honest, communication if it's not working, if it's not doing what we think it should be doing that people are ...open to articulate the concerns that they have. I think that's . . one of the most valuable parts of a partnership piece, you know, that people are comfortable to sit around the table and discuss where it's going wrong and look at putting plans in place to either readjust it and go back and design from beginning again. So, I think that kind of open communication at all stages ..is kind of key to making sure that it kind of runs to what it set out to do.

(Focus Group Participant, Middle Manager Education)

”

Knowledge exchange- networks to share practice, foster organisational learning and capacity

Closely linked to communication, knowledge exchange, concerned with the “multidirectional flows of information” through the levels and network of connections across partner organisations, has been identified as facilitating partnership success (Fynn et al., 2022 p92; Wiggins, Anastasiou and Cox, 2021). Information flow is critical for organisational learning and capacity development, also identified as key to success in partnership working (Horton, Prain and Thiele, 2009; Clifford et al, 2008). As summarized in Table 2.1, Austin and Seitanidi (2012b) describing business nonprofit partnerships, refer to this as “interaction value” which “builds from information to knowledge to capabilities” (p940).

From a systematic review of 24 research studies conducted across a range of settings and contexts and published between 1994 and 2011, Long, Cunningham and Braithwaite (2013 p1) note that collaborative networks “are increasingly seen as an optimal structure via which to both organise and think conceptually about clusters of diverse individuals, groups organisations who aim to work together collaboratively”. The value associated with these networks, and examples are documented in the literature across a range of partnership settings and contexts. This includes a systematic review of 50 community academic partnership studies, conducted by Drahota et al. (2016 p189) where partners reported that access to the “diverse spectrum of research experiences and outcomes across partnerships through the different reporting schemes, phone calls and web conferences, face to-face conferences, and informal interactions has served to strengthen the partnership”.

The review of LCDCs identified the value of, and a need to “further develop and strengthen existing national and regional networks ... where LCDCs can meet and learn from each other – these include, for example, the three regional LCDC Chief Officer Fora, an LCDC Chairs’ Network managed by the Department, and the HSE representatives’ network” (DRCD, 2019 p29). The mid-term review of Children and Young People’s Services Committees reported that “national CYPSC events, workshops and seminars will continue to provide an opportunity for knowledge exchange and networking, and to ensure that best practice models are identified and shared” (Department of Children, Equality, Disability,

Integration and Youth, 2023 p21). These networks, conceptualized in the context of schools as Professional Teacher Learning Communities, have been associated with innovation and system level practice development (Lantz-Anderson, Lundin and Selwyn, 2018). Teacher communities of practice are an important element of the Trinity Access Programme providing professional development opportunities and building the capacity of schools (Tangney et al., 2022). Dempsey, Collins and Malone (2022) also used Communities of Practice to support the development of partnership working within Tusla Child and Family Support Networks (CFSNs).

In the primary research element of this research, analysis of the qualitative focus group and interview data highlighted the need for structures and processes to support knowledge management and transfer across partner organisations as well as internally within partner organisations. During the focus group and interview discussions it emerged that often partnerships facilitated with schools and community organisations are part of a bigger intra-organisational relationship.

“

No, I'm not setting it [partnership] up at all, but I suppose the partnership I have with them is usually short term, but like it's within the bigger relationship they have with [organisation], if that makes sense.

(Focus Group Participant: Staff Officer Education)

”

Moreover, these participants documented that their organisation was engaged in many, many partnerships. A small minority described internal structures and processes to support knowledge transfer and management and wider organisational learning.

“

So there's no point in one person knowing what the [partnership] is doing. It has to get shared. So all of our services {bring together staff who provide an input from different committees}, so that's a relatively new development because I think previously a lot of things used to go to committees and then never came back and you wouldn't have an awareness of what we're doing.

(Interviewee, Senior Manager, Education)

”

One focus group participant also shared their experience of a practice network that supported their partnership working in a very positive way.

“

I think there was 53 or 54 organisations within that town working for social inclusion, so instead of overlap or duplication, it was how can we all work together so that formed the committee and then there was quarterly meetings every year and people presented on what they did. And I remember starting that role and was brought to that meeting, and it was just fantastic, like, you know, that day I met so many people, it just opened up doors for me to be able to do the job to the best I could, to be honest. Yeah.

(Focus Group Participant: Staff Officer Education)

”

Yet it was noted by a minority of participants that competition could pose a barrier to collaborating and developing networks to support knowledge transfer across the higher education sector.

“

Let's bring, you know, different academics from the universities nationally together in a space to really see who's doing what, what's best practice, and have a chat about that where we can learn from each other... maybe we can improve and but sometimes that that that kind of piece doesn't sit well. .
But there's a tendency, maybe not a tendency but I found that sometimes the university wants to be the leader.

(Interviewee: Middle Manager, Education)

”

Brokers and champions

Bridging, brokering or boundary spanning roles are connecting roles that facilitate engagement and the flow of information across partnerships and networks of partners (Baas et al, 2023). Long, Cunnigham and Braithwaite (2013 p37) concluded from their systematic review of 24 studies that “brokers can support the controlled transfer of specialized knowledge between groups, increase co-operation by liaising with people from both sides of the gap [geographical, cognitive or cultural gap between people or groups], and improve efficiency by introducing “good ideas” from one isolated setting into another”. These roles have been positively associated with innovation through synthesizing and sharing diverse knowledge and understanding across partners, and disciplinary, cultural and organisational boundaries (Long, Cunnigham and Braithwaite, 2013).

The role of brokers in higher education is highlighted in research studies concerned with innovation (Baas et al, 2023) and those concerned with promoting access and widening participation (Ali et al., 2004; Empower, 2022). Ali et al. (2004) document the key contribution of a broker to the success of the STEP Access programme at the University of Nebraska. The broker, a STEP Outreach Liaison Officer played an important role in promoting both the university and local community college, and the established partnership and transfer pathways to prospective students and parents (Ali et al, 2004). A recent evaluation of the D15 access programme run by Empower CLG⁵⁰ in two secondary schools in the Fingal area of Dublin, highlighted that Empower as a Local Development Company is a community partner of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, funded by the Higher Education Equity of Access Division. In delivering this programme, supporting students in the local community to access higher education, Empower CLG takes on a brokering role and “offers a dynamic link between schools and the community. Empower’s establishment of networks in the North Dublin LEA and beyond ensures that information is shared, expertise utilised, and impact for the community and the individual in need is maximised. As such, this enables Empower to be the door that opens endless doors, ensuring that students are well-informed and connected before, during and after they leave school” (Empower, 2022 p10). Moreover, in delivering the programme, a designated Liaison person is employed in a brokering role with the schools: “this two-way communication serves as identifying and responding to emerging needs within the schools and the wider community (p18).

The literature also highlights costs associated with brokering roles that include an over reliance on an organisation or individual who may become overloaded in managing the relationships and flows of information (Long, Cunnigham and Braithwaite, 2013). This requires appropriate resourcing, particularly in longer term relationships as well as risk management to prevent information bottlenecks or hoarding. Baas et al. (2004) reporting from research on developing open education resources across 15 higher education institutions in the Netherlands, documented that while brokers were able to engage staff and set up organisational structures, their impact was limited by ambiguity around the authority and position of their role spanning across a number of institutions. This research recommended the importance of situating the broker role within a project management context and ensuring effective communication on the project and brokering across all stakeholders.

Analysis of the qualitative data collected through focus groups and interviews confirmed the significant value of brokers in engaging underrepresented groups in partnerships. Many of these groups lack trust in government led and bureaucratic public sector services having experienced pervasive discrimination and exclusion. Local community organisations were identified consistently in the data as key brokers of relationships with these groups.

50 “Empower CLG is a local development company responsible for delivering a range of Government funded programmes, services and supports, to meet the needs of individuals, families and community groups who are experiencing socio-economic disadvantage across the Fingal area” (Empower, 2022 p4). For more detail see <https://www.empower.ie/>

“

And then when we're talking about those kind of hard to reach groups, it's a lot easier for a community organisation to build trust with hard to reach groups and breakdown those barriers than it is for us.

(Focus Group Participant, Middle Manager Education)

”

Northside Partnership is hosting the NTRIS project for this reason while Empower CLG, also a local Development Company, is a key broker of relationships with the Roma Community in North County Dublin and has established a National Roma Network.

“

We were in negotiations with Traveller organisations and ...they didn't bite really. They had a lot of concerns, and you know we appreciate those concerns... Northside Partnership we knew because of their work locally in the area so we would have had relationships. They agreed to host the project physically because we needed somewhere where the education workers, community based statutory service such as ourselves and the school outreach services would all be in one office and they would be equal but nobody was pulling rank or be as equal as possible and as much equity and inclusion as possible. And you know, I think a community development organisation is the ideal place to broker....you're away from their hierarchies of school and public services, you know.

(Focus Group Participant, Senior Manager Health and Social Care)

”

Identifying and securing champions within leaderships has been highlighted as important for the success of partnership working as they play a key role in building relationships and supporting cross functional teams (Austin and Setanidi, 2012b). Barnes et al. (2017 p10) emphasised that “inter-agency cooperation must be anchored with the leaders of the respective agencies”. This also emerged strongly in the review of LCDCs (DRCD, 2019 p27) where review participants noted “the LCDC role is significantly influenced by the value placed on the LCDC by the relevant local authority, and this in turn can impact on LCDC strategic capacity and effectiveness.

Academic faculty role

Communication between academic faculty staff and students, and particularly students from under-represented groups who may be more vulnerable to dropping out, has been identified as important to “foster both the social and academic integration of students into the institution” (Nagda et al. 1998 p57; Gorard et al., 2006; Parkes et al., 2014; Thomas, 2012; Wanti et al., 2022). “Evidence on student attrition suggests that retention efforts need to move beyond largely a social matter for staff of student affairs” (Nagda et al., 1998 p71). This was highlighted in partnerships established with indigenous community organisations to deliver tertiary vocational programmes in New Zealand. “The building of relationships with one another and with tutors was very important for student success. Participants highlight the importance of having tutors who were approachable, inspiring and able to enter into their culture, in short who were willing to develop authentic relationships with them” (Hamerton and Henare, 2017 p37). In a similar vein, Macqueen, Southgate and Scevak (2023) emphasised the importance of faculty staff adopting a “pedagogy of care” in facilitating the success of “students from non-traditional backgrounds who may come to study disbelieving their ability to know, their capacity to study, and their right to voice and agency” (p359).

This body of education research also asserts the importance of faculty student contact and relationships that extend beyond the classroom and studies advice, to include engaging students in challenging activities such as research and mentoring and peer facilitator or teaching assistant roles. “Whatever form engagement might take ... students should be helped early in their careers to find academic and social niches where they can feel that they are a part of the institution’s life, where friendships can be developed, and where role models (whether student or faculty) can be observed and emulated” (Nagda et al., 1998 p65).

The Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program at the University of Michigan is an example of such an engagement programme which aims to build “intellectual relationships” between faculty and first- and second-year undergraduate students through research partnerships. Students, matched with a faculty sponsor receive additional support from programme alumni peer advisors and through peer research interest groups and are engaged in undertaking reviews, conducting research, analysis and disseminating results through presentations and co-authoring journal articles. Evaluation conducted using a matched control group design found positive and significant programme impacts through reduced attrition for some minority racial groups (Nagda et al., 1998). See Thomas (2012) and Parkes et al. (2014) for further examples reported across UK universities.

Professionals who took part in the focus groups and interviews, particularly those working in further and higher education, adult and community education and social inclusion and community development programmes, emphasised the critical importance of additional and wraparound support to learners from underrepresented groups.

“

Wrap around supports to build their confidence, to give them the tools to engage in the actual level 7 and the other supports as well, like the laptop ... emotional support if you know stuff is going on in their family supporting them in that sense We have a huge wrap around support here for our learners and an individual like we'd meet with them on an individual basis and support them and through one to ones as well so it is it's the journey that they're on and you're on the journey with them from the time they walk through the door to have the cup of tea to you know hopefully when they're throwing their hat. So, it's seeing somebody grow and the confidence building.

(Focus Group Participant: Middle Manager, Social Inclusion Community Development)

”

Interviews with current and past students who took part in the Learner Voice element of the research confirmed that students from underrepresented groups manage a multiplicity of issues while studying in higher education institutions. Three of the seven participants had or were currently living in emergency housing /homeless accommodation while two had experience of the Refugee or International Protection services. The majority struggled with finances and the need to work alongside their studies and/ placement. One female Roma student who had dropped out before completing her course reported being overwhelmed with caring for her five children while undertaking the course.

“

In my community the woman's responsibility is to take care of the children. This is the tradition that the woman needs to stay at home and raise children". (Past student)

"I'll do overnight shifts and so I'll go to school during the day and take over night shifts then come home, come to school, go home, get off, get ready for overnight shift.

(Past Student)

”

“

I suppose I never finished secondary school because I grew up in the Care system and I was kind of being moved around a lot and I had kind of a lot of other issues that I needed to be dealing with and a lot of trauma I had to deal with. So school wasn't really ever safe space for me.

(Current Student)

”

“

Umm, there were quite a few challenges actually, because I remember at the beginning there were a lot of lectures altogether, but I only had my phone so I wasn't really able to access the online bits of the lectures, and there were other stuff like transport. I'm like even though like it's one bus to my college, there were still issues with like transport costs and stuff like that. And even like during lunchtime, like buying food and lunch and stuff like that was an issue around the beginning.

(Current Student)

”

The need to start early and provide consistent and seamless support from primary through secondary school and into and through university was also highlighted in line with a focus on early intervention and prevention approaches.

“

A programme that works with children from 6th class as they transition into secondary school, all the way through to sixth year and then we support them on to third level as well and that works with all the DEIS schools in our area and each year we support about 240 young children across the different years.

(Focus Group Participant: Senior Manager, Social Inclusion Community Development)

”

Most frequently, funding was secured through a patchwork of social inclusion grants and philanthropy.

The potential to provide additional support to learners through growing partnerships between adult and community education, and further education and training with higher education institutions was also identified. It was noted that placing learner outcomes at the centre and working in collaboration rather than competition actively addresses the social and cultural capital deficits that prevent learners from progressing in higher education.

“

[FE centre] had a brilliant course and then [university] set up a pre-certificate course to compete with it because they weren't satisfied with getting people transferring just off and when then when it comes to the learner, I can't blame them because they go 'so I can go into the university and it has a swimming pool, a weights room, a gym or I can go to a FE college'.

Yeah, but I thought it was a shame when [FE centre] had a good course... a transfer route and they [learners] were really happy and..... they came along and said now we're gonna set up a course to cut your throat. ... they need to be able to focus not just on bums on seats and they could redevelop their degree so the first year is in Further Education and Training where you know the ratios are 1:20 about and there's learning support in place and its more of a schooly, hold your hand kind of environment which will get them ready.

(Interviewee Senior Manager, Education sector)

”

Learners, two of whom have come into higher education through Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses in FET, highlighted the need to raise awareness of pathways other than CAO.

“

I just I think there's so many different pathways, but they're just not advertised enough that people kind of put all their eggs into one basket.

(Current Student)

”

4.4 Resourcing frameworks and staff skills to support partnership working.

Findings and key learning

Adequate resourcing of staff time and capacity is needed across higher education institutions and community organisations to establish and nurture partnerships. Short-term funding cycles and narrow funding streams limit the development of a strategic approach to partnerships aimed at widening participation. Job insecurity results in a loss of tacit knowledge and expertise. This prevents the deepening of relationships and work of the partnership.

Staff engaged in partnership working require training to develop skills in communication, participation and engagement, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion and trauma informed practices, and in the management and use of data for learning and improvement.

Introduction

Resourcing of partnership working emerges consistently in the research literature across sectors, disciplines and contexts (Mu et al., 2023; Deveney et al., 2021; Plummer et al, 2021; Drahota et al, 2016; Horton, Prain and Thiele, 2009; Clifford et al., 2008; Gorard et al., 2006). This is evident in Table 2.1 where the discussion concerns success factors and includes efficient use of resources, adequacy of resources, incentives, equitable sharing of and the flow of resources across the partnership. In these contexts, resourcing refers to funding, time, availability of administrative support and capacity or human resources within the partnership. Drahota et al. (2016 p185-186) report from their systematic review of 50 studies of community academic partnerships that three of the 11 factors identified hindering partnership working relate to resourcing - “excessive funding pressures or control struggles”, “excessive time commitment” and “high burden of activities or tasks”. These include partners leaving because of having to invest too much time collaborating, struggles over the control of funding, “external pressures from funding sources related to decisions.. outcomes, or its purpose” (p185), as well as that “some, many or all members are dissatisfied with the amount of work they have to do in order to sustain the... partnership” (p186).

These themes were also confirmed in the analysis of the qualitative data gathered through focus group and interview discussions with a range of professionals across organisations and sectors. Participants conceptualised resourcing in terms of funding, time, staff and workload/capacity in terms of all being critical to the success of partnership working, and all being in relatively short supply in practice on the ground.

“

I think the biggest assets in any organisation is their staff. So when staff is depleted, it can really have an impact. There is massive buy in. I think we have the buy in and we have the spirit. We have the belief in it, but just organisations having their workforce to be able to be released to do it can be tricky.

(Focus Group Participant: Senior Manager, Health and Social Care)

”

“

It's staff and pressure is on time because it's ...this is extra work on top of already stressed, stretched services and managers who have who have already very heavy workloads.

(Focus Group Participant: Middle Manager, Health and Social Care)

”

Participants working in large organisations noted the burden of servicing many partnerships and attending associated meetings as a “huge challenge”.

Austin and Seitanidi (2012a) recommend that the nature, level, and directional flow of resources should be discussed at the stage of partnership formation. This body of research has highlighted that funding is often associated with mistrust and inequality of power in partnership relationships (Drahota et al., 2016; Voller et al., 2022) and can present challenges for the full engagement of some non-statutory partners as well as longer term planning (DRCD, 2019; Drahota et al., 2016). In the context of partnerships between research institutions in high- and low-income countries, Voller et al. (2022) noted that “several participants described how feelings of mistrust and inequity were fueled when the lead partner lacked transparency about how funds had been allocated between institutions (p8). Another participant felt that the tone of a partnership was to a large extent set by funders. This individual felt that partnerships were more likely to be fair when the funder issued criteria for equitable participation than where arrangements were left to the lead partner to determine “(p9). This research concluded that funders have a key role to play in determining how partnerships should operate.

Drahota et al. (2016) noted in their systematic review of 50 studies of community academic partnerships that two thirds of studies did not report on funding at the start of the partnership and many reported receiving funding during their partnership, and often as an outcome of partnership working. This funding was frequently secured from federal agencies (46.3%) or local or national foundations (38.9%) and much less often from universities (3.7%) or corporate sponsors (1.9%).

The funding challenges experienced by smaller community organisations working in partnerships emerged within the focus group and interview discussions with professionals.

“

The decision on the money before the money gets out needs to be a decision of the partnership in how we do that, because a lot of the time in partnership, those are the most power will say this is how it needs to get done...

You have people who are sitting in there and look, they're volunteers, you know, and the breadth of what they need to cover or be aware of and the knowledge all of that, you know, there's just all sorts of dynamics and challenges associated with that.

(Interviewee: Senior Manager Social Inclusion and Community Development)

”

While the resources and time required to build and manage relationships for partnership working were acknowledged, participants also noted that this was rarely resourced, particularly for small community organisations.

“

I would also have some staff who would support that, but for the partners, it's not ...a lot of the time like they might be funded to run a programme but they're adding in a lot of extra time on a volunteer basis. So no, it's generally not and even in [university], that's not funded...we get a very minimal amount of engagement charge which covers a salary, it doesn't cover....It's people giving their time.

(Focus Group Participant: Middle Manager Education)

”

The importance of resourcing underrepresented groups to engage in partners was also highlighted. Examples included paying childcare costs or creating shared funded roles.

A mix of resourcing models are noted across higher education partnerships in the research literature (Drahota et al., 2016) and include philanthropy (Tangney et al., 2022; Barkat, 2019), statutory government funding (Empower, 2022; DRCD, 2019), grants (Ali et al., 2004), and benefit in kind /incentives (Plummer et al., 2021; Parkes et al., 2014).

Philanthropy

The Academic Enrichment Programme (AEP) in the Universities of Birmingham, Manchester and Nottingham, evaluated by Barket (2019) was originally established as a partnership between Goldman Sachs and the Sutton Trust in England. After 3 years, funding for ongoing delivery at the University of Birmingham was provided by a charitable foundation before being absorbed into and mainstream funded through the universities access activities. The Trinity Access Programme (TAP) Strategic Plan to 2020 documented the importance of philanthropy and corporate partnerships as part of a mixed funding model. “TAP strives for a 30/70 blend of corporate/philanthropic and public funding and multi-annual grants (typically a four-year engagement) to drive sustainable development and achieve efficiencies through the maintenance of long-term donor relationships. TAP engages with statutory funders on a regular basis, to assess how to align project objectives with national policy objectives and also to advise how privately funded ‘innovations’ developed within the programmes might be replicated to good effect across the sector (Trinity College Dublin, 2013, p9). In 2022, two thirds of the staff working on the Trinity Access Programme were funded by philanthropy and research funding. Senior programme staff, with the support of the university fundraising team, invest significant time securing this funding. Between 2014-2017 Google provided substantial funding and since 2017, philanthropic funding has been provided by Rethink Ireland (Tangney et al., 2022).

Analysis of the data from focus groups and interviews with professionals highlighted the important role played by philanthropy in meeting the funding gap experienced on the ground by participants working across a range of partnerships in higher education, community development and health and social care. Participants spoke of how this type of funding provided by Rethink Ireland, Google, and The Science Foundation Ireland among others, enabled them to take a more strategic and systemic approach to partnership working.

“

We have relied heavily on philanthropy to enable us to do that because the academics themselves, they're not going to create the research infrastructure and the partnerships with schools and all that stuff and then go out and collect the information. They're very happy to work with us on that, but they don't have the resources and time to do that.... So really, what's made the partnership successful is the fact that we're doing a lot of the heavy lifting and the reason for that is because some rich companies and individuals gave us some money ..

(Focus Group Participant, Middle Manager Education)

”

“

So resources help you bring people together and like the school avoidance piece I mentioned, [local community partner organisation] secures 100,000 funding, but we weren't able to put anything into that product. That was through Google Ireland.

(Focus Group Participant, Middle Manager Health and Social Care)

”

Statutory

Policy and progress reports from a number of government-led partnership programmes including Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC) and LCDCs suggest a mixture of statutory core funding alongside grants secured through application to various government department and funding initiatives (DCEDIY, 2023, NEIC, 2023; Department of an Taoiseach, 2022; Devaney et al, 2021; DRCD, 2019). This can include funding for core staff members (DCEDIY, 2023; NEIC, 2023), including jointly funded posts (Devaney et al., 2021) in an effort to pool and integrate resources to maximise impact. Writing on the integration and co-ordination of services to support children and families, Barnes et al. (2017 p10) emphasised the importance of securing “adequate and sustained funding (e.g., through pooled budgets, written agreements around funding), ensuring continuity of staffing (e.g., by ensuring staff capacity and support for staff) and an adequate time allocation (e.g., realistic timescales, built-in time for planning)”.

The review of LCDCs that are funded by the Department of Rural and Community Development through local authorities, found that LCDC partnership committees' ability to focus on strategic issues was hampered by a high volume of operational tasks and recommended additional resourcing of administrative support to alleviate some of this burden. Moreover, poor resourcing was identified as a key barrier to the engagement of representative partners from the community and voluntary sector. “There is a concern that these groups may be poorly resourced and lack the experience and confidence to engage fully with the LCDC, resulting in a lack of real representation in local decision-making processes. In addition, as many representatives from this sector are voluntary and represent marginalized groups or groups generally underrepresented, the time commitment required to ensure effective engagement and participation was also identified as a factor limiting participation” (DRCD, 2019 p25-26).

Overall, the inadequacy of funding for partnership working was discussed by participants in seven of the nine focus groups and interviews. In relation to widening participation in higher education, this included small piecemeal amounts that could only be spent on particular activities and funding cycles that were too short thereby limiting the potential to adopt a more meaningful strategic approach to working in partnership with underrepresented groups, and to tackling systemic issues.

“ Generally, the money that comes ...is really, really tiny, insignificant amounts. So this is like, but we'll have 10 grand this year to do research on
(Focus Group Participant: Middle Manager Education) ”

“ So, we're not able to really drive some of the bigger interagency change pieces like change how services are delivered, how services are managing projects or responses. If you don't have a budget where you can actually invest in services, say, well, let's try this. Let's try a new approach. It's very hard to really to influence that change but we couldn't do that because we don't have financial power, resources available ... So that's the gap.
(Focus Group Participant: Middle Manager Health and Social Care) ”

“ You can do outreach activities with amazing people till the cows come home.....that piece of like embedding it into in embedding it into the university structure? So I'm not sure, it's kind of like a big flash and then ...whereas if you know the money's there, I think the potential for doing really meaningful stuff like creating really meaningful connections and long term relationship is there and I think that energetically it's not as exhausting cause you don't have to constantly be doing something new.
(Interviewee: Middle Manager Education) ”

The negative impact of short funding cycles on organisational capacity, expertise and memory was also acknowledged in community organisations, community education and in higher education institutions.

“ What you want is I think ideally that your people who are working on it stay because they have the connections, they have the contacts, they have the investment, you know and they're not gonna stay unless their role is permanent. I mean, if you're on a 3-year project, you know you're gonna start by the end of year two. You're looking for another job, you know, and it doesn't matter if there's another role of path coming down the line. You can't hang on for that and then if you transfer, if you move ... all that knowledge is being lost. I think that's ...really frustrating for the university because you spend so much time sitting on interview boards, writing up job descriptions.
(Interviewee: Middle Manager Education) ”

“

There's a tension between getting funding for programmes for three years, let's say, or, you know, being on a temporary cycle. And then if you want to attract and retain people willing to work in the sector, you know long term and see a future in it....that's the challenge just in terms of hanging on to good people over extended period of time.

(Focus Group Participant: Middle Manager Education)

”

The analysis also highlighted a perception among some participants not employed in higher education that universities require payment including administration costs or research to engage in partnerships with community organisations.

In-kind benefits/ incentives

From their survey research with 27 higher education institutions and 44 community partners in Canada, Plummer et al. (2021) found that two thirds of higher education institutions provide incentives for faculty, staff, administrators and students to engage in partnerships with community organisations. While almost all reported providing in-kind incentives including technology and time for faculty, staff and students to engage, only half provided direct financial support. In this regard, Parkes et al (2014 p21) noted the importance of promotion and reward structures to promote the involvement of academic and other staff across UK universities. “Institutional commitment to activities that enhance the student experience, demonstrated through adequate resourcing, and reward and recognition for staff, was highlighted as important by participants, particularly if institutions wished to avoid such activities becoming tick-box exercises. Indeed, evidence ... suggests staff need recognition, support and development alongside effective reward schemes to encourage and enable them to engage students, nurturing their sense of belonging” (Thomas, 2012 p66 cited in Parkes, et al., 2014).

In the focus group and interview discussions with professionals, participants working in higher education institutions spoke of the challenges of seeking to engage colleagues across internal departments within their widening participation partnerships. Aside from a small number of shared posts, academic input is seldom formally acknowledged as part of their role and is often done “at the side of the desk”. (Interviewee: Middle Manager Education)

“

It's all been informal and there's some of the [academic staff] they would like to spend more time working with us, but they have other demands on their time and they like it to be a recognised part of their academic role and for it to be assigned to them in much the same way as being the director of some postgraduate course would be assigned to them.

(Focus Group Participant: Middle Manager Education)

”

“

We need to see processes in place for people to be actually allocated hours of their time. There's an over reliance, probably on people caring and if we're really serious about sustainability, we yes, we need to see longer term funding.

(Interviewee: Middle Manager Education)

”

The discussions also identified a change experienced by some participants in the approach to staff co-location and secondment to partnerships. The negative impact on knowledge transfer across the system and sector was also acknowledged.

“

One of the most effective [partnerships] that I've come across or been involved in has since been dismantled.... The [programme] team was mutually invested in by lots of different agencies because we actually had staff on secondment into that team... where other organisations had given up their resources to make this project really, really work.

And to me that was phenomenal because it brought synergy across a lot of different subject matter expertise into the one space into one room and so you had this whole holistic approachstatutory parties have stepped away from that level of interagency collaboration now and partnership and no longer are willing to give up their staff or resources or embed them in the teams. Part of that I think was down to moving to more of a contract management space and you would find organisations expressing concerns about conflict of interest and stuff like that... and staff supervision.

(Focus Group Participant: Senior Manager Social Inclusion Community Development)

”

Staff skills needed to support partnership work.

Review of the research literature on promoting access and partnership working highlights a gap in skills and capability across a range of domains that include communication, cultural awareness and data management and literacy (Ni Chorcora, Bray and Banks, 2023; Hains and Hains, 2023; Wanti et al., 2022; Barnes et al, 2017; Parkes et al., 2014; Austin and Seitanidi, 2012b; Thomas, 2012). These are closely aligned with many of the factors associated with hindering or facilitating successful partnerships (Drahota et al., 2016). Plummer et al. (2021) reported from survey research with higher education institutions and community partnerships in Canada that approximately one in four respondents had received formal partnership related training while three in four had received limited or no training.

These gaps were also identified in the focus groups and interview discussions with professionals conducted as part of this research. The gap in training specific to partnership working was acknowledged in four of these nine discussions and noted in relation to higher education, health and social care as well as social inclusion and community development. Moreover, the fact that significant on the job learning takes place and is often lost to organisations when people move on due to job insecurity and short- term funding cycles, was also acknowledged.

Participants identified gaps in skills across a range of areas that included the practical things of meetings and documents, budget setting, consultation and engagement practices as well as reporting and evaluation.

Communication skills

A range of communication skills are identified as important at various stages in the lifecycle of a partnership, to communicate with a multiplicity of stakeholders at every level of the partnership. At the early stage of forming a partnership, Austin and Seitanidi (2012b p935) highlight the importance of “skills in collaborative know how, knowledge skills and competencies, in searching as well as terminating early low potential relationships”. Boundary spanning skills are important is brokering and maintaining relationships with partners across organisations, disciplines, sectors and cultures (Barnes et al., 2017; Long, Cunnigham and Braithwaite, 2013; Ali et al., 2004). Carpenter (2023 p4326) noted that “partners might be using the same words for different concepts or different words for the same concepts without noticing [or] might be unaware of unshared individual knowledge which could be crucial for completing the task successfully”. Skills in identifying and discussing this type of difference and conflict in perspectives is important to reach convergence, consensus and a shared understanding of goals and a way of working in partnership (Carpenter, 2023; Austin and Seitanidi, 2012a).

Analysis of the primary research data collected with professionals in this project, highlighted the importance of skills in negotiation and communication to manage conflict. This emerged strongly in one of the focus groups around the management of new or changed funding streams that did not sit within the established formal agreements of the cooperative and consortium structures to which the research participants belonged.

“

And [funding] was extended for a year and then for six months and then for three months and now it's on a year-to-year basis. So, we had to sit down and re-organise and think again about what the budget would be. So now every year, we have to sit down and decide a budget as a steering group. At first it was more challenging because we had no idea how to set a budget...So there was some challenges around that of just even being like is this process fair? Not everyone felt it was. Should we just keep continuing the programmes that we were already doing? Should we look to do new ones? So, all that had to be sat down and talked through and negotiated. We do have a process now that seems to work fairly well. It's quite inclusive, but it's very time consuming to make sure everyone gets a voice, and everyone gets a chance to apply for funding.

(Focus Group Participant: Middle Manager Education)

”

“

But when additional money comes in so this was a new challenge. When the Ukrainian fund came in, there was an independent amount of money came into the sector . . .but that came in without any agreements. It came into all of the partnerships around the country, and it was up to each organisation . . . spend it whatever way you want, so long as you were benefiting the essentially Ukrainian and open to Ukrainian and International Protection individuals in your area. So that's certainly meant a whole new negotiation . . . which was really interesting ...our members came up with their own plans and again collectively that was agreedit was very, very challenging, very, very challenging.

(Focus Group Participant: Middle Manager Social Inclusion Community Development)

”

Participation and engagement skills

In addition to communication skills, some research has identified gaps in partners skills to fully engage with the structures, mechanisms and processes that support partnership working. The review of LCDCs (DRCD, 2019 p33) identified skills gaps across some LCDCs and the need for a “more coordinated approach to developing standardized training pathways in specific areas to support cohesiveness across and between LCDCs”. These areas included induction training for new members, roles and responsibilities or members, strategic understanding and approaches regarding the Local Economic Community Plan goals and targets, as well as monitoring and evaluation.

The need to develop skills in engagement and participative processes also emerged in a number of the focus group and interview discussions with professionals. This was driven by the fact that not all organisations adopt a participative ethos nor principles of social inclusion and community development in the way they work.

“

The process that people use to enact partnership might be very different. . . So my idea of partnership and your idea of partnership might be very different and my idea of participation and your idea of participation might be very different.

(Interviewee: Middle Manager Education)

”

Some participants noted that while many working in partnerships in contract management skills, there was a greater skills gap in relation to engaging in meaningful partnership working with underrepresented groups. The Department of Rural and Community Development recently published a new resource⁵¹ to support government agencies in this area. In a similar vein, one participant described how their organisation had developed a place-based leadership development programme to address this skills gap.

“

Trying to build relationships with key stakeholders in the community in in terms of residents in community organisations and leaders and workers and community organisations and in statutory bodies. We took eight people from each of those cohort and brought them together over an 18-month period and did a program that was about relationship development, but also the tools for partnership doing collective analysis, doing appreciative inquiry design thinking, taking a deep dive into key teams or issues that were impacting upon communities and ensuring that everybody could understand them from the different perspective. .. there's a real challenge in terms of the gap and cultural understanding many of the people that are designing policy and policy instruments in our government departments nowadays are graduates that have come up through third level and careers in government departments.

(Focus Group Participant, Senior Manager Social Inclusion Community Development)

”

Others described capacity building training they had provided to underrepresented groups to empower them to engage in partnership working. The contribution of philanthropic funder Rethink Ireland, to building the capacity of awardee organisations, was also highlighted.

Skills and awareness of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

The growing body of research concerned with addressing institutional barriers and a deficit of cultural capital in relation to the participation of underrepresented students in higher education, and that concerned with higher education partnerships with community organisations, emphasised the need to develop the knowledge and skills of staff within higher education institutions (Macqueen, Southgate and Scevak, 2023; Wanti et al, 2022; Parkes et al., 2014; Thomas, 2012). According to Hains and Hains (2023 p9), there is a need to develop training in “culturally relevant community engagement” so that those wanting to “engage with communities different from their own should be provided with the opportunity to evaluate their own cultures, examine personal bias(es) or cultural unknowns, and establish community mentors to assist them in better understanding the communities in which they intend to engage”. Reporting focus group research with academic and student support staff in an Australian university, Macqueen Southgate and Scevak (2023 p359) found that while “staff generally exhibited willingness to adapt to meet the needs of diverse students, academic staff also represented deficit views expecting students to adapt to university culture”. This research identified a need for staff skills and training in the creating a relationship-based learning environment and processes to promote a sense of belonging among underrepresented students who may lack cultural capital to navigate established university culture and processes. This was highlighted by indigenous students accessing tertiary vocational programmes in New Zealand: “I think it all comes down to the tutor, thoughtful of us as people as individuals... being culturally aware was very important. Culture matters when you come into a shared space like this” (Hamerton and Henare, 2017p 37).

On a related theme but at a more strategic level of the organisation, Voller et al. (2022) identified the need for larger higher education institutions with more developed capacity to seek to understand the operating context and perspective of their smaller partner organisation with less developed infrastructure and capacity. There is also a need for partnerships to develop and build the skills and capacity of these smaller organisations.

In the primary research with professionals, the need to develop skills and adopt the principles and practices of equity, diversity and inclusion emerged in three of the nine focus group and interview discussions. One organisation reported investing in significant awareness training for their staff to better meet the needs of their learners. Another highlighted the importance of role models.

“

You're employing people from their communities to work with their communities, you're building their capacity and ...people need to see themselves reflected in the institution in terms of the people that are lecturing or teaching and you know. If they see a lecturer up there, giving the lecture with similar background, it's hugely important for them.

(Interviewee: Senior Manager Social Inclusion Community Development)

”

Learners who took part in the interviews as part of this research noted the lack of representative role models in their higher education institution.

“

I wasn't taught by someone like me in those two colleges there.

(Past Student who has completed Level 8 and 9 courses)

”

The need for faculty and lecturing staff to adapt their approach to meet the needs of underrepresented learners also emerged within one interview.

“

It's not the same, you know, lecturing to a class of 18-year-olds is not the same as lecturing to a class of mature students and they have different wants and needs. So faculty have to be, you know, they have to understand and they have to be open ...it takes a bit more thought. It does take a bit more organisation and it takes a little bit more, maybe support and coaching and mentoring than it does for a standard, not to say any class is standard, but you know what I mean, by standard CAO entry group.

(Interviewee: Senior Manager Education)

”

Two learners who took part in interviews reported experiences where staff displayed a lack of awareness and non-inclusive practice.

“

My first year I did, I had a lecturer have a conversation with me in front of the class about my care experience and to not put too much pressure on myself because I probably wouldn't make it anyway. And that was that was kind of hard to hear because it was my first week of first year and that was hard to hear when I was already so anxious and stuff.

Now I couldn't look at him for a couple of weeks because it really infuriated me and after a few weeks I pulled him aside and I was like, can I talk to you? And we had a conversation about it, and it was ...I think he kind of was trying to come from a caring kind of side of it, but it just came out all wrong for him.

(Current Student)

”

The other described a lack of diversity in the curriculum and staff inflexibility to accommodate different cultural experiences in the assessment.

“

There were some issues here and there in terms of the curriculum and the expectations, obviously, for someone who is of a foreign background, you know, like some of the examples and all the things. But some of the modules I couldn't, I couldn't resonate with them, but I had to. If I want to pass this course, I need to agree with what's being said because in this part of the world it makes sense. I found myself, I found myself as an average student. I'm not an average student. If I look at my marks, every time I look at them, I feel pain because it's because of the curriculum.

(Past Student)

”

Another learner shared their experience of receiving discriminatory comments from other students not in the Access programme, highlighting the need to raise awareness of EDI among the student body.

“

Because I already had the impostor syndrome going into it, I.... I don't belong here, people, somebody like me don't go to college like. This is really weird and wrong.... and then to have people that had like parents that are professors at other universities being like, oh, you poor people get everything.

(Past Student)

”

Skills in the management and use of data for learning and improvement

The gap in practice and skills concerning the collation and use of data, performance management and evaluation emerges consistently in the research literature about partnership working (Ni Chorcora, Bray and Banks, 2023; Mu et al., 2023; Plummer et al., 2021; Wiggins, Anastasiou and Cox, 2021; Horton, Prain and Thiele, 2009). This is critical for organisational learning and development and skills gaps are evident in the research summarized and presented in Table 2.1, across organisations, sectors and disciplines.

First, there is a need for skills in designing systems and processes, as well as in the collation and effective use of good quality administrative data for learning and improvement. This includes data governance, data literacy and business intelligence skills. Reporting from a systematic review of 18 studies concerned with widening participation outreach programmes in post primary schools, Ni Chorcora, Bray and Banks (2023) highlighted the need to improve the quality, completeness, accessibility and availability of administrative enrollment data to allow for the measurement of access and progression outcomes and programme

impact. In order to do this, they also noted that college admission and access teams require data and research skills and support to work in a joined-up way with their research departments (Tangney et al., 2022).

Secondly, skills in the conduct of evaluation; formative evaluation to understand the contextual factors as well as the key processes and mechanisms that determine the effectiveness of interventions and partnership working, and robust impact longitudinal evaluation to investigate outcomes and causation in the short and longer term for learners and for partner organisations (Wiggins, Anastasiou and Cox, 2021; Barkat, 2019; Clifford et al., 2009; Gorard et al., 2006).

In the majority of focus groups and interviews with professionals, participants highlighted the need for data skills to ensure data quality and integrity and to promote partnership and organisational learning and improvement. Participants asserted the need for investment to address this skills gap across partnerships in all sectors.

“

It's only possible because we have our own dedicated research staff. ...So we have people who are responsible for collecting data, for cleaning data, you know, for designing surveys for all this kind of stuff, and they have that expertise because often the access practitioners don't have that kind of quantitative expertise.

(Focus Group Participant: Middle Manager Education)

”

“

We're doing data collection stuff now, an outcomes framework for two SLA and we have very little resources so it's not going to be done very well and it's not going to be useful for a few years. We're asking partners to collect data that they can't even necessarily use, but this takes a lot of time. It needs to be resourced if it wants to be done well and resourced in terms of money and in terms of knowledge and in terms of people.

(Focus Group Participant, Middle Manager Education)

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4.5 Sustainability in Community Education Partnerships

Findings and key learning

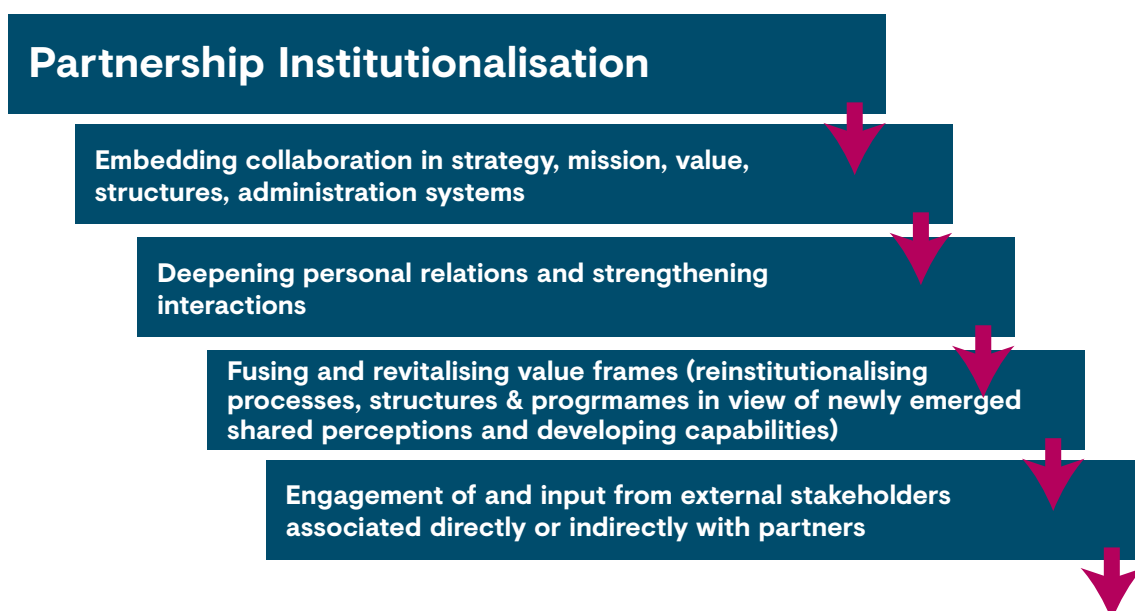
Mutually beneficial relationships are a key factor in the success and sustainability of partnership working. Funding, an evidenced based approach and organisational learning and improvement are also closely linked to partnership sustainability.

Introduction

Sustainability in partnership working emerges consistently as a theme in the research literature, and is closely related with the success factors of adequate and committed resources, shared ownership, transparent and equitable governance, monitoring and evaluation and, organisational learning and improvement (Ni Chorcora, Bray and Banks, 2023; Mu et al., 2023; Plummer et al., 2021; Wiggins, Anastasiou and Cox, 2021; Barkat, 2019; Drahota et al., 2016; Horton, Prain and Thiele, 2009; Clifford et al., 2008). The importance of sustainable funding to the overall sustainability of the partnership, and the inherent role of evaluation was highlighted (Hamzeh et al., 2019; Horton, Prain and Thiele, 2009). Drahota et al. (2016) noted in their systematic review of 50 research studies of community academic partnerships that while only 57.4% reported any details on the duration of their partnership, 27.8% reported that their partnership lasted between one and three years, 20.4% between four and six years, and 9.3% between seven and 10 years.

According to the stages of partnership working proposed by Austin and Seitanidi (2012b) and detailed in Table 2.1, sustainability relates to the “partnership institutionalisation” stage where “its structures, processes and programmes are accepted by the partner organisations and their constituents and embedded within the existing strategy, values, structures, and administrative systems of the organisations” (p939). Fuller detail is set out in Figure 4.12 below.

Figure 4.12 Partnership Institutionalization Process (Austin and Seitanidi, 2012b p942)



At this stage, they note that “partners are able to speak the ‘same language’ and embark in co-creation that may produce innovative products, services and skills. This is a manifestation of the iterative and accumulating generation of interaction value that can also progress to synergistic value” (p940) where greater social innovation and change is achieved by the partners together than separately.

Analysis of the data collated through focus groups and interviews with professionals confirms the key emerges evident in the research literature on the sustainability of partnerships. Some participants reported organisational partnerships that have sustained for 20 -30 years. Participants identified mutually beneficial relationships as core to sustainability alongside funding, evaluation and organisational buy-in. It was also noted that systemic societal issues impact the sustainability and success of local partnerships. These mutually beneficial relationships developed and deepened around a commitment to a shared vision and outcomes were identified as the most significant factor in the sustainability of partnerships, across the range of sectors represented by the research participants.

“

I think the most sustainable ones are where the relationship is beyond the partnership element of it beyond, the formal element of it, where it's progressed to a point where you can pick up the phone and say, how are you approaching this or how are you doing? I really think that's the thing that makes it sustainable.

It moves the partnership from being something that needs to be very regulated into something that's much more natural and I think that will only happen when there's equal commitment to it, when it's mutually advantageous and when there's a lot of trust built up over time.

(Focus Group Participant, Senior Manager Education)

”

Participants identified that evaluation, despite inherent challenges and limitations with data was important to secure ongoing funding.

“

There is an emphasis on evaluation ...and the funding structures are such that you have to provide the evidence to show why this works and why it needs more funding.

(Focus Group Participant: Senior Manager Health and Social Care)

”

Evidence based approach

The importance of adopting an evidence-based approach to partnership working is highlighted in the research literature concerned with partnerships, and the specific literature concerned with partnerships aimed at widening participation in higher education (NiChorcora, Bray and Banks, 2023; Plummer et al., 2021; Barkat, 2019; Gorard et al., 2006).

This approach supports the creation, dissemination and transfer of knowledge as well as the building of capacity, contributing to organisational learning and improvement in partnerships. This may be within higher education institutions with internal partnerships across departments (Parkes et al., 2014) or between higher education institutions and community partners (Mu et al., 2023; Drahota et al., 2016). “Sustained university–community relationships must be grounded in meaningful research partnerships. Outreach interventions are often practitioner led, or else organised by siloed access or widening participation departments within universities. Internal collaboration is needed within universities to utilise the expertise of research academics as well as on-the-ground experience of widening participation and school practitioners. Furthermore, more detailed information on interventions and resources would be welcomed..... [and] would be of great benefit to both researchers and practitioners. This would enable practitioners to implement effective interventions in a timely manner as well as form widening participation communities of practice around the world. This would also support researchers to replicate interventions in different contexts and countries” (Barnes et al., 2009 cited in Ni Chorcora, Bray and Banks, 2023 p15). The Trinity Access Programme (TAP) is premised on an evidence-based approach that sees schools engaged as ‘Leader Schools’ commit to participating in longitudinal research (Tangney et al., 2022). Evaluation is one of four strategic themes alongside outreach, admissions and progression, identified within the most recently published strategic plan, “2020 Vision- The Trinity Access Programmes Strategic Plan to 2020” (Trinity College Dublin, 2013). This states “TAP will continue to refine programme evaluation systems, to question assumptions in our practice and to continually learn from each other, colleagues across College and national and international networks” (p16). It includes actions to “engage in continual collaborative research and disseminate outcomes”, as well as to “deepen our evidence-based approach through the development of a learning philosophy, and associated annual plan to ensure that best use is made of evaluation data” (Trinity College Dublin, 2013 p16).

Two participants working in higher education institutions, who took part in focus groups and interview as part of this research, acknowledged the need to engage researchers and academics in widening participation programmes to support organisational learning and learning through research, publication and knowledge transfer. One participant shared their experience of working in this manner.

“

We have a number of academics who are interested in publishing and doing kind of more in depth research and so we would have developed some partnerships with [universities departments] because they're the kind of they're the people are interested in similar kinds of data and they would give us advice on how to collect the data in such a way that it would be useful to them, but also useful to us for a longitudinal studies and things like that.

That's possible, but it's only possible because we have our own dedicated research staff. We have relied heavily on philanthropy to enable us to do that because the academics themselves, they're not going to create the research infrastructure and the partnerships with schools and all that stuff and then go out and collect the information. They're very happy to work with us on that, but they don't have the resources and time to do that. We produce more data than we can look at so we're getting people who have the expertise and networks to be able to analyze the data, but also put it out there. We're getting a huge amount of expertise and kind of like people power in that, and I suppose they're getting the data collection infrastructure that is unique and readily accessible.

(Focus Group Participant, Middle Manager Education)

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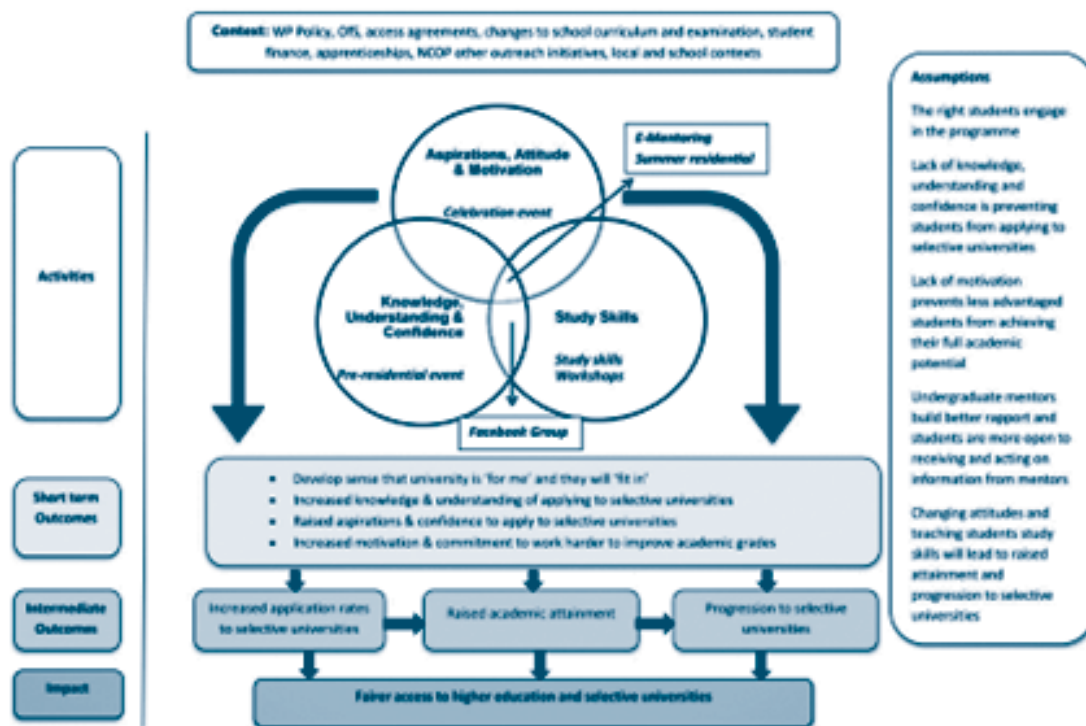
Limited evaluation

The dearth of evaluation of partnership working across sectors and disciplines is highlighted and discussed in Chapter 2. A number of robust research reviews confirm this applies to partnerships concerned with widening participation (NiChorcora, Bray and Banks, 2023; Wanti et al., 2022; Renbarger and Long, 2019; See at al., 2012) as well as community academic partnerships (Drahota et al., 2016). This limits the capture and dissemination of learning to inform partnership working and processes for sustainability.

While acknowledging the complexity and challenge in attributing causality to widening participation activities in the short term, Barkat (2019) considers that “despite the significant investment in outreach activities and the important role they play in widening participation in higher education, little is known of their impact and what works and why, due to the lack of rigorous evaluation. There is a dearth of research on the evaluation of widening participation interventions and on the whole, what exists has been limited to gathering feedback and using before and after intervention questionnaires to assess change. Few evaluation studies have gone further to track students into higher education to ascertain their progression and identify comparison groups to assess impact” (p1164).

Seeking to address this gap, a Theory of Change Framework approach described below in Figures 4.13 and 4.14 was used in evaluating the Academic Enrichment Programme at the University of Birmingham. This approach enabled the programme’s contribution to observed outcomes to be investigated and is also being promoted across higher education in England including by the Office for Students.⁵²

Figure 4.13 Theory of Change for Academic Enrichment Programme, University of Birmingham (Barkat, 2010)



52 <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/5447939d-0edc-4813-956d-b8502f65bc23/raising-attainment-targets.pdf>.

Figure 4.14 Using Theory of Change to evaluate the Impact of the Academic Enrichment Programme (Barkat, 2019 p1174)

Theoretical proposition	Assumptions	Research questions	Data required
Supporting students around aspirations, attitudes and motivation; developing knowledge, understanding and confidence; and study skills will increase their knowledge, aspirations and motivation to apply to selective universities	Lack of knowledge, understanding and confidence is preventing disadvantaged students from applying to selective universities Universities are best placed to raise aspirations and knowledge about higher education and motivate students to go to university	Did the programme engage the right students? Are the right activities delivered? Are they effective? Did the programme have an impact on students' knowledge, attitudes and motivation to study at selective universities? Do students apply to selective universities?	Monitoring data Extent and quality of activities delivered Extent to which participants demonstrated increased knowledge, understanding and confidence Applications to selective universities
This will motivate students to work harder to achieve the required grades to go to a selective university	Lack of motivation prevents disadvantaged students from achieving their full academic potential	Did the programme have an impact on students' attainment?	Extent to which participants increased students' motivation to improve attainment Attainment data
Higher attainment will lead to more disadvantaged students progressing to selective universities	Low attainment prevents disadvantaged students from progressing to selective universities	Did the programme have an impact on students' progression to selective universities?	Progression to HE data

Barkat (2019) notes that few studies meet the highest level of the Standards of Evaluation Practice⁵³ issued by The Office for Fair Access (OFFA) in England, as presented in Figure 4.15 below. These standards are a resource that supports higher education institutions in evaluating their widening access programmes and development of evidenced based practice.

Figure 4.15 OFFA Standards of Evaluation Practice (Barkat, 2019 p1164)

	Description	Evidence	Claims you can make
Type 1: Narrative	The impact evaluation provides a narrative or a coherent theory of change to motivate its selection of activities in the context of a coherent strategy	Evidence of impact elsewhere and/or in the research literature on access and participation activity effectiveness or from your existing evaluation results	We have a coherent explanation of what we do and why Our claims are research-based
Type 2: Empirical Enquiry	The impact evaluation collects data on impact and reports evidence that those receiving an intervention have better outcomes, though does not establish any direct causal effect	Quantitative and/or qualitative evidence of a pre/post intervention change or a difference compared to what might otherwise have happened	We can demonstrate that our interventions are associated with beneficial results.
Type 3: Causality	The impact evaluation methodology provides evidence of a causal effect of an intervention	Quantitative and/or qualitative evidence of a pre/post treatment change on participants relative to an appropriate control or comparison group who did not take part in the intervention	We believe our intervention causes improvement and can demonstrate the difference using a control or comparison group

53 <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/standards-of-evidence-and-evaluating-impact-of-outreach/>

In addition to a dearth of longitudinal outcome and impact evaluation, others have identified limitations regarding the use of aggregated data that prevents analysis across subgroups of students to inform the tailoring and targeting of programmes (Renbarger and Long, 2019; Nagda et al., 1998). Moreover, the gap in reporting widening participation programme and context implementation processes and mechanisms prevents analysis of their impact on programme outcomes and limits understanding of how programmes and their delivery in practice can be tweaked to maximise their impact (Barkat, 2019; Renbarger and Long, 2019; See, Gorard and Togerson, 2012).

Effective use of monitoring data

Devaney et al (2021 p82) emphasise the importance of monitoring and reporting to the visibility and sustainability of inter-agency partnership working. “Monitoring and reporting can help to demonstrate accountability and commitment to stakeholders as well as show that resources have been allocated, used wisely and resulted in the desired processes and subsequent outcomes”. In their recent systematic review of 18 international research studies on widening participation outreach programmes for 12–18-year-olds, Ni Chorca, Bray and Banks (2023, see Table 2.1 for fuller detail) identify a significant gap in the effective use of administrative programme data for monitoring, evaluation, learning and improvement. This limits the partnership’s opportunity to learn and develop their capacity for sustainability.

They also highlight issues with the quality as well as availability and access to this type of data across partnerships and call for government policy to establish a centralised system for data sharing to facilitate children’s progression through the education system to be tracked and used as a source of learning. This is not a new issue (Barkat, 2019; Harrison et al., 2018) and was documented by Gorard et al (2006) in their research review for HEFCE in England where they noted that “institutions and widening participation partnerships generally have poor tracking data and are often unable to assess the impact of their interventions” (Woodrow et al. 2002, cited in Gorard et al, 2006 p85). Brady, Gilligan and Nic Fhlannachadha (2019) highlight that this issue is significantly worse for care experienced young people accessing higher education in Ireland. The limitations of the current system mean that monitoring data tracks only whether they have received an offer and whether they have accepted a place in higher education. Data is not captured on whether they have registered for, started or completed their course, rendering it impossible to understand their progression journey and outcome in higher education.

Gaps in the effective use of administrative monitoring data were also identified community academic partnerships and other partnerships outside of higher education (Plummer et al., 2021; DRCD, 2019). In their survey research with 27 higher education institutions and 44 community partners in Canada, Plummer et al. (2019) found that 26%, one quarter of respondents reported that their partnerships were not monitored or evaluated while 52% reported this took place sometimes. Just 41% reported that their partnerships were tracked while the remaining 59% reported this took place sometimes. Interviews with stakeholders as part of the review of LCDCs in the Republic of Ireland recorded an expressed need for more guidance and support with evaluation, monitoring

and performance management (DRCD, 2019). “The need to evaluate the effectiveness of the LCDC and the Local Economic Community Plan (LECP) was also a concern for respondents. There is a lack of consistency in arrangements to support monitoring and evaluation of LECPs” (DRCD, 2019 p27).

These themes emerged consistently in the primary data collection with professionals in focus groups and interviews. Participants discussed the pervasive challenges in capturing the impact of their partnership work and questioned the limitations and reductive nature of collating numerical data that does not capture the client’s story, the learner’s journey nor the ripple effects of programmes, and noted concerns about the integrity and availability of administrative monitoring data to support organisational learning and improvement. Participants identified the need for a central resource to support evaluation and the need to define and measure success using a learner centered approach that went beyond “bums in seats in higher education”.

“

Are you doing what you said you’d do with the money and the sense was the accountability, but the sense was always that the numbers which were very basic, the data that was being requested don’t tell the story or ..that was the piece that was focused on primarily. The story is all there in the report, but the focus seems to be kind of primarily on the numbers. You know, you said you were going to deliver 400 extra students, where are they?

(Interviewee: Middle Manager Education)

”

“

But how we can measure the impact of what we do on that person’s decision is really difficult, but it is something that we plan to focus on and get more guidance on and training on it and how to make our programmes more measurable and evidence based and to have outcomes that we want to meet.

(Focus Group Participant: Middle Manager Education)

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Partnerships to promote joined up working within higher education institutions.

Knowledge management of partnerships

Plummer et al. (2021) found that community academic partnerships were led and managed by a range of personnel across universities that included senior administrators (6%), staff (33%), faculty (28%) or by a combination of faculty, students and staff (33%). Furthermore, two in five (61%) reported that there were more than 30 community higher education partnerships at their institution.

The volume and breadth of partnerships highlighted in this research suggest the need for co-ordination and effective knowledge management around partnerships within higher education institutions. Butterworth and Palermo (2008) in their published case study of developing and embedding partnership working at Deakin University Australia, concluded that “the management and coordination of information across universities need action if universities are to deliver effective partnerships..... Some kind of central coordinating mechanism and relational database, with an interactive user-interface, could be very helpful to enable university staff to enter details of new or existing partnerships, and obtain real-time guidance about protocol” (p26). Horton, Prain and Thiele (2009) warn of knowledge loss, highlighting that “much of the knowledge that is accumulated on partnerships remains tacit – in the minds of partnership practitioners. Such knowledge of partnership processes, outputs and outcomes needs to be converted into explicit knowledge that is easily accessible” (p99). In a similar vein, from their research on collaborative networks, Long, Cunnigham and Braithwaite (2013 p11) “stress the importance of knowing who know what... in order to maximise the use of in-house intellectual capital” and highlight research on organisational memory theory that emphasised the “importance of storing and being able to retrieve knowledge acquired earlier or brought in by network members. Without an adequate process for this retrieval, the knowledge remains locked away and cannot be integrated”. Knowledge management is closely associated with organisational learning and performance (Mahdinezhad et al., 2018). Rehman et al. (2021) reported from survey research with 255 faculty staff across four universities in Pakistan that knowledge management practices including knowledge acquisition, knowledge documentation, knowledge creation, and knowledge application had a statistically significant and positive influence on organisational learning. Knowledge transfer was found to have a positive but non-significant influence.

The focus groups and interviews conducted with professionals across a range of partnership types, structures and sectors as part of this research also highlighted the need for a strategic approach to knowledge management. This relates to the high volume of partnerships being managed by organisations, the levels of job insecurity and associated staff turnover within community organisations and widening participation projects, and the dearth of internal knowledge management processes and structures reported by focus group and interview participants.

Internal partnerships to develop a culture that promotes a sense of belonging in all students.

Research concerned with attrition and the progression of underrepresented students in higher education has identified a growing need for higher education institutions to adopt a joined-up, integrated and whole organisation approach to widening participation (Wanti et al., 2022; Parkes et al., 2014; Macqueen, Southgate and Scevak, 2023). Parkes et al. (2014 p7) note that “collaborative provision involving partnerships between different groups has the potential to bring together previously fragmented aspects of an institution to enhance and offer a holistic and less contradictory student experience. This also allows students to see an integrated institution where different aspects of provision work to complement one another, thus creating a whole educational experience”.

This approach should involve all staff (Hains and Hains, 2023; Macqueen, Southgate and Scevak, 2023) and seek to address the cultural capital gap for underrepresented students and the structural and institutional barriers that challenge their progression once in higher education (Nagda et al., 1998). According to Thomas (2012), this will help foster a sense of belonging that promotes engagement with their course and institution. In their 2006 review of barriers to participation in higher education in England for HEFCE, Gorard et al., (2006 p83) documented that “some research indicates the need for institutional development to improve current provision to better meet the needs of students from under-represented groups, and a more limited body of research calls for more fundamental change in all sites of higher education learning, including the further education sector and community settings. The culture, ethos and values of the institution can either reinforce existing social inequalities or oppose them. There is considerable variation between institutions in the acceptance of nontraditional qualifications. Staff from visibly under-represented groups might act as role models for students from these communities. There is a lack of staff-related activities to support widening participation, and a lack of staff awareness about the needs of disabled students in particular. Structural flexibility enables students to fit studying around other responsibilities. Changes include ICT and distance learning, off-campus delivery, part-time study, timetabling, changing programmes, and extended academic year”. Many of these themes were reiterated in a systematic review of 33 international studies concerned with access and equity in higher education published more recently, in 2022. This documented the importance of university support that includes infrastructure (teaching and learning strategies, curriculum) and accommodation alongside a range of supportive programmes, supportive peers and teachers (Wanti et al., 2022). This review highlighted the need for teaching and learning strategies to acknowledge that underrepresented groups are not the same as other students and the limitations of adopting a one size fits all approach. There is a need to adapt the curriculum to “acknowledge the different understandings of the worldnot just a language issue but also a cultural issue” (Thomas, 2012 cited in Wanti et al., 2012 p289). There is also a need to adapt the approach to teaching and learning. Macqueen, Southgate and Scevak, (2023) reported

from focus group research with university staff working across academic and student services roles that underrepresented students are managing a range of complex issues while studying. “For some students, the term ‘difficulties’ is grossly inadequate. Some students are experiencing extreme hardship, related to finances, carer responsibilities and other life situations” (p362). This research concluded to need to provide training and support to staff to enable them to meet students’ learning and support needs.

Two students who took part in interviews as part of the learner voice element of this research noted a lack of awareness of access support services provided by their institution.

“

I wasn't sure about what it does, so I was I didn't. I can't remember accessing it at any point because you know it's not something that you know what you need to do.

(Current Student)

”

“

I didn't actually know that there was any other supports. To be honest, I kind of was only aware of the counsellor and then I was speaking at a career day event and one of the access officers came up to talk to me and that was only in February of this year. So up until that point, I didn't even know there was an access service or what the access service is.

(Current Student)

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This highlights the need to publicise these services to all students, so that this reaches those who choose not to self- identify as an access student.

The Equality in Higher Education Statistical Reports 2023 in the UK asserts that there is also a need to adapt assessment in higher education. New data highlights that the ethnicity degree awarding gap i.e., the difference in the proportion of white UK students and Black Asian and minority ethnic students being awarded a first class or 2:1 degree, has widened for the first time in 10 years. Adjustment for post pandemic grade deflation shows that this was experienced more severely by students from Black Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds. This data shows that these students performed less favourably with the return to more formal assessment methods post COVID, which “tap into parts of the student experience which we already know are more common amongst among white students...e.g., being familiar with exam settings, feeling confident to access support from staff, trusting that you will perform well”. Moreover, this research also cited national student survey data which found that students from ethnic minority backgrounds ... “were disproportionately represented amongst those who did not feel they could express their ideas, opinions and beliefs on campus... And those who were less convinced about the inclusivity of their campus and their curricula” (Aldercotte, 2023 p5).

Analysis of the qualitative data collected in this research, though focus groups and interviews with professionals across a range of partnerships, highlighted the need for a joined-up approach and internal partnerships within higher education institutions to promote access and widen participation for underrepresented students.

“

We became aware that the university was doing lots and lots of work in this space but none of us could see each other's work because we were all doing it in silos.

(Interviewee: Middle Manager Education)

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“

If we're really serious about widening participation, then we all need to be involved in it and I wouldn't say just recruitment, admission and participations, ...partnerships. You have to have a champion for it in the faculties as well because there is, as I mentioned at the outset, you they have to see what the win is for them because you need that piece of the puzzle as well, because if you don't have them on board from the start ... looking at how they can interact, what they can do because anybody that comes through a non-traditional route - there are other things that that concern them at particular times and we need to be aware of that. So, I think it's three way. I think it's access. It's partnerships and it's faculty.

(Interviewee: Senior Manager Education)

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5.0 Key learning and recommendations

Widening participation for underrepresented students continues to be a policy priority in Ireland and internationally. Review of the relevant policy and research literature has confirmed the complexity of this issue with barriers to engagement and progression being closely linked to systemic and socio-cultural determinants.

This research has reviewed approaches and models of partnership working to inform current and future partnership work as part of TU Dublin PATH 3 programme. This included a comprehensive review of published national and international research and qualitative focus groups and interviews with 25 professionals and seven learners.

Key learning and recommendations

Models

Very few theoretical models have been developed and evaluated in relation to widening participation partnerships. Adopting ‘a model’ may not be appropriate to the nuanced nature of partnership working in widening participation. A framework that provides flexibility and adaptability to various contexts may be more appropriate to support the development of consistent good practice while promoting innovation.

Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions:

- » Define what is meant by the concept and ethos of partnership working for widening participation activity. Ensure it is closely aligned with and linked into the wider institutional approach to partnerships.
- » Co-develop, with staff and stakeholders from community organisations, a set of principles to guide partnerships with the community sector. Develop further into a framework that clarifies key activities, success measures, programme management and funding, monitoring and reporting and quality assurance arrangements.
- » Assess how various models can add value to current practice.
 - o A collaborative continuum model acknowledges the evolving nature and the levels and stages of partnership working. This can be used as a guide in developing sustainable partnerships that deliver social change/good.
 - o A Theory of Change model can add value in documenting partnerships: inputs, activities, intermediate and longer-term outcomes. This can support evaluation, measuring the contribution of widening participation activities to outcomes while acknowledging the complexity.
 - o A social change community development model can inform the concept and principles of partnership working with community organisations.

These models will also facilitate engagement with the community sector; co-design, co-creation and co-delivery, identified as significant for success. Evaluate to capture these processes to inform learning and improvement.

Structures to support effective partnerships.

There exists a range of structures and processes that support partnerships for success and sustainability. This research highlighted mutually beneficial relationships as more important than structures. Structures add value in ensuring good governance, promoting consistent good practice across partnerships, and driving organisational learning and improvement. Their use should be adapted and tailored to the context of specific partnerships.

Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions:

- » Establish structures and processes that facilitate clear decision-making, transparent communication, and effective knowledge transfer for widening participation activity. Ensure these are proportionate to the activity and balance governance requirements with innovation and the infrastructure in community organisations. Align these structures and processes closely with, and link to wider institutional structures and processes around partnerships.
- » Assess how structures and processes can add value to current practice.
 - o Steering groups and subgroups provide a practical way to ensure strategic and operational issues can be progressed. Ensure community organisations and underrepresented groups of learners are appropriately represented and their engagement is facilitated e.g., timing of groups, funding.
 - o Lead the development of a widening participation strategy that engages staff from across the institution e.g., faculty/academia, student support, access services to create a joined up institutional approach to widening participation that is aligned to the EDI strategy. This process should include internal structures (e.g., common budget, shared staff posts, cross-directorate project teams) that will enable the development of a joined-up evidence-based approach to widening participation.
 - o Establish knowledge management structures and processes to support partnerships across the institution. These will promote the development of consistent practice and a corporate identity, support knowledge transfer, and leverage learning and improvement.
- » Develop resources and templates to support staff through the process and stages of building, deepening and sustaining a partnership.
 - o Prioritise and invest at the early stages of partnership formation to provide sufficient time to build relationships, clarify roles and expectations, explore shared goals and sustainability, and identify how the partnership can be mutually beneficial. This should include adequate funding for staff from both the institution and from community organisations.
 - o Use a partnership agreement that is appropriate to the context to formalise the relationship.

Building and maintaining relationships in partnership work.

Good relationships premised on trust and integrity are core to successful and sustainable partnerships. This includes relationships with community organisations, other education partners (schools, FET), underrepresented groups, internal staff working in faculty/academia and other partnership roles, and learners. Relationships require significant investment of resources and time to engage underrepresented groups in widening participation activity. This research confirmed these learners are managing significant issues and barriers. Tailored support is important to ensure they progress in higher education. Community organisations play a key brokering role and should be resourced to do this.

Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions:

- » Make effective use of meetings to facilitate relationship building, two-way communication, and ongoing review and learning. Ensure the discussion is relevant to the information needs of community organisations and underrepresented groups.
- » Adopt an open and honest approach to communication that welcomes diverse perspectives and manages conflict.
- » Establish knowledge transfer processes (e.g., practice sharing networks, communities of practice, newsletters, blogs, business intelligence learning events) that promote organisational learning about partnership working and increase awareness and visibility of this work across the institution.
- » Formalise and fund partnerships with community organisations to broker and manage relationships with underrepresented groups. This will help to ensure that widening participation activities address identified gaps and expressed needs and are designed to take account of the cultural nuances and behavioural mechanisms relevant to underrepresented groups.
- » Scope the potential to partner with community education and further education and training (FET) on collaborative/linked provision. The wraparound support provided in these contexts has been identified as important to learner retention and progression in higher education. This should complement the important support services provided within higher education. Not all learners interviewed as part of this research were aware of available support. Further publicity of these services is required to raise awareness.
- » Acknowledge and resource the important role played by faculty/academia in widening participation; relationships with students, adaptations to teaching, learning and assessment, and curriculum development. Raise their awareness through training on the needs of underrepresented learners prioritised in the National Access Plan.
- » Engage the voice of underrepresented learners meaningfully in decision making, designing and delivery of widening participation work across the institution.

Resourcing frameworks and staff skills to support partnership working.

Adequate resourcing of staff time and capacity is needed across higher education institutions and community organisations to establish and nurture partnerships. Short-term funding cycles and narrow funding streams limit the development of a strategic approach to partnerships aimed at widening participation. Job insecurity results in a loss of tacit knowledge and expertise. This prevents the deepening of relationships and work of the partnership.

Staff engaged in partnership working require training to develop skills in communication, participation and engagement, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion and trauma informed practices, and in the management and use of data for learning and improvement.

Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions:

- » Advocate for a more strategic approach to funding from the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and the Higher Education Authority, that provides greater flexibility in how funding can be used.
- » Secure additional funding through new funding streams from philanthropic sources. Additional funding is required to cover and deepen work with the broad range of priority groups identified in the National Access Plan. Critical costs not currently funded include community partners time in forming the partnership, early intervention approaches that provide early and seamless support to children from primary school through their higher education journey, and incentives for underrepresented groups to engage in partnership working.
- » Secure core institutional funding for partnership working aimed at widening participation to meet institutional requirements in relation to the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty and United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4.

- » Develop comprehensive training on partnership working for all staff across the institution that aims to increase knowledge, awareness and skills in partnership working in different contexts. This evidence review is a resource that can be used to inform the content of training. Training should be available online and incorporated into induction and professional development provided by the institution to all staff members. It should be developed in a modular way so access can be tailored to staff roles and types of partnership activity. It can also be made available to community organisations to build their capacity. The training should include:
 - o Concepts and definition of partnership working.
 - o Useful models, structures and processes adopted by the institution.
 - o Types of partnerships; widening participation, industry, research.
 - o Skills in empathy, communication, negotiation, inclusive engagement process with underrepresented groups, conflict management, data management, evaluation and business intelligence, knowledge exchange, trauma informed approach to education.
 - o Embedding Equity, Diversity and inclusion practices across higher education including curriculum design and delivery, mentoring and assessment practices.
 - o Awareness of issues experienced by priority groups identified in the National Access Plan.

Sustainability in Community Education Partnerships

Mutually beneficial relationships are a key factor in the success and sustainability of partnership working. Funding, an evidenced based approach, and organisational learning and improvement are also closely linked to partnership sustainability.

Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions:

- » Undertake a strategic project that aligns partnership activity around widening participation with all other partnership work across the institution. This should scope and formalise links with ongoing institutional work in Equity, Diversity and Inclusion.
- » Build the mutually beneficial internal partnerships needed to foster the development of an evidenced based approach to widening participation activity e.g., collation and sharing of data, research and evaluation, and publication and knowledge transfer.
- » Assess how a Theory of Change approach can add value to programme evaluation. This will seek to measure the contribution to outcomes within the complex context that widening participation programmes are delivered.
- » Build the data infrastructure and capability to collect, evaluate, share and use data for learning and improvement.

This research is timely. National Census 2022 data has confirmed that society in Ireland is more diverse, and that the gap between Ireland's most disadvantaged areas and the national average has increased. This will impact on the social and cultural barriers to higher education. Higher education institutions can play an important role in promoting access and widening participation for underrepresented groups. Learning from this research is important to inform TU Dublin's practice.

In addition to the recommendations detailed above, TU Dublin can leverage the learning from this research process in the following ways.

- o Publishing a briefing on the key learning from this research to share learning and to profile the contribution of TU Dublin in generating new evidence and learning.
- o Maximise the value of the Research Stakeholder Group established for this research project by maintaining momentum and leveraging these relationships into working groups to implement the learning.
- o Use the content and learning as a resource when developing staff training.





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Appendix 1 Key search terms for Evidence review

KEY REPORT SECTIONS Search Terms	OTHER TERMS/ PHRASES suggested in Research Literature
Community Higher Education Institution partnerships	<p>Access, retention & completion in Higher Education, widening participation, widening access, diversity, inclusion, Equality, Equity, collaboration, interagency partnerships, relationships, engagement, social mobility, support for progression, partnership networks, Community University Partnerships, transition, University community outreach, community academic partnership.</p> <p>AIM Higher Partnerships and Lifelong Learning Networks (England), Regional Access Forums (Scotland) Reaching Higher Reaching Wider Partnership and Community Consortia (Wales) Discovering Queens, Step Up To Science Ulster (Northern Ireland), Community Alliance (Australia) School Community Learning Network (Australia)</p> <p>Other Strategic Partnerships</p> <p>Strategic Social Partnerships (Scotland), Local Area Safeguarding Boards (England and Wales) SBNI (Northern Ireland) CYPSC (ROI) Local Community Development Committee (LCDC) Prevention, Partnership and family support (PPFS) and Child Family Support Network (CFSN) (Tusla)</p>
Structures: Service level agreements, governance, Consortium agreements, meeting structures	Committees, Access agreements, Community Alliance benchmarking framework, Community Connectors, progression agreements,
Building and maintaining relationships in partnership work	AIM Higher Area Coordinators
Resourcing frameworks & staff skills	Frameworks, models
Sustainability in Community Education partnerships	Evaluation, impact and sustainability

