

TU Dublin
Review of approaches
and models of
partnership working

Summary Report

A copy of the full research report is available for download at <https://www.tudublin.ie/connect/communities/access-and-outreach/research/>

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Introduction

Government commitment to promoting access to and participation in higher education

*The National Access Plan - a strategic action plan for equity of access, participation and success in Higher Education 2022-2028*¹ (Higher Education Authority (HEA), 2022a) is the fourth successive access plan published since 2005 by the Irish Government. This plan signals its ongoing commitment to address gaps in access and participation in higher education in Ireland. This is also reflected and evident in the functions and strategic focus of the HEA, where “equity of access” has been identified as a key theme in the Strategic Plan 2018-2022 (Government of Ireland, 2022; HEA, 2018a).

The National Access Plan acknowledges that gaps in access and participation in higher education persist for particular groups.



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).



Despite intervention and improvement, persistent gaps remain for underrepresented groups

International research confirms this is not unique to higher education in Ireland (Barkat, 2019; Geagea, 2019; Gorard et al., 2006) and that while the overall picture is one of improved participation, unequal and poorer access remains a significant issue for many learners (Ni Chorcora, Bray and Banks, 2023). For example, recent data published by the HEA (2022b) highlights that 10% of students in the 2020/21 academic year were classified as disadvantaged, and fewer of these students, 13%, were undertaking postgraduate study compared to 24% of students classified as affluent. In addition, data from the Equal Access Survey² of first year undergraduate students in 2022 shows that 17.8%³ of those who completed the survey, 6,035 students, reported having a disability and 10.2% of these also reported being from a disadvantaged area. Research indicates that these learners 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).

¹ <https://hea.ie/policy/access-policy/national-access-plan-2022-2028/>

² 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). 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/student-disability-data-2023/appendix-eas-disability-2023/>

³ A decrease from 18.1% in 2020/21 first year student group.

This was confirmed in an analysis of non-progression⁴ among full-time 1st year undergraduate new entrants in 2014: the non-progression rate at 19% was higher among those who had attended disadvantaged (DEIS⁵) schools than the average of 14% across all school types and at 10% among those who had attended fee-paying schools (HEA, 2018b; 2020).

Underrepresented groups continue to face significant challenges

Current research confirms that students continue to face an array of barriers and challenges in accessing and progressing in higher education in Ireland. Often, these are experienced most severely and have the greatest negative impact on the underrepresented students identified as priority groups within the National Access Plan. This research is summarised in Figure 1 below.



⁴ Data from the HEA Student Record System database (SRS) highlights an overall non-progression rate of 9% for new entrants in 2019 and an improving trend.

⁵ Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a3c9e-extension-of-deis-to-further-schools/#about-the-deis-programme>

Figure 1 Summary of research highlighting the challenges in accessing higher education in Ireland experienced by groups of students identified in the National Access Plan

Students¹ who accessed higher education via the HEAR and DARE² routes reported **poorer mental health** “higher levels of depression and anxiety, greater likelihood of self-harm and suicidal ideation and higher absenteeism from college. **HEAR and mature³ 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., 2022 p4).

Research commissioned by the HEA found 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” (Indecon, 2021 pxvii).

Obstacles to progression to higher education reported by **students⁴ in further education** 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” as well as **fear about managing the academic workload** as well as **balancing study with work and caring responsibilities** (Sartori and Bloom, 2023 p10).

Refugees and people seeking international protection in Ireland face barriers that 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’** (Meaney Sartori and Nwanze, 2021)⁵.

Young adult carers⁶ in higher education experience **loneliness and poor mental health** and report that they **struggle to balance college work with their caring responsibilities** (Family Carers Ireland, 2023).

1 My World Survey completed by 9,935 students aged 18-65 registered at 7 universities and 5 Institutes of Technology (now Technological Universities)

2 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.

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

4 Participative and creative research with 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 2021/22.

5 Community needs analysis research using peer research and photovoice approaches to conduct in-depth interviews (40 participants) and a survey (104 respondents) in 2020.

6 National survey and 7 participatory workshops with 131 young carers (up to and including 17 years) and young adult carers (18-24 years) who help care for parents, siblings, relatives or friends who experience chronic illness, poor mental-health, disability, alcohol or substance misuse.

Those with **experience of the criminal justice system** face a range of barriers in accessing higher education that include structural (garda vetting processes getting in the way of taking up work placement opportunities), **psychological** (low self-esteem), **lack of accessible information on financial and other supports** (addiction supports) and **educational e.g., “not having their adult status and experiences understood and appreciated”** (Meaney, 2019⁷ p9).

Students from the **Traveller Community** experience a range of challenges that include **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** (Cummins et al., 2022⁸ p6-7; McGlynn, Noctor and Joyce, 2023⁹). 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 including a **lack of understanding of Traveller culture in schools**, experiencing **discriminatory and negative treatment, low teacher expectations at school**, particularly at post primary level (Quinlan, 2022¹⁰).

Disabled students consider the return to **on-campus and in-person learning** post COVID-19 **has eroded the accessibility benefits** enjoyed during lockdown. Many 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, 2023¹¹).

The educational experience of **Care Experienced students** 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).

7 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.

8 SOAR evaluation involving 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

9 Peer action research case study completed by Blanchardstown Traveller Development Group and TU Dublin involving 4 students and 2 access staff.

10 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.

11 Peer action research case study completed by Blanchardstown Traveller Development Group and TU Dublin involving 4 students and 2 access staff.

Current research on approaches and models of partnership working

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's Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH 3). A comprehensive desk review of published national and international research was undertaken alongside a series of qualitative focus groups and interviews with 25 professionals engaged in a range of partnership types, structures and sectors. Seven current and past students contributed the voice of the learner.

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, Further Education and Training (FET), underrepresented groups, internal staff working in faculty/academia and other partnership roles, and students. Relationships require significant investment of resources and time to engage underrepresented groups in widening participation activity. This research confirmed these students are managing significant barriers and challenges. 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. 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 the work of partnerships.

- » 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.

Changing Irish demographic presents new opportunities

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 (Central Statistics Office (CSO), 2023). Moreover, the Pobal HP Deprivation Index, updated with Census 2022 data has confirmed that the gap between Ireland's most disadvantaged areas and the national average has increased (Pobal 2023).

New ESRI research noted that while most people have positive attitudes towards immigrants and immigration in Ireland, a fall in positivity was recorded between June and November 2023. Positivity towards non-EU immigration fell by 6% while people's feelings that immigrants contribute a lot to Ireland fell by 5% during that time (Laurence, McGinnity and Murphy, 2024). Other research concerned specifically within Higher Education Institutions in Ireland highlighted that teaching and learning, and the curriculum fail to recognise ethnic and cultural differences for Black and Minority Ethnic students (Darby, 2000). An HEA survey of staff found that white Irish staff in higher education institutions felt they were treated more equally by students, colleagues and management than ethnic minority groups, and that ethnic minority groups may feel excluded or socially isolated (Kempny and Michael, 2022).

Higher education institutions can play an important role in addressing society's complex issues through partnership working. 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.

Learning from this research is important to inform practice in TU Dublin and other higher education institutions in meeting their legal obligation, as public bodies under Section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Act 2014, the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty to promote equality and other relevant legislation⁶ (Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC), 2019; 2023). In addition, it will inform practice to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” as set out in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015).

⁶ Employment Equality Acts 1998–2015, Equal Status Acts 2000–2018 and Disability Act 2005 (IHREC, 2023)



Widening participation programmes and PATH 3 in TU Dublin

Widening participation programmes

Approaches, programmes and activities aimed at promoting access and participation in 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; Barkat, 2019; Gorard et al., 2006; Nagda et al., 1998) and should seek to tackle differences in social and cultural capital as well as in academic attainment. A summary of research is provided in Appendix 1.

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 (Geagea, 2019). Having conducted an independent review of the existing relevant evidence in this area for the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), Gorard et al., (2006 p5) identified the following three types of barriers to access and participation to higher education⁷.

- » “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”.

PATH 3 in TU Dublin

The Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH 3) in TU Dublin is a partnership between the University and community organisations to support access to higher education for under-represented groups.

The partnership brings together different sectors, including statutory education providers and community organisations, to share knowledge and devise strategies that support equity of access to higher education. Particular focus is placed on strategies to support people from communities and groups where there has not been a strong tradition of participation in third level education.

⁷ 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.

The project is funded by the HEA⁸ under the National Access Plan: A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022-2028. PATH 3 sits within Access and Outreach in TU Dublin and is one strand of Access and Outreach activity.

Access and Outreach is part of Recruitment, Admissions and Participation in TU Dublin and operates across the three campuses. It ensures the widest possible participation in higher education of the local communities served by the University and underrepresented groups, with a particular focus on the National Access Plan and the University's Strategic Intent with regards to widening participation.

Access and Outreach comprises a suite of activities related to breaking down the barriers between higher education and communities which are historically underserved by it and providing opportunities for alternative entry routes. Close cooperation with targeted schools at primary and post primary levels and community groups are a hallmark of this activity, as well as maintaining expert levels of understanding and specific knowledge to be able to assist students from underrepresented backgrounds to access TU Dublin.

⁸ <https://hea.ie/policy/access-policy/path/>







Background rationale for this research

Partnerships – a key mechanism to promote access

Partnership working is widely regarded as a key mechanism to promote access and widen participation in higher education. This is reflected in key education policy documents including *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (Department of Education and Skills, 2011) and *Future FET: Transforming Learning - The National Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy* (SOLAS, 2020), as well as in the international research (Tangney et al., 2022; Cummins et al., 2022; Empower, 2022; Gorard et al., 2006; see also Appendix 1). Partnerships are viewed as a means to achieve more appropriate and locally responsive provision. Working in partnership presents opportunities to change 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 (Gorard et al., 2006).

Range of existing higher education partnerships - need to co-ordinate and deepen

Higher education institutions are engaged in a range of partnerships of varied type and purpose that include widening participation partnerships with schools, further education colleges, communities and community organisations (Ni Chorcora, Bray and Banks, 2023; Empower, 2022; Cummins et al., 2022; Gorard et al., 2006), research and consultancy service partnerships with business and industry (Plummer et al., 2021), as well as internal partnerships across departments and faculties of higher education institutions themselves (Tangney et al., 2022; Parkes et al., 2014).

“

Higher education institutions need to deepen the quality and intensity of their relationships with the communities and regions they serve

[*National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*. Department of Education and Skills, 2011 p77].

”

Poorly defined, measured and evaluated, gaps in evidence about effectiveness and processes

Partnership working has been defined and described in various ways, and this includes collaborative arrangements, joint ventures, networks, strategic alliances, cooperatives, alliances, coalitions and consortia but not buyer-supplier relationships, contractual or outsourcing arrangements (Wiggins, Anastasiou and Cox, 2021; see Appendix 1 for more detail). Partnerships are complex and diverse, are dynamic and develop over time (Horton, Prain and Thiele, 2009).

The lack of clarity and consistency in defining partnership working has created challenges for evaluating partnerships and has led to gaps in evidence about effectiveness and the processes of partnership working. The research summarised in Appendix 1 confirms this is true of all types of partnerships, including those specifically concerned with higher education and widening participation (Ni Chorcora, Bray and Banks, 2023; Wiggins, Anastasiou and Cox, 2021).

“

Without a definition, attribution of outcomes to partnership is difficult to establish.

[Clifford et al., 2008 p10]

”

Learning from existing evidence - benefits of and associated challenges

While gaps in evidence present a significant issue for promoting good partnership practice and for measuring progress and success through monitoring and evaluation activities, the existing evidence highlights the following benefits for widening participation in higher education.

- » Greater 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; Gorard et al., 2006)
- » Progression and reduced attrition among students from ethnic minority backgrounds (Cummins et al., 2022; See, Gorard and Torgerson 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)
- » A more integrated and cohesive higher education institution and more diverse student body with enhanced student experience (Wanti et al., 2022; Parkes et al., 2014).

The following challenges associated with partnership working also need to be managed. More detail is provided in Appendix 1.

- » Mismatches of power, of timescales, of values, and of resources (Drahota et al. 2016; Austin and Seitanidi, 2012a)
- » Gaps in structures and processes to support performance measurement (Plummer et al., 2021)
- » Availability, accessibility and use of data for learning and improvement (Ni Chorcora, Bray and Banks, 2023; Barkat, 2019; Horton, Prain and Thiele, 2009).

“

While partnerships are important to promoting access to higher education, “collaboration poses practical, organisational and cultural challenges.

[Gorard et al., 2006 p83]

”



Methods

This research involved a robust review of evidence on approaches and models of partnership working, as well as interviews and focus groups with twenty-five professionals and seven students. The research was designed to extend beyond the education sector to capture and distil lessons and transferable learning from social inclusion and community development, and health and social care partnerships.

Evidence review

The review included published national and international research articles, reports and policy documents concerned with widening participation in higher education as well as other cross sector partnerships.

These included SAOR⁹ and the Trinity Access Programme¹⁰ as well as Local Community Development Committees (LCDC¹¹), the North East Inner City Initiative (NEIC¹²) and Dublin City Community Co-operative¹³. The following health and social care partnerships were also included in the review: Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC¹⁴), Child and Family Support Networks (CFSN¹⁵) and Prevention, Partnership and Family Support (PPFS¹⁶).



9 Soarforaccess SOAR Project- an inter-institutional collaboration on Access involving the Southern Cluster of Higher Education Institutions in Ireland, <https://www.soarforaccess.ie/> [accessed 16 October 2023].

10 Trinity College Dublin Trinity Access Programmes, Trinity Teaching and Learning <https://www.tcd.ie/trinityaccess/> [accessed 16 October 2023].

11 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” (Department Rural and Community Development, 2019 p9).

12 NEIC was established in 2016, by the Irish government to oversee the long-term social and economic regeneration of Dublin's North East Inner City and involves a Programme Implementation Board and Subgroups, and a set of recommendations (Department of an Taoiseach, 2022).

13 Dublin City Community Co-op An alliance of 13 grassroots, Dublin inner city, community development organisations which have come together to ensure the development and delivery of social, economic and cultural services continues within our communities. <https://dublincitycommunitycoop.ie/about/> [accessed 16 October 2023].

14 CYPSC – purpose. 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. [accessed 16 October 2023].

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

16 Tusla's PPFS programme has the Meitheal model at its core. This 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).

Focus groups and interviews with professionals

Twenty-five professionals, 52% (13) of whom were working in the education sector, took part in three focus groups and six semi-structured interviews aimed at exploring and reflecting on experiences of partnership working.

Seven participants, 28%, were TU Dublin staff with experience of working on the PATH 3 or other partnership programmes. Overall, 88% (22) were employed in senior¹⁷ or middle manager roles. Participants reported broad and deep experience of partnership working. This included international, national and cross border partnerships, industry partnerships, consortia and cooperative models, partnerships that have sustained for 20 or more years as well as project specific partnerships such as the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy (NTRIS) and local and regional Drug and Alcohol Taskforces.

Learner Voice interviews with students

In total, seven students took part: six chose an individual interview while one chose to complete the same questions through an anonymous survey presented in MS Forms. The questions engaged participants in exploring their journey and experience of accessing higher education, in evaluating the support they received on this journey and, in making recommendations for how higher education institutions can better support students from underrepresented groups.

Overall, participants included three current and four past students who had studied a range of National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ¹⁸) Level six- nine courses. One participant reported dropping out before completing their course and five were TU Dublin students. Participants ranged in age from 18-22 years to over 40 years.

Participants reported a broad range of experience in how they had accessed higher education and the support received on their journey. This included attending a DEIS¹⁹ post-primary school, completing a FET²⁰ or university access course, and applying via the HEAR/DARE²¹ route. Figure 2 below presents details on how the participants represented the priority groups identified in the National Access Plan.

¹⁷ Director/CEO/Head of Department/ Regional Manager level

¹⁸ National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

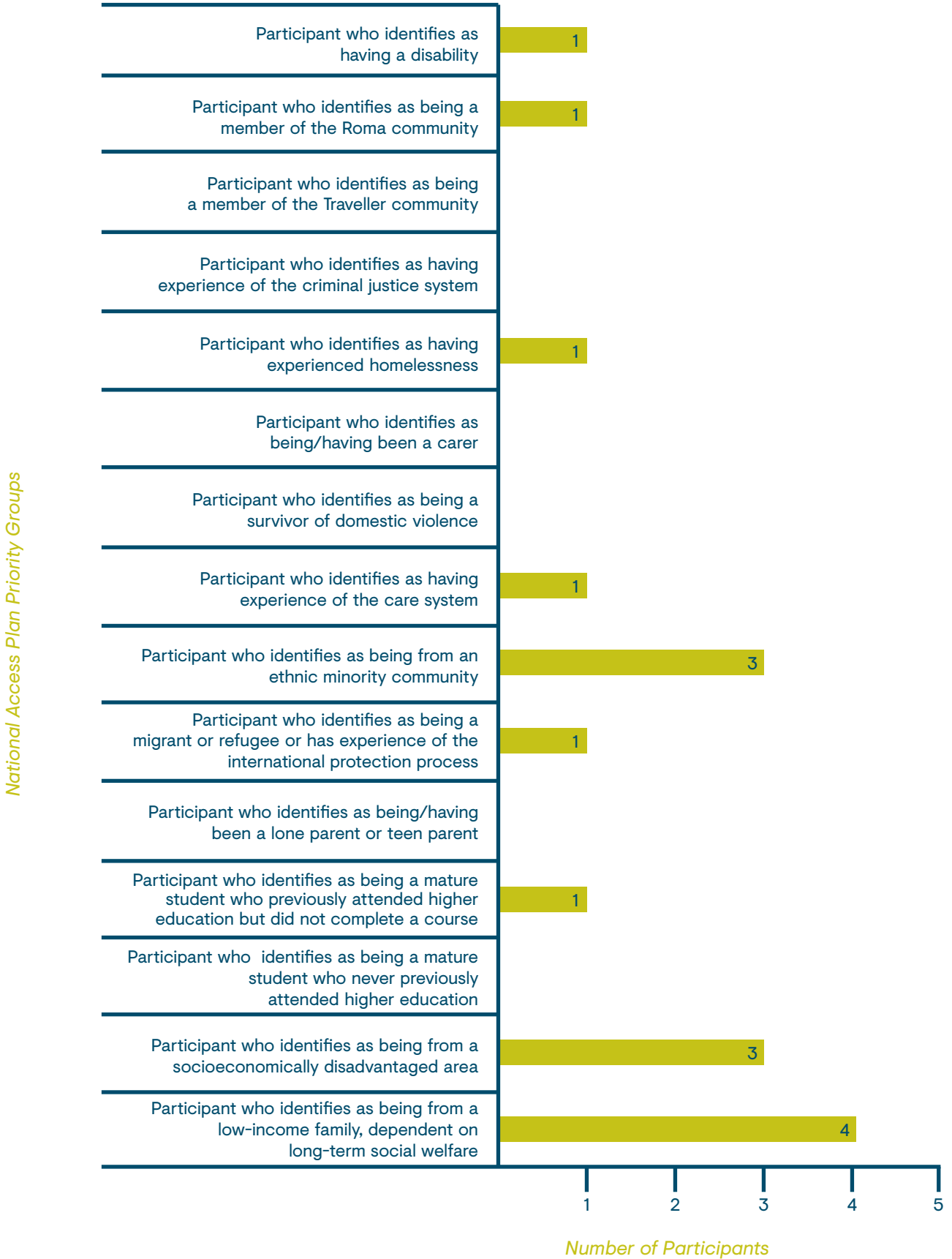
¹⁹ Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a3c9e-extension-of-deis-to-further-schools/#about-the-deis-programme>

²⁰ Further Education and Training offers a wide variety of life-long education options to anyone over 16 that includes apprenticeships, traineeships, Post Leaving Cert (PLC) courses. FET courses are provided at NFQ levels one to six.

²¹ 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.

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.

Figure 1 Learner Voice participant representation of priority groups identified in National Access Plan



Consent, confidentiality and GDPR

This research was carried out in a manner that adhered to the TU Dublin Data Protection Policy and the TU Dublin Safeguarding & Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults Policy. The written informed consent of participants was sought prior to their participation in interviews and focus groups. All data was processed, stored and reported in a way that protected their anonymity.

Strengths and limitations of the research

This research has contributed to what is known and understood about effective approaches and models of partnership that can be applied to PATH 3 to promote access to higher education in Ireland for underrepresented groups identified in the National Access Plan.

First, this research reviewed the existing international evidence about partnership working across the education, social inclusion and community development, and health and social care sectors. Secondly, it has engaged professionals working in these sectors in an Irish context, in interviews and focus groups to capture and distil transferable learning for higher education institutions, and statutory, community and voluntary organisations and partnerships. Interviews with current and past students, the Learner Voice element of the research, have highlighted the importance of Access and Outreach. However, this has also reaffirmed the ongoing challenges experienced by learners from the underrepresented groups in higher education as well as opportunities for effective partnership working to address these.

The limitations include the potential for bias in the sample of student participants. Purposive and convenience sampling may have resulted in those with more positive experiences of support and Access and Outreach volunteering to take part. In addition, the TU Dublin staff who took part in interviews and focus groups did not include representation from academic/ faculty staff.





Findings

What models can we draw on to develop effective partnerships?

Few models and a lack of operational detail to inform good practice

Very few theoretical models have been developed and evaluated in relation to partnership working including partnerships concerned with widening participation in higher education.

As a result, the research literature, including that presented in Appendix 1, contains little detail on the operational working of partnerships to help guide and formalise good practice. This lack of detail on the ‘how to’ of partnership working includes a lack of detail on structures and processes, monitoring and evaluation arrangements, and training. Similarly, interview participants across disciplines and sectors, consistently highlighted the lack of agreed good practice approaches to training, the evaluation of partnership process, outcomes and impact, and the business intelligence use of data for learning and improvement. This is a gap and area for practice development.

A model may be useful as a starting point, but flexibility and adaptability are key

Adopting ‘a model’ may not be appropriate to the nuanced nature of partnership working in widening participation where each partnership is different. 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.

“

How many of them would you have? ...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, ... 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]

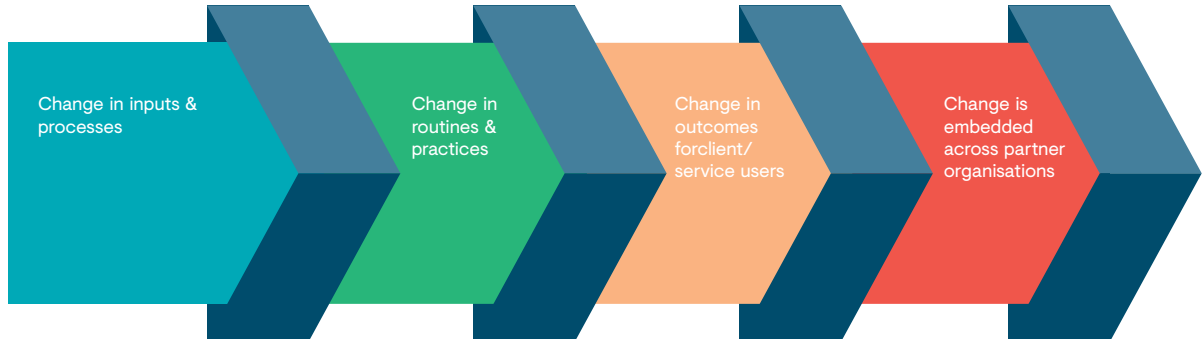
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Using a model to understand, review and promote good practice

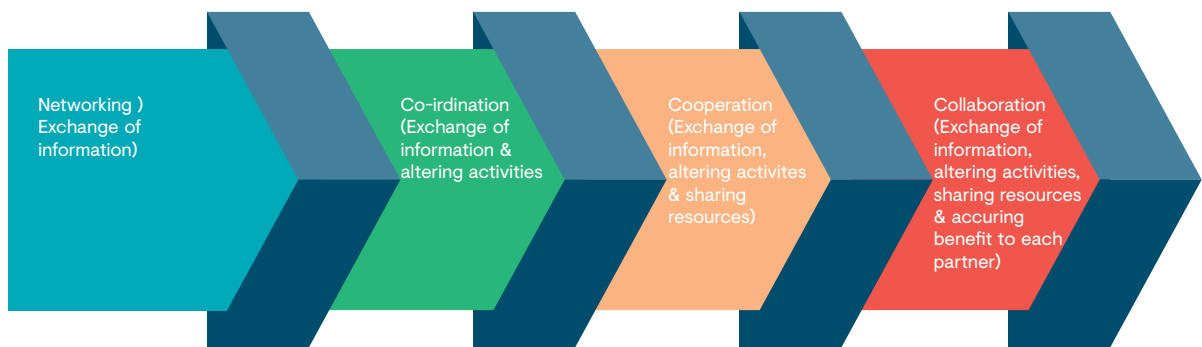
The evidence review completed as part of this project highlighted that Collaborative Continuum, Theory of Change and Social Change Community Development models and approaches have been used to review and guide partnership working across social inclusion community development, health and social care and the education sectors. Some of these were also raised in the interviews, each with strong potential to provide learning and to inform the development of good practice for partnership working concerned with widening participation in higher education.

Figure 2 Models that can inform the development of good practice partnership working for widening participation in higher education.

Stages of partnership working



Levels of partnership working



Theory of Change Format

| Inputs | Activities | Short & Intermediate Outcomes | Longer term Outcomes |
|--------|------------|-------------------------------|----------------------|
| | | | |

Collaborative Continuum

As Figure 2 shows, a Collaborative Continuum can be used to reflect the varied levels interaction/intensity of the relationship or the stages of partnership working evident over the lifecycle of a project as a partnership evolves (Devaney et al, 2021; Barnes et al, 2017). Participants who took part in the focus group and interview discussions referred to this model when describing their partnership work. One of its key strengths is its flexibility and applicability to understanding partnerships in a variety of settings and contexts, as they evolve over time.

“

The use of a continuum is important conceptually because it recognises that collaborations are dynamic and that stages are not discrete points; conceptually and in practice a collaborative relationship is multifaceted.... 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.... A continuum captures more usefully the dynamic nature and heterogeneity of evolving relationships and the corresponding value creation process.

[Austin and Seitanidi 2012a p737]

”

Using this model promotes understanding of good practice partnership working, and the journey to achieve this. It supports professionals and organisations entering into partnerships to design, develop and implement their approach and provides a means by which to review, evaluate and learn for improvement. This understanding and learning was evident in one interview where the participant spoke of 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].

”

Theory of Change

A Theory of Change, as outlined in Figure 2, maps how a programme works, how the programme inputs and activities lead to outcomes in the short, intermediate and longer term in light of the barriers and facilitating factors in the wider environment. This model has been successfully applied to understand programmes aimed at widening participation in higher education including, the Higher Education Progression Partnership (HEPP) funded by Sheffield Hallam University and the University of Sheffield (Pickering and Self, 2022 p8).

Usually, the Theory of Change is developed based on a range of stakeholders' views and information sources. The process of developing, agreeing and co-creating the Theory of Change 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. Importantly, it helps identify the key barriers and facilitating factors in the wider context of widening participation programmes. The Theory of Change also provides the basis for evaluating programme, isolating the contribution of observed changes to longer-term impact (Barkat, 2019; see Appendix 1 for more detail).

Social Change Community Development

In this research literature, references to the Social Change Community Development model include Community Based Participatory Research undertaken in and with the community to deliver programmes to benefit the community as well as Participatory Action Research which engages communities in identifying and addressing issues and creating social change (Drahota et al., 2016). This model, also raised frequently in the focus groups and interviews, is founded on social justice principles e.g., partnership in all phases of the project, building on the community's resources and strengths, providing benefits to partners and the meaningful engagement of underrepresented groups in a process that provides them with a voice and space to identify their issues and needs and to co-create solutions²². The benefits of this model for tapping into the cultural and social norms and nuances, and behavioural change mechanisms of underrepresented groups which are neither understood nor acknowledged by policy makers who design programmes was emphasised and the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy cited as an example.

“

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.

[Focus Group Participant: Senior Manager, Health and Social Care]

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This was the preferred model of those who participated in focus groups and interviews. The following key learning was highlighted through the evidence review and focus groups and interviews with participants.

- » The most sustainable partnerships were those that adopted participative democracy as opposed to representative democracy.
- » The importance of partnerships focusing on and addressing issues of real necessity identified at grassroots levels within and by communities rather than by universities (Mu et al., 2023).
- » The importance of including and measuring partnership working outcomes in any programme evaluation e.g., partnership synergy, knowledge exchange, tangible products (Drahota et al., 2016).

Other models

Review of other models mandated through legislation and government guidance e.g., Local Community Development committees (LCDCs) and Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSCs) indicates that clarity in defining the partnership, engagement processes, relationships and the tacit knowledge of those coordinating the partnership are more important in determining success than the legislative mandate or model prescribed in guidance documents (Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD), 2019; Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), 2023; Devaney et al., 2021).

What structures and processes will support effective partnerships?

There are a range of structures and processes to support partnership working that is successful and sustained over time. These can add value by ensuring good governance, by promoting consistent good practice across partnerships, and by driving organisational learning and improvement. There is a need to adapt and tailor to the local context.

Structures and processes promote good governance and the development of good practice

The evidence review and focus group and interview discussions carried out as part of this research confirm that structures and processes can promote good governance by providing clarity on purpose and decision-making. They can also facilitate communication and information sharing that drives organisational learning and improvement (Plummer et al, 2021). Table 1 below presents key structures and examples that were explored and reviewed in this research from across education, community development social inclusion, and health and social care. Key learning is highlighted to inform partnership working aimed at widening participation in higher education.

Table 1 Summary of Structures that Support Partnership Working

| 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). » Resources²³ & 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). |

²³ 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 ²⁴ | 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 ²⁵ | 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). |

²⁴ A consortium, a partnership formed by groups of organisations coming together to work towards a common goal
²⁵ “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).

Tailor and adapt structures and processes to the context of specific partnerships

While Table 1 above highlights key learning on the value of using strategic plans, annual reports, MOUs, Terms of Reference (TOR) and practice sharing networks to support partnership working, it also identifies the importance of contextual factors. These include organisational culture, local needs, and power and resource imbalances across partners. Therefore, learning from the evidence review and the focus groups and interviews, points to the need to tailor and adapt structures and processes to take account of these factors. The challenge of navigating lengthy and complex formal partnership agreement templates was acknowledged for smaller community organisations who do not have access to the same capacity or expertise as higher education institutions. There is a need for higher education institutions to acknowledge these differences, and to tailor structures and processes accordingly.

“

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 situationso they don't enjoy some of the certainties that we do as employees in the university or as those industry partners.

I think it's important 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 we are represented and we're very clear about what the implications of those type of templates and formats for community partners.

[Focus Group Participant, Senior Manager Education]

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Take time to understand partners' motivations, ethos and way of working

Investing time and resources to understand partners' ethos and ways of working, to clarify expectations and roles and to build relationships from the outset, at the stage of partnership formation and selection, is very important for building a successful partnership and for managing the risk around partnership working (see Austin and Seitanidi, 2012b in Appendix 1 for more detail).

“

And I think it's really important to sit down and have those discussions because partnership is so time consuming. .. sometimes as a larger organisation we can inadvertently approach this in a very extractive way. We want 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]

”

“

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 ... collaboration means that everybody does everything... so, we had to take time to explore that you know, workers often don't understand partnerships. Managers don't either sometimes.

[Focus Group Participant: Senior Manager, Health and Social Care]

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This clarity forms the basis of any partnership agreement, and for focus groups and interview participants, this process was viewed as more important than a partnership model. However, the challenge of resourcing this process for smaller community organisations needs to be acknowledged.

How do we build and maintain effective relationships in our partnership work?

Good relationships built on trust and integrity are core to successful and sustainable partnerships aimed at widening participation in higher education. This includes the relationships between higher education institutions and community organisations, other education partners (schools, FET), and underrepresented groups as well as the internal relationships in higher education institutions between staff working in academic and support roles and learners, and between all staff engaged in partnerships of various types.

Focus on people and relationships to build successful partnerships

The evidence review highlighted the importance of focusing on the people in partnerships (Gorard et al., 2006, see Appendix 1). This was confirmed in the interview and focus groups discussions where participants consistently identified relationships 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 organisations. 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.

[Interviewee: Senior Manager, Education]

”

Sharing information, managing and resolving conflict, open communication, demonstrating trust and mutual respect, and knowledge exchange are all key elements that require attention to build and maintain successful relationships within partnerships (Plummer at al., 2021; Drahota et al., 2016; Clifford et al., 2008).

Partnerships can support the progression of learners from underrepresented groups who manage complex issues while studying in higher education

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 International Protection Accommodation Service. 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.

[Interviewee]

”

“

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

[Interviewee]

”

“

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 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.

[Interviewee]

”

Partnerships premised on relationships between higher education institutions, schools, communities and parents address gaps in learners' social and cultural capital raising aspirations and positive expectations about higher education (Geagea, 2019). Research also shows that internal partnerships between access and outreach services, student services and support, and lecturing staff within higher education institutions are important to support students to progress and succeed when they are in higher education (Parkes et al., 2014).

“

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).

”

Staff in academic and lecturing roles have a key part to play in supporting and integrating learners from underrepresented groups. Adopting a “pedagogy of care” (Macqueen, Southgate and Scevak, 2023 p359), being approachable and willing to develop authentic relationships with learners helps integrate them by developing their connection and sense of belonging to the institution (Wanti et al., 2022; Parkes et al., 2014).

“

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

(Nagda et al., 1998 p57).

”

Wraparound support provided by partnerships with FET and community-based organisations throughout the learners' journey to and in higher education was also identified as important. Interview and focus group participants confirmed that this support needs to begin early in primary schools, taking a prevention and early intervention approach.

“

We have a huge wrap around support here for our learners, we'd meet with them on an individual basis and support them so 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.

[Focus Group Participant: Middle Manager, Social Inclusion Community Development]

”

Invest time and resources from the outset in building, nurturing and maintaining relationships with partners

Research reported by Austin and Seitanidi (2012b, see Appendix 1 for more detail) emphasises the critical importance of investing time in building and maintaining relationships with partners from the outset. Doing so at the stage of forming the partnership provides an opportunity to explore the mission, experience and linked interests of potential partners to assess strategic fit, suitability and potential for creating mutual benefit. Co-designing structures, processes and mechanisms to support partnership working during the partnership design and implementation stages helps build and deepen relationships.

While important, the interview and focus group discussions highlighted that this requires significant time and resources which is often not recognised nor covered adequately in planning and budgeting.

What helps to build and maintain effective relationships in partnerships?

- » Developing and using structures such as committees, working and/or special interest groups and other formal and informal channels of communication to enable effective communication and knowledge transfer within higher education institution partnerships (internal and external) (Parkes et al., 2014).
- » Ensuring meetings are regular, well-structured and focused on outcomes rather than operational issues. Develop an agenda that is relevant to partners and share relevant information in advance and in a timely way to support decision-making. In person meetings provide opportunities for greater interaction (DRCD, 2019; Drahota et al., 2016)
- » Providing time at meetings for open discussion to understand other perspectives, clarify understanding and misconceptions as well as opportunities for feedback and reflection to promote learning and improvement.
- » Sharing information, seeking and managing diverse perspectives and resolving conflict, communicating clearly, openly and transparently, and demonstrating mutual respect (Plummer et al., 2021; see Appendix 1).
- » Creating opportunities through networks and communities of practice, events, and newsletters to identify and share good practice. This supports professional development and organisational learning and builds the capacity of the partnership.
- » Developing structures and processes within higher education institutions to manage and transfer knowledge about all partnership working, including that concerned with widening participation. This will promote organisational learning and the development of good practice.
- » Identifying leadership champions within all partner organisations to build relationships, to promote organisational buy-in and to provide access to resources.

Community organisations broker relationships connecting higher education institutions to underrepresented learners

The critical role played by community organisations in brokering and bridging relationships between higher education institutions and learners from underrepresented groups emerged consistently in the interview and focus group discussions. Many of these groups lack trust in government led statutory and bureaucratic public sector services having experienced pervasive discrimination and exclusion.

“

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]

”

In brokering these relationships, community organisations facilitate engagement and the flow of information across partnerships as well as promoting understanding across partners, and cultural and organisational boundaries (Long, Cunnigham and Braithwaite, 2013; Empower, 2022). However, the significant costs associated with this work require adequate resourcing within widening participation programmes.

How do we adequately resource staff capacity and skill development for partnership working?

Adequate funding is critical for partnerships to work in a strategic way that has impact in the longer term

This theme emerged consistently in the evidence review and, in seven of the nine interview and focus group discussions. Participants shared examples, including those described below, of how the nature and depth of work that can be undertaken in the partnership and what can be achieved is limited by inadequate funding and funding provided in short-term cycles (Deveney et al., 2021; Plummer et al, 2021; DRCD, 2019; Drahota et al, 2016, see Appendix 1). This hampers the potential of partnerships to adopt a more meaningful strategic approach to working with underrepresented groups and to tackling systemic issues.

“

Generally, the money that comesis really, really tiny, insignificant amounts. So this is like, but we'll have 10 grand this year to do research on Travellers and I can't even hire 1/2 time person for that.

[Focus Group Participant: Middle Manager Education]

”

“

You can do outreach activities with amazing people till the cows come home.....that piece of like 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 relationships is there

[Interviewee: Middle Manager Education]

”

This also has a detrimental impact on organisational capacity and memory (Devaney et al., 2021; Barnes et al., 2017). Job insecurity results in a loss of tacit knowledge and expertise as people move on to new roles, and this prevents the deepening of relationships and of the work of the partnership.

“

What you want is ...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, ... 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]

”

The availability of staff with time and capacity to contribute to the work of the partnership and having access to administrative support also emerged as important in determining the success of the partnership.

Agree equitable and transparent distribution of funding when forming the partnership

Research suggests the importance of discussing and agreeing the nature, level, and directional flow of resources from the outset. This helps build trust and address imbalances of power among the partners (Voller et al., 2022). This is a significant issue for smaller community organisations.

“

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 partnerships, those with the most power will say this is how it needs to get done...

[Interviewee: Senior Manager Social Inclusion and Community Development]

”

Fund community organisations and underrepresented groups to engage in partnerships

Funding provided to community organisations and underrepresented groups is often inadequate to enable them to engage effectively in partnership working. This was highlighted in the research evidence as well by those who took part in interviews and focus groups (Voller et al., 2022; DRCD, 2019). Paying childcare costs or creating shared funded roles were identified as ways of resourcing underrepresented groups to engage in partnerships.

While the lack of funding for time to build and manage relationships for partnership working was identified as an issue for all, it is more significant 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....

[Focus Group Participant: Middle Manager Education]

”

Philanthropy, a funding model that enables a planned strategic approach to partnership working

This research identified a mix of resourcing models across higher education partnerships (Plummer et al., 2021; Barkat, 2019; Drahota et al., 2016; Parkes et al., 2014). However, analysis of the data from the 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 Science Foundation Ireland among others, enabled them to take a more strategic and systemic approach to partnership working. Examples from widening participation in higher education include the Academic Enrichment Programme (AEP) in the University of Birmingham, evaluated by Barkat (2019) and the Trinity Access Programme (Tangney et al., 2022).

While shared roles and secondments were identified as important in-kind models of resourcing partnership working, interview and focus group participants noted a move away from this model to a contract management one. This was viewed as having a negative impact on knowledge transfer and capacity building in the system.

In-kind benefits model needed to enable internal partnerships with lecturers and researchers

In the focus group and interview discussions, 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]

”

Build the skillset and capacity of organisations and staff to engage effectively

This research highlighted key gaps in the knowledge and skills required for working in partnership to widen participation in higher education (Ni Chorcora, Bray and Banks, 2023; Wanti et al., 2022; see Appendix 1). Moreover, formal training is rarely provided in this area. These gaps need to be addressed through formal training and the recruitment of additional expertise.

Communication skills needed to communicate with multiple stakeholders at every level of the partnership include:

- » “Skills in collaborative know how, knowledge skills and competencies, in searching as well as terminating early low potential relationships” (Austin and Seitanidi, 2012b p935).
- » Skills in brokering and maintaining relationships with partners across organisations, disciplines, sectors and cultures (Barnes et al., 2017; Long, Cunningham and Braithwaite, 2013)

- » Skills in identifying and discussing difference and conflict in understandings and 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).

Identified gaps in **participation and engagement knowledge and skills** include

- » practical ‘how to’ engage with the structures, mechanisms and processes that support partnership working (e.g., meetings and documents, budget setting, reporting) for underrepresented groups and volunteer led community organisations.
- » participative processes to engage underrepresented groups that are culturally informed and based on a participative ethos and the principles of social inclusion and community development. DRCD has published a resource²⁶ to support statutory partners in this area.

“

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]

”

This research identified the need to develop **skills and adopt the principles and practices of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)** in partnership working aimed at widening participation in higher education (Wanti et al, 2022; see Appendix 1). This includes

- » addressing deficit views of underrepresented groups that are often held. Research with academic and student support staff in an Australian university 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” (Macqueen Southgate and Scevac, 2023 p359). This also emerged as a theme in the Learner voice element in this research.

²⁶ <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/274611/a547919e-0cf5-412b-8983-f260c8ed66ed.pdf-f#page=null>

“

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 ...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]

”

- » acknowledging that underrepresented groups are not the same as other students and the limitations of adopting a one size fits all approach (Aldercotte, 2023; Gorard et al., 2006). The need to adapt the curriculum and assessment, and teaching and learning strategies to accommodate diversity and to “acknowledge the different understandings of the worldnot just a language issue but also a cultural issue” (Wanti et al., 2012 p289;) also emerged within the interview and focus group discussions with professionals and learners. There is also a need to develop an understanding among higher education staff of the different operating context and perspective of their smaller partner organisations with less developed infrastructure and capacity (Voller et al., 2022).

“

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 .. 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].

”

» employing role models from underrepresented groups.

“

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]

”

» Raising awareness of EDI and the experiences of underrepresented groups among the wider student body. Learners shared their experience of receiving discriminatory comments from other students.

“

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... 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]

”

The learner Voice element of this research also identified the need to publicise and raise awareness of available support and services to all students, so that it reaches those who choose not to self- identify to Access and Outreach services.

“

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 [at an] 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]

”

Expertise and **skills in the management and use of data for learning and improvement** are needed in widening participation partnerships. This includes the expertise to design systems and processes, and to collect, collate and make effective use of good quality administrative data. Skills gaps in these areas of data governance, data literacy and business intelligence are consistently reported in the research evidence (Ni Chorcora, Bray and Banks, 2023, see Appendix 1).

“

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 SLAs [Service Level Agreements] 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]

”

Skills to address the following gaps are needed in widening participation programmes.

- » the quality, completeness, accessibility and availability of administrative enrollment data to allow for the measurement of access and progression outcomes and programme impact. 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). Professionals who took part in the focus groups and interviews identified a need for centralised support to collate and share this data within and across partnerships.
- » the conduct of evaluation; formative evaluation to understand the contextual factors as well as the key processes and mechanisms that determine the effectiveness of programmes 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 (Barkat, 2019; Gorard et al., 2006 see Appendix 1).

What steps can we take to ensure our partnerships sustain in the longer term?

According to the research evidence, partnership sustainability is achieved when “its structures, processes and programmes are accepted by the partner organisations and their constituents and are embedded within the existing strategy, values, structures, and administrative systems of the organisations” (Austin and Seitanidi, 2012b p939; see Appendix 1 for more detail).

This research presented in Appendix 1 identifies adequate and committed resources, transparent and equitable governance, monitoring and evaluation and, organisational learning and improvement as key factors contributing to the sustainability of partnerships (Ni Chorcora, Bray and Banks, 2023; Mu et al., 2023; Plummer et al., 2021; Horton, Prain and Thiele, 2009). These have also emerged as key themes in the interviews and focus group discussions with professionals. The impact of systemic societal issues on the sustainability and success of local partnerships was also noted by these professionals.

As many of these contributing factors have been discussed elsewhere throughout this report, this section of the report will focus on the following themes which have not yet been explored.

- » Mutually beneficial relationships
- » Adopting an evidenced based approach
- » Promoting organisational learning and improvement

Ensure partnerships are built on mutually beneficial relationships

Mutually beneficial relationships developed and deepened around a commitment to a shared vision and outcomes were identified by professionals across a range of sectors, as the most significant factor in the sustainability of partnerships.

“

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 ..? I really think that's the thing that makes it sustainable. 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

[Focus Group Participant, Senior Manager Education]

”

Adopt an evidenced based approach, facilitated by internal partnerships with researchers

An evidence-based approach, built on mutually beneficial relationships between widening participation programmes and academic researchers supports the creation, dissemination and transfer of knowledge across the partnership. As discussed in the previous section of this report concerned with resourcing staff capacity and skill development for partnership working, this approach builds capacity and supports organisational learning and improvement in partnership working (Parkes et al, 2014).

“

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.

(Ni Chorcora, Bray and Banks, 2023 p15).

”

The Trinity Access Programme (TAP) is one such example. It is premised on an evidence-based approach that sees schools engaged as ‘Leader Schools’ and 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 which states that “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” (Trinity College Dublin, 2013 p16).

This approach will help address the following gaps.

- » Impact evaluation evidence - using a Theory of Change model such as that reported by Barkat (2019) in evaluating the University of Birmingham Academic Enrichment Programme (see Appendices 1 and 2 for more information) is also recommended in the research evidence. Related resources²⁷ and Standards of Evaluation Practice²⁸ have been issued by The Office for Fair Access (OFFA) in England.

²⁷ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/5447939d-0edc-4813-956d-b8502f65bc23/raising-attainment-targets.pdf>.

²⁸ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/standards-of-evidence-and-evaluating-impact-of-outreach/>

- » Use of aggregated data that limits subgroup analysis and learning to inform how widening participation programmes can be tailored and targeted to better meet the needs of underrepresented groups (Nagda et al., 1998).
- » Understanding of the processes by which widening participation programmes are implemented in various settings and contexts – this will provide learning on how their delivery in practice can be improved to make them more effective (Barkat, 2019).

Develop systems to manage partnership knowledge within higher education institutions

This research confirmed a high number of different types of partnerships are managed by various individuals across higher education institutions (Plummer et al., 2012), and points to the need for co-ordination and effective knowledge management around partnerships.

In their published case study of developing and embedding partnership working at Deakin University Australia, Butterworth and Palermo (2008) 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). Other research warns 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” (Horton, Prain and Thiele, 2009 p99).





Key learning and recommendations

What models can we draw on to develop effective partnerships?

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.
 - 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.
 - 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.
 - 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.

What structures and processes will 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.
 - 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.
 - 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.
 - 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.
 - 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.
 - Use a partnership agreement that is appropriate to the context to formalise the relationship.

How do we build and maintain effective relationships in our 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.

How do we adequately resource staff capacity and skill development for 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.

What steps can we take to ensure our partnerships sustain in the longer term?

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.



Conclusion

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. Research published by the ESRI in March this year found a fall in positivity in attitudes towards immigration in Ireland. This changing landscape will impact on the social and cultural barriers to higher education.

Higher education institutions can play an important role, by working in partnership to widen participation and promote progression among underrepresented groups in higher education. This research report presents key learning on how higher education institutions can build and sustain effective partnerships towards this important outcome.



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Appendix 1

Table: Summary of best practice research on partnership working across sectors and disciplines, including higher education.

| Research context | Research focus | Research methodology | Key learning points |
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| Ni Chorcora, Bray and Banks (2023) School of Education and Trinity Access Programme, Trinity College Dublin Ireland | Evaluating effectiveness of 18 widening participation outreach programmes for students, 12-18 years in post primary schools | 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) | <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). |

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| <p>Mu, Gordon, Xu and Cayas (2023) 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) 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 |

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| <p>Wiggins, Anastasiou and Cox (2021) 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 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 5 case studies based on 5 English speaking jurisdictions: 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. |

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| <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>Drahot, Meza, Brikho, Naaf, Estabillo, Gomez, Jnoska, Dufek, Stahmer and Aarons (2016)</p> <p>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%) |

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| <p>Austin and Seitanidi (2012a and 2012b)</p> <p>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. |
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| <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> |

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| <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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TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY DUBLIN (TU DUBLIN)

Established in January 2019, TU Dublin is Ireland's first and largest Technological University following the merger of the Dublin Institute of Technology, and the Institutes of Technology in Tallaght and Blanchardstown. TU Dublin's strategic plan was created with the three pillars of People, Planet, and Partnerships with the United Nations' Sustainable Development goal #4 'Quality education for all' as its driving force. Our vision is to 'Create a Better World Together' by engaging stakeholders - students, staff, enterprise, communities, and government - and working collaboratively for the benefit of society.



