

Community education as an enabler of Irish traveller engagement and belonging in higher education: diploma in community development practice learner case study

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine how community education outreach and campus-based programmes can promote engagement and belonging in higher education for marginalised communities, in this instance, the Irish Traveller community, who are traditionally under-represented in higher education. This paper is informed by both research and practice with collaborative community partners to provide a critical examination of learner experiences of higher education embedded in community and cultural contexts.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing on situated learning theoretical perspectives, this paper adopts an evaluative case study methodology. Data from an open-ended survey and graduate statements are presented to reflect learner perspectives and wider programme co-design and implementation considerations, with a focus on practical implications and actionable insights.

Findings – Community education approaches are essential in promoting genuine belonging and engagement in higher education, particularly for learners from marginalised communities. The provision of learning opportunities both within the campus and on an outreach basis with collaborative partners significantly impacted learners' sense of identity and "belonging" in higher education, challenging previous perceptions of "not being good enough" and "imposters" in the "foreign land" of higher education.

Originality/value – This paper proposes innovative collaborative community education approaches to promote the engagement of learners from traditionally under-represented minority groups in higher education.

Keywords Community education, Traveller community, Engagement, Situated learning, Belonging, Adult learning

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Having spent over 50 years collectively as educators involved in community education programmes in higher education, both authors have become increasingly aware of the need for research that reflects the voices and "lived life" realities of part-time adult learners, particularly those traditionally under-represented in higher education. In response to this objective, this paper shares our work illustrating how community education outreach and campus-based programmes can promote engagement and a sense of belonging in higher education for marginalised communities, with a particular focus on the Irish Traveller



community, an indigenous minority recognised as an ethnic group by the Irish state in 2017 (IHREC, 2024). Informed by both research and practice with collaborative community partners, our paper offers a critical examination of learner experiences of higher education through the creation of “communities of practice” embedded in social and cultural contexts.

Community education, as a philosophy and a field of practice, promotes a more socially inclusive society; it also has the potential to foster active citizenship through an informed, engaged and committed citizenry. “While it is accepted that employment is an important goal, education must also equip people to challenge dominant ideologies and become critical thinkers” (Finn, 2015, p. 15). The ethos underpinning community education, therefore, highlights the central importance of education in enabling communities to acquire the critical skills and knowledge necessary to collectively bring about change and challenge structural inequalities (Aronowitz, 2008; Casey, 2018; Hardiman, 2018; Finn, 2015; Fitzsimons, 2017). The provision of community education programmes through collaborative university and community partnerships has the potential to alter the nature of the relationship between higher education and wider society by challenging the perceived “elitist” dimension of tertiary education. However, the outreach, part-time and blended learning components of community education programmes present significant challenges in fostering a sense of belonging and engagement in higher education for adult learners, many of whom already have quite fragile academic self-esteem, largely because of their previous experience of formal education (Brennan *et al.*, 2025a; Fleming and Finnegan, 2011; Keane, 2011; Loxley *et al.*, 2021; McGinley, 2023). Research by Butcher on the decline of part-time higher education in England notes that “Part-time students can feel peripheral, like tourists visiting higher education but who know they do not really belong” (Butcher, 2020, p. 13).

This paper outlines the importance of active engagement between educational institutions and external community stakeholders in promoting learner-centred educational opportunities in higher education. Drawing on our experience as academics and community education practitioners, in conjunction with the expertise of our community partners and colleagues, we outline the importance of context and socio-cultural influences in building learning environments that develop “communities of practice” to enhance part-time adult learner engagement and belonging in higher education. Through the application of the theory of situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991), this paper provides insight into the conditions and strategies that support collaborative university and community partnerships in the design and implementation of inclusive higher education programmes in community and cultural contexts. A case study methodology was deemed appropriate to examine “communities of practice” as a distinguishing feature of situated learning theory (SLT), reflecting learner perspectives of community and culturally situated learning provision, their sense of engagement and belonging in higher education and the subsequent influence of this experience on their personal, family, community and professional lives.

2. Background

The authors, as community education advocates at the University of Galway [formerly National University of Ireland (NUI) Galway], promote community engagement through reciprocal partnerships with community, voluntary and statutory sectors in the design and delivery of teaching and learning programmes of societal concern. Through representation on several community, voluntary and statutory fora, the authors have fostered strong collaborative external relationships to respond to the needs of communities and contribute to fulfilling the university’s role in promoting a more socially just society. This collaborative approach between educational institutions and external voluntary/community stakeholders has proven to be highly successful in

promoting learner-centred educational opportunities in higher education, particularly for learners from traditionally under-represented minority groups.

This paper outlines one such collaboration between the university and two partners: the Galway Traveller Movement (GTM) and the Community Action Network (CAN). The GTM are an independent Traveller community development organisation for Galway City and County, composed of Travellers and non-Travellers. The CAN is a social justice non governmental organization (NGO) dedicated to working with communities to create an equal and just society that places people at the heart of change. The overall objective of the collaboration was to promote engagement and belonging in higher education for the Irish Traveller community through the provision of the diploma in Community Development Practice (CDP).

The diploma in CDP programme was developed in the early 1990s to enable community activists and individuals to gain access to accreditation in community development. The part-time programme seeks to equip community activists with the skills to enable them to work effectively in their communities. As a part-time programme, using blended learning methods of delivery, involving a combination of class-based, online and flexible learning provision, this programme is innovative in its approach, promoting active learning in the community with assessments based on real-life situations in a practice environment. Occasional weekend-based workshops also facilitate adult learners to sustain personal, family, community and work-based commitments. Learner engagement with programme content is highly participative and focuses on the practical experiences that each participant brings to the course. The module teaching and assessment strategies complement each other, premised on the mission to enable learners to acquire and practise skills to promote community engagement and development. Whilst the academic content of the programme is framed within university standards for accreditation purposes, aspects of programme content and delivery are co-designed in collaboration with external partners/ collaborators and learners to ensure the programme is tailor-made to respond to the uniqueness of the relevant community in line with community education principles. The principle of co-creation and flexibility was reflective of colleagues' research (Brennan *et al.*, 2025a; McGinley and Keane, 2022; Johnson, 2026) and paramount to authors, GTM and CAN in this project to enable curricular scaffolding of the diploma in CDP, which was deemed pivotal to dismantling some of the structural and nuanced barriers to the Traveller cohort. As an NUI-accredited course, carrying 30 credits within the European Credit Transfer System, this programme also promotes lifelong learning and enhances access routes to adult learners for higher education.

As previously outlined, the overall objective of this collaboration was to promote engagement and belonging in higher education for the Traveller community; therefore, all programme learners were Travellers (24 in total), an indigenous minority recognised as an ethnic group by the Irish state in 2017 (IHREC, 2024). The Equal Status Act (Ireland, *Equal Status Act*, 2000, p.7) defines the Traveller Community as "[...] the community of people who are commonly called Travellers and who are identified (both by themselves and others) as people with a shared history, culture and traditions, including, historically, a nomadic way of life on the island of Ireland". The Traveller community has historically been under-represented in higher education. To understand such poor representation requires a recognition of the scale of racism and segregation experienced by Travellers within the Irish educational system, reinforcing within school structures societal systems of power, privilege and exclusion of the Traveller community (Brennan *et al.*, 2025a; Boyle *et al.*, 2018; Ní Laoire *et al.*, 2009; Houses of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Skills, 2019). Furthermore, research undertaken by Brennan *et al.* (2025b, p. 59) examining the challenges and barriers faced by Travellers in education highlights that "[...] older generations of Travellers, through traumatic experiences within the school system, were

wary and reticent to encourage their own children to pursue higher education or, in some cases, post-primary education past Junior Certificate level". McGinley (2023, p. 6), in her qualitative study of Traveller experiences across the continuum of education, noted that "[...] new entrants to higher education in 2021/22 represent just 0.1% of all new entrants". Therefore, this collaborative project, leading to the co-design and delivery of the diploma programme by GTM, CAN and the university, sought to challenge this inequality and develop interventions to enhance belonging and promote greater inclusion in higher education for Travellers as an under-represented indigenous community.

3. Theoretical framework

Having reviewed many theories of learning, from more traditional to contemporary theories, it becomes increasingly evident that just as there is no one commonly agreed-upon theory of human learning, there is equally no consensus on one theory framing community education. The field of learning theory "[...] reflects our own complexities as thinking humans – the biological, cognitive and psychological differences and our differing experiences as well as social, cultural and environmental exposures" (Hunt and Chalmers, 2021, p. 36). According to Fitzsimons (2017), however, most community educators identify with humanistic educational philosophies focusing on person-centred approaches to support individual change or critical education philosophies adopting collective approaches leading to structural and social change. In her consideration of community education in a neoliberal economic environment, Fitzsimons raises concerns that humanistic approaches to community education would reflect neoliberal values by emphasising "[...] individualised agency, while occluding the structures that constrain and marginalise agency, such as class, gender, sexuality, as well as race, ethnicity and ability" (2017, p. vi). In focusing primarily on "individualised agency/individualism," humanistic approaches potentially reinforce neoliberal principles in emphasising individual responsibility for success or failure and dismissing the structural and systemic causes of inequality or injustice in our society. Critical education approaches, however, "[...] unveil the way that social structures shape our everyday lives and our everyday thinking so that people can interpret their reality through a process of critical thinking" (Fitzsimons, 2017, p. 111). In our experience, the combination of both humanism and critical education philosophies within community education practice is essential to ensure meaningful learning experiences. But we concur with Fitzsimons (2017, p. 111) that a focus on the "individuality" of the learner [...] thought of as the uniqueness each of us holds within our social conditions should supersede the emphasis on "individualism" commonly associated with humanistic approaches. This dual approach of person-centred care in supporting the "individuality" of the learner and the importance of "criticality", in challenging structural inequality and injustice frames our philosophy and approach to the practice of community education. This research, therefore, is informed by Lave and Wenger's theory of situated learning, which challenges traditional views of learning as an individual decontextualised process, emphasising instead that learning is deeply embedded within social and physical contexts, developed through interactions within "communities of practice" and real-world situations (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

SLT as developed in the late 1980s by Lave and Wenger highlights learning as a social act involving the application of knowledge in the authentic contexts of everyday life. According to Lave and Wenger: "learning as increasing participation in communities of practice concerns the whole person acting in the world" (1991, p. 49); emphasising the concepts of "legitimate peripheral participation" within "communities of practice". Whereby, learners as "newcomers" through ongoing social interactions with other "newcomers" and more experienced learners and facilitators progress over time from a position of peripherality to full participation within the "community of practice". Whilst historically associated with

apprenticeship-style learning, increasing interest in the application of SLT in formal educational instruction and classroom settings evolved with many researchers seeking to identify the critical elements to facilitate its transfer as a model of instruction to more formal learning environments (McLellan, 1994; Brown *et al.*, 1989). Herrington and Oliver (1995) identified the following key characteristics as essential in constructing a learning environment reflecting the core elements of SLT:

- “Provide authentic context that reflect the way the knowledge will be used in real-life;
- Provide authentic activities;
- Provide access to expert performances and the modelling of processes;
- Provide multiple roles and perspectives;
- Support collaborative construction of knowledge;
- Provide coaching and scaffolding at critical times;
- Promote reflection to enable abstractions to be formed;
- Promote articulation to enable tacit knowledge to be made explicit; and
- Provide for integrated assessment of learning within the tasks” (p. 3)

In many ways, the above characteristics are reflected within the concept of andragogy, defined by Malcolm Knowles as “[...] the art and science of helping adults learn”. Andragogy posits that adult learners are self-directed, drawing on their experience to find practical, real-world solutions to problems (Knowles, 1980, p. 43). Furthermore, research undertaken by Stein (1998) examining situated learning in adult education emphasised the relevance of SLT to adult learning/education, with its emphasis on participative, experiential and collaborative teaching and learning strategies and concluded that the key elements of situated learning in the context of adult learning must incorporate:

“Content- the facts and process of the task;

Context – the situations, values, beliefs and environmental cues by which the learner gains and masters content;

Community – the group with which the learner will create and negotiate meaning of the situation; and

Participation – the process by which learner’s working together and with experts in a social organisation solve problems related to everyday life circumstances.” (Stein, 1998, p. 3).

The combination of the above elements promotes a learner-centred approach and participative teaching and learning methods to support the acquisition, negotiation and application of knowledge through social processes embedded within community and cultural contexts. The use of SLT as the theoretical lens for analysis provides insight into the ways community education has the potential to promote engagement and belonging in higher education for historically marginalised communities, in this instance, the Irish Traveller community. As noted previously, a case study methodology was identified to examine “communities of practice” as a distinguishing feature of SLT, reflecting learner perspectives of community and culturally situated learning provision.

4. Research process: rationale, case study design, methodology and ethics

4.1 Rationale

The paucity of published research on Travellers experiences as part time adult learners and graduates of a higher education level 7 diploma in CDP award in Ireland has prompted the

researchers to present this unique educational case study on a cohort of Travellers as an Indigenous Community of Learners. The literature reviewed for this paper and practice experience of the authors illustrates the evident barriers to indigenous and disenfranchised learners across the globe relating to engagement and participation in education. [Amundsen \(2019\)](#) remarks on cultural adaption barriers experienced by Maori learners, while [Barney \(2016, 2018\)](#) speaks of the financial stress and need for ancillary supports for underrepresented learners in Higher Education. [Powell \(2017\)](#) denotes the feeling among many families of learners feeling left behind, traded off, betrayed by indigenous student progressing forward with their respective education. The intergenerational trauma caused by system inequalities, inadequacies and imbalances in Ireland has caused a “trickle-down effect” for many Travellers given their indigenous and underrepresented community status ([Casey, 2018](#); [Hardiman, 2018](#); [Villani and Barry, 2021](#)). [Fleming and Finnegan \(2011\)](#) posit that the multiple role and identity expectations on underrepresented cohorts in higher education can create dual identities for learners and impact on their sense of belonging in education settings and or in their geographic home place. The term “sense of belonging” in an educational setting is described by [Goodenow \(1993, p. 80\)](#) as “[...] the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the school environment”.

While the Traveller community in population size in the Republic of Ireland is estimated at 32,949, relating to 0.64% of the 5 million population ([CSO, 2023](#); [Ní Chorcair *et al.*, 2025](#)), is officially seen as a relatively small and under-represented figure, given that many Travellers do not identify or share their ethnicity formally for fear of exclusion or discrimination. Furthermore, educational and social intervention approaches to support Travellers vary in different organisations across the country due to the lack of clear commitments and targets outlined in government policies ([Houses of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Skills, 2019](#); [IHREC, 2024](#)). The lack of inclusivity and trust principles and practices in society can further impact the data surfaced relating to Indigenous and under-represented communities ([Durmush *et al.*, 2024](#); [Keane, 2011](#); [Ní Laoire *et al.*, 2009](#)). In the 2022 Irish Census, for example, it is estimated that over 15,000 Travellers were not accounted for due to “reluctance on the part of Travellers to identify themselves, difficulties encountered filling out census forms because of literacy barriers or in some cases not receiving forms in the first place” ([Ireland, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2024, p. 26](#)).

In this regard, Travellers engaging in community education programmes in the university catchment area (then known as NUI Galway) in the mid-nineties did not wish to be identified as an ethnic minority group in community outreach programmes but wished to blend in with settled members when choosing to engage with community education programmes and courses. However, with the national recognition of Travellers/Minceir as an ethnic minority in 2017 in Ireland, it created a new perspective among many Travellers and under-represented communities in Ireland to seek educational interventions tailored to their specific community needs.

The researchers are conscious that the Roma community is also under-represented in higher education and clearly considered in the NAP 2022–2028. However, the commencement of this project predates the current national anti poverty strategy (NAPS) policy and was designed specifically to support and promote access to higher education for the Irish Traveller community. Notwithstanding, the authors query the practice of certain government policies and reports conflating minority cohorts and their respective needs, which may be counterproductive in terms of challenging inequalities in the system for each ethnic minority community ([Brennan *et al.*, 2025a](#); [Johnson, 2026](#); [IHREC, 2024](#)).

4.2 Case study design

A case study design was chosen for this paper to showcase the University of Galway's diploma in CDP programme as a model of curriculum in terms of its adaptive design and flexible delivery. In addition, a case study design was selected to offer insights on the impact of the diploma programme on the learners' lives. The under-represented learner community considered in this paper is a cohort of Irish Travellers who are based in the West of Ireland.

In this regard, the key features associated with a case study design reflect the necessity to capture the community in question and to offer reflective insights that could possibly be overlooked if an alternative design approach were used. When choosing this research design, the authors also considered the type of questions this paper aims to answer and the circumstances around it. [Paparini et al. \(2020\)](#) reflect on characteristics of using a case study design, noting it as an "invaluable resource for understanding the dynamic and evolving influence of context on complex, system-level interventions" (p. 2). This feature of offering insight on mechanisms of participants and audiences and tracing patterns and processes is acutely aligned to the "thick" methodological scope of case study design according to [Paparini et al. \(2020\)](#). [Gilgun \(1994\)](#) stipulates that case study designs are idiographic in nature; a single unit is studied and diverse variables are considered leading to findings that are nuanced, evolving and generalisable rather than statistical and quantifiable in nature. This feature and facet of case study design has been acutely valuable in this research and data collection process, where the "how" and "why" type questions take precedence over "how many" ([Yin, 2009](#)). This aligns succinctly with our mapping of the Traveller learner engagement and learning experiences within the higher education diploma in the CDP Programme. Additionally, connecting this case study with major theories and further research on the Traveller community should increase its validity, as the pragmatic use of quantitative and qualitative data removes the anecdotal aspect of the case study that many have questioned ([Darke et al., 2002](#); [Bartlett and Vavrus, 2018](#)).

[Widner et al. \(2022\)](#) reiterate [Gilgun's \(1994\)](#) views that case studies are associated with intervention processes, studying problems and success stories to better inform practice. Similarly, this research paper does not aim to outline the universal marginalisation of the Traveller community but to reflect on the experiences of one cohort of Travellers educational experience and the effectiveness of the diploma in CDP as a community education process and educational intervention tool and learning model. Another determining factor for choosing a case study design in this paper was to reflect on the researchers/authors/pedagogues, curriculum design, approach and engagement tools undertaken to help navigate the complexity of the university pathway for adult learners, but especially under-represented communities such as the Irish Traveller community.

This case study design equally enabled the authors to map the diverse experiences and opportunities the diploma in CDP offered the Travellers as a cohort of learners to engage, navigate and progress in a higher education system heretofore alien to their ecological experience. The case study within this study hosts a duality of roles – illustrating the core features and design element of the diploma in CDP programme itself as an adaptive, inclusive model of curriculum design and delivery. In addition, the case study denotes the Travellers voices, views and experiences of their sense of belonging and engagement during and on completion of the NUI diploma in CDP Programme.

4.3 Methodology and ethical considerations

A case study design as discussed earlier enabled a fluid methodological process to be undertaken focusing on surfacing the viewpoints of Travellers as learner participants within

this collaborative university and community education journey of programme engagement, reflection and successful completion.

The Traveller learner cohort ($n = 24$) input to the CDP programme to aid the learning, co-creation and curriculum design journey was central to the project's methodological and ethical processes. All ethical principles, especially "doing no harm" to research participants, were pivotal to this study and the authors' social science research ethos as underpinned by SAI and university ethical codes of practices (Bryman, 2016; SAI, 2025). Learners on the diploma in CDP are routinely requested to offer feedback on the module learning experience throughout its delivery so adaptations can be considered for the learner cohort in question in line with community education principles of learner-focused delivery styles. The Traveller cohort in this study ($n = 24$) were equally offered this engagement and feedback process throughout the diploma module delivery and assessment stages. Furthermore, as noted earlier, given the partnership approach adopted in the setting up of this project with and for Traveller participants, members of GTM who were project leaders and students undertaking the diploma partook in the steering committee with partners from CAN and university representatives (both authors). In this regard, the facilitators of the diploma programme were in tune with students' lived experiences of the programme on an ongoing basis. Learners likewise, became stewards of timetabling and pacing of curriculum and assessment models which aligned to their cultural and lived life experiences. This evolving evaluative and adaptive process is essential in adult and community education models of delivery to ensure learners, especially indigenous community members, feel like partners and agents of change in the process as opposed to recipients of the learning experiences (Freire, 2015; Field, 2017; Durmush *et al.*, 2024; Johnson, 2026).

In terms of approach to the post-programme data collection phase, twenty-four learners (full population) from this case study on the diploma in CDP programme were issued a survey questionnaire twelve months post-programme completion of the programme to gauge their experiences in reflection of the educational journey. This process enabled the researchers to gather both quantitative and qualitative feedback and insight on the learner's experience as graduates since it was a year post-completion of the award that the survey was issued. The researchers developed an open-ended questionnaire in terms of format to enable both qualitative and quantitative data to surface from the respondents on their personal and collective educational experience and impact of the diploma in CDP on their personal, family, community and professional lives.

So in addition to sending the survey questionnaire to all participants via their personal email address where they existed, we decided as researchers to engage with our Traveller community partner GTM to help us encourage and reach out to the Traveller graduates to respond to the survey link and to explain the context for the survey engagement. This active encouragement and connection with Traveller community partners was in line with ethical principles of integrity and honesty as outlined in SAI Ethical Guidelines (SAI, 2025) to ensure due process was followed and that all participants had an opportunity to have a voice in the data while protecting individuals' anonymity and privacy. In addition, as the accrediting educational provider, we were conscious that community partners, GTM and CAN should be included in the data collection to ensure the voices of partners and learners were evident in the data collection phase.

The ethical precepts and principles were pivotal to this research journey, from planning, co-creation, delivery and post-graduation review of the CDP Traveller experiences. It was valuable to gain the Traveller cohorts' views both during the programme as learners and twelve months post-completion as graduates. The Traveller graduates of the CDP programme ($n = 24$) were invited to engage in the twelve-month post-programme completion

survey of which many shared personal qualitative graduate statements which are presented in the findings section. This post-programme survey, further enabled the Travellers as graduates to share their insights without fear of obligation, bias or coercion in sharing their experiences with the authors as researchers. Furthermore, the learners had collectively agreed to share their graduation photos in local and social media to promote positive role modelling among their community and showcase their achievement to wider society. In addition, the Aontas Star Award brought national recognition to the Traveller participants as university graduates and their personal and collective achievements, thus, reinforcing the trust bond between all the partners. The Aontas Star award was presented to the collective of learners and partners and accepted by GTM as a milestone of the experience. [Johnson \(2026\)](#) emphasises the six core assumptions of the intersectional ecological model of belonging which pivot on the personal and political sense of agency. This sense of belonging, identity alignment and achievement by the Traveller cohort reflect this intersectional impact of educational attainment.

A case study design has enabled this research topic to be examined through the perspective of one collective of adult learner Traveller community members aligned to the GTM organisation in Galway City and County. Hence, the focus of this case study is on one collective of Travellers' educational journey through the diploma in CDP programme, the university-accredited programme and the learner's individual and collective experiences. In particular, the case study offers an in-depth reflection and analysis of the enabling and prohibitive engagement factors and influences that access to and participation in the higher education programme and journey presented for this specific cohort of Travellers.

5. Findings

Several themes, including some of those previously noted as key characteristics in constructing a learning environment reflecting SLT (see theoretical framework), became prominent from data analysis. Other themes also emerged, reflecting survey responses and graduate statements, both undertaken 12 months post programme completion. Learner views and experiences, with supporting quotes, are presented within the four thematic areas below, using pseudonyms to maintain anonymity in relation to the graduate statements (five graduates from the full cohort of 24), whilst all survey responses were anonymous.

5.1 Content

The NUI, Galway diploma in CDP course content focuses on a number of key areas which include social analysis, communication, leadership and group work skills, public policy, project planning, development and evaluation, research techniques and the theory and practice of community development. Whilst the academic content of the programme is pre-established in line with university standards and protocols for accreditation purposes, each of six core modules (5ects) allows scope for guest inputs from community/voluntary/statutory speakers reflecting the specific topics/subject matter of relevance to the programme learners. This ensures that the delivery of the diploma programme in community settings responds to the unique interests of that geographic or issue-based community in question. The addition of field trip components (in this instance, to the Dáil - Irish Parliament and the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission) also provides for context-specific practice-based inputs from practitioners and policymakers within the sector.

A series of meetings were held between the GTM, the CAN and the university in advance of programme delivery to inform programme content reflective of the perceived needs, interests and requirements of the Traveller community. As each of the three partners had a long history of working directly with Travellers in educational settings, wider programme

co-design and implementation considerations were informed by past experiences and common values seeking to promote positive societal change, equality and human flourishing. However, additional modular content suggestions by collaborative partners were provisionally subject to consideration and majority consensus by programme learners at the initial stages of programme delivery.

Programme learning outcomes were assessed through a range of individual and group assignments undertaken by learners throughout the year. These included class presentations on social issues, local profiles, developing funding proposals, logic models, research projects and public policy analysis; each of these assessments was undertaken within the context of the learner's wider community engagement or chosen community group/organisation. The course content interweaves the life experiences that each participant brings to the learning environment, prioritising participative and collaborative teaching and learning strategies to ensure the acquisition and application of knowledge. Feedback from learners demonstrated that such strategies used by all programme facilitators enabled them to learn and practice course content in the group/"community of practice" through the lens of their individual and collective life experience to attain a new level of knowledge and understanding. As Kelly noted:

The approach to the delivery of the training sessions by [facilitators] was very good. They made every session as relatable and engaging as possible and time flew by.

Equally, Joan highlighted the importance of facilitators acting as guides to enable learners to successfully navigate course content:

I feel I could not have completed the course without their positive and empathetic support. All the facilitators/lecturers were so helpful and guided us through the course work.

The acquisition of knowledge and skills across modular content empowering learners to advocate on behalf of the Traveller community as an ethnic minority also featured as a recurring theme:

The NUI diploma in CDP (level 7) enabled me to upskill on the knowledge that I had regarding community development practice. It showed me the importance of being involved in decision-making and policy development in relation to the inclusion of my community, as it is quite clear that policies are developed and decisions made that can have a negative impact on minority ethnic groups in Irish society. (Isobel)

This course has given me the tools, knowledge, confidence and a great analysis on what community development is and has empowered me on how to apply community development to my work to try and get a positive change for my community. (Sean)

Collaborative and participative teaching methods reflective of both situated learning theoretical perspectives and adult learning approaches facilitated the acquisition, construction and application of course content among the learning community.

5.2 Context

This collaborative project reflects the principles of community education and creates opportunities for adult learners to engage, face-to-face, with their peers and facilitators. The provision of the diploma in CDP programme within this project involved a combination of both campus and community-based class settings in collaboration with GTM so that the physical environment in which learners were based included familiar community-based settings in addition to the university. The initial classes/workshops were held in the community setting to enable learners to become familiar with each other and the programme before coming into a large campus setting. Some of the campus-based workshops involved shared workshops with other adult learners undertaking similar campus-based community development programmes. The experience of being on campus was highlighted as having

made a significant contribution to the learner's sense of student identity, belonging and engagement in higher education. The following quote expressed by Kelly provides an accurate synopsis of feedback by the majority of the group:

The whole way that the course was designed to work was so different and very approachable and adaptive that it made taking part in the course sometimes feel like it was not work [...]. The sessions we then had with NUIG, where we mixed with the other community development group, were very good too, they opened up the campus to me, I would not have been on the campus before in an educational setting. This course showed me that there was a space for me in further education that the university was not just for richer or more educated people.

A number of strategies were put in place to actively engage participants in their learning journey. Thematic workshops provided subject matter content, shared life experience, practical community development skills (including communication, reflection, listening and group work skills), large and smaller group work activities/discussions, guest speaker inputs reflective of group interests and role play scenarios. Each workshop concluded with a brief discussion to provide feedback on what learners found worked well/not so well. This feedback was recorded to inform future inputs. It also aided the collaborative partners, who had formed a programme design and implementation board which included GTM, CAN, the university and two programme learners representing the learner group with expertise in Traveller culture as members of the community. Programme board meetings were scheduled on a bi-monthly basis or more immediately in response to any emerging issues e.g. requisite changes to timetables or assessment deadlines to support the learners.

Learners were encouraged to form study groups and learner support networks to provide peer support throughout the programme. This form of group support was noted as being very effective, particularly when challenging life events would intervene and impact on learner engagement.

GTM created a peer-led learning network space that kept me motivated and encouraged me to stick with it throughout the year. (Joan)

The need for some degree of flexibility with timetabling also featured as a core action in maintaining the engagement of the programme learners. Part-time programmes always require some degree of flexibility to reflect the wider work and family commitments of adult learners, particularly with regard to weekend workshops in order not to clash with scheduled primary/secondary school closures. The cultural context of the Traveller community reinforces the importance of family, community and religious beliefs and traditions. Therefore, considered curriculum scaffolding and timetabling flexibility on the CDP programme for religious, family or cultural events of the Traveller participants were facilitated. This enabling and supportive, learning environment for all the Traveller participants fostered strong retention and engagement practices throughout the CDP programme delivery.

In response to the diversity of learner history and experience, a broad range of learner supports were provided, these included; academic writing, assessment guidance and feedback and pastoral care, which is essential in supporting learner retention and success. This was of particular importance for this cohort of learners, as the majority of the group had prior negative experience of formal education. Furthermore, detail on learning experiences and engagement in higher education from the learners' perspectives may be found in Section 5.4, which outlines survey results regarding the perceived influence of the diploma programme on the lives of graduates one year later, further illustrating learners' sense of engagement in higher education.

Building a learning environment to promote learner engagement takes time, as it involves attaining a balance between task and process. A balance between completing the requisite tasks/assessments to successfully complete the diploma in CDP but equally, actively engaging in the learning process to achieve the confidence, competencies, agency and ability to become a successful learner and community development practitioner. Developing a group contract as a collaborative agreement, noting the group's shared expectations, responsibilities, norms and values, featured as the first group task on day one and was revised as necessary during the programme. Having this agreement in place allowed for multiple perspectives and animated debates and discussions within the learning environment, recognising the importance of tolerance of diversity in all its forms and respect for difference of opinion, of which there were many.

5.3 “Community of practice” and participation. The diploma in CDP programme was advertised within Galway City and County by GTM. A total of 24 learners registered for the programme; the gender breakdown was 8 males and 16 females. The “community of practice” therefore, was multi-layered, combining gender, familial, generational, cultural and power relationship dynamics as members of the Traveller community. But likewise, as a newly forming “community of practice” in adopting identities as learners within an emerging learning community.

In line with Lave and Wenger's description of “legitimate peripheral participation” (1991) the majority of the learners entered the learning environment and this new “community of practice” at the periphery, expressing corresponding concerns in relation to their learning ability, their confidence and equally, their fear of being judged.

I was afraid to go into university [on the] grounds I did not find I was good enough [...] but now since doing the course I have the confidence to go in to university now. (Alice)

Gradually, as trust within the group became established and equally, between the group and the facilitators, greater engagement and participation within the learning process developed. For facilitators, there was also an awareness of being a novice or “newcomer” on the periphery of a cultural community of practice and needing to listen and learn from the Traveller community to appreciate the values and customs of their community and life experiences. In many ways, for all involved, exchanging roles on a continuum of novice-expert became the norm as part of the social process of learning.

Thanks to this course I no longer feel like I am an imposter when I am on the grounds of NUIG. (Kelly)

5.4 Life influences following higher education learning experience one year later?

This section presents a summary of the key findings identified following a survey undertaken with the same group of Travellers, now as graduates of the NUI diploma in CDP one year later. This group completed their diploma (level 7, 30ects) in 2018–2019. The purpose of the survey was to determine, 12 months post completion, what, if any, influence the programme may have had on the lives of the graduates. Whilst the survey did not seek to specifically assess graduates' sense of engagement and belonging in higher education, much of the qualitative data provided contributes to informing future higher education policy and practice of the means to promote engagement and belonging of traditionally under-represented minority communities. A summary of the findings is outlined under a series of key headings, these are as follows: *influence on personal life, influence on family life, influence on community life, influence on working life and lastly, current view of the university*. As recorded previously, twenty-four Travellers graduated from the NUI diploma in CDP programme. The survey was sent to all 24 graduates, resulting in an extremely positive response rate of 83.33% ($n = 20$).

In summary, the majority of respondents (i.e. 75% minimum) indicated that the programme had an extremely positive influence on their lives across each of the four categories outlined (personal, family, community and work). For remaining respondents, the programme also had a positive influence across some of the categories presented, but not all four. The response rate to each of the four categories is included under the corresponding headings. All respondents ($n=20$) commented on the last question, which sought to determine if their experience on the programme had changed their view of university. In this regard, 90% ($n=18$) indicated that they now had a more positive view of university as a result of participating in the diploma programme; the remaining two respondents indicated that their view of university had already been positive and the programme fulfilled that expectation.

5.4.1 Personal influence: 80% ($n=16$). When referring to personal influence, respondents predominantly referred to greater confidence at both a personal and academic level because of programme participation. Fear/nervousness featured for some in advance of undertaking the diploma programme, however, this was resolved through programme participation and support. The majority of respondents indicated a desire to progress their personal development by continuing in education. Four diploma graduates subsequently progressed to register for the BA in Community, Youth and Family Studies and one year later, when this survey was undertaken, had successfully completed year one of this four-year programme. All four have since graduated with their BA qualification and one is enrolled in a post-graduate Master's programme:

Influence on Personal Life?.

Yes it has given me more confidence and feelings of wanting to continue my education further.

Yes it has made me more confident in myself, I was very nervous about doing the diploma, because I was afraid of failing or dropping out early. I went on to complete the diploma and get A's in all my exams. We had great support from [facilitators] that made what I thought was impossible at the start of the year possible because the time and the support they gave us on NUIG campus.

Yes, this course has given me great confidence and the courage to move on to the next stage in third level education.

Survey respondents.

5.4.2 Family influence: 85% ($n=17$). When asked if the programme had any influence on family life, 85% of respondents strongly agreed. Many felt that they had now become a role model in terms of creating a greater awareness among family members of the potential of third-level education for under-represented minority groups in higher education. The opportunity to return to education at any stage in life was particularly emphasised:

Influence on Family Life?.

Yes it just showed my kids no matter what happens in life education is very important and it's ok to take a break and go back.

They were proud, and it opens doors for my grandchildren to go to college and encourage others to stay in education.

I would hope to be a good role model for my family and show that nothing is impossible if you put your mind to it.

Yes it has made me more aware of the importance of education and made my family aware that there are opportunities to avail of.

Yes myself and my brother were, and still are, the first from our family to get a third level education diploma.

[It meant] I am a role model for my grandchildren so they will go onto 3rd level get an education before marriage.

Survey respondents.

5.4.3 Community influence: 75% ($n = 15$). In terms of community influence, 75% of respondents indicated that the programme had contributed to their willingness and confidence to engage and become more involved within their community largely due to the skills, tools, knowledge and confidence gained through programme completion. The importance of supporting communities to achieve positive change through collective action was a recurring theme:

Influence on Community Life.

It made me more open and more confident to be able to get involved in my community more.

The diploma has shown how society has impacted on Community and collective action is one way of having a large number of voices to be heard rather than one.

The diploma shows that knowing what community work is [helps] you gain the tools to work with the wider community to bring about change.

I'm a lot more confident in engaging in community activities and speaking for the community in public because of this course. I feel that this course has given me the confidence to be a better community activist for my community.

Survey respondents.

5.4.4 Influence on work: 85% ($n = 17$). A total of 85% of respondents indicated that the diploma programme had a significant influence on their working life and employability. Some respondents referred to feeling more confident in their existing employment in working with the GTM; others referred to having greater confidence and courage in seeking employment:

Influence on Work Life.

I believe that the course gave the courage to challenge for better outcomes through my work.

This course has changed my life, I have applied for work in this field with confidence I never had before and feel like I belong now.

Since doing the Community Diploma I have gained employment with GTM as a community development worker.

Survey respondents.

5.4.5 View of university: 100% ($n = 20$). Finally, when asked if their programme experience had any influence on their view of university 90% ($n = 18$) of respondents strongly agreed that their programme experience had a positive influence on their view of university. This question gave respondents the opportunity to comment further. A selection of some of these comments is documented below:

Did Diploma programme change your view of University?.

Yes, I thought university would be like a foreign land for me. That I would not fit into university life. But [facilitators]made it very easy and as comfortable as possible for me and all the other

Travellers doing the diploma course and I am grateful for them and the support they gave us. I hope in the future I will return to NUIG and further my education. The time in university went too fast.

Yes with all the support I had from the tutors they made it much more accessible for the future.

The University, as I see it, is more welcoming now to all minority groups.

Yes it made me realise that I have a space in there. I would never have imagined I could ever go to university before but now I want to go back to study more in community development.

Yes, with the support of NUIG and CAN network and GTM this course has broadened my horizons in third level. This course have given me confidence and removed all barriers for me to progress on further with third level. All of the additional supports I have received within the course from all involved has meant this course has made such a difference to the learning and made the course really enjoyable. Since the completion of this course I have progressed on to do a Bachelor Degree in community, youth and family studies with some other colleagues from the course. I am enjoying college within NUIG, doing my degree and I'm proud to have achieved my first year of 4 year part time degree. I would thank all involved for giving me this opportunity to be part of an amazing course. This course was well tailored to suit the needs for all the group. We need to keep this model going to empower other Travellers to progress on to third level education. Thanks again to all the organisers, GTM, NUIG and CAN for all your kind support throughout this course.

Survey respondents.

6. Discussion

Through an analysis framed by SLT, this research paper demonstrates that community education approaches can promote engagement and belonging in higher education for learners from historically marginalised communities, in this case, ethnic minority learners from the Traveller community. The paper illustrates how collaborative engagement and university-community partnerships embedded in community and cultural contexts can create innovative “communities of practice” promoting learning, engagement and belonging in higher education. Findings demonstrate that the learner-centred, participatory and empowerment orientation of the diploma in CDP as a model of community education created the conditions and strategies to support collaborative university and community partnerships in the design and implementation of inclusive higher education programmes.

An analysis of learner experiences one year post-completion of the programme, indicates that the diploma in CDP had a substantial impact on learners' sense of identity, culture and “belonging” in higher education, challenging previous perceptions of “not being good enough” and “imposters” in the “foreign land” of higher education. Whilst the influence of the learning experience at an individual level was apparent in terms of reported increases in confidence and self-esteem. The subsequent influence on the family and community overall regarding the potential of third-level education for under-represented minority groups equally became evident, with graduates identifying as role models confronting barriers to education. Such barriers are not unique to the Irish Traveller community, as international research clearly illustrates recognised universal barriers for indigenous communities, including concerns regarding cultural safety and fear of destabilising cultural norms and values (Amundsen, 2019; Barney, 2016; Barney, 2018; Brennan *et al.*, 2025a; Johnson, 2026).

Recent research specifically seeking to understand students' sense of belonging and engagement in higher education highlights the importance of “reciprocity” between students and higher education institutions, which in turn will enhance benefits for individual learners and the reputation of higher education institutions (Trowler *et al.*, 2021; Hall *et al.*, 2024;

Millar *et al.*, 2025). Recognising reciprocity as an essential component of engagement highlights the need to value learners as equals and contributors within the learning process. This also reflects the key principles of community education approaches and is core to the attainment of significant learning and engagement within a positive learning environment (Casey, 2018; Hardiman, 2018). Merrill (2015) states that “Adult students want to feel part of the academy and be respected and accepted” (p. 1869), reinforcing the conceptualisation of a sense of belonging as defined by Goodenow (1993). This requires a change in the culture of higher education in recognition of the needs of a more diverse student cohort with the right to belong and feel equally valued. Research examining a justice-centred understanding of belonging in higher education by Johnson (2026, p. 6) however, highlights the importance of both structure and agency, emphasising that whilst institutions have a responsibility to ensure equitable conditions for belonging, that belonging is also co-created by students as a reflection of their agency “[...] in pursuit of justice and inclusion”. The establishment of the Minceir Whiden (Traveller’s Talking) Society at the University of Galway by this cohort of Travellers provided clear evidence of this form of agency for belonging. Changes in educational policy and practice can ensure that higher education institutes provide the necessary structures to nurture and support the individual agency of adult learners. Research findings, as noted above, illustrated an increased sense of agency but equally a corresponding change in the learners’ view of university as being more welcoming to minority groups who traditionally have been under-represented.

The findings within this paper outline the importance of context and socio-cultural influences in developing “communities of practice” as a means of enhancing part-time adult learner engagement and belonging in higher education, particularly learners traditionally under-represented in higher education. Through the application of the theory of situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991), in conjunction with a case study methodology, this paper provides learner perspectives and wider programme co-design and implementation considerations to inform the development of inclusive higher education programmes in community and cultural contexts. The discourse of not apportioning the burden of access to, retention in or achievement in formal education systems solely on the learner, especially learners from under-represented communities, as this can cause inferiority conditioning, deficit myth building and “buffering” behaviour has been avidly addressed in this study, where the Travellers as learners and community participants, acted as central agents of personal and collective transformation (Brennan *et al.*, 2025a; Boyle *et al.*, 2020; Keane, 2011; Johnson, 2026). Thus, a culture shift is required in formal education systems, community structures and at wider societal levels to foster sustained engagement and belonging and inter-ethnic peer relationships, to collectively rebalance the social injustices, debunk myths and to avoid the “out-grouping” and “othering” mentality of minority ethnic learners, including Travellers across the formal and informal education spectrum (Goodenow, 1993; Loxley *et al.*, 2021; McGinley and Keane, 2022; Ní Laoire *et al.*, 2009). In the experience of the authors, as academics and community education practitioners, the diploma in CDP offers a conceptual model of best practice that can adapt and respond to the “individuality” of learners and communities by promoting participation and “criticality” and enabling engagement in higher education.

7. Conclusion

Much work is needed within the higher education sector, but equally, interventions at earlier stages of the education cycle are essential to address the systematic and social factors that are impacting so negatively on Travellers ability to access education. Many Travellers wish to return to higher education as adult learners and are more likely to attend on a part-time,

flexible basis due to life circumstances. To achieve the scale of change required in promoting educational equality for the Traveller community, a multi-sectoral collaborative approach is essential. Traditional educational policies and practices must adapt to become fit for purpose for current and future generations of all ages. Learners and graduates are impacted by learning experiences, positive and negative. Engaging learners, particularly those who are traditionally under-represented in higher education, requires creative and innovative collaborations. Such collaborations should involve pre-entry and post-programme supports to overcome perceptions of being an “imposter”, having a low academic self-esteem, and, in many cases, a negative experience of previous formal education. Educational providers have both a social and community responsibility to learners to provide positive higher education experiences and opportunities. Part-time, flexible pathways into and through higher education require additional investment in community education models of practice. Collaborative, co-created community education initiatives incorporating outreach and campus provision of learning opportunities for learners, in particular learners from geographic and issue-based communities of disadvantage, are essential in promoting genuine engagement and belonging in higher education. Based on this research, the authors believe that the diploma in CDP offers a unique conceptual model of best practice to promote access, belonging and engagement and advocate that this diploma in CDP model genuinely strengthens higher education access and retention practices and policies. In recognition of the importance of engaging the voices of learners within educational policy and practice, it is appropriate that the closing words of this paper should defer to one of the many Traveller voices that informed this study:

I thought that attending College would never be a possibility for me. The first time I visited NUI Galway I felt like it was a foreign land but with the help of [facilitators] from the School of Political Science and Sociology I settled in to college life very fast and felt welcomed. The recognition of the specific needs of adult learners is very important. I got involved with the setting up of the Minceir Whiden (Traveller’s Talking) Society as I felt there was a space needed to celebrate Traveller culture and identity. The society created a space where members of the Traveller community could gather and be themselves, I am passionate in relation to making sure that more members of the Traveller community take up third level opportunities and are included in the decision making within NUI Galway. (Sean).

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GTM, the CAN and diploma in CDP Programme Learners/graduates 2018–2019 [1].

Note

[1.] Both Authors are equal contributors to this paper.

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