

An Insight into the Experience of Individuals Entering Third Level Education from a Social Inclusion Perspective

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CARL Research Project
in collaboration with
The Education and Development Partnership Project



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What is Community-Academic Research Links?

Community-Academic Research Links (CARL) is a service provided by research institutes for the Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in their region which can be grass roots groups, single issue temporary groups, but also well structured organisations. Research for the CSOs is carried out free of financial cost as much as possible.

CARL seeks to:

- provide civil society with knowledge and skills through research and education;
- provide their services on an affordable basis;
- promote and support public access to and influence on science and technology;
- create equitable and supportive partnerships with civil society organisations;
- enhance understanding among policymakers and education and research institutions of the research and education needs of civil society, and
- enhance the transferrable skills and knowledge of students, community representatives and researchers (www.livingknowledge.org).

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How do I reference this report?

Author (year) Project Title, [online], School of Applied Social Studies, Community-Academic Research Links/University College Cork, Available from: <http://www.ucc.ie/en/scishop/completed/> [Accessed on: date].

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The UCC CARL website has further information on the background and operation of the Community-Academic Research Links at University College Cork, Ireland. <http://carl.ucc.ie> CARL is part of an international network of Science Shops. You can read more about this vibrant community and its activities on this website: <http://www.scienceshops.org>

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Statement of Originality

I wish to confirm that this dissertation titled 'An Insight into the Experience of Individuals Entering Third Level Education from a Social Inclusion Perspective' is my own work and has been completed in accordance with relevant ethical guidelines.

Any work that is not my own has been referenced accordingly. I have reviewed my originality report through Turnitin and have made any necessary changes in relation to citations. This is in accordance with UCC's Plagiarism Policy.

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Abstract

This research project was completed as part of the CARL initiative in collaboration with the Education and Development Partnership Project. This project explores the experience of individuals entering Third Level Education from a social inclusion perspective. Studies have shown that participation rates of those from disadvantaged areas remain low. Studies completed for the academic years of 2019 and 2020 of new full-time students, aged between 18 and 20, found that 10% were from disadvantaged areas while 18% were from affluent areas (Higher Education Authority, 2022). The Education and Development Partnership Project provides an educational gateway to Third Level Education for individuals who have experienced addiction, homelessness, mental health issues, and other social issues of disadvantage. This study was completed through primary qualitative research. The researcher conducted six semi-structured interviews with service users of the Education and Development Partnership Project. The findings were analysed from a social constructivist position utilising a critical theoretical approach. The key findings include the exploration of the experience of imposter syndrome when entering Third Level Education and how this may translate into apprehension when seeking or accepting supports available through Third Level Institutions. The Education and Development Partnership Project provides support independently to Third Level Institutions through peer-led groups and one-to-one support which has been effective. This highlights the importance of community-based projects in an area to support individuals in meeting their needs and goals.

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Chapter One: Introduction and Research Background

1.1 Introduction

The researcher will provide the reader with background context to the research topic and an overview of the services that the community partner, the Education and Development Partnership Project, provides to their service users. The research aims, objectives, and questions are discussed below. The theoretical considerations, the purpose and value of the research to Social Work are also outlined. An outline of each chapter and a glossary of terms are provided at the end of this chapter.

1.2 Research Title

“An Insight into the Experience of Individuals Entering Third Level Education from a Social Inclusion Perspective”.

1.3 Background Context

Social inclusion within higher education was first highlighted in Irish policy in the ‘Investment in Education’ report in the 1960s (Fitzgerald, 1965). This report highlighted the inequalities within the overall educational system in Ireland at the time. The research found that there was a low rate of progression into higher education. The research indicated that 12.8% of students in higher education were from professional families, while 0.3% were from unskilled or socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. This statistic highlighted the need for an increase in awareness and strategic planning surrounding social inclusion to increase participation within the education system (Riddell et al., 2018). In 2022, social inclusion in higher education was transcribed into law through the Higher Education Authority Act Section 8.1. Prior to this, social inclusion in higher education was addressed through various action plans. The Act states that the Higher Education Authority “shall have regard to: (d) to advance equality of opportunity, diversity and inclusion in higher education; (e) to strengthen engagement with the education system and society generally in performing its functions” (Government of Ireland, 2022). Studies conducted after the implementation of Section 8.1 of the Higher Education Authority Act have shown that participation rates of those from disadvantaged areas remain low. Studies completed for the academic years of 2019 and 2020 of new full-time students,

aged between 18 and 20, found that 10% were from disadvantaged areas while 18% were from affluent areas (Higher Education Authority, 2022).

1.4 Introduction to the Education and Development Partnership Project

The Education and Development Partnership Project (EDPP) is a joint project between Focus Ireland and the Recovery Academy co-ordinated by the Cork Local Drug and Alcohol Task Force. The EDPP provides an educational gateway to Third Level Education for individuals who have experienced addiction, homelessness, mental health issues, and other social issues of disadvantage. Identified issues of social disadvantage include limited access to resources such as financial, housing, and personal constraints. The EDPP uses a trauma-informed lens to provide peer-led support, developmental mentoring, financial assistance, life coaching, and academic structure to support their service users in their educational journey. The EDPP has two partners, Mr. Vincent Mulhern and Mr. Mark Wright. Mr. Mulhern is employed with Focus Ireland in their Youth Housing Department. He works with individuals aged between 18 and 25 years who have experienced homelessness. Once they are housed, Mr. Mulhern works with the service users to identify goals, such as education and employment, with the support of the EDPP. Mr. Wright is employed by the Recovery Academy co-ordinated by the Cork Local Drug and Alcohol Task Force as a project co-ordinator for the Boxing Clever Programme in Cork. The Boxing Clever Programme provides people in recovery from addiction with a daily structure of exercise and educational classes. Upon completing this course, individuals receive a QQI Level 4 and a QQI Level 5 Certificate. This gives graduates the opportunity to apply for additional further educational courses with the support of the EDPP. The EDPP works with their service users to resolve structural issues such as hereditary non-education, social exclusion, and poverty (Mulhern & Wright, n.d.).

1.5 Research Rationale

As this is a Community-Academic Research Links (CARL) initiative, the research was guided by the interests of the EDPP. From meeting with the partners of the EDPP and reviewing existing literature, it became evident that there is a lack of engagement in Third Level Education among individuals from socio-disadvantaged backgrounds. The EDPP provides a service to these individuals to assist them in accessing Third Level Education and has had

success. This has encouraged me to investigate the topic further and to assist the EDPP in ascertaining the effectiveness of their service and areas for potential improvement.

1.6 Research Aims and Objectives

The aim of the research is to provide the EDPP with evidence-based findings on its effectiveness and potential improvements that could be implemented. From this research, the partners have expressed their desire for the participants to receive the opportunity to have their voice heard regarding their experience using the EDPP service. Based on the compiled data, the partners hope to implement changes, where appropriate, which may empower their participants further, and they hope to expand the service to support a larger group of people. The objectives to meet the aim of the research are as follows:

1. This study will conduct a comprehensive literature review examining existing research and educational policies and programmes aimed at supporting those who have experienced marginalisation within Irish society.
2. This study will explore participants' experiences of the support provided by the Education and Development Partnership Project.
3. This study seeks to provide the Education and Development Partnership Project with evidence-based recommendations by drawing on participant interviews and existing literature.

1.7 Research Questions

1. What are users' experiences of the Education and Development Partnership Project, in terms of the effectiveness of the programme in providing an educational gateway to Third Level Education for individuals who have experienced social issues of disadvantage?
2. What improvements or changes are needed to increase the effectiveness of the project?

1.8 Purpose and Value of Research to Social Work

The research will benefit the Social Work profession by exploring the intersectionality of various social issues of disadvantage. This may give practitioners an alternative perspective

when working with individuals from areas of social disadvantage on various supports required to assist individuals seeking to access Third Level Education. The research aligns with multiple social work values, including promoting social justice, diversity, and equality.

1.9 Theoretical Considerations

The theory that is reflected in the research aims, objectives, and questions is critical theory. Critical theory identifies social research to be more than a task to collect and analyse data. It sees social research as a means to better explain and understand society and the way it functions. Critical theory aims to explore the causes and impacts of social inequality by examining exclusion and oppression within society and highlighting the existing structural and institutionalised forms of disadvantage and exclusion (Carey, 2013).

1.10 Structure of Dissertation

Chapter One – Introduction and Research Background:

The first chapter provides information and rationale for the research subject and an introduction to the research partner, the Education and Development Partnership Project. The research aims, objectives, and questions are outlined.

Chapter Two – Literature Review:

The second chapter examines the past and current educational policies relating to social inclusion and accessibility. This chapter will explore existing literature relating to engagement in higher education of individuals who have experienced social issues of disadvantage, the correlation between drug use and education, and the Boxing Clever Programme.

Chapter Three – Methodology:

The third chapter thoroughly outlines the methods used to complete the research. This chapter details the theoretical perspectives of the research, the research methods, ethical considerations, limitations, challenges, and the reflexivity of the researcher.

Chapter Four – Findings:

The fourth chapter highlights the key findings from the raw data gathered during the interviews. The data will be arranged using thematic analysis.

Chapter Five – Discussion:

The fifth chapter will analyse the themes outlined in the findings chapter. The discussion will link the findings to relevant literature.

Chapter Six – Conclusion and Recommendations:

The sixth, and final, chapter will draw conclusions from the research gathered and outline recommendations and implications from the findings. It will also contain a reflection of the research process by the researcher.

1.11 Glossary of Terms

CARL – Community-Academic Research Links

CBPR – Community-Based Participatory Research

EDPP – Education and Development Partnership Project

MSW – Master of Social Work

PLC – Post Leaving Certificate

UCC – University College Cork

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This literature review aims to outline the research available on the topic of education from a social inclusion perspective. This chapter will refer to literature on socio-economic disadvantaged areas and the impact on educational outcomes. The chapter will also continue to review the previous and existing policies and legislation in place to promote social inclusion in Third Level Education.

2.2 Socio-Economic Disadvantaged Areas

Socio-economic disadvantaged areas are defined as lacking access to vital resources. This includes access to education, health care, and employment opportunities. These areas are often linked to anti-social behaviour (Cronin et al., 2025). Children raised in socio-economic disadvantaged areas are at risk of social exclusion, poor academic performance, and a lack of employment opportunities in comparison to children raised in more affluent areas (Cronin et al., 2025).

2.3 Factors of Socio-Economic Disadvantage in Relation to Education

Individuals who experience socio-economic issues of disadvantage from an early age are at a higher risk of experiencing factors which impede their opportunities to successfully progress through Second Level Education and into Third Level Education. These may include low family income, underage alcohol consumption, illicit substance use, poor school attendance or school refusal, youth homelessness, and the requirement to work part-time to support their family (Higher Education Authority, 2015). Studies have shown that those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds are also less likely to engage in higher education than those from more affluent areas. The reasons found in this study include financial instability and territorial stigmatisation (Scanlon, et al., 2019).

2.4 Underage Alcohol Consumption, Drug Misuse, and Engagement with Education

In Ireland, young people have a high prevalence of underage alcohol consumption and drug use. A Growing Up in Ireland study was completed with young adults aged 17 and 18. The

findings show that over 90% had consumed alcohol. Furthermore, the study found that 67% had their first alcoholic drink between the ages of 15 and 17, while 8% had their first alcoholic drink at the age of 13 (McNamara et al., 2020). In 2021, a study on drug consumption in Ireland was conducted. Their findings highlighted that the youngest age group in the study, aged 15 to 24 years, had the highest prevalence of drug use (Mongan et al., 2021). They found that the prevalence of drug use for those aged 15 to 34 years having only completed a lower Secondary Level Education was significantly higher than individuals of the same age who had completed their Leaving Certificate and/or attended higher education (Mongan et al., 2021). These statistics show that younger individuals who have a lower level of education currently have the highest prevalence of drug use. This potential could lead to an increase in substance misuse or addiction.

2.5 Youth Homelessness

The term youth homelessness relates to individuals experiencing homelessness aged between 18 and 24 years. Potential reasons for youth homelessness include lack of support when leaving State Care, familial relationship issues, mental health challenges, economic pressures, and unemployment (Focus Ireland, 2021). The earliest statistic on youth homelessness was reported in April 2014 by the Department of Housing. There were 436 young people reported as homeless. In February 2017, 776 young people were reported as homeless by the Department of Housing. This was a 78% increase in three years, with youth homelessness accounting for 10% of the homeless population (Focus Ireland, 2021). In May 2025, there was a further increase in youth homelessness with 1,849 young people reported as homeless (Fhearraigh, 2025). Focus Ireland provides a Youth Housing service, which has adopted the principles of the Housing First model currently being used to tackle homelessness in Ireland. Focus Ireland aims to provide young people experiencing homelessness with housing as soon as possible. Once the young person is housed, Focus Ireland provides a multitude of person-centred supports. These include healthcare, education, and financial advice. These supports are provided with the aim of increasing a young person's independent living skills and decreasing the likelihood of any young person returning to homelessness in the future (Focus Ireland, 2021).

2.6 Higher Education Access Route

In 2000, the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) programme was developed and implemented. The aim of this programme is to provide socio-economically disadvantaged students with the opportunity to attend higher education to promote accessibility and social inclusion (Access College, 2026). The HEAR programme offers students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds places in various courses at reduced Leaving Certificate points. Students under the age of 23 may avail of the HEAR programme. When HEAR was implemented in 2000, it was only available to students attending secondary schools located in socio-economically disadvantaged areas that were in receipt of additional funding due to the school's location. In 2009, the HEAR programme was extended to include all secondary schools. The criteria to receive assistance from the HEAR programme includes "being from an under-represented socio-economic group, living in a disadvantaged area, having attended a designated disadvantaged school or being in receipt of a means tested social welfare payment or medical card" (Riddell et al., 2018, p.80). The number of places available to students through the HEAR programme may vary depending on the institution, and students must meet the minimum criteria set for the course they wish to study (Riddell et al., 2018). The introduction of the HEAR programme has increased accessibility for those aspiring to participate in higher education who are from lower socio-economic groups. Following the introduction of this scheme, participation rates have slightly increased but still remain low in comparison to other socio-economic groups (Scanlon, et al., 2019).

2.7 The National Office of Equity of Access

The National Office of Equity of Access was created in 2003 due to an increase in documentation of the disparities in higher education participation between those from affluent areas and those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Their primary focus is to oversee policies, documentation and practice in relation to educational accessibility for those who are underrepresented in higher education, this includes individuals from a socio-economically disadvantaged background (Higher Education Authority, 2004). The National Office of Equity of Access highlighted the importance and the need for accessibility of higher education to promote social mobility. Social mobility through accessibility of higher education increases employment rates in higher quality jobs among higher education graduates (Riddell

et al., 2018). Between 2005 and the present day, the National Office of Equity of Access has released four action plans to ensure equal access to education is available.

2.8 Achieving Equity of Access to Higher Education in Ireland Action Plan 2005 - 2007

In 2004, the National Office of Equity of Access released their first action plan, 'Achieving Equity of Access to Higher Education in Ireland Action Plan 2005 - 2007' (Higher Education Authority, 2004). This action plan was created following a review of surveys and reports from the previous twenty years, which demonstrated the prevalence of inequity of access in education. The action plan states that each year over 4,000 students leave school prior to completing their Junior Certificate, over 750,000 adults have little or no formal education qualifications, and less than 2% of students progress into higher education. Out of the 2%, students were predominantly from a middle to upper social class (Higher Education Authority, 2004). The action plan aimed to provide a national framework to achieve equity of access to higher education, provide routes of access, and provide necessary financial support to students who may have needed it. The target groups of the action plan were individuals from unskilled and agricultural backgrounds, mature students, individuals with disabilities, and individuals from the Traveller Community. The focus for individuals from unskilled and agricultural backgrounds was based on socio-economic group rather than social class, local area, and parental education (Higher Education Authority, 2004).

2.9 The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008 - 2013

The second action plan was released in 2008, 'The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008 - 2013' (Higher Education Authority, 2008). The focus of this plan was to build on the progress of the 2004 action plan. The target group remained as the above-mentioned groups but was expanded to include semi-skilled manual groups, following further research. To increase accessibility to higher education, they introduced flexible and part-time learning to increase participation. This action plan also saw the introduction of non-standard routes to higher education to acknowledge alternatives to access higher education (Higher Education Authority, 2008).

2.10 The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015 - 2019

The third action plan was released in 2015, ‘The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015 - 2019’ (Higher Education Authority, 2015). The action plan acknowledged that there had been improvements in many areas outlined in the previous action plan, but some targets had not been met. The statistics gathered in preparation for this action plan showed that the participation rate of individuals from semi-skilled or unskilled backgrounds was 26%. The participation rate among individuals from higher social classes was near full participation. This is primarily evident in the Dublin region based on postal addresses. Some areas have 99% participation in higher education while others have participation rates as low as 15% (Higher Education Authority, 2015). The action plan aimed to build on the progress made by previous action plans and address the unmet targets. This action plan was criticised at the time as ethnic minority groups, other than the Traveller Community, were not included in the action plan, despite an increase in immigration to Ireland at the time (Riddell et al., 2018).

2.11 National Access Plan: A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022 - 2028

As stated above, social inclusion in higher education was written into law through the Higher Education Authority Act Section 8.1 in 2022 (Government of Ireland, 2022). Following the law being passed, the Higher Education Authority released the ‘National Access Plan: A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022 - 2028’ with the aim to increase equity of access, participation, and success in higher education across Ireland from 2022 to 2028 (Higher Education Authority, 2022). Throughout this strategic plan, the Higher Education Authority has set realistic and achievable goals to increase participation in education of working-class individuals from socio-economically disadvantaged areas and individuals with disabilities. The strategic plan acknowledges that students experiencing disadvantage come from various and diverse backgrounds. Their list includes students from low income families or who are dependent on long-term social welfare payments, students from socio-economically disadvantaged areas, mature students, students who have experience in the care system, students who have experienced domestic violence, students who are carers, students who have experienced homelessness, and students who have experience with the Criminal Justice System (Higher Education Authority, 2022). The National Access Plan identified six goals, including inclusivity. They highlighted the need to embrace diversity

in the student population and to provide all students with an accessible, supportive, and inclusive higher education experience. To create an inclusive environment, the Higher Education Authority aims to ensure higher education is accessible, every student feels a sense of belonging within higher education institutions, and all programmes have a diverse student population. Studies completed in the academic year of 2019 and 2020 have shown that of new full-time students aged between 18 and 20, 10% came from disadvantaged areas while 18% came from affluent areas (Higher Education Authority, 2022).

2.12 Boxing Clever

Boxing Clever originated in Ballymun, Dublin and was introduced in Cork in 2022. The Boxing Clever programme is a multi-agency project which integrates fitness and education as an early addiction recovery intervention. Boxing Clever includes participants who are not yet substance free. This is an acknowledgement to the ongoing nature of recovery (Brennan & Wright, 2024). The term addiction includes the use of alcohol and/or illicit substances. Addiction is classed as a chronic disease where recovery includes cycles of remission, relapse, and treatment. Sustained recovery may take years to achieve, with significant social and economic impacts on the individual. An individual's journey on sustained recovery must incorporate their history, socio-economic background, and ambitions in life (Okrant et al., 2023). Boxing Clever Cork is a 30-week, community-based programme. They can facilitate up to 25 individuals, who participate in seven hours of education, fitness classes, and substance use rehabilitation per week. Once individuals have completed the 30-week programme, they are awarded two qualifications, one QQI Level 4 and one QQI Level 5 Certificates, related to Fitness and Community Addiction Studies (Brennan & Wright, 2024). The graduates of Boxing Clever have the opportunity to continue their education into Third Level Institutions, should they wish to further their education.

2.13 Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the prevalence and the impact of social issues of disadvantage, and the policies currently and previously in place to increase participation in Third Level Education for individuals who are socially disadvantaged.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the researcher will outline their chosen research design and ethical considerations when researching the effectiveness of the EDPP and the changes that may be implemented to improve their service. This chapter will discuss theoretical perspective, community-based participatory research, research methodology, data collection, data analysis, ethical considerations, research limitations, and researcher reflexivity.

3.2 Ontology

Ontology in social research refers to the “nature of being or social entities” (Carey, 2017, p. 67). Research questions from an ontological perspective may be broad in nature and include a persons overall experience within social reality (Carey, 2017). The research is examined from a social constructivism position. Social constructivism states “truth, or meaning, comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world” (Crotty, 1998, p.8). Furthermore, social constructivism highlights “the importance of culture and context in understanding what is experienced in the wider community and in constructing knowledge built on this understanding” (Pritchard & Woollard, 2010, p.20). By adopting a social constructivism position, this research aims to gain an insight into the experiences of the service users of the EDPP and the impact their experiences may have on their views regarding Third Level Education.

3.3 Epistemology and Theoretical Perspective

Epistemology refers to the “nature of knowledge and knowledge production, including what the researcher counts as knowledge” (Carey, 2017, p.78). Epistemology is represented by the researcher through the theories used in the methodology, data collection, and data analysis (Carey, 2017). The researcher will explore the experiences of service users relating to the effectiveness of the EDPP through the implementation of an epidemiological approach of critical theory. Critical theory has been described to view social research as “a political activity which can highlight disadvantage, power imbalances and question established normative practices, values, traditions, and so forth” (Carey, 2017, p.76). By adopting a critical theoretical approach, it allows the researcher to collect and analyse data to help identify and explain the

impact of social inequalities present within society. This approach primarily emphasises structural forms of social exclusion, discrimination, and social disadvantage (Carey, 2017). By adopting a critical theoretical approach, this researcher aims to gain an understanding of the effectiveness of the EDPP in relation to supporting individuals, who have experienced social issues of disadvantage, entering Third Level Education.

3.4 Community-Based Participatory Research

This study was completed collaboratively with the EDPP as part of the UCC initiative Community-Academic Research Links (CARL). The CARL initiative invites non-profit organisations or community organisations to suggest potential research topics that can be completed by students on their behalf (University College Cork, 2019). CARL projects are completed through Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR). CBPR is described as a partnership between the researcher and the community organisation (Springer & Skolarus, 2019). CBPR involves the researcher and the community organisation working together to develop a research question and decide on the best research method to achieve the objectives and aims of the study. By using a CBPR approach, it allows the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the community's strengths, challenges, and experiences (Springer & Skolarus, 2019).

3.5 Research Methodology

The aim of this study was to gain an understanding of service users' experience of engaging with the EDPP. This is to explore the effectiveness of the EDPP services for individuals who have experienced social issues of disadvantage. The EDPP intends to implement potential changes highlighted during the study, where applicable, to increase the effectiveness of the services being provided. A qualitative research approach was adopted to complete this research. Qualitative research is described as a way of gaining insight into social reality (Carey, 2012). This type of research is often used to “unpack the meanings people ascribe to activities, situations, events, or artefacts; build a depth of understanding about some aspect of social life” (Leavy, 2014, p.2). By implementing a qualitative research approach, the researcher can explore sensitive issues, including poverty and addiction. It allows participants to provide details on their lived experience and give an insight into the challenges they may have faced (Carey, 2012).

3.6 Research Methods

There are three main methods used within qualitative research. These include interviews, focus groups, and participant observation (Zahle, 2018). The researcher and community partner decided the best qualitative research approach was to individually interview service users. This was to ensure that the participants' voice was heard and understood, to ensure accurate data was collected. This decision was made as interviews are a flexible and adaptable method in which the researcher may guide the conversation based on the participant's responses. Through interviews the researcher would also have the ability to gather more specific raw data to capture the participants' experience with the EDPP. Participants are given the opportunity to use their own language to express their opinions and emotions. Interviews recognise that participants are experts in their lived experience and are the most knowledgeable person to describe their experiences (Carey, 2012). The community partner expressed their wish for this study to be service user led as the EDPP is led from the bottom up.

Interviews may be conducted in a semi-structured and unstructured manner. A semi-structured interview consists of the researcher having prepared several questions to guide the interview as it progresses, to ensure all relevant information is collected. Unstructured interviews are conducted in a conversational manner on the topic of the study (Zahle, 2018). The researcher and community partner agreed for the interviews to be conducted in a semi-structured manner to ensure all of the research questions were answered and the participants' experiences and thoughts were represented accurately.

3.7 Sampling Participants

The criteria that participants needed to meet included; being an active service user of the EDPP and currently engaging in education. There was no limitation on age or gender. All service users of the project are over 18.

The researcher joined the community partners during a peer support group session to inform all potential participants of the study. Potential participants were encouraged to consider joining the study. Potential participants were not asked to indicate whether they were interested in joining the study during the peer support session. They were requested to contact the researcher independently after the meeting to express their interest. All potential participants

were informed that their contributions would be anonymised, and any identifying information would be removed. They were also informed that the EDPP would be receiving the fully anonymised research report only.

3.8 Data Analysis

To analyse the data collected, the researcher will be applying a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.1). Thematic analysis establishes and interprets recurring themes within data obtained.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

Researchers must conduct their study in an ethical manner throughout all stages of the study. This is to ensure researchers protect their participants by considering the potential risks of the research but also the benefits (Mohd Arifin, 2018). As the researcher was conducting interviews with a potentially vulnerable population, it was important to consider the risks participating in the study may pose. To limit these risks, the researcher ensured all information gathered was anonymised, and each participant had adequate supports available. These considerations are discussed in detail below.

3.10 Ethical Approval

The researcher took several steps throughout the research procedure to ensure that the process was ethical. The researcher received ethical approval from UCCs’ MSW Social Research Ethics Committee prior to commencing their research. The community partner stated that no additional ethical approval would be needed once ethical approval was granted from UCCs’ MSW Social Research Ethics Committee.

3.11 Data Collection and Storage

The researcher conducted all interviews through Microsoft Teams. The researcher logged into Microsoft Teams using their UCC credentials, to ensure the interviews were stored securely and data was protected. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. All raw data from the

interviews were stored in a shared folder on Microsoft Teams. This data was only accessible to the researcher and their UCC dissertation supervisor who will store the data for a period of time consistent with UCC research policies.

3.12 Informed Consent

Informed consent is described as the process in which a researcher ensures the participants in a study are protected and fully informed of the nature of the study. This includes open and ongoing communication between the researcher and participants regarding the conditions outlined in the agreement to participate in the study (Sieber & Tolich, 2013). The participants were given an information leaflet and consent form during an information session. All participants were encouraged to consider participating in the study and to contact the researcher with any further questions. Prior to beginning each interview, the researcher explained the study and the nature of the interview again to ensure the participant fully understood the study. All consent forms were scanned and securely stored on a Microsoft Teams folder by UCC. The researcher used their UCC credentials to log into Microsoft Teams. The researcher's dissertation supervisor also had access to this folder. Once the consent forms were scanned and uploaded, the originals were destroyed by shredding the document.

3.13 Confidentiality and Anonymity

The study involved interviewing individuals from a vulnerable population in society. Participants had experienced social issues of disadvantage, including addiction and homelessness. Ensuring the anonymity of each participant is vitally important to safeguard participants from experiencing any further stigmatisation due to the study. To ensure anonymity, the researcher removed all identifiable information from the final research project. This included changing the participants names, genders, educational institutions, the courses they are studying, and any illicit substances they may have used.

To ensure confidentiality, the researcher did not share any raw data with the community partner. The partners received the fully anonymised final research project. The participants were asked to identify an independent support person, outside of the community partner, to contact should they experience any distress following the interviews. This was to ensure the confidentiality of all participants while also ensuring they receive any support needed.

3.14 Pre-Interview Preparation

The researcher joined an existing peer support group with potential participants. The researcher gave a short presentation on the study to inform all possible participants. The researcher was supported by the community partners during this session to assist with rapport building. Each participant was given an information leaflet and consent form during the session. The researcher encouraged all service users present to consider taking part in the study and to contact the researcher directly with any further questions and to express an interest in participating.

3.15 Debriefing Process

In advance of the interviews, the researcher asked each participant to identify a professional support person in their life, who was not involved in the EDPP, who they could contact for support following the interview if needed. If a participant expressed that they experienced any distress during the interview, the researcher would then encourage them to contact their named professional support person.

3.16 Research Limitations

The limitations in this study include sample size and timeframe. As the researcher interviewed between 5 and 7 participants, this is considered a small sample size. There was a short timeframe for the researcher to conduct interviews and complete an analysis of the information gathered. The researcher spoke with the community partners, and it was decided that due to time constraints, it would be best to interview between 5 and 7 participants. This was to ensure the researcher had adequate time to attend a peer support group to begin to build rapport and trust with potential participants. Participants' weariness of interacting with new people was highlighted as an area of concern by the partners in the application to CARL. This limited the scope of the study. Further research on the topic may explore participants' background and the factors which may have prevented them from engaging in education prior to joining the EDPP.

3.17 Researcher Reflexivity

Researcher reflexivity is described as an analysis of “the research process by both, the researcher and the researched with regard to how their socioeconomic status, gender, and general values in life may impinge on the research process and in particular on the interpretation” (Simbürger, 2014, p.3). Reflexivity ensures that researchers have an awareness of how their own personal experiences may influence their interpretation of the data collected. The idea of reflexivity in research acknowledges that academic knowledge, personal experiences, and political influence cannot be separated from each other but promotes researchers to actively reflect throughout the research process to identify if their previous lived experience may be influencing their researcher outcomes (Simbürger, 2014).

The researcher has a background in social care and was previously employed in a Housing with Supports team which implemented the values of the Housing First model for several years. Due to the similarities of the participant experience and the experience of previous service users that the researcher worked with, the researcher has an awareness that this similarity may impact or influence their interpretation of data collected. The researcher reflected regularly on the research experience in conjunction with their research supervisor, particularly during the interview process and the analysis of the data. This was to ensure that any preconceptions and beliefs did not impact the outcome of the study.

3.18 Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the ontology, epistemology and theoretical perspective, community-based participatory research, research methodology, research limitations, and researcher reflexivity. This chapter also highlighted the research design, plan, and ethical considerations which were carried out during the research process.

Chapter Four: Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will present the findings from semi-structured interviews conducted with six service users of the EDPP. The interview prompts used were guided by the research aims, objectives and questions. The interviews focused on the service users' journey into Third Level Education, their experience of attending a Third Level Institution, the supports available through the EDPP, and potential improvements to the service being provided. The researcher conducted the interviews with a critical theory approach. This was adopted to explore the impact of the supports provided by the EDPP on the service users' journey into Third Level Education. To ensure the participants of the study remain anonymous, their names and any identifying information have been removed from this report. The researcher used the method of thematic analysis to analyse the data collected. Six main themes were evident.

Theme One	Experiences of Marginalisation
Theme Two	Alternative Pathways into Third Level Education
Theme Three	Feelings of Imposter Syndrome
Theme Four	Additional Supports in Third Level Education
Theme Five	The Importance of Relating to those Providing Supports
Theme Six	Potential Improvements to the Education Development Partnership Project

4.2 Theme One: Experiences of Marginalisation

All participants in the study have experienced marginalisation within society. Their experiences include homelessness, addiction, and convictions. During the interviews, the participants explained the impact these experiences had on their lives. This included incarceration, the breakdown of their marriage, and the loss of their career prior to joining the EDPP. One participant spoke about their current struggles with homelessness while attending Third Level Education and remaining in recovery.

Participants spoke about suffering from addiction and being convicted of crimes which resulted in incarceration. They explained that a lot of information relating to recovery is advertised in prisons and this is how they became aware of different supports that are available. They stated:

“I got caught in addiction. I caught up on crime and then ended up in prison. I’ve been in and out of recovery for some time”.

“In fairness, anything recovery based, it’d be advertised in the prison and not a lot of people would kind of be aware of it”.

“I’m still early recovery. Like they say the first five years are still early days like. So ya, I’m dealing with a lot of stuff”.

A participant spoke about suffering from addiction and how this impacted all elements of their life. They stated that they lost their job, their marriage ended and they received a conviction due to their addiction. They stated:

“I got involved in a marriage. Unfortunately, addiction took over. So, my career was taken away. Because of my convictions, I did a residential treatment, and I came back here to Cork City. If I moved back home, I knew that I wouldn’t have stayed in recovery”.

Another participant explained that they left their home county to move to Cork following their time in a residential treatment centre. They stated that they are currently living in homeless accommodation while applying for housing. They stated:

“The last piece of the puzzle since moving to Cork is housing. I have six months where I’m staying so I am hoping to get something sorted but renting is expensive”.

4.3 Theme Two: Alternative Pathways into Third Level Education

All participants took alternative pathways into Third Level Education. Two participants spoke about leaving school once they completed the Junior Certificate. Several participants completed the Boxing Clever Programme as a pathway into Third Level Education. Others completed their Leaving Certificate and educational courses before experiencing marginalisation.

One participant spoke of leaving Secondary School following their Junior Certificate to begin a trade. They stated:

“I left school at 15 and started a trade. I’ve been qualified since I was 21. Second Level Education wasn’t really for me like I had no interest in finishing my Leaving Cert, so Third Level never really came into it you know”.

Other participants spoke of leaving Secondary School following their Junior Certificate and was unable to read or write. One participant explained that they learned how to read and write while in prison. They stated:

“I spent more time outside the principal’s office in school than I did in class. I knew how to write my name and my address but that was it”.

“A teacher in the prison said that I probably had dyslexia and helped me to learn how to read and write”.

Several participants completed the Boxing Clever Programme through the Recovery Academy. The participants who graduate from the Boxing Clever Programme have the opportunity to continue their education in UCC as part of the Youth and Community Level 7 course.

A participant said that they had completed a residential treatment course and joined the Boxing Clever Programme once they returned to Cork. They stated that they were nervous about completing the programme but continued due to the possibility of attending UCC. They stated:

“I did a residential treatment, and I came back here to Cork City. That’s when I did the Boxing Clever. I was very nervous doing that, but Mark reassured me and was like there’s an option here to go to UCC at the end of this. So even on the hard days, I stayed in recovery”.

Another participant explained that they had the opportunity to complete the Boxing Clever Programme two years prior to when they began the course. They stated that they did not avail of the opportunity. They relapsed in their recovery, and this resulted in a period of incarceration. Once they were released, they attended a residential treatment centre and then applied for the Boxing Clever Programme. They stated:

“I had the option to do the Boxing Clever; I didn’t avail of it. I struggled with the recovery part. Like that I ended up going getting clean for a while, getting back in trouble, going back to prison, and when it came up then I decided to go to a residential treatment centre. I graduated (the treatment centre) when I finished phases one and two came back to Cork and started the Boxing Clever. It was an option then to finish the Boxing Clever to go to UCC.

That really was the only time I kind of thought of it (Third Level Education)”.

Half of the participants spoke of having Third Level Education experience prior to experiencing marginalisation.

One participant explained that they completed the Leaving Certificate, obtained a Third Level degree and was in full time employment before their struggles with addiction began. They stated:

“I would have been in college before. Unfortunately, addiction took over. So, my career was taken away”.

Another participant explained that they completed the Leaving Certificate but had a negative experience in school. They continued into Third Level Education to complete a two-year course. They stated:

“I finished Secondary School. I went to Third Level. School was a nightmare. It was very difficult, the bullying was very, very prevalent. I went to college for two years. That was grand. But that's when all my problems started”.

Some participants explained that they completed their Leaving Certificate and completed a Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) course in a local college before experiencing homelessness. Once they decided to return to Third Level Education, their support worker from homeless services remained as a support through the EDPP. They stated:

“So, I left Secondary School, I did my Leaving Cert. Then I went and did a PLC course”.

“See I had him as my support worker because I was in (a homeless service) when I was homeless. Then going back to education, he links in with the assignments and stuff like that”.

4.4 Theme Three: Feelings of Imposter Syndrome

All participants spoke of their feelings of imposter syndrome while attending Third Level Education. All spoke about having the sense that they did not belong in Third Level Education, to the extent that some felt that members of the security team would question why they were on the campus.

One participant spoke about the feeling that security in the building, where their lectures take place, would query why they are there and they felt out of place. They stated:

“It creeps in every now and again. Like going in through the hall where we do our lectures, there's a security guard. Like when I'm walking up, I just feel like, you know, they're gonna say ‘What are you doing here?’”.

Another participant spoke about their constant worries, if they should be in UCC and if they belonged there. They also spoke about being reluctant to participate in conversations during lectures due to fears of being judged by other students. They stated:

“I'm like, ohh, Jesus, should I be here?”.

“I am holding back small bit with my experience because of the embarrassment that is coming up for me. And I would say that's kind of hard to sit with it, especially in lectures, being like, I have something to add here, but I'm afraid everybody else is going to judge me”.

A participant spoke about feelings of panic in the first weeks of attending lectures. They explained that they had to leave lectures to take a few moments alone before returning. They stated:

“It was the second or third week when we were put into groups. And that was just very difficult, I had to get up and leave. I had to get up and walk out the door and just go outside and gather myself together, in a way it was difficult”.

Another participant spoke about feelings of imposter syndrome when first attending university. They spoke of their belief that people like them did not belong in universities. They stated:

“I'm the first out of my family to go to university. I always thought that university was not for people like me”.

4.5 Theme Four: Additional Supports in Third Level Education

When asked, all participants spoke about the additional supports available in their respective Third Level Institutions. Some participants spoke about availing of the supports available and their experiences, while others spoke about feeling apprehensive to engage with these supports.

When the researcher asked, one participant explained that they were availing of services within the Disability Support Service during their first year of university. They spoke about the supports available during their exams but have since disengaged as they do not have exams in their current modules. They acknowledged that they can re-engage with the supports should they require it. They stated:

“I am linked in with a disability service, but like that the first year during exams season for supports, after that I didn't really need to go around, you know. Like, it's there if you want them”.

Another participant spoke highly of the Skills Centre and the supports that they have available. They stated that they have been responsive whenever they have worked with them. They stated:

“The college has a lot on. I used the Skills Centre. When I linked in, it has been really great and they respond quickly. Like they've really created an environment, you know, that we can bring whatever to them. There's nothing worse than being in college and having to wait for a response, you know? If you're waiting for responses for a week when there is a due date. It's stressful. They've been very, very fast at responding”.

When asked, participants explained that they are aware of the different supports available in the University, but they are reluctant to reach out to them. They acknowledged the supports available from individual lecturers and their reluctance to reach out as they feel they would be taking up too much of their time. They stated that they are more receptive to the supports available from the EDPP as they have built a relationship with them. They stated:

“Like that, after every lecture they were giving their e-mail, some of them gave their number. If you ever had any questions or you want to meet up, they'll have a chat with you and give you their time. But after a couple of video calls with the lecturer, you're talking nearly half an hour of the video call and that's what, forty students? So, you know what I mean? They are very supportive but it's a lot for them”.

“To be honest, I haven't availed of them. There are options that I could have taken, but my ego and pride would get in the way. Like I don't need nothing and no help. Yeah, I kind of struggled reaching up to the lads as well, but because I kind of have a relationship with them, it's a bit easier”.

One participant spoke highly of their course co-ordinator. They explained they had partially completed the application for the course but did not complete it. The course co-ordinator reached out to query if they were still interested in applying for the course. The participant explained that they did not have the funds to join the course. The course co-ordinator provided them with details of various grants that they could be eligible for. They stated:

“The course co-ordinator is very, very good. It was actually them that mentioned the emergency fund. It was them that emailed me. I don't know how they seen it, but they could see that I have applied for the course and then stopped. They reached out to find out why and then gave me the information on the emergency fund”.

4.6 Theme Five: The Importance of Relating to those Providing Supports

When questioned about the supports provided by the EDPP, all participants stated that the relatability of the partners of the EDPP is essential to accepting the support being offered. Several participants stated that they struggle to accept support and that the existing relationship with the partners helped them to accept the support when they needed it.

One participant spoke about the relationships they have built with the partners and the importance of their relatability, support and guidance. They highlighted the importance of having supports to rely on should they need it. They stated:

“I don't want to be putting them on too much of a pedestal, because they're very humble people. They really, really are but you know, their support and their guidance and just how relational they are has really brought me to the stage where I would go for it, you know. I mean, having them to fall back on has been really helpful”.

Another participant explained that they may not have attended Third Level Education or accepted the support and guidance offered by the EDPP if they did not have an existing relationship with the partners. They stated:

“I probably wouldn't have done it, to be honest with you. The fact that I had that connection with them and I had respect for them made it easier to accept the help”.

Participants spoke about the importance of the partners sharing their own experiences in Third Level Education. Sharing their own experiences and feelings while in Third Level Education increased participants' belief in the partners and the reassurances they provide. They stated:

“Their experiences said to me that they felt that same way. So that gives me reassurance”.

“They share so much with me about their own journey that I'm like, wow, you know”.

“When you have somebody that believes in you and tells you that you will be OK and that you can do this and that there is a chance, but I definitely would not have been there without their support”.

“I know they're there and they're always there and they will bend over backwards regardless of their own routines to make sure we get this over the line like, you know”.

4.7 Theme Six: Potential Improvements to the Education and Development Partnership Project

The researcher queried if there were any areas in which the EDPP could improve or change to ensure they are meeting the needs of all the participants. The participants highlighted four areas in which the EDPP could possibly implement changes. These suggestions are highlighted below and will be added to the recommendations as this theme directly answers one of the research questions.

A participant suggested that it may be beneficial for the partners to explore their previous education. They explained that the EDPP follows a five-year plan for all participants. This includes a two-year Diploma and a three-year Degree. They believe that there is space for this to be explored and alternative shorter options offered to participants. They stated:

“I think there could be a bit of exploration for people who have an education to maybe go straight into the degree, but I'm very, very aware of the fact of what the partners said. And it's from, you know, lived experience of them and how they see it. So, I think there could be a bit of exploration in that kind of way and that they could work together, you know, to support people because five years is a long time”.

Participants also made additional suggestions for potential changes. These included suggestions regarding communication and a group session prior to beginning a course. They explained that, at times, they have missed group sessions due to miscommunications. They suggested that one person takes responsibility for contacting participants to inform them of sessions. They also spoke about their course containing content that they found triggering due to their past. They suggested that it may be beneficial for a group session to occur prior to beginning a course to ensure that participants are informed of potentially triggering topics. They stated:

“The only thing I'd say is the communication about group stuff. It's easy to dismiss text messages about stuff. Not that it's on them, but like, even if it's like one person to be more responsible to let people know that sessions are on”.

“I'd say it'd be handy if they did it (group session) before. There could be some aspects of this course that could trigger you and you're going to have difference of opinions. Try not to take it personally yeah, but like that yeah that people still could take it personally but at least you're kind of prewarned that it's not your second lecture”.

One participant highlighted issues they had with the Garda Vetting Department in the University. They explained that they received a phone call from a member of staff querying their previous conviction. They expressed their concern about receiving this phone call as they were speaking to someone they did not know about sensitive information. The staff member did not ensure the participant was in a private place to conduct the phone call. The participant suggested that it may be beneficial for the partners to be included in this process. They stated:

“The college rang me one day, now that is something that they need to work on. I was home but I could have been on the bus or in work and I got a call asking me about my disclosure. For me that was the only thing that I didn't really like. I think needs to be handled a little bit with care. Like I was talking to a woman on the phone that I didn't know. And it wasn't the course coordinate. It wasn't the partners. Have it come back and to be cleared with the disclosure was powerful. It was just in the handling of the information”.

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the themes that emerged following a thematic analysis of the data collected through semi-structured interviews of six service users of the EDPP. The participants spoke openly about their life experiences, including their struggles, their feelings around being in Third Level Education, the importance of the supports they receive from the EDPP, and suggestions regarding areas of change.

Chapter Five: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will analyse the themes from the above chapter by comparing the participants' experiences to existing literature and theoretical frameworks. The themes were identified to help answer the research questions. They are:

1. What are users' experiences of the Education and Development Partnership Project in terms of the effectiveness of the programme in providing an educational gateway to Third Level Education for individuals who have experienced social issues of disadvantage?
2. What improvements or changes are needed to increase the effectiveness of the project?

The first research question will be addressed in this chapter. The second research question will be addressed in the recommendations section of the next chapter.

5.2 The Impact of Social Disadvantage on the Participants Education

To gain an understanding of each participant's experience of the EDPPs service of providing an educational gateway into Third Level Education for individuals who have experienced social issues of disadvantage, the researcher explored the participants' experiences of social disadvantage and the impact this had on their education. This is highlighted in theme one, experiences of marginalisation, and theme two, alternative pathways to education.

Some participants reported that they left school following their Junior Certificate. Others disclosed that they were unable to read or write following their educational journey. Following their experiences of marginalisation once they left school, both participants began using drugs. As stated in Chapter Two, individuals aged between 15 and 24 have the highest rate of drug use in Ireland. A study by Mongan et al. (2021) found that the highest prevalence of drug use in this age category had only completed a lower Secondary Level Education in comparison to individuals in the same age category who completed their Leaving Certificate (Mongan et al., 2021). The participant's experience is aligned with this research.

Five of the six participants completed the Boxing Clever Programme as an alternative route into education regardless of their previous educational experiences. 'The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008 – 2013' introduced the use of non-standard

routes into higher education to acknowledge alternative access, such as the Boxing Clever Programme (Higher Education Authority, 2008). The Boxing Clever Programme integrates fitness and education as an early addiction recovery intervention. Once individuals have completed the 30-week programme, they are awarded two QQI Level 4 and QQI Level 5 qualifications related to Fitness and Community Addiction Studies. The graduates of the Boxing Clever Programme have the opportunity to continue their education into Third Level Institutions, should they wish to (Brennan & Wright, 2024). The Boxing Clever Programme acknowledges the cyclical nature of recovery, which includes remission, relapse, and treatment. Sustained recovery must incorporate their history, their socio-economic background, and their ambitions in life (Okrant et al., 2023). This is evident as one participant explained that their goal was to attend University and this goal was crucial to remaining in recovery. *“There’s an option here to go to UCC at the end of this. So even on the hard days, I stayed in recovery”*. Their experience is a direct testimonial to the importance of the inclusion of their ambitions in life as part of sustained recovery.

Another participant explained that they experienced youth homelessness once they completed their Leaving Certificate and a PLC course. As stated above, youth homelessness relates to individuals aged between 18 and 24. In 2021, youth homelessness accounted for 10% of the homeless population (Focus Ireland, 2021). Focus Ireland provides the Youth Housing service in Cork. Once housed, their support workers assist individuals to identify goals, such as continuing their education. The participant stated, *“then going back to education, he links in with the assignments and stuff like that”*. This is with the goal of decreasing the likelihood of service users returning to homelessness (Focus Ireland, 2021).

A theory that is reflected in these findings and discussion is systems theory. Systems theory highlights the structures existing around service users that may influence them. These structures may include their family, their community, organisations, and institutions (Kihlström, 2011). One participant explained that once they became addicted to drugs, they became involved in criminal activity and were incarcerated as a result, which had a direct impact on their family. Systems theory represents the way in which these systems and structures integrate, create social order, and include or exclude individuals from communities (Kihlström, 2011).

5.3 Experience of Entering Third Level Education

To gain an insight into the effectiveness of the EDPP in providing an educational gateway into Third Level Education, the researcher explored the participants' experience of entering Third Level Education. This is highlighted in theme three, feelings of imposter syndrome, theme four, additional supports in Third Level Education, and theme five, the importance of relating to those providing supports.

All participants expressed a feeling of imposter syndrome when they began Third Level Education. A participant stated that imposter syndrome "*creeps in every now and again. Like going in through the hall where we do our lectures, there's a security guard. Like when I'm walking up, I just feel like, you know, they're gonna say 'What are you doing here?'*". Studies report that individuals from socio-economic disadvantaged backgrounds expressed concerns around not fitting in due to their social class. This concern is due to Third Level Education being perceived as elitist and a predominantly working-class institution and therefore are likely to exclude those from other social classes (Scanlon, et al., 2019). This perception is confirmed by the statistics gathered in the preparation for 'The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015 - 2019' action plan. They detailed that the participation rate of individuals from semi-skilled or unskilled backgrounds was 26%. The participation rate of individuals from higher social classes was near full participation (Higher Education Authority, 2015). A participant stated "*I'm the first out of my family to go to university. I always thought that university was not for people like me*". Although there are several action plans in place from the Higher Education Authority, the sense of imposter syndrome and elitism in Third Level Education remains.

'The National Access Plan: A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022 - 2028' highlighted the need to embrace diversity in the student population, and to provide all students with an accessible, supportive, and inclusive higher education experience (Higher Education Authority, 2022). Participants reported that their experience in Third Level Education has been supportive from both the EDPP and their university. In relation to the supports available from their university, a participant stated "*I am linked in with a disability service, but like that the first year during exams season for supports, after that I didn't really need to go around, you know. Like, it's there if you want them*". Another participant explained that they have utilized the Skills Centre in their University. They described the Skills Centre as "*an environment, you know, that we can bring whatever to them*". Alternatively, other participants explained their struggle in reaching out for support at

their university. Most participants stated that they are more comfortable reaching out to the EDPP for support as they have an existing relationship with them prior to beginning Third Level Education. When the researcher queried the supports available from their University, One participant stated *“To be honest, I haven’t availed of them. There are options that I could have taken, but my ego and pride would get in the way. Like I don't need nothing and no help. Yeah, I kind of struggled reaching up to the lads as well, but because I kind of have a relationship with them, it's a bit easier”*. Similarly, one participant emphasised how they have related to the partners of the EDPP and the reassurance they provide; *“I don't want to be putting them on too much of a pedestal, because they're very humble people. They really, really are but you know, their support and their guidance and just how relational they are has really brought me to the stage where I would go for it, you know. I mean, having them to fall back on has been really helpful”*. Although there are supports available through Third Level Education, all participants have highlighted the importance of the supports provided from the EDPP. The participants stressed the importance of relating to the people providing supports and the reassurance that this provides in relation to their success.

A theory that is reflected in these findings and discussion is critical theory. Critical theory “can highlight disadvantages, power imbalances and question established normative practices, values, traditions, and so forth” (Carey, 2017, p.76). As several of the participants of the study expressed their reluctance to seek or accept support from their university but did not appear to feel this apprehension with the EDPP, this may signify a power imbalance. As mentioned above, all participants expressed feelings of imposter syndrome when entering Third Level Education. This feeling may also be translating to their feelings of apprehension regarding supports available through their university. One participant explained that the partners of the EDPP share their own experiences and they can relate to their feelings around entering Third Level Education. They further stated that *“When you have somebody that believes in you and tells you that you will be OK and that you can do this and that there is a chance, but I definitely would not have been there without their support”*.

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter analysed the themes highlighted by applying and comparing existing literature and theoretical frameworks to the experiences of the six participants who took part in this study.

Chapter Six: Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Overview

The aim of this study was to provide the EDPP with evidence-based research on the effectiveness of the project and the potential improvements or changes that could be implemented. The partners expressed their desire for the participants to receive the opportunity to have their voices heard regarding their experience using the EDPP service. Based on the compiled data, the partners hope to implement changes, where appropriate, which may empower their participants further and they hope to expand the service to support a larger group of people. The study compiled a comprehensive literature review of existing research and educational policies and programmes aimed at supporting those who have experienced marginalisation within Irish society and completed six semi-structured interviews with EDPP services users. The findings show that the EDPP is successfully supporting their service users to gain a Third Level Education with the support they are providing. While the Higher Education Authority has several action plans relating to social inclusion in Third Level Education, they have been unsuccessful in reaching their set targets thus far. This chapter will answer the research questions outlined at the beginning of this study, provide recommendations, outline the implications of this study for social work, and include the researcher's reflection on the research journey.

6.2 Research Questions

The first research question asked, what are users' experiences of the Education and Development Partnership Project in terms of the effectiveness of the programme in providing an educational gateway to Third Level Education for individuals who have experienced social issues of disadvantage? The participants' experiences with the EDPP revealed that the EDPP are effective in providing an educational gateway to Third Level Education. Several participants stated that they would not have engaged in Third Level Education without the support of the EDPP. When the researcher queried the supports provided by their respective Universities, several participants expressed their apprehension about seeking and accepting the University supports available. The EDPP supports that each participant utilised varied, but they unanimously stated that the relatability of the partners and the respect that each participant had for them made accepting support easier.

6.3 Recommendations for the Education and Development Partnership Project

As outlined as one of the research questions, what improvements or changes are needed to increase the effectiveness of the project? Theme six of the findings chapter addressed this. The EDPP adopts a student led approach and values the voice of their service users. Following the conclusion of this study, the researcher would recommend, if possible:

1. For the partners to revise their methods of communication with their service users. Participants explained that, at times, they have missed group sessions due to miscommunications. They suggested that one person takes responsibility for contacting participants to inform them of sessions.
2. For the partners to explore the possibility of arranging a group meeting as service users transition from the Boxing Clever Programme into Third Level Education to discuss the topics and discussions that may occur in lectures to ensure that participants are informed of potentially triggering topics.
3. For the partners to explore the possibility of accounting for a service users previous educational experience when implementing a plan for Third Level Education. Participants suggested that there is space for this to be explored and alternative shorter options offered to service users.
4. For the partners to seek clarity, if possible, with Universities, if they may be involved in any communication between the Garda Vetting Departments and their service users as a support. A participant suggested this following an unexpected phone call regarding their previous conviction. They expressed their concern about receiving this phone call as they were speaking to someone they did not know about sensitive information without any support present.

6.4 Recommendation for Policy

Following the findings and discussion of this study, the researcher would recommend that the Higher Education Authority completes further research on the impact of alternative independent supports available to individuals from socially disadvantaged backgrounds entering Third Level Education, such as the EDPP, prior to the publication of their next action plan. This additional research may provide potential students with additional supports and address the feelings of imposter syndrome that was reported by all participants of this study.

6.5 Implications for Social Work

Social work practitioners are employed in various settings and serve all ages. This study provides an insight into the effectiveness of community-based projects in supporting individuals from areas of social disadvantage. This may increase practitioners' awareness of the importance of collaborating with projects such as the EDPP in the future.

6.6 Reflecting on the Research Journey

Reflecting on the journey upon completion of this research, I feel privileged to have received the opportunity and support to work closely with the partners of the EDPP and their service users. As a developing social worker, this experience has provided valuable insight into the struggles faced by those who have experienced social issues of disadvantage and the importance of being aware of the community-based projects in an area that may be better suited to support the needs of individuals I may work with in the future. The resilience of the participants of this study is something that I admire and hope to bring forward in my practice.

6.7 Conclusion

The final chapter presented the outcome of the research questions posed at the beginning of the study and outlined recommendations for the EDPP and policy. This study highlights the importance of understanding the impact of social issues of disadvantage on all aspects of an individual's life. While the primary focus of this study was the participants journey into Third Level Education, the participants of this study outlined a multitude of social issues and described the impact on their lives as a whole.

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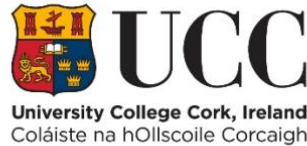
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Appendices

Appendix 1: Information Sheet

INFORMATION SHEET



Purpose of the Study.

As part of the requirements for the Master of Social Work at UCC, I have to carry out a research project. This study will be completed in conjunction with the Education and Development Partnership Project. The study will look at the effectiveness of the project, what is working well in the project, and what may need to be changed.

What will the study involve?

The study will involve one interview. The interviews will vary in length but will take between 45 minutes to 60 minutes. You will be emailed a copy of the final study.

Why have you been asked to take part?

You have been asked because the study would like to capture the voice of the people that use the project to see what is working well and what could be improved in the project.

Do you have to take part?

No, you do not have to take part. The study is completely voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may also withdraw your consent at any time if you change

your mind. This includes before the interview, during the interview, and afterwards.

Will your participation in the study be kept confidential?

Yes. I will ensure that no clues to your identity appear in the thesis. This will include changing your name, gender, and the school you attend. Any extracts from what you say that are quoted in the thesis will be entirely anonymous.

What will happen to the information which you give?

The data will be kept confidential for the duration of the study, available only to me and my research supervisor. It will be securely stored on my UCC account OneDrive. On completion of the project, they will be retained for minimum of a further 13 months and then destroyed.

What will happen to the results?

The results will be presented in the research project. They will be seen by my supervisor, a second marker and the external examiner. The completed research project will be given to Vinnie and Mark. The research project may be read by future students on the course. The study may be published in a research journal.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

I don't envisage any negative consequences for you in taking part, but it is possible that talking about your experience in this way may cause some distress.

What if there is a problem?

At the end of the interviews, I will discuss with you how you found the experience and how you are feeling. If you subsequently feel distressed, you should contact an identified professional support person, who is separate to the project.

Who has reviewed this study?

Approval must be given by the Social Research Ethics Committee of UCC before studies like this can take place.

Any further queries?

If you need any further information, you can contact me:

Leah Barry

115505153@uconn.ie

085 2747806

If you agree to take part in the study, please sign the consent form overleaf.

[Over...

CONSENT FORM



I.....agree to participate in Leah Barry's research study.

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing and in person.

I am participating voluntarily.

I give permission for my interview with Leah Barry to be audio-recorded.

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether before it starts or while I am participating.

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data within two weeks of the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.

I understand that anonymity will be ensured in the write-up by disguising my identity.

I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the thesis and any subsequent publications if I give permission below:

(Please tick one box:)

I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview

I do not agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview

Signed:

Date:

PRINT NAME:

Appendix 3: Interview Prompts

1. What has your journey been to Third Level Education?
2. What was it like to start a course at university?
3. What is the support like from the Education and Development Partnership Project?
4. What is working well?
5. What would you like to see more of going forward?
6. What is not working well?
7. If there is one thing you could change in the Project, what would it be?
8. What are the supports like from the university?

Appendix 4: Ethical Approval

MSW/PDSWS Ethics Outcome

Dear Leah,

We hope you're well.

We're delighted to inform you that the following project has been approved by the MSW/PDSWS Ethics Board:

"An insight into the experience of individuals entering higher education from a social inclusion perspective"

We attach your second submission for ethics review, where Donna and Calvin have included comments that we would ask you and Sara to review and address before commencing your data collection. This does not need to return to us, but that Sara supports you to address these before starting the data collection.

Massive thanks to Donna for your excellent review and time in reviewing the application.

Fiachra & Calvin

MSW/PDSWS Ethics Chairs.