

Adult Continuing Education



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Adult Continuing Education at UCC

2023 Edition



PEACE OF MIND: Timmy Long, a Master's student in Mindfulness Based Wellbeing, says meditation has changed his life.

Living and breathing the transformative power of mindfulness

His voice is widely known through The Two Norries Podcast but as Timmy Long settles down to chat

about his studies with UCC ACE, he apologises for his hoarse tones.

"I left my voicebox up in Dublin yesterday," he explains after cheering his son, Jay, into a national boxing final.

When it comes to speaking about his first year on the Master's in Mindfulness Based Wellbeing, it's as good as honey and hot water as Timmy talks at length about how meditation has transformed his life.

From addiction into recovery and through life as a father, husband, employer, podcaster, and student, mindfulness has been a constant in grounding his emotions.

That battle has been part of Timmy's life from a young age through addiction problems, mental health issues, childhood trauma, poverty, and violence.

He had a negative experience of education as a child with undiagnosed dyslexia and ADHD until leaving school early.

For a time, his life was a cycle of treatment centres and prison until a moment of awareness and awakening in 2011 during an alcohol- and drug-fuelled binge. Since then he committed himself to recovery and education.

It was in prison, aged 32, that Timmy learned to read and write, starting with the alphabet and the months of the year, while he also embarked upon his journey of personal therapy and mindfulness meditation.

"What happens when you stop the drinking and drugging and whatever the addictions may be, you're left with everything," he says.

"You're left with your past, you're left with your childhood, you're left

with all forms of trauma, you're left with all your actions from addiction, all the bad stuff that people do. "There's a lot of fear and shame and guilt with that. I suffered really badly with these things at the beginning and I didn't know how to cope."

It was a prison psychologist who first pointed Timmy towards meditation.

"I didn't even know I had ADHD at the time and sitting with myself was one of the most difficult things I've ever had to do in my life.

"From that, I started to gain a sense of awareness and I started to accept everything that was going on in my life in terms of my negative thoughts, the lack of worthiness, the lack of self-esteem and confidence, just the complete lack of worth in general I had around myself as a human being.

"Mindfulness showed me how to be compassionate to myself, kind to myself, loving to myself, and to put away the whip that I had all my life, the whip of constantly putting myself down.

"Mindfulness became everything in life. It gave me the tools to be able to cope with life on a daily basis, the tools to be able to sit in social settings, being able to be around people, things that I'd never have been able to do before without having drugs.

"Instead of being inside in my head and thinking of all these different scenarios, it allowed me to be able to drop into my body and feel the way I was feeling in my body and accept it for what it is without any judgement.

"The help is there; it's just about asking for it and gradually learning at your own pace."

Timmy Long

"Mindfulness has helped me to be able to cope with my mental health issues, my addiction issues, and life in general so much better than I could have ever imagined."

A BEAUTIFUL COURSE

Timmy did his Leaving Cert in prison and upon his release, he completed his carpentry apprenticeship and went on to study Construction Management at MTU Cork. He now runs his own property maintenance and construction company which employs people who are in recovery.

He swore he was done with education after that course but once Mindfulness Based Wellbeing popped up on his radar through ACE, it was a "no-brainer" to sign up.

"The class that I'm in at the moment, every single one of them is absolutely amazing. We're 18 or 19 mature students, from all different walks of life, and everybody gets on so well in the class.

Game-changers: Autism pioneers building a better future

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Prison collaboration tackling revolving-door system

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It just takes someone to make a little change | ACE and Cork Simon to extend collaboration

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STANDING OVATION: The Two Norries Podcast hosts James Leonard and Timmy Long after their show at a sold-out Cork Opera House in March.

“Everybody helps everybody. If someone needs a bit of information, you’ll always have five, six, seven people jumping in and very willing to help anybody in any way or direct them in the right direction.

“It’s really a beautiful course, the people on it are absolutely amazing, and I can’t say enough about the lecturers. They’re brilliant, really helpful.

“Mindfulness is one of these holistic courses where it’s compassion and love and empathy and being mindful but the lecturers themselves, they have that aura about them. They don’t just speak mindfulness; they understand it as well.”

He says the course doesn’t just give people qualifications to teach mindfulness; it gives them a whole new way to process the world.

“I’ve seen people starting on the course and the changes in them because their practice has really stepped up.

“The course itself changes lives. Not because they get a master’s in mindfulness teaching but because of what it does for them on a personal level.

“It changes everything about them. They become more aware of every aspect of their life; your family dynamics, work dynamics, community dynamics.

“When you’re more aware, you’re not as reactive as you normally would be and you can pull yourself back.”

INNATE DRIVE

The academic aspect remains a challenge, although Timmy

describes the course as 80% practice and 20% theory.

It was only in his late 30s, during his second year in MTU, that Timmy was diagnosed with dyslexia by an educational psychologist.

He knew something was wrong when his classmates were able to understand things at a speed and in a way he couldn’t grasp.

“When I was diagnosed with dyslexia, my life changed. All my core beliefs I had since I was a kid around being thick and stupid and not able academically, they all changed.

“I could study for five or six days around one subject. I could go into the exam and then my mind would go blank because I’d get stressed. I’d be going into fight or flight and I could never retain or think of any information when I used to get stressed.

“But somehow, I got through it and every time I got through something, every exam that I passed, every high grade that I got, my confidence started to grow, and my self-esteem started to grow, and I started to believe that I can actually do this.

“Yes, I do have to work four, five times harder than everybody else but I’m getting it done and I’ve a lot to offer here.

“I love mindfulness and I know I’d be a great teacher of mindfulness but because education can be so difficult for us around reading books and sitting still in a chair for so long, that can really pull the plug on a course for someone that has ADHD or dyslexia.

“With ADHD, I’m not the best in the world at organisation and structure but what I am good at is turning up

for things and getting stuff done when it needs to be done.

“I just have this innate drive that I’ve built up through all those years being undiagnosed with dyslexia and ADHD to get on with it and keep moving forward.”

He’d like to see methods of teaching continue to evolve for people in his position.

Timmy also appreciates the support of programme coordinators Pat O’Leary and Pascale De Coninck.

“I’m very lucky that Pat and Pascale are very accommodating, they’re empathetic to my situation, they understand what’s going on for me, and they give me that extra little bit of space.

“If anybody wants to do it but believes they mightn’t be able for it, UCC has one of the best Access centres in the country with all the help for people, particularly for mature students who may have learning differences.

“The help is there; it’s just about asking for it and gradually learning at your own pace if you can.”

AUTHENTIC

Timmy meditates once a day most days, especially early in the mornings, but the four first-year weekend seminars that are part of the Master’s still have a restorative effect.

“I’m really enjoying the course. We have weekends where we go into UCC, we do a bit of practice, we do a bit of theory, and when I come out of those weekend courses, it’s like my body is after being refreshed because of the meditation practice.

“I just love it. I love sitting in the meditation room with all the other students. Every time I leave that campus on a Sunday after doing two days of mindfulness, I leave that campus knowing that I’m here and this is where I’m supposed to be.

“This course is absolutely perfect for me and this is what I want to do with my life, become a mindfulness teacher.

“That stuff feels so authentic to me. It feels like it’s second nature for me to sit there with a load of people who are going through the same stuff as I am or have gone through in my past and be able to bring that meditation process to their level.

“It just felt like the most natural thing for me to do in my life.”

As he reaches the halfway mark of the two-year Master’s, Timmy is undertaking a teaching placement in school.

Listening to his story, it’s hard to imagine him failing to convince anyone in his class of the benefits of mindfulness.

“On a personal level, the course has helped me understand what I really want to be doing with my life and what’s important to me, where my strengths are, where my weaknesses are, and how much I really want to become a mindfulness teacher and share my experiences for others coming through all walks of life, who have their own mental health struggles and addiction issues.

“It’s also helped me become more aware around my own enquiry process around meditation.

“That has given me a lot of insight into how I work mechanically; how many times the same stuff comes up in my head and how many times the

same emotions and feelings come up in my body.

“It’s just a powerful course. It really is powerful. It has helped me to ground myself in the last year as my life took off with the podcast and the work in the construction industry.

“I needed something to be able to bring me back into my kind of really safe place which I had for years before that, and this course has done that.”

MORE THAN FEAR

For all the fears and anxieties that Timmy once felt around education, he’s glad to have conquered those emotions.

“You will never know if you could ever do something in life if you allow the fear that’s in your body when you think of doing a course to overcome you.

“I’d lots of fear when I started my own academic journey. I’d fear around not being good enough, getting poor marks, or not being able academically for the reading. Loads of fear.

“I’ve seen people starting on the course and the changes in them because their practice has really stepped up.”

Timmy Long

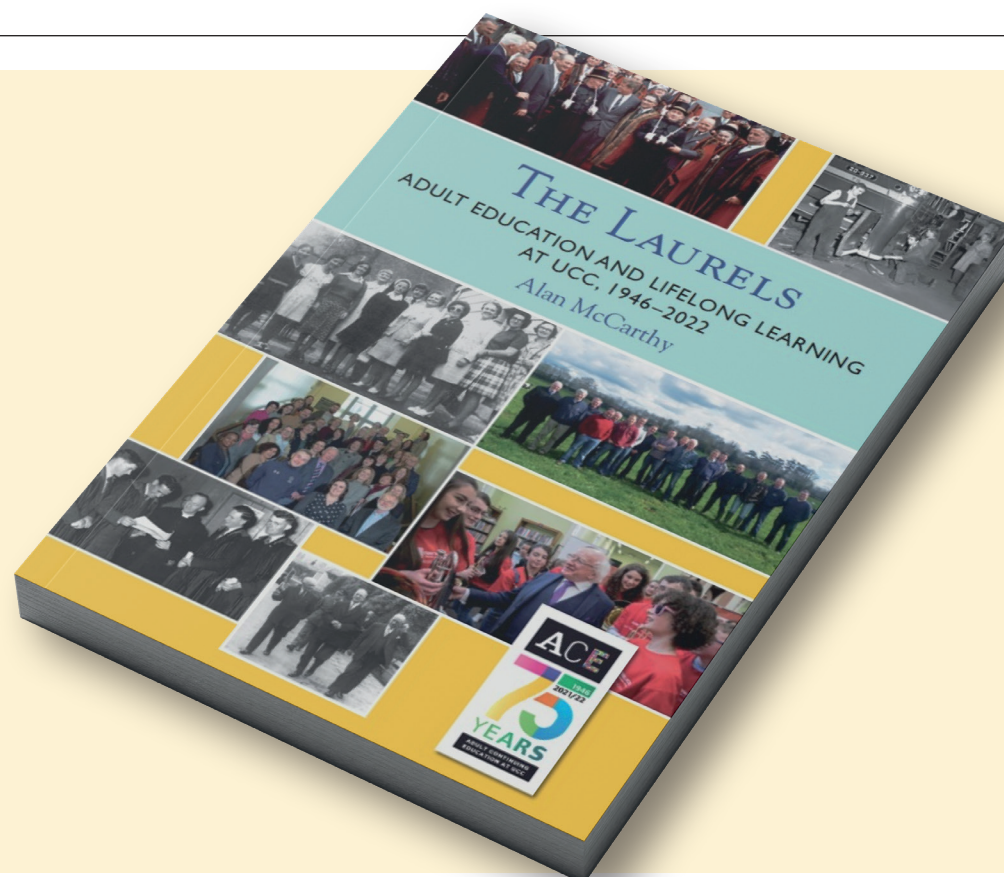
“But just tell yourself, we’ll see how we get on today and then we’ll do tomorrow, and don’t give up.

“And after the four years, two years, or whatever length of time for your course, you’ll tell yourself, do you know what, I’m actually well able, and you’ll start growing in confidence in your ability. That is what happened for me.

“The fear at the beginning can cripple people. You have to overcome that fear, you have to go through it, you have to understand that fear is going to be there, but you also have to understand that you’re absolutely more than fear.

“Fear will stop you in your tracks in all aspects of your life and you don’t want to be 80 years of age and looking back at the time you could’ve done a course in UCC but you didn’t do it.

“You don’t want those regrets. I’m fortunate that I don’t have those regrets and I did put my foot in. It was really tough but I wouldn’t change any of it for the world.”



'The Laurels: Adult Education and Lifelong Learning at UCC, 1946-2022' was commissioned to mark the 75th anniversary of UCC ACE. Author Alan McCarthy reflects on a process that connected him with so many of the key personalities in that history.

Writing the history of UCC ACE

In February 2019, I was conferred with my PhD by UCC and, eager for a change of scenery, moved to Australia that August with my fiancée (now wife) Sarah.

I completed the editing of my first book, 'Newspapers and Journalism in Cork, 1910-23' the following year while we worked on a banana farm in the far north Queensland tropics as part of fulfilling the regional work mandated by our visas.

Shortly after relocating to Brisbane, I was contacted by Donal Ó Drisceoil and Séamus Ó Tuama about writing a book to mark the 75th anniversary of Adult Continuing Education (ACE) at UCC.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and successive lockdowns in Ireland had compelled ACE to revert to remote working, meaning my working from the other side of the world wasn't a major issue in the short term.

ACE at UCC has been a leader nationally and internationally in the field of adult education and lifelong learning, establishing the first formal adult education department in Ireland in 1946.

ACE played an essential role in democratising education and bringing non-traditional learners in the south of Ireland into a university environment, forging strong links with urban trade unions and rural organisations in the 20th century and beyond.

The resulting study engages with the history of ACE, from its first short courses in 1911 (what we might now call micro-credentials) to Cork's present-day status as a UNESCO Learning City, charting the major events and personalities in between.

This history also explores the development of theory and research output from within ACE itself and considers the development of theory in the field of adult education / lifelong learning, tracing ACE's troubled origins to its present status as a leader in adult and continuing education, professional development, training, and lifelong learning.

Fiachra O'Mahony and Grace Kennedy served as research assistants for the project during the summer of 2021 while I worked remotely and played an important role in organising the substantial body of Willie McAuliffe's papers, donated to the University by his widow, Mary.

Mrs McAuliffe was one of a host of individuals who were integral to bringing this project to fruition. I am enormously grateful for the trust placed in me by Séamus Ó Tuama and Lyndsey El Amoud to tell ACE's unique and multi-faceted story.

The indefatigable Willie Weir was immensely helpful in proffering suggestions and directing me towards some of his many, many contacts while many more ACE staff members provided practical assistance and contributions to the work.

Brendan Goggin, James Cronin, Tom Mullins, Pat Murphy, Angela O'Donovan, Fred Powell, Cathal O'Connell, and Stephen O'Brien all very graciously participated in interviews for the project while Eda Sagarra, granddaughter of the trailblazing Timothy Smiddy and an adult educationalist in her right, corresponded with me, as did Orla McDonnell.

The late, great Máirtín Ó Fathaigh was interviewed on several separate occasions and was incredibly generous with his time and expertise, despite his poor health. His incredible depth of passion for lifelong learning was evident from our first encounter until his untimely passing.

Fiona Forde, Barney Whelan, Kate Ryan, Lenka Janik-Blaskova, Maura O'Donoghue, and Clare O'Keeffe are some of the ACE alumni who very graciously shared their experiences with me.

This involved a snowball sampling method with narrators suggesting other potential contributors. The staff of ACE also highlighted a number of cases of alumni willing to contribute to the project.

LEARNER VOICES

Individuals with unique stories generously shared written responses to a short, prepared questionnaire which shone some light on their learning journeys. Whatever can be written of staff, ACE would be nothing without its students. 'Learner voice' is a central concept within adult education and so it will also be quite prominent in this book.

This book would not exist without Willie McAuliffe. Alongside the enormous contribution he made to adult education at UCC during his career, the copious amount of material and files he gathered and the dozens of oral history interviews he conducted were indispensable in writing this work.

This mission took him into the homes of ACE alumni across the province of Munster, traversing over old ground much like he

had done as an organiser for the department for decades.

Interviewees/narrators often prepared in advance for McAuliffe's interview with some reading prepared written statements. In many cases, the narrators were personally familiar with McAuliffe and the vast majority of interviews took place within the narrators' home.

Frequent digressions into tangential subjects such as well-known individuals or the Gaelic Athletic Association are indicative of the rapport the interviewer had with his subjects.

In researching the book, I spent hours listening to his voice and by the end of the project, I felt like I had gotten to know him to a certain extent. This book is as much his as it is mine and I am grateful to his wife Mary for generously sharing her husband's papers and interviews with the University.

No work of scholarship could be completed without the help of archivists and support staff, with my archival research taking me to the palatial Dublin Diocesan Archives in Drumcondra where I appreciated the assistance of Noelle Dowling while exploring the papers of Archbishop John Charles McQuaid, who was invested heavily in adult education.

Damien Burke of the Irish Jesuit Archives assisted in my exploration of material pertaining to the Jesuit-backed Catholic Worker's College as did the staff of the National Archives of Ireland and the National Library of Ireland where I consulted in different collections of personal papers and government documentation.

MARXIAN SOCIALISM

Special Collections at the Boole Library and especially Catriona Mulcahy of the University Archives at UCC were invaluable to carrying out this research, while I must also thank the staff of the National Library of Australia in Canberra who have, somewhat bizarrely, maintained a copy of a 1917 pamphlet entitled 'Marxian Socialism' published by UCC!

Somewhat fittingly, Professor Alfred O'Rahilly would later establish Cork University Press who have brought the history of adult education to realisation in physical form.

Ultimately, this project will account for the structure, content, and style of lifelong learning at UCC, from the earliest short courses organised by UCC President Windle in 1911 to the present-day lifelong learning festivals.

Writing about the advent of ACE in 2007, the late Willie McAuliffe said:

"Through the courses, people who might have otherwise have remained withdrawn and apathetic were given the confidence and encouragement to broaden their horizons for the benefit of themselves and their communities.

"The courses instilled an openness and a willingness to take on new ideas; they produced a corps of energetic, well-informed, articulate, and, above all, self-confident people, many of whom went to make a profound impact on the development of their local communities, or in further education."



FRONT OFFICE: Chantelle Connolly and Marguerite Wiseman with their certificates after taking part in the Advocacy and Personal Development course, run in collaboration between UCC ACE and Cork Simon.

It just takes someone to make a little change

Chantelle Connolly always loved education which made it all the tougher to leave school at 15.

Having worked full-time from a young age, she watched friends of hers going to their graduations with the wish that it would've been her.

She was made homeless and that brought her into contact with the Cork Simon Community. It was there she took on every course available and in the space of little over a year, it has rejuvenated her love of education.

Now, she has a place of her own and is a role model for younger members of her family, setting an example that they can progress in education, study at UCC, and achieve their goals.

"I'm a member of the Traveller community and I've always been interested in education but I would've dropped out from peer pressure of other Travellers mocking me for being in school," says Chantelle.

"I copied other people. Everyone else was doing it. I dropped out even though I loved school at the time.

"But now, I'm really interested in education and really want to

educate myself because it helps you get along in life."

She was lucky insofar as her mother encouraged her to do a course through Youthreach, which allowed Chantelle to get her Leaving Cert at 19.

She enrolled in college after Youthreach, while working every day after classes, but couldn't keep up with the essays. She dropped out, unaware of the support that was there to assist her along the way.

She did various courses, training to be a make-up artist, brow technician, and nail technician, but always had another passion for helping people.

The power of such help was demonstrated first-hand to Chantelle when she needed the services of Cork Simon.

She took on all sorts of courses, including one in Advocacy and Personal Development, run by ACE in Cork Simon's employment, education, and training service.

"From being a member of the Travelling community, it's very important to be able to speak up for yourself and advocate for yourself," says Chantelle.

"A lot of Travellers have no education. I always wanted to be a social worker or key worker to help people, not just in my community but in every community."

UNHEARD

The course was delivered once a week for eight weeks. Chantelle describes the lectures as "interesting and fun", facilitating discussion between the students and taking direction from their experiences.

"When we were in class, people were talking about they feel stupid going in talking, or they can't speak up for themselves, or how easy it is to get aggravated.

"It's just nice being able to know how to speak up for yourself if you are mistreated or if you're not getting the help you're meant to get.

"Everybody that was there went through an experience like that and had to fight for themselves in all different types of ways, not just in the homeless.

"One of the girls on the course at the time had a child who was autistic and she couldn't get any help at all in the schools. It was so hard for her trying to fight because she wouldn't have been very well educated.

"It was interesting that so many people felt unheard. There's help out there but it's not being given and it's being hidden or they're being told it's not there even though it is. Then you have to fight for what you're meant to be able to get easily."

Her experience of homelessness has shaped Chantelle's outlook.

"I'm really interested in helping people because I know what it's like to be homeless.

"There was so many people living in the homeless shelter? When I was there that had mental health issues. These people have no hope of advocating for themselves because they need help themselves.

"So many people felt unheard. There's help out there but it's not being given and it's being hidden or they're being told it's not there even though it is. Then you have to fight for what you're meant to be able to get easily."

"It's sad but education is important to help yourself out in life and get further. It's after opening up so many doors to me and also my confidence level has gone up."

When Chantelle was first made homeless, she was moved to Macroom despite having to commute to Cork six days a week for her studies; in college Monday to Friday, and doing make-up training on Sundays.

At that time, she didn't know how to send emails for herself, relying on the assistance of friends to help make her case.

"I'd be told by one place go to this place and they'll help you out and they'd send me back somewhere else. Nobody wanted to help and then I wouldn't have been well-spoken.

"I wouldn't have known what I was meant to say or do. Then it gets frustrating and then you're aggravated.

"I found the course helpful because it taught me to be calmer and to take notes of stuff, take people's names, and send emails.

"That pushed me to want to be able to advocate for myself, not having to depend on someone else to do it for me.

"So in the last year, I educated myself more. I did every course I could possibly do in the Cork Simon Community and outside the Cork Simon Community. I took on extra classes from UCC to better my academic writing."

ONE-TO-ONE SUPPORT

All the while, Chantelle was studying the second year of her Diploma in Youth and Community Work, delivered by ACE in Knocknaheeny, as well as Substance Misuse and Community Development at Cork College of Commerce.

With the latter course just finished, she's now taking on a Train the Trainer programme to become a make-up tutor.

"I can't explain what the Cork Simon Community gave me with essays and with support.

"Adam [O'Connell] kept me sane through all the essays. I was doing four essays at a time and having that small bit of support really helped me. Now, I can do all the essays alone, I don't need help.

"I just needed someone to sit down and have that patience to show me because when I was going to the academic classes with all the big words they use, I was totally lost. Just getting someone to speak my language and do it slowly was such a big help.

"I kept up with all of it, I got amazing marks in everything I ever did. That for me was a very big achievement because I would've started out my journey not being able to write properly. I improved a lot.

"I contacted ACE and they gave me so much support going in writing essays, giving me one-to-one support, there's so much help out there. If you just ask for help there is help that can be given to you. It's well-doable. If I did it, anyone can do it."

It was all very different to her first experience of third-level education on a fashion design course.

"I didn't know at the time there was help in the college that could've helped me with essays.

"I went back to full-time work. All my friends were in college and I used to look at them going to their graduations and stuff like that. I really wanted that for myself but it was something I just couldn't do.

"Then, from being (in the) homeless, I said I'm going to educate myself and I'm going to be able to do everything I want to do.

"Now, I'm looking at going on next year to the Social Science course in UCC. There's so many outcomes, I've educated myself so much basically over a year."

MOCKED

Attitudes in the Traveller community towards education are slow to change but it is happening. More mothers are trying to keep their kids in school for longer.

Chantelle still gets mocked for pursuing education but it's the reaction of the younger generation that means more to her.

"In my own family at the moment, I would get mocked for being a Traveller that is in education. People would say, 'Oh, you think you're a college girl.'

"I was on TikTok Live the other day, sitting outside college waiting to go in, and there were a few Travellers making comments mocking me. 'You're a school girl.' 'You think you're posh because you're going to college.' 'You don't talk like a Traveller.' Mocking the way I speak.

"It's just strange. Even within the Travelling community, they think that you're not following your tradition.

"I have family members, younger kids, like my cousins, that would come to me and be like, I can't wait until I grow up and I want to do such a thing rather than want to go away and get married at 16.

"They look at me now and say I want to make a career.

"I'm in teaching make-up in a few different places, I do make-up on weekends, I do make-up for weddings, I'm trying to make something of myself. To see my little cousins looking at me and thinking I want to do something like that, it's amazing. It's lovely to see."

There are always small but meaningful signs of change.

"Even my cousin, I would've given him money the other day and he went in and bought a book because I went in and bought a book and I was reading it," says Chantelle.

"He went in and bought a book [Tyson Fury's autobiography] out of his money instead of spending it on something stupid.

"This boy, he doesn't even read books but I'm asking him all the time, are you reading your book? And he's like, yeah, and he's telling me little bits about it. It's nice to see. It just takes someone to make a little change."

Her learning journey is appreciated more widely too, having been invited to deliver a speech to 100 people at Collins Barracks.

"I'd never have thought of doing anything like that. I couldn't stand up in front of the class and talk in front of people because I'd feel awkward or stupid.

"For presentations, my legs would shake, I would be panicking, I couldn't breathe, whereas now I can stand up and chat to people.

"I still get nervous but I'm doing it. I know that's a step I need to take to better myself and be more confident so I'm going to do it.

"From being in education and putting in the time and effort, I'm really improving the way I can talk and my confidence."

Chantelle can now say she's had her graduation day on campus; the first of many.



LIFELONG LEARNING: Eddie graduating with his Diploma in Social and European Studies in 1976 and 40 years later, still learning every day.

Going to UCC wasn't a thing that was done in our lifetime

UCC's links to the community and other local education providers are fostered by the Learning Neighbourhoods programme.

Ballyphehane and Knocknaheeny were the chosen neighbourhoods to pilot the scheme in 2016, and the concept has since spread to Mayfield, Togher, South Parish, and The Glen.

This spring, a seven-week Neighbourhood University College programme was hosted in those locations across the city to provide a sample of what further and higher education has to offer in a welcoming and accessible space for the local community.

For one of the participants on the South Parish course, Eddie, it extended a link with UCC stretching back to the mid-70s.

A northsider by birth, Eddie arrived as the youngest of 10 children. His father died when Eddie was two so he was raised by his mother and 'seven fathers' in his seven older brothers.

Aged 14, he started working for the summer holidays and never went back to school.

"That's the way it was done at the time," he says. "Everybody we knew left school at 14."

He worked in retail in the city and it was there, one day, that the possibility of going to UCC was first floated by a colleague.

"I started laughing," recalls Eddie. "I said, 'I left school at 14. Why would I be going to UCC?'"

"It wasn't a thing that was done in our lifetime. I was the first to go."

She sent his details to UCC and shortly after, forms arrived in the post.

"I said I might as well try it if they accept me. I didn't think they would. I thought you'd have to have certain qualifications."

He was welcomed onto the two-year Diploma in Social and European Studies course, developed for Ireland joining the European Economic Community (now the EU) in 1973. It even included a trip to the European Parliament in Strasbourg.

More significant was another moment in UCC with his now-wife Rosemary as Eddie was in the midst of his studies.

"If you're looking at the Quad in UCC, there's benches outside. In 1975, when I was doing the course up there, I got engaged there.

"We went up there for a walk and I sat down on the seat outside the Quad and I said we'll always remember now where we got engaged," he says with a chuckle.

"And we're still together after 40 years, four children, and 13 grandchildren."

As for the course, it had a significant effect on him having left school at a young age.

"I didn't tell anybody because I said when I fail or if anything happens and I fall out, they'll all be saying, ah sure, we knew you couldn't do it. So I didn't tell anybody and I went up twice a week after work.

"I found it very interesting. I can't say I learned this, this, and this, but it definitely gave me confidence.

"My mother was delighted with the fact that somebody in our family was able to go to UCC. It was a big thing for me. It gave me confidence in myself that just because I left school at 14, I wasn't stupid."

He was happy with the exams too as you could give your opinion rather than being required to produce a 'right answer'.

"I got my diploma and I have it on the wall at home still," says Eddie.

Fast-forward a few decades and Eddie is now 71 and still active in education and his community.

He worked 13 different jobs in the pharmaceutical industry and was a founding member of the Cork Genealogical Society, where he's been involved in tracing ancestors for the past 29 years.

That voluntary work has ingrained in him the attitude: "When people organise something, the most important thing is that somebody turns up. I'd hate to organise something and nobody turns up. So I always try and go if I can."

He helps to update records in the South Chapel, which go all the way back to 1755. It was there he saw an ad for the South Parish Neighbourhood University College programme.

Over the seven weeks, there were talks on local history, addiction studies, mindfulness, architecture, art/craft, sustainability, and pathways to education from lecturers across UCC, MTU, and Further Education and Training colleges.

It was delivered on Friday mornings at Cork College of FET, Douglas St campus, while the final day featured a tour of MTU's Bishopstown campus.

"I found the course very good," says Eddie. "It opened my eyes to things that I wouldn't have had any interest in.

"The time was good, the content was good, and it was free. And I wouldn't mind paying."

Mindfulness was the lesson Eddie enjoyed the most.

"I worked shift work for 31 years. Trying to sleep during the day was always a problem. If I had mindfulness years ago, it might have been better," he laughs.

His four children have gone on to achieve in education and work, following in Eddie's footsteps.

"Someone said to me, 'Well, there you are. You went, you started it, and now the others carried on. They went to college.'"

More recently, he met former UCC president Tadhg Carey in Carrigaline. They got chatting and Eddie left him with the words: "You definitely made a difference for the likes of me."



WELD-PLACED: Austin Community College's car park welding class, an example of the college reaching out to under-resourced communities.

WORLD-CLASS: Austin Community College's first Community Pathways class took place in a church with 12 'zero-generation' immigrants. They wanted to learn English to help their kids with school but the confidence created in learning proved even more important.

An ocean apart but Cork and Austin are neighbours at heart

Don Tracy has only visited Cork twice – so far, that is – but he says the city feels like home.

He displays an impressive off-hand knowledge of the local geography and terminology. He sometimes uses the UCC Quad as his background on video calls for work. He has even started to look into buying a house in the city.

It is the culture of community learning in Cork City that resonates best with Don.

"It's just like home for me. It feels like home. I've really loved it," he says.

An educator with Austin Community College (ACC), Don is full of admiration for the work of ACE at UCC, the Cork Lifelong Learning Festival, the city's Learning Neighbourhoods programme, and its UNESCO Learning City status.

The shared lessons flow across the Atlantic from ACE to the Lone Star State and back.

Now, they are exploring a deeper collaboration to work together helping businesses and community groups on either side of the ocean.

"There's been a great deal more learning on our part. We intend to expropriate... replicate... steal everything," laughs Don as he searches for the right word.

"It's not just some lessons, I'm literally stealing, with permission, the whole thing! The Learning Neighbourhoods idea, it's brilliant. We'll do that too!"

The director of corporate and community education for ACC's Continuing Education Division has a lot on his plate.

His college serves 80,000 students each year and its service area covers 7,000 square miles, almost a quarter of Ireland's landmass. The population in the region is over two million people.

Their education services, which range from basic literacy and computer classes to customised training programmes for corporations, run 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

Achieving the same sense of a learning community is a challenge when some areas are so densely populated and others so sparsely inhabited.

"We don't really have well-defined neighbourhoods in the same way Cork does. People know they're from South Parish," says Don, who intends to clone the structure for a Texas context.

"We're working on putting together our first learning festival. We're going to do the same and it's the natural next step for us in our community education work to create hyper-local networks of learning partners in their regions.

"My team has loved getting to meet Séamus [Ó Tuama, ACE director] and Lyndsey [El Amoud, ACE assistant director] and hear all about their work and think about ways in which we can emulate what's happening in Cork because it's a great example of what can be done to really build a strong network of learning in a community.

"We're looking for ways that we can work together. There are some things that we may be able to do that would be interesting to people in South Parish and the reverse is absolutely true.

"From our perspective, if we're going to be thinking about sustainability and resilience in our community, the foundation for that is having a culture of learning."

That culture is built by creating those networks of learning partners and holding such festivals as a motor to connect people to resources available to them all year round.

"It supports community development, economic development, and a thriving community for all of us to live in," says Don.

VULCAN MIND-MELD

Don and Séamus were first introduced at an American Association for Adult and Continuing Education Conference in 2019.

"We started talking about our work and we had the Vulcan mind-meld," recalls Don.

"We had an immediate connection there and started having a dialogue about how we might be able to work together."

Don was booked in for the 2020 Lifelong Learning Festival but COVID delayed his introduction to Cork until the 2022 edition, where he spoke at a couple of events.

Séamus has since had the opportunity to visit Austin and see the work that Don leads there.

They have exchanged tours of all sorts of outreach locations, including jails.

Don has visited Cork Prison, where UCC collaborate with the education unit, and Séamus has gone to see Lockhart Correctional Facility, where ACC teach a range of classes.



One of their graduates has been employed as ACC's re-entry coordinator on their prison programme since her own release over three years ago.

In Cork, Don was wowed by the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Programme, where criminology and psychology students have worked on projects alongside prisoners.

More widely, ACC is making contact with a whole new population than they've ever reached before through their Community Pathways programme.

Their first such class, in 2016, was held in a small suburban church in North Austin with 12 'zero-generation' immigrants who didn't speak a word of English. They wanted to learn so they could help their kids with school and progress at work but the confidence created in learning proved even more important.

"You have to show up in people's lives," says Don. "You have to go to places where they're comfortable, wherever that is.

"We teach classes in churches, parking lots, libraries, social housing areas, business locations. By doing that, we go to places that are viewed as safe by non-traditional students.

"We work with trusted intermediaries, maybe it's a pastor or priest or community leader, to connect with those potential students and we bring them the kinds of training and educational opportunity that they tell us are important to them.

"You have to listen to them. It's not about meeting our metrics. It's about meeting their needs and desires for learning."

They've held welding classes in car parks, where they supply the mobile training modules and, due to the lack of power supply, their own generators, via two shipping containers.

"The bottom line for us is there's a whole population out there that has never seen the college as a resource for them," says Don. "We want to connect with them and bring opportunity to them."

In that way, it chimes with ACE's work with anyone not served by traditional education models.

CONNECTIONS

ACE at UCC and ACC are now hoping to work together in corporate education. The business links between Cork and Austin run deeper than you'd think. Apple, to give one example, is among the largest employers in both cities.

Don remembers walking around the gardens at Blarney Castle last year when he overheard two women, a daughter and mother, talking in Russian. Don, who can speak Russian, got chatting with them.

They had come over from Ukraine and the younger woman was working for a small Cork company. Their head office? It was based in Austin, Texas.

"There's a lot of corporate connections we could potentially partner around," says Don.

"We can do training for that organisation here, UCC can do some training there. UCC can do some training for the employees here, we can do some training for the employees there."

Don, for his part, has worked on developing such large-scale projects before, including one for 2,000 IBM and Cognizant employees across Texas in advanced web development, cloud computing, and cyber-security.

There are all sorts of other community education ideas being exchanged.

Don was impressed by the Roots community café at UCC, run by the Cope Foundation, which provides work experience and employment opportunities for young people with intellectual disabilities. Such an initiative would complement a pre-existing ACC programme.

A local community mayor in Austin requested a course for stay-at-home mothers to participate in after they drop their kids off at school. The two institutions are now exploring what they could offer to support them.

There are also the connections and friendships made. The delegates from France and Italy who Don met at the Lifelong Learning Festival. The colleagues all over Europe he can now call upon.

"Those connections and ideas inside of ACE have been invaluable to us. Invaluable," he says.

"It's unbelievable the sort of opportunities that we see opening and we're really excited about continuing to learn and to implement some of the ideas that we've gained from our relationship with ACE and Séamus and Lyndsey.

"I think Séamus and Lyndsey would tell you that they've learned something from us but I can tell you we've learned a lot from the work that UCC ACE is doing."

ACE and ACC, truly world leaders in adult education.

A career change to change the world

Lucy Gaffney describes herself as a risk-taker but even she couldn't have imagined her most recent roll of the dice would turn up double-sixes and see her named in the Irish Times' '50 people to watch in 2023'.

A biotech graduate and entrepreneur with a track record of starting several successful companies, she decided it was time for a change after 15 years in business.

The self-styled "quintessential nature nerd" started looking for a course that would turn her interest in sustainability into a potential career pathway.

“What’s been absolutely immense for me over the course of doing the programme within ACE at UCC is that as I was learning in my work, I was learning in parallel.”

Lucy Gaffney

Her timing couldn't have been any better. Through the Springboard+ initiative of subsidised upskilling courses, she found the ACE Diploma in Environment, Sustainability, and Climate. She checked the closing date for applications. It was that same day.

“I just snuck in the door which was serendipitous with the way that it has unfolded over the course of the last two years,” says Lucy.

She quit her job in the corporate world and started the diploma in October 2021 while simultaneously sending around her CV, thinking it'd take a lot longer to get established in sustainability work.

She would've been happy to take volunteer roles and build up her experience but the perfect job would open the door for her within a month.

Lucy was hired to lead Business for Biodiversity Ireland, a platform that assesses businesses' biodiversity impacts, identifies what concrete actions they can put in place to mitigate their negative effects, and advocates for policy reforms.

“It married my interest and passion for biodiversity and my experience in the business world into a nice package that suited this role really well,” she says.

It has also been a perfect union with her course over the past two years.

“What’s been absolutely immense for me over the course of doing the programme within ACE at UCC is that as I was learning in my work, I was learning in parallel.

“It’s mirrored so much of what I’m doing in my sustainability-biodiversity role, it’s actually been amazing.

“It’s almost like I’d come across some concept or someone would start talking about a particular aspect of sustainability and I’d find the next week we were covering it in the course.

“There was a lovely blending of the two worlds, between the academic side of it and my professional work.

“It really works quite well and I have found that the course has given me an amazing foundation for all things sustainability, which then I’m building on in my professional work.

“Certainly, the course opened my eyes to a lot of that stuff that’s going on in the background that is ultimately there to make the world a better place.”

It’s a fast-changing field, with new sustainability reporting directives being introduced for businesses, and her studies help Lucy to keep on top of it all.

She’s also had to relearn how to be a student, although she’s enjoyed the mode of delivery and continuous assessment more than cramming for end-of-year exams in her previous third-level experience.

She says the course is “mindful” of the fact people are juggling coursework with work and family life, with a “sympathetic” design giving enough of a lead-in time to complete assignments.

“For the most part, I enjoyed doing the assignments because, for me, it just enriched my learning more than even the recorded sessions or the online sessions.

“The assignments were the things that taught me the most because it was practical application of knowledge so that really worked well for me.”

The online delivery is done in such a way that Lucy has made friends on the course too, with many in a similar situation of using the course as a stepping stone into sustainability.

She was heartened by her classmates' support and congratulations as she went from managing a session at the National Biodiversity Conference, to addressing the Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss, to attending the COP-15 UN Biodiversity Conference in Montreal, Canada.

For 20 years, she never had any public speaking duties, let alone a Citizens' Assembly, but she speaks with authoritative ease to any audience on her specialist subject.

She's given lectures in Trinity to Master's students in biodiversity and conservation about the business aspect, and to business students about the nature aspects – all while still a student herself.

“The conversation has moved on so much. That conversation is about strategy now.

“It’s not about business actions for biodiversity which traditionally have been viewed as beehives on the roof or bug hotels and wildflower

meadows; that is not what we're talking about on the Business for Biodiversity platform.

“It’s very much more about the strategic approach, looking at how your business operates, looking at the key activities of the business, and how that might impact the environment at large or have an ecological impact.

“This is about the next evolution of business. It’s moving away from those damaging activities to ones that we’re terming nature-positive.

“So it’s not destroying nature in the course of doing your business activities and coupling that with an effort to restore, regenerate, and rewild spaces as well.”

As Lucy's journey has shown, it's an area open to new entrants.

“There’s plenty of work out there for people who have sustainability credentials at this point.

“I often see roles advertised and they say that a sustainability credential isn't even necessary so I already feel like anyone coming out of that course has an advantage if they're going into a sustainability role.

“Those positions are going to become really important over the next few years. Everybody understands the urgency of it and I've always been encouraging anyone I've spoken to just do it. There's no perfect time.

“For anyone who's worried about whether or not they'll be able to get a job and how soon they'd get a job, I would set their mind at ease and say there's going to be a torrent of jobs and requirements from business. Not least because of the sustainability reporting directive kicking in.

“A lot of businesses are going to need to get their sustainability act together, as it were, and there'll be a massive demand for this kind of work.”



ONE TO WATCH: Lucy Gaffney speaking at the Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss. She says sustainability is a massive area of growth for new jobs.



SHOW-BIZ: Eleanor McSherry at UCC ACE's Limerick Show stand with Paudcast presenter Pádraig O'Callaghan.

Game-changers: Autism pioneers building a better future

When ACE's Eleanor McSherry addressed politicians about the failure of autism policy at Leinster House, there was, at least, one ground-breaking positive she brought to light.

ACE's Diploma in Autism Studies is a unique, first-of-its-kind course not just in Ireland but worldwide.

It was designed from the ground up in collaboration with the autistic community and continues to be shaped by those who take the course in record numbers every year.

There were 200 applicants on the waiting list to register before Christmas, causing them to change the system to accommodate the growing interest fuelled by positive student recommendations.

The promotion is the easy part.

"What's unique about us is parents are in the room with teachers, psychologists, resource teachers, disability officers, intellectual disability nurses, so you've got this group of people who are 50% learning from us but 50% we learn from them and they learn from each other," says Eleanor.

"It's absolutely fantastic to be involved in a course where you've got such a mix. You get it nowhere else. Even across the world, it's very unique to us and we were the first to do it, which is fantastic."

That mix of students extends to include sanctuary scholars, immigrants, and international

students, with the most recent intake containing students from Spain and the Netherlands, and previous cohorts counting among them online students from as far away as Namibia.

"They've nothing like this in their country. They're absolutely blown away by it," says Eleanor.

Eleanor also found out recently that she herself is on the spectrum. "I was diagnosed by one of my colleagues at a conference.

"She gave me a formal diagnosis and I thought, at this stage of my life, it's not going to benefit me. I've been spending the last 14 years learning about autism so I think I know what I need to know."

She's always learning from those in her classes, with feedback taken on board in adapting the course.

Graded discussion boards were introduced but were hated by students; they're gone. Assignments were changed to suit students' needs too, reducing the emphasis on essays. Course content is more universally designed to accommodate all learners, with immersive readers, accessibility allies, and help from UCC Disability Support.

IMPOSTER SYNDROME

When it comes to the barriers that can block access to third-level education, Eleanor and her team do all in their power to help every student. Her door is always open.

"Every single person gives their time and gives extra time with students that need it so it's not a money thing. It's a vocation."

"I'm very well aware of it. My route into education was non-traditional. I did not get in through my CAO into third-level. I did a foundation course in Mary Immaculate College.

"I went back as a full-time carer so I had all of those barriers. Studying at home when you've a child with autism is a very big barrier and when there's only one earner in the house so I'm very well aware of those circumstances.

"I got my degree and then I went on and got my Master's. I didn't think I was worth somebody spending the time on. I had terrible impostor syndrome.

"So when I start with the students, I say I know exactly where you're been. I've a huge amount of pastoral care but it's worth it to keep the students on the course.

"I do everything within my power to keep them there, to help them, to guide them, to give them extra tutorials too, and we have all of that at our disposal. We've a very good team.

"Every single person gives their time and gives extra time with students that need it so it's not a money thing. It's a vocation."

Eleanor's experience of autism services has informed her career in the sector, although she never imagined this role as a programme coordinator.

For 20 years, she was a full-time carer and volunteer, fighting for the rights of her son and fighting the system for the benefit of others too. She took on night courses and soon her choice was between spending the rest of her life in advocacy or committing to third-level education.

"Until I went back to college, I was speaking to psychologists and psychiatrists and I didn't know what they were talking about and I couldn't help my son.

"When I went back to college, I did first-year psychology – it's hilarious now thinking back – but suddenly, I had the language. I had the words I could use and people started taking me seriously."

Her aim was to become a journalist and she worked as a freelancer for a time. It was only after two years of sending around CVs and being frustrated that this ACE at UCC job came up.

"I never expected it was going to allow me to continue the work that I'd done for 20 years.

"To be in a position to be able to be heard and to be seen... When I was a parent, nobody looked at me as an expert. Nobody looked at me as being able to have a valid voice.

"Even though I was invited to lots of things and allowed to speak on a public forum, there was always that scepticism.

"Now, when you say what we do in ACE, people look at you differently. It's an awful thing to say, that's the culture that we live, but they do respect education and they do respect what we do.

"That gives us a platform and we're using that platform to change the world that we live in. That's a massive opportunity."

Eleanor has been that soldier for a while now.

The 2001 Autism Taskforce report provided all the answers in one document over two decades ago. It was never implemented while other counties used the Irish findings as a foundation stone for their policies.

The political will to follow through on change is still falling short now.

CHANGE THE SYSTEM

Her Oireachtas submission dwelt on the positives too, based on what she sees in her Autism Studies students.

"It was so wonderful to be able to say how inclusive we are and that they should look at us because we're the game-changer. They're only going to be following what we do.

"We're sending people into the community who are better informed and better trained now and we didn't wait for anybody else to do that. We were doing it at ACE before they even thought of it.

"I really believe it's our children, the children that we have brought through the system, who have had help, who have had the better education, who have had the least, hopefully, amount of issues coming through, they're the people who are going to change it. Our little part of that is helping their parents to help them.

"I have absolute faith that people like my son, who is 24 and autistic, that are going to change the system."

There are all sorts of success stories out of the course and because it is so embedded in the community, Eleanor will hear from them when they get jobs or write books.

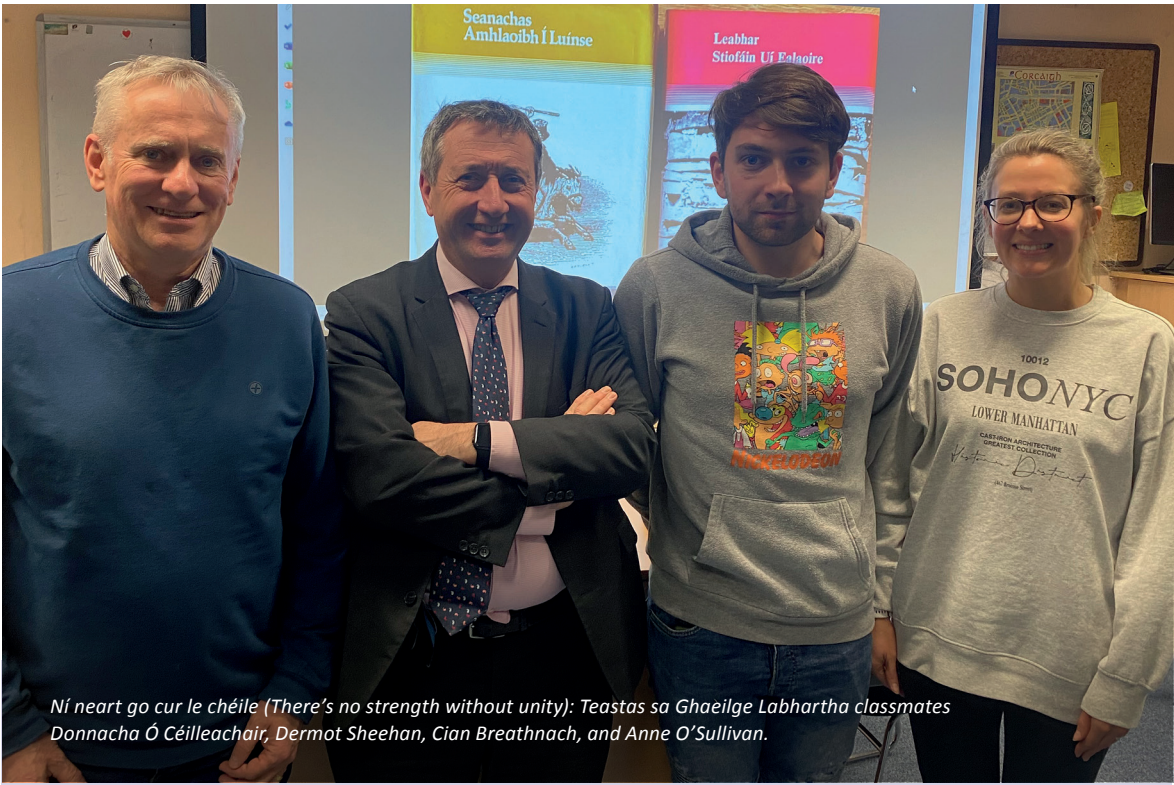
Three of the five lecturers on the new Continuing Professional Development course in Advocacy started out their college journey on the Autism Studies course. Three more Autism Studies lecturers are graduates of the course.

"I'm very proud of our students, I really am," says Eleanor. "There's some people who have gone on and become fantastic advocates for their children which I am also very proud of.

"It's fantastic to see how empowering education can be and having done that myself, to be able to share that with other people is a really fantastic gift ACE has given to me."

"I got my degree and then I went on and got my Master's. I didn't think I was worth somebody spending the time on. I had terrible impostor syndrome."

Eleanor McSherry



Ní neart go cur le chéile (There's no strength without unity): Teastas sa Ghaeilge Labhartha classmates Donnacha Ó Céilleachair, Dermot Sheehan, Cian Breathnach, and Anne O'Sullivan.

Keeping up the comhrá

It was after the first 24 hours in the Gaeltacht that Anne O'Sullivan felt the Irish fluency coming back to her.

A primary teacher, she had worked in a gael scoileanna in Cape Clear and Dublin over the years but fell out of practice during Covid and since moving back to Cork.

She took on the Teastas sa Ghaeilge Labhartha (Certificate in Spoken Irish) at ACE last September as an outlet "to keep up the comhrá".

The course culminated with a trip to UCC's Dún Chíomhain base in the Corca Dhuibhne Gaeltacht, with activities including local speakers coming in for scéalaíocht, a visit to Ionad an Bhlascaoid, and a trip to the local teach tábhairne.

"We're just back from the Gaeltacht which was a fantastic weekend," says Anne. "It would remind you what it's all about."

"We were totally immersed all weekend and we had a lovely class, just four of us, and lovely for opportunities to speak."

"After 24 hours in, it's amazing what a difference it makes being immersed. I wouldn't have had anything like that since I was working in Dublin over three years ago."

"I felt like, have I ever got back to where I was then? That's the first time I felt that comfort and fluency coming."

"I was blown away by how comfortable I was speaking away by Sunday evening and not necessarily feeling like that on my way in. You're rusty, it's strange, you need to get into it. But that was fantastic."

"I'd be eager to do that again, the full immersion for the whole weekend."

They had been building up to that Gaeltacht visit for most of the year. Some remote lectures from Dingle during December sharpened their skills.

"It was like virtually hopping into the Gaeltacht," says Anne. "They worked with us on our foclóir and the local dialect. It was very good."

"I like the blend of online and in-person. It's been mostly in-person but with a nice mix. For December, it was all online and that was a nice break then for the winter."

"It's always lovely too that we do go in and see each other and get to know each other."

That class includes a graduate working towards an Irish-language interview for primary teaching, a lecturer living in the Gaeltacht looking to brush up in order to engage more with the locals, and a judge with a grá for the language.

Their shared experience of doing the course has created that bond.

"The opportunities for spoken Irish in the class, even on the break, it's just fantastic," says Anne.

"One night, there was a mix-up and there wasn't a lecturer on. We all sat together and spoke for the two hours and that was as good as any class for us."

The focus of the course is to equip students with the skills to speak Irish socially and in the workplace, with modules on conversation, dialogue-building, storytelling, and interviews. Students are also encouraged to read in Irish between classes, which are usually held twice weekly.

The other module, on grammar, includes written work.

"It's all coming together really nicely. The different areas all complement each other," says Anne.

"The grammar has been good for me because I would have been doing it for the love of spoken Irish but it was good to put me to the test to brush up on a few different areas."

"The lectures were all outstanding. They make grammar fun somehow."

As for the continuous assessment: "It's great because at the end of the module, you know you've that part done."

Anne adds: "It's doable. They keep you tipping along with a few tasks. You have to put in something to gain. It's an enjoyable process. Everyone's so fantastic, the Ionad na Gaeilge Labhartha, they've made the whole process enjoyable."

For a decision Anne left until the last minute, it's one she's more than happy with.

"I felt like that last summer (unsure about signing up) and then, last minute, I just went for it and I'm so delighted I did. It's been so worth it."

"We're all very different on the course so it could appeal to anyone for varying reasons. It could really stand to you if you had an interview in Irish coming up and then you have just the love and interest."

"I couldn't be happier that I've seen out most of the course now and that I have a few new friends that speak in Irish."

"I've another outlet to have comhrá and those experiences. For that alone, it's been completely worth it."

Film industry makes big picture approach

Eleanor McSherry's primary degree when she returned to education wasn't anything to do with autism studies. It was in media and communications.

She has worked as a film producer, script writer, and arts advocate in the other side of her professional life.

Both areas of interest have now aligned in the continuing professional development (CPD) courses being initiated through UCC ACE.

Two years ago, Eleanor was approached by Screen Ireland about holding a neurodiversity workshop. It went well and next thing, they were asking about developing a full course.

"This is what education should be about... helping people to understand their environment and their culture..."

Eleanor McSherry

With the help of her colleagues at ACE, a pilot was created from scratch in an area where nothing like this had been done before. The CPD Certificate in Neurodiversity for the Screen Industry was born.

It was divided into two parts: the theory around neurodiversity, and the policies and practical measures to can create a culture that allows everyone opportunities to participate and thrive in the film industry, including more on-screen representation in acting roles.

They took on 20 students for the pilot. "We got a lot of data back and they all loved it. We were very lucky," says Eleanor.

She has since been invited to give workshops for Cartoon Saloon, Lighthouse Studios, RTE, TG4, the International Institute for Management Development in Lausanne, Switzerland, and the European Broadcasting Union. This summer, she will address the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA).

It's snowballing and the requests keep on coming.

"There's massive interest. One small 10-week course has created this massive ripple effect which we're at the centre of," says Eleanor. "These things keep coming in every day."

"All of our qualifications are internationally recognised. You've no idea what a big plus that is because in the film industry, the majority of the training internationally is by private companies who get payments when people go on set. We have none of that."

"We're a public-serving body. Anybody that we train is for the educational value and to help people change the culture so we've a much more altruistic viewpoint of it because nobody's paying us to put people on sets."

The first fully accredited group started in February, with a mechanism in development to allow the pilot students to gain the same qualification.

In response to the #MeToo movement and wider demands to develop better working conditions for people on set, another pilot programme was requested by Screen Ireland.

Wellbeing Coordination for the Screen Sector was a hit before it even started: "Within three days, for 20 places we'd 60 applicants."

Further interest has already come from Screen Northern Ireland and Media Cymru in Wales.

Another new development Eleanor has worked on is the CPD in Advocacy, which sprang from workshops run with the Simon Community and in Knocknaheeny.

"It worked out really well but they kept coming back and saying we want a qualification rather than just a workshop so we put together the programme."

Starting in March, it acts as an add-on for those who have come through ACE's Youth and Community Work, Autism Studies, Disability Studies, and Facilitating Inclusion, among other courses.

It guides people in how to advocate on behalf of somebody, whether as a parent, carer, community worker, healthcare employee, or anyone who needs to speak up for themselves or others.

"This is what education should be about," says Eleanor, "helping people to understand their environment and their culture and the world that they live in and giving them that bit of knowledge."

"This is our job and we take it very seriously."



NEXT STEP: Community-Based Mentoring participants and facilitators enjoying their celebration evening at The Shtepps in UCC. Karen O'Sullivan is second from right in the back row.

'I've never attended a course that was so facilitating'

The finishing date for the Community-Based Mentoring programme came and went but the students weren't quite ready to say goodbye.

A programme which encapsulates ACE's grassroots-up approach, it was designed to serve the feedback from Cork City's network of Learning Neighbourhoods.

That method of co-creation continued into the first-of-its-kind course to the extent that when the final day arrived, it was agreed that there was still more to cover.

"It was continuously growing and it was continuously developing as we were even attending," says Karen O'Sullivan, a community mentor with the Togher Learning Neighbourhood.

"The course was defined for so many weeks; it went on way longer than what we expected and they intended it to be but that was brilliant.

"That was how facilitating they were of us that they didn't say your time is up now, the course is over.

"There was none of that. It was just a matter of 'we need to meet again next week and discuss this.'"

Micheál Ó hAodáin facilitated the classes and through his guidance,

he was the perfect role model of mentoring at its best.

"It was so respectful for everybody attending it. We all have our own particular needs within ourselves to do what we wanted to do and he was always serving that aspect of us," says Karen.

"He modelled what he was suggesting we would do as mentors to perfection. He was a gem."

Led by the SOAR Project, the Continuing Professional Development Certificate was developed by Access UCC, MTU Cork Campus Access Service, Cork City Learning Neighbourhoods, Cork Migrant Centre, and ACE at UCC.

It recognised the work of mentors in the community with formal accreditation while equipping them with additional skills and knowledge to support learners accessing education.

In all, 16 mentors from Cork's six Learning Neighbourhoods plus the Cork Migrant Centre completed the course.

That responsiveness was its defining characteristic, to the extent that another group of students could've taken it in different directions. It's hoped to continue the course as a module option on a new programme.

"I don't think it's ever going to be a static defined course because that's not the nature of it," says Karen.

"If another group were doing it, there probably would be different things that would pop up within that group that they would want to address or learn about.

"Its flexibility in the attendees' needs and wants was quite amazing. I've never attended a course that was so facilitating of those who were attending it."

The course invited in guest speakers from a variety of further education and training institutions around Cork, increasing awareness of the full breadth of supports available across the city and generating a web of connections for mentors. In that way, they can offer a greater range of options to potential students.

That network extends to the bonds formed between the course participants too.

"That was absolutely amazing," says Karen. "All the people coming from the different neighbourhoods are incredible people, all working voluntarily, all very eager to be volunteers.

"They're great role models within their own community and inspirational people.

"People were very giving of their own knowledge. If I didn't have the knowledge I needed to support someone then I know there's someone else within the community that I can contact who's going to help me with that so that was fabulous as well."

The course also focused on the mentors themselves.

"When you're hoping to support other people, you look in before you start looking out. That was really well done. I didn't expect that aspect of the course," says Karen.

Having taught for 37 years in Togher, Karen believes the course has completely changed her approach to volunteering work.

"I would have had that idea of fixing things for people. That has changed. It's no longer a fixing role because there's nothing to be fixed as such.

"It was continuously growing and it was continuously developing as we were even attending."

Karen O'Sullivan

"It's just a matter of helping people to get where they want to go to. That was the biggest thing I learned from the course; the idea that people have the best solutions themselves for themselves.

"The big difference in my approach to mentoring people would be more active listening... You're a facilitator, not a fixer."

Togher Learning Neighbourhood provides inclusive and diverse learning opportunities through partnership and collaboration.

They're currently working on a Togher directory of all the various facilities available in the area.

Earlier this year, they hosted a Neighbourhood University programme which included taster classes at Cork College of FET's Tramore Road Campus.

All 48 of the participants were setting foot inside the building, formerly known as Coláiste Stiofáin Naofa, for the first time. Many have now registered for courses this autumn.

Another project coming to fruition is a Junior Park Run at Clashduv Park. The origin of that idea came from a children's wishing tree.

"It'll be great because it'll be a wish from that wishing tree that happened," says Karen. "You're just constantly looking to see what people want."

It was decided towards the end of the course to award grants to the various neighbourhoods. Each one was given either a phone, tablet, or laptop per participant to be used for their role as a mentor within the SOAR Project, a collaboration between third-level access programmes.

A graduation event was held in March, with certificates and branded glass paperweights presented to graduates.

"It was really lovely. We were just delighted to meet each other again more than anything," says Karen.

"Everybody really did enjoy it and everybody's expectations were far surpassed in that course."

Recognising the value of life experience

People from all backgrounds can apply to gain entry onto UCC programmes based on their practical work and life experience.

Adult Continuing Education (ACE) is leading the way in pioneering the recognition of prior learning (RPL) to break down the barriers to accessing higher education.

One example is the creation of Ireland's first Sustainable Farming Academy, which will see 20 farmers accepted onto the Diploma in Environment, Sustainability, and Climate each year. The places on the course are fully funded.

Taking into account the value of their pre-existing expertise and skills in the area, Tirlán Co-op members who participate will be granted exemptions from three of the six modules amounting to 50% of the entire programme.

The part-time course will therefore take one academic year to complete, rather than two.

It will be run predominantly online to fit around farmwork, with occasional sessions on UCC campus and at least one farm visit during the year.

There are no formal examinations, with all work continuously assessed. Assignments are scheduled to coincide with quieter times in the farming calendar.

“In ACE, we’re all about breaking down the barriers.”

Lyndsey El Amoud

Dedicated supports and training will be provided to get students up to speed with the online platforms.

“Being part of the first-ever group to take part in the Sustainable Farming Academy is probably the best thing I’ve ever done for me personally and to future-proof our family farm,” says Academy participant Amanda Mooney.

The Academy, in partnership with Tirlán and Baileys Irish Cream, builds on the success of a similar collaboration with a group of West Cork farmers through the Carbery Greener Dairy programme.

“It’s just trying to give people the awareness that we can recognise other types of experience and the confidence that they can come to higher education if they wish to,” says ACE at UCC assistant director Lyndsey El Amoud.

“We’re here and we should be able to find a route into higher education for anybody who is motivated to study.

“In ACE, we’re all about breaking down the barriers and RPL is another hammer in the toolbox that helps us bash those barriers out of the way.”

Another major success in bringing these innovations into mainstream use has been the rollout of the RPL Digital Badge to empower education practitioners to recognise prior learning in their work.

The free six-week course, offered through the National RPL in Higher Education Project, has drawn in 206 participants from 35 institutions across the country.

“Everybody can avail from the recognition of prior learning. People can apply to gain entry to programmes based on their experience of informal learning. That’s what we want to encourage,” says Ciara Staunton, ACE academic operations manager.

“Anybody can now start looking at our courses with RPL in mind and avail of RPL. It’s about recognising and acknowledging the valuable work that people do so they don’t have to start from scratch.”

UCC is working on formalising the central value of RPL through a new University policy.

“That will hopefully open up more opportunities for people to come to UCC in different manners to have their prior experience recognised,” says Lyndsey.

“We’re really putting an emphasis on prior experiential learning for people who may have left school after the Leaving Cert and went straight into the workforce but have amassed a huge amount of professional experience since then. We want to recognise that.

“Because we’re now able to recognise that professional experience, instead of expecting somebody to come back and start at a Level 6 qualification and move up, they may start at a Level 7, Level 8, Level 9 qualification, or may get exemptions on some modules.”



RECOGNISING PRIOR LEARNING: Receptionist Gwen Roche offers a guiding hand and a friendly face to people experiencing their first interactions with ACE.

The Face of ACE

Gwen Roche describes her nickname as an in-house joke but there’s more than a grain of truth to it.

The receptionist affectionately known as ‘The Face of ACE’ is the first port of call for prospective students considering a return to education.

Whether by phone, email, or in the front office, Gwen offers a guiding hand and a friendly face to people experiencing their initial interactions with ACE.

She knows first-hand the value of a return to education too, having gone back to work at 50 when she got her job at ACE’s base in The Laurels on Western Road.

“I was considered a good fit because I was an adult learner myself in the intervening years and had worked previously in UCC,” says Gwen.

During 17 years caring for her young family, she was conscious of upskilling by taking on courses in Microsoft Office, public relations, and coaching.

“The penny dropped that further learning, lifelong learning, was essential to gain a foothold into the workplace when it was my decision to return.”

Once she embraced learning for life, she hasn’t stopped, most recently taking on the 12-week Continuing Professional Development course in Recognition of Prior Learning (CPD in RPL).

The only course of its kind in Ireland, it aims to support educators working with employees who have low educational qualifications, lone parents, Travellers, migrants, people with disabilities, and marginalised and vulnerable adults. In short, it

chimed perfectly with the work Gwen was doing with ACE.

“I’m keen to stay where I am, I love it, but I’m also keen to expand a little bit and bring what I learned into play and use it in my role as time goes on.

“[The course] appealed to me because of what I was dealing with every day. People coming to me and saying, ‘I’m 47, I want to return, I’ve never done anything since I left school...’ A bit like myself. And then they say, ‘I’d like to return to education.’

“When they make the very difficult decision to ring, there’s a lot wrapped up in that call. There’s a commitment, there’s a bit of bravery, a bit of courage, a bit of a plan, a bit of timing, all sorts of things. All of that is encompassed in one single phone call – or alternatively, emailing ACE.”

She describes it as her ‘teasing out’ skills, trying to help people realise their own transferable skills. She recognises their prior learning, whether it’s from working in their local shop, volunteering on their GAA club’s committee, or caring for their family at home, and applies it to their potential applications.

“They don’t realise their own skills,” says Gwen. “You’re trying to establish what is this person trying to achieve and how can they become eligible for our courses.

“We’re all about inclusion but they don’t feel they are eligible because they say, ‘But I’ve never done anything.’

“I’m trying to get them to explore their own capabilities. And I’ve done it myself with myself and that’s how I’ve reached this point.”

Some people who get in contact already have an idea of the course they want. For others, Gwen will sometimes make suggestions based on their future ambitions, their past experience, or their present circumstances.

She often asks them to compile a short three-paragraph motivational statement as part of that process: “Tell us where you’re coming from, what you would like to do, how you would like to commit, what sort of time you have, and most importantly, what you would like to do upon qualification.”

She’s a conduit through which they can get in touch with course coordinators with specific academic questions and an anchor, always there over the years for any and all queries.

“We want to let people know that we can listen to your story. We can invite you in whatever way and assess your eligibility. That’s what we try to achieve here. And to allow people to appreciate the value of the qualification upon completion.

“I would say be brave. Have a bit of courage because we’ll take it from there. We just need the initial contact. That’s what I try to excel in then, allowing them to be comfortable, allowing them to feel they belong, and allowing them to feel they are in the right place. That’s what I’m trying to portray.

“Be realistic in your own achievements. Explore everything you have done because everything has a value attached to it. That’s what we learned in the CPD in RPL. Everything that you’ve done, no matter how big or small or how important you thought it was, it’s valuable when you’re applying for a course and we will explore that with them.”

And for those considering the CPD in RPL, that training will help them in their own dealings with learners.

“I know what to look for in a prospective student and I know how to guide them as a direct result of my training in that CPD course,” says Gwen.

“I love what I do. My learning is put into place every day now.”

She was invited to join the nationwide RPL Community of Practice Network, organised by AONTAS, and she learned plenty from her classmates through ‘peer triads’, held outside of lectures. Of course, she was able to help others access all of UCC’s resources too.

“We could bounce absolutely anything off one another; ask questions, discuss assignments, all of that kind of thing. I found that a terribly valuable lesson. I didn’t feel alone then as a student or isolated in any way.”

Such is her job; ensuring no potential student is left behind.



CARING FOR CARERS: Karen Lennon turned an old storeroom into a quiet space for her colleagues to address special education staff burnout.

If someone asked me to sum up UCC, you're minded in the course

Karen Lennon switched out of teacher mode when she took on ACE's Disability Studies Diploma last year.

The lessons she learned, though, gave her a more rounded approach to her classroom work.

Those studies advanced her career prospects, too, standing to her as she was recently hired as deputy principal of a newly opened special school for students aged from four to 18.

"Doing the course definitely helped me in the interview because I could talk from both sides," says Karen, "from a teacher working in special education but also how society is treating people with disabilities."

"That was something I said in my interview about having more understanding of parents; how hard they fight and advocate is something that we don't touch on in school because we're about the Department, inspectors, paperwork, lesson plans. It's a different side."

"It would give you more emotional awareness of what it is like for families."

A couple of years back, Karen worked with the Department of Education as a curriculum adviser on special education. Her motivation to take on the two-year Diploma came from the more inclusive admission policies implemented to provide wider access to school places.

"We're now seeing students with more profound intellectual disabilities entering secondary schools where those students in the past would've been told to go to a special education school," she says.

"There's a huge shift. They've really opened up a more inclusive environment for students to be in a mainstream setting, to be part of the special education class with the hope of integrating into some mainstream class, whether that's art or PE."

"The students coming in now need more assistance so I thought to myself, I need to go back and do a course on Disability Studies to learn more."

From her work in special education classes, Karen had plenty of insight into the in-school demands but the course opened her eyes to the wider challenges, barriers, and fights families face for services, grants, and access.

"You're looking at what it means to have a disability and you shift your thinking and now you're thinking through the lens of a person who has a disability."

"That could be a physical disability, it could be an intellectual disability, it could be autism, but it doesn't focus on a person trying to access education; it focuses on people and how to access their daily living throughout life."

"It's not about just doing the course to get the piece of paper; they were very much invested."

Karen Lennon

"It looks at how they're treated in employment, within HSE care homes, with universal design in buildings, how they navigate from morning to night with a disability."

"It gave you the understanding of what it is to live with a disability, in as much as you could understand."

SUBMERGES YOU

Many of Karen's classmates were family members of people with disabilities and they provided the biggest learning from their own experiences.

They spoke about their struggles to get places across schools, transport, occupational therapy, and even sorting the smallest supports for their children or partners. The continuous fights lead to exhaustion for carers and advocates.

While the focus is often on school years, students and families are all too commonly left pedalling their own canoe when they reach adulthood. The course gave Karen more of an understanding of the options for further learning she can recommend to those leaving school at 18.

The Diploma also gives a broad sweep of everything from models and perceptions of disability to developing inclusive environments, policy, and legislation.

"The course is very different. It submerges you in disability. It's not about you regurgitating the information. It's about your understanding of each module."

"What did that mean to you? They're very much interested in what was your learning from this."

"If we normalise people with disabilities and non-disabled in the one classroom from an early age mixing together, that's going to eradicate the idea of 'you're different'."

"The course focused a lot on people seeing people as different. That comes from the medical model, they see the disability first and not the person."

"It trying to move away from that into the social model, you're more than your diagnosis, and how you can access society."

"Doing the ACE course prepared me to understand someone with a disability of any kind."

A workshop on 'Caring for Carers', who are often overlooked, struck a chord with Karen and gave her an idea she could apply to her own work.

The lecturer put up pictures of herself when healthy and when burned out. The difference was immediately visible.

Karen could see colleagues in her special education unit getting emotionally exhausted. The nature of the interaction means students can get attached to that one adult when away from home and parents can offload their stresses on teachers.

They struggle to get away from the classroom, which can be an intense and high-stress environment dealing with behavioural issues, for a proper lunch break.

Karen cleared out an old storeroom. It wasn't much, she says, comparing it to the size of a small toilet, but it was enough for a small sofa and chairs, a few rugs, and a table left behind by some woodwork students.

"It meant that when a special ed teacher or an SNA wasn't on call, they could remove themselves from that room and give themselves headspace, quiet time, and regulate themselves," she explains.

"They weren't having their breaks with the students in the room. They could disconnect from what

"If someone asked me to sum up ACE, you're minded in the course. It's all about keeping you engaged, being very contactable."

Karen Lennon

was happening in the special ed classes and sit down with the other staff for 10 or 20 minutes and talk about something that wasn't school-related.

"That was one of the things that was appreciated the most and that came out of the course."

WARM AND OPEN

Karen found everyone at ACE understanding of her workload between employment and family life.

"If someone asked me to sum up ACE, you're minded in the course. It's all about keeping you engaged, being very contactable."

"I felt minded by ACE, which sometimes you don't get in courses. They're checking in throughout the lectures. They lecture in a style that's very warm, very open, as in you're invited to ask questions, they prefer it."

"Christine [Chasaide, course coordinator] knew that I had a young family and was working full-time so if I ever felt that I needed to contact her about an assignment, she'd get back to you."

"If you needed an extension, you could get one, or if you weren't sure what direction your assignment should go in, you could email and you'd get feedback."

"Christine would be someone who if I rang her now and say, 'Christine, this is happening at work, have you advice or do you know anything that could help this student out?', she'd say, 'If I know, I'll tell you. If I don't know, I'll come back to you.'"

"She was excellent. The lecturers I found very good and very approachable."

"You were more than a student number. The lecturers are very passionate about what they do, about Disability Studies, and that comes through in their lectures. They want you to know as much as you can."

"It's not about just doing the course to get the piece of paper; they were very much invested."



HEART OF GOLD: Karol Torpey (centre), chaplain of St Anne's Community College, Killaloe, being presented with Excellence in Care gold at the Education and Training Board Excellence Awards. She's pictured with George O'Callaghan, Limerick and Clare ETB chief executive, Ray Kennedy, awards host and RTE news presenter, Eukaria O'Grady, principal, and Christine Noonan, Limerick and Clare ETB ethos co-ordinator.

Dealing with the traumas of war and COVID

Since COVID, Karol Torpey is seeing more and more anxiety in school. She suspects it won't ease anytime soon either.

More children are coming from primary into secondary school having had their formative years in education disrupted. For some, being at home for so long highlighted other issues. And there has also been the arrival of pupils from war-torn countries.

As part of her role as chaplain, Karol built a strong connection between her school and students during the pandemic.

Her colleagues at St Anne's, Killaloe, nominated her for the Excellence in Care category at the Education and Training Board Excellence Awards, where Karol won gold.

She was commended for her leadership, selflessness, and school spirit, exhibited through her 'Humans of St Anne's' social media pages, organising a huge collection of supplies in a Ukrainian appeal, and support for all through bereavements and tough times.

Now, Karol is finishing up a Continuing Professional Development Certificate in Trauma-informed Care: Theory and Practice through ACE.

"The area of trauma came into play with students coming from war-torn

places," says Karol. "Post-COVID, it was looking at how people have been affected by all of that too."

CARE PACKAGES

During the initial teething problems of COVID, she used social media to bring families back into the school community, reaching out to parents on Facebook and students on Instagram.

"For the first week, I didn't know what to do with myself. I decided that I would phone every family in the school to see if there was anything I could post to them, if there was anything they needed, technology-wise, health-wise, just somebody to talk to really.

"I chatted to parents and the staff as well. It was about supporting them because they were trying to teach with their own kids in the background, and some of them had just come back from maternity leave, and some had elderly parents they were minding and all of that.

"Regularly, then, I would have sent little care packages to their homes with a box of chocolates, a few positive affirmation cards, whatever it was, just to let them know I was thinking of them."

Karol explains the social media engagement with parents and students "was about bringing them

"Regularly, then, I would have sent little care packages to their homes with a box of chocolates, a few positive affirmation cards, whatever it was, just to let them know I was thinking of them."

Karol Torpey

back to us rather than focusing on what the daily numbers were, what was going on with press conferences every evening, and getting them to come back to where we are and our school and what we're about."

She got staff members to send her a photo of something they were up to at home and had the students guess who it was.

There were table quizzes and she organised a magician to do a show on Teams to encourage pupils to get on board with using the video-call platform at home and be comfortable interacting on a screen with each other.

"That was lots of fun stuff," says Karol, "and then we had awful sad stories on the phone as well and talking through that with families.

"It was quite a privileged position, I suppose. I got to be part of what they were going through. Whether it was joyful or whether it was sad, it was to be there and present for them in whatever way they presented to me, warts and all."

OPENS YOUR EYES

Since COVID, everyone had endured a trauma, and Karol notices the course content reflects so much of what she sees in the world.

"As I was saying to Maria [Lotty, programme coordinator] before Christmas, everywhere I look now I'm seeing trauma. It opens your eyes to how I approach the students that come to me on a one-to-one, how I approach my group work, and how I can help other staff members to approach their classes.

"Recognising what the behaviours are telling me about this person has been huge. And having the language then to tell the people I'm working with to get them to understand it and have the theory behind that to back that up.

"It has been fantastic. I'm always hugely interested in the area of well-being anyway, given the nature of the job, so this is another add-on for me to feel more comfortable in it.

"Looking at my own practice and looking after myself has been huge because of the area of vicarious trauma as well."

She appreciates how the course practices what it preaches in terms of its care for those who study it.

"When you go to a lecture online, you might have come from a busy day or anything could have happened.

"Maria and Maura [O'Donoghue] understand that so if you're not saying much tonight, that's okay. Or if you don't feel like you can stay for the whole lot of it, that's okay.

"They're using what they're teaching from the get-go with us as well.

"And I loved... we have a little time at the start to ground ourselves so even if you have raced in the door and you're trying to get logged in and the WiFi isn't working and all the rest of it, you know that there's going to be three minutes there at the start when we're just going to relax."

Karol is looking into setting up a 'care closet' in her school now.

"It's given me loads of new ideas and new ways of looking at it. I'm recognising it more, I'm using the language more, and I just feel a whole lot more knowledgeable of it.

"It's very current, much needed. The American Psychology Association has said that since COVID, everybody has had a trauma.

"Whether it has affected them as much as the next person, that's as individual as the snowflake but it's current, it's relevant, it's really important, and it's evidence-based."

She describes the course as transformational for her work and manageable with all the support from SCE.

"It's totally doable and it's so enlightening. You will make fantastic friends from it, you have great support in it, and I have to commend ACE, the UCC library, everything has been fantastic, especially for people who haven't written an essay in a very long time to have those supports.

"It has no fear and I know we have to look at cost as well but it's stretched out over time. So it's all very doable and well worth it.

"You're applying it to your own work so it's changing your work as you're looking at it. It's transformational.

"After each week of the course, your own work is transforming. It's a whole new lens that you are looking at everybody with."



HALL OF FAME: Deborah McMullin (centre) was awarded third-year student of the year and best dissertation at the School of History Annual Prize-giving Ceremony 2023. She's pictured with lecturers Rory O'Dwyer and Alan McCarthy at UCC's Aula Maxima. Picture: Tomás Tyner

History-maker: 'You'll know straight away. I knew the first week I love this'

Deborah McMullin describes her introduction to UCC ACE as a very quaint story.

She saw a poster up in her local library for the Certificate in History and remembers staring at it for ages. She contacted programme coordinator Rory O'Dwyer but the course wasn't running that year.

Fine, she thought, I tried and it didn't work out. But he emailed her back the following year to say it was going ahead and asking if Deborah would do it.

"It was a midlife crisis," she laughs. "I just wanted to do something different."

"I always loved history, always loved reading books about history. I just wanted to do something different."

"I didn't really have a plan. I just said I'll do this course for the year and see what happens. Will my brain still work in that way?"

Deborah had studied Fine Art at Crawford College before moving to Dublin, where she shifted into retail design. On her return to Cork in 2007, she started working in domestic interiors.

The UCC ACE course, which she started in 2018, allowed Deborah to continue her work while figuring out if history was for her. It didn't take her long to find the answer.

That first night she left knowing she was in the right place.

"It was the best night in the week for me. I really loved it."

"The people I did the course with were fantastic. We still have a WhatsApp group, believe it or not."

"I really enjoyed it and I loved the challenge of just having to think in a different way and do research and all of that."

LOVELY VIBE

Deborah relished it all, from the lectures on Irish, American, and European history, to the tea-break chats.

Her classmates came from all walks of life, all ages, and all with a shared passion for history. Some did it purely for enjoyment while others had the added benefit of progressing into further study.

"There was 10 or 12 of us on the course and at least three of us went

on to do something more with UCC, which is brilliant."

"I discovered I really loved the process of writing. We also had to do a presentation – that was scary – but they're such a lovely group, you knew everyone was going to be supporting you. There was a really lovely vibe."

"All the lecturers were really supportive. They wanted the best for you and as a group, it was the same. Everyone helped each other out."

Towards the end of that year, Deborah decided she would take the plunge and return to full-time education.

She had missed the mature student application date but applied based on her CAO results from 1992 and got in to study Arts, with a joint honours in history and politics.

"I was nervous about going back to college full-time because they're all going to be kids, and they're not. There are mature students but even the kids are brilliant. They don't treat you any different because you're older."

"It's very positive to be around all different age groups all the time. It's brilliant to meet so many different people."

UNEXPECTED

Three years later and Deborah not only graduated with flying colours, she was awarded third-year student of the year in both history and politics as well as winning best dissertation in both award ceremonies.

"That was unexpected but amazing," she says. "For all the old people out there, you can still do great things!"

Her history dissertation was about UN Resolution 242, on the relationship between Israel and the USA, while for politics, she researched America's reaction to 9/11.

Her education journey isn't finished yet. She's halfway through the UCC PME (Professional Master of Education) course, studying to become a secondary school teacher.

That journey was something Rory O'Dwyer, who helped Deborah start out on that path five years ago, asked her to speak about at the School of History Annual Prize-giving Ceremony in March.

"I tell you, it's much scarier to stand up in front of a classroom full of teenagers; that's really nerve-racking."

"It went really well."

"I was anxious to talk about ACE and how it had prompted me to go back to full-time education because there is literally no way I would have taken that leap to go back to college full-time without having done that first. No way."

"Just from wondering if you can do it, can you balance it with work, to the money that it costs, it was too big of a risk without doing ACE."

"My advice to anybody if they're thinking of going back, if they're on the fence, it would be do the night course, do ACE first, and you'll know straight away. I knew the first week I went I love this."

"You get to dip your toe in the water for not very high stakes so you can test it and see."

She also spoke about doing her undergraduate degree during COVID, with some of first and third year and all of second year moving online.

And then, there was the matter of how important history is for everyone to study, although she quips that she is a biased source on that matter.

JAZZ HANDS

Deborah's teacher training includes placement in partner schools.

"In one way I'm lucky because I'm a mum and I'm older so it took them a good long while to catch on that I was a student teacher," she laughs.

It's been a huge change from being self-employed for 18 years to working in a staff room with 130

colleagues and a school of 1,460 kids.

"When I worked for myself, you have that decompression time in between meetings. Now, it's jazz hands all day long so it is a completely different thing."

"I wasn't sure at the start if it was for me or not. I was going, oh my God, what did I do? But as I get more used to it, I'm enjoying it more."

Deborah has a son in fifth year who's starting to consider his college options. Her own experience has changed her attitude towards his choices.

"The people I did the course with were fantastic. We still have a WhatsApp group, believe it or not."

Deborah McMullin

"I'm much more relaxed about him making decisions because you can start something, it's not necessarily where you're going to end up, so do what you love and you can change. Nothing's set in stone."

"It's made me not afraid to go 'I'm going to try that' if something else cropped up. That was a great bonus. Great for the kids to see as well."

"It's life-changing. That sounds like an overstatement but it's not really because it has changed fundamentally how I live and it's impacted the kids and all in a very positive way."

That opportunity to transform her life isn't something Deborah takes for granted.

"I'll be 50 when I graduate from the Master's and it's so rare you get to completely change your life at that age. I think that's amazing."

"If you're thinking about it at all, the ACE course is the way to go. Just try it."

"Most of the courses are a year, not even a year, they're two semesters long, a college year. It's doable with work and then you can make a really informed decision once you're finished whether you want to jump back into full-time or not."

"Even meeting new people who love what you love is great. It's been so positive for me."

"That's what is brilliant about the ACE courses, it's giving you a taste of something. Once you've got the bug, that's it then."



ADULT CONTINUING EDUCATION AT UCC

What we offer at ACE

AT ACE WE STRIVE TO OFFER:

Engaging course content from experienced lecturers – Our lecturing team are experts in their fields and will provide exciting and engaging content throughout the programme. Our teaching teams are comprised of a blend of UCC academic experts and senior practitioners in the relevant field. Our courses are rated highly by employers and graduates alike.

Dedicated support for adult learners – We understand that adult learners like you have multiple priorities in your lives and we will support you to achieve your learning goals with our flexible learning approaches. We also appreciate that some learners may have been outside of formal learning environments for some time, so we will build your confidence and help you to develop the skills needed to excel in your studies.

Community of Adult Learners – In joining an ACE programme, you will become part of the ACE community of over 3,000 adult learners who join us every year and will have access to a range of student services within the university.

HOW ARE OUR COURSES DELIVERED?

ACE's approach to education is based on a system of flexibility that is designed to suit the busy lives of adult learners. Programmes are delivered on a part-time basis with the majority of classes taking place on weekday evenings and/or weekends. The majority of our

courses are delivered through a blended/hybrid delivery style approach with live classes delivered online supported by in-person workshops.

ACE PART-TIME COURSES

At ACE we offer a wide range of courses that cater to a diverse range of interests across a number of interesting and intriguing categories.

ARTS, CULTURE & HERITAGE

- Arts (History), Certificate
- European Art History, Diploma
- Genealogy, Diploma
- Languages, Certificate
- Local and Regional Studies, Diploma
- Mythology, Certificate
- Spoken Irish, Certificate

COMMUNITY, DIVERSITY & INCLUSION

- Advocacy, Certificate in CPD Microcredential
- Community Based Mentoring, Certificate in CPD Microcredential
- Disability – Inclusive Practice, Certificate
- Disability Studies, Diploma
- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Awareness for Health, Social Care and Education Professionals, Microcredential
- Facilitating Inclusion (Disability Studies), Higher Diploma
- Leadership in the Community, Diploma
- Practice Support in Social

- Farming, Certificate
- Social Citizenship, Certificate
- Social Studies, Diploma
- Trauma-informed Care: Theory and Practice, Certificate in CPD Microcredential
- Trauma Studies, Postgraduate Certificate /Diploma, MA
- Trauma and Front-line Workers, Certificate in CPD Microcredential
- Youth and Community Work, Diploma
- Women's Studies, Diploma

CROSS-SECTOR PERSONAL & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- Building Workplace Resilience in Self and Others, Certificate in CPD Microcredential*
- Coaching and Coaching Psychology, Higher Diploma
- Leadership Development, Higher Diploma
- Learning and Development Practice, Diploma
- Management Practice, Diploma*
- Mindfulness Based Practice and Research, Postgraduate Certificate /Diploma
- Mindfulness Based Wellbeing, Postgraduate Certificate, MSc
- Personal and Management Coaching, Postgraduate Certificate /Diploma, MSc
- Procurement Management, Certificate*
- Project Management, Certificate in CPD Microcredential
- Safety, Health and Welfare at Work, Certificate*, Higher Diploma
- Workplace Change: Practice and Skills, Certificate in CPD Microcredential

EDUCATION SECTOR

- Digital Education, Certificate in CPD Microcredential
- Further, Adult and Community Education, Postgraduate Diploma
- Play Therapy, Postgraduate Certificate /Diploma, MA
- Recognition of Prior Learning for Adult and Community Educators, Certificate in CPD Microcredential
- Trauma-Informed Practice

in Education, Certificate in CPD Microcredential

ENVIRONMENT & SUSTAINABILITY

- Climate Crisis and Local Government, Certificate in CPD Microcredential
- Environment, Sustainability and Climate, Certificate*, Diploma

FOOD SECTOR

- Corporate Direction (Food Business), Diploma
- Food Manufacturing Management, Diploma
- Food Science and Technology, Diploma
- Leadership for Agri-Food Sector, Diploma
- Food Studies and Irish Foodways, Postgraduate Certificate, Diploma, & MA

MANUFACTURING, (BIO)PHARMA & ENGINEERING SECTORS

- (Bio)Pharmaceutical Technologies, Certificate in CPD Microcredential
- (Bio)Pharma Processing, Postgraduate Certificate/Diploma*, MSc
- Introduction to BioPharmaceuticals and Advanced Personalised Therapies, Certificate in CPD Microcredential
- Manufacturing of Pharmaceutical Formulations, Certificate in CPD Microcredential
- Operator Development (Pharma Manufacturing), Certificate*
- Process and Chemical Engineering, Certificate*/Diploma
- Validation Science, Certificate in CPD Microcredential*

PSYCHOLOGY, MENTAL HEALTH & NEURODIVERSITY

- Arts (Psychology), Certificate
- Autism Studies, Diploma
- Interpersonal Communication, Certificate
- Mental Health in the Community, Certificate
- Neurodiversity for the

Screen Industry, Certificate in CPD Microcredential

- Psychology of Criminal Behaviour, Diploma
- Relationship Mentoring, Higher Diploma
- Responding to Problem Gambling, Certificate in CPD Microcredential
- Social and Psychological Health Studies, Diploma
- Substance Misuse and Addiction Studies, Diploma

**A limited number of places on this course are available under the Springboard+ initiative which provides fee subsidies of 90-100% for eligible applicants.*

SHORT COURSES:

ACE at UCC is the country's largest provider of short courses in the Irish university sector. We offer an unrivalled range of courses across a wide range of subjects and topics, including history, literature, music, genealogy, local history, creative writing, politics, philosophy, and art history. Topics relevant to environmental issues include climate change, permaculture and deep ecology. We also have a suite of courses in the professional development category, for instance, life, business and team coaching, confident communication, and leadership and conflict resolution. People chose to participate in our courses for many reasons; many like to engage more deeply in special interests or to test what university life is like in deciding whether returning to education for longer programmes of study is a good fit. And of course, the social dimension to courses is of great value in bringing people together in a community of shared interests. Whatever the reason for taking a short course, we offer the best quality teaching based on the research activities of our lecturing team

For more information on any of our courses scan the QR code below or visit:

www.ucc.ie/en/ace

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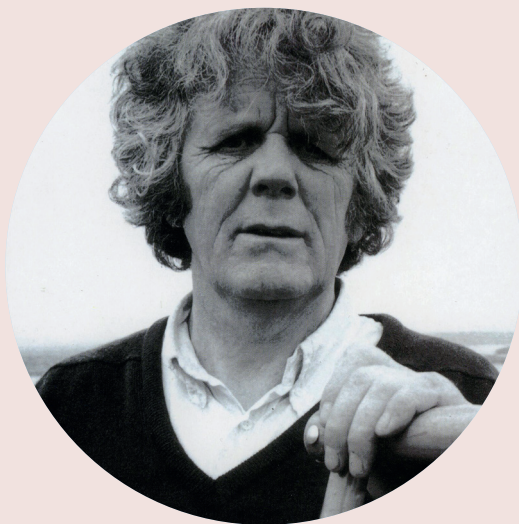


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LIVING LEGACY: John Moriarty, the visionary Irish philosopher and writer, is the subject of a UCC short course. Picture: Jim Vaughan

The story behind a great Irish mind

There's a quote from John Moriarty, the visionary Irish philosopher and writer, that Kevin J Power loves for how it neatly encapsulates the essential foundations of his worldview.

"Most of us grow up in a story. We don't grow up so much in a house built of bricks and mortar – we are housed in a great story."

Kevin, a philosophy lecturer with UCC ACE, has been living and reliving Moriarty's story as he retraced his steps from Moyvane to Manitoba and back to Mangerton in his Kerry homeland.

That Kevin's journey to Canada coincided with his delivery of the eight-week short course, 'A Mind for Our Times: The Living Legacy of John Moriarty', made it all the more current and engaging for students.

The new details uncovered on those travels will feature when the course runs again this autumn.

Moriarty's legacy is something of a hidden one to the extent that it was only when Kevin returned to teaching, after two years working in the music industry, that he encountered the wisdom of one of the greatest Irish thinkers of his generation.

"I looked him up the next day and I was instantly converted. I loved his style of writing but also the compassion of it is very heartfelt," says Kevin.

"His work stands up as a really valuable contribution to probably world philosophy but definitely Irish philosophy. I was a bit taken aback when I saw the depth of his work that he was so underexposed.

"It's not totally academic. And his life story is really interesting."

Moriarty was born in 1938 into a rural farming family but was exposed to the works of Darwin and Freud at a young age.

His fate would have appeared predetermined by his birth right but those books changed his perception of the world.

His father gave him the money that would've gone towards buying land to keep the farm going and instead, Moriarty studied for a philosophy degree at UCD.

He ended up teaching in Canada for six years, where Kevin travelled this spring to meet some of his old colleagues and reveal how his work was shaped by those experiences.

"He became disillusioned with academia and what Western education was doing to his own mind and doing to the world in general," says Kevin. "So he stepped away from it and came back to Inishbofin and then on to Connemara and eventually down to Mangerton.

"In Manitoba, he was basically snowed in all the time. He had none of the colour that you would have in the Irish landscape. He was yearning for that felt experience of the natural world.

"He wasn't just writing about the natural world, he was used to being out in it. By the time he comes back to Ireland, he's meditating by waterfalls and up trees so he really was in a physical as well as an emotional and a spiritual interaction with the natural world.

"That's something we can learn from his work. A lot of us are cut off from that and it does affect our empathy towards not just the natural world but the people and the environment around us."

He worked as a gardener but later returned to lecturing and also worked in broadcasting.

His work touched on how the way we perceive the world informs our attitude towards it, with a focus on the commodification of nature. He believed in the interconnectedness of humanity with ecosystems,

other animals, and different religions and cultures.

"He would have been saying things about what we would call climate change or sustainability decades before they were in mainstream awareness.

"He was talking about that and people didn't know what he was on about in terms of things like global warming and the impact of fossil fuel extraction.

"But he wasn't a scientist so he was saying it less technically and more with regard to our personal relationship to the earth."

The course touched on a different theme each week, examining what Moriarty meant in his work and its modern-day relevance.

The online delivery has facilitated students in attending from all over Ireland, plus another from England, while the variety of backgrounds and disciplines represented in the class made the discussion richer and the understanding deeper.

Kevin also recently lectured on Moriarty at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Connecticut. The American college previously created The John Moriarty Institute for Ecology and Spirituality in Dingle.

"A lot of his work has a contemporary relevance to it, even though he's been gone for 16 years. It's very much relevant and becoming more relevant over time.

"While we still have people walking around who knew him and had interactions with him, it's simultaneously preserving his work and preserving all the things that are attached to that.

"The stories raise insights that really remind me of how rich Ireland's intellectual heritage is, non-academically, even outside of schools and universities. There's just this level of wisdom there."

'You should always be coached'

ACE and UCC's commitment to lifelong learning and personal growth applies just as much to its staff as its students.

The University has established a trained coaching panel of staff who offer a free, confidential, and impartial service for their UCC colleagues, with a focus of personal and career development and wellbeing.

Rather than giving advice and recommendations, coaches create a space to think and challenge pre-existing beliefs which facilitates self-discovery.

There are many testimonials online from those staff members who have been helped by the coaching panel:

- "It is such a valuable space to hash things out with no judgement involved."
- "I am feeling much more positive and more in charge of my own destiny."
- "My coach helped me in ways I never anticipated."
- "Coaching has been one of the best things I've ever done for my career."
- "Coaching has helped me to focus on aspects which now allow me to live a happier and healthier life."

Dearbhail O'Callaghan was one of those who signed up to become a coach on the panel.

A work placement manager for Political Science students, she has been with UCC for 15 years. Taking

on a Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning Certificate got her "learning brain back into focus" and so when the call for coaching panel applicants went out in 2019, Dearbhail felt well positioned to go for it.

The training involved taking on the Postgraduate Certificate in Personal and Management Coaching.

"It was just a joy from start to finish," says Dearbhail. "We were really enjoying it, really learning, pushing us out of our comfort zone. I hadn't known anything about coaching really beforehand but I felt it was a skill that would be really beneficial working with students."

Then, along came COVID and pushed the course online. It didn't dampen Dearbhail's enthusiasm and once the course was over, she decided to continue on to do the Master's in Personal and Management Coaching, supported by some funding from her department.

"During COVID was a great time because there was nothing else to do. In a way, it was easy to be stuck inside on your book because there wasn't much distraction."

As part of her studies, she undertook 50 hours of coaching, which involved meeting 10 different 'coachees' for five or six sessions each.

CHEMISTRY

Dearbhail describes coaching as performance minus interference. The task, therefore, involves



HEAD COACHES: Due to COVID, Dearbhail O'Callaghan (front left) only got to meet some of her Master's in Personal and Management Coaching classmates in person on their graduation day last March.

finding out what isn't working well and focusing on managing the reasons behind that.

"Seeing different people's coaching styles was really interesting. That's probably one of the biggest learnings I've had about coaching.

"Everybody brings their own unique skills and personalities to coaching. What works in a coaching relationship is your relationship with your client and that is very much a chemistry thing.

"So you can see why having huge variety in the types of people who are coaches is really good because there's such variety in life.

"Some people are very reflective, other people are very much off the cuff, and everybody's style is working for them. That's been really nice to see and that's given me a lot of confidence to develop my own style."

Previously, she would joke with programme coordinator Pat O'Leary that she was always thinking, 'What would Pat do?' Now, she feels comfortable applying her own unique style on UCC colleagues through the coaching panel and on students in her day job.

"Ultimately, it's for them and it's not for me and that's what's so valuable about it. A lot of the time in our interactions with people, they have skin in the game. What's really powerful about coaching is that I don't have any. Whatever decision that person makes is fine for them.

"My only aim is that it's going to be something that is authentic to them and they want to do it and they want to achieve it. I think that's really nice. That's why sometimes when people go to the coaching panel, they won't go to someone they know."

Dearbhail usually begins with a 10-minute chat before the first session with any prospective client to address preconceptions or doubts over the process and ensure there's a good match between coach and coachee. It gives them time to decide whether to come back and book that first session.

"It's really nice. It's a really positive thing because you do feel that by the end of it, there's usually a nice outcome for the person in some shape or form or just even they've had a bit of a journey that's been positive for them, even if the outcome isn't what they wanted."

EVERY ASPECT OF LIFE

The coaches are supported through coaching supervision too, ensuring that any challenges they are experiencing are addressed and they feel supported in dealing with sometimes sensitive topics and strong emotions.

"You should always be coached," says Dearbhail, speaking the day after graduating from her Master's. With her studies having moved

online, it was the first time most of her classmates got to meet up in person.

"I keep saying it's made me a better person. It really has. We were talking about that yesterday when we met people.

"Regardless if I never coached somebody again, I've learned so much more about myself and I've learned so much more about how we as people function, or sometimes don't.

"It's back to that sense that it's up to the person themselves to be motivated to make the change. No amount of advice will change somebody unless they're willing to change themselves.

"You can bring that into every aspect of your life, with children, with partners, with friends.

"I'm much more understanding of people now than I would have been before, just to see where people's motivations are, why they're making decisions the way they are, and how things impact them. Just seeing it a little bit more of a psychological way rather than a purely social way."

"So you can see why having huge variety in the types of people who are coaches is really good because there's such variety in life."

Dearbhail O'Callaghan

And just like the very concept of coaching itself, these Personal and Management Coaching courses can accommodate those looking for career progression or self-development.

"Some people come into it because they're looking to set up and become a professional coach," says Dearbhail, "but I just think, whether you do that or not, there's a load of positivity to just engaging with people in coaching, whether it's for me or volunteering or professionally.

"The fact that you can see people moving forward and when you finish the coaching sessions with them, it's a really nice feeling because they tell you, I think I'm okay, and it's like they've made the decision; they're ready to go.

"You can see that they know themselves this has worked for me and I feel stronger and better able to cope, whatever the situation is. It's a really nice job."



SAFETY FIRST: Nicholas Murray got the bug for education after taking on the Higher Diploma in Safety, Health, and Welfare at Work.

The foundation stone to build a successful career

Nicholas Murray remembers the day he graduated, surrounded by his family and classmates, from the Higher Diploma in Safety, Health, and Welfare at Work.

His daughter was about 10 at the time. She turned to him, full of ambition, and said, 'Can I go to here, Daddy?'

The answer was an enthusiastic, 'Yes, you can!'

All these years later, both his kids have completed their master's degrees through UCC and that young girl is now finishing her doctorate.

"I enjoyed the UCC course so much I felt I had to get more. The more I got, the more I wanted. And the more I wanted, the longer I stayed on.

"I had to give up because my two children were going to UCC," says Nicholas with a chuckle.

To this day, he's still recommending UCC and that Higher Diploma to his colleagues. He mentions two of them, one now studying for their master's, the other having achieved promotion in work.

For Nicholas, himself, further study wasn't on his radar in his school days.

He went to Scoil Eoin Naofa on Sawmill St. in Cork City purely to become an electrician. Jobs were few and far between, however, and his parents recommended staying on in school.

He did his Leaving Cert upon which AnCO (the forerunner to FÁS and SOLAS) told him his results were

too good for an apprenticeship and he should go to college.

"That frightened the bejaysus out of me but I went on," says Nicholas. He continued into Cork RTC (now MTU) to study Mechanical Engineering and got a job with a local firm.

"I didn't like the way the engineering was going but the one thing I always gravitated to was design. I loved designing.

"In Cork Engineering, which is long gone now, I designed things from a pipe support to a lorry body.

"It was a small engineering company trying to design a whole new lorry body so I often was measuring parked trucks in town with my measuring tape," he laughs.

Nicholas joined DPS Group, where he still works today as EHS (environmental health and safety) manager.

He was designing pharmaceutical plants and then, one day, the managing director told him, 'You're designing it, now you can go out and build it!'

He was construction manager on a number of sites and then he was told safety was to be his responsibility too.

The Safety, Health, and Welfare at Work Act, 1989, was just coming into force. Nicholas read it and thought, 'Uh oh, I need to be educated towards safety.'

He told the company he needed to go to UCC to study and he's been doing health and safety ever since.

"It was a fantastic course from UCC. It covered every aspect that I needed it to cover, especially law.

"It's the legislation side of things I really liked, even though we covered so many different modules in UCC, from toxicology to construction to health to risk assessment.

"We covered a lot but without the legal side of things, I would've been left behind."

Information was free-flowing and anything the class of 70 needed was given.

He remembers stand-out lectures from Willie Reville on radiation, Ivan Perry on epidemiology, John Gallagher on occupational medicine, plus Willie Weir and Máirtín Ó Fathaigh pulling everything together.

Nicholas still meets old classmates of his, including the occupational health nurse for a Gilead Sciences site he's working on.

"We were only reminiscing about old times the other day, about UCC. That course bonds people together."

Once he'd finished his studies in 2001, Nicholas swore he would never again do a course in his life. "But it was so informative," he says, "the bug hit me."

He became a Safe Pass tutor, did his Master's in Health and Safety Management at the University of Leicester, and returned to UCC in 2007 to take a two-year Diploma in Environmental Engineering. As a colleague-turned-classmate joked, that gave him the 'E' in EHS manager.

He also went on to study Psychology through City Colleges Dublin to understand the human element behind workplace accidents and how best to manage that. "I was working in Dublin at the time and it was ideal to pass away the evenings," says Nicholas.

He still has links to the UCC's Safety, Health, and Welfare at Work, and not just through DPS's graduate programme with the University.

The exams aren't the same as they were two decades ago, replaced by continuous assessment, and Nicholas is now involved in reviewing some papers for learners on the Certificate course.

"That was the foundation stone, without a doubt," he says.

"The excitement going up there every Tuesday and Thursday night to get something new or to get into trouble by arguing with one of the lecturers, it was fantastic.

"There was never heated debates but there were some great discussions in the canteen as well.

"I was lucky because, so far, I've sent a number of people up to do the course.

"One of my work colleagues, she's now doing her Master's this year up there. Another work colleague with a client of mine, I said you should be going up and doing the Diploma, it will suit you well. He's escalated up in his workplace now because of the course.

"Education opens doors. It helped me with my company. Not alone I worked in Ireland, I worked in the UK, I worked across Europe.

"When people ask me where I started, I would have no hesitation in saying ACE at UCC."

Nicholas is always keen to make the connection clear when he plans pharmaceutical plants between the construction work and the life-saving drugs that will be produced there. Everything has to be done right from the foundation up.

"People understand then how important the industry is," he says.

"We're in the Premiership when it comes to that and UCC got me to the Premiership of work."

"Yes, you can!"

Nicholas Murray



SPREADING THE WORD: A career highlight for UCC ACE assistant director Lyndsey El Amoud was being invited as the keynote international speaker by the Latin American continuing education network, RECLA, for its 25th-anniversary conference in Monterrey, Mexico.

‘There’s a bit of magic around lifelong learning in Cork’

Lyndsey El Amoud has had the “craziest year”.

Emerging out of weeks and months being stuck behind screens through COVID, she has since embarked on something approaching a world tour.

Starting in May 2022, the ACE assistant director has given talks in Budapest, Zurich, Brussels, Milan, Texas, Monterrey, Barcelona, Malta, Rome, Ljubljana, and remotely to a conference in Japan.

It all flowed from her first presentation at the EUCEN (European Universities’ Continuing Education Network) annual Conference in Hungary about ACE’s pioneering work on micro-credentials.

Those bite-sized five-to-30-credit courses, delivered on a part-time basis, allow returning learners to dip their toes in the water of third-level education and gain a formal UCC award.

In the future, they will enable students to create a custom-made award, even across different universities, stacking micro-credentials together based on their own interests or needs to build a personalised qualification.

Lyndsey returned to Ireland with a trail of invitations to speak in other countries across Europe and further afield.

“What’s attracting people to the ACE model and why it’s being held up as best practice internationally is

our commitment to the UNESCO mission of leaving no one behind,” she says.

“We take a very holistic, humanistic approach to our work in ACE where we try and cater for the people who want to upskill and reskill and move on in their careers, because that’s really important, but also all of the work we do in the community and trying to reach out to marginalised groups.

“It’s striking that balance between the reskilling agenda but also the broader purposes of lifelong learning, the social impact, the societal impact.

“That’s what sets us apart on the international stage and that’s why people are looking to what we’re doing and noticing that it is a bit unique.

“They want to learn how they can try to replicate some of the things we’re doing here in Cork.

“It’s the passion to change people’s lives. It’s the desire to do whatever we can to empower people, to reach their potential, and have the best lives possible for themselves.

“There’s nothing too complicated to it. For us, it’s opening the doors to as many people as we can.”

STRUCK A CHORD

A career highlight for Lyndsey was being invited as the keynote international speaker by the Latin American continuing education

network, RECLA, for its 25th anniversary conference.

Lyndsey spoke about ACE’s inclusive approach, trying not to leave anyone behind, and opening the university doors to all.

“That was a phenomenal experience. It was one of the highlights of my career to date.

“I think it really struck a chord and there was just a sense of enthusiasm in the room that I’ve never felt before. It was such a warm and welcoming event. It was amazing.”

She was “adopted for the week” by colleagues from another UCC, the Catholic University of Chile, who kicked off a standing ovation to conclude her keynote address.

“That was phenomenal to be in Mexico and to try to influence the direction of lifelong learning in these different jurisdictions.

“It has been really humbling for me because what we do in ACE, what we do in UCC, I know it’s special. I know the work my team put in, the investment they put into our students, is remarkable.

“It’s humbling then to get recognition from our peers internationally to say, yeah, what you’re doing is really special and we wish we were able to do it too.

“There’s a bit of magic around lifelong learning in Cork.”

Lyndsey began her speech by asking those in attendance how they would like to be remembered on their headstone if they died tomorrow: as a great worker or a good person?

“Yes, the career development piece is so important and it’s wonderful for us in ACE to be able to help people reach their ambition and reach their potential but learning is not just about progressing in your career.

“There are so many other reasons why we as a people need to be constantly engaged in lifelong learning; to understand the changing world around us, to understand the impact that we’re having on our environment, to understand things like fake news, to have those critical analysis skills to get by in the world today.

“That message is really what I’m trying to bring around the world, that lifelong learning is for everybody and it is for a multitude of different reasons.

“There was a professor who coined the term ‘learning for earning’ and this was what lifelong learning was turning into about a decade ago. It was all just ‘learning for earning’ for career progression.

“I would argue that lifelong learning is about learning for living. Yes, earning is one part of that, but just one part.”

Lyndsey is always learning on her trips abroad. She heard from

Ecuadorian colleagues about their work in rainforests reaching out to indigenous people.

One of the most profound experiences was a tour of Lockhart Correctional Facility, a women’s prison outside Austin, Texas.

“It was remarkable to see and we do some prison education here in ACE; not enough and we’re trying to do more.

“When we go abroad and we talk about all the work that ACE is doing, I still come home and think there are so many more people we should be reaching. As good as it is, there’s still so much more to be done.

“For as much as we inspire people, we always come home twice as inspired.”

Lyndsey has spoken about UCC’s work in recognition of prior learning (RPL), which has been applied to give a group of farmers exemptions from half the modules in the Diploma in Environment, Sustainability, and Climate based on their practical expertise.

She has also brought the story of the group of Traveller women who studied for a Diploma in Leadership in the Community around the world.

“That’s one that attracts a lot of attention because wherever you are in the world, there are groups of marginalised people in society like the Irish Travellers.

“What strikes a chord with everybody is the co-creation part of it. We co-created this with Traveller NGOs. It’s not the university going and telling people what they need. We listened and we built a programme together.

“People are sitting up and taking notice of what we’re doing here in Cork and they’re looking at it as international best practice.”

One group of PhD students she spoke to at Texas State University were sufficiently moved by the story that they came up afterward to ask: ‘Can we fundraise for you to do more?’

“This group of PhD students in Austin wanted to fundraise so we could run another course for more Traveller women to go back and change their communities,” says Lyndsey. “That was really powerful.”

CATCH-22

Funding is something that is an issue all around the globe.

“The world over, there is a recognition among all of our peers of how much work we could be doing but we’re all hampered by a lack of resources,” says Lyndsey.

“If we could change the world just with the enthusiasm we have, we’d do it in bucketloads but unfortunately, we do need some level of investment as well.

“Here in Ireland, there’s a lot of talk around funding part-time education and reinstating the student grant for part-time learners but unfortunately, at this stage, it’s still just rhetoric and there hasn’t been action yet even though this has come up in multiple national access plans for the last few years.

“Until that happens, we’re still going to be marginalising a whole lot of adult learners who wish they could come back to education but just can’t because of the cost involved.”

Lyndsey is currently writing her doctorate on perspectives of the role of higher education in lifelong learning in Ireland.

“I’m trying to build a vision of lifelong learning for the sector and hopefully then be able to advocate for policy change,” she explains, “because there’s only so much we can do at a grassroots level.

“We do need investment, especially in terms of trying to reach the hardest-to-reach learners, the most marginalised, who are probably most in need of and most deserving of lifelong learning opportunities.

“That’s where you would really change lives but they’re the poorest in terms of resources so it’s a Catch-22.”

“There’s nothing too complicated to it. For us, it’s opening the doors to as many people as we can.”

Lyndsey El Amoud

The benefits of ACE’s work are evident at every graduation ceremony she attends. For Lyndsey, no one should be denied that chance.

“It’s quite special what we do and we’re so lucky to be working where we are and to be able to be involved in educating people to change their lives.

“It’s very humbling when our students are at graduation and we can see the impact the learning experience has had on them.

“Wherever we go across the world sharing the story of ACE, UCC, Cork as a Learning City, it’s trying to showcase that learning is for everybody and everybody in the community should be involved in one way or another and universities should be open to everybody.

“Higher education is a public good in Ireland. Everybody is paying for it through their taxes so it should be for everybody.”



SCHOOL OF LIFE: Michael and Siobhain O'Shea with their daughter Michaela.

A perfect match made in the classroom

When Michael O'Shea signed up for his first ACE course in 2011, he got more than he bargained for.

Not only has he completed two more courses since then and gone back to take on a Master's but it was also on that diploma, back in 2011, that Michael met his now-wife Siobhain.

The course was Social Studies, taught at ACE's Limerick centre. Michael had worked in retail management for over two decades and wanted to change into something completely different. What exactly? He wasn't sure. But he thought Social Studies was a good place to start.

Siobhain was also looking for a change. She had been working in publishing but was laid off during the recession.

They shared the same classes for a while before they were put into a group together as part of a research project. It was then they first got talking.

They graduated together in 2013 and had a night out to celebrate in Cork but it wasn't for another year until things really started to move when they met in Siobhain's hometown of Ennis.

"The rest is history," laughs Galbally-native Michael. "I got more than just the bit of parchment at the end of it."

They got married in 2017 and they now have a five-year-old daughter at the heart of their family while working away in their changed careers; Michael as a special needs

assistant in a secondary school, and Siobhain as a cancer care coordinator with the HSE.

More than a decade later, the impact of that first course has stuck with Michael in many ways.

"Going back in was daunting," he recalls. "I had been out of education for a good number of years. You ask yourself over and over, will I be able for this?"

"I have to say the team of lecturers were absolutely brilliant. It's nearly 10 years since I did the Social Studies course but James Connery, Jo-Anne MacMillan, I still remember their names... Sheila McDonald and, of course, Christine Casside, the course coordinator. They were very supportive for adult learners.

"I met lots of people on the course. Some were changing careers, some were working in the area, and some weren't working in any of those areas at all but just trying something different."

Michael continued on to complete the Youth and Community Work Diploma from 2013 to '15, again at UCC ACE's Limerick base. He got experience working in Youthreach before jumping ship out of retail and into education.

"I was always drawn to something like that but I just wanted to actually be able to reach that target.

"That was the opportunity I got by being able to study part-time with UCC and build on that.

"It's never about what marks you get or how well you do in an assignment or whatever it is. It's about you getting through each module, what you're taking from that module for you, and what you can use it for.

"That's the way I looked at it and that's the way it went for me."

"Helping you to do presentations, public speaking, bringing the best out of you, I would say, and getting through the coursework."

Michael O'Shea

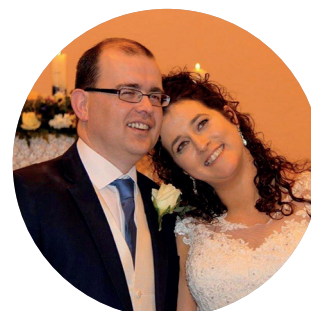
PROGRESSION ROUTE

Michael was back a third time in 2020, this time taking on the Higher Diploma in Facilitating Inclusion (Disability Studies). The balance with work and family life was helped by the online delivery, in between occasional in-person workshops in UCC.

"I found that was an absolutely brilliant course for my line of work.

"Each module benefitted me. Particularly the two lectures, Oliver [Whelton] and Jessica [Amberson], they were with us from year one right into year two, they were absolutely brilliant.

"Helping you to do presentations, public speaking, bringing the best out of you, I would say, and getting through the coursework.



CLASSMATES TURNED SOULMATES: Michael and Siobhain O'Shea on their wedding day in 2017. They met on the Diploma in Social Studies, taught at UCC ACE's Limerick base.

"Brenda Healy, the course coordinator, absolutely any issue, you could pick up the phone to Brenda. She's there to support you and help you along the way.

"That's the one thing I've always found since I started my education with ACE, they are always there. They're very supportive.

"I would say to anybody, if you're unsure of something and you don't want to ask that question or something might be going on at a particular time, you can always meet the lecturer at the end, you can talk to them, or pick up the phone, send an email, and they will guide you.

"But in my own line of work, definitely I would recommend it as a great progression route for special needs assistants."

With the work of an SNA so broad, the course prepares its students for the many different disabilities they may encounter.

"It looks at multiple different ways of how you can support the student and that's why it's of immense benefit for any special needs assistant looking to challenge themselves in their own job and how to be more supportive to students," says Michael.

"What can I do different and what can I do for my own school different?"

"Another lecturer again, Fiona O'Sullivan, fantastic on the sports module. I learned so much on that and so much information that I've used in my own school as well."

He didn't see himself taking on another course so soon but he decided to carry on the momentum into a Master's in Inclusive Education and SEN (Special Educational Needs) at Portobello Institute.

"Even going on and doing the Master's, there's always a part of you that's going to be anxious about it or getting an assignment in but if something crops up in life, this is where the coordinators of the courses, and lecturers, are very supportive.

"It's important for any student to pick up the phone and let them know what's going on, whatever it is."

LIFELONG AMBITION

Picking up the phone: it's a point Michael reiterates for those considering a return to education too.

"Definitely engage with ACE. They have a fantastic range of courses.

"Send an email, pick up the phone, go onto the ACE website; it's an easy, user-friendly website. Click into it. Don't be overwhelmed if you see modules or if you see hours per module.

"Just pick up the phone or send an email, even if it's to Gwen (Roche), the receptionist, or to the coordinator of the course. Ring and make that first point of contact.

"Even if it's last minute that they're thinking about doing the course and they see on the website courses are full, I would still ring, put your name in there, you may get on the course, and take it step by step.

"It's about getting through each module. It's about working your way through the course and eventually, you'll find that you're coming out the other end of it having completed the course.

"There is tremendous support. I couldn't recommend it enough from any of the lecturers that I've come across in ACE at UCC. They will help you right through the programme. They will give you the best advice that they can give you.

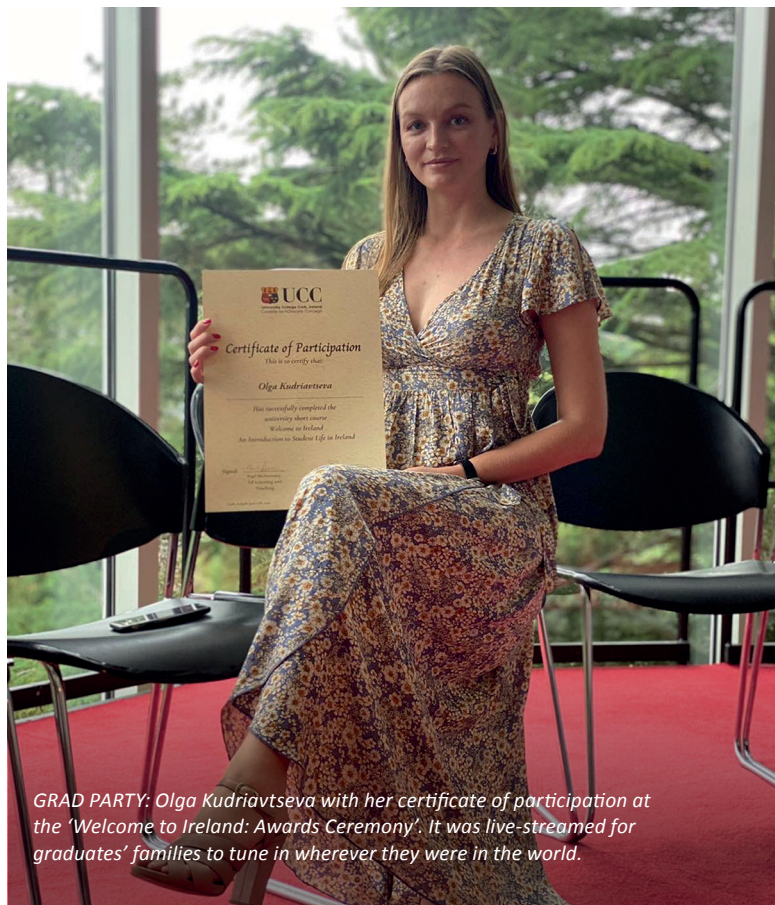
"And remember, you're doing it for yourself. If it's a lifelong ambition or you didn't have the chance to do it or you're going back as an adult learner, the opportunity is just to make that phone call.

"Even enquire, don't be daunted, putting it off, or I'll do it next year. Just go with it because they're more than happy to take that phone call and chat to you.

"There will be times where you won't have enough time in the day but it does work out. I'm 46. As I say, I have a five-year-old, I'm married, and working full-time as well. You will find a way.

"There's always something in it that you will enjoy. I found that anyway during my studies."

And found so much more too



GRAD PARTY: Olga Kudriavtseva with her certificate of participation at the 'Welcome to Ireland: Awards Ceremony'. It was live-streamed for graduates' families to tune in wherever they were in the world.

From Kyiv to Cahersiveen: How UCC reached out to Ukrainian refugees

Olga Kudriavtseva will always remember the day she arrived into Ireland. March 18, 2022. The day after St Patrick's Day.

Seeking refuge from the humanitarian crisis back home in Ukraine had brought her from Kyiv, the seventh biggest city in Europe, to one of the smallest towns in Ireland: Cahersiveen, Co. Kerry.

"I remember the empty streets," she laughs.

It was quite the culture shock walking down the sleepy streets early that morning although she was soon taken by the beauty of the marina, sandwiched between the rugged hills and Atlantic Ocean.

"Kyiv has a 5 million population and here we were brought to South Kerry," says Olga.

"It seems it was not even a town anymore when we arrived. It's just that Ukrainians, 200 or more at one time, made the population of Cahersiveen exceed 1,000 and they got that town status again."

At first, she continued working remotely for her Ukrainian advertising office, donating her time to launch several social projects raising money for the military resistance back home.

Also, her English was put to use translating for the 200 other

Ukrainians finding themselves uprooted to a new life overnight.

"I don't know how it happened but I somehow found my place here very quickly," says Olga. "Well, I kind of invented it."

She created a group chat, finding and translating useful information about local services, administration issues, and communications from the hotel management.

It was work that became formalised six months later when she was hired as a family support to the Ukrainian community for the South West Kerry Family Resource Centre.

The outbreak of war was like the outbreak of COVID, they all thought it would only last a few weeks or months. A year on, the main goal is to integrate people in Ireland.

"It's a very hard thing to do when you have no certain things to tell them," she says. "You cannot tell them you can stay here for this long or you can live in this accommodation for this long."

"It's all temporary and it's very hard to manage things and manage people and encourage them in this uncertainty."

"When you are constantly in on-hold conditions, it's very bad for your mental health and for children's mental health."

"For me, personally, the hardest thing is when I face a situation I cannot help. This is really upsetting for me."

"Sometimes, it's because nothing can be done and sometimes it's because people are not ready to get help and this is the most painful for me."

That work began in October 2022 but rewind to the previous April and UCC ACE were among the first institutions to reach out and offer practical support through their 'Welcome to Ireland: An introduction to student life' course.

The local Kerry ETB manager passed on the message to Olga that UCC was inviting people from South Kerry to join the free, six-week course for displaced students.

It was perfect timing for a group just finding their feet in a new and confusing place. Kerry ETB organised a bus. At first, they offered places to those aged from 18 to 21 but there were still seats left on board so it was opened up to everyone.

Over in Waterville, they had to get up at 5am three days a week to get ready for the bus as it collected people from villages all across South Kerry on the 350km round trip.

A WHOLE NEW LIFE

Among them was a woman in her 60s who made a strong impression on Olga.

"It was incredible that a woman like her signed up for this course."

"It was the first time she left Ukraine for 60 years. I think she didn't even leave her own town."

"It's like taking someone from South Kerry and bringing them to Ukraine or wherever they don't speak English."

"She had to start a whole new life. Her house is ruined, her only son is fighting, and she has the balls to come here alone."

"She still has the curiosity and interest for life. She stayed positive and tried to keep herself busy with whatever, not just sit in the hotel and stare at the ceiling."

The course focused on life in Ireland for a young adult, politics and society, and communications and services. An introduction week included an induction day on UCC campus with Youth Work students and trips around Cork City and Cobh.

A 30-minute English language training course was delivered by the UCC Language Centre on each day throughout the six weeks.

Students were involved in giving lessons on student life, Irish culture, work, fashion, and food. There was applied information: how to look for a job; how to

look for accommodation; how to communicate with your peers.

UCC lecturers gave information sessions on Ireland's politics and history, culture and values, and constitutional rights and laws.

The University's Careers Service provided seminars on applying for jobs and interview skills, as well as organising the essentials of banking, mobile phones, transport, and taxation.

"It was a really great experience," says Olga. "The classes were so fun and useful. We had different lecturers and they were such great people."

The political structure and constitutional law lectures stood out. "I was just hypnotised by the way she [the lecturer] was talking. I could not take my eyes and ears off of her."

Speaking after the course, she remembers often using the phrase in conversation or debates: "In UCC we were told..."

For another Ukrainian student in Cahersiveen, the course helped facilitate his transition to enrol at MTU.

"There were student-aged people, 18 to 20, and it was really great for them to meet their Irish peers and get those connections. The UCC students were so friendly and welcoming," says Olga.

"It's great because we had an opportunity to meet a lot of people and then if you need something or you are interested later in entering into a politics course or economics course or whatever, you already know the person and you can email someone and ask for advice."

"The most important thing we got from that course is to see the prospects here. It might be different for those who stay in Cork or Dublin but when you stay in Cahersiveen, you cannot see the whole picture of your prospects and the opportunities that are here."

"This course was like that for us, to see another life and the college itself which is amazing and so inspiring. It influences people."

I WILL CRY!

The most moving thing about the course was the 'Welcome to Ireland: Awards Ceremony', held at Devere Hall. It was live-streamed for graduates' families to tune in wherever they were in the world.

"The graduation party was so lovely. The most touching thing was – I will cry! – they made an online stream from the hall and they shared the stream so that the students could share it with their friends who are not with them or their relatives in Ukraine."

"It was very kind. My family are in different countries and I haven't

seen some of them for more than a year now.

"I didn't even expect that they would watch but they did and they texted me. Our family chat, they were texting, oh, I'm seeing you, you're taking the certificate. That was really touching."

"That the college thought about a thing like that, it was a big thing, a great idea."

"For the younger students, whose parents are left in Ukraine and they cannot be together, they can worry every day. Where is my child? What is he doing? Is he ok or not?"

"To see he is enjoying and achieving something is really important. UCC did a great job and they created something very important at that time."

Olga still sees her classmates from other local villages, Ballinskelligs, Glenbeigh, Portmagee, Valentia, and Waterville, through her work. And she's returned to Cork several times to enjoy the city and remember those days at UCC.

"It was like the first step here. Of course, it's not the qualification, we understand that, but it gives you the feeling that you can be a part of this life, even for some time."

"It gave people a confidence that they can do it. Even when you get to see the campus life, it's not that intimidating anymore."

"I just want to say that I was lucky to be there and I'm really grateful for UCC and each person that was involved. Órna [Hayes] was so friendly and so helpful and everyone... Larysa [Samosonok], the Ukrainian lady that was helping, I know it was not easy for her but she is a very lovely lady and she did a lot as well to encourage people."

March marked one year since their arrival but with one major difference on St Patrick's Day: "This time, we were on time!"

"To see he is enjoying and achieving something is really important. UCC did a great job and they created something very important at that time."

Olga Kudriavtseva

Prison collaboration tackling revolving-door system

An innovative and interactive course in Cork Prison aims to give its students the tools for addiction recovery and a potential pathway into higher education.

The Introduction to Addiction Studies is the brainchild of HSE addiction counsellor Robert O'Driscoll and The Two Norries Podcast host James Leonard with the shared purpose of breaking the cycle of addiction.

They approached ACE at UCC and the Cork Prison Education Unit, building on the work done by such courses as the History of Art, Mental Health in the Community, and an Inside-Out Prison Exchange Programme, where criminology and psychology students studied alongside prisoners.

The initial programme in Addiction Studies has proved very popular, with a full intake of 15 students each term. Cork Prison staff say they could fill the course twice over such is the positive uptake and word of mouth.

"It's a particularly relevant area of study to these students," says Robert. "A lot of them have ended up in prison as a result of addiction or alcohol or drug problems.

"These are their own addiction problems or addiction problems in their family or with parents, etc., so very few of these students are unaffected by the subject material.

"While the course is not therapy and doesn't attempt to be therapy, we do provide them with valuable information to help them understand from a different perspective their lived experience.

"I think they really appreciated the personal nature that we brought to the teaching of the programme and the respect that we brought for their knowledge and lived experience. That was very encouraging feedback for us as a team."

Initially, students were awarded a certificate of attendance but feedback showed a strong demand for a more substantial qualification.

As a result a flexible dual-track approach has been developed. The first module from UCC's Level 7 Substance Misuse and Addiction Studies course has been reworked for the prison context and is due to begin next autumn.

For those who simply want the information, they can still participate and be awarded their certificate of completion. For those who want the extra qualification, an

open-ended means of assessment has been adopted.

Prisoners have all too frequently been underserved learners. For many, their first positive engagement with education comes in a prison setting. Four in five prisoners (80%) do not complete a Leaving Cert, more than half (52%) leave school before Junior Cert, and just over a quarter (26%) never attended secondary school.

That meant a universal design for learning approach was required to make the content and assessment accessible for the prison population.

For those with literacy issues, digital scanners that read information into an earpiece were sourced. One assessment option is a reflective journal, which means audio recorders must be procured. Other options include a traditional 2,500-word essay or more creative means.

"What's distinctive to this course is that we're working in collaboration with the art workshops and the art teachers in the prison," says Robert.

"Students would get maybe six or eight tutorials about how they can produce an artefact that demonstrated their understanding of addiction and then they might speak to that in class.

"It could be anything from doing a drawing, a wood carving, something from matchsticks, pottery or ceramics, or maybe write a poem.

"Whatever they choose in a creative modality, it represents their understanding of addiction and/or recovery and then they speak to it in class so they're learning with and from each other about their whole experience on the course.

"We're still allowing it to be what's called audit only for those who just want to attend, learn about addiction and recovery, what services are out there, what to do if somebody overdoses, and maybe learning that just because they've been in prison, they're at high risk of overdose on release.

"Those are real valuable learnings for that student population."

The course will involve 24 hours of student-teacher contact across eight three-hour sessions, plus those extra tutorials in Cork Prison's arts and crafts room.

The role of James Leonard, who has publicly shared his experiences of addiction, crime, and recovery, adds significant credibility among the students.

"Some of the students would have known James from the landings on the prison and now they see him doing what he's doing, running a very influential podcast, and still making the time to come back in and talk with them about that whole experience. They found that valuable in terms of sharing lived experience."

James is also working proactively with the Irish Prison Service to develop a recovery day and potentially a recovery month within the prison system. That could feature activities such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous meetings, SMART Recovery workshops, and other therapeutic activities.

This course would fit around that work.

"It's to start the conversation within the prison system about recovery and how that can be the antidote to this revolving-door system that's very often fuelled by addiction," says Robert.

"We're hoping what we're doing with this course will be one strand of that in terms of trying to break the cycle."

His other hope is that this five-credit Level 7 qualification could be the springboard to more success.

"What we really would love to see, and we think it's realistic, is potentially for one of these students on release to study at a Level 5 Introduction to Addiction Studies and Community Development that we deliver in the Cork College of Commerce and potentially then transfer from that into a Level 7 diploma in ACE.

"Wouldn't that be a great pathway into higher education for students that are very often underserved?"

ACE and Cork Simon to extend collaboration

UCC ACE and Cork Simon will collaborate again this year on another short course.

The topic has yet to be decided but it will be dictated by the needs of the learners.

"That's something we massively promote in Cork Simon: experts by experience," says Fiona Hagenson, employment and training coordinator at Cork Simon.

"We always want the service users and the learners to know we learn as much from them as they learn from us. Their lived experiences, my God, you couldn't learn it in any degree.

"We'll come up with two or three options of potential courses for this year but we'll most certainly be presenting those options to the learners and letting them decide what will we go with because it's not about our needs, it's about theirs.

"That's really important in every aspect of our service."

Their service offers a wider range of internal courses as well as external referrals for further education and training opportunities. In 2022, 51 applicants were successful in taking on 67 courses.

Adam O'Connell notes how important the course content is to their clients.

"One of the personal development modules was managing stress and the other was mindfulness. The clients we're working with could be in situations that are very traumatic or challenging.

"It's difficult enough having to go through the bureaucracy when it's something mundane but when it's about housing or trying to get that support you really need, those tips, although they might seem straightforward, are really important when you're dealing with so much at once."

Having a graduation event on campus helps to break down the barriers around third-level education.

"Everything that we're about really is making education accessible and inclusive and trying to tackle stigmas as regards UCC mightn't be attainable, the imposter syndrome, or feeling you don't belong," says Fiona.

"It's all about building people's confidence and abilities and knowledge and literacy along the way."



Edel Cunningham, Cork Prison Education Unit supervising teacher; David Lane, Cork Kerry Community Healthcare Drug and Alcohol Service coordinator; Robert O'Driscoll, HSE senior addiction counsellor; Declan O'Brien, HSE Addiction Services clinical lead; James Leonard, The Two Norries Podcast host; and Billy Foley, Cork Prison art facilitator.

The only failure is if you don't take the opportunities



HATS OFF: John McCarthy celebrates graduating with his Higher Diploma in Safety, Health, and Welfare at Work at the Quad in UCC.

John McCarthy came out of his first class at ACE at UCC, walked over to the Quad, and took a selfie. “Just in case I never went back again,” he says with a chuckle.

That evening, he had walked down the hill behind the Boole Library and saw all these teenagers coming and going across campus. “I’m in the wrong place altogether,” he thought to himself.

After getting directions to the West Wing lecture hall, he was made to feel at home among his class of 17 enrolled in the Certificate in Safety, Health, and Welfare at Work.

“There was a lot of fears on the first night but we were made to feel so comfortable, relaxed, and made to believe in ourselves and in the fact that this was going to be a journey but we were all going to be brought on the journey, not left to try to figure it out for ourselves.

“It made me feel relaxed and it whetted my appetite then to go back and keep going at it.”

That sense of support was a constant throughout his education, from the big things, such as assignments, to the little ones, such as the subsidised food at the canteen ensuring you weren’t running into class hungry.

“What struck me that first night was the mix and the blend of people and the diversity of the ages in the class as well,” says John. “And just how friendly everybody was from lecturers to the support staff.

“After being out of education for roughly 20 years, just figuring out how to study again, how to take notes, and submitting assignments, all that kind of stuff... In fairness, the support staff were fantastic.

“Órna [Hayes, programme coordinator] went above and beyond for every one of us. If there was any query we had, she was able to look after us and make sure that we knew where we were going.

“Everybody in class supported everybody and helped each other out. That was one of the big things; the camaraderie that nobody was left behind and no question was stupid.

“We were given good supports. We did classes in the Boole Library in relation to how to submit assignments, what to put into them, how to write them, where to find information, and how to study to be able to do them.”

John’s motivation for returning to college in the first place grew for a few reasons. He hadn’t felt well equipped for it after leaving school, at the age of 17 and living away from home for the first time.

He was married with kids by his mid-20s and employed by an engineering company in Tipperary for the best part of two decades, working his way up from the yard into middle management.

“I always wanted to go back to college and do something but I suppose with trying to raise the kids, never really had the chance.

“And then, I had gotten as far as I could go in my career and was a bit frustrated with that. Financially, as well, there wasn’t going to be much more going so I said, what can I do to better myself?”

AFRAID OF FAILURE

Their health and safety officer advised John to consider ACE at UCC as the next step to build on the work he was already doing, which included toolbox talks, risk assessments, and security work.

“I was afraid of failure, afraid of not being able to do it, afraid of letting my family down, and that would’ve held me back an awful lot in doing the course.

“But the time spent in UCC has given me an education in that as well. The only failure is if you don’t take the opportunities, if you don’t try and see how you get on with it, and it’s given me the confidence to go and try out things.

“The positive experience I had from the first course led me on to do the Higher Diploma [in Safety, Health, and Welfare at Work].

“Definitely, those qualifications have opened an awful lot of doors to me and given me the qualifications that I can be confident in who I am and what I am and what I’m trying to do.”

By the time he was taking on the Higher Diploma, which involved a second night a week, John had changed jobs to work in Dublin.

The balance was more challenging but manageable with some planning ahead to schedule his time to keep on top of his coursework. Plus, there were plenty of familiar faces as nine of the initial Certificate class carried on into the Higher Diploma.

Some of those have gone on to study for their Master’s. John, having taken on a Train the Trainer course in Maynooth, is enjoying a year’s break before he intends to embark on that next step.

CONVERSATION OPENER

“It has definitely whetted my appetite and given me the bug to keep going,” he says. “Definitely, ACE, the college, the staff, and the support you get nurtures that and encourages it.

“You gain a network and you develop the network over time. When people see you were in UCC, it’s a conversation opener. What did you do? When were you there? It breaks down barriers for you with people.”

It has taken him to places he never thought he’d go and encouraged him to do things he never thought he’d do.

“I would have never done a presentation previously before I started the course but I did a working at heights campaign that went out across 3,000 employees last year. I’d never have got to do that if I wasn’t after attending ACE at UCC.”

John now works as a senior HSEQ (health, safety, environment, and quality) adviser with KAEFER, based in Cork.

“Because of the qualification I’ve a better work-life balance,” he adds, noting his blend of working from home, from the office, and travelling.

“We work across power stations, breweries, docks, we’re in wind energy, offering services like electrical insulation, scaffolding, etc., so it’s opened up so many opportunities. I’ve seen so many different places, different industries because of it.

“It’s a qualification that’s recognised worldwide. Our company is global and it’s opened up opportunities for me to be involved in projects in the UK and across Europe.

“Without the qualification, I wouldn’t have the opportunities I do have and get to see different parts of the world so that’s fantastic.

“Opportunities that I’d never have got and never even have known about if I hadn’t gone to UCC.”



The stuff of legend: ‘Enthusiasm is the main requirement’

Riona Doolan says her background has always been in the past but now she’s looking forward to the launch of a new Certificate in Mythology.

The only requirement to apply is enthusiasm for the subject matter, which covers the major figures from Irish, Norse, and Classical mythologies.

The roles of famous gods and goddesses such as Lug and Étaín, Thor and Freya, and Hercules and Athena will be examined in detail as well as their many reincarnations through generations of art, film, and folklore.

“We learn about Greek and Roman myths when we’re in school,” says Riona, who is programme coordinator. “Norse myths are quite popular too through films like Thor and Loki so people will already recognise a couple of the characters.”

Students will learn about the different approaches and different sources behind each of the three strands of mythology being examined.

One module, Modern Representations of Ancient Mythologies, will include their adaptations into the worlds of comic books, films, and video games. Another module, Representations of Mythology in Art, will examine how Renaissance depictions reflected the political backdrop of the time.

The course will also give students the tools to challenge inaccurate information and false propaganda attached to ancient myths.

“We’ve seen it with the rise of various attacks that have happened around the world where there might be mythological symbolism used,” says Riona.

“Tom Birkett, one of the lecturers on the course, has written about the use of Norse symbols as symbols for Neo-Nazism and how to recognise that.

“With mythology, there can be a lot of misrepresentation or reinterpretation. It can be misused so we want to make sure that students are aware of that as well.

“It’s a constant learning curve. Certainly, there’s some symbols from Irish mythology that can be, on occasion, used as far-right symbols.”

The first intake of students is slated for this September, with a closing date for applications set at the end of August.

It’s an introductory course so no prior experience is required, the classes will allow for discussion with the lecturers, and the online delivery means anyone, anywhere in the world can take part.

What’s more, Riona will take the first module, Study Skills for Mythography, which will teach students how to critically analyse texts and how to produce their own assignments, whether in the form of an essay, presentation, or reflective journal.

“All those skills, nobody has to have any of it prior to coming in. I

“All those skills, nobody has to have any of it prior to coming in. I will help students do that.”

Riona Doolan

will help students do that. There is no expectation that students have any prior knowledge of being in college or being in school.

“It is completely open to everybody. We have the support put in to be able to take on the assignments as well.

“I’ve made sure that no matter what you’ve done previously, you can take this course. Enthusiasm for the course and the subject area is really the main requirement.”

In that way, the course can be a stepping stone towards further study or just taken on for fun.

Students of another programme coordinated by Riona, Local and Regional Studies, have already been expressing an interest.

“They’ll come back to us and say, ‘What have you got on offer this year? Is there something that I can do?’

As ever, UCC ACE keeps finding new ways to answer yes to those questions.



MEETING OF MINDS: Nghia Mai, project manager of the ASEM Education and Research Hub for Lifelong Learning, with chair and ACE at UCC director Séamus Ó Tuama, and marketing intern Phuong Dang.

UCC forging closer links between Europe and Asia

ACE at UCC is taking a global view to lifelong learning.

As hosts of the official network of Asian and European higher education institutions from over 50 countries, Ireland’s five-year stewardship is focused on partnership-building and changing perceptions.

ACE director Séamus Ó Tuama is chair of the ASEM (Asia-Europe Meeting) Education and Research Hub for Lifelong Learning and he has been visiting as many countries as possible for that work.

“I think Europeans don’t fully grasp how energetic and innovative Asia is,” he says.

“Asia is ahead of Europe in lots of ways and you wouldn’t be there very long to realise that Asia is the dynamo of the planet. This is where it’s happening economically.”

For a continent with such a mass of population, Séamus was impressed by the collective sense of community evident as he visited seven countries in seven weeks last winter; Singapore, Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, and Brunei.

“A lot of European universities are looking to Asia as a place to bring in students to pay very big fees because,

in a sense, it’s almost a replacement of governmental funding.

“But the big lost opportunity for Europe is not sending European students to Asia.

“Erasmus+ is a really fantastic programme in Europe but we don’t do that enough with Asia.

“To really leverage the relationship between the two places, more people from Europe need to go and embed themselves in Asia for periods of time to get a better understanding of the culture and how people think and how people do things.”

A CHOICE

Nghia Mai, the newly hired project manager of the ASEM Lifelong Learning Hub, and marketing intern Phuong Dang have both joined the team at ACE. They bring with them different perspectives on such international work.

Both are from Vietnam, with Nghia having moved here on a Bord Bia scholarship in 2019, while Phuong is studying for her Master’s in Management and Marketing in UCC after doing an Economics undergrad in France.

Their stories reflect attitudes on life and learning.

“I think Europeans don’t fully grasp how energetic & innovative Asia is.”

Séamus Ó Tuama

“I’m one of those really lucky people who have really great parents. They directed me that if you go this way, you will have a choice in the future,” says Phuong.

“The reason why most of the Asians who go to Europe to study is also so that they will have a choice.

“My mom and I had this really long talk about it because I was having my own internal question as well. ‘What am I doing here? I could have a bachelor’s degree in Vietnam and find an office job and go on.’

“She told me, ‘Yes, but then you will only have one way. You can only be this person and you cannot be another person because you don’t have enough capital.’”

Nghia adds: “Firstly, it’s a lot of pressure in education. If you have a ticket to go to university, you have a ticket to have a better life. Otherwise, lots of doors are going to be closed back in Vietnam.

“I see it myself, when I have the opportunity to go outside of Vietnam to be involved more in this culture, I feel like lots of doors opened for me.”

Séamus says much of what he saw on his travels would rank among global best practice for lifelong learning but it is not recognised in the same way there.

He recalls one project in Thailand where a highly invasive weed species in the water was harvested to make everything from wedding dresses to kitty litter.

“In Asia, the challenge is for people in the more formal system to recognise that more,” he says.

“In Europe, there’s a lot of movement in that direction. We’re not doing enough of it but there’s a lot of movement around recognition of prior learning.

“That’s one of the things that Europe can bring to Asia, a better way of acknowledging and understanding and seeing why that’s important.”

As well as recognising prior learning, Séamus says the pathways can’t be too linear or pre-drawn.

“Lifelong learning has to be all linked up and you’re not channelling people in straight lines. In Asia, there’s more of a tendency to look at it like that, and I can understand in a sense why they do.

“If you have limited resources, you want to make sure those resources are put to the best use. That’s how you think about it in that rational way.

“But sometimes by doing that, you’re actually not making the best use of your resources. By having more flexibility in the system, and seeing it in a broader spectrum, you’re creating more opportunities in the wider society.”

MILLIONS

The ASEM Lifelong Learning Hub’s research networks have been extended to include a seventh topic: non-formal and informal learning.

“A lot of people in Asia are being left behind, no question about that educationally,” says Séamus. “Millions.

“One of the things that I think Asia can learn from us and this is one of the strengths of the ASEM Lifelong Learning Hub is there’s a longer tradition of non-formal and informal learning being recognised in the system in Europe.”

For Phuong, finding the inflection point where education becomes lifelong learning depends on expanding those career choices for students.

“Lifelong learning is embedded in the culture to the point where we don’t even know it’s learning.”

Phuong Dang.

“Lifelong learning is embedded in the culture to the point where we don’t even know it’s learning,” she says.

“We learn how to eat. We learn how to talk. We learn how to communicate with people. We are subconsciously doing it. To us, it’s not learning. It’s just what we have to do.

“Where you’re talking about how Europeans can bring non-formal or informal education to Asia, I think the hard part is how do you make Asians feel that if we have non-formal and informal learning, what guarantees us that we will have choices in future?”

Nghia’s motivation comes from the possibility of extending learning opportunities to her peers who didn’t get the same chances.

“When I ended up in Ireland, I felt that lots of my peers back home didn’t have the opportunity to be exposed to international education and didn’t see education in the way that we see in Europe.

“A part of it is inequalities when it comes to education in Asia but it’s also something that we could improve when we think of the relationship between Europe and Asia.”

The work of ASEM can act as an add-on for institutions to reach a wider range of learners.

“What we can do, I think, through the ASEM Lifelong Learning Hub is to give people a better sense that this can be part of the discussion,” says Séamus.

“It doesn’t mean that what you’re doing doesn’t stay in place. Of course, that stays there and talented people with drive and supports and all that can go on and get on and do things. But what about all the other millions of people? What happens with them?

“We need to get policy-makers to try to escape from where they are because they’re actually limiting the possibilities of their own societies. Lifelong learning should really mean that.”



END GOAL: Cork hurler Conor Lehane took on the Master’s in Personal and Management Coaching to fulfil his wish of returning to UCC. Picture: Piaras Ó Midheach, Sportsfile

‘You apply it to your life as much as you can’

Conor Lehane had a sense of unfinished business when it came to his time in UCC.

He studied an Arts undergrad and a Criminology postgrad but he had the nagging feeling of not giving it the same total commitment that he’s used to investing in his hurling with Cork.

“I felt when I was in college at that time, I never justified myself in really giving it 100%,” says Conor. You can float through it a bit. I wanted to challenge myself and go back and see how I get on.

“I knew going in what I wanted to get out of it; putting myself in the position of being back in college and going through essays again. I used always struggle with assignments and putting the time in and having the discipline and trying to get that done.

“That was the whole point really to do something that I felt I never gave 100% to back when I was in college. That, not satisfaction, but [that feeling of] at least I put myself in that situation again to see can I do it more properly than I did before?”

When Conor came out of his first course, he didn’t feel ready to leave college yet. Criminology was the choice as he had an interest in getting into the Gardaí at the time.

When he finished that, his next destination was just across College Road to the AIB branch. As Conor says, “I went out of UCC just to go back to UCC!”

For the past three years, he’s been working as a rep out on the road for Bulmers Ireland.

The urge to return to UCC reached its tipping point during COVID. He started looking up courses and the Master’s in Personal and Management Coaching caught his eye.

“The fact that I had such an interest in it had a huge impact because you’d be a lot more driven to do it and finish it out.”

Having the choice of studying online (students can also choose a predominantly classroom-based delivery) made the work-sport-study balance all the easier to manage.

“It can be applied to anything, that’s the beauty about it,” says Conor. “It’s just what I’d be interested in normally and the fact then there was a course based around that...”

“I was very interested in how people think and how they work. Coaching was a good avenue for that.”

NARROW DOWN

What he particularly appreciated was the way in which he could zero in on the topics that most intrigued him.

“It’s mostly about what appeals to you the most because as you go on, you narrow down into your own field that you feel you’d be best positioned in.

“Whether it be business, sports, group coaching, individual coaching, we cover all those areas and then when it comes to your thesis, you narrow it down to what suits you best and what you’d be most interested in.”

Conor’s chosen thesis topic is about the pressures on mid-adolescent teenagers as they approach adulthood.

“That’s a period of time where you’re still a young mind, your brain isn’t fully developed, but you’re taking on a lot more responsibility.

“I’m wondering will coaching help a person at that stage of their life to make more informed decisions and take more responsibility in what they’re doing?

“With all the influences you have at that age between your friends, your family, what’s expected of you, it’s a way of narrowing that down and letting the person making the decision be more informed.

“Is it their own call or is it a family member that pushed them to do something?

“There’s no one path for everyone but a couple of years will go by and you could be doing something that you’ve no interest in at all and then as time goes on and you get more mature, you figure out if only you had this knowledge when you were younger.

“That’s my route in, to bring that kind of hindsight to a younger age rather than being 25 onwards and then realising it.”

A unique aspect of the course is the 50 hours of pro bono coaching work students undertake. That practical element counts for 40% of the first-year credits.

Conor put the call out on LinkedIn for candidates interested in being coached.

“You have to put yourself out there a small bit. You’d avoid getting someone that you’d know, you’d want to put yourself in an uncomfortable situation really... having to put yourself in a position where you’re meeting new people and not knowing their background.

“Coaching is all about going after a goal and using self-awareness, descriptive questioning, and really intense listening so the topic itself wasn’t necessarily the most important thing.

“If someone wants a goal to go after, it’s our job then to listen to where they’re coming from, question, and direct them in a way that suits them best and gives them the responsibility to actually achieve it.”

As for his own goals, Conor credits programme coordinator Pat O’Leary and the support staff for enabling that balance.

“Everyone was so accommodating, that was the biggest help with it. Nobody was, by any means, putting a gun to your head or [saying] ‘this has to be done’. The course is brilliant for that.”

GROUP DYNAMIC

Even online, there was still scope to learn from classmates.

“It was unreal because they were from all over Ireland and there was a couple of students living in France or England,” he says.

“You’d learn a huge amount just from listening to other people and what they experienced coaching.

When you’re talking to the other students, you’d often find very similar experiences.

“How did you feel going into it? What was it like doing it? Was one session quite tough? Was one session brilliant? That group dynamic really helped in terms of knowing that you’re not on your own.

“If you felt a bit awkward asking questions or you didn’t feel totally comfortable, hearing them having the same experience gave you a bit more confidence that look, it’ll come in time. Little things like that.”

The course seeks to build emotional intelligence in coaches through effective self-management, evidence-based mindfulness, and heightened personal and social awareness.

Does any of it have external benefits for Conor on the field with Cork or as a leader in a dressing room full of promising young players?

“It definitely would... Normally you take on the expectation of a whole year all at once without realising it and nearly fry your head a bit.

“But when you break it down, set a few goals here and there, and then work towards those goals itself, the process of the whole thing is the most important aspect of it rather than the end goal.

“You learn about the importance of setting a goal for someone who’s looking for coaching but it’s what it takes to get there is where the real benefit comes from. The goal is the by-product of what you’re doing throughout that term.

“And then coaching can help give you a lot more confidence in terms of talking to people and really taking in what they’re saying. When you’re actually hearing what other people might say, it really changes the dynamic of your response.

“It’s all small little things but when they’re done over a period of time, you can see the benefits of it then.

“Rather than one big moment and then two months later, there’s another big one, it’s more the consistency of it.

“You apply it to your life as much as you can.”

“It’s all small little things but when they’re done over a period of time, you can see the benefits of it then.”

Conor Lehane