

Bridging Communities and Campuses: Community Education Pathways to Higher Education-A Case Study of the Diploma in Community Development Practice

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How to cite: Hardiman, D.; Casey, H. (2026). Bridging Communities and Campuses: Community Education Pathways to Higher Education-A Case Study of the Diploma in Community Development Practice. In: 12th International Conference on Higher Education Advances (HEAd'26). Valencia, 15-18 June 2026. <https://doi.org/10.4995/HEAd26.2026.21764>

Abstract

This paper examines how community education programmes can act as a bridge to promote participation in higher education for marginalised communities. Informed by both research and practice with collaborative community partners, the paper provides a critical examination of learner experiences of higher education from the perspective of members of the Irish Traveller Community, an indigenous minority recognised as an ethnic group by the Irish State in 2017 (IHREC, 2024). Drawing on ecological systems theory and community education principles as a combined theoretical framework, this study adopts an evaluative case study methodology to reflect learner perspectives and wider programme co-design and implementation considerations. Findings illustrate that learner-centred, participatory and empowering community education programmes can create the necessary environments to support collaborative university and community partnerships in the development of inclusive higher education programmes, challenging the perceived 'elitist' dimension of higher education.

Keywords: Higher Education; Adult Learners; Traveller Community

1. Introduction

Community education as a philosophy and a field of practice promotes a more socially inclusive society. The ethos underpinning community education, therefore, highlights the central importance of education in enabling communities to acquire the critical skills and knowledge necessary to collectively bring about change and challenge structural inequalities (Casey, 2018; Fitzsimons, 2017; Hardiman, 2018). Having spent over 50 years collectively as educators with learners participating in community education programmes in higher education, both authors had become increasingly aware of the need for research reflective of the life realities of adult

learners, particularly those learners traditionally under-represented in higher education. In response to this objective, this paper shares our work illustrating how community education outreach and campus-based programmes can promote participation in higher education for marginalised communities, with a particular focus on the Irish Traveller Community, an indigenous minority recognised as an ethnic group by the Irish State in 2017 (IHREC, 2024).

This paper outlines the importance of active collaboration and partnership between educational institutions and external community stakeholders in promoting learner-centred educational opportunities in higher education. Drawing on our experience as academics and community education practitioners in conjunction with the expertise of our community partners and colleagues, we outline the importance of building community and campus-based participatory learning environments to enhance adult learner participation in higher education. Through the application of Ecological Systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) in conjunction with the principles of Community Education, this paper provides insight into the processes that support collaborative university and community partnerships in the development of inclusive higher education programmes that promote a genuinely equitable and diverse higher education sector.

2. Background

To illustrate the potential of community education and outreach programmes, this paper focuses on a collaborative project between the University of Galway and two partners: the Galway Traveller Movement (GTM) and the Community Action Network (CAN). The Galway Traveller Movement (GTM) are an independent Traveller Community development organisation for Galway City and County, composed of Travellers and non-Travellers. The Community Action Network (CAN) is a social justice NGO dedicated to working with communities to create an equal and just society that places people at the heart of change. The central purpose of the partnership was to promote participation in higher education for the Irish Traveller Community through the provision of the Diploma in Community Development Practice, with collaborating partners contributing to the co-design, implementation, and evaluation of the programme, in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (United Nations, 2015), which promotes inclusive and equitable access to quality education for all.

The Equal Status Act (2000, p.7) defines the Traveller Community as ‘... the community of people who are commonly called Travellers and who are identified (both by themselves and others) as people with a shared history, culture, and traditions, including historically, a nomadic way of life on the island of Ireland’. The Traveller Community has historically been under-represented in higher education. Such poor representation requires full recognition of the scale of racism and segregation experienced by Travellers within the Irish educational system, reinforcing within school structures societal systems of power, privilege, and the exclusion of

the Traveller community (Brennan et al., 2025). The Traveller Community in the Republic of Ireland is estimated at 32,949, relating to .64 percent of the 5 million population. This estimate, however, is officially noted as an underrepresented figure given that many Travellers do not identify or share their ethnicity formally for fear of exclusion or discrimination. McGinley (2023, p. 6), in her qualitative study of Traveller experiences across the continuum of education, noted that ‘...new entrants to higher education in 2021/22 represent just 0.1% of all new entrants’. Therefore, this collaborative project, leading to the co-design and delivery of the Diploma programme by GTM, CAN and the University of Galway, sought to challenge this inequality and develop interventions to enhance participation and promote greater inclusion in higher education for Travellers as an underrepresented indigenous community.

3. Theoretical Framework

The Irish White Paper on Adult Education (DES, 2000, p.110) defines community education ‘...as a process of communal education towards empowerment, both at an individual and a collective level’. Community education approaches, therefore, ‘...unveil the way that social structures shape our everyday lives and our everyday thinking so that people can interpret their reality through a process of critical thinking’ (Fitzsimons, 2017, p.111). The emphasis on ‘criticality’ at the level of the individual and the collective reinforces the broader social, economic, and political contexts framing a philosophy of community education grounded in principles of equality, social justice and democratic participation (Fitzsimons, 2017). This dual approach of supporting the learner, whilst equally challenging structural inequality and injustice, frames our philosophy and approach to the practice of community education. To examine this approach, our research is framed within Uri Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems theory (1994). This framework allows us to analyse learning as a holistic experience shaped not merely by the immediate learning environment (microsystem), but also through interactions with family and community (mesosystem) and broader educational and societal values (macrosystem). Thus, challenging traditional views of learning and development as an individual decontextualised process, in support of the acquisition and application of learning through social processes embedded within the wider ecology of family, community and societal contexts. An earlier analysis of this study explored learner experiences of engagement and belonging in higher education through the theoretical lens of situated learning theory. In contrast, the present paper analyzes the same dataset using an integrated framework of ecological systems theory and community education principles. The prior analysis is currently under review for publication. The use of Ecological Systems in this paper as the theoretical lens for analysis provides insight into the ways community education has the potential to promote genuine participation in higher education for marginalised communities, in this instance the Irish Traveller Community.

4. Research Process: Case Study Design, Methodology and Ethics

The Diploma in Community Development Practice (CDP) programme was developed in the early 1990s to enable community activists and individuals gain access to accreditation in community development. As a part-time community education programme using blended learning methods of delivery, this programme is innovative in its approach, promoting active learning in the community with assessments based on real-life situations in a practice environment. Learner engagement with programme content is highly participative and focuses on the practical experiences that each participant brings to the course. Whilst the academic content of the programme is framed within university standards for accreditation purposes, aspects of programme content and delivery are co-designed in collaboration with external partners/collaborators and learners to ensure the programme is tailor-made to respond to the uniqueness of the relevant community in line with community education principles. As a community education programme with a specific social purpose of promoting inclusion and equality in higher education, this programme became the central focus of the research process.

4.1. Case Study Design

A Case Study Design was chosen for this paper to showcase the University of Galway's Diploma in Community Development Practice (CDP) programme as a model of curriculum in terms of its adaptive design and flexible delivery. Paparini et al., (2020, p. 2) highlight the benefits of a case study design as an '...invaluable resource for understanding the dynamic and evolving influence of context on complex, system-level interventions'. This research design, therefore, is highly appropriate in examining the learning experiences of graduates of the programme from the perspective of one collective of adult learners; members of the Traveller Community aligned with the Galway Traveller Movement (GTM). A total of 24 learners registered for the programme in 2018-2019; the gender breakdown was 8 males and 16 females. All participants graduated with their Diploma qualification in 2019, and subsequently became the focus of this case study 12 months post-programme completion to determine what, if any, influence the programme may have had on their lives.

4.2. Methodology and Ethics

A mixed methods methodology informs this study to enable both qualitative and quantitative data to surface from the respondents on their personal and collective educational experience and the influence of the Diploma in CDP on their personal, family, community and professional lives. An open-ended survey was issued to all 24 graduates, resulting in an extremely positive response rate of 83.33% (N=20). Ethical precepts and principles were pivotal to this research journey from planning, co-creation, delivery, and post-graduation review of the CDP Traveller experiences in line with ethical principles of integrity and honesty as outlined in the Sociological Association of Ireland Ethical Guidelines (SAI, 2025). It was valuable to gain the Traveller

cohort's views, both during the programme as learners and twelve months post completion as graduates. This post-programme survey further enabled the Travellers as graduates to share their insights without fear of obligation, bias or coercion in sharing their views with the authors as researchers. In addition to sending the survey questionnaire to all participants via their personal email address where they existed, we decided as researchers to engage with our Traveller Community Partner, GTM, to help us encourage and reach out to the Traveller graduates to respond to the survey link and to explain the context for the survey engagement.

5. Findings

This section presents key findings from the survey undertaken with programme graduates twelve months post-programme completion. Although many interesting findings emerged during this survey, for this paper, a brief summary of the findings is outlined under a series of key headings. These are as follows: *Personal and Professional Influence (microsystem)*; *Family and Community Influence (mesosystem)*, and lastly; *View of Higher Education /University and Wider Society (macrosystem)*.

5.1. Personal and Professional Influence - Microsystem

The course content interweaves the life experiences that each participant brings to the learning environment, prioritising participative and collaborative teaching and learning approaches to ensure the acquisition and application of knowledge. Survey feedback from learners demonstrated that such approaches employed by all programme facilitators enabled them to learn and practice course content in the group (microsystem) through the lens of their individual and collective life experience to attain a new level of knowledge and understanding. To reflect the diversity of learners' histories and experiences, supports included academic writing assistance, assessment guidance and feedback, and pastoral care, all of which are crucial for retention and success, especially for this cohort with largely negative prior experiences of formal education. In terms of the personal influence of the programme on their lives, 80% (n=16) of respondents described having greater confidence at both a personal and academic level because of programme participation. In this context, some respondents referred to a sense of fear in advance of undertaking the Diploma programme; however, this was resolved through both their engagement within the group and a broad range of programme supports. The majority of respondents indicated a desire to progress their personal development by continuing in education: *'Yes, this course has given me ...the courage to move on to the next stage in third level education'* (survey respondent). Four Diploma graduates subsequently progressed to register for the part-time undergraduate degree programme in Community, Youth and Family Studies, and one year later when this survey was undertaken, had successfully completed year one of this four-year programme. All four have since graduated with their BA qualification and one is currently enrolled in a postgraduate Masters programme. A total of 85% (N=17) of

respondents indicated that the Diploma programme had a significant influence on their professional life. Some respondents referred to feeling more assured in their existing employment with the Galway Traveller Movement, others referred to having greater confidence and courage in both their employability and in seeking employment within community development work: *This course has changed my life, I have applied for work in this field with confidence I never had before (survey respondent).*

5.2. Family and Community Influence - Mesosystem

The provision of the Diploma in CDP programme within this project involved a combination of both campus and community-based class settings in collaboration with the Galway Traveller Movement, so that the physical environment in which learners were based included familiar community settings in addition to the campus (mesosystem). The initial classes/workshops were held in the community setting to enable learners to become familiar with each other and the programme before coming into the university setting. The experience of being on campus was deemed to have made a significant contribution to the learner's sense of student identity and engagement in higher education. The opportunity to return to education at any stage in life was particularly emphasized. When asked if the programme had any influence on family life, 85% (N=17) of respondents strongly agreed. The potential of third level education for under-represented minority groups in higher education was consistently reiterated and many respondents spoke of a feeling of responsibility to become a role model for family members in creating greater awareness of what can be achieved by returning to education; *I would hope to be a good role model for my family and show that nothing is impossible if you put your mind to it'(survey respondent).* With regard to community influence 75% (N=15) of respondents indicated that the programme had contributed to their willingness to become more involved within their community as a direct result of the knowledge, skills and competencies attained due to programme completion: *I feel that this course has given me the confidence to be a better community activist for my community (survey respondent).* The importance of supporting communities to achieve positive change through collective action was a recurring theme, particularly for marginalized communities experiencing discrimination and injustice.

5.3. View of Higher Education /University and Wider Society - Macrosystem

All respondents (n=20) commented on the final question, which sought to determine if their experience on the programme had changed their view of higher education and wider society overall. In this regard 90% (n=18) indicated that they now had a more positive view of University as a result of participating on the Diploma programme, the remaining two respondents indicated that their view of higher education had already been positive and the programme fulfilled that expectation: *Yes, with the support of NUIG and CAN network and GTM...this course has made such a difference to the learning and made the course really*

enjoyable...This course was well tailored to suit the needs for all the group. We need to keep this model going to empower other Travellers to progress on to third level education (survey respondent). The acquisition of knowledge and skills across modular content empowering learners to advocate on behalf of the Traveller Community as an ethnic minority also featured as a recurring theme. Survey feedback highlighted the need to challenge the scale of societal discrimination, segregation and racism experienced by the Traveller Community in Irish Society.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Through an analysis framed by Ecological Systems theory, this study demonstrates that community education principles and approaches can promote participation in higher education for learners from marginalised communities, in this case, ethnic minority learners from the Traveller Community. Findings demonstrated that the learner-centred, participatory and empowerment orientation of the Diploma in CDP as a model of community education created the necessary environment to support collaborative university and community partnerships in the development of inclusive higher education programmes. Community education programmes, such as this project, are distinct from traditional mainstream education in that they are designed to respond to specific community development needs. The skills, knowledge, and competencies of programme graduates are continually reinvested, either on a paid/unpaid basis, back into their communities, contributing to the development of vibrant, inclusive and sustainable communities. Equally, outreach provision of learning opportunities for adult learners, in particular learners from geographic and issue-based communities of disadvantage, is essential in promoting genuine access to higher education opportunities and corresponding life chances at an individual and societal level. Harnessing the combined energies, ideas and resources of communities in conjunction with relevant educational institutions and statutory agencies consolidates a collaborative relationship between Government (both national and local) and the community and voluntary sector. Such collaborations contribute to the establishment of participative and deliberative approaches in the identification and development of life-relevant and sustainable educational and public policy measures, enhancing the potential of a vibrant, responsive participatory democracy. A democracy where people believe that their voice will not only be heard but also acted on, particularly those traditionally excluded from full participation within education and society. Higher Education is obliged to align curriculum and educational outcomes to SDGs, and the authors posit that the Diploma in CDP is a conduit in the community education process to bridge the gap for many under represented learners in higher education campuses and therefore aligns to SDG4. This paper illustrates how collaborative engagement between higher education institutes and external community stakeholders embedded in ecological community, campus and societal contexts can create

innovative ‘bridging’ community education programmes promoting participation in higher education in seeking to achieve a more socially just society.

Acknowledgements

Galway Traveller Movement (GTM), the Community Action Network (CAN) and Diploma in Community Development Practice Programme Learners/graduates 2018-2019.

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