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Institute for  
Lifecourse and Society

# Enabling an inclusive and equitable quality education for all,

THROUGH THE IMPLEMENTATION  
OF A NEW, EVIDENCE-BASED MODEL  
ON EDUCATIONAL PROGRESSION  
AND TRANSFORMATION

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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**JUNE 2021**

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Any citation of this report should use the following reference:

Kovačič, T., Forkan, C., Dolan, P. & Rodriguez, L. (2021). Galway: UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, National University of Ireland, Galway.

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**ISBN:** 978-1-905861-85-9

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## **About Rethink Ireland**

Rethink Ireland is a national organisation which supports high-quality social innovation projects through cash grants and provides business support for its awardees. The purpose of Rethink Ireland is 'to make Ireland a better more equal place through social innovation'. Rethink Ireland works in partnership with companies, foundations, trusts and individuals committed to tackling pressing issues in Ireland, predominantly in the fields of education, health, social enterprise, equality and green transition. Rethink Ireland provides grants, supports and access to networks to awardees to enable them to thrive and to spread their innovative solutions across the country. Funds raised by Rethink Ireland are matched by the Department of Rural and Community Development, and from the Dormant Accounts Fund. Recently Rethink Ireland received match funding from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection.

Rethink Ireland grants will ultimately contribute to a more equal Ireland where every person can have access to quality health and education.

## **About the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre**

The UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre (UCFRC) is part of the Institute for Lifecourse and Society at the National University of Ireland Galway. It was founded in 2007, through support from The Atlantic Philanthropies, Ireland and the Health Service Executive (HSE). With a base in the School of Political Science and Sociology, the mission of the Centre is to help create the conditions for excellent policies, services and practices that improve the lives of children, youth and families through research, education and service development. The UCFRC has an extensive network of relationships and research collaborations internationally and is widely recognised for its core expertise in the areas of Family Support and Youth Development.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>About Rethink Ireland</b> .....	<b>iii</b>
<b>About The Unesco Child And Family Research Centre</b> .....	<b>iii</b>
<b>1 – Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Rethink Ireland’s Education Fund And The Gamechanger Programme</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>2 – Evaluating the Education Fund</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>3 – Key Findings and Recommendations</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>Evidence-based Recommendations for Practice</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>Evidence-based Recommendations for Policy</b> .....	<b>14</b>
<b>4 – Concluding Comments</b> .....	<b>15</b>

# INTRODUCTION

01

**T**his is the Executive Summary for a major national three-year research and evaluation study<sup>1</sup> conducted on Rethink Ireland's *Education Fund (2017–2020)*, by the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre (UCFRC) at NUI Galway. Rethink Ireland<sup>2</sup> was officially launched by former Taoiseach Enda Kenny in 2016. Its aim is to stimulate philanthropy and fill a gap in funding innovation for the non-profit sector. Its mission is to provide growth capital and supports to the best social innovations in Ireland, enabling them to scale and maximise their impact, and in doing so, address persistent social problems.

This Summary presents a new evidence-based model, describing *Educational Progression and Transformation* for learners across the Education Fund, who are experiencing educational inequality.<sup>3</sup>

As well as being of interest to social innovators, social science researchers and the general public, this model and related findings are designed to speak to two specific sectors. First, they speak to frontline projects both in Ireland and internationally, similar to those in the Education Fund, which support those experiencing educational inequality and which are open to learning about 'what works' in providing *spaces* and *faces* that enable educational progression and transformation. Second, the findings speak to policymakers with responsibility for children and young people, and their education. Our model explores how the vision set out in the UN's Education 2030 Sustainable Development Goal 4, on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all, can be moved forward through a deeper and more nuanced approach to the needs of the learners catered for within the Education Fund.

## **Rethink Ireland's Education Fund and the Gamechanger Programme**

Recognising the persistence of educational inequality and disadvantage in Irish society, Rethink Ireland introduced the Education Fund in late 2017 as a way to confront this extremely complex issue. Education and related qualifications determine people's life chances to a large extent. Those who leave education without qualifications are often hindered in their ability to find well-paying jobs and as a result are more at risk of poverty. Rethink Ireland now counts education as one of its five strategic areas for investment. Following in the footsteps of the Education Fund, Rethink Ireland opened two further Education Funds, namely the Youth Education Fund (2018) and the Children and Youth Education Fund (2019) (both of which will form part of a composite evaluation due out in 2023 by the team involved in this report). In 2020, Rethink Ireland opened an additional Education Innovation Fund, focused on education transitions and tackling the poverty created by inequality in education.

The Education Fund was open to projects focused on improving educational outcomes for those experiencing educational disadvantage, and which specifically supported learners to progress from Levels 3 to 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). The Education Fund's definition of educational disadvantage is a difficulty that arises from living in a disadvantaged area, socioeconomic disadvantage, experiencing mental health or other health issues, or disability. Rethink Ireland's goal via the Education Fund is to improve access to third-level education for students affected by disability or disadvantage, through improved educational attainment at Levels 3–6 on the NFQ.

1 You can access the full evaluation report at [www.childandfamilyresearch.ie](http://www.childandfamilyresearch.ie).

2 Previously known as the Social Innovation Fund Ireland (SIFI).

3 Educational inequality and educational disadvantage are used interchangeably in this executive summary.

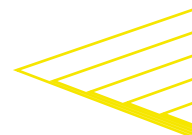
Following a rigorous selection process, ten<sup>4</sup> projects were chosen as recipients of the Education Fund Award. Eight are based in Dublin and two in Cork. Of these, seven completed the programme and evaluation. The name of each project, their location, their participant group and a short description of their work are provided in Table 1.1 below.

**Table 1.1 – Details of the seven projects funded under Rethink Education Fund**

PROJECT/AWARDEE	ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE BASE	PARTICIPANT GROUP	DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT
An Cosán VCC	Dublin	18+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>An Cosán VCC seeks to empower women and men from disadvantaged communities across Ireland.</li> <li>It provides an entry model of higher education and blended learning, face-to-face workshops, technology workshops, live virtual classes, offline individual and group work, collaborative peer learning, and communities of practice.</li> <li>The programme partners with a wide range of community education organisations at local, regional and national level.</li> </ul>
Aspire2	Dublin	13–18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Aspire2 aims to increase DEIS school students' prospects of completing the Leaving Cert and progressing to third-level education and apprenticeships.</li> <li>The project provides students with group mentoring and work experience placement.</li> <li>The programme established a collaborative partnership with several academic institutions around Ireland (i.e., UCD, CIT, UCC, TCD and IT Tallaght).</li> </ul>
Cork Life Centre	Cork	12–18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Cork Life Centre's vision is to provide a unique alternative environment for education for children and young people who have disengaged or are at risk of disengaging from mainstream education.</li> <li>It provides an alternative one-to-one and small group learning environment with wraparound support and outreach service.</li> <li>The Centre established links and relationships with numerous agencies and services in Cork City across the areas of business, academia and health, and with local community groups.</li> </ul>

4 Of the ten projects that started in the Education Fund, PETE, Speedpak and Churchfield Community Trust exited the fund along the way and so are not included in this final report. These projects were involved in the first year of the evaluation only. More information on these projects is available at: <http://www.childandfamilyresearch.ie/media/unescochildandfamilyresearchcentre/documentspdf/Report-1.pdf>

PROJECT/ AWARDEE	ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE BASE	PARTICIPANT GROUP	DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT
Citywise Fast Track Academy	Dublin	15–19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Citywise Fast Track Academy’s vision is focused on improving communities through youth education by using a whole-person approach.</li> <li>▪ The project focuses on developing social, behavioural and academic skills and the conditions necessary to increase the number of young people transitioning to higher-level education.</li> <li>▪ It collaborates with IT Tallaght and other agencies in the community.</li> </ul>
iScoil	Dublin	13–16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ iScoil provides innovative flexible online and blended learning for early school leavers. This model provides a safe environment where young people can achieve meaningful accreditation, and can re-engage with education and access further education, training or employment opportunities.</li> <li>▪ Personalised and online modalities of intervention are provided to each student based on their needs, interests and abilities.</li> <li>▪ iScoil works in partnership with local agencies and youth services nationally.</li> </ul>
Trinity Access 21	Dublin	13–18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Trinity Access 21 (TA21) aims to transform the Irish education system and aspires to an education system that supports every young person in reaching their full academic potential.</li> <li>▪ Trinity Access 21 provides DEIS schools (and schools where progression to higher education is low) with student and teacher training. Trinity Access 21 is grounded within three core principles: Mentoring, Pathways to College and Leadership in Learning. Students are provided with one-to-one and group mentoring programmes, group work and team-based workshops.</li> <li>▪ The project works in partnership with schools, communities, other educational organisations and businesses.</li> </ul>
Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities (TCPID)	Dublin	19–25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ TCPID’s mission is to enable people with an intellectual disability to develop their potential through a combination of lifelong learning and professional training.</li> <li>▪ The Centre provides learners with a high-quality higher-education programme, mentoring, work experience and career guidance.</li> <li>▪ Key partners of the programme come from business, including companies and banks (e.g., Abbott, CPL and Bank of Ireland).</li> </ul>





Each awardee received a cash grant and a place on Rethink Ireland's Gamechanger Programme. The overarching goal of the Gamechanger Programme was to bring together a group of selected disruptive innovators to:

- Create a sense of community and a common vision for the sector and system that needs change.
- Underpin this journey with core business and leadership capacity building with an emphasis on execution along the way.

The three-year programme was executive-level management training, using a workshop format, and was delivered in close collaboration with the academic evaluation team, strategic consultants and communication experts. The creation of a positive group dynamic, transformative experiences and peer-to-peer learning resulted in the setting of ambitious project goals and the realisation among awardees of their potential as real game changers individually and as a collective.

# EVALUATING THE EDUCATION FUND

02

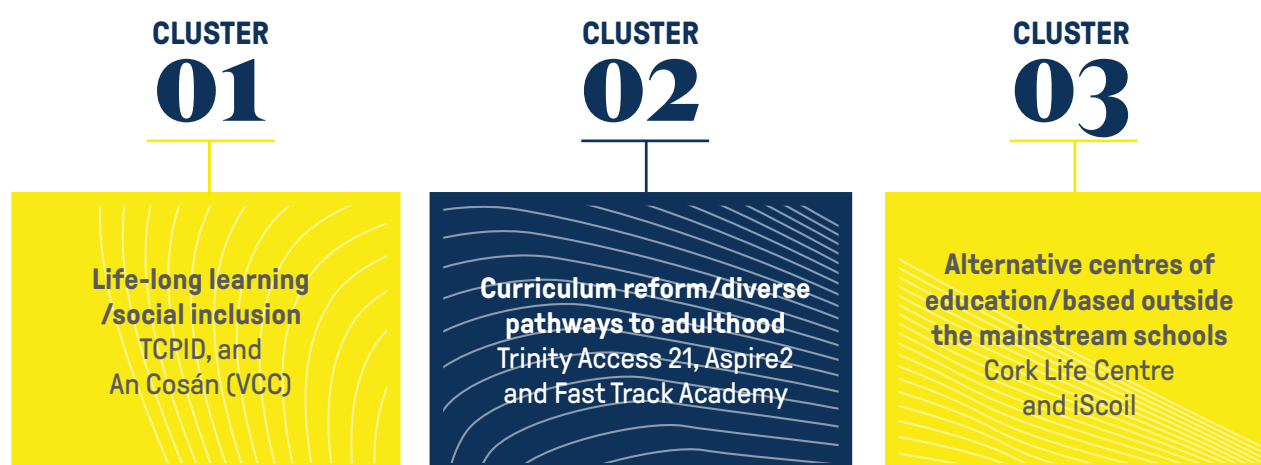
The overarching aim of the evaluation of the Education Fund was *‘to investigate the extent to which practices and processes utilised by awardees can serve as models of excellence in overcoming inequality in education’*. As illustrated in Appendix 1, the various elements of the Evaluation Framework spanned the three years of the process and were specifically designed to address this overarching aim.

Given that the evaluation was specifically designed to have a macro focus and thus to collate learning from projects categorised into specific thematic clusters, three clusters of projects were subsequently created. The process involved matching projects across five core elements, namely vision, aims and objectives, project activities, participants’ ages and positionality in relation to the mainstream education system. Three clusters of projects emerged as shown in Figure 2.1.

- **Cluster 1** contains two projects with a focus on enabling participants to experience social inclusion by supporting their educational progression through lifelong learning opportunities.
- **Cluster 2** contains three projects and focuses on curriculum reform and supporting participants to engage in diverse pathways to adulthood.
- **Cluster 3** contains two projects and provides alternative modes of education which are outside the mainstream system.

For each cluster, the evaluation team used seven core questions to structure and integrate the data (see Table 2.1). While this Executive Summary draws out the core learning from each of these areas, we would invite you to read the full report, available at [www.childandfamilyresearch.ie](http://www.childandfamilyresearch.ie).

Figure 2.1 – Outcome of the Clustering Process



**Table 2.1 – Conditions of collective impact (Hanleybrown et al., 2012)**

<b>KAY QUESTION BEING ASKED</b>	<b>FOCUS OF SECTION</b>	<b>LOCATION OF SUB-SECTION FOR EACH CLUSTER IN THE FULL EVALUATION REPORT</b>
<b>1. What’s the problem being addressed by this cluster?</b>	Each project within the cluster is introduced and then contextualised by naming the specific area of educational inequality it addresses.	Cluster 1 – Section 3.3.1 Cluster 2 – Section 3.4.1 Cluster 3 – Section 3.5.1
<b>2. How well and for whom did this Cluster support educational progression?</b>	The central focus of Objective 2 is to track the number of participants progressing on Levels 3–6 on the NFQ. This section presents data on the hard outcomes, that is, the numbers engaging with, completing and dropping out, and breaks the data down by gender and age.	Cluster 1 – Section 3.3.2 Cluster 2 – Section 3.4.2 Cluster 3 – Section 3.5.2
<b>3. How is educational progression understood by key stakeholders in this Cluster?</b>	The meaning of academic progression as perceived by both internal and external stakeholders involved in the projects within the cluster is examined.	Cluster 1 – Section 3.3.3 Cluster 2 – Section 3.4.3 Cluster 3 – Section 3.5.3
<b>4. Who benefits from these projects and what would have happened to learners without access to them?</b>	This section examines how life would look for learners and their families if they did not have access to their respective project. This process benchmarks the value of the work done by projects in a cluster.	Cluster 1 – Section 3.3.4 Cluster 2 – Section 3.4.4 Cluster 3 – Section 3.5.4
<b>5. What was the lived experience of learners in this cluster around Covid-19?</b>	This section documents the ‘lived experience’ of a sample of participants from across the projects, using both traditional and online photovoice data, with a particular emphasis on their experiences during the first Covid-19 lockdown from March 2020.	Cluster 1 – Section 3.3.5 Cluster 2 – Section 3.4.5 Cluster 3 – Section 3.5.5
<b>6. What are the similarities and differences between projects in the cluster?</b>	A brief summary of the similarities and differences between the projects within each cluster is provided here.	Cluster 1 – Section 3.3.6 Cluster 2 – Section 3.4.6 Cluster 3 – Section 3.5.6
<b>7. What is the social value of the outcomes created by the activities in each individual project?</b>	This section describes the results of the implementation of a Social Return on Investment study with individual projects. It specifically addresses the outcomes achieved by participants as a result of being involved in their respective projects which they most valued.	Section 3.6

# KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

03

The Education Fund was open to projects focused on improving educational outcomes for those experiencing educational disadvantage and which specifically supported learners to progress from Level 3 to 6 on the NFQ. The following are the core findings of the evaluation:

### 1) Progression Rate in Education:

The average progression rates of learners completing a QQI level qualification in their respective cluster varied from 91% in Cluster 1 to 94% in Cluster 2 and 54% in Cluster 3 (so far)<sup>5</sup>, between January 2018 and July 2020. This shows that in the majority of cases, learners in these projects had significant success in progressing their education.

### 2) Social Return on Investment (SROI):

A second core finding came from the application of an SROI study with the projects. SROI proved a useful framework to show how to manage and improve social impact. A SROI framework was introduced to explore the perceived social value for participants of the outcomes they achieved as a result of being involved in their respective projects. SROI is an internationally recognised and accredited framework for measuring and accounting the social value<sup>6</sup> of project activities as perceived by key stakeholders. SROI is much more than a number – its purpose is to assess the social value of the outcomes created for participants by these activities, rather than just a monetary value for the activities as in cost-benefit-type studies (The SROI Network, 2012: 8).

One of the findings of the SROI study related to the nature of the interventions offered to participants across the fund. Self-confidence (described also as self-efficacy, self-esteem, etc.) was recognised as a common outcome

valued by both projects and participants. However, there was a significant mismatch between what the project staff defined as outcomes central to their work and those defined as most valued by participants. A larger list of outcomes was recognised by the projects, but some of those, for example coping skills and resilience, seem to be less relevant to participants. Awardee projects did not see some areas of personal development as essential, such as increased independence and maturity, more positive future outlook and study skills. The SROI has, therefore, allowed projects to use this evidence to reflect on how best to do more good for their participants, by tailoring their interventions appropriately. Aggregated across the awardee projects the two outcomes most valued by participants were ‘increased independence (maturity)’ and ‘more positive future outlook’.

A Social Return on Investment (SROI) ratio provides an overall comparison of resources and the social value they create. The calculation includes all the inputs required for an activity. Rethink Ireland funds rarely support 100% of project costs; and often the proportion of project costs supported within a fund varies from award to award. Within a complex structure of a fund like this there are, therefore, different ways to present and understand the SROI ratio. Here we present two helpful versions showing:

- the overall comparison of all the costs for Awardee Projects in the Education Fund;
- the proportion directly supported by the Education Fund investment.

We found that the total social value generated for project beneficiaries was just over €68m, with a total cost of €7,790,285 for the seven Awardee Projects over three years. The return

5 Many participants from Cork Life Centre were still enrolled but had not completed the programme at the time of the data collection process. Additionally, 65% of participants from iScoil had fully completed and 20% had partially completed the programme. This suggests that the final progression rate of students in Cluster 3 is higher than calculated.

6 Value refers to the benefits, changes and actions that happen as a result of actions and activities, which go beyond the purely economic or monetary value (Social Value UK).

on investment ratio is in a range around 1:9, meaning that for every euro invested in these seven Awardee Projects, €9 of social value was created.

Some 55% of the social value was directly created by the Education Fund investment of €4,302,479 through Rethink Ireland. The return on investment ratio for Rethink Ireland's investment is in a range around 1:12, meaning that for every euro invested in these seven Awardee Projects, €12 of social value was created.

In interpreting these SROI results, a number of points are important to consider:

Avidson et al. (2010: 6) point out that even though it uses monetary terms, the SROI ratio does not express financial value as such, but should be seen as a comprehensive way of expressing the 'currency of social value'. This currency needs to be read with qualitative evidence based on stakeholder inquiry. The SROI process has shown that participants of all projects experienced positive change as a result of being involved with their projects and experienced an increase in independence (maturity), developed a more positive future outlook, had increased self-confidence and better communication and social skills. Therefore, the value of these changes as valued by participants is what the total social value of €68m represents.

The total return on investment so far refers to the value that projects created for their participants exclusively. This sum does not include the projects' value for other stakeholders (for example, parents and teachers).

The SROI analysis revealed the differences between projects, specifically connected to the cost per person and the value created per person. As revealed in this particular SROI analysis, projects with higher numbers of participants have lower unit costs, but they do not necessarily have higher social returns. Further analysis is required to explore the reasons for such differences between the projects which will be considered in future research.

It is important to contextualise the SROI findings, in the knowledge that the projects cater for different populations of young people with varying levels of need, from the most basic to more complex. Therefore, some projects are more costly to run than others, and because of these innate differences between projects, direct comparison of social value figures is inappropriate.

### **3) Developing a Model of Educational Progression and Transformation**

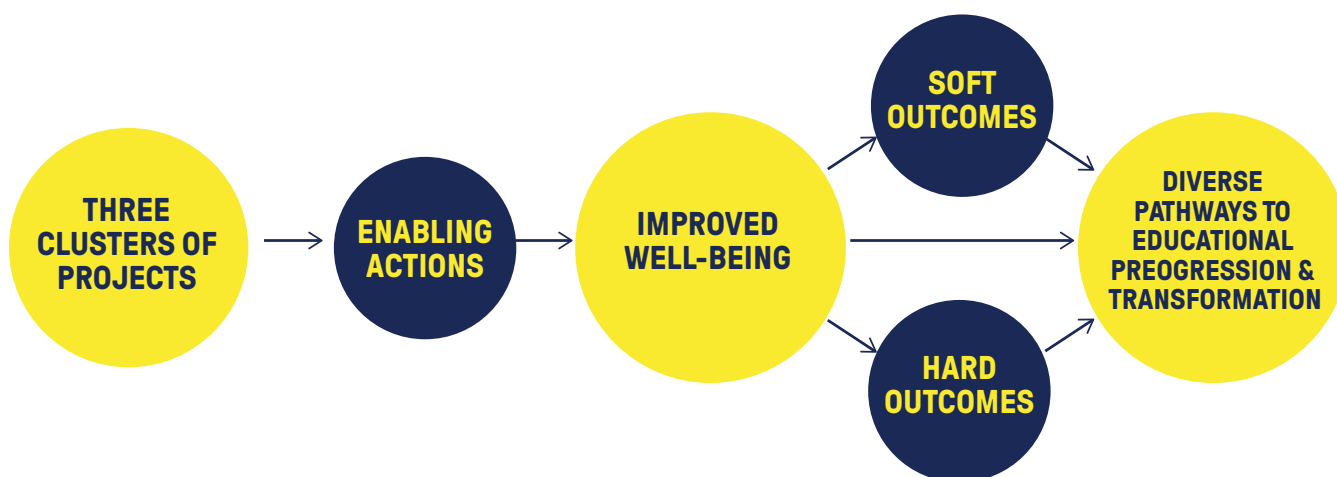
As the overarching aim of the evaluation was to '*investigate the extent to which practices and processes could serve as models of excellence in overcoming inequality in education*', in Section 4 of the full report we set out our new evidence-based model on *Educational Progression and Transformation*<sup>7</sup>. This enables us to look inside the 'black box' of how these projects support their learners. This model shows how the projects developed and implemented innovative approaches (called 'actions') to address various areas of the five strategic goals in the Action Plan 2016–2019.

We found that progression is of course about participants moving along Levels 3 to 6 of the QQI framework of qualifications and achieving

<sup>7</sup> Our model is built on three elements:

- firstly, on the evidence gleaned from the evaluation as presented in Chapter 3;
- secondly, on evidence from the published literature on what best supports those experiencing educational inequality to progress through use of an alternative approach, and
- thirdly, on relevant current Irish government policy directives, namely the Action Plan for Education 2016–2019 (incorporating the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the specific sustainable development goal (No. 4) on education) and the Department's Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2018–2023).

Figure 3.1 – Model of educational progression and transformation



‘hard outcomes’. However, our model shows that it is also about their personal transformation and development of their ‘soft outcomes’, like increased independence (maturity), increased self-confidence, and increased more positive future outlook. Our new evidence-based model, as shown in Figure 3.1, recognises that awardee projects provide critical and enabling actions for their participants in both of these domain areas and ultimately address better wellbeing for participants.

The intersection of the findings of this evaluation with the Department of Education’s Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice creates a significant opportunity for our Model of Educational Progression and Transformation to further aid practitioners in the alternative-education space as well as to build capacity in the formal system on what works when trying to achieve a mutually reinforcing circle between student wellbeing and soft and hard outcomes for students. The thinking behind Rethink Ireland’s establishing the Education Fund in the first place was to explore the practices and processes found to be beneficial when addressing educational inequality. We now have a chance to build on

the principles of social innovation used by Rethink Ireland to establish the fund, and to develop an approach where the learning from this three-year evaluation can begin to inform systems change.

Based on the findings of our research, we offer a set of micro recommendations for practice (x 8) as well as more macro, high-level considerations for policymakers, primarily for the Department of Education but also for other relevant departments.

### Evidence-based Recommendations for Practice

Based on the *critical enabling actions* identified and discussed in our report (Section 4), which describe how Education Fund projects support the educational progression and transformation of their learners, we suggest the following evidence-based recommendations be considered by other projects working with students experiencing educational disadvantage, both nationally and internationally. Projects can use these recommendations as pointers to assess their own practice, with a view to doing ‘more good’.



## 1) Wellbeing

- Establish a friendly, less formal and non-judgemental environment allowing students to feel safe and welcomed.
- Begin supported learning by establishing caring, less hierarchical relationships between project workers and learners, which can provide opportunities for developing trust.
- Develop a holistic wraparound approach together with students, families and other community partners to be followed when working with students who experience mental health, behavioural or other emotional challenges.
- Work together with students experiencing educational disadvantage to provide activities and practices focused on student wellbeing. Establish a stronger link with community organisations to provide different supports to students (e.g., physical activities, mindfulness programmes, formal and informal types of supports).
- Provide a designated study space for students from disadvantaged communities to help them develop a study routine and work ethic.

## 2) Critical skills, knowledge and competencies

- Involve students in a range of formal and informal activities (organised in cooperation with formal and informal education providers) to expose students to a variety of experiences, practical skills and theoretical knowledge.
- Use different methodologies and approaches to pursue students' interests and passions.
- Incorporate IT skills as part of employability skills into the curriculum of programmes that work with people with intellectual disabilities and learners from other disadvantaged backgrounds.

## 3) Greater subject choice

- Introduce a range of subjects to encourage students' interest and curiosity (e.g., STEM, coding, robotics, but also humanities and social science) for students experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage and people with intellectual disabilities.
- Assist students' personal and social development; introduce art courses, such as drama or poetry, in programmes working with people with intellectual disabilities.

## 4) Information technology

- Use blended and online learning when working with adult learners and/or learners who experience mental health issues. Consider personal needs and preferences of each student when implementing such programmes.
- Consider issues around connectivity, usability, access and the digital divide when introducing such programmes.

## 5) Progress and access

- Focus on the development of soft outcomes, including self-confidence; independence; future outlook; and social, communication, employability and study skills to support students' wellbeing and educational progression. One of the key pieces of learning from this evaluation is that it is important to research what learners value most in project activities.
- Focus on the activities and practices (e.g., mentoring) that support students' progression to third-level education.
- Establish a positive culture of progression by applying critical actions, including role models, mentorship, stronger links with universities, and links with families, broader communities and government to change expectations around educational progression.

## **6) Learning experience**

- Introduce student-centred and supported learning and encourage student engagement and interest in learning to develop them as independent and competent learners.
- Provide flexible and gradual approaches to learning, considering students' needs and strengths.
- Introduce gradual and flexible options for progression, such as modular, non-accredited and accredited courses for adult learners.
- Introduce a 'learning-to-learn' approach to engage adult learners and students from marginalised backgrounds in the learning process.

## **7) Informed career choices**

- Introduce a practice-oriented approach to career guidance in cooperating with external stakeholders (e.g., community partners, businesses, civil society organisations, universities, etc.).
- Provide a range of activities, such as organising visits to university Open Days and joint activities with universities (e.g., subject-specific programmes, summer schools, etc.) to give learners opportunities to experience how specific studies and employment look in practice.
- Provide suitable mentorship to support career guidance work.
- Provide mentorship for people with intellectual disabilities and other learners from disadvantaged backgrounds when offering placements with businesses and other avenues of work.

## **8) Support local communities**

- Introduce interagency work and cooperation with other statutory and non-statutory agencies to ensure all supports

and opportunities are available to learners experiencing educational disadvantage.

- Locate third-level programmes for people with intellectual disabilities in the centre of the campus, to ensure visibility, diversity and inclusion of these learners in university life.

## **Evidence-based Recommendations for Policy**

- 1.** Develop a cross departmental strategy on tackling educational disadvantage, – this cannot be solved by the education department alone. We need to tackle the social and economic inequalities facing children, young people and their families, using learning on what works from this study on alternative educational provision.
- 2.** The Department of Education and Science should formally recognise Alternative Education provision as educational providers in their own right and fund them in the same way as the formal education system. This should be done following a mapping exercise on service gaps with the view to increasing numbers should demand outweigh provision.
- 3.** Create a forum for mainstream and alternative education providers to exchange evidence-based knowledge and experiences so as support all learners and address educational inequality head-on.
- 4.** Organise a showcase where the learning about actions and processes used by the awardee projects to tackle education inequality can be shared with mainstream and alternative education providers and with broader society.

**CONCLUDING  
COMMENTS**

**04**

Over three years ago, we set out in partnership with Rethink Ireland and the awardees in the Education Fund ‘to investigate the extent to which practices and processes utilised by awardees can serve as models of excellence in overcoming inequality in education’. We have provided evidence of what works via the introduction of a new evidence-based Model of Educational Progression and Transformation and have indicated how we see this being implemented in practice and policy.

However, there is one final contextual factor that took us all by surprise – Covid-19 – which was never supposed to be part of this process. Covid-19 has presented an unprecedented challenge globally, and it had a significant effect on education. School closures forced schools, students and families to adapt to a new way of schooling and learning. In a short period, all involved parties had to upskill their digital competencies using a ‘learning by doing’ approach (Mohan et al., 2020). Primary and secondary schools and universities in Ireland closed on 12 March 2020 and remained closed until 1 September 2020 to mitigate community transmission of the virus. Educational settings experienced another closure starting at the time of the Christmas break. A phased reopening of post-primary education commenced on 22 February 2021 for special classes only. Primary and secondary schools reopened in the period from 1 March 2021 to 12 April 2021. The response of schools and teachers to the closure were mixed due to the diverse provision of technology in schools (Hall et al., 2020).

Changes in teachers’ work during the school closure were documented by several studies. Teachers have adapted to online teaching by adjusting the ‘traditional’ face-to-face classroom to teaching online. More student-centred online activities, such as applying

knowledge in practice tasks, organising peer review or using collaborative learning, seem to have been less used by teachers at this time. Developing these activities requires specific pedagogical, content and technological knowledge and skills (Hall et al., 2020: 5).

School closures have had a negative effect, particularly on disadvantaged students, and have resulted in widening existing inequalities in education and skills in Ireland (Doyle, 2020). Students and families from low-income backgrounds, students from DEIS schools, students with special educational needs and students studying English as a foreign language were significantly affected (Mohan et al., 2020: x). Mohan et al. (2020) show that Junior and Leaving Cert students from DEIS schools were affected by school closure, reporting lack of motivation and engagement and regression in learning and wellbeing. Devitt et al. (2020) report that teachers in DEIS schools were almost three times more likely to report low engagement from students than those from non-DEIS schools. This study also shows that DEIS students are more likely to have experienced lack of interest, lack of support and lack of access to IT devices in their homes (ibid, p. 1).

The effect of the pandemic on mental health and wellbeing as a result of school closure is also documented in research. Schools are not only learning environments, but also safe spaces for students who experience disruptive home environments. Young people reported being concerned about the loss of contact with friends, loss of structure and supports, and potential loss of a ‘safe’ place for those living in dangerous home environments (Youngminds, 2020). The Department of Education worked with the Department of Social Protection, education partners and TUSLA Education Support Service to ensure that schools could continue to facilitate school meals during

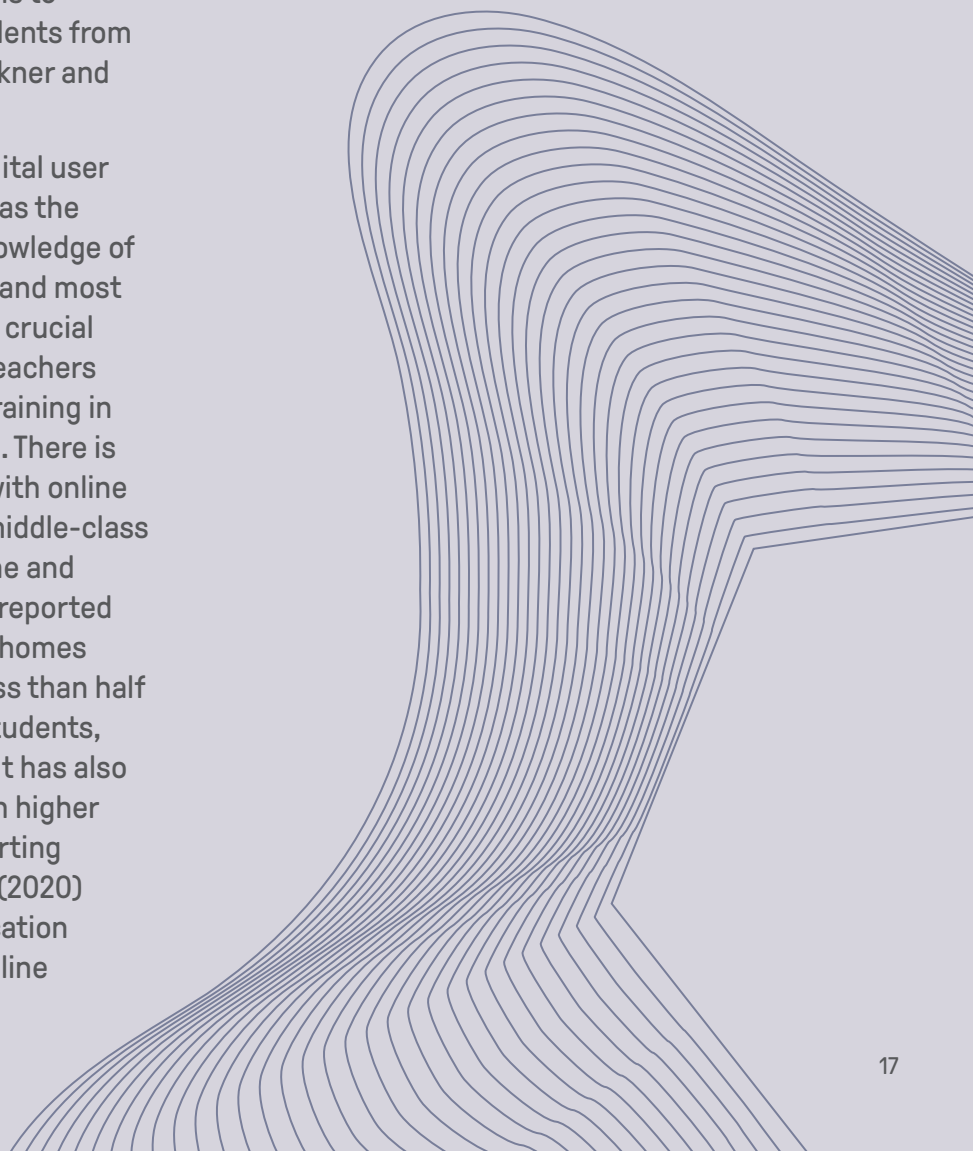
school closure periods. McCoy et al. (2020) show that schools tried to foster a sense of school community online to ensure relational closeness despite physical separation.

The digital divide has been recognised as one of the key concerns connected to online learning in Ireland. A clear divide between technology haves and have-nots, and issues around access to digital education for all, have been recognised in this pandemic (Hall et al., 2020). Schools in areas with lower broadband availability and schools in regions of lower household income reported slower internet speed (Mohan et al., 2020). Issues around connectivity were also acknowledged in rural areas, as well as issues with intermittent Wi-Fi services. Education can also be limited for students who do not have access to the internet, a computer or a place to study; this represents a challenge for teachers and education systems to develop support materials for students from low-income backgrounds (Van Lackner and Parolin, 2020).

Hall et al. (2020) argue that the digital user divide requires as much attention as the digital divide. Technology skills, knowledge of how to use technology in the best and most effective way, and access to it, are crucial for online teaching and learning. Teachers and schools require support and training in using technology (Hall et al., 2020). There is a recognised gap in engagement with online learning between students from middle-class and working-class homes. Cullinane and Montacute (in Mohan et al., 2020) reported that students from working-class homes engaged with online learning at less than half the rate of that for middle-class students, and also spent less time learning. It has also been established that parents with higher education spend more time supporting students' work at home. Hall et al. (2020) show that parents with lower education in Ireland were less likely to use online

resources, such as educational apps, or to refer to educational television programmes such as the Home School Hub provided by RTÉ.

The upshot of Covid-enforced change is that it has provided frontline educators, policymakers, and learners and their families with an opportunity to reimagine what education can be. If there can be any positive from the last year, it must be this fact. As evaluators, we believe that the endeavour of all involved in Rethink Ireland's Education Fund over the last three years has created a strong evidence-based footing for the system to respond in a more proficient way to the needs of those most educationally marginalised in our society.



# APPENDIX 1

Figure 4.1 – Evaluation Framework co-developed for the Education Fund

